2003). It is worth noting that Shabat Gula is not veiled in the photographs on this website.

17 W.J.T. Mitchell, 'The pictorial turn,' in Mitchell, ed., *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago, IL, 1994, 15.

18 See Retort's reference to the last testament of one of the London July 2005 bombers in Retort, 'An exchange on Afflicted Powers', 2006, 12. This is discussed by Yates McKee in an article about the artist Alia Hasan-Khan. See Yates McKee, 'Suspicious packages', October, 117, 2006, 99–121, 101.

19 T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, New Haven and London, 2006, viii.

20 See the interview with T.J Clark, 'T.J. Clark with Kathryn Tuma', in *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2006, http://brooklynrail.org/2006/11/art/tj-clark, accessed 21 June 2007; and the account by Jim Brook, 'Seville Diary', 10 November 2006, which also includes photographs, on the Retort Mailing List, http://www.ludd.net/retort/msg00691.html, accessed 21 June 2007. In the catalogue, Retort are listed as authors not artists, but as is clear from 'Seville Diary', they saw themselves as artists.

21 Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society*, Seville, 2006, 15.

22 Retort complains, 'At the [Biennial] party, we encountered the Australo-Pittsburgher and art critic Terry Smith, who tried to provoke with his remark that the Retort installation was of course "very 1980s"', 'Seville Diary', 10 November 2006.

23 See Chan's website, http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/index.html, accessed 10 July 2007 and Ganahl's http://www.ganahl.info/, accessed 10 July 2007.

DEALING WITH DEMATERIALIZATION

The Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture by *Ina Blom*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2007, 255 pp., 49 col. illus., $29.95/€24.00

Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art by *Liz Kotz*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2007, 352 pp., 72 b. & w. illus., £19.95

The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade by *John Roberts*, London and New York: Verso, 2007, 256 pp., £60.00 hdbk, £16.99 pbk

DEMATERIALIZATION REMATERIALIZED

Only the most conservative voices today will deny that there is more to conceptual art than meets the eye. Indeed, it is precisely what happens when art *refuses*, so to speak, to meet the eye – in order to address the viewer's body and mind – that has emerged as the preoccupation of much contemporary art since the 1960s. The 'increasing non-visual emphases' of conceptual art practices, accompanied by a shift to 'art as idea' and 'art as action', were famously described in 1968 by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler as a 'dematerialization' of the art object.[1] Conceptual art, as Lippard would explain, challenged all the traditional material features of the modern artwork – its 'uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness'.[2]

There may indeed be 'nothing to look at' when viewers are confronted with a snow shovel, a card with the word 'exit' written on it, or an empty room with a light going on and off. But, as three recent publications demonstrate, the dematerialized art object never actually disappeared: it simply took on different material forms. John Roberts argues that by presenting an everyday commodity produced in a factory – the snow shovel, in the 1915 work *In Advance of a Broken Arm* – Marcel Duchamp was commenting on issues of skill and labour. Liz Kotz discusses George Brecht's event score – titled *Word Event*, and consisting of the single noun/verb 'exit' – as an example of the ways in which artists in the 1960s used language as a new material. For Ina Blom, Martin Creed's *Work No.227 (The lights going on and off)* of 2000 partakes in the

'strange obsession with lamps' running through contemporary art from the 1990s concerned with 'a field of artistic articulation in which art, technologies, media, economic production, and personal lifestyles are treated as a continuum' (59–60).

Historically, a direct trajectory can in fact be traced from Duchamp's readymades to Brecht's event scores and finally to Creed's installation. Kotz elaborates on the shift from readymade object to readymade action or 'event' in Brecht's scores, via John Cage's famous 'silent' composition *4′33″*, while Blom highlights Creed's debt to another score by Brecht, his *Three Lamp Events*, which reads:

- on. off.
- lamp.
- off. on.

The historical genealogies explored by Kotz, Roberts and Blom are wider in scope than the number of books and exhibitions that, over the last decade, have shed light on the dematerialization practices of conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[3] Though Kotz's focus is the narrowest, it provides a most welcome insight into the 1950s precedents for language-based practices, in a narrative that situates the conceptual work of familiar figures such as Joseph Kosuth, Vito Acconci and Douglas Huebler in relation to earlier language-based experiments by students of composer John Cage, including poet Jackson Mac Low and Fluxus artist George Brecht. What Kotz's micro-history reveals is the wealth of interdisciplinary dialogues across music, poetry and sculpture that preceded the moment in which conceptual art is usually said to have introduced language and indeterminacy in the visual arts. Both Roberts' and Blom's studies span a broader historical period ranging from early twentieth-century avant-garde works, via certain conceptual practices of the 1960s, to the contemporary art of the last decade. Just as they confirm that dematerialization never entailed the actual disappearance of the art object, all three authors definitely lay to rest the postmodern rumours concerning the 'death of the author'. What emerges from their accounts is an intriguing series of new author-positions taken on by artists, including, significantly, attempts to find 'ego-diminished' ways of engaging with materials (to use Roberts' phrase), whether in John Cage's music and George Brecht's event scores, or Duchamp's readymades and the Objectivist poetry of Louis Zukofsky to which Roberts compares them.

Kotz, Roberts and Blom have all developed new critical vocabularies with which to address these changing definitions of the art object and the artist. Kotz's literal and visual readings of the language-based works of the 1960s certainly suggest new ways of looking at the art of this period: her most far-reaching conclusion is that the use of language introduced 'a model for a different kind of materiality, one structured from the outset by repetition, temporality, and delay' (98). For her part, Blom provides the most insightful critical account to date of the dominant trend in contemporary art from the last decade often referred to as 'relational aesthetics', a term coined by art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 collection of essays.[4] While Bourriaud's theories have by now been extensively criticized, Blom's book may be the first rigorous analysis of the aesthetic and social specificities of these practices. Concepts of style and atmosphere, 'perceptual activity' as the 'real material of television' (69), the relation between bar lounges and utopian communes, and the cultural significance of rock and roll, are only some of the topics that Blom elegantly addresses. Roberts' theoretical framework for dematerialization is more obviously ambitious, as it follows

a very detailed Marxist reading of theories of labour, and takes some very idiosyncratic – and often unnecessarily confusing – detours via evolutionary psychology, theories of consciousness and Artificial Intelligence, as well as telerobotics. If Roberts provides some illuminating insights into the 'equalization' of skills in capitalist labour, the role of the 'amateur' for the avant-garde, or the contemporary convergence between artist and curator, his examples of artistic practice often remain, unfortunately, at a level of extreme generalization. Nevertheless, his argument hinges on a lengthy discussion of Duchamp's readymades, at which point Roberts decides to engage with art historical literature. While he justifiably criticizes Thierry de Duve's 'nominalist' perspective on Duchamp for failing to make any reference to the works' socio-political context, Roberts' summary dismissal of Molly Nesbit's important work is problematic, as is his reductive reading of Jeffrey Weiss' groundbreaking discussion of Duchamp as a turn-of-the-century *blagueur*.[5] Most strikingly, Roberts remains blind to the close connections, mapped out by Weiss, between the *blagueur* and the *raté*, whose characteristic laziness and failure could have served to cast some healthy doubt on Roberts' account of Duchamp as a Marxist hero for the labouring proletariat.[6]

While Chandler and Lippard themselves never supplied the required critical apparatus for the study of dematerialization, their contemporary Jack Burnham drew upon the then-fashionable systems theory to describe conceptual practices as a new 'systems aesthetics'. Recently revived in a major exhibition of conceptual art at Tate Modern in 2005, Burnham's analysis started from a 'systems viewpoint', which 'focused on the creation of stable, on-going relationships between organic and non-organic systems'.[7] Inspired by biology, closely associated with cybernetics, and used in all spheres of government activity (including warfare), systems theory now appears as an outmoded, and politically problematic, conceptual fad.[8] In contrast, Burnham's 1968 description of a 'systems aesthetic' in which 'art does not reside in material entities, but in relations between people and between people and the components of their environment'[9] emerges not only as a useful tool to understand conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s: more surprisingly perhaps, it seems to resonate with contemporary forms of dematerialization today. Most significant is system aesthetics' focus on the exchange of information and the 'growing symbiosis in man-machine relationships',[10] two topics that are central to Roberts' and Blom's recent studies, although neither refers to Burnham's 1968 text. If Kotz engages with the impact of recording technologies on the experimental music of John Cage and on Andy Warhol's delirious *a: a novel*, both Blom and Roberts go as far as describing the very nature of the modern subject as being shaped by the 'immaterial' forces of technology, information and power. Rather than a 'monadic, bounded, self', Roberts' 'post-Cartesian' subject functions as a 'convocation of competing forces, and nexus of competences and capacities' (114). This leads to new definitions of the artist: 'artistic subjectivity', Roberts insists, '*is* the use and manipulation of ''stand-ins'' ' (15) or 'surrogates' – be they paintings or readymades. Similarly, for Blom, the figure of the artist gives form to 'the intangible processes of subjectivity production'; in particular, she argues, many conceptual practices of the late 1960s demonstrated that 'subjectivity no longer seems to arise as if ''from within'' but rather as an effect of particular types of aesthetic and mediatic technologies' (39). Information – including the language, diagrams and maps so prominent in conceptual art – acts alongside technology as a form of mediation.

IMMATERIAL LABOUR

As artists become manipulators and organizers of signs and symbols as well as objects and materials, they participate in a field that has become the focus of intense political debate: that of 'immaterial labour'. Immaterial labour was defined by Maurizio Lazzarato in 1996 in relation to the new 'informational' and 'cultural' content of commodities.[11] For Lazzarato, the 'informational content' of the commodity is produced by workers whose new skills involve 'cybernetics and computer control', while its 'cultural content' reflects the increasing importance, for capitalist economy, of fashion trends, consumer tastes and public opinion. Economic value in today's capitalism is generated by communication and the consumption of signs as much as the exchange of material goods and services. Lazzarato points out that even 'systems theory', which maps out ensembles of immaterial and material, as well as individual and collective, activities, cannot address the challenge to traditional models of organization that has ensued from this shift – with immaterial labour, power has been diffused, systems have been dispersed, production has been de-territorialized. The artist is not only embedded in this immaterial economy: it turns out, as Blom puts it, that 'avant-garde art throughout the twentieth century has been an arena for the development, promotion and legitimization of the key elements at work in the new technologies of distributed aesthetic sensitivity and creativity' (37) that drive immaterial labour – whether it is flexibility, openness, collaboration, or an emphasis on process. Inevitably, dematerialized practices will appear more closely related to immaterial labour than any other avant-garde gesture.

It is precisely in their analysis of the political implications of this relation that Blom's and Roberts' accounts of dematerialization diverge significantly. In Roberts' Marxist framework, 'immaterial labour' remains a form of labour among others; it is simply distinct from the craft-based skills of the traditional artist. Following post-autonomist thinkers such as Lazzarato, as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Blom refuses, in contrast, to distinguish between labour and leisure, doing and being, the artist and his/her activities. From her largely Foucauldian perspective, capitalism permeates all spheres of our lives including leisure as well as work, and the society of control operates through the self-definition of individual subjects rather than authoritarian institutions, unlike the previous 'disciplinary' society. With immaterial labour, there is no longer a distinction between production and consumption; all sections of the population, including children, retired workers, and the unemployed are involved in this new form of capitalism. In this context, it is our *time* that has become a commodity, and our very 'affects, feelings, sensitivities' that shape the economy.

Walter Benjamin's writings, Lazzarato informs us, 'are certainly fundamental for any genealogy of immaterial labor and its forms of reproduction'.[12] Whereas Roberts praises Walter Benjamin's exploration of the intrinsic relations between the 'first *technik*' of technology and the 'second *technik*' of culture, Blom turns instead to Benjamin's writings about fashion and style, and pays particular attention to his well-known definition of the artwork's 'aura'. For Blom, the kind of 'distant presence' between subject and object suggested by Benjamin's 'aura' seems to describe the specific atmospheres created by contemporary artists, through the use of lamps and television's 'bright shadows' in particular. Roberts' and Blom's diverging perspectives also inflect their readings of László Moholy-Nagy's engagement with technology. Roberts compares Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* with Duchamp's readymades on the basis that both introduce heteronomous industrial labour within the field of

autonomous artistic labour by transforming 'artistic subjectivity' into 'a kind of ego-less ''writing machine'' ' (148). Blom focuses instead on what she calls the 'signature-machine' in works such as Moholy-Nagy's *Yellow Discs*, where the artist's name comes to occupy a central role in the painting's composition, only to be exploded into a random typographical anagram of 'visual and verbal signals'. Here, argues Blom, 'the personal signature is no longer simply or primarily seen as the *sign* of original subjectivity but as a subset of a particular productive and distributive *technology*' (45). In contrast to Roberts' emphasis on labour, Blom draws on recent scholarship by Christina Kiaer and Maria Gough to demonstrate that even Russian constructivists were more concerned with potential social relations among people than the production of objects itself. Boris Arvatov's constructivist utopia of a possible 'creative consumption' of commodities, and of 'human beings connected by electric impulses', prefigures, according to Blom, the Internet revolution as much as Lazzarato's description of the ways in which 'immaterial' commodities transform their consumers as they are being produced (43).

For Roberts, the notion (developed by Hardt and Negri[13]) that immaterial labour can simultaneously be a site of *both* control and freedom is problematic; for Blom, this space is the only site in which the subject's self-transformation and self-realization can occur. As she remarks: 'In Foucault's strategic conception of power, new forms of control also engender new forms of freedom' (61). By making visible the ways in which our styles of being are produced by fashion and technology, Blom argues, contemporary 'style' works encourage us to seek new forms of subjectivity within a 'social field where the different elements have not yet . . . become parts of a closed set of social or political identities whose meanings in relation to one another are already determined' (138). Moreover, the 'style' works often introduce multiple temporal layers – through references to the past, through the use of scenarios and live participation, or the presence of television sets – which allow viewers to mine the 'uncontrollable' time of 'creation and events' that constantly 'doubles' the 'empty temporality of exchange value'. Thus it is possible, it seems, to resist the ways in which immaterial labour 'extracts value from time itself' (99).

For Roberts, such undialectical, ambivalent work is ultimately doomed to fail because it will always end up aligning itself completely with the heteronomy of alienated labour – a 'dissolution of artistic labour into non-artistic labour' (218). Roberts repeatedly cites Theodor Adorno's discourse on the autonomy of art in order to support his claim that only the autonomous artwork can act as a countermodel to 'the subjectless content of abstract labour' (42). Contemporary 'constructivist' collaborations between artists and non-artists, which aim at providing concrete solutions to specific problems, raise this fundamental question in even starker terms. The group Superflex, for example, has been involved in finding energy solutions, building a water pump in Africa, and setting up community broadcasting in Liverpool. In this kind of project, remarks Roberts, 'the neo-avant-garde dialectic of skill-deskilling-reskilling is employed to transform art into *artistically invisible* social practices' (215). While this move certainly succeeds in bypassing institutions and institutional critique, the 'artistically invisible works' also risk ignoring the spectator altogether. And without a spectator, Roberts fears, there is no possibility of 'recognizing' the difference between heteronomous and autonomous types of labour and of achieving the 'emancipatory transformation of general social technique by productive labour' (228).

Blom, however, objects to the very claim that the work of Superflex is 'artistically invisible'. Taking to task a critic who writes that the group has banished 'all consid-

erations of style and genre in favour of an unfettered engagement with content itself', she explains that Superflex is in fact very interested in 'style', as they carefully design logos (*Supergas*, *Superchannel* . . .) and choose specific clothing and furniture for each project (11). As Blom develops similar arguments about other works, which have also been characterized as 'artistically invisible' because of their focus on 'content', she draws our attention to the spatial, temporal and technological details that shape the works' 'atmospheres' historically and symbolically. If 1960s artists such as George Brecht could aspire to a '"degree zero" of mediation' (87) – which, as Kotz reminds us, nevertheless required the mediation of language – contemporary artists know that even a piece of furniture belongs to a specific time and place, and can act as 'a sort of mutable memory material' (101).

Roberts' and Blom's perspectives, then, may not be as incompatible as they seem – their radically different emphases could perhaps even complement each other. After all, Roberts grudgingly acknowledges that '[i]f Negri and Hardt are overly optimistic' about the subversive potential of immaterial labour, 'they are right to think of the convergence between productive labour and non-determinate [i.e. autonomous] labour as a site of the repoliticization of political economy and culture' (214). Whether we agree with Roberts that Negri and Hardt are indeed 'overly optimistic', or share Blom's impatience with a dialectical model of Marxist critique such as Roberts', there is no doubt that together they have succeeded in revisiting dematerialization in the context of the new 'fleshy immateriality' that lies at the heart of capitalism today.[14]

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Notes

1 Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, 'The dematerialization of art,' *Art International*, 12:2, February 1968, 31–6.

2 Lucy Lippard, 'Preface', *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London and New York, 1973, 8.

3 For reviews of such publications see Michael Corris, 'Brain . . . and after: conceptual art to conceptual strategies', *Art History*, 24:3, June 2001, 445–9, and Grant Pooke, 'It's all in the idea', *Art History*, 28: 1, 2005, 128–3.

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon, 1998. English translation by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods: *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, 2002.

5 Jeffrey Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp and Avant-Gardism*, New Haven and London, 1994, chapter III.

6 On Duchamp's laziness, see also Helen Molesworth, 'Work avoidance: the everyday life of Marcel Duchamp's readymades,' *Art Journal*, Winter 1998, 50–61.

7 Jack Burnham, 'Systems aesthetics', *Artforum*, September 1968, reproduced in Donna de Salvo, ed., *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970*, exh. cat., London, 2005, 165.

8 For an excellent discussion of system theories and system aesthetics see Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MA and London, 2004, 62–81, and 233–50.

9 Jack Burnham, 'Systems aesthetics', 165.

10 Jack Burnham, 'Systems aesthetics', 165.

11 Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Immaterial labour', trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emery, in Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis, MN, 1996, also available online at http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm (accessed 28 June 2008).

12 Lazzarato, 'Immaterial labour'.

13 See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA, 2000.

14 The term 'fleshy immateriality' is borrowed from Antonio Negri, 'Metamorphoses', *Radical Philosophy*, 149, May–June 2008, 22. This paper was first presented at the conference on 'Art and Immaterial Labour' at Tate Britain, London, 19 January 2008, which also included Maurizio Lazzarato and other 'post-autonomist' speakers.