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The Phantom Audience

> *Yet won't those who are interested in extraterrestrial life smile at a mathematical deduction which accords them not only immortality but eternity? The number of our doubles is infinite in time and space. One cannot in good conscience demand anything more. These doubles exist in flesh and bone – indeed, in trousers and jacket, in crinoline and chignon. They are by no means phantoms; they are the present eternalized.*
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> *– Auguste Blanqui*[1]

Presentness is grace.

– Michael Fried

"Art and Objecthood" is still current – mainly because of the resounding epistemological break minimal sculpture made with previous abstract art, a break Michael Fried identified early and with uncanny insight. This break, moreover, is so decided that minimalism, insofar as it engages a social a priori, cannot properly be called abstract. Its theatricality gives abstraction a literal, concrete presence which corresponds to the abstract reality of capital. Fried, however, drew an unpopular conclusion; the kind of theatricality he deplored now prevails in both contemporary art and mass culture. Since this outcome is bound up with the broader logic of political economy, it offsets the idealist nature of preceding contemplative esthetics.

At first glance, minimalist theatricality promises to be utterly empirical. Fried considered presence minimalism's distinctive feature; what counts is what is literally there. Operating within a given architectural shell, minimalist works create a passive-aggressive arena that implicates the beholder. Constantly compared against the displayed object, the viewer's own body obtrudes upon the usual expectation that the viewing subject be condensed into an ethereal, perspectival point. Nevertheless, these comparisons underscore the object's nonrelational, unitary character which, in turn, distances or alienates this viewer both sensually and psychically.

> ...Someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to *become* the beholder, that audience of one – almost as though the work in question has been *waiting for* him. And inasmuch as literalist work *depends on* the beholder, is *incomplete* without him, it *has* been waiting for him.[2]

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1 Auguste Blanqui, *L'Eternité par les astres: Hypothèse astronomique* (Paris, 1872), pp. 73-76, quoted by Walter Benjamin, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaoughlin, "Boredom, Eternal Return," *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Belknap Press, 1999) p. 114.

2 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968) p. 140.

The viewer, in other words, completes a work that feigns aloofness from her or him. Because this kind of work hypostatizes a phenomenologically corporeal presence, it seemingly concerns particularized individuals, not a collective audience. Yet because minimalism's mode of address unfolds over time, it begs the question as to who or what will be the ultimate recipient. Any kind of theater, minimal or not, discursively concerns a social body through residual classical expectations such as catharsis and identification with the antagonist. Minimalism brings the social body as a determinant absence into play: How is the audience, then, constituted demographically? Ideologically? How is it predisposed to even consider an artwork at the outset? What are the terms for this consideration? All these forces – and more – fill "the space between the arts." Because they are relational, they are also negotiable. In this sense, they correspond to an immanent – or phantom – audience.

Fried cited Epic Theater and the Theater of Cruelty as references for minimalist theatricality. Both Brecht and Artaud wanted theater to transform the audience. Both wanted it to wrest it away from the dominant fiction of a master historical narrative. Through the alienation effect, Brecht sought an intensification of political consciousness. Artaud instead wanted to exteriorize the unconscious:

> A real stage play upsets our sensual tranquillity, releases our repressed subconscious, drives us to a kind of potential rebellion (since it retains its full value only if it remains potential), calling for a difficult heroic attitude on the part of the assembled groups . . .
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> If fundamental theatre is like the plague, this is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation, urging forward the exteriorisation of a latent undercurrent of cruelty through which all the perversity of which the mind is capable, whether in a person or a nation, becomes localised . . . [3]

Thus, for both playwrights, the audience is teleological. The point of engagement is its latent potential.

By producing works that confront the audience with the terms of its own negotiability, Dan Graham has realized the minimalist imperative in its most explicit form. The value of doing this depends on what the audience, in turn, may or may not go on to do. Its power, then, lies in its promise. This is also the underlying logic of service art and interactive art. It is, however, a bifurcated logic. On one hand, it impels the audience to comprehend itself as a heterogeneous entity – that is, something which exists for its own sake, akin to Marx's ideal of the proletariat as a class in and for itself. On the other, replacing contemplation with interaction, like it or not, opens the door to behaviorism. Physical manipulation *of* or *by* the audience seemingly ratifies the esthetic wager. Although interactivity and functionality are legacies of Soviet revolutionary art, the audience – instead of "integrating esthetics into its everyday life," whatever that might mean – is reduced to completing the artwork by completing a rote task. A hamster, then, might easily replace it.[4] This prospect signals a reintegration of the empiricist model.

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3 Antonin Artaud, "Theatre and the Plague," *The Theatre and Its Double* (London: Calder Publications, 1999) pp. 19-21.

4 Bruce Nauman's title "Learned Helplessness in Rats" suggests this explicitly.

Against this backdrop of premeditated "interaction," theatricality conceals the boredom that arises from an absence of events. As a minimalist effect, theatricality has come to govern not just visual arts production but a far-flung cultural field. In so doing, it has also become more cerebral and more rarified: a predominantly mental paradigm. As such, it left its architectural moorings behind. Traditionally, the stage, as Robert Nickas notes, has defined the relationship between performer and audience, both architecturally and psychologically.[5] Minimalism turned the audience into a performer and placed it onstage, i.e., by effectively transforming the space literally occupied by the viewer into a stage. The dissolution of the discrete exhibition space precipitated the steady internalization of theatricality. The audience learned to carry the stage in its head. In mass culture, this corresponds both to capital's ongoing abstraction and to the proliferation of tv, video and web technologies. The panopticon and the classical Debordian spectacle gave way to an all-pervasive optical infrastructure wherein the camera no longer *surveys* everyday life but instead *produces* it as a kind of game or ritual. The Internet allows anyone to broadcast information such as round-the-clock images of their coffee makers – grassroots versions of Warhol's "Empire." Many do; small cults form around the consumption of such imagery.

By turning a quotidian ranch house into a show room, Dan Graham's "Alteration to a Suburban House" also exposed the potential for comprehending daily life as a performance or game. One precedent for this work was Craig Gilbert's 1973 tv documentary "An American Family." Here, Gilbert filmed an upper-middle-class California family for nine months to produce his nine-hour series. He had previously worked for Margaret Mead and considered his project to be a kind of auto-anthropology. During the course of shooting the film, the parents divorced and their oldest son came out of the closet as a homosexual. These revelations, coupled with the blank form of the film itself, forced American viewers to reconsider the nuclear family. They did not know whether to identify with or to condemn the Louds, Gilbert's subjects. Since they had already seen this family televised, some wanted to respond to it as stars.

Flash forward twenty-seven years. A sudden resurgence of game shows brings an abrupt and unexpected end to a dynasty of talk shows. Here, action seemingly replaces confession, but a potent dose of Baudelairean spleen tinges this action; the repetitive movements of the gambler, ultimately a Sisyphean task, confront the tedium of everyday life with expectancy and resignation. The gambler echoes the disinterred figure of the assembly line worker. In the U.S., the trend began with a spate of millionaire shows: "I Want to Marry a Millionaire," "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" – this at a time when amassing a million dollars has become banal, a running gag in Austin Powers movies![6] When the millionaire in "Who Wants to Marry . . . ?" proved to be a wife beater, the series ended in disaster.

A second generation, with a more radical, hybridized format, has overtaken the millionaire programs. The new programs combine the game show with reality tv, social experiment and pure novelty – the perfect fad for the new millennium. Here, however, social experiment does not mean reinventing social relations, but instead casting the contestants as

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5 Robert Nickas, "A Brief History of the Audience," *Performance Anxiety* (Chicago: the Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997).

6 Regis Philbin, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"'s blandly charismatic host, had already hosted his own talk show "Regis and Kathie Lee."

laboratory animals. From the U.S. comes "Survivor," which portrays the fundamental struggle to stay alive into a form of play. It combines Social Darwinism with *Lord of the Flies* and the Robinsinade (the literary genre arising from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, none other than an examination of modern society having to build itself from scratch under primitive conditions).[7] From the former Soviet Union comes "The Naked Truth" in which the news readers are strippers. This theatricalizes news reports in a contrived, mechanical way, akin to the narrative drive of a porn film. Real world events take on the role of a pretext. This echoes communism's failure to match the libidinal pull of commodity culture. Unlike other shows in the new genre, this one does not bring contestants (in fact, there are no players) into a game that is a revivified reality. It instead casts a de-realization effect onto current events. Japan's version is "Denpa Shyonen," or "Box Man." It parodies a novel by Kobo Abe, an avant-garde writer. In it, a comedian encases himself in a box, left in the countryside in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. Inside the box he is under constant surveillance. He can only communicate with others, on whom he relies for food and everything else, via an electronic signboard outside the box. His goal is to persuade them to gradually push the box back to the television studio in Tokyo from whence it came. Finally, from Holland comes the best known of all: "Big Brother," a group Skinner box. The series begins with a group of twenty contestants who agree to live together in a container, with no contact to the world outside. Each week the group nominates three candidates. Viewers then vote on one of the three to leave the container. At the end of one hundred days, the last player remaining is the winner. The rules for expulsion force contestants to curry favor with both their competitors and their viewers. In former East Germany, seemingly fulfilling Adorno's dire warnings, "Big Brother" treated viewers to Stasi-like monitoring as entertainment. But here, the reveling in alienation was retrospective. The very title mocks the idea of living in a police state under constant surveillance, suggesting the Orwellian model has become quaint and antiquated. Instead, through the constant threat of expulsion, contestants internalize the gaze of their peers and the cameras as a kind of superego. This converts the phantasmic audience into paranoid yet cheerful conformists.

All these programs begin with the premise that social reality is intrinsically fictive and therefore changeable. The contestants are stand-ins for the viewing audience. The two promise to become more intertwined and more interchangeable. The programs promise to deliver an audience that is "really there." That the players' roles are improvisational and self-regulatory minimizes the sense of artifice. It also acknowledges, with more sophistication, what cameras can not capture: experience as duration, the unconscious, perhaps even a sense of the Real as a symbolic void. To compensate for this limitation, producers encourage contestants to participate with the cameras, not just to passively sit before them. If the theatricality of these programs owes something to minimalism, their scenarios usually derive from literature – literature, moreover, intended as social commentary. Ironically, just when the culture at large seems to want to literalize all its contents, it is exactly this kind of writing that comes off as corny and without impact. Yet, instead asserting its own autonomy, the audience ends up a marketer's dream – an audience that is determined, overdetermined, entirely calculable. Will what is repressed in such a representation come back to haunt it? Failure in all these contests results not in death, but a mimicry of death, the mummery of social denigration, which may stave off a more profound ennui. Even so, the stakes may be too low to sustain anything more than a season or two's attention: "We are bored when we don't know what we are waiting for. That we do know,

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7 Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* in prison.

or think we know, is nearly always the expression of our superficiality or inattention. Boredom is the threshold to great deeds.– Now, it would be important to know: What is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?"[8]

8 Benjamin, p. 105.