Dialectics of the hero: representing subjectivities
-On the Possibilities of Contemporary Figurative Sculpture-

A dissertation submitted by
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I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and effort

Acknowledgments

Abstract

This thesis sets out to critically reposition contemporary figurative sculpture through a re- articulation of *the hero*.

It starts by identifying the removal of the human figure in minimal art and with notions of objectivity, repetition and indifference. Here I argue against Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Rosalind E. Krauss, by claiming that there is a necessity to reflect upon the sculptural object and the subject beyond that which is produced by the principles outlined by these artists and critics.

Working through readings of Judith Butler, Alain Badiou, Hannah Arendt, Bernard Stiegler, Jacques Lacan and others, the argument establishes the contingency and polemics of the term *hero*, the way it pertains to the introduction of the new and how it coalesces action and narrative with constant negotiation. Using the philosophy of Richard Rorty as a scaffold, I propose in turn that the hero constitutes a necessary idealism for improving vocabularies, and along with Bruno Latour's position on composition, that this can be translated into figurative sculpture as a dialectical becoming-object.

Additionally, the problem of knowing what constitutes a subject of heroism is associated with the formation of an ethical subject. I conclude, in contrast to Simon Critchley and Jacques Derrida, that this subject can be articulated using *the hero* strategically as a conceit. I also suggest that, as such, it can be realized through the work of figurative sculpture and the agonist space it produces.

Alongside this, the thesis rethinks the materiality associated with figuration in terms of construction, and elaborates on the importance of the hero to the post-mannequin condition of figurative sculpture based on how it combines invention with political determination. This is further examined by looking at the work of Isa Genzken, Rachel Harrison and Mark Manders, and especially at the practice-based component of this thesis.

Dedicated to my father, Álvaro Esteves Gonçalves

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Introduction

This thesis explores the 'idea' of the human form in sculpture after the conceptual frame of Minimalism. It consists of two elements, one practical, which is documented at the end of the volume; the other written, which is introduced here. In fact, the problem the text endeavours to solve is one to be found at the intersection between these two modes, that is: the problem of knowing how to reclaim and reposition the project of sculptural figuration from a theoretical point of view. Starting from the premise that there is a tendency not to recognize in the numerous polemics of figurative sculpture its critical potential, the aim is to show that a connection can be established between figurative sculpture and politics through a rearticulated notion of the hero.

This proposal is concerned with two main factors. Firstly, it refers to the necessity to find an alternative to the conceptual markers that are still in use by the history of contemporary art to think about sculpture. Rosalind E. Krauss's *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* or Thomas McEvilley's *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt,* for example, are important texts in studies of post-modern sculpture but not appropriate sources for a positive reconsideration of figurative sculpture because respectively, they exclude figuration and view it in terms of irony. Secondly, the proposal also acknowledges the necessity to work with a concept that allows us to separate the theme of representation from *repetition* and *mimesis* and to replace these with *difference* and *invention.* The claim is that the notion of the hero meets these two criteria whilst opening into a process of reimagining the contemporary subject through the medium of sculpture. In other words, the task is less concerned with the specificity of contemporary figurative sculpture – in reality there is not a lot that is said about figurative sculpture in isolation, but rather to discuss how figuration in sculpture challenges the mode through which we might understand the construction of subjectivity.

Hence, in parallel to reading some classic texts on Minimalism, which are important to understand the evacuation of the figure by the latter, the thesis brings together different references from philosophy, literature and sociology to discuss the possibilities of figurative sculpture beyond the scope of the art field. Amongst these, the main theoretical reference is the writing of Richard Rorty, who I would claim is a *ghost in the machine*. Not always in an explicit way, his discussions on objectivity have made it possible to see representation

separately from truth claims and prepare from the perspective of utility, a reflection on how the combination of figurative sculpture and the hero might function as a form for articulating the political subject. In this instance I read mostly from Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. The other major reference is Bruno Latour whose object-oriented sociology, again not always in an obvious way, helped to provide an understanding of such utility in political terms. The main sources from Latour include his seminal work *We Have Never Been Modern*, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, and the essay "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto".

More a path than a model, the argument is divided into four distinct moments corresponding to four semi-independent chapters, which work linearly between themselves and thematically in alternate pairs. The first and third chapters deal more directly with questions related to sculpture, while the second and fourth focus more on the theme of the hero.

In the first chapter I have attempted to trace the discrediting of figurative sculpture in Minimalism and understand therein the possibilities to reverse the negative reading of the first by setting up a critique of the latter. Here I examine Krauss's minimalist reading of modern sculpture together with Robert Morris's and Donald Judd's art works and writings, proposing to use the framework of Rorty's neo-pragmatism in order to discuss the limitations of objectivity and the staging of the body in Minimalism. In short, the first chapter attempts to understand the reasons behind the evacuation of the human figure through Minimalism's claim to facticity and argues that this is limiting for the task of reimagining the contemporary subject.

The figure of the hero is discussed immediately after in the second chapter with the use of philosophical and literary examples. This chapter begins with Judith Butler's reading of Sophocles's *Antigone* and the idea of forming/deforming political subjectivities. It continues with a dialogue between Simon Critchley and Alain Badiou on political disappointment and the politics of resistance, which is used to set up a connection between the hero, positive dialectics and the necessity to think about a new political subject. Furthermore, the chapter also locates the notion of the hero in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* and establishes a link between heroism and the occurrence of the new, action,

speech and public life. Bernard Stiegler's take on the question of *technique* is discussed afterwards, which makes it possible to associate the hero with what he presents as the mutual process of psychological and social individuation. Naturally coming to the surface at this stage, Rorty allows us to see the hero as a strategy to improve vocabularies, or as I describe it, to create an *idealism of necessity* whose value resides in the subject's potential for reimagining contemporary forms of living. From there, the text investigates Lacan's seventh seminar titled, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* to sketch out a few ideas on why such idealism requires a form of sublimation and why this can be met by the figure of the hero. The chapter concludes with a study offered by Angela Hobbs, who suggests that Plato tries to replace a Homeric ideal for the Socratic subject by discussing the theme of courage and heroism. Here I explore the importance of notions of heroism in the task of reorganizing politics and subjectivities.

If in the second chapter the text works through the subject of writing in relation to the hero, then in the third chapter the argument returns to the subject of sculpture. Based on the idea that sculpture cannot be an index of what it represents, the text intimates that figurative sculpture can be seen as a way to compose, or indeed to invent, a public and politicized selfhood. This is observed in relation to classical Greek sculpture, which furthermore helps me to establish how the medium of figurative sculpture lends itself to the heroic. Meanwhile, I also acknowledge the limitations of using classical Greek sculpture for a contemporary take on the figure. This is done along Jacques Rancière's reading of Johann Winckelmann's commentary on *The Belvedere Torso* where the need to consider the fragment, the multiple and the potential in sculpture comes to the fore. The argument that I develop next is that the notion of hero can be used as the conceptual tenet for a methodology of composition. The aim of this step is to establish that, as such, composition can include the fragment, the multiple and the potential alongside a priority to answer to reality, as opposed to correspond to reality, and a necessity to actualize procedures of composition depending on the specifics of each situation.

I found Latour's take on composition and his notion of assemblage, with its focus on interactions, useful when discussing contemporary sculpture and in particular, the nature of installation found when encountering Rachel Harrison's practice. The chapter covers Harrison's work in order to debate how the human figure cancels out the abstraction produced by 'object orientated' art works that

seem to deliberately push the viewer aside. Debated in relation to Isa Genzken's work, it is also suggested that there is a need to rethink the condition of figurative sculpture after the mannequin and that the hero as a conceit of representation helps in this process. The work of Mark Manders and the way it combines the ready-made with modelled figures to form heterogeneous bodies is advanced as an innovating alternative.

In the place of a conclusion, the thesis finishes with a fourth and final chapter where the attention turns once again to the hero. This is a logical move but also a result of a series of events that took place during the time of research leading up to this text. In 2008, when the project commenced, the effects of the economic recession were yet to hit Europe and the political scenario was relatively calm. The concept of the hero was not easy to work with but the difficulties had more to do with a negative acculturation of the term and with the necessity to find ways of reversing the threat of anachronism. All of a sudden, from economical meltdown and politics of austerity to the reawakening of protest, all things changed. On the one hand, ideas surround the subject of the hero seemed increasingly more in tune with the political nature of the events that were taking place everywhere, on the other of this, one was left feeling incapable of keeping up to speed with what was happening and with the profound changes that were being introduced in the socio-political context, and more importantly, with how these constantly brought into question any short-lived certainties surrounding notions of heroism. What happened between 2008 and 2014 affected the project profoundly and made me repeatedly question the direction of the ideas as it became more urgent to understand the real implications of thinking through the subject of the hero and to make it clearer what contemporary figurative sculpture might offer in today's world.

The lesson of what happened during these years to this research project, as it was happening, was that the notion of hero can only be found in a constant dialogue with reality, which in turn made it clear that the project itself had to address, in some form at least, what took place during the eventful years of its making. I have to add that any reading of the impact these years had for the practical element of this thesis can be found the section containing visual documentation of my studio work. Although I might add that while it may not seem obvious, it is there. In the written element, I have tried to put the argument in relation to the spirit of the moment by reading from Simon Critchley's *Ethics*

and Infinite Demanding – Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance, where Critchley is very precise in the way he diagnoses the feeling of political disappointment at the heart of western democracies and in the way he demonstrates how it is possible to conceive an ethical experience through collective, anti-heroic, humour-based forms of resistance.

That being said, the chapter offers an alternative view to that of Critchley, and in a way to that of Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship,* which Critchley draws from, to then reason that the idea of the hero opens into a form of sublimation that, unlike the anti-hero, allows for a positive articulation of an ethico-political subject beyond the duration of a sensible experience, proposing in addition, that we can associate figurative sculpture with the *presentability* of such subject. In other words, the thesis concludes by arguing that it is possible and productive to imagine a subject-to-come through the hero and that sculpture can operate as the mode of appearance of such a subject.

Lastly, I need to make two remarks concerning the methodology of the essay. Firstly, the essay constitutes an attempt, made by a sculptor, to contextualize sculptural figuration in relation to the field of contemporary art that assumes the form of a speculation about its implications and possibilities for what is beyond the artistic. However, its aim is not to produce new knowledge on a particular author from the perspective of art, nor inversely, to verify in what way specific theoretical positions or concepts can bring new light to artworks. Instead, what I have attempted to do is define a framework for the accountability of procedures inherent to the work of figuration in sculpture. Finally, concerning the use of footnotes: these will be used in the conventional way, i.e. to indicate bibliographic references and disambiguate any necessary issue, but also where appropriate, to make observations relevant for the main text that may not find the right space therein.

FIRST CHAPTER: Objectivity and the empty presence of Minimalism

Introduction

This chapter examines some key developments introduced in art during the 1960s and 1970s via Rosalind E. Krauss's minimalist reading of modern sculpture, and Robert Morris's and Donald Judd's art works and critical writings. Their positions, which are often contrasting, will help me to elaborate questions that are central to the argument. Running further behind the scenes is Alex Potts's more recent history of sculpture, which was focal in developing an understanding of Minimalism in relation to the history of figurative sculpture, and Richard Rorty, whose influence forms the basis for a discussion on the limitations of objectivity in Minimalism.

The argument is set up by a brief account of key aspects of minimal art followed by a discussion of the relationship of this to what I will call a correspondence theory of knowledge which will be used as a platform to answer questions of objectivity, repetition and indifference. The chapter concludes by analysing the limitations of Minimalism in recent artwork recreations.

The term Minimalism is used in its (controversial) general sense, as well as in referring to an expanded use of things in space and to the centrality of language in visual arts. It may refer to sculpture, installation, performance, or post-minimal works – a broad approach but a risk that I hope will be justified by serving specific conclusions about what is behind the evacuation of the human figure by minimal art.

On using the term Minimalism and the expression minimal art in relation to sculpture

For the convenience of writing and a more fluent reading of this text, the term Minimalism and the expression minimal art are used indistinguishably. It is, however, important to make a few remarks about the terminology in question.

Most artists one associates with Minimalism did not recognize the term as appropriately describing their practice. For example, it is well known that Donald

Judd refused to associate Minimalism with the work he and others were producing during the 1960s. In a text published in 1966 for the catalogue of the exhibition "Primary structures: Younger American and British Sculptors" (an exhibition to which I will return in a minute), Judd argues that the term "minimal" is inadequate because it suggests a reduction which in his opinion cannot appropriately describe the sort of intellectual investment found in the artworks associated with it. In his own words: "I object to several popular ideas. I don't think anyone's work is reductive (…) New work is just as complex and developed as old work."[1]

Already in "Specific Objects", published the previous year and possibly Judd's better known text, one finds a clear attempt to undermine the use of the term mentioned above and the use of any fixed definition: "The new three-dimensional work doesn't constitute a movement, school or style. The common aspects are too general and too little common to define a movement. The differences are greater than the similarities."[2]

Robert Morris is far more tolerant with the term. In fact, he uses the terminology in the last part of his highly influential series of texts "Notes on Sculpture". Published in 1969, at a time when his work had moved away from geometric solids and closer to Process art, this is a text that allowed Morris to launch new ideas whilst also looking back at the developments that made what both Judd and he were calling 'new work' and that he was now referring to as minimal art[3]. By force of using the expression, Morris brings some historical legitimacy to the body of terms associated with it.

Keeping in mind that minimal art is an expression normally used in a critical context – it was used for the first time by art critic Richard Wollheim, in an essay published in early 1995[4] - one might interpret Morris's choice of worlds as an attempt to acknowledge the critical reception of the work that he and others had developed up to that point. This is speculation in the case of Morris, but one that announces the line of thought followed in this thesis. Using the term Minimalism

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1 Donald Judd, Complete Writings 1955-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints, Nova Scotia, The press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005, 190
2 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon wood, eds., Modern Sculpture Reader, Leeds, Henry Moore Institute, 2007, 214
3 See Robert Morris, Continuous Project Altered Daily. The Writings of Robert Morris, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1995, 54
4 See: Richard Wollheim, "Minimal art" in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, London, University of California Press, 387-399

or the expression minimal art constitutes an attempt to emphasize the way the latter developed through a dialogue with theory and critique.

But using both the term and the expression in question is also a matter of simplifying the terms of the discussion. They evoke a certain familiarity that allows for ideas to be explored in a more direct way, given that it is neither possible nor necessary to talk in detail about the polemics generated around the use of this or that expression. What is more, they help to keep in mind the ideas that the words themselves evoke: that minimal art reflects a break with the association between expressive qualities and artistic value, a formal simplification and a minimum of manual work. In fact, it is key to remember that minimal art evolved as a result of efforts made by artists such as Judd and Morris to liberate art from metaphor and to reconfigure the art object around its own simple material qualities.

So, in short, the use of both the term Minimalism and the expression minimal art, form part of a strategy to signal an important dialogue with critique and theory; to evoke the sort of formal bareness that is characteristic of the works that will be discussed; and a strategy to bring to the fore the contrast between minimal art and the formal complexity and subtleties of metaphoric meaning at play in figurative sculpture. All these aspects are central to the main argument.

Furthermore, it is necessary to say something about the connection between Minimalism and sculpture. Minimalism is related to an attempt to abandon medium specificity and to create an integrated conception of art. This idea is present in the writing of Judd who once again can be identified with a more rigid conception of the sort of artworks one might call Minimalist. The very first line of "Specific Objects" reads: "Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture"[5]. In others words, and what matters here, Judd reasons that despite being primarily three-dimensional the "new work"[6] does not belong to the domain of sculpture. Rather, the use of the three dimensions is simply an alternative whose value relies on the fact that it "opens to anything"[7]. It opens the works to their context, and crucially, the field of art to

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5 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon wood, eds., Modern Sculpture Reader, 213
6 It is perhaps worth clarifying that Judd uses the expression "new work" in reference to the work he and others started to produce around the early 1960s. It is equivalent to what I am calling Minimalism and minimal art.
7 Ibid., 214

non-art. Now, Without being able to address the issue of context and of how Minimalism undermines the separation between art and non-art (I shall return to these questions later) what needs to be asked at this point is if it is legitimate to think about figurative sculpture through a paradigm that resists a definition of art in terms of medium specificity.

If Judd raises the question, in a way he also indicates a possible answer to it. As was already mentioned, he tells us that the "new work" is neither painting nor sculpture. But he also goes on, saying that whilst it resembles sculpture it is closer to painting[8]. In fact, from a close reading of "Specific Objects" it becomes clear that Judd's proposal to use three dimensions mostly applies to the difficulties one associates specifically with painting. Namely, problems to do with the frame and how it necessarily turns the pictorial space inwards and limits painting to a series of internal relations. Also of importance is the predicament of the wall, that is, the problem that no matter how good a painting is, it is always a rectangle on the wall and therefore a form of work that involves a figure/ground relation - created by the image of the frame on wall. This led Judd to conclude that somehow painting always functions as a picture, and the only way to break with this logic and with any residual illusionism is for it to become three-dimensional. He says:

> Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid
> of the problem of illusionism and of literal space,
> space in and around marks and colors – which
> is riddance of one of the salient and most
> objectionable relics of European art. The several
> limits of painting are no longer present.

However, the suggestion that painting must advance beyond its own limits in order for it to become three-dimensional, demands, within the logic explored in "Specific Objects", a theoretical distinction between the three-dimensionality that Judd is referring to and that of sculpture. And what does he do? Specifically he distinguishes the "new work" not from sculpture but from the tradition of

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8 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon wood, eds., Modern Sculpture Reader, 216

sculpture, which he considers to be dominated by the logic of composition, therefore hierarchy, and representation. This is perhaps the weakest point of the argument in "Specific Objects". Judd is clearly able to separate the "new work" from the tradition of sculpture by discussing how it breaks with the aspects mentioned above, but is unable to clarify what differentiates the former from sculpture in terms of its physical presence in space. The more one reads, the more it is suggested that Judd's main concern is to question the relevance of history and situate the "new work" as far as possible from any tradition and fixed definition – which would compromise the sought out transition towards an unified notion of art. Therefore in considering only a limited number of general aspects, such as part/whole relations and the problem of mass, Judd is unable to distinguish, in a satisfying way, the three-dimensionality of Minimalism from that of sculpture in a broad sense.

Now, considering the level of his influence, Judd might be regarded as a spokesman for this argument, saying that because minimal art opposes medium specificity, it should not be thought of as sculpture. And yet, he also leaves us with the idea that the separation between minimal art and sculpture (and the disqualification of both terms) results primarily from the influence of a theoretical framework that no longer considered the medium to be a relevant category. In short, what supports the division between minimal art and sculpture seems to be the ambition to engage with art as an integrated field.

This thesis departs from such an idea and proposes instead to reflect on the possibilities of contemporary figurative sculpture. This change of perspective gives me just enough space to use Minimalism as a starting point for a reflection that engages with sculpture. This is supported by two main factors, which are based on what has been said above. Firstly, in terms of concrete presence, it is difficult to separate the three-dimensionality of minimal art from that of sculpture. Apart from the more technical difficulties created by the use of specific theoretical references, there seems to be no reason why minimal artworks should not be regarded as sculpture. Secondly, and more probably, it seems relevant to use Minimalism as a starting point to reflect upon contemporary figurative sculpture because Minimalism has played an instrumental role in the development of the reconfigured notion of sculpture we know today, which in turn logically influences the use of the figure. In fact, it is not uncommon to claim that minimal art has developed around issues pertaining to sculpture. Morris, for

instance, supports the idea in "Notes on Sculpture, Part 4", where he writes: "Part of the possibility for the success of the project of reconstituting objects as art had to do with the state of sculpture."[9]

Finally, it is important to outline some initial and general terms. It is useful to understand sculpture both as a practice and conceptual discipline that deals with the transformation, dislocation, assemblage and juxtaposition of materials and objects. One can also think of it as an artistic practice that engenders a physical relationship between objects and the viewer in a space shared by both. Essentially the artworks discussed in this chapter can be included in this definition of sculpture.

Meanwhile, we need to consider that in minimal art it is not so much the object that matters, but the way that viewers engage with it. Furthermore, in rejecting the use of metaphor, minimal art invites the viewer to participate in the construction of meaning. This also means that it is possible to define Minimalism as a form of art that uses simplified forms to establish a relationship between objects and viewers in space, and more specifically, that works towards setting the awareness of the experience of viewing as its very central aspect. This implies that by positing the viewing experience as a condition of meaning, minimal art is ontologically realized through the living body.

On that note, it is worth restating that in the following pages the term Minimalism occasionally appears associated with artworks where the object has a residual presence, or even no presence at all, and that clearly replace the importance of the object for that of a lively experience. In other words, Minimalism may refer to installation, performance or post-minimal works.

In fact, this relationship between minimal art and the body is key to the main argument here, which is based largely on a contrast between the way the former stages the body and the way that figurative sculpture opens up the possibility of recomposing the body beyond the living body and therefore, as will be argued later, the subject. Proceeding on from this, in a somewhat abbreviated and condensed manner, the proposal is to understand figurative sculpture as a specific field of sculpture that evokes the human form as the condition of its

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9 Robert Morris, Continuous Project Altered Daily. The Writings of Robert Morris, 53

initial meaning, and perhaps more importantly, where the figure may come to the fore as a way of rehearsing and negotiating multiple and often conflicting new meanings.

The discredit of contemporary figurative sculpture

One of the premises of this thesis is that contemporary figurative sculpture is discredited; this needs to be established. Perhaps it is beneficial to start by saying that it is impractical to talk about contemporary sculpture in an academic context without taking into account today's expanded notion of sculpture, something upheld during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the radical alterations which occurred in the art world during that period. These changes included a profound reconfiguration of the art object and of the viewing experience. Furthermore, the advances made during those two decades have irrevocably determined our present understanding of contemporary art by introducing a constant demand for the critical, conceptual and relational aspects of artworks to be taken as a priority.

Minimal art was instrumental in the development of these changes. It brought into question the use of metaphor, undermined representation, and crucially, worked to produce an idea of art as a whole, as opposed to a phenomenon defined in terms of different mediums. It also helped to make the experience of the viewer a central preoccupation to practicing artists. Having mentioned this before, it is important to underline that if these questions were intensified during 1960s and 1970s they still continue to influence the way artists work today.

One cannot separate the almost complete removal of figurative work from western art during the 1960s and 1970s from Minimalism and its influence. In actuality, it is no surprise that a significant part of the figurative work that started to appear again at the beginning of the 1980s, continued to demonstrate the effect of this influence.

For example, both Stephan Balkenhol and Charles Ray, (particularly in work made during the early 1990s) started to produce figures that seem to confront the viewer in the space of the gallery and, as a result, engender awareness of

the very act of viewing. Directly carved in wood, and evoking the common man in the case of Balkenhol, or bringing to mind the mannequin in the case of Ray, these figures also recall the everyday, and therefore challenge the division between art and non-art. Let us not forget, that these are all priorities which were insisted on by minimal art.

In more recent years, the number of leading artists that have used the figure as a central element of their practice has further increased. These include artists like Isa Genzken, Rachel Harrison or Mark Manders who, in using an exploratory approach, have been charting new possibilities for the sculptural human form. I shall return to these artists later.

So, in some respects figurative sculpture has been gaining ground in the field of contemporary art, but we also need to consider that this field is structured around paradigms that have largely evolved from a denial of representation. Paradigms that seem to foster an idea of art as an activity that produces critical visions of reality and that tends, one could say naturally, to be suspicious of figurative sculpture and particularly its illusionistic nature.

In other words, the discrediting of figurative sculpture is revealed by a certain discomfort that contemporary thought has towards the ambiguous materiality of figurative sculpture, (which is neither entirely concrete nor a result of mere appearance), and explains why the figure in sculpture is not used as an object of artistic discourse so much as a point of departure. Indeed, one might be tempted to compare the antagonism between the materiality of figurative sculpture and the idea of reality, to the tension that exists between a figure and the living body in space. Considering that the body is a central theme in contemporary art, then it might be argued that this tension is one of the causes of what I am here calling the discredit of figurative sculpture.

Writing in 2014, on the occasion of a major exhibition of contemporary figurative sculpture held at the Hayward Gallery in London, Ralph Rugoff, then director of the gallery, drew a portrait of how the figure was currently being used in sculpture, (which could equally be applied to the state of figurative sculpture today). He suggested that the figure is engaged with "not to affirm our existing notions of subjectivity and identity, but as a means of looking askance at

them"[10]. This observation reflects the ironic tone that can be detected in so many of today's figurative projects, (including some belonging to the artists mentioned above), and the numerous cases where the figure, approaching the form of the caricature, appears to ridicule its own presence in space. Artworks that strategically use the figure to evoke a series of codes and conventions do seem more frequent than those that engage with the figure as a project in its own right. The presence of figurative sculpture, it could be said, is mostly a negative presence.

As a whole, beyond a demand to reflect its historical condition and place it within the discourses of contemporary art, artists seem unable to use the figure in a positive manner. It may appear that artists are starting to turn to the figure more, but the suspicion is still there: figurative sculpture always needs to be thoroughly justified, almost apologised for. Clearly when something needs to be justified repeatedly, it is because it is discredited. Its criticality is always in question, its relevance and value always need to be asserted. Furthermore whilst one could be mislead by the work of a small group of artists who managed to bring attention back to the possibilities of the human form, this suspicion towards figurative sculpture becomes more tangible when we consider the relative number of artists and curators who decide to work with it in important events. I shall now continue the argument by providing some statistical evidence

Let us start by looking at *Skulptur Projekte* - an event that takes place once every 10 years in the small town of Münster, Germany. It is one of the largest international events dedicated to sculpture, and more importantly, one whose relevance is widely recognized. It aims at exploring the relationship between sculpture and the city but it is demonstrative of the question examined here. Furthermore, the long period between editions makes *Skulptur Projekte* a legitimate example to take the pulse of the different expressions and trends of thought presented there.

The first edition of *Skulptur Projekte* was held in 1977 and hosted a total of 9 projects, all by key artists of the time. None of the projects were figurative. The second edition was comprised of 63 projects of which only 3 evoked the human figure. This represented about 6%. After 10 years, with the event now on its third

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10 Ralph Rugoff, ed., *The Human Factor. The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture,* exh. Cat., London, Hayward Publishing, 18

edition, the ratio of the number of projects to figurative work increased but not in a significant way. In 1997 there were 74 projects, and only 7 engaged with the figure making up 9% of the whole; incidentally this included a work by Hans Haacke who appropriated a previously existing sculpture by constructing an installation around it. At the time of writing, the last edition was held in 2007 and it included 35 projects. Again, only 3 object-based proposals evoked the human figure, which amounted to around 8%[11].

Documenta is another international event recognized for its artistic relevance. Held every 5 years in Kassel, also in Germany, it is a multidisciplinary event particularly known for promoting a reflection about how art can relate to the world at large on a social and political level. It gives us an idea about the relative presence of the figure in relation to a wide range of artistic practices - and in that sense is a good indicator of the weight artists assign to the human figure. Focusing on the same period as above, 1977 saw the sixth edition of *Documenta*. This was the first event related to the visual arts ever to be transmitted by means of television, and a large number of video works and performances were shown. Similarly to what happened in *Skulptur Projekte* during that same year, the figure was completely absent[12].

The following edition, named *Documenta 7*, was held in 1982 and saw artists like Joel Shapiro, Markus Raetz, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Jonathan Borofsky, introducing figurative work to the event. But these still represented a rather modest presence if compared to the total number of projects and the wider scope of the exhibition. *Documenta 7* hosted a total of 178 projects, comprising 31 non-figurative sculptural projects, 14 installations, 4 performances, 16 conceptual works (language based), 12 photo based artworks and 86 contributions made in the form of painting - including 34 where the human form was represented. By comparison, the artists above contributed with a total of 7 figurative sculptures, which represents about 4%[13].

This tendency for diversity and residual figurative work continued over the following editions. *Documenta 8,* produced in 1987, was comprised of 140

11 The information gathered here can be found at: < http://www.skulptur-projekte.de/skulptur-projekte-download/muenster/index.htm >[Accessed September 26th 2015]
12 See Michael Glasmeier, *50 Jahre / Years Documenta 1955-2005: Archive in Motion – Discrete Energies / Diskrete Energien*, exh. cat, Kassel, Steidl, 2005
13 See AA.VV., *documenta 7*, exh. cat, Kassel, Dierichs, 1982

proposals that included video art, conceptual art, photography, architecture, design and even music. Installation was represented by 19 works, including 2 that used figurative elements, painting with 33, with 8 that engaged with the human form, and finally sculpture, with 62 projects of which only one was clearly figurative[14]. This translates as 0,7%.

In the editions that followed there was a slight increase in the number of figurative works, again without this increase ever becoming really significant. The combined number of figurative sculptures presented in 1992[15], 1997[16], 2002[17] and 2007[18] was 25, which stands against an impressive total of 523 artworks. This means less than 5%.

In 2012, during *Documenta (13)*, the last edition to date, this percentage rises to approximately 9%. These numbers, however, are largely the result of curatorial decisions that, according to the curator, sought to explore the idea of art as research[19]. They included a series of projects with small figurative elements used as a form of support to a theoretical and critical construction of ideas more than as a project in their own right. This misleading increase is further supported by the presence of the figure which resulted from an unusual selection of figurative works by deceased artists, including Gonzalez, Man Ray and the surrealist sculptor from Brazil, Maria Martins – whose works were again used more from a set of curatorial decisions than as an artistic project per se.

The near absence of the figure, and the tendency to appropriate it as a conceptual point of departure more than as an artistic proposition, becomes even more explicit if we look at the history of another, more recent event: the Biennial of art *Manifesta.* Initially put forward as a platform to investigate the post-nation European identity,[20] it has become of increasing significance through the constant participation of influential artists and theorists.

Between 1996, the year that saw *Manifesta's* first edition, and 2014, the year of

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14 See AA.VV., *Documenta 8*, exh. cat, Kassel, Verlag und Gesamtherstellung, 1987
15 See Jan Hoet ed., *Documenta IX*, exh. cat, Kassel, Hatje Cantz, 1999
16 See Paul Sztulman, Catherine David, Jean-François Chvevrier, eds., *Documenta X: Short Guide*. exh. cat. Kassel: Verlag Gerd Hatje. 1997
17 See Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Documenta 11*, exh. cat., Kassel, Hatje Cantz, 2002
18 See Roger Buergel, Ruth Noack, eds., *Documenta 12: Catalogue*, exh. cat., Kassel, Taschen, 2007
19 See AA.VV., *Documenta (13) Catalog 1/3: The Book of Books*, exh. cat., Kassel, Hatje Cantz, 2012
20 For more on the initial proposal of Manifesta, see for example: Robert Fleck, Maria Lind, Barbara Vanderlinden, eds., *Manisfesta 2. European Biennial of Contemporary Art/Luxembourg,* exh. cat, Luxembourg, Manifesta, 1998, 6-8

the event's last edition, more than 700 projects have been presented, of which only 13 were sculptural projects which engaged with the figure. This corresponds to less than 2%. Significantly, the numbers include a huge amount of projects that relied upon the direct participation of viewers, and crucially, that involved local communities as a way of rehearsing and thinking about the social and the political spheres[21].

It is worth remembering, that, within the context of visual arts, the idea of producing conditions for viewers to participate in the creation of meaning started to gain relevancy as an artistic strategy primarily after minimal art - and that today, as evidenced by the above, this continues to occupy a central place in the field of contemporary art.

Artangel is another useful reference to look at. It is a leading arts organization in the UK and beyond, which for the past decades has commissioned and produced an array of daring large-scale projects, and more importantly, has a strong opinion about what constitutes subjects of interest for the general public.

If I can now focus on the United Kingdom, and take a very brief look into projects supported by Artangel, further evidence is available concerning the priorities of the art world and the relative value ascribed to figurative sculpture. Numbers are once again revealing. Between 1992, when it first started to operate, and 2015, the year at the time of writing, Artangel has been involved in the production of 93 projects, of which only 2 have explored the human figure. This again, corresponds to only 2% of the total number of projects[22]. As suggested by the history of Artangel and all of the events mentioned above, the presence of the sculpted figure corresponds to approximately 5% or less[23] of the works highlighted by the art world over the past few decades.

This allows us to infer two things. The first is that the number of artists who choose to engage with the figure (more than who those artists are), and the

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21 An archive with documentation from all of Manifesta's editions can be viewed at: < http://www.manifesta.org/network/manifesta-archive/> [Accessed September 11th 2015]
22 For a complete account of Artangel's commissions, see: < http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects> [Accessed September 11th 2015]
23 The value corresponds to an average calculated by using the added number of editions of each event between 1977 and 2012, in the case of *Skulptur Projekte* and *Documenta*, the added number of editions between 1996 and 2014, in the case of *Manifesta*, and the total number of projects realized between 1992 and 2015, in the case of Artangel.

frequency with which figurative work actually gets to be exhibited in the context of major art events, suggest that figurative sculpture is, or rather continues to be, a discredited language. To be more precise: statistic evidence does not prove intent on the part of the individual artist, but it indicates tendency of practice and receptivity, or the lack of it, on the part of the art world towards figurative work. The second inference, already intimated earlier, is that minimal art has played a central role in undermining the logic of figuration. With this in mind what I will do next, is try and reverse these terms and utilise a discussion on minimal art as a starting point to rethink the possibilities of figurative sculpture.

Exposition

Having started as an attempt to reinstate a notion of art that is critical of the aesthetic and to undermine the idea of autonomy, medium specificity and the stability of meaning, Minimalism managed to exchange a concept of artwork based on visual composition for a much broader definition based on experience, which includes viewers and the very act of perception as integral parts. As mentioned above, this was instrumental in forming the basis for an understanding of contemporary art.

The introduction of a new relationship between art criticism and art making was also central to the movement, with artists such as Judd and Morris writing some of the most groundbreaking and provocative art criticism of the time (whilst establishing themselves as the main theorists of their own practice). Smithson and Carl Andre could also be remembered as artists and prominent writers. In turn, Rosalind E. Krauss, who will be considered for the main thread of this chapter, has contributed much to the development of Minimalism - and crucially helped to define and position it - as an art critic and theorist. Furthermore, whilst maintaining that phenomenology and structural linguistics are the two main theoretical frameworks behind the development of Minimalism, Krauss develops a specific reading of the history of modern sculpture, as gathered in the hugely

influential *Passages in Modern Sculpture*[24] *,* first published in 1977, where Minimalism appears as its final stage of development.

This reading appears reworked in the essay "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum"[25], published in 1990, where Krauss explains that one of the most important achievements of minimal art was to simultaneously reconfigure the art object and the viewing subject. In other words, that in denying both "the work as a repository of known forms"[26] and "a subject who cognitively grasps these forms because he or she knows them in advance"[27], minimal art managed to break with the idea of sculpture seen in terms of mediation and to exchange a centred, autonomous subject, that experiences the work mentally, and therefore privately, for another that coheres only temporarily in the physical space – space that, in this sense, would offer further critical possibilities in its ability to be shared. I will return to this essay later.

Giving shape to a critique of interiority in sculpture, the notions of *essence* and *being* were also questioned by Minimalism as well-illustrated by Judd's *Floor Sculpture Series*. Produced from 1967 onwards, these are normally constituted by single units or progressions of repeated units, presented as something between a well-defined whole and an opening, and that together with the repetition of modules - neither solid nor simple containers - seem to refuse the concept of an object with a core and a connection with authenticity. This idea is underlined by the fact that both formal variations and repetition take place in the absence of an original and originating element, which clearly breaks with the association, traditionally made in relation to figurative sculpture, between sculpture and the idea of soul[28].

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24 "Indeed, the history of modern sculpture coincides with the development of two bodies of thought, phenomenology and structural linguistics..." in KRAUSS, Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 1981, 4

25 Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum" in *October* Vol. 54 n° 104, MIT Press, 1990

26 Ibid., 8

27 Ibid.

28 As a leap forward, it is interesting to note that in placing the work of Rodin right at the beginning of *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Krauss identifies the latter as a predecessor of Minimalism. She suggests, albeit not explicitly, that his groundbreaking visibility of process, repetition and multi-positionality, as found in *The Gates of Hell*, as well as in the way, for a significant part of his work, the artist uses surface, has no direct correlation to the figure's anatomical tension. This makes it difficult to locate Rodin's work within, precisely, a relation between sculpture and the idea of soul (as the strong affirmation of sculpture's materiality and the priority he gave to surface values seem to constantly undermine the idea of interiority). That being said, it is equally relevant to make a note of how Krauss avoids the question of representation by bracketing Rodin's figures as a sum of pure formal elements – helping her to reflect on the increasingly problematic category of sculpture, by putting the figurative element of the work out of focus and hence announcing, or confirming, the idea of an object that no longer comes invested with meaning. Later in the text, I will try to reverse this logic and bring 'the figure' back into focus by concentrating on 'what a figure does' rather than on 'what a figure is (supposed to be)', which I think is what causes difficulties in conciliating a materialistic approach to sculpture

1.Vladimir Tatlin. *Corner Counter-Relief* (1914), iron, aluminium, paint. 31 ½ x 59 x 29 ½ inches

And then, of course, there is the question of representation that the minimalist artist sees as a form of illusion and negative idealization, or as a vehicle to an imaginary space that presents the viewer with something other than reality, hence concealing the truth about reality. The contours of a pedagogical problem, whose solution had been shown several decades earlier by Vladimir Tatlin's pioneering gesture, consisting of moving forms and materials from the pictorial space to real space in *Corner Counter-Relief* [29] from 1914 (fig.1); a work that minimal art took as a formula to purge metaphor and illusionism, to produce self-identical works and to engender a situation that involves literal objects, living people and real space in a single situation.

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and figuration. For more on Krauss's argument, see the first chapter in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*: "Narrative Time: The question of the Gates of Hell" in Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 7-37

29 We can perhaps speculate on the relation between Tatlin's *Corner Relief* and some types of Russian icons since, unlike the western tradition of drawing the geometry of an imaginative space that the viewer is invited to enter, these are painted with an inverted perspective to suggest the *entering* of the pictorial space *into* real space – serving the fact that these are normally placed in a corner (a feat that of course Tatlin also uses) to increase the effect of perspective distortion and further suggest that the religious image exists as if in the same room as those who view it.

2.View of 'Primary Structures' exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York, 1966, with Donald Judd's *Untitled* (1966), galvanized iron, aluminium, 40x189¾x40 inches with 10 inches intervals, on the wall and on the floor, on the left of the image and further to the right, with Robert Morris's *L-beams* (1965), painted plywood, 96x96x24 inches

During the seminal exhibition "Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors" held at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966, it became clear how such a 'situation' could be translated into the context of art after modernism in the West. Judd, one of the participating artists, showed *Untitled* from the same year (fig.2) composed of two similar elements, one displayed on the wall, the other placed on the floor with each made of four repeated units plus a bar on top, of galvanized iron and aluminium respectively – hence, this is a work that signals the refusal of representation by giving all its elements a physical presence in space.

Furthermore, judging from the image provided, if a viewer assumed a position in front of the work, the two elements must have been perceived as four undifferentiated cubes separated by equal distances and visually linked on top by a line of different colour. However, if the same viewer moved towards the side, the single cube must have appeared as the strongest element, now with the aluminium bar taking the shape of a hollow tube of square section. In other words, it would have been difficult to identify a principal viewing position and, concerning the objects, difficult to single out the parts or even to identify an

overpowering element in the set. Moreover, *Untitled* shows how minimal art functions in terms of a bodily engagement in detriment to a mental engagement, achieved by giving the viewer different perspectives from different positions, all of which were equally important, that provide the latter with a sense of his own position in space.

This awareness is what functions in support of Minimalism's ambition to present the subject to himself – a non-idealized subject that, in the process of opening up to the context around him, is able to learn things in time (marking a clear effort led by minimalist sculptors to break with an autonomous, centred subject). What this signifies is that the viewer *is* the condition of the meaning of the work, which is not found internally in the artwork but is instead structured externally on site; that being the case, the stability of meaning is also questioned by the variety of different, equally relevant, views. One immediate result of this is that artworks become more explicitly dependent on the viewing conditions and, borrowing from Morris, that taking relations out of work and making them "a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision" produces, in turn, "less self-important works"[30].

Besides the dismissal of representation, *Untitled* also reveals the intention to move away from hierarchy and part-by-part sculpture towards forms perceived as a whole; argued at the time to be the key to abandoning the imaginary and the individuality of one's encounter with a sculptural object. In addition, Minimalism's inherent refusal of medium specificity is in a way also signalled by the fact that the two elements do not change, be it on the wall, as is traditionally associated with painting, or on the floor, commonly associated with sculpture.

The dissolution of hierarchy in Minimalism, as discussed above and referenced here in terms of whole-orientated preoccupations, further translates as a break from composition seen as a historical formula for organizing meaning (the sort of linear implication that is typical in art works that depend on narrative, the use of references or those that are constituted in terms of part-by-part relations)[31].

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30 These ideas are the very basis for the conceit of an expanded sculptural object, which Morris developed in "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2", first published in 1966, and that appears later, in 1979 to be precise, in Krauss's "Sculpture in the Expanded Field". For the citations and Krauss's essay see: Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture part 2" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon Wood. eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader*, 238. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1986, 276-290

31 Throughout "Specific Objects", it becomes clear that part of the argument behind the opposition to illusion and composition is also to do with an attempt to distance the 'new work' from the European tradition of art.

What again underlines the claim about Minimalism as a public form of art - with the removal of the hierarchic forms of organizing meaning and any forms of pre-knowledge as requirements for understanding works – is that once organized in terms of a whole, as is found in *Untitled,* the difference both on the level of objects and on the level of the viewing experience, seems to be cancelled out by reporting exclusively to a form of external engagement that activates only aspects common to an undifferentiated viewer. In summary, insofar as breaking with the pictorial space and hierarchical forms of organizing meaning, individually known images were also dismissed to suggest the possibility of a communal perception. Indifference seems also to be at the heart of the Minimalist artist's claim that Minimalism as a genre was a public form of art in terms of the engagement with the work, the work itself, and the undifferentiation of viewers.

Dance is another good example to understand some general implications of Minimalism. During the 1960s, the Judson Dance Theater developed a new concept of dance based on ordinary movement involving gestures with no 'interior meaning', or 'task performance' as it ended up being called, the principles of which Morris used for the famous collaborative piece *Site* performed in 1964. Here he moved several boards of plywood around a stage, describing these movements in a way similar to that of any other common worker; leading, upon removal of the last board, to the apparition of Carolee Schneemann, enacting the position of the painted figure in Manet's *Olympia, from* 1863, thus more importantly suggesting an unmediated presence of a woman stripped of any forms of visual illusion. As Krauss states in a catalogue essay published much later in 1994, in that moment Schneemann joined " her body to the anti-illusionism expressed in the very idea of a dance of ordinary movement as well as that refusal of interiority in painting that would become the manifesto of Minimalism, whether in Morris's own 'Notes on Sculpture' or Donald Judd's essay 'Specific Objects'" [32].

The performance allows us two main considerations. Firstly, again we have the refusal of illusionism, which at this time is explained to us through a metaphor of

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Here is an example: "Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colours - which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art" in Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon Wood. eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader*, 218

32 Rosalind E. Krauss "The Mind/Body Problem: Robert Morris in series" AA.VV. *Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem.* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. 1994, 6

painting. In fact, anti-illusionism appears as an attempt to answer the problems raised by the immateriality of something produced by marks on a bidimensional plane and that exists only as a visual suggestion. So what is now literally illustrated is that, conceptually, Minimalism is established in the passage from the pictorial space to the real space, or in other words, that it is rooted in a painterly understanding of art. As Judd suggests: "The new work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting, but it is nearer to painting" [33]. Secondly, we also have a refusal of anthropomorphism that, if before it was felt in terms of form, here it takes the side of gesture, or, a certain emptying out of gesture (repeated, for example, in the evacuation of the manual from processes of making objects), that in turn makes it clear that the critique of interiority also applies to the subject at play in Minimalism – one whose conceptualization corresponds as it were, to the emptying of the body.

Now focusing on the theoretical background of minimal art, if we consider the importance of the arguments developed around the viewing experience, it is clear why phenomenology, and in particular Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, was so important: "Viewing was envisaged by him, [Merleau-Ponty] not as the self-contained activity of a disembodied eye, but as embedded within the body and inextricably bound up with a broader situation of the body within the physical environment."[34].

However, alongside the framework of phenomenology, one can appreciate that the notion of objectivity occupies a chief position within the territory of Minimalism's conceptual markers, for it forms the basis for a distinction between concreteness and illusion. In fact, objectivity did at some point emerge as a central conceptual support for Minimalism's political claims of working within a framework of depersonalized experience of art, and the need to presuppose the beholder's mindset. It does this through a principle that prevents the possibility to imaginatively, that is individually, recompose artworks - a scenario which Merleau-Ponty's idea of creative viewing was unable to suspend[35].

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33 in Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon Wood Jon. eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader*, 216
11 Here I am quoting from Alex Potts who discusses the impact that Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology had on the intellectual development behind Minimalism, in Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernism, Minimalism,* London, Yale University Press, 2009, 208
35 There was always a contradiction between phenomenology and objectivity. Not so much that the first might be falsely associated with a subjective experience - in an individualistic sense - but because it defines a symbiosis between the self and the world which the latter denies.

Reading across references, the one-directional movement between object and subject implicit in the notion of *sense-data,* a notion that entered the vocabulary of minimal art through the influence of Wittgenstein, seems to have resolved the contradiction between phenomenology and objectivity over a short period of time. A period that allowed a transition from phenomenology to post-structuralism and then to structural linguistics as the main theoretical references for Minimalism from the mid-1960s onwards. This in turn, established language and critical analysis as principles for an unequivocal assertion of meaning and, precisely, the objective means to distinguish between knowing and believing[36]. In Krauss's own account: "The implementation of the Word is public; I either use it correctly or I don't" [37], or:

> to reduce the 'mental' to 'language' is to transform
> the presumed privacy of thinking into the public
> medium of speech and the logic of propositions. It is
> as well to exchange the mysterious domain of what
> can be known only to the knower for the overt
> space of shared events [38]

The influence of objectivity as a principle behind the development of Minimalism can also be identified with reference to the idea of art criticism as centred around judgment. This approach, typical of Greenberg's criticism, lost its prevalence to theories developed by Judd, Morris, Krauss, and those associated. As the latter points out in the introduction to *The originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, these took the influence of Structuralism and Post-structuralism to exchanged judgment for method, and replace the goal of asserting value through the historical reading of formal ruptures and continuities - which is typical of the first kind of criticism - for the analysis of the structures of signification materially integrated in the works of art. Artworks, that in being increasingly developed in a state of symbiosis with

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36 Whilst the influence of French thought continued to be felt in the works of Barthes, Foucault, Saussure, or Lacan (explicitly in writings of Krauss), Wittgenstein is perhaps the single author whose philosophical vocabulary most appealed to artists, theorists and critics during this period. Alex Potts, for instance, notes that: "By the end of the 1960s, artists or art critics looking to ground their analysis philosophically, and seeking alternatives to traditional rationalist or positivist models, tended to return to Wittgenstein rather than to the French exisentialists or phenomenologists. With this insistence on the centrality of an understanding of language to a conceptually informed critical analysis, Wittgenstein became the thinking artist's and critic's philosopher" Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernism, Minimalism*, 210. For a more complete account of the series of substitutions of philosophical references during this time see: Ibid., 206-213
37 Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Mind/Body Problem: Robert Morris in series" in AA.VV., Robert Morris, *The Mind/Body Problem,* 6
38 Ibid., p. 4

art criticism – it is significant that a lot of artists were also accomplished writers - tended to facilitate an objective, non-historical analysis, by means of establishing (and exposing) the criteria of their own signification within its physical structures[39]. A feat connected to the notion of verification in Minimalism, which I will discuss later.

Lastly, reflecting on the implications of an experience that is located between an intellectual and emotional response, such as that of viewing a minimalist art work, through the logic of linguistic propositions, seems to require the means to legitimize such object without imposing the conceptual limitations of an experiencing self. This can perhaps explain why Minimalism developed, once again in Krauss's view, along a parallel between "a need of certain artists to explore the externality of language and therefore of meaning", with "the project in the work of other sculptors: the discovery of the body as a complete externalization of Self."[40] This is a formulation that, if we consider the movement as defined by its initial dismissal of representation and the autonomy of the work, passing by the decentring of the subject and arriving at the introduction of language, appears to take the shape of a mature theoretical understanding of minimal art.

The exposition here would not be complete without a note or two about the unexpected direction minimal art took. In "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum", written in 1990 in a clearly post-Minimalism context, Krauss delivers both an overarching survey and a re-evaluation of the movement. On the one hand, she maintains that Minimalism offered a compensatory experience; some instant of bodily plenitude in a world of fast industrialization [41].

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39 Right at the end of the introduction to *The originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, a book that like others from the author organizes and collects previously published essays, Krauss writes: "Postmodernist Art enters this terrain (the theoretical domain of structuralism and poststructuralist analysis) openly. And it is this phenomenon, born of the last two decades, that in turn, has opened critical practice, overtly, onto method." In Rosalind E. Krauss, *The originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 6.
40 The quote here is taken from "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture". An essay originally published in 1973, where Krauss reflects on the continuity between minimal and post-minimal art and in particular on how the latter continues to reject history as a source of meaning. The argument is established on general lines and although Krauss spends a bit more time reflecting, with no specific detail, on the work of Roberto Morris and Richard Serra, a large numbers of other artists are mentioned therein. The expression "other sculptors" is left, one could say adequately, with no specific reference. The essay can be found in Rosalind E. Krauss "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture" in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism*, London, Phaidon, 2000, 256
41 "(…) the Minimalist subject is in this very displacement returned to its body, regrounded in a kind of richer, denser subsoil of experience than the paper-thin layer of an autonomous visuality that had been the goal of optical painting. And thus this move is, we could say, compensatory, an act of reparation to a subject whose everyday experience is one of increasing isolation, reification, specialization, a subject who lives under the conditions of advanced industrial culture as an increasingly instrumentalized being. It is to this subject that Minimalism in an act of resistance to the serialization, stereotyping, and banalizing of commodity production, holds out a promise of some instant of bodily plenitude in a gesture of compensation that we recognize as

On the other hand, she states that Minimalism is now being used in the service of capital.

The text begins in a typically 'Kraussian' style by making the argument ever more eloquent through a form of writing that places the reader alongside Krauss as she walks through an exhibition of minimalist works from the Panza Collection, where many of her "old friends", as she calls the works, "triumphantly fill vast suites of galleries, having muscled everything else off the walls" [42]. Confessing to be happy at first, she continues to communicate resentment, for she explains, a revision of Minimalism, and particularly the sort of spatial relations that it introduces, is now being used to reconfigure the museum according to the logic of late capitalism. This being, the type of museum that as she recognizes in the Guggenheim group, which is made to fit the needs of, as well as working to produce, a "subject in search not of affect but of intensities"[43], leading her to ask if it is possible that "a movement that wished to attack commodification and tecnhologization somehow always already carried the codes of those very conditions"[44], only to conclude a few pages later that:

> With Minimalism, the potential was already there that not only would the *object* be caught up in the logic of commodity production, a logic that would overwhelm its specificity, but that the *subject* projected by Minimalism, would also be reprogrammed. Which is to say that the Minimalism subject of "lived bodily experience" – unballasted by past knowledge and coalescing in the very moment of its encounter with the object – could, if only pushed just a little farther, break up entirely into the utterly fragmented, postmodern subject of contemporary mass culture. It could even be suggested that by prizing loose the old ego-

deeply aesthetic" in Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum" in *October* Vol. 54 nº 104, 9-10
42 Ibid., 3
43 Ibid.,17
44 Ibid.,10

centered subject of traditional art, Minimalism unintentionally – albeit logically – prepares for that fragmentation.[45]

Now, whilst Krauss anticipates part of my argument, what is going to be discussed next is that the problem of Minimalism is not so much its 'code' but its ambition to present the subject to itself together with self-identical objects. It will be argued, in other words, that the problem might actually concern what Minimalism has always left out: the possibility to think about - and inscribe - notions of the *subject* beyond "what the subject already is" and about objects of difference. Suggesting upfront that this has something to do with how Minimalism is caught in the logic of objectivity, I will now discuss, from a position influenced by pragmatism and more precisely by Richard Rorty, the limitations of minimal art from the angle of its subordination to the logic of objectivity.

Minimalism with Pragmatism

Having published his first book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature[46]* only in 1979, when Minimalism was conceptually well-structured, one can only imagine the sort of positive influence Richard Rorty could have had for minimalist artists with works such as the above – where he argues modern epistemology is misguided by an idea of the mind as trying to faithfully correspond to a human-independent external reality; or inversely, the impact that his defense of narrative, notably in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity[47]* from 1989, could have had for Minimalism's refusal of narrative. However, despite the absence of a documented line of influence, his work allows us the possibility of thinking in a different way about Minimalism.

Rorty's project is concerned with building an argument for the need to orientate philosophical debate towards social and political questions. Throughout his

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45 Ibid.,12
46 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature:* Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009*
47 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989

writings he often returns to Dewey and specifically to his position, maintaining that western philosophy is conservative by its favouring of stability over change, the priority of objective truth, and thus producing a system of belief with fixed values that privilege the leisure class over the producing class. It is with this in mind that Rorty tries to redefine the philosophical vocabulary, combining the analytical tradition (following mostly Dewey, precisely) with continental, post-Nietzschian philosophy (in line with Heidegger and Derrida). He proposes that we abandon a dualistic view, and the distinction between reality and appearances together with the epistemological distinction between finding and making, replacing these for a distinction between the more useful and the less useful in order to give priority to democracy over philosophy. That is, to dissolve what keeps philosophical debate and the preoccupations of democracy apart. To put it another way, in recuperating Nietzsche's maxim of saying that philosophy and literature are one and the same, Rorty proposes the task of attempting to improve the health of our democracies, replacing argument for re-description - of the way we live- and crucially, to part ways with:

> The tradition in western culture which centres around the notion of search for Truth (…) the clearest example of the attempt to find a sense in one's existence by turning away from solidarity to objectivity. The idea of Truth as something to be pursued for its own sake, not because it will be good for oneself, or for one's real or imaginary community, is the theme of this tradition [48].

Unsurprisingly, my contention is that Minimalism can be associated with this tradition, an association I propose to explain in three short steps, and then followed by a longer one.

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[48] Objectivity is one of the terms that Rorty elaborates on the most. It is frequently found in contrast with the term solidarity which partially disambiguates the question about relativism that his work is often accused of. A similar fault may be found in the term *irony* , which in Rorty's understanding of the word, relates to the idea that there is no final vocabulary or narrative, thus, that these can be modified for the benefit of solidarity. Irony is not merely 'being ironic' where 'everything goes'. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 21

3.Donald Judd, 'Untitled' (1965), aluminium, 8 ¼ x 253 x 8 ¼ inches

1

We are already in a position to claim that minimal art is influenced by theories of knowledge and concerned with problems arising from the discovery of artworks, that is, with how different aspects of artworks get to be *known* – problems which it aims to situate in relation to the possibility of articulating meaning publicly. From the outset, both aspects were considered important to reinstate and define a critically invested work of art as one that lends itself as "a way of finding out

what the world's like" [49]; in turn, this allows us to say that Minimalism is a movement that articulates questions of truth.

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49 The phrase is a definition of Minimalism originally attributed to Donald Judd. Krauss used it on three different occasions and I retrieved it from David Raskin's essay: "Judd's Moral Art". See David Raskin, "Judd's Moral Art" *in* Nicholas Serrota eds., *Donald Judd*, London, Tate Publishing, 2004, 82

Krauss, for example, often aligns positions in regard to claims of truth. In the essay "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd" [50], writing about one of Judd's wall progressions (fig. 3), she notes that Judd wants to remove both "allusion and illusion" but that his work has kept both. The frontal view of the piece, suggesting a mathematical progression, does not clarify the physical condition of the object, perceived only from the side[51]. However, this is seen as a positive feature because it makes the work depend on the accumulation of views, a quality Krauss named "lived illusion" and as you may find elsewhere is:

> a realisation that she [Krauss] celebrated with a didactic claim about life … 'lived illusion' rightly demonstrated that it is the very interplay between a person and the world that gives meaning to both, that makes each exist[52].

This would be revised on two different occasions. First, negatively in 1971[53], when Krauss argues that "lived illusion" depends on the private experience of a singular viewer and therefore offers no certainty of truth. Second, positively in 1973 [54], when she stated that "lived illusion" demonstrates that the senses do not offer access to truth, suggesting that Minimalism is set to work like (and measured as) a field where the interplay between the subject and the world, and in particular acts of conscience, can be staged.

In order to make a distinction from the traditional understanding of correspondence theories of truth, it is possible to say that Minimalism therefore, relates to what we could perhaps call a correspondence theory of knowledge.
This distinction is made on the basis that, as far as Minimalism is about the whole preceding the parts and about artworks that stand on their own right, i.e. in the immediacy of their concrete presence in space, neither a description nor a sensual expression, then minimal art refuses the very idea of medium and

50 Rosalind E. Krauss "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd" in, *Artforum*, vol. 4, no9 1966
51 Ibid., 24
52 David Raskin, "Judd's Moral Art" *in* Nicholas Serrota eds., *Donald Judd*, 79
53 *See* Rosalind E. Krauss "Problems of Criticism, X: Pictorial Space and the Question of Documentary" in *Artforum,* Vol.10, N° 3 November, 1971
54 *see* Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post '60s Sculpture",in *Artforum*, Vol. 12, N°3, November 1973

dissolves a structure-content schema which is unlike any correspondence theory of truth. However, Minimalism also retains the priority of articulating questions of truth, as gathered from the use of materials and processes, which are stripped bare as it were, from anything but themselves, or in the way it engenders a situation that, in basic terms, produces the conditions for the viewer to gain awareness of the very process of viewing as a form of knowing and thus suggesting the idea of a correspondence theory of knowledge.

In other words, Minimalism does not want to correspond to truth. Instead it claims that minimalist art works 'are truth'. However, it does stage the process of acquiring knowledge and constructing meaning (under the principle that meaning is unstable), firstly by offering an empiricist 'way of knowing', and secondly, by corresponding to a behaviourist version of language that understands meaning not in terms of mental concepts but in the ability to use words. In the case of Minimalism, it is always in relation to an after-linguistic inquiry which makes it possible to undermine the object as a container of meaning whilst providing the means to an external determination of both object and viewing experience – according to how these correspond to, and in a way, resolve specific versions of philosophical problems, such as the process of acquiring knowledge, the nature of meaning, or the mind/body problem.

To return for a moment to Rorty, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* [55]*,* he reasons that most western philosophy takes truth to be a relationship between representation and reality, leading to the question of how truth is determined. He speaks of two systems of thought: 'idealism' and 'realism'. For an idealist it is representation, or an image in the mind that establishes reality and thus determines truth, while for realists, truth is determined by the case of a given object, or reality, that informs representation[56]. Rorty calls both "representationalists": examples of a tradition that is obsessed with pursuing truth for its own sake, and so investing in the discovery of images as possible explanations. He uses the term representation as part of a philosophical and scientific lexicon, not in an artistic sense (a distinction that will require further attention), but the term is nonetheless useful to the discussion at this point when attempting to describe the relationship between a given object, or reality, and a

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55 Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008. The first out of the four volumes that make the series "Philosophical papers" – a series published between 1991 and 2008
56 See ibid.,1-17

situation that claims to demonstrate it. This theory provides a method to describe Minimalism as a representationalist system and within that, as a project that is essentially concerned with realism. Not because it presents the appearances of an object or isolated ideas, but because it engenders a situation that wants to correspond to the way a person interacts with the world: it wants to be representative of the process of knowing.

Inversely, we cannot align Minimalism with idealism because it is not assumed that the nature of this process can be modified. In fact, this is a distinction that also holds in terms of the viewing experience, an experience which is not predetermined by mental representations, but rather, as discussed in more detail further ahead, one that inevitably asks its subjects to produce a mental and objective image of the reality that such an experience is.

In Summary, Minimalism can be inscribed in a line of thought that believes we cannot represent truth without betraying truth, because representation involves a game of simulation and substitution, but that in the name of truth, we must gain awareness of acts of conscience. This in turn means that, in trying to break with the appearance of truth, Minimalism has kept truth as a priority; that whilst its attack on representation is set out from a distinction between appearance and reality, and is indeed able to break with 'appearances', it remains conceptually hostage to the distinction between the two. Rorty's definition of representationalism makes it possible to say that the minimalist anti-aesthetic approach to reality relates to what I have called, a correspondence theory of knowledge, that is, a representationist system of the very process of knowing.

2

For the second step, we need to exchange the question of truth, which could easily lead the argument into a black hole, for another concept that is close enough to continue within this avenue: the idea of verification, which appears in Minimalism, so to speak, in a fold. On one side, we can recognise the way in which a minimalist artwork is designed to suppress difference and cancel part-by-part relations for the benefit of the whole. Because of this, artworks become objects where in reality we cannot really say that something happens besides

ocular variations produced by different positions of viewing. On the other side, Minimalism foregrounds the viewer's finding out about the work, suggesting the most important aspect to discover is the fact that there is indeed, something to be found – measured in terms of formal variations that motivate the viewer to continue looking. This makes it possible to say, therefore, that Minimalism is related to the process of knowing through verification, and because verification (of the verifiable) is the condition of the viewing experience – what animates the lively bodily engagement and provides the moving awareness of one's relative position in space – then all Minimalism effectively does is to produce conditions of verification.

In connection to this Ralph Perry, an influential thinker for Judd, maintains that: "In the theory of value it is this *object,* [referring to an abstract object] and not the acts of judgment themselves, which is primarily in question" [57]. This follows Judd's own conclusion that a work of art "needs only to be interesting."[58] Now, although it is not clear what Judd means by 'interesting', the answer is not too far away since if we are to consider how minimal art and specifically Judd's own work abandons mental concepts, then 'interesting' is not only about the absence of judgement, but it is also about perception without concepts, from where it can be gathered that 'interesting' must be what keeps the viewer looking.

Untitled from 1969 (fig. 4), for example, is a progression that most people, I imagine, would find visually appealing. It is formed by four open elements (each 48x60x60 inches) displayed linearly and separated in consistent intervals of 12 inches. The appearance of the work shifts from a group of solid forms to near absence, with each unit being constructed with four planes of anodized aluminium, layered with dark blue plexiglass inside. The work can be seen both as an object, or objects, and as space, since each element communicates with the spatial context around it and overall resists a definition of interior or exterior as well as refusing the notion of sculpture in terms of a core. It is also worth noting that units are displayed along a line with the open ends facing each other

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57 Ralph Perry was president of the American Philosophical Association, a professor at Harvard for nearly fifty years, as well as student, editor and biographer of William James. Having been an influential figure for Judd, he is quoted here for the catalogue essay of the artist's retrospective at Tate in 2004 (see below). As student of James, Perry is often associated with the theorists of Pragmatism Yet, as indicated by this quotation, his thought is radically different from that of Rorty, who throughout his work argued for the importance of continuous forms of judgment (as evaluation of vocabularies) David Raskin, "Judd's Moral Art" *in* Nicholas Serrota eds., *Donald Judd,* 85.

58 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon Wood Jon. eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader*, 218

so that the whole presents itself as 'seeing through' without being a real passage.

So although there are actually that many different elements to see, plenty can be said about the act of seeing which only confirms Judd's point that: "The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting". Where different elements exist, they do so only to produce a rich perceptual field, and therefore 'interesting' is as much what keeps one looking as what keeps one doubting – the very condition that brings the viewer, who knows things (only) moment by moment, into a process of infinite verification, that is, always doubting and verifying what lies around; a process that is key to producing the perceptive awareness one associates with Minimalism described by Potts, as he reads from Fried, as a moment "located firmly in the potentially endlessly looping experience of viewing" [59].

4.Donald Judd, *Untitled* (1969), anodized aluminium, blue plexiglass, each unit 48x60x60 inches at a constant distance of 12 inches

59 Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination, Figurative, Modernism, Minimalism,* 198

To summarize, the minimalist object translates the claim to objectivity into a form of verification – the verification of its own objectivity that in turn produces a neutral space where nothing happens beside the awareness of the viewing itself; its only task is to put together a rich perceptual field where the viewer is not completely unlike the figure of the sceptic – someone who doubts everything, but spends their life trying to find a way to verification. In turn, viewing could be described as the experience of verifying the verifiable (which is a kind of minimum truth), a pursuit which we can conclude has no purpose other than itself.

3

The third step is a move into questions of making. Here the connection I am trying to establish between minimal art and objectivity manifests itself in the industrial ethos of the first – where we can again recognize an attempt to break with forms of illusion, symbolic value and the idea of works of art as commodities: an attempt thought to be possible by the very process of industrial fabrication and how it breaks with objects conceived in terms of originality. In connection to how the industrial aspect of Minimalism lends itself to the process of museological commodity production, there is not much to add to what Krauss has already said, as mentioned earlier with reference to "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum", and therefore this topic will not be addressed directly. It is more productive to look instead into the implications of the model of objectivity (especially with regard to the applicability and reproduction of abstract diagrams) as it pertains to an absent model of agency.

To begin with, we know that objectivity is the condition of what is exterior to subjective forms of apprehending the world typical, in short, of a subject-of-conscience that tries to relate to what is independent of himself without altering it (to change it would mean to be unfaithful to it). This again brings to mind the idea of a correspondence theory of knowledge that is in fact similar to what Dewey, in *The Quest for Certainty*, has called a "spectator theory of knowledge", which evokes objectivity as a system that places an impediment to the dissolution of what separates the order of knowledge and a knowing subject,

adding a sense of distance and the suggestion of relations of power, all singly captured in the term *spectator*.

In terms of the association between this and Minimalism, we might think for instance, of Judd's artworks as a whole. They are thoroughly planned and executed with a spatial and temporal distance between the two moments, that hence define a mode of production where the works 'do not become', because they, as it were, already pre-exist, in the planning. Minimalism, we can conclude, operates through planning a de-situated practice within the framework of objectivity that does not allow for a model of agency beyond the moment of an abstract conception. Or for difference to be introduced during making – a real difference, that is, that has not been planned or predetermined by industrial processes of fabrication and a logical priority use of construction methods and the plane.

But indifference is not a rule in an absolute sense since variations take place here and there. An example can be found in the installation at Marfa *100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum* (1982-1986) where each of the 100 objects that comprise the installation has the same outer dimensions (41x51x72 inches), but a unique configuration within those limits. That being said, and in continuation of the example, the limitations of the industrial model of production are still present because singularity is not introduced, and crucially, difference is not a significant difference. Why? Because what makes each object distinct does not produce difference within the installation as a whole inasmuch as the difference of the first is dissolved into the whole of the second to which it does not add meaning.

In parallel, to the consequences of an industrial model on the level of objects, we can also recognize other problems associated with the separation between *thinking* and *making*. Since making is seen as mere execution, there is not only the question of difference not being introduced, but a hierarchy that is established between thinking and making, which in turn raises political questions concerning the value attributed to different activities and different social groups.

However, it needs to be said that, in the context of Minimalism, the indifference of *making* is not part of an intentional attempt to establish *thinking* as having a higher value to *making*, and even less so as an attempt to downgrade industrial works. And in fact, we know of the identification that artists and factory workers

shared at the time[60]. The emptying out of the significance of making in (archetypal) minimal art has to do with the search for the means to achieve a public determination of meaning which, as discussed earlier, seems to ask for the erasure of gestural and formal anthropomorphism. However, the separation between the two moments, that of thinking an object and that of making an object, works to reproduce the conditions that have established a social hierarchy and a division of activities in the first place; in the broader context of the social distribution of activities leading to the production of a piece by Judd, for example, that enact the division (overlapping with the notion of objectivity) between thinking and making.

Another political mishap here is that in parallel to the argument that states indifference as the key to a democratic form of art, as pointed out before in relation to the viewing experience and the absence of difference in objects, the idea of democracy has a necessity for difference simply because democracy cannot be thought of in terms of a totalizing whole that cancels out the possibility for the 'parts' to introduce some form of significant difference (which, in effect, seems contrary to the levelling out and cancelling of part-whole relations in Minimalism). I will come back to this throughout the text.

Now, coming together under the influence of the critique mounted throughout the 1960s, with reference to the notion of author and intentionality, specifically through Roland Barthes' dissolution of the author's mastery of meaning into the context of reception and Foucault's association between the author and the disciplinary order[61], the question of *making* in Minimalism, or in this case *doing*,

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60 It is possible to establish a connection between a significant number of artists associated with the New York art scene during the 1960s and 1970s, who often experienced life with financial limitations, and perhaps therefore able to identify with the working classes. Furthermore, artists incorporated aspects of industrial work into artistic production. One particular example is that of Richard Serra, who maintained a long and engaged relationship with metallurgic workers (his father worked in San Francisco shipyard and during a period in his life Serra himself worked in steel mills), a relationship that influenced his artistic work in formal and obviously in material terms and that one might also recognize in the way Serra's work seeks to undermine the relation between gesture and meaning as a way to translate an absent identification between blue collar workers and the nature and product of their work (Industrial techniques can also be found in, for example, Chris Burden and his *Honest Labour* ,1979, and Franck Stella and his use of industrial paint and industrial-like techniques of transferring paint onto the canvas as anticipated in bodies of work such as *Black Paintings*, 1959-1960). *Steelmill/Stahlwerk,* a documentary from 1979 made in collaboration with Clara Weyergraf, Serra's future wife, exemplifies this well by showing the construction of an artwork whilst focusing mostly on the de-humanizing working conditions experienced by steel workers involved. This is perhaps Serra's most direct and explicit attempt to find the means to empathize with workers by giving them visibility. Certainly, one may accuse Serra of developing work that problematically depends of those very same conditions, but not of ignoring nor of not respecting them. For more about the film Serra's relation with industry, see: Annette Michelson, "The films of Richard Serra: An Interview" in Richard Serra, Clara Weyergraf, *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970-1980*, New York, The Hudson River Museum, 1980, 93-117.
61 I rely on the analyses of Krauss who in "Who Comes After the Subject?", in which the author selects Barthes and Foucault as the main theoretical references for the conceptualization of the minimalist subject, namely through the seminal "The Death of the Author" from the first and 'What is an Author?' from the second.

has another side. This is particularly expressive in a later phase of Morris's minimalist period that involves the inverse to planning and therefore not the same type of objectivity but one that continues to refuse a model of agency.

By the time the fourth and last part of "Notes on Sculpture" was published - the part where Morris is more critical of the institutionalization of art and of the commodity status of art works as finished products-, his attention had shifted from the idea of the *gestalt* [62] and an earlier minimalist understanding of sculpture, one that maintains a "figure-ground relation" [63], towards process, materials and anti-form. Describing a movement that Lucy Lippard would later call the "Dematerialisation of the art object"[64], or in Morris's own terms, "sculpture as field", that is: sculpture that takes "the conditions of the visual field itself (figures excluded) and uses these as structural basis for the art" [65].

Rosalind E Krauss. "Who Comes After the Subject?" in Rosalind E. Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, London, MIT Press, 2010, 257-263

62 Notably in Notes on Sculpture part 1, Morris uses the term *gestalt* for *shape* in line with the principles of Gestalt psychology - that argues the human mind tends to organize the visual world by forming perceptual wholes. For more see: Roberto Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1" in Robert Morris, *Continuous Projected Altered Daily. The Writings of Robert Morris*, 6-8

63 The complete citation reads: "So-called Minimal art fulfilled the project of reconstituting art as objects while at the time sharing the same perceptual condition as figurative sculpture. Both objects and figures in real space maintain a figure-ground relation" in Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture Part 4" in Robert Morris, *Continuous Projected Altered Daily. The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1995, 54

64 In Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of Califórnia Press, 1997

65 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture Part 4" in Robert Morris, *Continuous Projected Altered Daily. The Writings of Robert Morris*, 57

5. Robert Morris, views of and diagram for, *Untitled [Stadium]* (1967), eight units in total, fibreglass, four 48x60¼x60¼ inches, four 48x48x48 inches

6. Robert Morris, *Untitled (scatter piece) 1968-69*, as recreated in 2010 at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, copper, aluminium, zinc, brass, lead, steel, felt

Initiated by investigations into the instability of shape in works such as *Stadium* from 1967 (fig. 5), made of interchangeable elements that Morris would rearrange into different configurations, this phase arrives at a more mature stage with the now iconic *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, exhibited alongside *Untitled (Scatter Piece) 1968-1969* at Leo Castelli Gallery warehouse in New York in 1969. Two works that marked the moment when Morris clearly distanced himself from the preceding period, with explorations into gravity, formlessness and, to use a colloquial expression, the random distribution of 'stuff'. This allowed him to move away from the concentration and homogeneity found inobjects and figures, i.e. away from isolated things and towards dispersion and heterogeneity, or precisely, in the direction of the visual field itself – a distinction that Morris maintains is the same as what separates a figurative mode from a landscape mode[66]. However, dismissing the figurative logic by breaking withfigure/ground relation is of course, not the same as cancelling the staging of the body. In an oeuvre, which is fundamentally theatrical, Morris' is defined around the viewer's body, and crucially, around his own [67], which brings us again, to questions of making and then later, to the viewer's body.

Untitled (Scatter Piece) 1968-69 (fig. 6) was recreated in 2010 once again at Leo Castelli Gallery [68]. Similarly to its original version, it was made of felt and metal pieces distributed in equal part throughout the gallery. The felts corresponded to the shape of the metals before bending, which in turn were made of copper, aluminium, zinc, brass, lead or steel. Morris followed the original plans to fabricate the elements, plans had been determined by chance operations: coin tosses and numbers taken from a phone book that determined the length; width and thickness of each element and whether it was to be flat or bent at a right angle once or twice.

That same year Richard Kalina, who had been sitting behind the front desk at Leo Castelli warehouse during the original exhibition, published a text in *Art in America* [69]. Here he writes of an episode from 1969 when Richard Serra entered the room containing the piece *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, and without

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66 Ibid.
67 *Column*,1960, *I box*, 1962, *War*, 1963, *Site*, 1964, *Waterman switch*, 1965, and his infamous sadomasochism-inspired poster for Leo Castelli Gallery (1974) are all works that mark a strong presence of Morris's body in his own oeuvre.
68 The work was recreated at Leo Castelli, which by 2010 had changed location.
69 Much of the information here is owed to this essay: Richard Kalina, "Robert Morris: The order of disorder" in *Art in América*, N° 5, May 2010, 65-68

permission started "kicking things around much like a kid does to a tempting pile of leaves" [70] gleefully justifying this act by saying that it wouldn't matter. And it didn't, as Kalina says, Morris would arrive later that day and notice nothing.

In fact, Morris himself told the gallery director that his hand was not necessary in the making of the piece; that either she, or a group of eight-year-olds, could arrange the work. This, of course, is coherent with the critique of authorship and intentionality that we recognize in Minimalism, where the issue at work is the subject, or more precisely, the attempt to erase the personal aspect of the subject. Morris effectively achieved this by removing choice and purpose, thus the work is a negative intent or the equivalent to indifference. Things were put together in such a random way that any residual possibility of distinguishing the important from the irrelevant was lost and whatever Morris would add or change would make no difference. So although the reading of *Continuous Project Altered Daily* is determined by a coherent theoretical production[71], the artwork itself cancels any possibility of producing meaning, be it on the level of the artwork or on the level of the subject at play, both in viewing and in making. It shows, or rather confirms, the fate of Minimalism as working to produce a subject that is incapable of meaningful actions and artworks without a capacity to introduce difference.

All this comes in line with a text that Morris published in 1970 titled, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for Motivated" [72], where he argues that it is critical to evacuate intentionality from art and turn the process of making into an end in itself – a move we can align with the principles of so-called Process Art. But not only that, he also argues about the importance of using chance operations, much like those mentioned above, in order to replace intention and what he calls, arbitrary reasons such as taste. The problem is that chance operations come with a free-flowing energy that he calls "the motivated", or a motivation without object, which is not only free from intention but serves no necessity: this is the other type of objectivity. Retrieving from a process of

70 Ibid., 68
71 The fact that writing is what gives some coherence to Morris's rather dispersive oeuvre seems relevant, particularly in relation to the works being discussed and the publication of "Anti-Form" and "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated". Robert Morris, "Anti-Form" in *Artforum*, vol. 6, April 1968, 33-35. Robert Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated" in *Artforum*, vol. 8, April 1970, 62-66.
72 First published in *Artforum* in 1970, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for Motivated" was republished in 1993 in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, London, MIT Press, 1993

making decisions leaves the space open, as Stanley Cavell has observed, to a return to a sort of superior order, to an elsewhere determination:

> The invocation of chance is like an earlier artist's invocation of the muse, and serves the same purpose: to indicate that his work comes not from him, but through him – its validity or authority is not a function of his own powers or intentions. Speaking for the muse, however, was to give voice to what all men share, or all would hear; speaking through chance forgoes a voice altogether – there is nothing to say [73]

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The final step may be the most abstract of all four. If we return for a moment to the question of fabrication, we could defend Minimalism in terms of its acknowledgment of making, pointing out that there are numerous cases where there is an obvious preoccupation with giving the viewer the possibility of understanding how different elements come together and how their physical support is achieved. As much as we may say that this is a general rule, there are exceptions that undermine the principles of this being a rule. In viewing Judd's vertical progressions for example (fig. 7), we are not able to know how gravity is defeated and how the different elements are able to stand on the wall and walking around or getting closer to it does not provide an answer. What Krauss calls "lived illusion" as referenced before, does not apply here because the material condition of the predetermination of these art works (as such) is hidden and instead it is as if all elements float.

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73 A more complete quote would be as follows: "When a contemporary theorist appeals to chance, he obviously is not to call attention to the act of composition, but to deny that act; to deny that what he offers is composed. His concept is singular, with no existing plural; it functions not as an explanation for particular actions but as a metaphysical principle which supervises his life and work as a whole. The invocation of chance is like an earlier artist's invocation of the muse, and serves the same purpose: to indicate that his work comes not from him, but through him – its validity or authority is not a function of his own powers or intentions. Speaking for the muse, however, was to give voice to what all men share, or all would hear; speaking through chance forgoes a voice altogether – there is nothing to say" in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 202

7.Donald Judd, *Untitled* (1968),
stainless steel, yellow plexiglass, ten units,
each unit 6x27x24 inches at a constant distance of 6 inches

What this registers conceptually can perhaps be summarized by two observations. First, that the concealment undermines the very idea of a concrete presence in space and a pure ahistoricism of minimal art works, which are questioned by the impossibility of understanding what precedes the physical support of objects in space – a feat related to what Charles Reeve has called Judd's hidden historicism[74]. This refers to the obscuring of the history (and politics) of materials before and beyond the moment of industrial recasting and, for what matters the most here, of the pre-

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74 The idea that Judd's artwork carries a hidden historicism (an idea that can be easily translated to Minimalism in general) can be found as claimed by Charles Reeve in REEVE, Charles Reeve, "Cold Metal: Donald Judd's Hidden Historicity" in *Art History*, Vol. 15. nº4, 1992, 486-504

condition of objects. Second, what this concealment suggests is that there is a blind area in Minimalism's claim to objectivity. As will be outlined below, this allows me to summarize some of the ideas discussed so far.

First of all, objectivity carries a claim to universality and its logic is that of an elsewhere determination, that one assumes to be exterior to any subject-related aspect such as personal, cultural, or political influences. It reclaims a certain matter-of-factness, if you will, that although has no specific location can be repeated, and once used on matters of decision reduces the capacity to make decisions. In other words, with objectivity the space of decisions is replaced with a numeric relation that in turn is presented as a motive for consensus – an observation that we can associate with both fabrication and chance operations.

Secondly, the form of such consensus is what is behind a connection between objectivity and democracy which is, in that sense, reduced to a relation with the numeric in the specific form of the consensus as an ordering that neutralizes any difference. Furthermore, the claims behind the use of objectivity, and this is particularly clear in Minimalism, seem to assume that there is an artistic and political gain in replacing a symbolic order for the numeric (which itself becomes similar to a symbolic order established with no apparent relation to [a] community). This is at stake in Judd's use of mathematics, notably the *fibonacchi* sequence, and once again Morris's use of chance operations.

However, such exteriority is not truly universal because its very definition is determined by an intellectual tradition. As Rorty has told us, as a concept it has its own history and results from a series of contingencies including the formation of isolated social groups with the power to control the conditions, one could say the staging, of a claim to universality (any project that tries to legitimize knowledge by isolating institutions and transcending practical questions) which, in that sense, appears as an exercise of power, taking place between the subject that determines and fixes what is *objective*, that is, what is proposed as transversal and equal to all, and the subject that receives it.

Summarily speaking, therefore, objectivity seems at once to be a condition of the democratic and anti-democratic; democratic because it relates to what is equal to all, and anti-democratic because it imposes an ordering that involves the attempt to fix a form of what is public. Doing so by problematically, foregoing the very conditions of

its determination which we can recognize, if only by pushing the argument to its limit, in how Judd's wall pieces literally hide the contingency of their physical support.

So in synthesis, we could perhaps define objectivity as a condition of a conservative model of the democratic – a model that promotes the repetition of a given order under a claim for universality. And insofar as we can say Minimalism reclaims objectivity, we can also say that it follows a conservative model of the democratic which, in turn, would seem to correspond to the weakening, indeed the illusion, of a democratic form of art produced in terms of an experience of viewing that is undifferentiated. Or what we have come to call a communitarian perception, and simultaneously contingent to the isolation and control of the viewing conditions.

Hence, it is also possible to say that a model of the democratic that claims relevancy through objectivity lends itself more easily to the logic of commodification through repetition and subservience to the numeric. In fact, this is not so distant from a certain prohibition, not-to-be-democratic, that we experience today in the form of a coercion to find consensus, cancelling out difference and reinforce a given order in place – often taking precedence from economic questions and a priority of the numeric – therein considered natural to the claim of democracy.

If we return to the works presented at Marfa for a moment, it would be complicated to say Judd anticipated the more commercial side that the project has acquired since its early stages – largely resulting from the fact that Marfa was progressively established as an exclusive travel destination for art lovers. However, the way the project was absorbed by the industry of art, furthermore describing the transference of Minimalism as a public form of art to the sphere of the private, reveals the difficulties that Minimalism has to resist the effects of a culture organized around acts of consumption. This happens because its logic of repetition and indifference carried the seeds of commodification all along, but perhaps mostly because Minimalism's "moment of bodily plenitude", to use Krauss's expression, is unable to answer back with an alternative to the symbolic void produced by such culture around everything except the very act of consumption. This brings me to another point that needs some attention before the chapter's conclusion: the analogy, already suggested, between the minimal object and subject.

The analogy between the object and the subject of Minimalism

It is as difficult to accommodate the idea of interiority on the level of the object as it is on the level of the subject, which signals how Minimalism lives from a continuous correlation between the object and the subject, the first functioning as a visual analogy of the second. The analogy is always there in the relation of scale that the viewer establishes between his body and the work, but the true analogy that is taking place seems to be between undifferentiated specific objects and undifferentiated and unspecific subjects – something at the very origin of Minimalism.

Morris' *Column*, a dance piece from 1960, exemplified this point well by parodying the idea of the object as a container of meaning, as well as a model of intellect based on interiority through a visual play. The piece made use of the image of the mind inhabited by a humanoid who stood inside a box made to fit his body, as suggested by Morris himself. In an albeit more subtle style, Judd suggests something similar with his famous rule "it's just one thing after another,"[75] which could be applied well to art works but could also be seen in relation to the undifferentiated subject of Minimalism.

Hinting at something similar is Michael Fried who identifies the analogy in terms of a hidden interiority and anthropomorphism, as exemplified when he writes: "the apparent hollowness of most literalist work – the quality of having an inside – is almost blatantly anthropomorphic" [76] and, "being distanced by such objects is not … entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person"[77]. More recently Alex Potts noted that: "Judd's work might just be envisaged as a categorically modernist analogue of the ideal classical nude of earlier figurative sculpture"[78].

Hardly a surprise at this point, it is nonetheless important to make clear that this analogy between the minimalist object and the human body, the way this mirrors

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75 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon Wood Jon. eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader*, 218
76 The example Fried gives is Morris's now titled "Ring with Light" from 1965 "with its fluorescent light glowing from the within". Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 156
77 Ibid., 155
78 Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernism, Minimalism*, 304

the subject being produced, which leaves us with a visual suggestion of the neutral viewer posited by the latter's demand for an experience structured externally – a subject that is anonymous, or undifferentiated, and mentally calmed. Productive as it may be within the minimalist logic, this subject has serious limitations in a wider context. It is the nature of these limitations that needs to be discussed, which I propose to do next in relation to a 1971 exhibition and its 2009 recreation.

8. Exhibition view, Robert Morris, *Neo-Classic* (1971) at the Tate Gallery, London

The first is *Neo-Classic* [79] (fig. 8), exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1971, another groundbreaking work by Morris and one that, in comprising different phases of his artistic development [80], allows me to return to some problems concerning how the viewer enters the space of Minimalism. In the year that it took Morris to

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79 I am relying on a description of the exhibition offered by Jon Bird. See Jon Bird, "Minding the Body: Robert Morris's 1971 Tate Gallery Retrospective" in Jon Bird, Michael Newman, eds. *Rewriting Conceptual Art.* London, Reaktion Books,1999

80 The idea for the exhibition was proposed by art critic David Sylvester who, in addition to seeing Morris's work at Leo Castelli Gallery, had interviewed him for a series of talks on the BBC. Initially, the proposal was for a conventional retrospective of works from the 1960s but as Jon Bird tells us in an essay dedicated to this exhibition "Morris recognized the necessity to show past works in London, although from the outset he clearly intended to limit the retrospective element within an overall conception of a large scale installation" in Ibid., 90

discuss the exhibition with the Tate, he went from a project of a traditional retrospective to a rather more experimental one that gave him the opportunity to recapitulate the movement from a reflective and purely visual reception of contents to a bodily engagement; to emphasize the object as a sign of play and exchange of meaning (not its bearer); to mark the visual field as a site for exchange and process; and finally, to combine a form of institutional critique with the viewer's body as a destabilizing factor.

The exhibition was divided into three main areas and consisted of objects and structures, i.e. props, plus a series of instructive photographs displayed along the gallery walls, a slide show of previous works and the screening of some of Morris's films, including "Neo-Classic", completed just forty-eight hours before the opening to document the exhibition[81]. The first area of the exhibition housed objects to be moved by the viewer along metal and wooden ramps. In the second, it was the movement of the viewer that set objects in motion:

> timber logs or large cylinders that could be set rolling, plywood platforms balanced on large balls, or balls that could be propelled along tracks. Here, the works were mutually interactive and imposed a certain choreographic pattern on the movement and gestures of the spectators[82].

The third area was occupied by flexible devices and large structures with the potential to determine the movement of viewers:

> Variations on the theme of a tightrope, double-tired ramps which increased and decreased in height, contorting the body as it moved up or

81 The film *Neo-Classic* was made with a female model interacting calmly with the works while naked. I was unable to find any footage from the actual film, but judging by the cinematographic description offered by Jon Bird, it was suggestive that the model was a sculptural figure, in that it showed a person slowly interacting with the props with an almost static and precise, rather than fluid, mechanical movement. It is hard not to imagine those who saw it thinking of classic sculpture in its more common known version of the nude. The description can be found in Ibid., 88-89
82 As above, I am relying on the description of the exhibition offered by Jon Bird in Ibid., 88-106

down, and wooden crevices negotiated by
jamming the body, or part of the body, against
the structure and using leverage to gain or lose
height[83]

The only instructions on how to interact with the props were given by the display of black and white photographs taken prior to the show with demonstrations by gallery staff. These are the images that more commonly illustrate the 1971 exhibition (see fig. 8). Contrary to the tranquility that the images suggest, we know that the response from visitors resulted in an exhibition that somewhat exploded into excessive enthusiasm for the works being engaged with. For the first time in its history, the Tate Gallery had asked people to interact directly with works of art, indeed to complete them, resulting in what at the time was a form of unconventional behaviour and, if only collateral, an anti-establishment physical release. A growing concern about the safety of visitors and some minor injuries caused by the scrappy quality of materials as reported, led to the early closure of the exhibition only four days after its opening. Six days after it came down, a more traditional retrospective exhibition of Morris's works, *new exhibition title,* was reinstalled. Despite its contrived and early end, *Neo-Classic* is a milestone in contemporary exhibition culture because of the way it expanded the notion of the viewing experience in a direction that is now common: works that exist in the same space as viewers who, in turn, make them operative. In 2009, *Neo-Classic* was recreated at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall with the name *Bodyspacemotionthings* (fig. 9).

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83 see Jon Bird, "Minding the Body: Robert Morris's 1971 Tate Gallery Retrospective" in Jon Bird, Michael Newman, eds. *Rewriting Conceptual Art.* London, Reaktion Books, 88-106

9. Exhibition view from the mezzanine, Robert Morris, *bodyspacemotionthings* (2009) Tate Modern

However, *Bodyspacemotionthings* represents a different kind of exhibition. Commissioned as a four-day event in May 2009, due to public demand it continued for two extra weeks. Exhibited in one open area, many of the props remained similar in form, material and function to those from 1971, but they were larger and made according to recent health and safety procedures. No major injuries occurred this time.

Those who participated in this version of the work were caught between the awareness of their body in space – provided by the physical engagement with the props – and the externalization of that awareness. 'To be aware' constitutes a moment of self-reflexivity, or to 'see' oneself viewing, requires a disembodied perspective of sorts. If before this awareness was associated with the use of language, it was now materialized in the mezzanine above the Turbine Hall where one could have an exterior overview, i.e., an objective perspective, of the work. My contention is that this is a late feature that operates as an equivalent to the 'externalization of self', which completes the minimalist logic and simultaneously supports the critique developed here. It certainly seems to correspond to the last chapter or the last stage of development in Krauss's history of Modern Sculpture where she writes: "It causes us to meditate on a

knowledge of ourselves that is formed by looking outward toward the responses of others as they look back at us. It is a metaphor for the self as it is known through its appearance to the other"[84].

So while participants engaged in the activities proposed by the props and, similarly to what happened decades before, they would balance, roll, climb or crawl, acquiring in that manner a sense of their own bodies and relative position in space, they were also quite aware that they were being seen; a form of conscious externalization, if only temporal, of their own activities. And what did the perspective from the mezzanine show? Well, besides the quasi-theatrical setting of the installation, the activities first of all seemed simple and fun; simple physical exchanges, or tasks, determined by the form of the props. No pre-knowledge was required to fully engage with all the work had to offer, which perhaps explains the success it achieved across different groups and different generations. It was clearly a very inclusive piece and one with a sense of communal and lively fun. Looking out from the mezzanine and into the Turbine Hall, however, also showed something different.

The work, as we know, corresponded to a stage of development when the figurative mode had been completely dismissed, while maintaining a figurative aspect. The audience completed the visual field with the live anthropomorphic image of the body and appeared in space with the unequivocal shape of figures, an image that Minimalism has always carried in its interest of the body. Using the term 'figure' here is perhaps confusing, but not if we remember that Minimalism wanted to rid of *the referent* and to place artworks and viewers on the same plane of concrete existence, thus arriving at a condition we can say the human body 'figures' itself. The point of the question here is that the *self* of these 'figures' is looked at from the outside as if it was something separated and independent from the inner *self*, appearing as a subject dispossessed from its interior tension and much like objects, posited as though without a content of its own, confirming the analogy between objects and subjects – almost like a figure without a figure.

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84 The original quote is as follows: "By forcing on us this eccentric position relative to the centre of the work, the Double Negative [Michael Heizer's work from 1969] suggests an alternative to the picture we have of how we know ourselves. It causes us to meditate on a knowledge of ourselves that is formed by looking outward toward the responses of others as they look back at us. It is a metaphor for the self as it is known through its appearance to the other." in Rosalind E Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture,* 280

Of course, to dismiss one's personal history, character or emotional drives, or even to reduce free will to a series of arbitrary decisions, serves a rhetoric of objectivity and the logic of Minimalism well. But it also narrows the engagement with the work into a simple physical exchange where behaviour results primarily from exterior conditions, in this case defined, or regulated, by the props. In other words, looking at the work from a certain distance provided by the mezzanine, created the critical distance that one could say, showed participants as not only anonymous, interchangeable, non-judging selves, but also as subjects, evoking Morris's earlier search for movements, without interior meaning, where actions are like empty verbs – activities about nothing else other than the activity itself. An experience that is about meaning, but one that has no meaning.

This is to say that the relation between the *image* produced from the mezzanine of the action taking place during *Bodyspacemotionthings* revealed, if it is possible to conceive, what I called earlier the 'blind area' of Minimalism. The situation meant that the subject of the work was created right there, not because of accumulated knowledge or historical references, but because of the 'experiencing' of the work consisting in the discovery of the body in space and a form of body awareness produced through the engagement with the props. At the same time, in line with Minimal art's demand for a collective and external perception, *Bodyspacemotionthings* asked for an objective, and therefore disembodied and mental, perspective of the work; a perspective, normally theoretical, that was now, as it were, materialized by the view from the mezzanine. Overlooking the work with the necessary distance, a distance that can be well referred to as the 'objective distance', solved a series of questions at play in minimal art. The engagement between viewers and non-illusionistic objects, the possibility to resolve the mind/body problem through a series of activities about nothing else other than the activities themselves - marked by a conceptual void, and the communal aspect of such engagement as carried out by a group of undifferentiated viewers, were all made externally visible, indeed, externally verifiable.

But the point to be made here is that the mezzanine materialized not only as a perspective normally reserved to theory, but as a theoretical slip between two contradictory, yet central, principles of Minimalism that should be invisible in order for the minimalist conceptual theory to hold; a slip between the principle that says minimal art is concerned with a bodily experience and the principle

that says that it needs an externalization of the body. Indirectly staged at Tate Modern, the aporia was set up by the impossibility to simultaneously 'experiment with art' in the Turbine Hall and to occupy a position up on the mezzanine where the whole situation could be seen as an 'externalization of selves'. Easy to ignore otherwise, the problem is found right at the very core of the minimalist project, as Krauss seems to note in a rare passage where the contradiction appears only to be left unexplored: "Part of the meaning of much of Minimal sculpture issues from the way in which it becomes a metaphorical statement of the Self understood only in experience." [85]

It is this inconsistency between a movement that wants to purge illusion and metaphor and the fact that it actually ends up functioning as a metaphor - and that I content minimal art cannot think - that the exhibition at Tate exposed with the contradiction between the importance of a bodily engagement with the work and the way the work came together as an external overview of such engagement.

What if we assume for a moment that this is just a minor conceptual mishap, a mere detail as it were, that we can easily ignore in the face of what the setting at Tate Modern produced? As seen from the mezzanine: the possibility of offering the priority of truth - in the version of self-identical objects and experiences about nothing else other than those experiences - its very own vivid and verifiable image. Then to return to Rorty again, we may seem to be holding on to the habit of looking for truth for its own sake, taking truth to be a noble pursuit and priority in itself and independently of the use it may or may not have for its receiver. Chances are we might be forgetting to question the importance of the pursuit itself and altogether ignoring reality.

Let us see: the theoretical framing of Minimalism is already tautological in the sense that it translates a form of art that is tailor-made to structural analysis and objective inquiry. That being said, what the view from the mezzanine has made explicit – in the live image of people engaging with an artwork through moments of bodily awareness (as a value in itself), and where this awareness is produced by a series of frivolous activities without a real consequence, relation or any sense of contribution, let alone commitment, to what is going on outside such

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85 In Rosalind E. Krauss "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture" in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism*, 256

experience - is the bankruptcy of the relation between verification, objects and experiences beyond the limits of Minimalism's self-legitimizing and circular argument, which reclaims criticality whilst denying any attempt to reconfigure the world.

Hence, we could say that Minimalism completes modernity's compromise to resist any forms of idealization and render notions of truth concrete and verifiable. That it corresponds to a form of realism, obviously not in terms of mimesis, but in the way that it involves objects and real people in a direct way. It is this priority given to the presentation of things and people being in themselves that grounds minimal art's claim to critical and political traction, whilst preventing by its very logic, an address of reality beyond what 'already is' on a physical plane.

Once again this is illustrated metaphorically by how viewers who stood on the mezzanine were asked to contemplate an idea, that of a situation involving objects and real people, but not to create any. The idea was 'down there', out of reach, where people moved as instructed by similar props decades before. And the viewer, or knower, who in this case could enter and leave the *image* but only as an accident, remained an outside spectator of what was to be known: something that cannot be reached, touched, or even comprehended unless with theory or with an over-viewing platform.

So in completing the four steps set out earlier – Minimalism's commitment to truth, the question of verification, the absent model of agency and what I have called a 'blind area', now placed in connection to the analogy between object and subject – we can, lastly, return to the initial proposal and respond to Krauss's focus on the appropriation of the 'code' of Minimalism, with my own hypothesis stating that the real problem is how the latter prevents us from thinking beyond 'what is already in place'.

Bodyspacemotionthings gave us the counter example to "exercises in sensory reprogramming" [86] (such as that of James Turrell's work, which Krauss identifies

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86 Krauss elaborates on a work by Turrell called *Blood Lust* from 1989. She writes: "The Turrell piece, itself an exercise in sensory reprogramming, is a function of the way a barely perceptible luminous field in front of one appears gradually to thicken and solidify, not by revealing or bringing into focus the surface which projects this colour, a surface which we as viewers might be said to perceive, but rather by concealing the vehicle of the colour and thereby producing the illusion that it is the field which is focusing, that is the very object facing one that is doing the perceiving for one"; what she sees in close relation to "a subject that no longer does its own

as the wrong sort of Minimalist revision), by positing something different to the unrealized technological subject that Krauss considers is behind the misappropriation of Minimalism by the logic of late capitalism, i.e. that of a general industrialization of all aspects of life, including culture and art. Simply put, what *Bodyspacemotionthings* suggests is that the problem is not really how Minimalism anticipated its own technological update and a problematic articulation of space, and the fact that the work is not 'technological' is the key here, but rather questions of a different nature.

We can recognize in *Bodyspacemotionthings*, Krauss's own idea that "meaning … is unintelligible apart from … the (semiological) conventions of a public space" [87], as well as Morris's early conviction that "much of the new sculpture makes a positive value of large size" [88] that he sees in terms of producing a public mode of viewing. Both quotations point to the centrality of space for Minimalism, which is precisely the element that seems to determine most of the decisions that go into exhibition-making today, alongside a rhetoric of presence according to which the experience of viewers is at the core of exhibitions. In that regard, curatorial decisions behind the programme for the Turbine Hall have been exemplary for their extraordinary inclusivity – one of the main concerns within a contemporary understanding of art, for which Minimalism was with no doubt instrumental. However, Morris's 2009 installation also made evident some of the negative aspects of the transition from an initial phase of Minimalism to a present-day context, especially in comparison with its original version. *Bodyspacemotionthings* has posited a *body* that is no longer a site of institutional critique and indeed, a subject in search not of affect, but of gratuitous 'intensities'.

Once again, the most important question does not seem to be whether or not Minimalism, in its relation to the industrial object and a decentred subject, has anticipated, or even prepared for the transformation of the end of *grand*

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perceiving but is involved in a dizzying effort to decode signs that emerge from within a no longer mappable or knowable depth". An experience associated with what Jameson as mentioned here, calls the hysterical sublime, which is to say the *hyperspace.* In Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum" in *October,* Vol. 54, n° 104,12

87 In Rosalind E. Krauss "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture" in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism*, 255

88 In brief, Morris argues that when an object is much smaller than the body, it tends to produce the illusion of existing in an imaginary space and to create a personal mode of viewing by asking viewers to reduce the distance to it. Works with larger dimensions on the other hand, require the viewer to step back and look at them from a distance. That is a public mode for between the viewer and the work there is now a space that can be shared by others. For more details, see: Robert Morris "Notes on Sculpture part 2" in David Hulks, Alex Potts, Jon Wood Jon. eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader*, 238

narratives into the utter fragmentation of the post-modern subject and its role within the logic of late capitalism. Instead, the most important question seems to be that in a time when it is crucial to propose something other than a subject who experiences life as "an increasingly instrumentalized being"[89], the logic of objectivity in Minimalism prevents any alternative, other than that of a compensatory experience, because its priority is to present the subject to itself in a direct, non-idealized form as well as to generate terms of engagement with concrete objects, themselves characterized by indifference.

Seen from another angle, this means that in privileging knowledge as a form of *finding out about reality* indeed in trying to correspond to ways of knowing, Minimalism and the logic of objectivity withdraw from exploring *ways to cope with reality* and hence exclude, to use Rorty's terms, "coordination of behaviour"[90].

Additionally, Minimalism as discussed earlier, presents itself as a democratic form of art, one where the democratic assumes a conservative condition because it seeks to cancel difference and to achieve a form of consensus that prevents change. Together with its rhetoric of presence, one that is conceived exclusively in terms of the presence of living bodies, Minimalism cannot be conceived, with a nod to what will be discussed later, in terms of a democracy of promise.

Thus, these are some of the reasons why the logic of Minimalism, or Minimalism as no-figuration, stands in the way of the task of reimagining a subject capable of a meaningful action, as well as objects capable of introducing indifference, beyond what objectively, externally, already exists. In the end, Minimalism seeks to resolve philosophical problems such as the question of verification, the body-mind problem, and how to achieve a communal perception that once becoming a priority in themselves, and especially if we are to consider the context outside the scenario where these terms are rehearsed and eventually formally and structurally resolved, appear as pseudo-problems when it comes to the ambition of answering to reality as opposed to corresponding to (structures) of reality. In sum: if for the philosophically-informed Minimalist artists and thinkers, "what

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89 In Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum" in *October,* Vol. 54, n° 104, 9
90 In its originating form: "Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay" *in* Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* London, Penguin, 1999, xxv

sculpture *was* is insufficient because founded on an idealistic myth" [91], then for someone concerned with the relation between art and reality, Minimalism's own insufficiency is that of not allowing re-descriptions.

Moving towards figurative sculpture

The impact that Minimalism had for a theoretical, critical and practical break with representation and specifically, for undermining the (represented) human figure is undeniable. This being the reason that it has been discussed at the beginning of the argument. Choosing to begin with the opposite of figurative sculpture means that a connection has been established between the evacuation of the human figure and a concern for questions of truth, with which Minimalism can be associated, via its attempt to refuse any forms of idealization, or the appearance of truth, which it replaces by concrete forms in real space. Despite its centrality to the theme, the oceanic dimension of the concept of truth had to be replaced by the more graspable logic of objectivity in Minimalism, which allowed a few conclusive points that I will summarize below.

Firstly, the realization that the awareness of viewing produced by minimal art is made possible, under the principle that formal variations can be verified, and that verification is enabled because of the facticity of objects in space, indeed, because of their objectivity. This condition is also what supports the claim that Minimalism presents itself as a public form of presentation.

Secondly, I discussed the reasons behind the dissolution of hierarchy and composition in minimal art, observing that both objects and the viewing experience become neutral this way. This can be explained by the fact that nothing is really brought to question or produced besides the experience itself. In connection with this, I reasoned that Minimalism aligns objectivity, repetition and indifference, and how, once looked at from the perspective of the industrial process of fabrication, it is difficult to associate Minimalism with a model of agency, which is also repeated in works that altogether refuse intention in favour of chance operations or any other forms of random decisions.

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91 In Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 242

Thirdly, as observed throughout the texts presented here, the recognition that indifference and repetition have an equal effect on the subject of Minimalism, and that the promise of a decentred subject at the heart of minimal art - one that that does not cohere as a form of idealization but rather opens to its context, coinciding only temporarily- leads into a subject incapable of a meaningful action, or a figure without a figure as I called it, as well as into an analogous impossibility for objects to be aligned with the introduction of difference.

Finally, the concluding examples allowed us to sketch/identify a connection between the idea of a complete externalization of self and the easiness with which Minimalism, and we can conclude its decentred subject, has been appropriated by capital, and crucially, to argue that the real problem is that of a logic that altogether renounces a position where the articulation between subject and object can be thought beyond a concrete order of things.

I owe a few lines to Michael Fried, whose diagnosis of Minimalism is perhaps the closest to my own and a good way to bring the chapter to its end. The connection should come as no surprise as his influence is felt throughout this text, specifically in regard to the relation between 'literal art' as he calls it, and theory, in his words: "The enterprise known variously as minimal art, ABC art, Primary structures, and specific objects is largely ideological. It seeks to declare and occupy a position – one that can be formulated in words and in fact has been so formulated by some of its lead practitioners" [92] ; also about Minimalism's hidden anthropomorphism, already quoted, and most importantly, in regards to a situation that neutralizes the viewer:

> My critique of the literalist address to the
> viewer's body was not that bodiliness as such
> had no place in art but rather that literalism
> theatricalized the body, put it endlessly on
> stage, made it uncanny or opaque to itself,
> hollowed it out, deadened its expressiveness,
> denied its finitude and in a sense its

92 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 148

humanness, and so on. There is, I might have said, something vaguely monstrous about the body in literalism.[93]

Besides that, Fried's preoccupation with the weakening of the distinction between art and non-art and its effects for a culture defined, at the time of the publication of *Art and Objecthood*, by a growing consumerism (being that which he thought distinguishes the two is a capacity of the first to suspend its own materiality, which he thinks modern painting in contrast to Minimalism still achieves because of the frame and its capacity to be 'wholly manifest') continue to hold relevancy for today's culture – a culture that more than ever before is precisely constituted around acts of consumerism.

However, I do not subscribe to his 'optical' reading of sculpture, since the condition of sculpture as an object in space, regardless of configuration and position, seems always better understood when described in terms of space and time. I am closer to Krauss on this matter. Similarly, the way Fried tries to restore the importance of an ideal fixed moment – an instant moment of grace[94] – seems too close to the logic of objectivity (minus the duration of Minimalism). It is therefore questionable, we could argue more than in Minimalism, when it comes to the possibility of a relation between a work of art and a wider non-artistic context.

That is to say that I do not think 'theatricality' (of objects) is the enemy and neither that it is necessary to suspend the 'objecthood' of works of art in order to distinguish art from non-art by means of a clear-cut separation from the *real*. On the contrary, there seems to exist a space between 'objecthood' and 'non-objecthood', as if a vibration between art and non-art, that is capable of offering us the possibility firstly, to think about objects using a different logic from that of consumerism, and secondly, precisely because materiality is never fully suspended, to rethink the subject in its projection as an object. That is, to think

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93 Ibid., 42

94 The expression is mine but it is related to Fried's claim that the presence of the minimalist artwork in space brings to question the distinction between art and non-art. A distinction that he thinks can be reinforced through what, in contrast to *presence*, he refers to as *presentness* – a capacity of an artwork to reveal itself all at once and that he associates with the experience of *grace*: "We are all literalists most of all our lives. Presentness is grace." Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 168

about the subject in terms of becoming-object, using its sense of traction, consequence and decision-making problems found therein as a platform to rethink the subject.

I am of course, moving in the direction of figurative sculpture. And the premise is this: if, as Minimalism posits, the question of truth will always undermine the possibility of associating figuration with a project with critical and democratic ambitions, whilst at the same time the priority of truth is what prevents us from thinking beyond 'what already is', what happens if, to return to my previous Rortian position, we replace truth as a goal of inquiry with a question, for instance, on how to coordinate decisions and behaviour? How can we think about defining a meaningful action and an object of difference? This is what will be discussed in the next chapter where, in summary, I will try to dissolve the association between representation and correspondence to truth by replacing it with representation as construction seen in relation to necessity and use, via a discussion on the use of the hero as a representational conceit.

SECOND CHAPTER: The figure of the hero between language and reality

Introduction

In the previous chapter I identified how the priority of objectivity grounded the evacuation of the human figure by minimal art. I also discussed how such evacuation combined an attempt to break with idealization with a form of art that could be more democratic, by locating the source of its meaning solely in the experience of art - marking a traditional critical position that tries to reveal the world of appearances as such and the ideological construction behind it. The chapter concluded with the idea that there is a necessity for some sort of figuration that can help us to reimagine the subject in separation from a priority to 'correspond to reality'. I will now discuss how this can be considered through the notion of 'the hero'.

The proposal of course, is not innocent. It comes with a nod to the historical relationship between sculpture and the hero, produced by the celebrative function of public sculptures: a relation that has much contributed to the dismantling of figuration in sculpture. The historical factor, however, is not the main reason behind the choice of this uneasy concept, but rather the hope that it might help to build an approach leading to the possibility of reversing what is normally understood as an artistic constraint - the danger of conservatism and celebration - into the critical potential of figuration. This in turn is related to two other factors: the first, the combination of problems of representation with politics in a way that involves a moment of affirmation and a constant negotiation of what constitutes heroic significance; the second, how the hero is related to invention and in that sense, how it allows an exploration of representation as construction rather than as correspondence.

Therefore, this chapter will argue that a rearticulation of the hero allows the possibility to see matters of human representation in terms of construction and political determination, and that this involves constant negotiations that ground the theme of figuration as a form of dialogue with reality. The idea is to reason why the concept is productively contingent and polemical, as well as to discuss

how its plasticity and elasticity, meaning the possibility to be moulded together with its resilient implications, offers us useful possibilities for a consideration of what we might call a *contemporary subject*. This is achieved by gathering a collective of voices – often contrasting – gathered from literary and philosophical examples, which allow for a more insightful take on the conceptual implications of the hero. The attention to the visual arts will, for that reason, be temporarily suspended until the third chapter where I will discuss how a then rearticulated notion of hero helps to reposition contemporary figurative sculpture. In sum, the chapter reads from a series of authors who have explored questions of heroism in order to identify what makes the hero an interesting conceit of representation.

One of the points I will try to make clear, is that any discussion on the hero ties in with problems associated with the notion of a collective; indeed, that many of the difficulties that come along with a reflection on the hero, are similar to those found at the heart of problems to do with notions of community. Like the idea of democracy, for instance, which can be both formal (one that lives on repetition, stability and order, therefore of power) and radical (one that opens into the critique of the very concept of democracy, therefore opening to emancipation), the notion of the hero too seems to follow two general and conflicting lines of thought. It is often seen that the figure either upholds sovereignty or defies its order. Neither of the positions can be ignored, but I want to focus on the second, which has a more comprehensive potential for discussion.

There is no point in denying the affects of war narratives in our culture - appearing in many guises - nor the pervasive influence of a political subconscious that is mostly populated by male figures worldwide. Indeed, it would be hard to contest that the archetypal idea of the hero, the idea that most immediately comes to the mind of most people, corresponds to a male figure. Although war and masculinity are culturally connected, the intention here is not to explain why this happens and neither to explore the relation between the hero and masculinity, on the contrary, it is to establish and discuss the term beyond gender specification. This is where I will start. Furthermore, the question of war is dissolved throughout the text.

Reading Antigone as a hero with Judith Butler

In order to dissociate the hero from the question of gender, I will begin with a brief discussion on Judith Butler's reading of Antigone found in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* [95], where she reads across Sophocles' trilogy. Butler writes of the connection that is set out between the way Antigone represents kinship in a state of deformation and between the need to recognize and legislate the right to care, suffer and mourn for those who are loved outside of today's heterogeneous family, parenting and intimate alliances. Butler establishes this connection with a confessed hope that the process of reading Antigone may move us into forming a legal precedent where these alliances can be publically and politically recognized.

Since references to the trilogy will appear throughout the text, it is useful to summarize the Theban plays[96]. Written in a different order to the chronological sequence of the dramatic events – *Antigone* is the last in terms of the plot but the first to be written, followed by *Oedipus king* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. The trilogy presents some inconsistencies of narrative, but a story can be deduced, very shortly, as thus. Beginning with the Oedipus as the king of Thebes, here the idea of hero appears hand in hand with that of the political leader. He's married to Jocasta, who is also his mother and together they have two sons, Esteocles and Polynices, and two daughters, Ismenes and Antigone. After discovering that he had killed his father and married his own mother, Oedipus blinds himself and leaves Thebes and Jocasta, who commits suicide. Years later Oedipus arrives in Athens. Although the term only appears much later, it is not completely without sense to say that at this stage, Oedipus appears in the form of the anti-hero. After Oedipus' death whilst still in exile, his two sons kill each other in battle for succession. Having gained power Creon, Jocasta's brother and uncle to all four of Oedipus's children, and to Oedipus himself, orders Esteocles' proper funeral rites, since he was considered a hero of the city. Meanwhile the dead body of Polynices, who king Creon views as an enemy to the city, ought to be left unburied, outside the city walls. In this narrative one

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95 Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
96 I read from the 1984 combined edition of *The Three Theban Plays*, translated by Robert Fagles and published by Penguin Books. See Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays. Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. London: Penguin, 1984, 82

can interpret a broader observation on the relationship between war, territory and a conservative distinction between hero and enemy, which we can still find at work today. Antigone, meanwhile, decides to bury Polynices thus disobeying the law of Creon, and for this reason is condemned to be enclosed in a cave, leading to Antigone's suicide by hanging. Here the figure of the hero is close to that of the political dissident.

And so departing from two influential readings of the myth, that of Hegel and that of Lacan[97], Butler makes a case for the relevancy of Antigone beyond gender specification. Firstly, by underlining how the play invites the reader to think of Antigone as a man, because of the way she confronts, and in a way mirrors, Creon; and crucially, by underlining that Antigone occupies multiple and contradictory symbolic positions within the structure of the family. Secondly, Butler's argument establishes a connection between Antigone's act of disobedience and her speech-act.

In relation to the first point, Butler reasons that Antigone's ambiguous and unfixed symbolic position within the family, the love for her brother and even for Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonous,* puts her beyond the incest taboo. A prohibition that Butler sees as the principle behind the traditional form of the family and the key to a dominant heterosexual logic based on the priority of biological reproduction, which she sees as the structuring element of our cultural

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97 Butler reads from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and from Lacan's *Seminar 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. In the first, as she interprets it, kinship is derived as a result of blood relations rather than of social norms and is therefore unable to sustain what is universal or to have a real political implication. This is clearly the discourse of the state seen in terms of an order structured around the suppression of the individual, which the character of Antigone represents. In this view, corresponding to an aristocratic model of heroism, the function of the family is only to consolidate the state, namely by preparing men for the activity of war. No less important is the concept of legal rights that is established by what crime prepares through the recognition of guilt – as observed in Oedipus and significantly not in Antigone. This means Hegel places the latter outside what he calls an ethical order because of the consciousness of her act and her lack of guilt; preferring instead the figure of Creon [the ruler of Thebes after Oedipus and simultaneously Antigone's great-uncle and uncle] and Oedipus, precisely because of Oedipus's unconscious motivation and consequent guilt. Oedipus's crimes – the killing of his father and espousing his mother – are done unknowingly, and as the play tells us he is consumed with remorse whereas Antigone is not. Lacan on the other hand, as also read by Butler, maintains the separation between family and the state but focuses on the family instead and more specifically on the subject as a unit. Here, kinship is seen essentially like a function of the symbolic that arrives from the interrelation between language – its very source – and the relative position occupied by a subject within a nurturing environment. So maintaining the incest taboo as the limit of culture, what is interesting for Lacan is to find Antigone at the border of culture and necessarily at the threshold of the symbolic. She comes to represent the limits of the culture she finds herself in, thus establishing but also redefining it. Furthermore, the fact that her actions and act of defiance through speech are directed at a state-regulated symbolic order but originate from the family sphere, represent a connection between love, or true desire, and the necessity to have the ontological and legal status of her brother being recognized. In fact desire and necessity are interchangeable in Lacan's reading of the play, and they both have to do with singularity: it is for this brother and not the other that Antigone's sacrifices her life. Yet, as Lacan teaches us, Antigone's desire is also for the idealized or symbolic brother, and hence, that such unmeasured desire can only lead to death precisely because it is at odds with, and seeks to defy, the state-regulated symbolic order that threatens Polynices "pure being" - arriving at the famous "second death" formulation that holds as a subject orientated symbolic realm, which is achievable only by the evacuation of the living body. See: Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, 1-25

and legal understanding of kinship. So in bringing into question the way in which Lacan conceives of the subject as being formed in relation to a series of relative positions and their translation into linguistic nominations – mother, father, daughter, son, brother, sister - as well as the distinction he makes between the symbolic and the social, Butler is able to posit that Antigone's claim does not hold according to an understanding of the symbolic order structured around a notion of law that (still) regulates desire according to a prohibition against incest.

In relation to the second point, Butler calls attention to what she sees as the political potential that is born out of Antigone's action(s) and out of her capacity to speak the language of power, as well as to speak in the face of power. That is, the act of burying her brother against the order of the law and the way this is matched by her verbal confirmation of this act directly to Creon[98]: "Of course I did. It wasn't Zeus, not in the least" [99]. A defiant act - subversive to the point of almost mocking Creon whose power, as Butler maintains, resides in the fact that "she cannot make her claim outside the language of the state but neither can the claim she wants to make be fully assimilated by the state"[100] Butler's reading, in others words, signals the possibilities that are open when an abnormal, unregulated actor who can speak the language of power simultaneously creates a space eccentric to power where it is possible to say something different.

Summarily put then, Butler argues that reading Antigone holds relevancy for today's political challenging environment, more exactly, for the need to legally recognize alternative forms of kinship - where love may not sustain biological reproduction - because of three things. Because the character of Antigone can be read beyond gender specification and beyond the heterosexual structuring of the family; because of the implication of her defiant act(s) and the way she disturbs the order of the law; and crucially, because she represents a process of forming and deforming political subjectivities that arrives from her performativity, that is, from the combination of action, the use language and gestures that put

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98 Part of Butler's argument relies on the play's ambiguity between 'deed' and 'word,' and the way Antigone intertwines physical and linguistic acts. Therefore questions of agency and language arise as equal moments of defiance. Here is an example: "because she acts in defiance of the law but also because she assumes the voice of the law in committing the act against the law. She not only does the deed, refusing to obey, but she does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it, thus appropriating the rhetoric of agency from Creon himself" in Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, 11
99 Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays. Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, 82
100 Ibid., 28

into play the possibility to state an alternative within the language of power, as it were, presenting an example of how to change power from within power.

That being said, in exploring how Antigone dismantles the logic of the family and the ordering of behaviour according to social position, Butler comes to terms with Lacan in regard the interest they both share: the way Antigone disturbs a stable notion of community; an interest which contrasts to Hegel's negative reading of Antigone based, in short, on how she acts against an established ethical order. In fact, a lot of what Butler points out is anticipated in Lacan's *Seminar VII: Ethics of phsychoanalysis*, namely the political possibilities opened by Antigone's radical incompatibility with a discourse of power based on, as established in the context of Sophocles trilogy, repetition and patriarchy structures.

In fact, both explore the way Antigone's act subverts (such) modalities and, if only indirectly, the instrumental logic of capitalism. Lacan in terms of the 'disinterest' of Antigone, which he discusses along with Kant's notion of the beautiful and on the lines that an act, which follows nothing else other than a personal ethical demand, that is, a 'beautiful' or 'pure' act that puts everything at risk without any attainable compensation in mind. Meanwhile Butler, who as mentioned, sees Antigone without a fixed subjecthood and on the lines of an un-predetermined action that foregrounds the latter against an idea of gender constituted around the repetition of normative behaviour – an argument that goes back to the idea of gender as performance, or as she puts it in *Gender Trouble* "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frames that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a nature sort of being"[101]. There is also the fact that by displacing the question of heroism from Oedipus and the competition of the two brothers, and instead focusing on Antigone, in a way Lacan anticipates Butler's argument by inverting the patriarchy structure of the play and reflecting on the implications of Antigone for a larger, present-day context, including politics and Freud's legacy for psychoanalysis.

However, the differences between the two are indeed significant. The tenets of Lacan's proposal are singularity and authenticity (the singularity of Antigone, of her brother and the authenticity of her 'desire'), and the centrality of action in

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101 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 2002, 43

face of an ethical demand and the possibility of an ethical action to rupture the established symbolic order. Butler by contrast, brings to the fore the question of multiplicity, in order to construct a theory made to elicit the idea of a continuous, less violent, performative process of deforming and forming political subjectivities outside any regulatory framework.

In all cases, it is relevant to establish a quick parallel between Antigone and the current climate of political and economic crisis and draw a line between Butler and Lacan in order to distinguish two forms of non-inscription in the discourse of late capitalism. The first, closer to Butler, is the position that affirms itself as a form of resistance structured around subversive acts. It is the position that thinks new subjectivities are possible to be formed through moments of political disturbance, engendered by multiplicity and performativity and a general disregard for power. At a time when the economical-instrumental logic of power consumes notions of multiplicity and produces a permanent 'demand for performance', it is perhaps worth considering the second form of non-inscription, closest to Lacan, which affirms that the situation can only be overcome with a fracturing action and a complete transformation of the 'symbolic order' in place: that is, the idea that a different direction asks for a rupture and a completely new logic of affiliation between the subject and the world. I will come back to this and Lacan later. With regard to Butler's position, what is important to register at this point is that she allows for the figure of the hero to be clearly separated from the problem of gender specification by her reading of Antigone - which as preliminarily established, can be seen as a hero – beyond the symbolic structure associated to a set of relative, yet fixed and hierarchical positions originally created within the logic of the family, and hence, beyond a system of thought structured around the male subject. Butler, in short, gives witness to the idea of the hero beyond gender specification by arguing that reading Antigone holds relevancy for recasting contemporary politics of kinship.

There is a second line of thought running through Butler's text that is worth considering. She reasons that the trilogy brings into question the notion of representation and the idea of a representative function: a function that Antigone no longer holds according to a normalized version. She says:

> Indeed, it is not just that, as a fiction, the
> mimetic or representative character of Antigone

is already put in question but that, as a figure for politics, she points somewhere else, not to politics as a question of representation but to that political possibility that emerges when the limits of representation and representability are exposed.[102]

There is little room for doubting that, on the plane of fiction the tragic circumstances of Antigone's life places her outside any patterns of representation and brings her to the limit of her political and ontological being. She demands for recognition whilst having no recognizable social position, which means her position cannot be successfully repeated within the patterns of normativity. So Butler's argument is a logical one. She thinks Antigone offers an alternative to normalized forms of social representation and the heterosexualization of the family by denying a reproductive dimension of representation - a negation played out in the very idea of reproduction, which Antigone's contrived refusal of maternity breaks with[103].

This concept only works as long as we see representation as a form of repetition, which is an association that does not hold all the way through. In fact, the disruption of the representative function in terms of repetition seems integral to the concept of the hero itself - for a hero has to represent something, so that he or she may be called a hero, and at the same time so it makes sense to be called a hero, he or she has to have introduced difference and somehow departure from conventional forms of representation. The most obvious counterexample to Antigone is Oedipus and the way we tend to read him, specifically after Freud, as a figure that gives in to the patriarchal order and that reifies its logic of repetition; whilst in fact Oedipus occupies an unstable symbolic position and does not accept representation in terms of repetition. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Oedipus interrupts the cycle of representation and repetition and is in fact a hero only because he is also a

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102 Ibid., 2

103 Antigone's sacrifice, as you will remember, entails the contrived choice of leaving behind the possibility to become a mother, and thus cancelling the biological, but also the political principle of reproduction. But the opposition between reproducibility and singularity is also present in the way Antigone affirms the singularity of her brother – the fact that he is not replaceable – as the reason for her disobedience: "Never, I tell you. If I had been the mother of children or if my husband died, exposed and rotting – I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself, never defied our people's will. What law, you ask, do I satisfy with what I say? A husband dead, there might be another. A child by another too, if I had lost the first. But mother and father both lost in the halls of Death, no brother could ever spring to light again". In Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays. Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, 105

patricide, that is, someone who symbolically asserts his own beginning by killing his father and thus becoming his own symbolic father.

Seen this way, Oedipus' character also reads as being consistent with a general definition of the hero as a category that remains radically open and that connects to the occurrence of the new. And what this suggests, if we are to be rigorous, is that it is impossible to conciliate the hero with the continuation in time of a regime of representation. Because, and to put it another way, referring to a figure as a hero presupposes that an idea of heroism is not only being represented but also that difference is at work, that such a figure introduces some form of meaningful singularity. This is present in Antigone but also in Oedipus, in the sense that he represents a changing of orders, from that of father to that of the son. So seeing the hero together with the occurrence of the new, which is a necessary condition for heroism in the terms being discussed here, allows us to say that the hero is a concept found at the limits of representation, and by implication, that what counts as heroism disappears once it is repeated because once repeated it is no longer heroic, or finally, that the condition of heroism is difference and that difference cannot be repeated.

But the question of representation is also at play in a sphere exterior to that of fiction. Butler's own argument, for example, suggests that Antigone has a representative function which operates not only by putting ideas about multi-positionality and performance at work within the text, but according to the representative dimension that these acquire externally: that is, for the process of rethinking contemporary forms of the family and its politics. Once again, this indicates that it is the stability and reproducibility of the representative function - read according to fixed indicators - and not the function itself that Antigone displaces.

In connection to the external work of the dramatic text and the way it affects its readers, there is one last aspect in Butler's appropriation of Antigone that I want to mention. Butler does not use the aid of objective demonstration to put her ideas forward. She does not say: legal precedents should be open for new forms of kinship because statistics show these have an increasing electoral representativeness. No. What the reader encounters is not an attempt to establish an objective implication between the political context of the play and contemporary politics, but instead, an invitation to read. This may sound too

oversimplified, but indeed the text relies on the hope that reading Antigone - a figure that posits a subject formation that is both transformed through the text and that transforms the text, and crucially, one that allows for a similar transformation to be experienced by the reader - might eventually permit an updated articulation of the subject at play and from there open into the possibility of an actual legal change. Similar to the method found in the original play, Butler involves the person who reads, who does not remain separate from what is being discussed, in the form of what we might call a *subject-of-change*. A subject to whom questions are not simply offered (or impose upon) but instead asked to work those questions out through the very process of reading. This is of course what Sophocles himself and famously other ancient Greek writers like Plato do: their writing involves the thought process of the reader as the very condition for the subjects being discussed. And there is no coincidence here. We know Butler is part of a larger group of thinkers, in which Lacan can also be included, that frequently return to Classical Greek texts as a source for philosophical debate and as an alternative to the scientific-epistemological paradigm that, specially after Foucault, can be identified with a disciplinary framework of knowledge. That being, a framework built around objectivity and that operates under the principle that it remains necessary to separate the process of reading from the argument that has been written down.

The growing influence of continental philosophy has normalized this mode of theoretical writing. However in the context of my own argument this gains a different dimension. One can establish a direct connection between the negative of objectivity and the figure of the hero. Using figures that call into question notions of heroism, for instance, by describing ordeals or the consequences of action, asks the reader to work out mentally what the text enacts internally. For the reader, who from the outset is recruited to think alongside the hero, dismantles the very continuity between argument and the normative structures of objectivity - because his very self is called to articulate those notions. This has another implication. It's hard to think of a way to ask a reader to consider problems of heroism and to expect him or her to accept what heroism means in a passive and apolitical manner.

On that note, Butler allows us to think about the hero beyond the question of gender, as a mechanism of deformation and formation of political subjectivities, and as such, as a pivotal conceit for a reflection on the subject at the intersection

between the personal and the political. Following in the footsteps of Antigone, heroism implies being close to, and simultaneously distant from power, which means: to be able to speak the language of power and at the same time have the capacity to say something different. In this view, the hero disputes what can be done or said. It is also possible to state, if only provisionally, that the figure of the hero carries an association with representation but not with repetition, and finally, texts that work through the problem of heroism are texts with ideas that are not transferable as facts, but instead demand an active/imaginative participation of the reader.

It is possible to say that finally, the hero represents the idea of a subject capable of a meaningful action and of changing the perspectives of what is possible for individuals. In that sense, it also appears as the idea of someone who produces a political disturbance by renegotiating the terms of the engagement between individuals and a given community. As explored later in more detail, this implies that 'what a hero is' is neither a neutral or universal definition, but instead a concept that permanently brings claims to universality into question; which in turn suggests that whilst the figure of the hero represents something, it does not have an essence, because what counts as heroism, and therefore what constitutes a hero, is effectively always changing. In other words, we cannot really speak of 'a truth' about 'what a hero is' and neither about a stable form to represent the 'heroic' because both are idealizations that change according to political, philosophical (and artistic) contingencies. And yet, precisely because of this, 'what constitutes a hero' opens the process of reimagining a subject who is capable of a meaningful action by exercising non-regulatory and non-objective forms of thinking, against any predetermined version of what a subject is supposed to be. A process that seems possible to align with key contemporary preoccupations, such as finding ways to constitute and render emergent political subjectivities. The idea of unstable representation and the possibility of introducing difference in the process of deforming and forming political subjectivities is the very basis for my argument. In what follows, I widen the discussion on why this is important.

Alain Badiou and the political necessity of the hero

In a study on the anti-hero in modern European literature, where the term was first introduced, Victor Brombert suggests the anti-hero hero can be characterized as presenting an opposition to the dominant values of a given time while being a creation of the critical spirit specific to that same era[104]. He also notes that he normally appears as a self-conscious, anonymous, ironic and reflexive figure – often to the point of paralysis – and that whilst being outside the norm, the anti-heroic figure often demonstrate resistance in the face of power, with a great capacity to destabilize and, importantly, to demonstrate alternative forms of courage. In a chapter dedicated to Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* for example, he observes that in assuming anti-military and anti-rhetoric positions, the anti-hero undermines grandiloquence and idealistic views; he connects to the 'tragedy of the everyday'[105] and to the common person via the maintenance of a certain existential fear[106]. Furthermore, reading from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, he observes that the anti-hero often appears as a literary device used to question the very process of conceiving a text in terms of internal coherence and that the anti-hero introduces a voice of critique by means of infinite reflection and fragmented, interrupted and unfinished writing exercise[107]. The bottom line is the anti-hero appears in culture as a strategy to shift the attention from action to critique; he appears as a subject of critique.

The question then is this: if the anti-hero is a reinterpretation of the hero that carries a heroic potential, if it posits a decentred subject that as many argue, is more in tune with contemporary values and post-modern sensibility, what after all, are the tenets of the heroic and more specifically, what is value of the hero as a figure of thought in a contemporary context? In other words, what do we gain from figuring the hero?

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104 See Victor Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes. Figures and Themes in European Literature 1830-1980*, London: The University of Chicago, 1999
105 Woyzeck is often called a 'working-class tragedy'. As quoted by Brombert, George Steiner describes it in terms of a "dissociation of tragedy from poetic form" and as a "tragedy of low life. It repudiates an assumption implicit in Greek, Elizabethan, and neo-classic drama: the assumption that tragic suffering is the sombre privilege of those who are in high places" in Ibid., 11
106 Ibid.,11-23
107 Ibid., 31-42

In recent times, there has been an interesting overlapping of an anti-heroic and a heroic mode – between acts of resistance, protest and occupation and a pressing necessity to introduce change. Consistent with the question of protest, or to be more precise, with the question of changing tactics in the context of contemporary politics of resistance, Simon Critchley attempts to connect philosophy, politics and invention. If we consider his idea that philosophy does not start with wonder but with disappointment[108], with the experience of a failed transcendence that produces an infinite demand, which is the result of an ethical subject divided between a demand and his or her incapacity to be the same as that demand, then we can read the recent wave of protest – with a peak during 2011, and in cases such as anti-austerity protests and the Indignats and Occupy movements - as a demonstration of disappointment in the form of what Critchley has defined as non-violence at the limits of violence[109]:

> an energy that is predicated not upon the heroic figure of the political actor, but on the existence of a common form: a collective force that creates distance from the state in the alternative spaces of democracy; spaces that permit the deconstruction of traditional categories of opposition and their rearticulation as forms of resistance. The same that occupation manifests in real space.[110]

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108 Immediately, in the opening paragraph, Critchley writes: "Philosophy does not begin in an experience of wonder, as ancient tradition contends, but rather, I think, with the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. Philosophy starts with disappointment. Although there might well be precursors, I see this as a specifically modern conception of philosophy" in Simon Critchley, *Infinite Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London: Verso, 2012, 1

109 The exception would have to be the more violent uprisings in the Arab world and the more recent situation in Ukraine.

110 The original source for this and the points being presented here through the theories of Critchley and Badiou relates to a conversation between the two in November 2007 at the Slought Foundation, Philadelphia, under the title: "Democracy and Disappointment: On the Politics of Resistance". http://slought.org/content/11385. Badiou's remarks were later published in Alain Badiou "Comments on Simon Critchley's Infinitely Demanding" in *Symposium (Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy / Revue canadienne de philosophie continentale)*: Vol. 12: Issue 2, 2008, 9-17. The text is also available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/symposium/vol12/iss2/3. This particular quote, however is directly transcribed from the audio file.

Critchley believes that the claim to universality is going to permit such political subjectivity to be constituted and held together, that this universality will assume the precise form of an infinite ethical demand that exists under the shared feeling that a situation is unjust. In his words, the result of this consensus of feeling corresponds to a form of neo-anarchism, a form of anarchism predicated not on freedom but on responsibility: "An anarchism that abolishes my autarchy, my autonomy, my self-sufficiency, my self-satisfaction and opens me to the other's infinite demand"[111].

In conversation with Critchley, Alain Badiou notes that the tension between the negativity of disappointment and the affirmative side of an infinite demand demonstrates firstly that it is not easy for us to accept our limits and that if we are to accept the possibility for an infinite demand, than there is something infinite in us. Secondly, it is not easy to accept and articulate the infinite beyond the infinite demand itself. Such is the tension he sees dividing the subject in Critchley: a distinction between the subject that experiences disappointment – that he calls a "dividual" – and the ethical subject that results from the demand.

In fact, Badiou's philosophy connects the problematic of the subject to a speculation on the condition of heroism and is for that reason, helpful to consider with some detail. However some coordinates are necessary. Instead of his more technical texts, such as *Being and Event* and *Theory of the Subject*, I will consider smaller, more intelligible texts where first the figure of the hero and then the hero and the subject of art can be recognized. I will begin with the conversation abovementioned, where Badiou reasons that it is possible to part ways with heroism conceived in terms of authenticity, the true origin and self–sufficiency, proposing instead a heroism of the void, that is, the heroism of the becoming subject in a concrete situation.

> I [Badiou] define heroism as the possibility for
> an individual to become subject (…) We exist
> as individuals; we exist finally as something
> like human animals. And in some
> circumstances we have the chance to become
> subjects. And there is heroism, not at all

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111 Ibid.

because it is much more authentic to be a
subject than to be an individual or something
like that, but simply because the becoming-
subject goes beyond the popular limits of our
existence as individuals.[112]

Therefore, one of the problems of a non-heroic model and Critchley's neo-
scepticism, as Badiou continues, is the negativity of modesty; a negativity that
may conceal a desire to remain in the individual state and become a pacifying
instrument. That is, to "…be modest, stay in your place!", and inversely the
problem of anger, the first political emotion and one that produces political
movement but not the political subject [113]. For Badiou, the shared feeling of
wrongness, leading to a demand, is not the creative element of a new political
subject. Instead what generates a new political subject is the beginning brought
about by the discovery of new means and a small victory. What really fuelled
events in may 68' was not injustice, he argues, but the small victory that came
when the government decided to demobilize the police from the Sorbonne. That
was the moment that unleashed the entire movement, or what he calls the
"power of affirmation, the positivity of ethics"[114].

So what Badiou seems to be suggesting is that there is a tension between
negativity and affirmation in the political process and that the moment when the
individual (singular or collective) becomes a political subject is always an
affirmative moment; a moment that does not come from inside the individual
alone, but from its exteriority too. From a specific context and a specific
situation.

The point is the relation between the question
of the limits of the individual, the potentiality of
something that happened outside the
individual and the opting for something which

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112 In Alain Badiou "Comments on Simon Critchley's Infinitely Demanding" in *Symposium (Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy / Revue canadienne de philosophie continentale)*: Vol. 12: Issue 2, 14

113 "I [Badiou] think anger is very important, and, contrary to the classical tradition, in Seneca say, I think it is the first political emotion. It is often anger that moves the subject to action. Anger is the emotion that produces motion, the mood that moves the subject (…) My problem is that this sort of beginning is a negative one: the sense of injustice, the revolt against the wrongs of the world, the feeling of anger. But, I think that this cannot create a new political subject. This is my difficulty. I think that we can have, naturally, negative feelings, negative experience concerning injustice, concerning the horrors of the world, terrible wars, and so on. But I do not think that all that is the creative part of a new political subject." Ibid.,10

114 Ibid., 16

is beyond the individual limits, which is
precisely the beginning of a new subject which
of course is composed of the individual, but it
is also beyond the limits of individuality.[115]

So even if the non-heroic has been the slogan in recent strategies of resistance - constituted around a field of anonymous people coming together in shared discontent - the moment is not completely anti-heroic. There is a necessity for action and as Badiou's response to Critchley proposes, a potential place for heroism. Parallel to this, an anonymous subject is a subject that is not yet articulated, which by contrast, brings us back to the idea that the figure of the hero might allow us to reimagine the political subject with a positive affirmation.

Badiou puts it in surprisingly simple and useful terms. If, in "any period of time, in any sequence of history, we have to maintain a relationship with what exceeds our possibilities"[116] especially in a time of disorientation. He continues:

we must create a symbolic representation of this
humanity which exists beyond itself, in the
fearsome and fertile element of the inhumane. I
[Badiou] call that sort of representation a heroic
figure. 'Figure' because the action of a figure is a
symbolic one. 'Heroic' because heroism is
properly the act of the infinite in human
actions.[117]

That is why courage, and from here, war as a field of courage, is so important as "the expression of human capacities beyond risk, beyond death". This explains two things: the nostalgia for the old figure of the warrior [118] thus "a combination

115 http://slought.org/content/11385. This direct quotation from the audio file does not appear in the published version of the event.
116 In Alain Badiou "The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry" in Simon Critchley. LEVY, Aaron Levy. eds., *Democracy and Disappointment: On the Politics of Resistance*, DVD (booklet) Philadelphia: Slought Foundation, 2007, 2. The text is also available at http://www.lacan.com/badsold.htm.
117 Ibid.
118 What Badiou refers to as the nostalgia for the warrior figure meets the idea that we are already witnessing a return to the heroic. A view that raises the idea, in terms of today's celebration of the body and how status is increasingly acquired in a space of appearances through the media in particular, is that the body rather than the ideas or convictions of that subject, is what ultimately matters; views that in short, make an association between an obsession with the body, celebrity culture and the cult of heroes. I am thinking in particular about Boris Groys and the argument in "The Hero's Body" as here presented in a longish quote: "But what is a hero? What distinguishes a hero from a non-hero? The medium of the heroic is not the mind but the body. The hero is someone who risks his life regardless of the consequences. The heroic act turns the hero's body from a

of victory and destiny, of superiority and obedience,"[119] which is both a symptom of disorientation and an instrument of crisis; and because "war in our days, has become an obscure slaughter,"[120] the need for a political gesture consisting of imagining a form of 'immanent immortality' after the figure of the soldier, the "first dialectical unity between courageous death and immortality, without reference either to a personal soul or to a God [a] democratic glory, which creates something immortal with collective and anonymous courage"[121]. So the task, as Badiou concludes,

> is a very precise one. We are after the period of the aristocratic warrior, and after the period of the democratic soldier, but we are not in a peaceful end of history. On the contrary, we live in confusion, violence and injustice. We must create new symbolic forms for our collective actions[122].

medium into a message. In that respect the hero's body is distinct from that of the politician, the scientist, the entrepreneur, or the philosopher. The bodies of the latter are concealed behind the social function that they fill. When a body manifests itself directly, however, when it explodes the shell of the social roles, that it usually plays, the result is the hero's body (…) And these are not bodies at rest, they were battling, enthusiastically, emotionalizing, vibrating, explosive bodies – that is to say, heroic ones. The heroes of antiquity had such bodies, when they were seized by an unbridled passion and were prepared to destroy or be destroyed. Italian Fascism and German National Socialism adopted the artistic program of making the medium of the body the message and made it a political one. They did not side with convictions, theories, and programs but with bodies – those of athletes, fighters, and soldiers. Making the body the message requires above all an arena, a stage – or alternatively, it requires modern reporting, a public created by the media. This is why we are experiencing today a vast return of the heroic, even if it is one that is not always explicitly avowed, because we live amid a world theatre in which everything ultimately depends on the body. (…) Today's media stars become stars entirely by mean of their bodies, not by what they say or do. (…) Above all we shy away from asking the crucial questions: What distinguishes the heroic body of a media star from the non-heroic bodies of the audience? Where lies the magic border separating the hero from the non-hero on a purely physical plane? These questions arise because on the ideological plane a democratic equality of all bodies is postulated that does not in fact exist in the reality of the media. For in today's media democracy, all ideologies, theories and discourses are equal, and hence also irrelevant. Yet bodies are all the less equal for that." (The details of the citations are given at the end of the footnote). Others underline the problematics of action figures and their status in culture, as seen mostly in popular cinema, most often coinciding with violence as rhetoric for political decisions. A view that understands heroism as a product of, as much as represented by, neo-liberal imagery, specifically cinematic, where we can easily recognize an obsession with the body and with victory. Here we see the figure of the warrior, and its translation into language via an abundant use of a vocabulary of violence – everywhere from sporting fields to boardrooms. A tone that accompanies the rehearsing of a post-tragic heroism, i.e. the tragic without death, which as Amanda Beech argues in her PhD thesis, comes in support of a rhetoric of autonomy and violence as decision and in support of a naturalization of belief associated with a specific idea of justice. I think Both Groys's and Beech's observations are fair, but only rightly so because they mostly rely on an oversimplifying and traditionally aristocratic understanding of the concept; one that goes hand in hand with a superficial archeology of term and the habit of considering the hero and the intellectual as two irreconcilable figures. My point of departure, by contrast, is that the hero constitutes a fractured figure that carries the possibility of reconciling action, the question of the body and critical thinking – which for the specific use here – we can directly connect with figurative sculpture. For Groys's citation see Boris Groys, "The Hero's Body" in Friederike Fast, Véronique Souben, Michale Kröger, eds., *(my private) Heroes*, Germany: Kerber, Marta Herford, 259. For Beech, see: Amanda Beech, *Heroic Realism: Rhetoric and Violence in Narratives of Justice and Discourses of Decision, (Ph.D. thesis,* Goldsmiths, University of London, 2003. Available at: http://eprints.gold.a.c.uk/174/

119 In Alain Badiou "The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry" in Simon Critchley. LEVY, Aaron Levy. eds., *Democracy and Disappointment: On the Politics of Resistance*, 4
120 Ibid. p. 8
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.

As much as this seems to clarify the emergency of the hero, thinking about the necessity to figure the heroic through Badiou (being a ferocious defender of a return to truth), it is not without a sense of contradiction with the initial proposal to disconnect representation from the priority of truth. However, the figure of the hero appears in a paradoxical position in the work of Badiou, which as discussed below undoes the contradiction, where I disambiguate the contradiction between Badiou's take on the hero as a subject of truth and my own effort to establish the hero as a conceit of representation without the priority of truth, by elaborating on the hero and the positivity of the moment when a subject is formed. Here we find a perfect moment in Badiou's praise of transformative ruptures, vis-a-vis the attempt to explore the potential of universalizing innovation at the heart of the question of truth in the latter, which precisely, the hero destabilizes. Furthermore, this will allow me to establish an important connection between the hero and art and elaborate on how such a connection ties in with courage. I will begin by describing in a summary manner the areas in Badiou's thought where these problems can be located.

In the first instance, Badiou considers 'truth', or 'truths', to be infinite and unchangeable. Yet he also conceives of truth to be something different from metaphysical or objective truth. He tells us truth is a generic form of thought that does not wait to be discovered but rather one that is brought to the fore by four different types of procedures or events - art, politics, science and love - all capable of creating the new. And truth for Badiou is always new, and more, produced locally yet with the quality of including what is universal. Located somewhere between a contemporary version of Platonism and a form of Constructivism, Badiou's body of thought is also known for combining ontology and mathematics with the historical, and for rendering the question of *being* inseparable from that of *appearing*.

Importantly, the notion of event, which is the kernel of Badiou's philosophy, is seen as an eruption that takes place because of the accumulation of something that is missing from circumstances - that Badiou sometimes refers to as "the state of things" – an eruption that ultimately produces truth. One needs to consider though, that truth is something that Badiou separates from knowledge, which he disqualifies because of its instability. Often making the association between the nature of knowledge and that of encyclopedia knowledge (with its constant need for revision) as being marked in terms of a series of 'subsets,'

which truth always exceeds. Truth is viewed both as the object of knowledge and as that which gives origin to knowledge. It is, to put it more simply, not knowledge but what is beyond knowledge.

Finally, it is the event and the new that produces the subject through the subject's fidelity to the event. This fidelity is what gives the subject the opportunity to connect (in fact the opportunity for a commitment to take place) with something beyond the condition of the individual - a moment when it becomes possible to connect the infinity of truth, to the finitude of the individual. This brings us to the question of ethics. A question articulated around a commitment to a given situation, that demands something from the subject; and since an event is always a collective moment for Badiou, this commitment is one that involves a self but, and significantly, a demand that can only be properly described as a demand of the Other. Writing in *Ethics: An essay on the Understanding of Evil* Badiou explains that in being subsumed to the question of desire - the unattainable desire for the other, the unconscious unknown - ethics is a field of not-knowing, and therefore that the demand it produces cannot be communicated. It begs for an encounter and a commitment, a fidelity, that I and no one else experience, because: " To enter into the composition of a subject of truth can only be something that happens to you"[123].

So confirming what is written before, the subject in Badiou can indeed be seen as a kind of heroic subject. It connects to an event, where something new is produced, crucially via a commitment to a sphere larger than that of the individual. The subject appears with an answer given to an ethical demand, a demand to take action, brought upon the subject by something that happens to the subject. After ethics, this introduces the question of politics, which can summarily be described as the only of the four procedures where the infinite, in the form of 'for all' [124], appears as the first goal; intertwining with ethics in the sense that in Badiou's terms a political event is always a collective and interdependent with the formation of a subject.

But then we have another question: if the ethical subject is formed because of

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123 Significantly, Badiou writes the passage with a reference to Lacan's notion of ethics. In Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An essay on the Understanding of Evil,* London: Verso, 2001, 51
124 Badiou posits the formula 'for all' as the first condition of politics as truth procedure – an idea announced throughout this work and explicitly when he writes: "'Thought' is the name for the subject of a truth procedure. The use of the term 'collective' is an acknowledgement that if this thought is political, it belongs to all." in Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics,* London, Verso, 2005, 141

the fidelity to the event, why should we think about the hero? Why should we go in that direction instead of exploring the complexities of 'a procedure of truth'? The question has two possible answers. The event, Badiou tells us, cannot be known. The subject has to 'name' it in order to understand in which ways what happens can affect and change the circumstances. Indeed, the subject has to 'name' the event in order for the possibility of understanding whether or not what occurs constitutes a 'truth'. So one way to answer the question is by identifying the hero with the moment of nomination; that is, as strategy to think the event and measure the relevancy of what happens, and how this modifies the state of things. So 'heroism' here is the name for the consequences of the event. But in my opinion the real answer rests with the notion of figuration. If what occurs is what originates a subject, and not the other way around, why the necessity to imagine a figure of heroism? What is at stake in the very process of figuration? Considering Badiou's interpretation, one has to struggle to think about what comes before the event. His philosophy starts when something occurs so when we say that it is important and perhaps even necessary, to imagine a figure for a new type of heroism, a figure that can represent a relationship to what transcends the possibilities of individuals, we are opening a paradox in Badiou's thought. Whilst most of Badiou's philosophy is post-event, the moment when he suggests that it is the importance of imagining a figure for a new type of heroism, he's pointing in the direction of a subject that does not yet exist, and therefore, evoking the subject of a political 'pre' or even 'para' event. This is what connects the hero to invention and with invention, to art.

As he establishes in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou views art as a procedure capable of producing its own truth and that such truth results from the procedure that it involves. The truth of art is both singular and immanent. He says: "Art is a thought in which artworks are the Real (and not the effect). And this thought, or rather the truths that it activates, are irreducible to other truths – be they scientific, political, or amorous."[125] Having putting it like that, in "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" [126], he also considers if only indirectly, that art is never completely autonomous, that art is something that is always about something else; that unlike politics, where the infinite is the first goal, art is what is capable of producing the truth of something else, by producing something infinite in finite

125 In Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford: Standford University Press, 2005, 9
126 In Alain Badiou "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" in *Lacanian Ink*, Vol. 23, Spring 2004. It can be found at http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm

forms. This is the reason why the the hero is close to the work of art as conceived by Badiou, because similarly to art, the hero appears as a figuration of something universal – an attempt to represent something universal within the limits of a figure.

This is illustrated in the text mentioned above, where he reasons that the task of contemporary art is to produce new possibilities and to "reverse the infinity of the desire for new forms and the finitude of the body, of the sexuality, and so on", into, "precise and finite summarization." By which he means to undermine the fetishization of transitory stages at the heart of present day capitalism (youth, sex, the spectacle of death, fashion and do on), by creating an infinite body in a finite body - a body, as it were, without a body – because real desire, he argues " is subversive desire, is the desire for eternity. The desire for something that is a stability, something which is art"[127]. The three citations summarize Badiou's first two theses on contemporary art and I risk saying all the other 13. They make clear that although art and politics are generally seen as different procedures, in Badiou's view art is necessarily political because its task is to create new political paradigms and to produce, within the limits of its material existence, a form of universal truth - a form that can oppose the logic of a global market-based economy and the 'universality of money,' which as he contends in the same text, is the only form of universal truth we know today. And between the list of reasons why we need to raise barricades and start something new, something meaningful, heroism is the word that never gets to be spoken, but one that that has a particular traction within the argument as a finite manifestation of something infinite. In this sense, the presence of the hero is felt as the proper figure to the truth of art.

And yet, if "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" crystallizes Badiou's expectations for art, it also shows the vulnerability of his instructions and the relation between these and their unspoken connection to heroism. On the one side, it is not difficult to associate the notion of heroism with that of a new political paradigm, where a claim to universality can be found beyond the truth of

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127 Badiou's first two theses on contemporary art derive from two theoretical problematics. The first being is as the author outlines:, "The artistic obsession with novelty, of critique, of representation and so on, is really not a critical position about capitalism because capitalism itself is the obsession of novelty and the perpetual renovation of forms"; the second, the idea that "in our world there is something like an ideology of happiness. Be happy and enjoy your life and so on. In artistic creation we often have the reverse of that sort of ideology in the obsession with suffering bodies, the difficulty of sexuality, and so on. We need not to be in that sort of obsession. Naturally a critical position about the ideology of happiness is an artistic necessity, but it's also an artistic necessity to see it as a new vision, a new light, something like a positive new world. And so, the question of art is also the question of life and not always the question of death". In ibid.

money; whilst on the other, the idea that we can imagine a figure of heroism disturbs any claims of universality. This is why.

Within Badiou's scheme of things, the inconsistency of the circumstances leading up to an event cannot be repeated. This in turn implies that it is not possible to conceive a definitive figure of heroism, a figure that would completely exhaust the relationship between individuals and what transcends the condition of the individual. In other words, what counts as heroism cannot be fixed or hermetically configured.

Looking again into *Handbook of Inaesthetics,* we could perhaps force a definition of the hero as an "artistic configuration", which Badiou defines as an artistic truth that thinks itself through multiple "subjective points" created locally[128]. An idea that translated into the hero would register as the implication of different situations to different definitions of heroism. But the difficulty here is that heroism cannot be described as something generic and unchanging, which is the very condition of truth as defined by Badiou. What counts as heroism is not the same everywhere, all the time. In fact, it could be said that the challenge presented by a "precise and finite summarization"[129] has a parallel in the insufficiency of any definition of heroism; or in other words, that the difficulty in imagining a figure of heroism in the mode of the generic is similar to the difficulty of art.

This can perhaps be explained with the necessity of limits –that exists in something finite- and the tension produced when it comes to claim that something universal is sustained within those limits. But where there are limits, there is also politics. So limits are at once what brings to question any claims of universality and the condition for a possibility of politics in the figure of the hero. What this tells us, is that the hero does not correlate to the mode of the generic, but instead to the mode of the common. The difference between the two is this: whilst the term 'generic' means 'for all,' where this 'all' appears as an abstraction (with no place for cultural or political differences) the term 'common' refers more clearly to a situated collective with shared beliefs and shared necessities (where

128 Badiou offers a comprehensive discussion on why it is necessary to define an artistic truth as an artistic configuration in the introduction to *Handbook of Inaesthetic*, which I think is well summed up here: "In the end, a truth is an artistic configuration initiated by an event (in general, an event is a group of works, a singular multiple of works) and unfolded through chance in the form of the works that serve as its subject points." In Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 14
129 Badiou in Alain Badiou "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" in *Lacanian Ink*, Vol. 23, Spring 2004.

precisely differences are brought to the fore). Therefore, if trying to imagine a figure for a new type of heroism is a way of articulating a subject subordinated to something that transcends the individual condition of the human, it is complicated to say that there is a universal equivalent, indeed a universal form, associated to what heroism is. At best, a claim to potentially universality, heroism, and in the end, is not a generic definition but instead one that belongs to the sphere of the common; where it appears as something that is relevant, not because of mere novelty or formal games, but because what it introduces is considered meaningful - which in turn involves non-generic negotiations about what is meaningful[130].

It might be hard to think about negotiation as being heroic, especially if negotiation is understood as necessarily requiring compromise. And then again, is it possible to describe what the word heroic actually means without some form of negotiation? The answer, if only intuitive, seems to be no. What people consider heroic changes and often appears in distinct, often conflicting, contexts and under different guises and therefore requires negotiation. As intuitive as this might be, the question marks an important point of my general argument and requires further attention and a short detour.

Badiou continues to be a good interlocutor here. As already pointed out, he tells us that the subject, a figure of finitude, is produced through an event and more exactly through the occurrence of something infinite, e.g. truth, which the subject needs to connect with in order to be qualified as such. Once defined in these terms, however, the event also excludes the subject because it correlates to something infinite, which is precisely the *other* of the subject. A second difficulty is born out of the relationship between the finitude of the subject and the infinitude of truth. In Badiou's system of thought, the event has to be named - insofar as the event needs to register the recognition of how it changed the state of things in a given situation. This means that because an event can only be recognized as such through its naming, not as it happens, it is only constituted after the proper event has already taken place, which further means that there is a kind of permanent deferral within Badiou's logic of the event[131].

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130 At this point it becomes relevant to say that using 'the hero' in the context of an argument that wants to undermine the idea of the universal presents a clear problem: the article 'the' posits the universality of the name it prefaces. The decision to use this form and no another was made to facilitate writing and not to confuse reading. In other circumstances, to use the conjunction in the graphic form '~~the~~ hero' would have been more appropriate and a good alternative.
131 For a more detailed account of the problems with Badiou's theory of the subject in terms of its finite-infinite

In turn, it is possible to say that the hero is a name that establishes a relationship between the individual and transcending the dimension of the individual, but that is not the same as what we would call infinite. Its very condition, a condition defined by the extraordinary, is realized by the new but also by moments of negotiating whether or not what is done and brought forth is relevant and of a heroic status.

In other words, it appears that the hero needs to be understood according to two different moments: that of difference and that of negotiation, and ultimately this process is rooted in culture. One might think of Antigone here once again, for what qualifies her as a hero is her courage and trangressive actions and the way these introduce difference in the form of a renewed sense of what was possible for an individual to do within a given historical, that is fictional, setting. But it is also the fact that such actions, which in the play are described as being against the law of a community, have been culturally renegotiated and reclaimed as a feat of heroic resistance against power.

Still, one could argue that what I am describing here does not seem that much different from the temporal leap one finds in Badiou's account of the event, but there is a fundamental difference. As soon as we consider culture as the field where the heroic is negotiated, what we are saying is that what heroic means is defined according to terms gathered by a collective, terms that may or may not have to do with fundamental political truths. The point of the matter here is that this 'negotiating' is not exhausted or fully determined by truth as defined by Badiou: something generic and universal. Rather, it is a process that needs to be seen together with political but also cultural contingencies. The heroic, in its broad sense, does not descend from fundamental political truths located 'elsewhere'.

Indeed it is very common for an action to be perceived as heroic in one place and time and as its absolute opposite in a different place and time, which underlines the fact that heroism is a complex and often conflicting notion that depends on social circumstances and on a shared and situated sense of what is

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schema and the temporal deferral this schema produces, see for example: Simon O'Sullivan " The strange Temporality of the Subject: Life In-between the Infinite and the Finite (Deleuze contra Badiou)" in Simon O'Sullivan, *On the Production of Subjectivity. Five Diagrams of the Finite-Infinite relation. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012*

more meaningful and less meaningful. Holding this in mind, we can therefore say that the hero is a figure that exists in a double temporality defined by difference and negotiation. We can also say that, in a sense, this temporality replaces the defferal that exists in Badiou's logic of the event, and furthermore lends itself to the rehearsing of the extraordinary from the intelligibility of culture. Once the cultural root of this double temporality is considered, then it is possible to conclude that the hero appears not as the belated recognition that something infinite has occurred, but as a positive affirmation located in culture that rehearses but also invents, as suggested below, versions of a subject capable of a meaningful gesture.

This brings us back to the assertion that the hero operates as a concept of figuration and therefore that it is more than a simple word designating the recognition of the occurrence of truth. Holding this in mind, one might also define it as a figure that allows us to project cultural conceptions of what lies beyond the dimension of the individual. Furthermore, that it operates as a figure where ideas about how a given culture might transcend itself can be rehearsed, whilst simultaneously, because it is formed locally, calling into question any attempts to universalize matters.

These problems skirt around a distinction I invoked earlier between 'common' and 'generic' that needs to be clarified further. On one hand, we have the thesis saying that there are fundamental political truths, such as equality and freedom, which are universal and generic and that need to be reclaimed and rehearsed within local historical 'sites'. Under these terms, 'generic' can be defined as something universal in quality and that can be shared by, and applied to, all without belonging to anyone in particular. Seen this way, 'generic' registers as something that does not belong to this or that community but is instead related to an abstract collective. In contrast to this definition, by 'common' I designate the nature of something shared by what we might refer to as a non-abstract collective. In other words, a community defined around a sphere of shared necessities and beliefs, which are both specific to that community, and one might say transformative and in transformation, for it is safe to say that members of any community will be influenced by that community, which in turn evolves because of transformation such influences have produced in its members[132].

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132 The distinction that I am making here is based on a definition of community that presupposes the existence, albeit not necessarily in a fixed way, of limits. This definition is in tension with Badiou's philosophical

Democracy for Badiou corresponds to a form of adjustment between equality and freedom[133], and part of his longstanding, and often attacked, critique of contemporary forms of democracy stems from what he perceives as a problematic privileging of liberty over equality that characterizes the latter. He thinks that in order for political truths to be produced, the particularity of liberty has to be limited and the universality of equality necessarily enhanced.

Equality and freedom are beyond the subject of my discussion here but I think Badiou's argument is solid. And yet it is difficult to describe all the different aspects that take part in and influence the state of democracies around the world solely by reflecting on equality and freedom. How can we think about democracy as a space of emancipation, for example, without developing a capacity to reflect on and put into practice, the right to difference and the possibility to produce influence in the public sphere? Therefore, how can we think about democracy without thinking about difference? It seems complicated for a definition of democracy based on an idea of adjustment between equality and freedom to leave space for any of the important subtleties inherent to democratic life. So there is perhaps a simple conclusion that can be draw here. Any attempt to address communal complexities beyond those found in generic forms will inevitably ask for the plurality and specificity of social phenomena to be recognized. And this, at least in some ways, is what supports the distinction between the sphere of the generic and that of the common.

Picking up from there, the fact that we can use the word 'hero' in a wide variety of situations - and still make sense when using it - that may or may not bring matters of equality and freedom into play, suggests, or more exactly confirms, that it is the common, not the generic, that is the privileged sphere for giving the name heroic to this or that figure.

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project. On one side, we have the notion of a social unity defined in terms of its boundaries together with the post-modern idea of community as a site of decentralized discourses. These definitions are hard to reconcile with Badiou who sees politics as being deprived of its subversive force due precisely to the designation of community, the dividing of the world as "the inherent impossibility of our world", as he writes in *Conditions* (for reference see below). On the other side, community comes to the fore along with the idea of communism, the right political hypothesis as he calls it in works such as *The Communist Hypothesis* and *The Meaning of Sarkozy,* in which he tries to map out the basis for emancipatory politics in the twenty-first century. However, the problem remains. In order for a community to be a community of all and for all, which is the condition of politics according to the latter, it requires boundaries to be non-existing and therefore to posit a form of radical openness. This means that to Badiou, community is defined and thought over through its own impossibility and ultimately that it does not, properly speaking, belong to the real world. It is a community that, in reference to the work of Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, Badiou has called: unavowable, inoperative and perceivable only as a coming community. See Alain Badiou, *Conditions*. London: Continuum, 2008, 148

133 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*. London: Verso, 2005, 151

So in coming to the end of this section, the implications and flaws of Badiou for a discussion on the contemporary hero can be outlined as thus. Before the necessity to reconfigure the political imaginary, Badiou tells us that the moment when a subject is formed is always a positive moment. This moment shares with the notion of heroism the passage from the condition of individual to that of a subject, and a connection with something larger than the individual: something collective and infinite, something non-human. But 'heroism' also implies a series of ideas that are difficult to reconcile with the concept of generic truth because there are strong reasons to doubt an address of heroism that leaves out cultural aspects and how these may influence the very notion of heroism.

So having followed Badiou's lead in recognizing the relevancy of the hero as a figure of thought for the task of thinking about the contemporary subject, it was suggested that the latter holds a double temporality. The first moment of this temporality involves the occurrence of the new and secondary to a process of negotiation based on cultural contingencies. It was also suggested that it is precisely through culture, not through generic truths, that one might articulate a sense of collective meaning. Culture is our best chance to harbour the infinite, or more exactly the promise of something we might choose to refer to as infinite.

In this sense, to think about the hero begs for a series of cultural, political and even generational negotiations and hence cannot rely upon unchanging definitions. For as soon it is equated with the knowledge of new possibilities, something that can transcend mere formalism and that can be used to reconstruct new symbolic forms for our collective actions, then this thinking takes place less in terms of what is truth or not truth, and more in terms of what is more meaningful or less meaningful, more useful or less useful. In turn, this implies that to work with the hero is to work with a conceit of representation that places the subject beyond itself whilst introducing a demand for a constant revision of what constitutes heroism.

In summary, along with Badiou, we can consider the hero as a positive affirmation through which one might think about a subject capable of a meaningful action. However it is difficult to describe questions of heroism in terms of generic truths. In fact, we can expect descriptions about what constitutes a hero to produce disagreement and bring to question claims of universality. In turn, I have reasoned that questions of heroism demand a

distinction between what is generic and what is common and need to be considered as culturally determinable. This suggests that the hero calls for a discussion on the space of language. In what follows next, I will attempt to explain this relationship between the hero and language in terms of a dialogue with reality, and to establish the latter in terms of what I shall call, an idealism of necessity. This will allow me to move further away from the question of truth, get closer to the notion of redescription and furthermore, relate the hero to an intensification of the vocabulary used to describe the ethical and collective subject.

Answering to reality: on the uses of the hero and its principles

The figure of the hero makes a rare appearance in the writings of Maurice Blanchot, most notably in *Infinite Conversations* where Blanchot proposes that his reader rethink the association between the hero and authenticity, through a relation between origin and beginning[134]. The hero, he contends, needs to be seen in terms of *being,* and more importantly, in terms of action. And what he means by this, is that the origin of the hero is not *origin* as such, i.e. proper name or family lineage, but rather action; because it is not before an action that the hero proves himself to be legitimately heroic.

This clarifies the question of potentiality. We do not need to see the hero as a transcendental subject, a figure becoming something it already is, the predestined, the natural, and so on. On the contrary, the hero is a figure that becomes what it is in the process of introducing the new. But Blanchot also tells us, correctly in my opinion, that the hero involves not only the sovereignty of the act and a beginning, but the inscription of both in speech:

> The hero, the active man par excellence,
> owes his existence solely to language. (…)
> Measured speech and heroic lack of
> measure have this in common: both affront

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134 Here I am reading from an essay entitled "The End of the Hero," found in Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 368-379

> death. But speech is more profoundly engaged in the movement of dying because it alone succeeds in making of dying a second life, an enduring without duration.[135]

This brings the hero closer to inventive procedures but also to a public condition. Once again in Blanchot's more trained hand:

> One could say that he represents the first form of what will later be meant (but in a sense still scarcely elucidate) when one speaks of an existence that is public, for he has no other presence than an exterior presence, and seems solely toward the outside; hence also corresponding to the speech that quite wholly produces him and that he in turn translates.[136]

Let us consider the two ideas announced in the citations: the relation between action and language and the hero as a public subject. These produce a series of sub-questions, for instance: if action is the proper field of heroism, what separates action from other human activities and what is the distinct aspect of heroic action? And where does language come in? Gathering thoughts on these questions, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* is a good place to start looking for answers.

Arendt divides human activity into labour, work and action. She tells us the first is what one does when trying to meet immediate necessities, such as the necessity to eat, drink, sustain a household and so on; the second one does as an instrumental activity but where the necessities being addressed are not as immediate as in the first case, and where there is normally technical knowledge involved and a form of accumulation, be it material or immaterial; and finally the third, action, Arendt conceives as a type of non-predetermined activity, that is,

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135 Ibid., 371
136 Ibid., 378

as an activity that remains its own cause. Labour is strictly located in the domestic sphere, action meanwhile is envisaged as being proper to the public sphere, while work, well understood, is found between the two. Drawing on the example of Classical Greece and the clear separation between private and public life model, Arendt concludes that action is the activity of politics practiced by free citizens in the absence of any form of coercion, material or other, with expression within and for the public sphere; where it is recognized amongst equals through its translation into speech.

Moving on from this analysis, Arendt suggests the passage from action to speech holds sway against the weakening of the political subject, the instrumental use of reason with an economic schema and against the erasure of the public sphere – an erasure she identifies with a series of historical changes that caused the notion of public sphere, and indeed politics, to evolve in a direction where discourse was to be replaced by, or regressed to, the priority of a domestic-like preoccupation with material sustainability[137]. Crucially, Arendt also underlines the potential of action as that which produces novelty and knowledge.

And it is in this sense, as a call for extraordinary action, that Arendt's view affirms itself clearly, albeit not directly, as a discourse on heroism[138]. Confessedly influenced by Aristotle, Arendt sees in the image of a scientist working in a laboratory – someone who is free from basic preoccupations, and who works without knowing in advance the results of his or her own work – as a modern translation of the sort of heroism she recognizes and praises in Oedipus, that is, presented in a position separate from a state of not-knowing to another form of knowing. A movement she regards as the very engine of development and that which makes it possible to move beyond the limits of 'the human condition'. An idea she illustrates, with a clear nod to universalism, with

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137 One of the strands of the argument in 'The Human Condition' is the idea that the technological advances at the heart of modernization guided knowledge towards a means/ends scheme and that in turn this lead to an idea of the public sphere as a system that in its essence exists to regulate the balance between production and expenditure; which according to Arendt is a logic that belongs more to the domestic sphere - with its necessity for material sustainability - and therefore what registers the erasure of the public sphere. This is also the nature of her critique of Marx, who's she accuses of reducing the social to the perspective of the humans specie. For more on this, see: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, London, The university of Chicago Press, 1998, 109-118

138 In the introduction to *The Human Condition* (in the edition referenced here) Margaret Canovan reminds us that Arendt is often negatively accused: "Many readers have taken offense at Arendt's derogatory references to social concerns, and have also assumed that in criticizing the conformist materialism of modern society, Arendt intends to recommend a life of heroic action. But that reading misses the book's complexity, for another of its central themes concerns the dangers of action, which sets off new processes beyond the actor's control, including the very processes that have given rise to modern society" in Margaret Canovan. "Introduction" in. ARENDT, Hannah Arendt,*The Human Condition*,. xiii

the image of the satellite as an example of development and human capacity for changing its fate and transcending biological necessities and political limitations. Finally, heroic action for Arendt is what carries the promise of new beginnings[139] and the improvement of life delivered by new knowledge.

But this image of the scientist working in a laboratory does not clarify all the complexities of Arendt's proposal, in terms of the relationship between the figure of hero and the public sphere. In fact, the hero for Arendt is not someone hidden and unknown to the world nor someone special, but anyone who, in possession of freedom, is capable of courage. As she observes, the main political currency in ancient Greece, meant no more than a capacity to abandon domestic life in favour of public life:

> The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all (…) And this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's private hiding place.[140]

Positing heroic action as a crevice in the repetition of everyday life, and as a form of visibility associated with public life, means we cannot conceive action as anonymous activity but instead as the activity that discloses the singularity of the agent of the action, within a common domain constituted by others capable of recognizing it through speech; a domain formed by an "existing web where their

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139 The word "beginning" has a special relevancy in *The Human Condition*, as Arendt clearly places a great hope in the idea of new beginnings, that is, in the idea that humans are capable of responding to life by beginning something new. In fact, as suggested in the citations below, part of the general argument of *The Human Condition* is that the unpredictable nature of action and new beginnings are tied in together. "To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, "to begin," to lead," and eventually "to rule," indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*)"; "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what it infinitely improbable." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177-178
140 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186

immediate consequences can be felt"[141]. This relates to the passage from action to speech that Arendt underlines as a kind of permutation between the question 'Who am I?', a question I ask of myself, and the question 'What am I?', a question I ask about what I am to another person, who perceives me according to what I do.

So Arendt allows a definition of the hero as a political subject characterized firstly, by introducing difference in the public sphere through action and through the translation of action into speech – or to make the use of term broader, we can call language; and secondly, by the disclosure of singularity set out within a transition from the private to the public sphere. The hero, in short, appears as a form of an ideal public self.

Paradoxically, this also implies that what determines the hero, a figure of action par excellence, is not action alone but in fact, as it was already been suggested through the reading of Blanchot, through language. The moment of nomination and the construction of narratives are the elements that seem to establish the hero as such. In fact we can say that the hero is produced by the transformation of action into language. Significantly, this means that the hero does not have the full authority of its own condition. It is tied in with language and therefore, dependent of language and of those who use it. In a way, the hero is always constituted as fiction[142] and dependent of someone else – so, in this sense, the hero is never truly autonomous. It is important to keep this in mind for later.

In the meantime, one must acknowledge that a discussion of the hero is one always at risk of sounding outmoded, which I don't think is much different from when Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* almost half a century ago. Yet considering the way late capitalism has worked to reduce life to a series of instrumentalized activities, it is also hard to ignore the vitality of an argument that identifies the political and historical necessity of a subject of heroism in the way she does. A necessity identified together with the importance of

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141 Ibid., 184

142 Arendt makes a distinction between hero and author. In fact, the distinction allows her to conceptually prevent action from becoming an instrument of execution (circumstances, motives, or necessities, constitute action for Arendt, more than intentions or instructions). This produces an inconsistency between the hero in action and in speech, which Arendt resolves, albeit only superficially, by noting that the hero is always manifest as a double and a paradox form in a scenario of interdependence between authoring an action and authoring its inscription into language, as Arendt herself notices here: "Even Achilles, it is true, remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile; but he is the only 'hero', and therefore the hero par excellence, who delivers into the narrator's hand the full significance of his deed, so that it is as though he had not merely enacted the story of his life but at the same time also 'made' it." In Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 194

extraordinary and non-instrumentalized action, for a break with the political abstraction introduced by economic calculation and the loss of meaning associated with the universalisation of numerical quantification of everything. And it is not only the introduction of difference in the public sphere per se that gets to be underlined, it is also the notion of singularity as a necessary condition for the democratic process itself, one that in her view promotes pluralism and prevents totalitarianism.

With that said, Arendt's heroic subject, indeed the Greek heroic subject, cannot be taken at face value. It is difficult to reconcile action with a critique of instrumental reason – one that is based on a disinterested pursuit of knowledge - with contemporary politics. In contrast to the privileges brought to ancient Greek democracies by slave labour, finding the means to material subsistence and the distribution of material and immaterial production, needs to be on today's political table. Put another way the problem in appropriating Arendt's model is that it does not allow for the political dimension of the private sphere nor the political dimension of labour and work (or indeed workers as political agents). Whilst Arendt gives us further evidence of the relationship between the hero, action and language, and of how these two aspects intertwine with the notion of public sphere, her writing also reveals, if only indirectly, that within a contemporary context the relationship between action and a disinterested pursuit of knowledge is not enough for a rearticulation of the hero.

If a relation between action and a disinterested pursuit of knowledge is not enough for a rearticulation of the hero, what happens if we add 'necessity' as a third element to the equation between 'action' and 'speech'? Is this conceptually possible? Intuitively speaking, it's actually difficult to separate necessity from the possibility of heroic action, but is this true? Is necessity actually a condition of heroism, and if so, how can the relation be thought out? The question can thus be translated. If we consider 'technique' to be the application of knowledge as a means for a given necessity, then surely the theme of knowledge and the theme of 'technique' need to be worked together rather than separately, so this what I will now attempt to do.

Let us continue along the lines of Bernard Stiegler's theory and consider a notion that has much in common with what Arendt has to say on the division

between private and public life, i.e. the notion of 'individuation'. Stiegler considers that what is 'public' has, by definition, a relation of mutual possibility and mutual exclusion with what we calls the 'private' sphere. The logic is that what is public, is public insofar as it belongs to all and not solely to one or just a few, and inversely, that what concerns the individual needs to be recognized and accommodated by what is public. Politically too, there is a relation between defining what is public and defining the individual subject, since democracy is born hand in hand with the notion of the citizen. This evokes the idea of democracy as a non-totalizing political system that requires individual difference.

But 'individuation' also covers a different ground. It is a process of distinction and mutual possibility of the public sphere and the private sphere that Stiegler, with a nod to Gilbert Simondon, has called collective and psychological individuation, and that corresponds to the process of responding and adapting to effects and concerns that make the individual and collective mutually individuate. In Stiegler's words, "I only individuate myself psychically, insofar as my psychic individuation meets the individuation of other individuals within a collective individuation, which, precisely, is not only psychic but social"[143].

One way to understand this process of mutual individuation of the collective and of the individual is through writing, which Stiegler conceives as something that allows a community to come together under a shared language, what allows for 'singularity' to become public (by means of publication), but also provides the possibility to criticize and transform the process of collective individuation itself. In other words, it appears as a tool that allows the subject to think of himself as a citizen and as such, to introduce 'difference' in the public domain. Again, this does not sound too distant a concept from that of Arendt's and what she has to say on speech. But if writing is indeed a form of speech, it is also a form of inscription that involves an element that is not necessarily at work in oral communication, and that is, the presence of technical supports.

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143 The text I am quoting from was published in Portuguese only and constitutes part of a book commissioned and published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 2010: A *República Por Vir. Arte, Política e Pensamento para o Séc. XXI*, which can be translated as: *The Republic to Come. Art, Politics and Thought for the XXI Century*. This excerpt is my translation, which in turn, was translated by Luís Leitão from, what I imagine, was the original French version: "Só me individualizo psiquicamente na media em que a minha individuação psíquica vai ao encontro de outros indivíduos psíquicos numa individuação collectiva que, precisamente, não é apenas psíquica, mas social." as featured *in* Bernard Stiegler, (2010) "Literal Natives, Analog Natives, Digital Natives. Entre Hermes e Héstia" in Rodrigo Silva, ed, *A República Por Vir. Arte, Política e Pensamento para o Séc. XXI,* Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2010,132

Mutual individuation, as Stiegler remarks, is only possible because there is also the "individuation of technical objects forming a system of *technics* in constant evolution"[144]. A system that includes writing that is also constituted by other causes, materials, structures and institutions, that gives form to the public sphere; which once again and in short, is constituted by what concerns all individually but not privately. This also means that individuation is a problem of material and technical causes and therefore that it involves both the human and the non-human. A relation described earlier through the reading of Badiou, in terms of truth that can now be identified with the public sphere viewed as the non-human fabric that supports collective and psychological individuation and in fact, life beyond the condition of the individual.

In *Technics and Time,1. The Fault of Epimetheus* Stiegler argues that the use of technology is in a process of becoming second nature -a process he calls "technization"- and that this involves a great loss of memory (increasingly located outside the body in some type of technology-based device). As Stiegler views it, this confirms the worst anxieties surrounding the question of technique: the progressive transformation of technology into a form of domination, which (de)regulates the political through the automation of activities, leading to a progressive erasure of language, the numbing of our capacity to make decisions and ultimately, the danger of de-individuation – all threats that he identifies with capitalism. So there is a "necessity of return (to things themselves, to metaphysics) as well as to that of a major overturning"[145], which he proposes, is possible by means of rethinking the separation between technique and the question of knowledge.

Hence he overlaps the theme of anticipation in Heidegger, where *being* equals *being-towards-death*[146], with two temporalities found at the heart of the problem

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144 As I have explained in the previous note, this translation is my own. The original quote, published in Portuguese, reads as follows: "…este jogo diferencial só é possível porque se produz, além disso, uma individuação técnica, em que objectos técnicos formam um sistema técnico em evolução constante" in ibid., 133

145 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1. The Fault of Epimetheus*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, x

146 Stiegler, on Heidegger: "Dasein [i.e. being, human existence] can in its activity always not "possible" the being-towards-the-end that forms its very essence, refusing thereby to open itself to its future as it is its own, a future that is as radically indeterminate as the "when," and "why," and "how" of its end (…) Dasein can live its own possibilities *as* its inconmmensurable "ipseity," refusing to retreat before the essential solitude in which the antecipation of its own end ultimately always leaves it (by the publicness of being-in-common) as the death of Dasein, which can only be its own, is only its own because, radically indeterminate, death can remain nothing but unknown to it. *Its* death is what it cannot know, and to this extent, death gives the "mine-ness" its excess. Death is not an event within existence because it is the very possibility of existence, a possibility that is at the same time essentially and interminably deferred. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1. The Fault of Epimetheus*, 5-6

of technique: fore-thinking and after-thinking. Two modes that he identifies with the mythological figures of Prometheus and his often forgotten brother Epimetheus. In just a few lines, the myth tells of Prometheus having to steal *the knowledge of technology* from the gods as a consequence of Epimetheus realizing, only too late, that he had forgotten to distribute 'equipment' for the humans in due time. Importantly for Stiegler, and relevant for what I'm trying to say here, the myth introduces the question of necessity through problems associated to the body, or rather the necessity of a living body for equipment due the precariousness of the human-animal: and the necessity of a body that dies and thus produces the demand for reflection and the inscription of singularity; a double default as Stiegler puts it, of those who are born unprepared into a community of those without community - a community constituted by the radically singular members of humans.

This may sound similar to what Arendt has to say about the individual and the collective, but the marriage between "individuation" and "technicity" introduces the notion of necessity, which is absent from Arendt. This allows for a slightly different, yet significant, take on the hero. Stiegler himself does not refer to Prometheus or Epimetheus as heroes, but the fact we can see them as representing the division of being, thus suggests it is possible to see them as a form of divided hero.

In his reference to Heidegger, the history of being appears in Stiegler's theory as the inscription of being in "technicity", which the latter defines as "the pursuit of life by means other than life"[147]. True to its duplicity, the formulation includes a circular argument that moves in two complementary directions. It says that technique requires a form of examination to be constituted as equipment for life, and inversely, that reflection without "technicity" does not prepare for death. So once broken down, the term implies the possibility of a subject to write down and inscribe his or her singularity in a system of 'technics' which allows the subject to becomes intelligible to, and significantly a part of, a collective. The term, in other words, implies the possibility to exercise a capacity to make decisions based on a reflection on life and on the anticipation for death. And this is what really fleshes out the question here: The necessity of being to be realized beyond biological limitations produces the necessity of meaning which coincides with the

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147 Ibid.,17

urgency to inscribe being beyond the living body, to improve the equipment for living and indeed to improve life.

After Stiegler, we can perhaps call heroism the reconfiguring of 'individuation' and the hero a conceptual tool for this process, a figure through which a distinction between new beginnings and *important* new beginnings can be rehearsed - according to how the occurrence of the new answers to the necessity of meaning found at the intersection of individuality and collectiveness. With a connection to the hero's double temporality discussed a while ago, this process also involves the existence of technical supports where being may be rehearsed and, registered as a potential to become public, inscribed in life beyond life itself.

Richard Rorty is another voice that attempts to disrupt the division between technique and knowledge, and someone who makes a great effort to argue, using a far less cryptic language than others that I have been discussing, that we ought to focus on finding ways to improve our lives and the health of democracy rather than pursuing an ideal of truth. He will help us to understand the pragmatic implications of using the hero and lay the basis for my own definition of how such use can be drawn.

To start with, Rorty's defence of irony and occasional sentimental tone seems at odds with any notion of heroism, but I dismiss this quickly by noting that with Rorty, the term irony does not refer to an end or a form of philosophical discourse in itself, but rather to the activity, mainly private, of doubting one's *own* vocabulary. For Rorty irony is, in other words, essentially a tool of critique and an attitude that refuses to believe that one's own specific way of looking at the world is the definitive way to understand life.

It is also important to note that Rorty's project does not seek to re-describe the world simply for the sake of playing a linguistic game. On the contrary, he tries to maintain an ongoing and serious attempt at improving vocabularies and decision-making skills - without omitting affirmative concessions. For instance *solidarity* in Rorty's work is philosophically, politically and socially as important, if not more important, than *irony*. This explains why the ideal subject for Rorty is actually not an ironist – someone who remains in a state of self-centred relativism – but rather a liberal-ironist – someone who acknowledges private

obsessions as an opportunity to improve liberal, i.e. democratic, societies. Critchley when discussing Rorty, defines this as "someone who is committed to social justice and appalled by cruelty, but who recognizes that there is no metaphysical foundational to her concern for justice"[148].

This connects to another aspect of Rorty's philosophical project. It is a project that privileges the individual and entertains the idea of self-creation and self-improvement, that is somewhat opposed to descriptions made by larger groups, which thus creates a tension. At the same time this position is one that posits a holistic view. Put differently, it is a project that opens a space between private obsessions and social hope, that refuses to totalize the subject and to contribute to what he describes as a society without society; but also one that argues that social construction depends on a relation between the literacy of individuals and the good health of public institutions, and from there: that ethics ought to be approached without any principles other than the 'demand for the other.' Crucially, furthermore, that we ought to stop using the vocabulary of metaphysics as grounds for decisions and instead replace it with non-metaphysical negotiations. This comes in line with a turn to linguistic philosophy and the decision to work under the logic that the principle task of language is not to produce an image of reality but to produce the means to interact with it – a position that considers it insufficient to make truth claims with no other purpose than truth itself.

The theme of language as a philosophical theme appears as a major preoccupation in Rorty's body of work, with his lifelong championing of Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, but it is the idea of philosophy as literature that ends up taking the lead in Rorty's mind; an idea he explores through his later works and specifically in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* through close readings of Nietzsche, Proust, Derrida, Nabokov and Orwell. By working through his theory that the best philosophy can hope to achieve is to provide us with the tools to reflect on what sort of human beings we would like to be, Rorty's position - known for being the anti-philosophy philosopher - comes in line with his continuous appeal to the general reader, and more notoriously to professional philosophers, to abandon one's preoccupation with theory and focus on practical problems related to how to improve life under the conditions

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148 In Simon Critchley "Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal" in Simon Critchley, *Ethics*. London: Verso, 2009, 85

of democracy.

And in turn, this is behind the argument that we ought to replace truth claims for redescription in order to improve vocabularies and produce the means for a better literacy which, as Rorty sees it, is not only an opportunity to develop practices of self-improvement but an opportunity to open such practices to vocabularies and ways of being different from our own, and hence generate empathy, educate and increase solidarity. This is why Rorty defends the importance of continuous and diverse reading habits for an acquisition of new vocabularies and the priority of literary criticism (that Rorty suggests should be called "cultural criticism") for intellectual work which he thinks is most valuable when creating new vocabularies and "placing books in the context of other books, figures in the context of other figures"[149].

Although Rorty focuses chiefly on literature, he has given us enough reasons to believe we can extend his ideas to a more general definition of art and still hold the argument that it is possible to produce an increasingly embracing activity of thought as a form for constructing social hope. For instance, he would almost certainly agree with Schiller's idealistic views on art – idealistic in a way that says that ideals are not to be found but invented, that in believing that this might be achieved through the invention of ideals, created by art, society matures. This is not to say that Rorty is interested in recuperating something similar to Schiller's aristocratic positions, but rather, similarly to Schiller, he thinks the gift of literature, and we could say art, is the possibility to improve our capacities to make decisions about how we would like to live our lives, by the "playing off figures against each other"[150] with effect for both self and social improvement.

But can the hero be inscribed within this theoretical framework? The fact that when we speak about the hero we are making a reference to a notion that is both ontologically unstable while related to language seems promising. So does the link between the hero and the occurrence of the new, and crucially the awareness that 'the hero' does not speak about true or false, but rather about a meaningful gesture.

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149 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* 80
150 Ibid.

The notion itself only makes sense when the subject at play is formed after an answer given to some kind of necessity. Is there any other way - once we exclude metaphysics, religion and politically indoctrinating ideas - to conceive of what a hero is, other than through the notion of necessity? Gathering ideas from different points presented above, the hero appears as an actor who introduces something that was missing, something which was a necessity, and is therefore constituted as a positive affirmation. At the same time, this also brings us to question and negotiate the situated condition of heroism. As discussed before, it is difficult to conceive of a generic and unchangeable form of heroism.

Significantly, it is the relationship between the hero and language and the fact that the latter is constituted after the construction of a narrative that really allows us to connect the hero to the framework proposed by Rorty. At the same time, this brings me to a pivotal point in my argument: the possibilities that are opened when we shift from analysing the 'figure' to 'the use of the figure'. This shift is made possible by inverting the terms of the relationship between the hero and language and by working under the principle that language itself is capable of producing and questioning notions of heroism; a proposal that joins Rorty's own proposal and my own project, that is, to consider language - in my case sculptural figuration- not as a medium, but as a tool.

The association itself is mine, and Rorty does not encourage at least explicitly, any writer-philosopher to invent figures of a contemporary type of heroism. Yet, from the angle of pragmatism, there is no reason why we shouldn't describe the use of the hero as a philosophical and narrative device for building new vocabularies. So what does the hero add to the theoretical framework proposed by Rorty and what are the main conceptual implications for what I'm discussing? In the first instance this: using the figure of what we might call a hero immediately asks for an ethical position, because nominating a hero as such, directly or in any similar terms, determines that the pragmatic implications of what is being said is not only positive, but meant. In other words, being able to describe a subject capable of an ethical commitment and declaring it to be heroic constitutes in itself a commitment.

Another point is that the hero has no essence. The terms of his or her character changes according to necessities and views specific to a given place and a given time. This reinforces the adequacy of the hero as a conceit for inventing

new and historically located *vocabularies*, and dictates that proposals need to be in a constant dialogue with reality. More than that, it asks from the subject producing such vocabulary, a predisposition to work under the premise that art is, or ought to be, accountable for life. This means, in other words, that using the hero as a conceit of figuration –literary or otherwise- introduces a principle of answerability - a principle that places art under the priority of an attempt to answer to reality.

However, this 'answer' can only be constituted as a moment in series of substitutions; a method for playing figures against other figures with no final conclusion, because after all a definitive, stable, idea of what heroism is, can never truly exist. This is something that I allude to in the title of the thesis, i.e. Dialectics of the hero: the notion of the hero as a dialectical device understood as redescription rather than objectivity rhetoric. Indeed, to the idea of a positive affirmation in a series of substitutions or, in the words of Rorty: "as the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another, rather than merely to infer propositions from one another, and thus, as the partial substitution of redescription for inference"[151]. And it is important to underscore, that because it can never support a claim of universalism, heroic affirmation does not cancel the possibility, as it were, to conceive of the world from within, and in fact produces the conditions of irony; understood, with an obvious nod to Rorty, as the possibility for a critique to be mounted from private, non-totalized and smaller spheres.

Consequently, any attempt of heroic figuration is one that exposes and brings to question the division between the community and non-community, or rather, between a community of those who share a similar contingency, and therefore similar necessities, and the community of others. In general terms then, the hero presents itself as a figure structured as the representation of collective meaning, whilst at the same time, exposing the limits of what shared meaning actually means. In fact, if there is one thing we can expect from any conversation concerning the figure of the hero it is dissent, which here I consider as a positive activity, again in the sense that it produces movement of thought, discussion, debate, perhaps even conflict. Negotiation, we can conclude, is another principle as much as the value that can be ascribed to the hero.

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151 Ibid.*, 78

This brings us to the question where the contrast between the hero and Rorty's position is more accentuated. Rorty praises writers including Nabokov, Flaubert, and Proust, for making a contribution to our collective life by exploring the intricacies of the differing mental states belonging for the most part, to private life. Writers who allow readers to examine the interior, personal life, whilst increasing the empathy for others by increasing the map of their own feelings and perhaps revealing elements of their conceptual toolbox to perceive the world, - again in line with Schiller's idea of art as sentimental education – therefore help to improve the state of (our) democracies. Introducing the mode of the heroic to this context means to open the space from the private sphere to the political, and yield open the way to vocabularies that focus on the condition of the individual as a political subject. Indeed, the mode of the heroic is located in the passage from the personal to the collective and produces a subject who is capable of introducing difference on a public level. But let me underline the word heroic here. Heroism, as a lexicon of thought, presupposes an intensification of vocabularies. Together with difference, intensification is the last of the principles I want to set out.

These principles, mostly the last two, bring the idealistic logic of the hero to the fore. The logic of what it is now possible to call an 'idealism of necessity'. I will call this the 'idealism of necessity' for the problem of reimagining the contemporary subject where 'idealism' appears not in a transcendental sense, but in the sense of a positive and, precisely, intensified affirmation of difference; 'necessity' because heroism, understood in the context that we have come to explore, is something that answers to what is missing from reality, or to put it another way: what constitutes an answer to reality which is contingent to, and determinable by, necessity.

So looking back at the beginning of this section, we started with the idea that it is difficult to combine questions of heroism with generic notions of truth. In turn, we have established that the hero is intelligible along the lines of an answer to reality, and following the idea of language as a tool, that to describe what a hero is, is to produce the knowledge of new possibilities, which can work as an example of what can be achieved by everyone, beyond the condition to the individual. With some ambition, this can be translated as: a contribution to collective life made in the form of an idea about what, in a given situation,

counts as a heroism. And right above, the section closes with a definition of the hero as an idealism of necessity not without before underlining the principles of negotiation, answerability, difference and intensity, as well as locating the mode of the hero between the person and the public. What follows in the last section of this chapter, is a consideration of this important relation between the personal and public, through the question of desire.

Desire and courage

We've traversed the ground of positivity and by now, it is possible to change the concept of what a political actor is or could be. Positivity is central to the hero, but as a theme it also brings the text close to an idea of heroism as that, which can only uphold an established order. This is a precarious crossroad, where it is important to remember the way in which heroism registers positivity comes with a problem. Can true positivity exist without first existing as a radical refusal? How far can we go in speaking about heroism without speaking about a crime? Judging by how hard it is to find references where the hero is not involved in some sort of crime, not very far. From antiquity to the contemporary world, from Oedipus and Prometheus, from the soldier to the hacker, the figure of the hero is often interchangeable with that of the criminal. This involves, of course, the question of whether a crime is done for a community or against a community, or at least against the legislation of a community.

The first kind registers, executes, expands, and replicates one power over another power; the second disrupts the structures and jurisdiction of power. It is this second case that I now want to return too in order to deepen the discussion on how the hero renegotiates the terms of the engagement between the individual and the collective. It is useful, therefore, to return to Lacan's reading of Antigone and the way in which he is able to demarcate heroism as reform, progression and revelation of knowledge, and in turn, underline the notion of singularity and authenticity at the heart of a positivity affirmed in terms of a break with the order of power.

What interests me is not so much the notion of crime as such (this would open up a whole other discussion in the argument) but instead, it is what lies behind

the *crime,* that is, the ethical imperative that precedes the crime that is key here. It is the conflict between singularity and power, and in the case to be explored, the fact that Antigone's heroic crime responds to what threatens the structure of her symbolic being.

Lacan is very convincing when telling us that Antigone enacts a refusal of the instrumentalization of being – a refusal to yield to the law of Creon and give up the fight for the dignity of her brother and most importantly, to give up on her own ethical integrity. He focuses on the connection between the ethical demand to bury Polynices's body, that only Antigone reaches a point of making it a priority, and the fact that she commits herself knowingly to such demand and thus, that she would put herself at risk and eventually, die for this 'crime'. What is more, he recognizes Antigone's feelings at that point as based in a desire and crucially stresses that pure desire as he finds in Antigone, is in fact, a desire for infinite desire, a desire that isn't attainable – that, finally, what Antigone really desires is the pure, symbolic brother. This is the reason why Lacan considers the scenario created by Antigone in terms of beauty, which he identifies -after the Kantian notion of disinterestedness – as being composed of gestures, which are not motivated by any warranty of compensation.

Another central aspect in Lacan's reading, is the identification that the play works metonymically both on an internal and external plane. For instance, how in the plane of fiction the question of desire works as the symbolic replacement for the question of ethics and how Antigone's sacrifice represents the sublimation of such demand. Also how externally, the play works in the opposite way to the Aristotelian idea of catharsis (one that operates a form of didactic control over its audience by producing pity and horror), and instigates its audience not to give up on true desire.

Except of course, the question of sublimation is not that simple. Placed between the ethical call and a reality that stands in its way, Antigone's act of disobedience, as we know, leads to her death. So death is the vehicle of Antigone's ethical being, for she can only by faithful to her own authenticity by accepting the possibility of death. Here too the play works metonymically. After being immured by Creon's order, Antigone commits suicide by hanging. A death that corresponds to what Lacan famously calls a second death, which is in

fact also a symbolic death that re-enacts the conscience of the decision that brought her to that moment.

More important than seeing Antigone's suicide as a form of re-enactment, it is necessary to consider the act as the only option Antigone has. That being, the only act she is left with to reclaim the construction of her own ethical symbolic universe. It is no longer the desire for her brother and the demand to bury his body that is at stake. In Lacanian terms, Antigone's suicide corresponds to the transition from desire to drive, that being the true moment of sublimation when the subject stops interpreting the desire of the Other – the unreachable, impossible object of desire, and replaces it for another 'object' constructed around the first. It is the moment of a truly active voice, when the subject takes full responsibility for his or her own contingency and is able to reconstruct their own symbolic universe. This is the moment when someone stops claiming that they carry out the action(s) for family, for one cause or another, and instead begin to say: I do it because it is my own will, because it is important to me, independent of being important to someone else. In the case of Antigone, this object, this drive, is realized through her own death, the only thing she is left with and that which gives her the opportunity to reclaim her own symbolic position in the word. A moment that finally, corresponds to the goal of therapy: the moment when someone is able to redescribe him or herself[152].

So we have the possibility to recognize at least one similarity between the therapeutic process and art. A similarity suggested throughout *Seminar VII* and, in my view, interestingly gathered in the single term "extimacy", which Lacan introduces very discretely (it appears more frequently in later texts) to speak about prehistorical art in relation to site. This relation is not what interests me, but rather what the term itself designates: "the central place, as the intimate exteriority or 'extimacy', that is the Thing". A citation that firstly, provides what the construction of the neologism suggests: something that is at once external and intimate; and secondly, the fact that Lacan associates "extimacy" with the Thing, after saying of this Thing, that it:

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152 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. BOOK VII*, London, Routledge, 1999, 2013-17,293

will always be represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else – or, more exactly, because it can only be represented by something else. But in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative (…) All art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness.[153]

"Extimacy", then, designates at once the symbolic landmark that one always returns to and the central place for the construction of a symbolic universe: something that the subject constructs around a void left by the original object of desire, and crucially, what allows for sublimation. A conceptual object, as it were, simultaneously intimate and external that enables for redescription around the emptiness left by desire whilst determining the very condition of sublimation; a domain that understood within the theoretical context established by Lacan is one that is shared by psychoanalysis and art.

Right at the beginning of this chapter it was asked why, in comparison to multi-positionality and performativity, is it worth considering notions of singularity and authenticity? In order to try answer to this we can perhaps start by claiming that the Lacanian subject is realized in the moment of sublimation, which is always an intimate moment and therefore one that involves the singularity of the subject at play. Consequently, one can add that a true rearticulation of the subject takes place through authenticity, but where this authenticity takes the form of a fidelity to the object of desire, and crucially, the form of something that is constructed around the void left by it. Authenticity, in other words, comes out as something that is both fundamental and something that has no core.

Now, *Antigone* is of course a play that speaks of a profound incompatibility between individuals and the collective as represented by power, speaking of the point at which the process of individuation is no longer possible. So Antigone appears as a character, who is simultaneously a-political and supra-political, a

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153 Ibid., 129-130

character in a situation that dictates her to actions and where these actions taken result in an eclipse of the order of power, leaving this power permanently changed. She exposes the malaise of a dysfunctional relation between power and an individual, disjoins the social categories, the do's and don'ts of that society, and thus demands for recognition and new social links. This is the case where the hero appears as a figure that helps to renegotiate the terms of the engagement between individuals and the collective. Not just by simply adding new possibilities, but rather through a crime that disrupts the very basic fundaments of what a community is, an act that tears the symbolic order that has been up to this point in place and thus opens the potential for a new symbolic constellation.

Yet, if there's one key lesson in the story of Antigone, it must include the realization that the political possibilities opened by Antigone's act asks for a commitment; that such commitment depends on the subject being capable of reconstructing a sense of authenticity, after a radical break with the order of power. In fact, an ethical demand, especially in a situation of conflict, seems to ask for a redefinition of what authenticity is. It asks for the rethinking of what is truly important. So the value of authenticity as construction is that it combines redescription with commitment.

And if this is one of the main strands in Lacan's account of *Antigone*, then we can perhaps see the following as his own lesson: the idea that breaking with the logic of an increasingly instrumentalized life begs for three simple, yet difficult things. It begs for acts of resistance against the order of power that anaesthetizes the mind and domesticates true desire with moments of instant satisfaction, or with what he calls the "service of goods"[154] (the goods of consumerism and wealth, the goods of puritanism, the goods of industrialized knowledge and so on); it begs for the construction of authenticity, because acts of resistance and the construction of the ethical subject passes through the construction of authenticity; and what to me is his key proposal: the consciousness that ethical subjectivity requires a commitment, and that such commitment can be only realized through a willingness to pay the price, that

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154 The following citation does not give a clear definition of what Lacan means by "the service of the goods," but it does clarify the logic of the expression and my own use of the phrase: " The Ethics of psychoanalysis has nothing to do with speculation about prescriptions for, or the regulation of, what I have called the service of goods. Properly speaking, that ethics implies the dimension that is expression in what we call the tragic sense of life." Ibid. 313.

comes with the construction of an ethical subject – the price of a sacrifice whose weight clarifies and sublimates desire.

So it seems almost logical that Lacan describes an ideal hero as someone who acts knowingly of the consequences for not given up on true desire. In a rather odd formulation, he actually defines a hero as "someone who can be betrayed with impunity"[155], which although sounds strange at first, does come in line with the fact that Antigone decides to sacrifice herself whilst being fully aware that this will put her at risk: the risk, precisely, of being "betrayed with impunity". In short, what appears to interest Lacan regarding Antigone as a figure of thought is that which links to courage and where this courage implies an awareness of the price. The message of Antigone, in the end, is that, "the only thing one can be guilty is giving ground relative to one's desire"[156], which the psychologist would translate into: have you followed the path of the hero? What is essential and have you stayed true to what is unattainable, yet essential to you? Can you describe yourself as able to challenge the conventions that stand in the way of your ethical self, and can you sacrifice yourself for it?

On the opposite side, he tells us, that for the ordinary man "the betrayal that almost always occurs sends him back to the service of goods, but with the proviso that he will never again find that factor which restores a sense of direction to that service"[157], leading to the conclusion that: "There is no other good than that which may serve to pay the price for access to desire – given that desire is understood here, as we have defined it elsewhere, as the metonymy of our being"[158].

Two final observations can be made here. The first that heroism, as Lacan sees it, cannot be conceived of in terms of the everyday - or to put it in colloquial terms, that the price he's talking about cannot be paid, using an everyday currency. Heroism must involve saying something different, something new, something that cannot be repeated by everyday discourse, because it is precisely what introduces an alternative space to the everyday. The second observation, results from the method in which Lacan addresses action and the problem of not-knowing versus knowing. He stops us from bracketing heroism

155 Ibid. 321
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.

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between a mode of acting without knowing, knowing and therefore not acting, or acting because one has the advantage of knowing something that nobody else does, by associating heroism, as I have said more than once, with the courage of acting knowingly of the consequences (ultimately, sublimation requires conscience). This knowing, however, means above all that there is a willingness to accept the burden of the action one must take, regardless of being certain of what will be achieved. Heroism, as Lacan tells us, relates to that which is needed, something that we can call an internally articulated necessity.

This is a good moment to formulate a working definition of the hero. We know from ideas presented earlier on, that the hero posits a subject capable of introducing difference through a meaningful act. It follows that imagining a hero correspond to a process of imagining new possibilities beyond the condition of the individual and what a meaningful act could actually be. This involves invention and an attempt to organize a sense of collective meaning. Furthermore, the hero is a figure who represents a possibility available to everyone, a possibility to re-describe his or her place in the world without using the subterfuges of the everyday, and crucially, one that gathers the idea that to do so requires sacrifices.

To summarise into a shorter version: this uneasy figure can be described in terms of a double that is born out of a necessity to articulate an ethical subject in the face of the reality of ethics coming under threat. A figure that presents itself as a subject for reinventing the available vocabularies to describe a politicized selfhood and thus, radicalize the processes we have come to describe as individuation. It constitutes an idealism of necessity, and difference, answerability, negotiation, and intensification, are its principles.

Coming to an end, I would like to return to the question of art and sketch a link between the hero, Lacan and figurative sculpture, as this is important to open some question for the next chapter. In *Seminar XX, Encore*, Lacan makes a rare reference to a sculpture, that being Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1645-52). The reference to this baroque sculpture is strategically placed at the end of an essay on feminine pleasure (Jouissance). Overseen by two masculine figures and one Cupid - but clearly not minding them – her body in contraction, her eyes closed and her facial expression as one of pleasure, the figure of Saint Teresa clearly represents a moment of solitary sexual rapture. Here Lacan precisely

reflects on the sculpture in order to bring a discussion on pleasure, emancipated from the object of desire, to a conclusion[159]. One must understand that here Lacan brings into play not only the question of sexual pleasure as such, but rather the idea of a realization beyond what prevents pleasure, which means, beyond the order of power associated with the idea of the masculine.

The discussion of this particularly sculptural work nor Lacan's reading of it is of particular interest to me. Rather it is the presence of sculpture in a seminar full of references to the baroque and to the interior/exterior logic of the 'fold', which the discussion brings to mind: that it is perhaps possible to establish a connection, albeit speculatively, between the idea of sculpture and the conceptual object at work with reference to the notion of 'extimacy'. The fundamental questions for this speculation are of course in regards to the materiality of sculpture as a form of externalization (which significantly in the case of Bernini's sculpture, is followed by the many folds of the composition, where the surface constantly becomes both interior and exterior), and the body.

To approach these questions requires a short detour on ethics, the body and heroism. To begin, ethics can perhaps be broadly defined as an inquiry into the interrelationship between notions of good and action, that is, as a philosophical inquiry that focuses on the problem of how to act according to a notion of good. It is also possible to say that this question needs to be worked out by the subject to which it is posed and the answer has to be given willingly - otherwise the question is never truly answered since it did not involve a real choice. With a nod to Badiou, we can even say that the ethical subject is formed through a fidelity to a demand, the demand of the other, whose answer must be both responsible and accountable. This in turn means that such demand has to be internally articulated by an individual self - it is something that happens to me, and that I need to feel - and in that sense, it is always experienced as an embodied experience. So an ethical demand calls for the sort of commitment that, in extreme circumstances, such as in the case of Antigone, may come to a point where the subject at play is asked to risk everything and to put his own life and body in danger. Thus, we can also say the body is, in a sense, the real frontier of the ethical.

159 Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Book XX, Encore 1972-1973*, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, 76-77

So there is the idea that an ethical demand, the infinite demand of the other, cannot be completely realized through a living body, because it requires a body ready for its own potential extinction. The relationship between the hero and the body is a fundamental one, but it has nothing to do with the typified body of celebrity culture. The hero, most of all, expresses a disregard for the body.

The body of the hero is a body located between the limits of a living body and a symbolic body, complete only at the same moment of its potential cancelation. An impossible body, we can conclude, that can only be fully realized through a symbolic construction. Conceptually, and in terms that are familiar by now, it is a void and at the same time a construction around that void. Once put in relation to the larger context of the present thesis, the intimation implicit here is that figurative sculptures carry the possibility to externalize, in a literal physical way, the symbolic construction of a subject that is required to be internally articulated, yet can never be fully accomplished except by being externally formed. The idea, to put this another way is that figurative sculptures, which are a kind of body without having real bodies in them, can be theoretically viewed as stand-in objects for the hero conceived in terms of the ethical subjectivity. The next chapter attempts to translate this to a contemporary setting and further explore the implications of using the hero as mode and conceit of figuration via the principles pointed out in the working definition.

Just before that, I would like to finish with the theme of courage and try to resume what has been said up until this point by claiming that the figure of the hero always combines a form of idealism with a form of pragmatism. This can be done by looking into how Plato addresses the question of heroism not in terms of action but in terms of subject formation, and how he attempts to redescribe a communal subject by exchanging a Homeric subject for a Socratic subject. This will be done via a study offered by Angela Hobbs who examines how Plato uses notions of heroism according to his own ethical principles[160].

Hobbs observes that questions of heroism and courage are important for Plato in relation to what Socrates, debating with Callicles in the *Gorgias*[161], posits as the most important question of all: how should one live? Plato tries to respond to this

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160 Angela Hobbs discusses Plato's use of notions of heroism across *The Gorgias*, *The Republic* and in *The Symposium*. Angela Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006,
161 See ibid., 1

question by asking what produces happiness or, in his own terms, a 'flourishing' of life: reason, as argued by Socrates, or pleasure as Callicles maintains? In order to answer to the question, he proposes a tripartite model of soul and its correlation with parts of the state. The ideal state would be a state where all parts would be in a position of equilibrium, but where reason, and rulers would respectively play the most important part. Yet Plato's theory of the hero focuses on a specific part of the soul, the *thumos*[162] – the mettle-spirited part of the soul where he crucially locates the tendency to emulate role models[163].

Plato suggests, as Hobbs continues, that the solution for how the parts come together, both on the level of the subject and that of the state, would be a result of a reprogramming of values through the reconfiguration of what counts as a hero. In other words, Plato makes use of the question of heroism to introduce and establish an articulation between the subject and the state, according to ontological principles (what a subject is and what it should be) and political principles (how a subject relates to others and how he or she comes to be part of a state).

Courage becomes important here. By presenting courage as the "knowledge of what is to be feared and not to be feared"[164] - as opposed to simple fearlessness-, Plato is able to associate courage with virtue and then to assert that the practice of philosophy involves courage. This means that far from dispensing courageous acts, what Plato wants to do is redefine them and rethink the relationship between courage and subject formation.

Plato shows that the pursuit of truth and the act of resisting a life of appearances asks for the *endurance of the soul:* such endurance requires courage, which is also necessary for producing happiness. Plato is able to clarify the source of

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162 According to the glossary provided by the author, the term thumos signifies: " life-force, mettle, the spirited part of the *psuché."* The author also argues that whilst *thumos* is important for a series of key aspects in *The Republic,*, the term remains scarcely explored. A theoretical deficiency that she attempts to correct and that I here borrow for my own purpose. Additionally, Hobbs touches upon *thumos* in relation to the work of Aristotle, Nietzsche, Adler, Freud and Fukuyama here and there. See Angela Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*, xvii

163 Plato's ideal state relies upon a tripartite model of the soul and of the state to correspond between each other. In The Republic, more precisely, he divides the soul into reason, appetites and *thumos*, each corresponding to a social class: reason to the rulers, *thumos* to the auxiliaries, and the appetites to the producers. In turn, this relates to the three different states of being: reason and democracy, *thumos* and timocracy, and appetites and oligarchy. Furthermore, Plato considers that for each of the elements to be at harmony with each other, reason needs to be the dominante element, because reason is what is in tune with the divine world of forms. However, he also recognizes that the *thumos* is the part of the soul where motivation, the sense of personal value and indeed the disposition to look for role models, are located; and therefore, that *thumos* is a key element for the connection between soul and state. For a summary of Plato's tripartite model of the soul its correspondence to the state, see for example: Ibid., 3-6.

164 Plato in *Protagoras*, as cited in ibid., 9

happiness and by doing so, demonstrate that mortal thoughts are not the source of happiness but rather a *divine* ideal. Thus, that Socrates is a better heroic model than Callicles or than Homer's hero Achilles[165], because philosophy requires more courage than a life dedicated to pleasure or action.

This theory of Plato's is, of course, normally read within the context of metaphysics, but the way he uses the hero to combine the personal and the political show something different. Nietzsche was perhaps the first to have noted the contradiction at play between an argument that wants to claim that reality lies some place else, in a world of perfect forms that supposedly organize the entire universe, and the fact that Plato is himself inventing ideas as he continues to write, thus that prior to anything else, Plato's is a literary project. And if we are to begin with Plato's intentions, then the result will be a utilitarian Socrates, which undermines the whole division between knowledge and technique at the heart of Metaphysics. Plato's way of working through notions of the hero brings these contradictions to the fore.

One contradiction relates to notions of happiness as that which is articulated externally around a concept of impersonal good, located in the realm of ideas but also associated with a collective form of life, which Plato tries to organize. In fact Plato's subject is articulated by combining the subject and the state (a necessary condition in Plato's republic) – or, rather, through a mutual conflict of the two. And the question of heroism is right there, to introduce the questions 'what counts as courage?'; 'how should one live?' and 'who should one be like?'.

What I am suggesting here is that it is possible to read works such as *The Republic* or *The Symposium* as spaces of literature and theoretical utopia constructed around an idealized version of Socrates. For what Plato does is not only to work out metaphysical questions, he also composes a political subject by means of inscribing the question of subject formation in technicity, or in other words, in terms of 'who' becoming 'what', of 'who should one be like'. This meets something Rorty has remarked on when commenting on a suggestion made by Heidegger who identifies Platonism as a form of pragmatism: "Being, which Plato

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165 Hobbs suggests that Plato's attempt to replace a Homeric ideal for a Socratic ideal is largely based on a comparison, albeit disguised, between Achilles and Socrates. She argues, more exactly, that Plato used such comparison as an attempt to undermine the allure of Achilles as a role model for the culture of his time. For more on this comparison, see: ibid., 178-186

thought of as something larger and stronger than us, is there only as long as we are here"[166]. Rorty's declaration gains a particularly clear resonance with reference to Plato's use of the hero, which, from an opposite perspective to mine, aligns a relation between the prospect of reorganizing politics and the need to rearticulate subjectivities.

Plato's suspicion of democracy is something to worry about but I think there is something relevant in Plato's use of the hero. Forming a paradox with his own thinking, Plato suggests that the notion of hero can be utilized to redescribe ways of living, because the very idea of heroism plays out with one's sense of self worth – allowing, in different words, to 'educate' the *thumos* and its yearning for the things that provide such feeling. And this hits a nerve with respect to the present-day society. A society largely organized around acts of consumerism and that promotes an idea of worth associated with those very acts. So what we might say after Plato, is that reconfiguring notions of heroism would produce the conditions to reconstruct a sense of worth, using a completely different logic from that of consumerism. However this does come with a caveat. Since the hero appears when associated with social value it tends to produce models of behaviour. Models have huge implications. So the hero also speaks of how it is the collective responsibility of a society as a whole to decide who to admire and what to elect as the source of status. With that being said, the fact that the 'hero' is a situated and non-neutral concept somehow leads to its own, constant, revision - a revision that needs to be practised. In the next chapter I will consider what has here been discussed, mostly in connection to literary and philosophical sources, in relation to the subject of figurative sculpture. Furthermore, I will continue later by introducing the notion of the dialectical-becoming-object and discuss how composition in sculpture enables the rearticulated figure and subject.

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166 Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, contingency and Pragmatism" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge, Cambrige, 2008, 33

THIRD CHAPTER: Figurative sculpture as medium of the heroic;
the heroic as a methodology for figurative sculpture

Introduction

So far we have seen how minimal art ties in with the tradition of examining figurative sculpture using an appearance/reality distinction, and how this tradition discredits figuration under the argument that what figuration does is basically to constitute an illusion, or more simply, a lie. We've also considered the way the subject of the hero diverges from the question of truth and how this works as a conceit of figuration. In this chapter I return to sculpture and attempt to understand what relevancy the project of sculptural figuration holds today and how this relevancy, if there is one, can be explored without the appearance/reality distinction. I do this by combining Bruno Latour's object orientated ontology, specifically his take on composition, and the hero, and by using a twofold movement: on the one hand, to do with the idea of sculpture as a medium of heroism, and on the other, to do with the hero as a methodology of composition.

The strange condition of the figure in sculpture

Let us start with a simple, yet I think, efficient association of ideas. Any figurative sculpture constitutes a fact of truth in the sense that it has a physical existence. However, for this same reason it is also something not quite true because the 'figure' in figurative sculpture, the 'thing' being represented, does not really exist. This is what a reality/appearance distinction tells us, that figurative sculpture can only pretend to be something else. But the distinction is actually not appropriate when thinking about figurative sculpture in the first place, precisely because it ignores the other side; the side where figures really exist in the world. To put it another way, a reality/appearance distinction presents a scheme that overlooks and disqualifies the concrete possibilities at work in figurative sculpture.

If we approach the question from a different angle, the problem remains. Opposite to what happens with lens-based mediums, for instance, sculpture does not allow for an indexical relationship with *reality*. To be more precise, it may accept the indexical mark, like in Giacometti's hand work in clay/bronze, and allow for an indexical relationship with the reality of the event of making (which in the terms I am developing here is an important relationship because in a way is what enables the sculptural object to exist as a figurative object and simultaneously affirm its own material condition) but not with what it represents. Even when we speak of resemblance in sculpture, there is no direct relation with the represented object. Direct casts or objects produced using 3D scan and printing technology exemplify this well. Despite having a direct connection to an originating object, these technologies do not carry the possibility of an 'indexical' relation to reality in the sense that the object that is produced, the positive double of the first object, exists as another entity with its own concrete existence. It is, in short, complicated to make truth claims about the existence of what is represented in figurative sculpture beyond the materiality of sculpture even when the objects have been produced as doubles of something else.

Surely, the same could be said when considering, for instance painting. However, the physical presence of sculpture makes the connection to reality quite different. Without being able to enter the philosophical complexity of the question here, it's enough to say that what figurative sculpture does, that other art forms are unable to do, is to posit 'the figure' in a mode of fleeting vibration between absence and physical presence. A mode comprehended, to return to the point just made, between the non-truth of something that does not really exist and the truth of its presence in space. A quality, that with a nod to Fried, we could say makes the 'objecthood' of figurative sculpture intermittent, but never fully suspended – for even when we encounter a sculpture where it exists as an *efficient resemblance*, the materiality of such sculpture will prevent a complete or a stable suspension of disbelief.

Resemblance, of course, does not need a pre-existent object. It can also be produced in art and even invented to a point of 'resembling' something that clearly had to be imagined; which means the question of belief is not always at play. But the point of the matter is that even when belief is plausible, and this is where I wanted to get to, the material condition of figurative sculpture undermines the usual logic of belief: one is asked to think about what is being

represented but not to believe in it. In other words, what sculpture seems to do best is not so much to allow us to see an object as a subject, but rather to allow us the opportunity to think about someone as an object. Therefore, the better figurative sculpture is able to 'imitate', the more it seems to lose the strength specific to that object. I'm here thinking of the affect produced by hyperrealist wax or silicone figures which, as impressive and most of all disturbing as they are at first, are incapable of producing a lasting interest.

The above tells us that, from the viewpoint of a distinction between reality and appearances, the strange condition of figurative sculpture - being true and not true at the same time - and the impossibility to recognize in it an indexical relationship with reality, give reasons to those who in holding truth to be a priority artistic inquiry, doubt the relevancy of figurative sculpture. On the other hand, and if only by oversimplifying the problem at this stage, it also tells us that such distinction is not adequate because it focuses on what sculpture is –or, more exactly, on what sculpture is not, when on a formal level such a question is never really at work. So let us move direction and try to understand not what sculpture is or is not, but what sculpture is capable of doing.

Sculpture and death

The claim that what figurative sculpture does better is to allow us to see subject(s) as objects, rather than the other way around, carries a connection with death which is important for my argument and therefore needs to be established. In his book *Statues* (yet to be translated into English), Michael Serres speaks about figurative sculpture and the connection to death, posited on a relation with the corpse. Kenneth Gross, a reader of Serres who presents a rigorously translated account of the book, writes:

> The corpse is for Serres, the first object, the form in which
> we first confront our troubled awareness of things outside
> us, things fading away or in exile. The statue, the second
> object, becomes a way of stabilizing our relation with the
> corpse, with the idea of death (…) it conceals what is
> revealed by the fact of a corpse, our decaying materiality,

our being's entanglement with alien, apparently inhuman processes or substances, our bondage to a lifelessness we inhabit or once inhabited (…) it helps kill the body's living lifelessness (..) The opaque statue thus becomes the paradoxical ground of our ideas of subject and object, securing the relation of one to another, and to the fact of death. Marking and concealing the site of the dead body, the statue, on which the words ci-git (here lies) seems always inscribed, also appears to Serres as the foundation of our sense of place, of our knowledge of what makes place significant; the statue is a cynosure, the definer of axes of views, centres of attention, and fixities of memory, the anchor of what is volatile, the guardian of what is about to flee.[167]

In a similar line of thought, Gross draws on the Freudian image of the mind as a place populated by statues and fragments (that the mind, according to the latter, produces in the process of internalizing the object of desire in order to be able to abandon it and protect it at the same time) to suggest that sculpture functions as a strategy of mourning as well as a metaphor for human presence beyond death[168]. What this suggests, and insofar as it is possible to replace the word *statue* for the expression *'figurative sculpture'* [169], is that we can describe the latter as the field of objects that carry a relation to death by enunciating the idea of a body-as-an-object introduced by death. We can also further conceive of it as a way to compose the subject in its projection as an object, and finally, as an announcement of death thus rendered not necessarily as suffering, but in fact, in terms familiar to us: as a promise of "life by means other than life"[170].

The proposition allows us to sketch some initial ideas about sculpture as a medium of the heroic. As set up in the previous chapter, the heroic cannot be predefined or understood in terms of generic truth. Rather, it demands for a constant dialogue with the flow of different necessities produced by different

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167 In Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992, 21-22.
168 Ibid., 35
169 I am here assuming that it is possible to replace the word 'statue' with the expression 'figurative sculpture', based on the idea that a statue is by definition, a sculpture with a civic function. Although this does not mean a statue has to be a figurative sculpture, but this is in fact its most common form in relation to more traditional understanding. It also corresponds to the way Serres uses the term.
170 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*,17

situations and realities. From here it was also established that the hero is a figure constituted as an invention that registers a positive affirmation and a redefined knowledge of what is possible. Sculpture enters this scenario then, not only through the abovementioned connection with death, but as a technical support for the invented body; one that undermines any truth claims about what is being represented but that at the same time, allows for an inscription of the human figure in the concrete order of things via a rather literal combination between the human and the non-human.

And again, although this could be extended to other supports, the medium of sculpture allows not only for the invention of a symbolic body but for its presence in real space. Therefore for the staging of a situation where people and sculptural figures share, to use a Heideggerian expression, *a common dwelling*. To put it another way, in being capable of producing a physical hybrid between the human and the non-human, figurative sculpture also introduces the question of co-habitation between the two. This theory of *seeing* the subject as object in relation to death should be kept in mind for later in the fourth chapter, where I discuss the implications of death and sculpture to subject formation.

Greek sculpture, Jacques Rancière and democracy

Let us return to the reality/appearance distinction for a second. Classical Greek sculpture is of interest here because of the profound implications that the *untrue likeness* found in sculpture from this period had for Greek democracy. A form of *likeness* that allowed for the composition and the inscription of an idealized democratic subject in the physical reality of materials, and that made it possible for this 'subject' to become part of a shared spatial reality. Giving witness to the material root of democracy, so well captured in the expression *public matter*, in short Classical Greek sculpture is an example that speaks volumes about the political dimension of forms of coexistence between real people and figurative objects.

Writing for *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of democracy*, a curatorial and editorial project that sough to question what an object-orientated democracy would look like today, Peter Weibel starts a speculation on the possible role of

artworks within contemporary democracies by referring to Greek sculpture, more exactly to Polykleitos' *Doryphoros*[171] *(circa* 440 BCE). A clear example, as he describes it, of how the "The aesthetic canon and social canon were mutually determining"[172]. A lot could be said, indeed a lot has been said concerning this figure, but it is the relation between its proportions and the "social canon" what matters the most here.

As indicated by different sources[173], *Doryphoros* combines proportions established by Polykleitos using mathematical and theoretical principles together with the average measurements of a high number of people, with a pose that looks unnatural, and in fact is anatomically incorrect, and that, more than a normalized subject, posited a relation to the idea of an exemplary subject. This is reinforced by the visual movement of the figure and the way it appears as if the body is simultaneously at rest and in action; an in-between state that we might assume must have appeared as the perfect *moment* for the Greek contemplative mind after the introduction of an ethics of action in Greek culture during the Greco-Persian wars in 5th century BCE.

A pose that might also suggest a relation to the notion of isometry as well as to that of the *isonomic* subject: the notion of a subject that fulfils the ideal of the citizen as one that is not only an equal amongst equals, but an equal to power; and crucially, one who is capable of introducing difference through action[174], thus an idealized, indeed invented, version of the citizen. In fact we know that Greek art is not an art of the portrait but rather, if I'm to generalize, an art of heroicizing people by providing the material means to override the biological body and achieve excellence (the Greek arête) in the form of a public self. This being, the best of a public self, standing quite literally between the living and the non-living; an 'ideal amongst citizens' that answered to the necessity of a public body beyond the individual, biological life - a subject position that cannot be formed or occupied otherwise.

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171 Familiar to the English world as the *spear*-bearer, Doryphoros is known only in the version of a roman copy. The original bronze is from circa 440 BCE.
172 Peter Weibel, "People Making Art Making People", in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds. *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, 1008
173 A general account of *Doryphoros* and some aspects of its production can be found in: John Boardman, *Greek Sculpture: The Classical Period*, London: Thames & Hudson. For a comprehensive and very rigorous study on *Doryphoros and the work of* Polykleitos see: Warren G. Moon, ed., *Polykleitos, the Doryphoros and Traditio, Madison:* University of Wisconsin Press.
174 I am here relying on Hannah Arendt's intimation that the Greek polis was not conceived of as a democracy but as an isonomy; for unlike the democracy, which relies on a form of rule, announced in the suffix 'cracy', isonomy in turn denotes political freedom and a state of 'no-rule' where there is no distinction between those who rule and those who are ruled. For more on this see: Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London: Penguin, 1990, 30-31.

Overall, what the human body represents for the Greek sculptor is a form of organizing the universe that, especially in a pre-Socratic period, echoed at once a strong sense of concreteness and the belief that decisions concerning the human *demos* and the material structures forming the basis for public life are to be taken not by the gods, but between fellow citizens - that is, between humans, not the divine. A logic for which a body without a body clearly provided a field where decisions about being and politics could be played out, and literally become part of the Greek agora. In fact, considering how much sculpture was part of public space, it is not hard to imagine the Greek citizen thinking of himself as potential sculpture[175].

Actually, we know that sculptural developments paired the mutual appearance of the notion of citizen and the emergency of democracy, and that similarly to theatre, it provided a form of appearances where the individual condition of citizens could be played out and be given a physical presence in space. Far from being disqualified because of a reality/appearance distinction, sculpture connected to the part, or period, of Greek culture that saw the spirit as a concrete thing (being as part of the *physis*). A view of the world that sculpture was able to translate in terms of a political subject but also in terms of rhythms and forms found in nature. The rhythm of waves and mathematical relations, for example, that Greek sculpture thought and combined with the human figure through the treatment of forms, notably, with undulating visual movement and part/whole relations established after numeric relations. It was not only the figure in the world, but also the world in the figure. Reasons why it is not surprising that Actor-network theory (hereafter ANT)[176] and Heidegger before ANT found a connection with pre-Socratic philosophers, especially with Anaximander, who conceived of the human and the material world in the same order of things.

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175 Nigel Spivey notes on this matter that the "polis was obliged to provide the means of cult for those who died defending it". Significantly, what this suggests is that whether on the battle field or in civic life, an acting citizen would know his decisions could open the possibility for his life to be monumentalized in sculpture. To the centrality of death in Greek culture, of being towards death, sculpture added the perspective of becoming an object; a second body, beyond death, whose idealized form would take up a place in public space. The citation is found in Nigel Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture. Ancient Meanings. Modern Readings,* London: Thames and Hudson, 1997,107

176 Actor-network theory, or ANT, is an approach to social theory and research based on the claim that objects and other non-human entities can affect, and indeed are a part of, what we normally call 'the social'. Critical of a human/non-human divide, ANT also avoids using conventional and fixed sociological categories and to give essentialist explanations about events - focusing instead on mapping the interactions between different agents and knowing how these form networks of influence. Key proponents include Michel Callon and Bruno Latour who is discussed in the main text. The interest of Latour for my project ties in with the way his writing allows us to change the focus from what objects are and into what objects do.

I immediately hear the critic's voice saying that we can not seriously consider Greek sculpture as a model for repositioning contemporary figurative sculpture; that despite its continuing influence on our understanding of the relation between figurative sculpture and politics, as the great reference for the western tradition, we cannot regress back to the Greek model, because our priorities and necessities are completely different as is our 'technical' and artistic settings and modes of living. And I agree, even if we take into consideration that most of our prejudices about Greek statues are the result of conceptual misappropriations by regimes that have transformed a certain 'classical look' into an instrument for totalitarianism, we cannot redefine figurative sculpture through the Greek model. However, it remains relevant to explore the marriage between the human form and the material world and this is why.

Greek sculpture tells us that a contribution to the process of individuation, established elsewhere as the process of mutual development between the individual, the social and the technical, can be made in the form of a subject posited beyond the biological body; a subject composed by means of combining the human figure and the concrete order of things. In brief, Classical Greek sculpture introduces the idea of becoming-object as a form of rethinking the political imaginary, by providing the sort of technical support needed to articulate and make physical a public, indeed ethical and political, subject. And if this is what Greek Sculpture tells us, then the logical step is to ask if there can be a contemporary equivalent to such becoming-object of sculpture.

We find something in Rancière that allows us to set up a transition between Greek sculpture and contemporary art. In *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* Rancière draws on a previous reading from Winckelmann and reasons that the *Belvedere Torso* [177] signals a break from the classical paradigm (which, furthermore he recognises as marking a moment of freedom for the Greek people) because of the way in which the missing members of the sculpture suggest an action without determining it and in that sense posit an emancipated movement. This is also present on a metaphorical plane, given that

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177 The *Belvedere Torso* is an over life-sized fragment of a Greek marble sculpture from the first century, BCE or CE, now believed to be a copy of an earlier version. It belongs to the Vatican Museum. You can imagine it as the figure of a seated male nude, with no head or arms, with legs missing below the knee and in a position as if turning slightly upwards to the left side.

the absent head suggests the idea of a non ruling member, and therefore of no hierarchy or intentional command. He says:

> A mutilated statue is not only a statue lacking parts. It is a representation of a body that cannot be appreciated any longer according to two main criteria used by the representative order: firstly, the harmony of proportions –that is to say, the congruence between parts and the whole; secondly, the expressivity –that is, the relation between a visible form and a character –an identity, a feeling, a thought – that this visible form makes recognizable in unequivocal traits.[178]

The argument is more complex than how I am revealing it here, but what is important to note is that what interests Rancière is not only what Winckelmann reads in the object as such, but the fact that the latter believed the torso could translate the Greek experience to his 19th century contemporaries - exactly because it exists as a fragment. In other words Winckelmann, as Rancière points out, thought that the Greek experience of *plenitude* was no longer possible to perceive in terms of addition but instead required a form of subtraction. An idea that Rancière underscores by reasoning that in breaking with the classical sense of hierarchy and the harmonious relation between the parts and the whole, as well as in dissolving a formal coherence between artistic intention and reception, the torso registers the possibility of aesthetic autonomy and of including the viewer in the event of art by putting him or her in a position of completing the missing part of anatomy and the unfathomable action. Once again in his own words:

> It is the power, which remains obscure to the artist, of doing something other than what he does, of producing something other than what he wants to produce, and thus giving the reader, the spectator or the listener the opportunity to recognize and differently combine many surfaces in one, many

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178 In Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art,* London: Verso, 2013, 3-4

languages in one sentence, and many bodies in a
simple movement.[179]

Now, to think about figurative sculpture in terms of the fragment, the potential for a multitude of bodies and the possibility of invention and plural composition, never to be actualized, never finished, always in transformation[180], constitutes a good point of departure from the Greek model. Furthermore, I think useful for a general reconsideration of contemporary figurative sculpture.

Rancière's reading of Winckelmann's consideration of the *Belvedere Torso* takes us through his re-conceptualization of the viewing experience in terms of an autonomy/heteronomy tension (between the concrete presence of the object and the cultural milieu of a community that reads it and that thus participates in the production of meaning)[181]. It reminds us that it is important to break with a 'classical' ideological unity between the parts and whole. Rancière also makes a convincing case for art, useful as a form for breaking with any *ordering* that predetermines a unity between action and thought and therefore any fixed 'ordering' of 'who is what' and 'who makes what'. He defends in short, an idea of art as a space of mobility, or what appears most frequently as *distribution*, which I think is a key idea for the project of figuration today.

And yet, in closely examining the citations from Rancière, one might presuppose that the subject of composition and the subject of democratic emancipation oppose to each other. In the terms explored therein, emancipation corresponds to a moment when thought and physical gestures are liberated from a political and artistic order, which correlates with a structural mobility and that, as Rancière seems to suggest, is incompatible with the materiality of sculpture; a materiality that appears with the mark of a formal stability and the hierarchy of part/whole relations that he associates with the order of power. Thus he brings us to a situation where what remains for figurative sculpture is to frame the performative and produce a situation where multiple and potential compositions can be imagined by the viewer.

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179 Ibid., 11
180 Rancière reaffirms this view in a later episode of the book by speaking of the fragment as a module of re-composition and the notion of active surface, viz. a surface that reacts to the movement of the viewer, in the work of Rodin. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art,* 155-170
181 Ranciere speaks about the work of art as existing between a condition of autonomy and heteronomy with more care than I could include here. For more on this, see for example: "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Employments of Autonomy and Heteronomy" in *New Left Review* 14, 2002, 133-151

To put it another way, Rancière aligns the *Belvedere Torso* with the need for *the redistribution of the sensible[182]* and with a subject that is formed after a reaction to something that has been preformed - something given in advance to a 'spectator' that even if emancipated, is still a subject that engages with something that has been given to him to engage with[183]. He does not predict the position of the subject of composition, and in my view, the need not only to reconfigure experiences that can "create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity"[184], but also to reconstruct the sensible material upon which those subjectivities can be enacted.

Showing some common aspects with what has been discussed in relation to minimal art, this is in a way linked to an inadequate and limiting translation between political inequality and difference in art, that is with reference to the idea that a democratic form of art begs for the structural cancelation of difference, part/whole relations and what Rancière calls the unity of expression. And on the other hand, to the belief that democracy in art manifests itself mainly in the way the viewer engages with the work – a belief that naturally devalues the origination of the art objects and with it, the introduction of difference on a material level. Consistent with his suspicion of representation, Rancière's view if briefly put, misses the 'matter' in the 'public matter'.

So to summarize: the perspective that Rancière brings to figurative sculpture via the *Belvedere Torso* is preoccupied mainly with reception of art and in particular the actual moment of perception. It underlines the potential of the fragment – the power of the absent part, the importance of the multiple and especially the importance of the viewer negotiating meaning. He introduces key ideas for the task of rethinking sculpture and its politics outside the Greek model. However, to limit ourselves to these ideas would mean to accept that everything that figurative sculpture is able to do functions within a space of negotiation. Instead,

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182 Right at the beginning of *The politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière outlines what he calls the "distribution of the sensible" as a system of rules that conditions what is possible to see and hear, to say and think, or in other worlds, what determines the conditions of possibility of thought and what is possible to apprehend by the senses and therefore establishes forms of inclusion and exclusion. See, for example: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The distribution of the sensible*, New York: Continnum, 2006, 12-14

183 This somehow echoes the way Rancière understands the question of representation, as elaborated in The *Politics of Aesthetics* and elsewhere, in terms of the relations of power established by a subject in power against another not in power, between rulers and the common person. By opposition, he suggests the contemporary 'aesthetic regime of art' as one that in breaking with the active/passive divide in the reception of art announces the possibility to break with an authoritarian ordering of activities and social positions (as well as with the many 'partitions' that the contemporary art world itself produces). This, he identifies, occurs without offering an address of the moment of composition, which I believe relates to the fact that he mostly thinks about art from the perspective of the viewer.

184 Jacques Rancière, *The politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, London, Verso, 2006, 9

a deeper reflection on contemporary figurative sculpture requires a consideration of the formal structures internal to figurative objects and the way these are able to promote specific negotiations by force of the ideas inscribed therein. For example, the question of the 'multiple' is important, but surely, it is also important to ask: a 'multiple of what?'.

In the end Rancière's reading of the *Belvedere Torso* raises important questions, but at the same time leaves us with a very limited account of figurative sculpture. Indeed it recuperates the vision of figurative sculpture as an art of power, an art in tension with the spirit of modernity. It is for sure not a coincidence that he has placed the discussion on the Greek fragment right at the beginning of the abovementioned book where he lays out, in more or less chronological order, scenes of *the aesthetic regime of art*, and where sculpture, or more exactly a mutilated sculpture, assumes the position of a precondition of modernity. He clearly thinks that other mediums are better. In his approach to collage or film[185] for example (and to film as collage), he is often found praising the capacity of the medium to break the distance between heterogeneous realities and re-distribute visibility, not only in terms of what is produced at the 'event of art ', in the presence of a live audience, but as he points out in *The Emancipated Spectator* in relation to the films of Pedro Costa[186] or Martha Rosler's photomontages from the 1970s[187], in terms of what is done, indeed composed, internally in the unity of

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185 Cinema, unlike sculpture, provides the perfect metaphor for modernity – with its relation to light and its privileged capacity to show real people and capture reality in movement. And it is perhaps because of its indexical relation to reality, which many argue is also a relation with truth, that despite the tainted history of both sculpture and cinema when it comes to their role in the propaganda apparatus of totalitarian political regimes in the past, cinema can easily be associated with the idea of an emancipatory, even militant, idea of art. Sculpture, however struggles to depart from its association with ideological constructions, resistance to change and autocratic power. As I suggest in the main text, Rancière (who dedicates great part of his writings on art to cinema) reinforces, if only indirectly, this view with his reading of the *Belvedere Torso* by playing the idea of a sculptural body against that of a living community. But he is not alone on this. Interestingly, Krauss starts *Passages in Modern Sculpture* with a reference to cinema, more precisely to the very first scene in Eisenstein's film *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* from 1928: "In that first scene Eisenstein set up the two poles of his film: the two opposing metaphors that establish both his analysis of history and the space in which it occurs. The crowd and the real space through which it moves are asked to represent the hero of the revolution; while the enemy of that revolution is cast as a series of ideologies and formal spaces, each on symbolized by means of statuary. In the film's re-creation of the struggle to retain imperial power in Russia, sculptures are made into surrogate actors; and there is consistent identification of particular icons with particular political views. " It is significant that both authors have chosen to start a survey of modern art with a scene of a defaced sculpture. Figurative sculpture appears as the enemy of informal space and truth, which are both conceived of as a condition of modernity, and importantly as an obstacle of emancipation. Part of my work here is precisely to change the perception of sculpture as the bastion of power and to reclaim for it the same sort of expectations presently placed upon contemporary cinema. The quote is found in Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 7-8.
186 Writing about Pedro Costa's so-called *Fontainhas trilogy (Ossos* from 1997*; In Vanda's Room* from 2000*; Colossal Youth* from 2006*)* Rancière remarks that: "It affirms an art in which the form is not split off from the construction of a social relation or from the realization of a capacity that belongs to everyone." In Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London: Verso, 2009, 81.
187 Rancière makes a reference to Martha Roshler's work in "The misadventures of critical thought", the second section from the *The Emancipated Spectator* where he brings to question the path taken up by critical thought, precisely through a comparison between " the artistic and political success of collage and photomontage: the clash on the same surface of heterogeneous, if not conflicting elements," that we can recognize in the way Martha Rosler addressed the Vietnam war in her collage series from the 1970s *Bringing*

film and paper. These questions are similar to those that need to be asked in relation to contemporary figurative sculpture. Considering that working with a contemporary language means to include heterogeneous parts and the fragment, and in order to avoid total fragmentation, we cannot completely ignore the question of the whole either; which in turn means, that we need to ask how to rehearse problems of distribution *in* and *through* objects.

A new task for sculpture

Returning for a moment to an earlier source will help me to formulate the next step. In *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* Alex Potts reasons that some of the major developments introduced in sculpture from early nineteenth century to late 1990s have resulted from attempts made by artists to broaden the way viewers engage with work and stop the promotion of ideological integration of individuals. In fact, similarly to Rancière, Potts also tells us that on a formal level, this was accompanied by a progressive break with the unity between the parts and the whole, and with the unity of expression defined in terms of an accord between artistic intention and reception. Potts's argument, in short, is that the history of sculpture for the past two centuries is defined by moments that renegotiated the viewing conditions of sculpture and that such history culminates in the minimalist mode, which is about the viewing itself.

He concludes his "story of sculpture", as he describes it, by arguing that a lot of the questions raised by minimal art, and indeed by the general developments in sculpture, continue to be explored but become manifest in different ways: in a sculpture of spaces, of objects, and even of the figure. Three approaches that he sees represented in the work of Bruce Nauman, Louise Bourgeois and Georg Baselitz. Very quickly, Potts explains that Bruce Nauman is able to produce a sculptural mode for viewing video art that disturbs the relation between a private

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the War Home . As the title suggests, Rosler coalesces the reality of domestic life in America during that period and the reality of a scenario of war created by America in Vietnam. In a similar vain,Josephine Meckseper uses collage-like techniques, photomontages and assemblages of objects from opposing universes often shown inside vitrines, to comment on the American machine of war and consumerism society in more recent years, here the process that exposes seemingly opposing universes as belonging to the same reality "proves to be identical to the structure of a reality where everything is exhibited in the manner of a commodity display (…) it is always a question of showing to the spectator what she does not know how to see, and making her feel ashamed of what she does not want to see, even if it means that the critical system presents itself as a luxury commodity pertaining to the very logic it denounces." Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 26-31

mode of viewing and the public exposition of such viewing[188]; and that in the series known as *Cells,* Bourgeois presents artworks that simultaneously appear as wholes in the space of exhibition and put to play the idea of fragmentation through different elements placed inside the cell and through multiple views produced by mirrors and frames in the partitions that defined the area of the *Cell*[189]. Finally, referring to the kind of figures Georg Baselitz has been producing since the early 1980s, e.g. over-life size and roughly carved in limewood, Potts points out that expression, gesture, painted marks, and more importantly, marks made by the saw used to carve the figures out, appear dissociated from one another - that despite the figurative nature of such works, these don't follow any internal logic and don't represent anything – elements that for that reason are "specific", as Potts puts it, with a clear reference to Judd.

Picking up from this last example, one of the implications of Potts' analysis of sculpture is that Minimalism and figuration are not completely incompatible. And it is not only artists such as Baselitz that show this. Examples can also be found in the historical roots of Minimalism. Namely in the work of Auguste Rodin, who with the object-quality of his figures anticipated the transition from the figurative mode to Modernism's preoccupation with the specific conditions of each medium and furthermore prefigured the active viewing of Minimalism by giving visibility to process, including fragments and repetition, and finally, with his modeling technique based on variations of light effects on the surface of sculpture – a technique that ask the viewer to change positions in order to visually understand its forms. Brancusi also comes to mind here, with his treatment of the plinth, simplification of volumes, use of modules and repetition, and the notable influence these had on artists such as Richard Serra and Carl Andre. Rodin and Brancusi are in fact two of the most obvious names when it comes to give witness to the influence of the transformation of sculptural figurative language at

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188 In my opinion, Potts' claim about Bruce Nauman's work is most explicit in *Live Taped Corridor*, from 1970, where Nauman is able to address the social phenomena of participation and surveillance. For reference: the work invites the viewer/participant to walk along a narrow corridor towards two stacked television monitors. As he or she approaches the monitors, the viewer sees one monitor showing an image of the corridor being empty and his or her own image in the monitor on top, which gets smaller and smaller as approached. This results from the fact that the image is transmitted from a surveillance camera mounted at the entrance of the corridor. The relation established with the image is thus contra-intuitive, further so because the viewer can only see his own back. Adding to the environment of surveillance created by the angle of the camera, positioned higher than eye-level, this gives the viewer the felling of being watched. In other words, the work coerces the viewer to see himself being watched, which is also felt as he walks out of the corridor, this time because of the presence of other viewers, eventually standing outside the corridor, looking in.
189 The works from Louise Bourgeois commonly known as Cells, are in most cases, room-sized autonomous areas, but visually open to the outside, where the artist creates spaces of memory with the use of different objects – often including furniture pieces, mirrors and figurative objects, notably strained hand gestures carved in stone. In his final discussion on the work of Bourgeois, Potts includes *Cell (You better grow up)*, from 1993, and *Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands)* from 1990-1993, both of which can be described as above. See: Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist,* 361-370

the turn of 20th century on Minimalism. We could also mention Picasso and later David Smith and, as noted below, at least one example from an earlier period.

Potts makes a convincing case for the influence of the work of Antonio Canova (1757-1822) on future sculptural practice, more exactly for the idea that he anticipated a lot of what is at play in Minimalism with figures that appear to acknowledge the presence of the viewers, and significantly that invite attention to specific, somehow independent, details. He believes, for example, that we can compare Robert Morris's large and heavy strips of felt pieces that hang freely from the wall from the late 1960s with the sense of self-sufficiency and the affect of gravity conveyed by the drapery carved in marble in Canova's *The Three Graces* from 1815-17. As Potts remark: "The elusive and provisional sense of wholeness one has in the presence of the Canova can never be pinned down – it too hovers forever on the margins of one's immediate awareness".[190]

So here we have an interesting suggestion in Potts's argument. The western tradition of sculpture has moved towards an increased preoccupation with how to engage viewers and along the way relegated formal problems, specially those to do with representation, to a secondary plane of importance doing so despite the fact that plastic form, or more exactly, structures internal to artworks and elements of figuration, don't necessarily compromise the engagement of viewers. In a very sharp conclusion, Potts surmises that:

> the post-war projects of artists like David Smith and Alberto Giacometti mark a kind of turning point when serious sculpture began to be severed from any connection with visions of a reconfigured world. Sculpture then became increasingly caught up in a bleaker, more insistently critical process of self-reflection, both at the level of questioning what a sculpture is or is not as a kind of object, and at the more rhetorical level of how the viewer is being interpolated by it.[191]

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190 Ibid., 13
191 Ibid., 378

I would perhaps add a couple of names including Marino Marini and Magdalena Abakanowicz on that same post-war context, but regardless I agree with Potts' position on this. For the past half century, the field of sculpture has been instrumental in redefining the way artworks engage viewers and in developing strategies to resist the commodification of objects of art, but has indeed stepped back from the task of reconfiguring reality. On the whole, the field of sculpture seems more preoccupied with staging objects, and with establishing analogies with reality and pre-worked conceptualizations, than with inventing "visions of a reconfigured word".

It is in this gap, already announced in the previous section with Rancière, that it is important to explore the theme of composition. Focusing on the figure, below I try to establish a conceptual framework for composition via Bruno Latour, only to argue later that the hero can operate as a methodology for composition.

Bruno Latour, Rachel Harrison and the indifference of objects

In the first instance, including Latour might come across as a jump in the text. However, Latour shares with Rancière not only an interest for contemporary art, but also the idea that democracy demands for a certain disorder, to which art associates itself with the capacity to "redistribute the sensible" in the case of Rancière, and to "reassemble the social"[192] in the case of Latour. Having said that, the *demos* of democracy is differently conceived of by each of the two. Rancière sees it as an embodied subject, i.e. as a living community, whereas Latour conceives the democratic as a series of changing negotiations, translations and mediations between different 'actors', both human and non-human. In fact, throughout the latter's work in sociology, he convincingly questions the division between the human and the non-human and has managed to bring attention to the interactions between the two. What is more, he has a transversal approach to composition with some important, albeit indirect, implications for what I hazard to say, can be a renewed understanding of figurative sculpture.

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192 The expression is taken from the title of one of Latour's books, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, from 2005, where Summarily put he argues for the importance of sociology to reformulate its principles in order to extend the notion of the social to non-human entities and precisely *"reassemble the social".*

For what matters here, Latour views composition as a post-human *assemblage* of negotiations and heterogeneity which is also an adaptive system (or systems) without a fixed hierarchy; one that chances according to a network of influences - simultaneously local and global - and that can be composed or taken apart, added to or subtracted from. Crucially, he argues that composition, not cosmologies or critique, is the key to handling the 'social' because the search for a contemporary *assembly* cannot be sustained by any systems of thought that sift reality through something exterior to reality. As it appears in "An attempt at a compositionist Manifesto", an essay where Latour condenses his ideas and expectations about composition:

> with critique you may debunk, reveal but only as long as you establish, through this process of creative destruction, a privileged access to the world of reality behind the veil of appearances. Critique, in other words, has all the limits of utopia: it relies on the certainty of the world beyond this world (…) it can break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudice, but you cannot repair, take care, assemble, reassemble.[193]

By contrast to critique[194], Latour's conceptualization of composition presupposes the possibility of intervention (significantly, it puts the reader in the position of the subject of composition) and underlines the connection between the logic of composition and the search for the common. This in turn posits composition both as a mode of knowing reality and of re-organizing reality - to arrange, re-distribute, constitute, care for, or in short, to reassemble a common world instead of simply mapping a sociology of the social. On a first basis, composition is about establishing relations towards the idea of the common with a form of commitment. Again in Latour's own words:

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193 Bruno Latour, "An attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto", *New Literary History, 2010, Vol. 41,* 475.
194 "An attempt at Compositionist Manifesto" is, as Latour mentions therein, a kind of follow up to another essay, more influential perhaps, where in brief he argues that the priority of explanation and the stubborn object/subject division, and therefore a deficient acknowledgment of non-human agency, has brought critique to its exhaustion. For more on this see: Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2004, 225-248

Composition takes up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered. It is thus far from relativism (in the papal sense of the word) as it is from universalism (in the modernist meaning of the world (…). From universalism it takes the task of building a common world; from relativism, the certainty that this common world has to be built from utterly heterogeneous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable material and diverse composite material.[195]

So in this scheme of things, composition applies to distribution, to establish both connections and positions in a network of influences as well as having the weight of a commitment, as opposed to a gathering that can at any point by dissolved. It appears as a mode for reorganizing affects that furthermore correlates with an idea of heterogeneous parts working between themselves to form a whole that constitutes the reason of this 'working' together; therefore meaning it is not about what things are but about what things do and the way in which different elements interact in the absence of fixed rules. It describes a whole, but not a totality.

Three points can be made here. By focusing on the interactions between things, Latour's take on composition avoids giving essentialist explanations about the nature of those things and logically refuses an appeareance/reality distinction. More important still, he offers us a theoretical framework for composition that refuses fixed rules of composition but predicts the position of the subject of composition, the inclusion of heterogeneous elements and the fragment. Based on all these, I would like to call this *composition-without-essences*.

Now, the influence of Latour on art theory is nothing new and can perhaps be explained in just a few words with a note on how he has managed to construct a body of theory that blurs the distinction between objects and subjects, and in so doing, has made it possible, or at least suggests that it is possible, to

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195 Bruno Latour, "An attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto",474

conceptualize the agency of art works in a broad political sense. Thus his theories have become both attractive and useful to renew our ideas about art objects. However, it also reveals some limitations. Let us consider the work of Rachel Harrison and later of Isa Genzken: two artists that use figuration in line with a post-minimal legacy and that paraphrase Latour's ideas rather well.

Consistently acquiring the form of object-gatherings, Rachel Harrison's exhibitions give witness to a sculptural version of a Latourian assemblage. These are normally constituted as a field of interactions between objects conjured with various procedures of making and finding that assume different strategies of power. In fact, while some objects are presented as if just to be seen, most are actually doing something or with a potential to do something. Harrison's work confront us with *assemblages*, that as described by Ina Blom are "not taken as a formal principle but as a form of activity or as a confrontation of forces, wills or perspectives, the assemblages of art is the scene of sociality itself"[196].

In that sense, Harrison's practice makes sense primarily in the context of the exhibition as a whole, which for the larger part appear without a clear figure-ground relation, meaning, as exhibitions where it is difficult to visually isolate this or that element from other elements. That being said, most individual artworks maintain their independent integrity but with the condition, once again in most cases, that they are impossible to be perceived instantly. Important features become visible only as the viewer walks around them. Harrison's work, in short, is an example of a body of work that successfully establishes part-whole relations but where the parts are not totalized by the whole. This is not strange to the space of the exhibition either, which is frequently fragmented by dividing boards, physical lines or artworks that seem deliberately positioned to interrupt the visual field of other artworks (for example in the installation *Snake in the Grass* 1997/2000 – fig. 10)

The result, is that the space of Harrison's exhibitions produce multiple and fragmented perspectives that make it difficult to essentialise things and that ask the viewer to negotiate with the exhibition by traversing it. Plus, often as a result

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196 Ina Bloom, "In the Wake of Object Fever, Art Criticism will turn to the politics of things", *Text Zur Kunst,* 74, 2009, 95.

of acquiring the atmosphere of a site in construction, Harrison's exhibitions seem to set out the idea of process against any attempt to stabilize objects and meaning.

10. Rachel Harrison, *Snake in the Grass* (1997-2009)
Multiple materials
138x288x498 inches
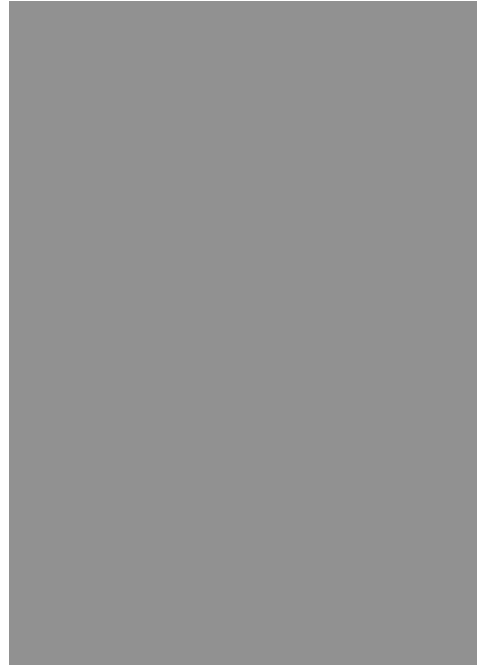
11. Rachel Harrison, *Untitled* (2001)
Wood, Polystyrene, Cement, Acrylic, Formica,
Protective film and Ceramic figurine
57x 24 1/5 x 24 1/5 inches

Another important aspect is the frequent inclusion of individual objects that acquire the aspect of viewing subjects - such as small figurines displayed as if someone is observing the objects in a gallery (see fig. 11). This aspect contributes to a form of display capable of attributing inanimate objects with a sense of *subjecthood*[197] by confusing the place of objects and the place of the viewer.

Hence we can establish a connection between Harrison's work and Latour's idea of *assemblage* on the basis of the first constituting a series of visible interactions between heterogeneous elements (including technological objects such as screens and media players) whose content is defined, but not totalized by the whole exhibition, and between those elements and the viewer, which translated into the context of an exhibition can be described as the scene of several assemblages. This

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197 I am here using the term 'subjecthood' in obvious reference to Fried's concept of 'objecthood', after it was first used in a seminar at the Institute Für Kunstkritik Frankfurt am Main and in the subsequent publication: Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum and Nikolaus Hirsch, eds., *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism,* Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2011

in turn, makes it possible to establish a connection between Harrison's work and the broader new 'sociology of the social' that Latour calls a "sociology of associations"[198]. That being, a sociology as indicated by the name, that does not focuses on objects but on the association between objects.

There is a second concept in Latour that Harrison's work translates equally well, and that as discussed below, reveals some of the limitations of both Harrison's exhibitions and ANT, i.e. the concept of *assembly.* Closely associated with the notion of *assemblage* but not the same, *assembly* pertains to the problem of representation and cohabitation. In the introduction to *Making Things Public: Atmosphere of Democracy*, Latour develops the idea that it is possible to conceive of an art exhibition as an *assembly* and that as such an exhibition is a place where we can rethink '*who is to be concerned' and 'what is to be considered*', and it is in this sense that I think it is possible to describe Harrison's exhibitions as heterogeneous complex human/non-human assemblies, with a wide range of perspectives and with different 'actors', procedures and references, distinct temporalities and localities, all juxtaposed, considered and co-exiting without being summed up.

In fact, entering one of Harrison's exhibitions is not completely unlike entering some sort of natural habitat, where objects have their own social life, their own assemblies and their own power relations; a place, simply put, where objects seem to exist indifferently to the viewer. An *indifference* of objects that on a larger scale has been gradually acquiring the form of an 'object-turn'. A new realism, as it's often termed, that in a way backed up by Latour and others, has had a clear impact on exhibition making practices in recent years and that one can perhaps connect with the way in which the 'group-show' has become the exhibition format of choice for many artists working today, especially in alternative art spaces. We can also connect this with the fact that individual practices often try to mimic the atmosphere of an exhibition and explore the interaction and 'agency' of objects, as well as is the case of artists that curate shows with their own work included – where the meaning and significance of artworks can be established in relation to a network of influences produced by the 'cohabitation' with the work of other artists.

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198 See for example Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory,* New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, 248

But this 'object-turn' has also been pivotal on the level of theory, especially for those who, in being interested in rethinking what it means to speak about a collective, also find it politically promising to include objects. In other words, the recent wave of object-orientated thinking has been feeding the idea of an expanded collective and setting the tone for new philosophical movements - like Speculative Realism – that gives support to the project of rethinking the left and of getting back to politics through claims to universality structured around the idea of agency and knowledge beyond the human aspect. This too, can be read in Harrison's work as it de-centres the viewer by staging what can be called an object-orientated scene where objects seem to have a life of their own. But there is a problem here. If the stakes of Harrison's work can be read as an articulation between art and politics, one that considers positive an understanding of a collective where human beings are no more necessary than objects – where both are 'represented' and cohabit in equal terms -, whose necessity and opinion is being voiced after all?

Indeed, Harrison's multi-layered practice references different localities and temporalities, uses a wide vocabulary of procedures and covers quite a lot of today's vast landscape of materials and objects. What is more, it produces a complex field of interactions where it is possible to recognize Latour's definition of composition and, within the framework of ANT, what we are able to call the politics of objects. However, it is also organized around exhibition settings where it is difficult to know who, as opposed to what, is being considered. Put another way, Harrison's practice carries the mark of a potential political abstraction, a problem, which in my view, is equally at play in ANT itself.

The political project of ANT consists in preparing the necessary conditions to represent and welcome new and changing actors and open the possibility to 'reassemble the social' with the method that it produces, viz., with improved instruments of analysis and strategies of synthesis in a process leading to the conceptualization of new assemblies. In the words of Latour: "What ANT has tried to do is make itself sensitive again to the sheer difficulty of assembling collectives made of so many new members once nature and society have been simultaneously put aside" [199].

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199 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory,* 259

This is not the place nor is it my intention to bring the political value of ANT to inspection (the above seems relevant enough) but it is important to note that using the theoretical space of ANT has some limitations. ANT is a theory of the social with a focus on connections and that has in the format of an exhibition its logical practical counterpart. The theory frames the setting of an exhibition, which it translates as an assembly, as a context where it's possible to ask who is being considered and what is a concern. However these questions are asked as if they were already answered - as if it would be enough to simply stage them. In sum, it maps the possibility to recompose the social and include new actors, but leaves unclear what the politics of objects actually is, and leaves unexplored the possibilities at play on the level of a singular actor. These cannot be ignored.

Latour in particular asks us to recognize non-human agencies and the existence of systems where those agencies come together in a constant fight for influence and adaption. The recognition of these fights, as it were for power and survival, substantiates the possibility to speak about politics in connection with the non-human and specifically in connection with objects. Furthermore, he has successfully demonstrated that the politics of objects are influenced by, and indeed influence, politics on the level of living people. He has told us that the social needs to be understood in such a way that includes both human and non-human agencies.

Thus, Latour has offered us the theoretical tools for identifying the role of objects, and more importantly of art works, in the transformation of the social world at large. These tools have gained a significant currency within the vocabulary of art theory. And yet the way in which Latour identifies the political dimension of objects is not completely satisfactory for what I am trying to set out here because his theory does not grant us the means for a reflection on how to direct the politics of objects towards the benefit of human agencies and necessities.

Aramis, or the Love of Technology, a book published in English in 1996, illustrates this rather well and it is worth giving it a moment of attention. Surely one of Latour's strangest publications, it tells the story of a failed technological project of a hybrid public/personal system of transport – Aramis - developed for the city of Paris during the 1970s and 1980s from the perspective of several actors, including non-human actors. With one foot rooted in academic tradition and the other in literature, it attempts to understand the cause of the failure using a combination of documents and a fictional approach to the problem. Somehow registering as a traditional

research question, is starts out by asking: "Who killed Aramis?"[200].

This question unfolds into a demonstration, one could say, of the thesis that technological systems thrive or disappear according to their capacity to adapt to the circumstances that surround them. And Aramis, the book tells us, died precisely because it failed to adapt to the changing social and political paradigms of its time. Further supporting the idea that technology is not an isolated sphere but a central realm of culture, the book traces those changes and in a way functions as portrait of French society during the abovementioned period.

But Latour also seems to be suggesting something different, something that manifests itself in the way the argument unfolds from the perspective of Aramis and the different elements that compose it. Using an impressive array of rhetoric tropes to convince the reader of the importance of technological beings, he presents us with fictions of what Aramis and the automated-cars would say or think. Yet, in humanizing the world of non-human agencies, by giving them a voice, thoughts and autonomy, Latour declassifies human matters and necessities – suggesting, in a way, that the lives of technological beings are as important as human beings.

So the book is quite convincing in the way it establishes a relationship between the outset, the outcome of Aramis and the social situation in which these took place, but it does not offer a reflection on the implications and changes the project could have brought to that specific situation and to its respective social (human) contingencies. The difference between the two observations is perhaps subtle, but it nonetheless carries an essential detail. For instance, whilst the book suggests that the resistance to the idea of abandoning privately own vehicles was one of the causes behind the project's failure, it does not discuss ways Aramis could have changed the social paradigms that support the division between the private and public sphere nor the political implications these changes could have had.

Aramis, or the Love of Technology gives witness to Latour's general argument that we need to reformulate the methods of sociology as a discipline of thought. But it also suggests that we should learn to love technological beings as independent, autonomous subjects, a need that comes to the fore as being crucial to understanding technology in its own right and not through the lenses of a tradition

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200 Bruno Latour, Aramis or the love of technology, London: Harvard University, Press, 2002, 1-11

that interprets the social as being composed exclusively of human subjects.

But then again, whilst underscoring the importance of widening our perception of technology and the world of objects as actors in a network of social influences, the book leaves us with the problem of knowing how to employ this world in human causes and preoccupations. This book in particular, condenses Latour's general arguments and furthermore demonstrates those arguments in writing, recognizes and humanizes the politics of objects but at the same time devalorizes human agencies, which risks justifying a vision of the world where politics are an abstract field of thought. Although it is useful to use Latour's writing as a framework, this framework also falls short of the kinds of commitments I seek to explore and that involve the way in which the world of objects, specifically sculptural composition, can operate as a vehicle for the reconfigured (human) subject.

A second reference to this book will by in made in a moment. First, let us discuss the question of composition not in relation to *networks* but at the point of *things*; which in an overtly Heideggerian way, Latour frequently reminds us is already a gathering of causes. In fact, Latour uses the term *things* after Heidegger, as entities associated with *matters of concern* (that reveal being), but in a sense that also includes what Heidegger refers to as objects: that is, entities associated with *matters of fact* (that the latter thinks has no connection to being). Heidegger's distinction is partially based on the differences between manual and industrial objects, which Latour tries to equalize by showing that industrial, manual and in effect, all kinds of entities, interact and therefore determined each other. This of course has to do with the fact that Latour refuses the idea that "man was shepherd of being"[201] and considers instead that all things matter. But I need to take a step back here. I will, as mentioned, approach the question of composition at the point of 'singular gatherings' but will call these objects. A minor detail perhaps, but one that helps me to deliberately set a distinction, if only subtle, from Heidegger's condemnation of industrial objects and from Latour's all encompassing notion of *matters of concern*, a notion which raises a lot of questions, but does not really orientate decisions inherent to the process of composition. Building a common world requires an open understanding of composition but also a careful consideration on the differences between matters of concern and matters of non-concern.

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201 "Who told you that man was the shepherd of being? Many forces would like to be sheperd and guide the others as they flock to their folds to be sheared and clipped. In any case there is no sheperd" Bruno Latour, referring to Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, as cited in Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Melbourne: re.press, 2009, 24

The proposal then, is to address the problem of composition under the principle that it remains necessary to rethink, indeed to recompose, the human subject and, based on the idea that being and objects are mutually determining, that it is possible to do so using the vocabulary of objects. In other words, the proposal is to see how composition works in relation to the figure.

**Isa Genzken and the condition of figurative sculpture after the mannequin**

The use of the human figure - be it the whole figure, small or large, fragments or sometimes just simple suggestions of anthropomorphic forms - always seem to give a sense of orientation to what we have come to call an 'assemblage'. The human form, in effect, functions as an anchor of meaning. When part of an assemblage, it quickly becomes the element with the strongest conceptual gravity, around which the meaning of other elements is determined. But the chain of signification created by references to the human form does not necessarily lead to the rearticulated figure and subject. This is what we first need to address in order to identify some important aspects of contemporary figuration.

I will start with the work of Isa Genzken, another artist whose practice is exemplary of assemblage procedures. Her work provides an example of how the human figure has been referenced in recent sculptural practices, and specifically in terms of a dialogue between sculpture, operating as an investigation into the condition of objects, and aspects of consumerism culture. Consider for example, *Untitled* from 2012 (Fig. 12): a work over average in height, that given its proportional relations to the average viewer and the presence of a mask, registers as a figure in the convention of a bust on a plinth, or more precisely, as a portrait. Mounted on casters, the part that reads as a plinth is visibly constructed with MDF with orange plexiglass side panels, with a mirrored interior. On top of it a transparent kitchen chair is balanced on a lounge chair, also transparent but with a greenish tone where one also finds an almost invisible, easy to miss, toy-sized figurine of an aristocratic looking soldier and two crystal swan figurines. Overall, *Untitled* has a very appealing material, formal and chromatic scheme, which is dominated by the presence of the chairs and by the grotesque mask fixed to one of the legs of the upper chair. Because the sculpture has an entrance but no real back, because it produces the

possibility to have one's own reflected image in its interior, together with the fact that the different elements have their focal points distributed along the four sides of what I call a plinth (but could also be called a private cabinet) it provokes in the viewer a will to move towards, as well as around it. It clearly wants to seduce. However, some of its elements also yield a capacity to repel and keep the viewer at a distance, as is perhaps more successfully expressed in the image of aggression produced by the inverted legs of the first chair and by the grotesque mask facing the opposite side of the mirror (not clearly visible from the image), as if a no trespassing warning has been attached.

12. Isa Genzken *Untitled* (2012)
MDF, Plastic, glass, mirror, foil, Perspex, glass, mask, tape, artificial hair, casters
94 x 37$_{2/5}$ x 44$_{1/2}$ inches
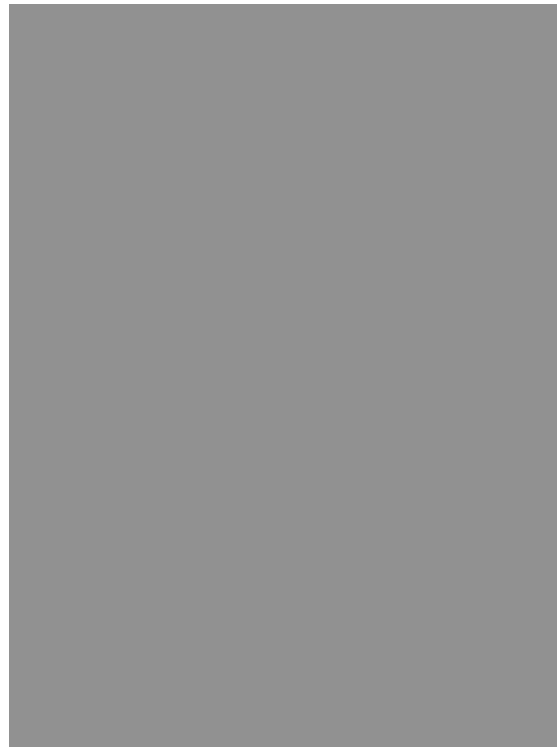
13. Isa Genzken, *Untitled* (2012)
Mannequin and mixed media.
57$_{7/8}$ x 32$_{5/8}$ x 39 inches

The point of the matter here is that by forming a rather unstable figure, achieved much like a collage of high-end retail items, that is, without material intersections, the composition attributes meaning to objects through an allusion to the human form, whilst at the same time revealing and increasing their commodity status. We still see them as sleek objects. In fact, the work seems to play with the attraction of fashionable home furniture whilst giving a version of what a portrait of someone

living in privileged circumstances under advanced capitalism might look like - a portrait, without the human in it, of a psychologically unstable and absent consumerism-based self.

Writing on the occasion of Genzken's retrospective at MOMA during 2014, Hal Foster has suggested that Genzken's work produces a form of dialectics that reveals "not only merely the failures of utopia (of which is easy enough to do today) but also the energy in disaster"[202]; dialectics that, as he continues, functions as a diagnosis of a consumerist society at the point of rupture. But the diagnosis Foster is speaking of is also concerned with a subject hostage "to its perverse onside of getting to pleasure according to a perpetual movement between trash and consumerism"[203], that reveals a state of material uncertainty with *being* about to collapse whilst suggesting that material (and ideological) precariousness can only be slightly disguised and compensated for with excess, dark humour and parody, or, the feeling that nothing could go wrong as long as the party continues.

Some commentators have even suggested that this form of alienation is in fact what constitutes the critical dimension of Genzken's work, for example, with reference to a work from 2006, comparable to the one above, Caroline Busta writes:

> Returning to Genzken's *Untitled*, the form is abstract but the form clearly registers as some kind of person – at first glance, a pathetic one, one that's barely keeping it together, overloaded and seemingly unable to communicate anything really, except the inability to clearly communicate. However, seen another way, we might instead take this figure as refusing to communicate (…) Considering information is a currency and that post-Fordist capitalism demands that everyone communicate as fluidly as possible, maybe this is what a radical body is supposed to look like. Everything flows through it –air, desire, and power yet whilst functioning as this conduit, Genzken's *Untitled* refuses to contribute to new

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202 In Hall Foster, "Isa Genzken", *Artforum*, Feb. 2014, 205
203 Ibid.

content.[204]

Doesn't the suggestion that such a treatment of the human figure can respond critically to a challenging consumerism culture, fall into the trap, and the contradiction, of endorsing a notion of resistance that is too consumerism friendly? In plain formal terms: there is appropriation and eventually critique, but no refusal, subversion or transformation of the elements that formed the work, which furthermore, and because of that reason, is subsumed to a closed universe of forms and limited to a set of operations that do not break with a pre-determined material order. Works such as *Untitled* (fig.12) seem unable to depart from the logic of advanced capitalism. Genzken's incredible talent to improvise and rearrange objects with a trashy sense of glamour reveals the contradiction of contemporary life. It is critical of consumerism but relies too much on its logic to be able to break with it. It is as if "everything flows through it"[205], which is problematic because what is limiting about a life orientated around acts of consumption - the constitution of being through a process of obtaining goods that inhibits an active construction of meaning and that therefore reduces the potential of life - is not being altered or recomposed but rather upheld.

This double game of critique and reinforcement of consumerism culture is in fact a problematic that we can associate with a more general but vast use of the mannequin in contemporary sculpture - the main source for ready-made figurative work of which Genzken's practice is one of its most visible faces with artworks similar to *Untitled*, from 2012 (fig. 13). We need to elaborate on this. In some ways, the use of the mannequin constitutes a strategy aligned with a modernist legacy that tries to include elements of reality in a direct way and be critical of that reality at the same time from a position of neutrality mapped out by excluding any symbolic order other than that which can be overtly shared and verified.

I'm here thinking, for example, of the work of Charles Ray who moved from sculptural explorations within the lexicon of minimal art at the beginning of his career, into an address of the mannequin during the 1990s, thus commenting on high modernism by disturbing the logic of identification associated with the

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204 Caroline Busta, "Body Doubles", Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum and Nikolaus Hirsch, eds., *Art and Subjecthood. The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism,* Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2011, 41-42
205 Ibid.

mannequin with variations of scale, the use of his own image and by making explicit the sexual identity of the figures. One can also think about John Miller who often uses the mannequin to critically confront the viewer with his own identity as a consumer whilst sabotaging identification by dressing mannequins with unglamourizing clothing. In this sense, the use of the mannequin is more about exploring the possibilities for the figure in post-minimalist sculpture than properly being a work of figuration. By which I mean, that it appears more as a form of sculptural commentary on the mannequin as sign of consumerism culture and on the contingency of the figure within such a culture, than an attempt to rearticulate the vocabulary of figuration. If only by stretching the argument here, we can locate the use of the mannequin within the legacy of minimal art because it undermines the very idea of figuration by using figures, which are significantly abstract, objective, and empty of expression and artistic intention. It could be said that this is an anti-figurative use of the figure.

The way Thomas Hirschorn uses the mannequin as a strategy to stage what we can describe as a scene, or the way Cathy Wilkes employs the mannequin in installation and affirms the human figure in relation to everyday objects and to a non-verbal system of signification, are just two more examples of artists in an extensive list, working with mannequins today. In fact it's hard to deny the centrality of the mannequin within the landscape of contemporary figuration.

There are obvious advantages of using the mannequin as sculptural source material. One is able to work with the human figure in an immediate, fast way, and what is more, to work with the human figure with it a direct reference to a typify western mode of living. But this carries a similar problem to that identified above with consideration of Genzken's practice. By displacing the mannequin from commercial spaces into spaces of art where it never quite looses the commercial connotation creates, almost automatically, a critical tone that does not avoid positing the contemporary subject as a consumer. It's a form of critique, if only subliminal, that in speaking the language of power without saying anything different, can and indeed is, easily absorbed by its own logic. Furthermore it affirms the domestic condition of contemporary subjectivities through the system of art. More problematic still, the use of the mannequin - a general, typically industrial and undifferentiated figuration - puts to work the idea of the consumer as a politically compromising abstraction of the democratic subject.

And the impact of the mannequin does not stop in its direct use. At first, one might be tempted to compare the condition of sculpture after the mannequin to the problem of painting the figure after photo-realism. But the comparison does not really hold since the mannequin is not an index of a real person, like in a photograph (see what was said about the relation between objects as index before), and therefore, even if that is what is at stake, it cannot be used as a measure for figurative efficiency. The problem of figurative sculpture after the mannequin has instead to do with its massive presence in our lives – by far the most familiar reference for the tridimensional human figure - to which figurative sculpture needs to respond directly or indirectly.

In addition to artists who use the mannequin, there are others who repeat its logic. Antony Gormley, for example, with his 'figures-as-place' that deal with repetition, indifference and standardization. Other artists produce works that are easy to associate with the mannequin because of formal aspects inherent in the materials used, such as the use of polyester resin or polychromatic surfaces. In addition and importantly, there are also artists whose work operates through a different logic to that found with reference to a use of the mannequin, or that even try to oppose it, but who are yet to offer a clear alternative to the passivity posited by the mannequin. Artists like Stephen Balkenhol with his figures of everyman and everywoman, and Ugo Rondione's figurative work, notably *Clowns* (2001) and *Nude* (2010), two series of works constituted by figures that seem to refuse to do anything at all. I would also cite the work of Mark Manders, who I will discuss in a moment. All things considered, two things can be said. The first is that the condition of figurative sculpture is a post-mannequin condition, and the second, that the task of sculpture passes through finding an alternative space to that of the mannequin.

So let us make a point of situation. Within the framework of Latour's notion of composition, it is possible to depart from the logic of deconstruction and critique, and replace, as it were, the logic of the eye that looks *at* the world, for the logic of the hand that is *in* the world. Put in a different way, Latour predicts the position of the subject of composition, who in the context of his proposal is neither the subject of critical contemplation nor of power, but rather someone, singular or collective, facing the need to reconfigure the world. This introduces an important theoretical precedent for contemporary art as it allows attention to be given to moments other than the moment of reception. But Latour's definition

of composition is also useful in the sense that it focuses on the interactions between different elements, rather than isolating them, and because it introduces plasticity to part-whole relations and accepts heterogeneity. It is a take on composition, which in my view has the merit of combining the priority to reconfigure reality with the complexities of today's material and technical landscape. I called this *composition-without-essences*. And yet, as seen in relation to Rachel Harrison's work (that can be identified both as an assemblage and as an assembly - two central ideas in Latour's book) one can extend the condition of subject to everything that exists, as implied in such account of composition, which leaves too much space open for situations where human affairs can easily be forgotten or side-lined. Looking at a work by Isa Genzken, sculpture-wise this problem is partially undone when objects are put together with a reference to the human form, operating as a signification coordinate, but with the proviso that the possibility to rearticulate the subject of contemporary life does not quite follow from the use of ready-made elements, and more notably, from a direct use of the commercial mannequin, which reaffirms the problematic logic of an (material) order already in place.

From form to function: the figure as a tool

I need to open a parenthesis here. With his defence of the *Belvedere Torso* based on the notion of the potential, multiple compositions, and on how these allow for an audience to be involved in the construction of meaning, Rancière is adding his voice to the association often made between the fragment and modernity[206] and indirectly, to the idea that the development of modern life has brought down the possibility to conceive not only of the body, but of the subject as a whole. This is a commonly accepted argument, that says that the very circumstance of modern life (industrialization, acceleration, the infinite fragmentation of space and time, and life and so forth) have undermined the concept of an authentic subject and the possibility to shape life in a coherent

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206 Linda Nochlin, for example, argues that the iconography of the fragment appears as a sign of modernity after the attacks and subsequent destruction of monuments during the French revolution. It also gain a connotation with revolution via the influence that the live image of mutilated bodies, and in particular of decapitated heads, had for artists during that period – and only then, because of fragmentation produced by the photographic frame. In Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces. The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2001

whole. For quite a while now, according to this argument, one is not one, but many.

Minimal art comes to mind here again – more exactly, its attempt to break with a subject conceived in terms of coherence, intentionality, and the notion of meaning as something stable and immanent to objects of art. In this sense, Minimalism ties in with Postmodernism and the tradition of deconstruction. In fact, it underscores Jean-François Lyotard's idea of Postmodernism as the end of grand narratives by relying on a non-historical subject and on the evacuation of narrative structures from objects. On the other hand, however, following on from the end of Chapter One, it also comes close to Frederic Jameson's idea of Postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, in that it produces a subject – unstable, neutral, fragmented and serial - that gives way to the instrumentalization of being and the commodification of culture and life. Minimalism, put another way, echoes if only indirectly, the association between fragmentation and modernity as well as the impossibility of constructing a meaningful life under the conditions of late capitalism with its elusive, free from historical determination and a condition of meaning constantly on the verge of disintegration. The body, of course, enters the space of Minimalism with the living body of viewers. Which brings us to another question.

Some fields of knowledge, notably found in feminist theory, have explored the importance of the performative, and therefore of the body, for processes of subject formation.   However, the sexualized and cultural body of Postmodernism, which is still the body of today, is a body of sociological analysis, critique and deconstruction. More performative than active, it is a body of theory that appears dissociated from consequences and the threat of death. A post-tragic body of the multiple lives of video games, Facebook and of the disembodied experience of the screen, where in short, it is no longer possible to recognize a connection with the notion of place. Postmodernism, in other words, seems to have diluted the importance of the body as the locus of self and action. And if the culture of healthy living and physical exercise have brought a new attention to the body, this attention appears hand-in-hand with an obsession with monitoring the body and the possibility to instrumentalize the corresponding data. This is a body of physical activity, but not of true action or the construction of self.

Summarily put then, the very same conditions that have created the modern world have made it difficult to shape life as a coherent whole; and if, at best, the dissolution of a stable notion of subject continues to inform critical thought, at worst, it feeds back into late capitalism and its demand for adaptability and performativity under the guise of 'whatever subjectivities'. This is where Latour's proposal to exchange critique for composition becomes a tour de force in the sense that, as he points out, whilst critique deconstructs power and is able to produce knowledge, it is composition that lends itself to the construction of alternatives to the fragmented and confusing reality of living conditions today. The task of the previous is to react against a pre-set reality, that of the latter, to reconfigure reality.

It is in this scenario that the sculptural figure presents itself as a tool for reimagining subjectivities - using the vocabulary of objects, different materials and techniques, and through the staging, assemblage, and most importantly the origination of new objects. Let me underline the word 'tool' here. Never quite about truth but about invention, what a sculptural figure does best is not to deceive us into believing that this or that is *real*, but more exactly the other way around: it asks us to think about the human being as an object and in so doing, introduces traction and the quality of gravity into the modes upon which we might understand the construction of subjectivity. This, if you will, is the utility of composing the figure in sculpture, which in these terms carries a connection with pragmatism as it gets to be expressed in the original Greek meaning of the prefix pragma (πρᾶγμα) registering 'matter', a 'thing', or an 'object'.

Along these lines, whilst the definition *composition-without-essence*, invites us to consider (a) composition and its different elements not in terms of what things are, certainly not in terms of what things look like, but in terms of a network of interactions between heterogeneous elements, its translation into the human form anticipates the displacement of the anatomic body and consequently the positing of a coherence which is not of a formal, but instead, of a functional kind.

Let me illustrate this quickly using an example other than that of sculpture; that of the book. One could argue that part of the influence Latour has acquired derives from his style of writing, a style that combines academic erudition with an entertaining flow of ideas and everyday examples. However Latour's style of writing is not exactly a stylization of language, but rather a form of writing that

meets ANT's account of a multi-layered reality. One book in particular stands out in this regard, that is the already mentioned *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, a book where one finds different registers of writing including official reports, interviews, press reports, the diary of a research student and notes from his fictional supervisor, each printed with a different typographical layout. The writing method, therefore, accepts and underlines the interruptions, pauses and contradictions that compose the book.

If we were to focus on the formal writing aspects in this book it would be hard to call *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* a coherent whole and yet, the parts strangely work well together. They are coherent between themselves and function well in terms of covering different angles of the story of Aramis. And in fact, this is not something exclusive to this book alone. One can say any book of fragments is already a whole, be it for the influence each element has over the rest or for the physical unit provided by the book. Indeed, what I've called *composition-without-essence* has a lot of expression in the world of printed material where hybrid forms of writing – and of publishing formats – are largely being explored.

In terms of objects, and if only by pushing the comparison between the physicality of the book and that of sculpture, sculptural figuration can likewise group and make coherent sculptural elements of a different kind, through its materiality and through a chain of signification that is formed between different elements and between the human form. Like the book, the sculptural body can also speak with different languages, and in that way provide us the opportunity to combine the human form with the concrete reality of different materials and objects.

Let us then establish that after Latour we can think about a figure as a conceptually determinable whole, rather an anatomically complete whole, where meaning is achieved through a chain of signification defined between potentially heterogeneous parts. Significantly, the very idea that things can be composed demonstrates how, on the level of 'meaning', associative operations displace the notion of 'things in themselves' by creating something other than what elements are in isolation and by changing, by force of influence, the very meaning of each element. The process of composition is, in this sense, a practical demonstration

that intrinsic meaning is a fragile concept as well as a process opening the possibility of producing meaning.

Building on this, it is also possible to say that the precondition of meaning in figurative sculpture is formed after an initial association between figure and materiality. In bringing to mind the idea of an inanimate body, this ties in symbolically with the idea of death, whilst at the same time opposing a fascination with death by being formed as a body that cannot die - or more exactly, as a body that disappears in a much slower pace than the biological body. Figurative sculpture, finally, is capable of inventing and inscribing the body in *technicity,* whilst operating as a reminder of mortality. In other words, it is a form of dialectical becoming-object that represents a return to the body as a concrete thing (which is of course distinct from the body in the cyberspace) and from there, the possibility to reimagine and compose subjectivities with a sense of consequence over time.

So to close the parenthesis opened above, if on the one hand the intent of figurative sculpture can never be to unveil reality like, for instance, cinema does (since on a basic level it refuses an indexical relation with what it represents), on the other hand, the opportunity is there to use the figure as a tool to construct meaning without a claim to truth. That is, to give some sort of coherence to a fragmented and confused reality through operations of composition, where versions of the rearticulated figure and subject can be explored and - considering the materiality of sculpture - brought into the physical world.

The hero as methodology of composition

It is here that the hero re-enters the argument, this time as a methodology of composition. However, I need to explain this in detail since, with reference to an earlier passage, the words 'hero' and 'figure' are both empty concepts that need to be constructed, around their own conceptual void, in order to take shape. We need to know what the 'hero', as oppose to the 'figure' brings to composition. What, after all, does such an abstract notion like an *idealism-of-necessity* brings to another, also very abstract proposition, such as *composition-without-essences*?

These questions point directly to problems of composition and become more pertinent once approached from the perspective of practice. Thus from that angle, I will now outline a few ideas about the hero as a conceit for reimagining the possibilities of figurative sculpture for the post-mannequin and post-commercial era using the principles established in the previous chapter. I will do this without, for reasons that become clear below, describing how such principles translate into specific operations.

It was determined the hero has to be nominated. However, nomination does not have a direct equivalent in plastic form. Even if some sculptural figures appear heroic simply because they are sculptural, the connection between sculpture and the 'hero' is not an autonomous one. It remains dependent on the use of the word, be it written or in the form of a verbal declaration, simply being about naming, or associated with a narrative. Hence we can conclude, using the hero as theme of representation undermines sculptural autonomy because it relates to something other than to the specificity of the medium of sculpture. Of course, sculpture can include the use of written language and indeed has done so for many centuries in the form of legends - epigraphs or otherwise - or commonly in contemporary art through incorporated pre-existing written material. There are, of course, different ways to make names and narratives become part of objects.

In reality the 'naming' of the hero is perhaps the most problematic and provocative gesture within the association that I am trying to set out here between objects and questions of heroism. But to stop here would be to avoid the problem of sculpture, which lacks both an equivalent to nomination and the quality of being fully based in narrative. Sculpture can suggest a gesture and tell a story for sure, but not in the same way literature, cinema or television can; not through the unfolding of events and the transformation these cause through a series of one directional transitions, from one moment to another. So the way the hero is translated in sculpture through composition must be through processes of signification within the sculptural body, that is, in the way the body is put to speak through attitude, gesture, materials, techniques and so on.

Apart from nomination, introducing the hero to the process of composition gives way to a mode of figuration, neither personal nor abstract, which is conceivable along a dialogue with reality. What is more, this dialogue is based on the idea that it is possible to answer to such reality with a positive affirmation. In other

words, thinking through the hero introduces the principle of answerability and asks for decisions at the heart of composition to be taken in connection with what is exterior to composition itself. It makes the 'whys' of composition, the knowledge of what (a) composition means in relation to a wider context (a question that can never be exhausted internally) ever more so urgent. Hence, as methodology of composition, we can also conclude that the hero institutes a mode of self-reflexivity that asks its subject about the 'whys' of the procedures of composition, and in contrast to the negativity of deconstruction and critique, that it presupposes the aspiration of a rearticulated figure and subject.

In addition to the idea of a non-personal mode of figuration, as discussed previously in Chapter Two, the hero appears associated with difference. However difference or rather the new, is as some would rightly argue, always somehow a pressing condition in art and therefore not specific to the hero, and it is hard to disagree with this. And yet within the scenario of the hero, the new cannot be understood as a simple novelty. It is something that appears associated with a set of collectively shared concerns, or more precisely, as something that negotiates and brings what constitutes a concern to question. Put another way, the attempt to represent a figure of heroism needs to negotiate the universe of human concerns. And despite my use of the word 'human' here, we need to remember that speaking about heroism is not something generic, but rather contextualized. Therefore, it is conducive of a figuration that we can describe as being situated, and by implication, one that has a connection with the history.

But we need to be careful here. Thomas Houseago, for instance, produces rough, often 'in-process' looking figures that play with the history of sculpture, notably with the vocabulary of Cubism and Futurism. Using traditional sculptural materials – plaster, bronze, wood – Houseago develops a postmodern take on plastic forms and stylistic conventions borrowed from a pantheon of sculptors to produce figures, often imposing in scale, that confront us with overstated feats of masculinity and an invocation of a world of kings and warriors; rather evident in the frequency with which Houseago treats the head in the style of an ancient war mask. Which is to say, that even without repeating heroic gestures from the past, Houseago's work plays with the idea of heroic sculptures. Yet, in the terms being explored, Houseago's figuration cannot be called heroic because it reclaims relevancy through the history of art and not through a dialogue with the

present moment; it thus starts and finishes in formal questions. Instead, along the lines established before, and in following the path of the hero, the principles of answerability, negotiation and difference asks the subject of composition to avoid 'formalisms' and engage with the historic beyond the artistic.

This brings us to another aspect, which is to explore the body in sculpture requires a formal likeness with the human form but not a naturalistic resemblance. As mentioned above, the framework of Latour admits this by allowing different formal registers. However, Latour also leaves us with a grey area. The passage from *matters-of-fact* to *matters-of-concern*, with which he constructs a central part of his argument, describes the necessity to recognize the interchangeability between what one considers a fact and what one might think of as a concern (coming from the idea that a fact is necessarily a social construction that results from a series of social concerns, for instance concerns with science, with medical improvements and etc). But his use of the word 'concern' is misleading, for it is used in a generic sense as opposed to implying that something is a cause of preoccupation. Everything can be a concern in Latour's terms, which translated into artistic composition does not allow for a compositional reasoning.

Thinking through the hero, by contrast, represents a move from *matters-of-fact* to *matters-of-concerns*, but where what a 'concern' is must be associated with some sort of common necessity or preoccupation. A distinction that is relevant for both the human form and for the use of different materials, objects and even techniques. So whilst the model I'm trying to set out here is largely based on Latour's understating of composition, I depart from Latour when it comes to the outcome of composition. The non-hierarchical idea of composition, and what this opens in terms of probing new possibilities - specifically for inventing the body in sculpture - is considered as a starting point, but not as point of arrival.

In fact, there is no reason why we shouldn't replace the association between hierarchy and power for one that combines hierarchy and distribution once this is understood in terms of organizing associations according to what is more useful and less useful. This can be done in order to allow the most important ideas to be heard, the right tone to this or that, or to give that small detail its own voice. Not so distant, in fact, from what happens when organizing meaning through writing and its many forms, which are sometimes highly experimental, of

composition. Likewise, part/whole relations must be organized in sculpture to make the body speak. And this is to say, that instead of distrusting part/whole relations and identifying composition with a set of restrictions and rules, it seems possible to conceive of composition as that which opens a field of possibilities and allows us to organize and reorganize part/whole relations[207]. From this perspective it is equally possible to imagine the *heroic* operating as a way to adjudicate procedures of composition and intensify the work of figuration. This is a key idea but one that also needs to be thoroughly explained.

Firstly, it does not necessarily translate as imposing sculptures, visual overload or figures in grand poses, but quite the contrary. Intensification in this context means a form of *concentration* and *selection,* if you will, that seeks to distinguish between matters-of-concern and matters-of-no-concern rather than a simple intensification of the elements of composition. So in order to speak about the hero as a methodology for composition, intensification needs to be thought of again in terms of a situated necessity and how different elements of composition can potentially be more or less useful in this or that situation. In other words, using the hero as a mode of orientating composition implies an intensification of the internal structures and relations of a composition. On the other side, it also demands for a permanent reflexivity regarding the way in which a given composition is able to establish a dialogue and potentially introduce difference in its external reality. This also means that using the trope of the hero to work out problems of composition refuses a fixed rule of composition. It is more a mode of approaching the unspecificity of problems; a strategy for decisions at the heart of composition without a scheme for decisions or a fixed syntax.

For example, the heroic is often equated with scale. Scale is quite important because it provides a means to determine the relationship between the work and the body of the viewer, and by implication, the number of people that can share in the viewing of a work. The bigger the work, the more people will be able to see it at once. However, as important as scale may be, scale alone does not determine the meaning of a work, nor its heroic quality. When it comes to

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207 The material substance of clay, which I frequently use in my practice and have done so in the developing of the present research project, provides something of a perfect metaphor for this plastic understanding of sculpture. A material with no predefined hierarchy or structure that can assume any form, whilst keeping the potential for new forms (for if unfired, clay can always be brought to a working stage with water). In other words, it is a good metaphor for my claim because it allows unequivocally, for the re-actualization of potential forms.

relations of size, it is proportion rather than scale that determines how the figure is read. For instance, in scaling up his small figures from the early 1990s, titled *United Enemies,* which are made with modelling material, fabric and other cheap materials, to massive bronze versions in 2011, some of them with almost 4 meters, Thomas Schütte gave a public dimension to the latter that the originals clearly lacked. However, these later works are certainly not more 'heroic'. In fact, we can even reason that despite their dimension, the smaller figures are not only more innovative, but indeed more heroic given the relation of visual proportions inherent[208] and how the different materials 'situate' the small figurines. Actually, something similar can be said about the bronze pieces, or more precisely about bronze itself: although we tend to associate it to sculptural representations of heroic or presumed heroic figures, bronze alone cannot signify ideas of heroism.

What I believe establishes a relationship between different process and materials with notions of heroism is more to do with how these are able to respond to specific demands. Thus, once again, more a questions of what materials do rather than what materials are. The same goes for pose, surface values, and other factors introduced by a combination between the human form and other assembled objects. To return to Latour, the strength of each element is not in the element itself, but in the relations it establishes within a system of inter-relations. Not in scale, or this or that material, this or that configuration, but in the inter-relation between all the different elements. What can perhaps be tentatively established is a general connection between the positivity of the hero and operations of addition as opposed to subtraction, and with plastic form defined in terms of volume, rather than by reduction or geometric synthesis, which has further implications for the way sculpture is viewed; the more a sculpture works through volumes, i.e. the less flat it is, the more the viewer is asked to move through the space around it as opposed to stand in front of it.

Now, the fact that aligning the hero with composition stops me from being more specific about forms, techniques or materials, suggests that these are important but not the main point in this context. Let us then recapitulate a few ideas in order to try to single out the central implications of using the 'hero' as

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208 The influence of proportion on the way a work is read, is particularly explicit in the photographs Schütte has made of *United Enemies,* where by changing the relations of scale with the use of the photographic frame he reveals the figures are actually more imposing than what they actually appear to be.

methodology. As suggested earlier on, figurative sculpture is in a sort of impasse. For it is often regarded as an outmoded project and therefore rejected, or read in terms of irony or even categorized as a subdivision of installation art. The field of sculpture itself is found in a phase as Potts has told us, that seems to be less about creating visions of a reconfigured world and more about reflecting on what sort of object a sculpture is and how viewers engage with it. A logic, that as demonstrated in Chapter One in connection to Minimalism, intertwines with the question of truth as well as with an association between the viewer's experience and the democratic subject: an idea that reemerged with Rancière's position and his defense of art as a way to create new modes for sense perception.

Yet truth, as I've also tried to show, is never at play in figurative sculpture, not in terms of something that is 'out there'. Instead, figurative sculpture affirms the connection that exists, as Rorty argues, between truth and construction[209]. And Latour, whose views are not far from a constructivist theory of truth, or in fact from a pragmatist attitude, who considers it to be necessary to break with an object/subject divide and root philosophy, social theory and critique in a practical approach to social problems, has asked us to think about composition within the logic of assemblage and as a system of multiple, and multidirectional, negotiations between heterogenous elements. This produces a theoretical framework that supports the exchange between composition seen in terms of a fixed system of hierarchy, for composition seen as a system of relations where affects can be reorganized. An exchange that furthermore makes it possible to extend the idea of a social actor to the world of objects and therefore to extent the *demos* of democracy to the non-human. This touches upon an important area in the art field for whilst the idea of composition has fallen into disuse, largely due to the influence of views that connect hierarchy in art to a structural refusal of the idea of democracy, Latour's ideas brings the focus back to objects and shortens the distance between the subject of composition and the democratic subject.

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209 On this matter, it is worth to include a short citation with reference to Rorty's take on the difference between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there: "To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with a common sense, that most things in space and in time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth. That sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.
Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind, because descriptions of the world are not. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only description of the world can be true of false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot. ". Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 5.

Before this and still in connection to the question of truth, I suggested that what figurative sculpture does best is to permit us to think about the human as an object, and that in so doing produces something I've called the becoming-object dimension of sculpture. This is the premise that has lead me to propose that by using a Latourian notion of composition it is possible to produce thoughts on subject formation around the invention of the sculptural body where different types of objects and materials can be included. As pointed out in the Greek case, in conclusion figurative sculpture opens into the invention and the inscription of the body in the concrete order of things, but instead of forms and rhythms of nature, we have now a diverse material landscape and temporalities to consider and work with. And while this is already at play when considering the 'figure', the 'hero' as Lacan teaches us, connects with the tragic dimension of life. In this sense the latter asks for composition and what, as a result, gets to be rehearsed therein to be channeled towards creating versions of the rearticulated subject around interrogations concerning what constitutes a meaningful gesture and crucially what can exceed the possibilities of the everyday.

So to summarize, Latour's objected-orientated thought and specifically his notion of composition offers theoretical support to a heterogenous materiality in sculpture. More importantly, it allows for this materiality to be aligned not with a will to dissect what sort of object a sculptural work is or can be, but rather with a preoccupation with the interactions between the different elements of (a) sculptural composition and how to render them effective, as a whole, within the context they are found in. Latour, in brief, allows us to replace a pattern of thought based on the idea of formal coherence, for another that searches for a functional coherence.

In this scheme of things it is possible to conceive of the body in sculpture in terms that combine the human form with different types of objects and procedures. Now, although being able to work with a broad material landscape represents an advantage for any sculptor, I've suggested that the use of the figure, obviously central to any project of figuration, guarantees that within an assemblage of different elements the articulation of meaning is done around the 'idea' of the human. It is also my opinion, that the origination of objects is more significant than working with found sources because it allows for deeper levels of artistic intervention and reduces predetermination; in short, because the new

appears more easily through *making* than it does through *finding* – or more exactly, through *making* as a form of *thinking* as oppose to simple execution.

Additionally, Latour associates the theme of composition with the necessity of building a common world, thereby opening a theoretical precedent that enables us to assume the position of the subject of composition, without undermining the democratic nature of the task. And, as mentioned, what thinking through the hero asks this subject to do, is to put what is internally rehearsed in sculpture in a dialogue with problems exterior to sculpture. Furthermore considering that figurative sculpture operates as a mode of thinking about the human being as an object, this also implies an attempt to articulate the ethical-political subject, which is a condition proper to the hero but not to the 'figure', through the exploration of different materials, procedures and significantly sculptural gestures. These being what, in a given situation, may voice common concerns and potentially register as forms of collective meaning. This is the central implication of using the hero as way to work out problems and decisions at the heart of composition.

Two more inferences can be made here; the first, that composition demands for an on-going revision of its conditions - which for that reason cannot support a practice based on the signature of conventions or style. This brings back the idea of relating dialectics of the figure as one that correlates with affirmation but also with substitution, that is with a positive redescription in a series of substitutions. The second inference is that within the framework of Latour's idea of composition and my own theory of the hero operating as an artistic conceit, the subject of composition at play is not the personal, biographical artist, but instead a subject formed around *necessity* and the principle of answerability.

It is also important to note that Latour changes the shape of the problem in regards to part/whole relations. Once we consider that what matters is the interaction between different elements and what objects do, not what objects are, it no longer makes sense to work around a preoccupation with the *truth* of self-identical objects and the specificity of different elements of composition. Similarly, a critique of figuration based on a reality/appearance distinction no longer holds after Latour's notion of composition; a notion concerned not with debunking and exposing a reality behind the veil of appearances, but with

constructing, bringing together, assembling, reassembling, and more importantly, with bringing immanence and truth together[210].

Thus building on Latour's understanding of composition and on the idea that the hero ties in with invention and questions of meaning, what I have tried to show is that as a subject of representation the latter can orientate problems of composition and in particular the work of figuration in a different direction from that of individual representation and into forms of rehearsing and figuring collective meaning. In general terms, this replaces the idea of art as a machine of sense experience for that one that focuses on composition as a mode of reconfiguring the sensible material upon which ideas about the subject can be rehearsed and the meaning of different *objects* brought to question and be changed in its function.

As a final point, it is relevant to say that the coherence of (a) composition, as defined in terms of function rather than in terms of form, depends on whether or not a whole can be produced without becoming a totalizing whole. In turn suggesting that the success of a given composition depends on process and associations being intelligible to those who encounter it, viz., it relies on the possibility of composition to be understood according to the logic of its construction. Finally, we can outline how the hero helps to reimagine the possibilities for the post-mannequin condition of figurative sculpture as thus. It introduces intensity and the principle of answerability to composition and gives priority to the new, to difference and non-neutrality. Therefore it refuses a figuration which is mass-produced and neutral, in favour of the probing of new gestures of meaning and new associations of materials, techniques or objects, outside the (domestic) sphere of consumerism and the logic of capital. It designates an approach to figuration, that by definition, refuses positing a subject associated with the world of commodities[211].

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210 The theme of immanence appears throughout the essay "An attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto". Here's an example that I think clarifies Latour's idea about the relationship between composition and immanence: "We compositionists want immanence *and* truth together. Or, to use my language: we want *matters of concern*, not only *matters of fact*" in Bruno Latour, "An attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto", *New Literary History,* 478

211 Whilst a connection can be established between the fixed nature of objective representation and capitalism, between correspondence and repetition and hierarchized modes of production, the idea of construction and difference open alternative spaces of thought, that explicitly in the case of *difference*, resist many of enticements of contemporary forms of capitalism, notably, the logic of branding

Final notes: on the figures of Mark Manders

I would now like to conclude this chapter with a discussion of the work of Mark Manders, which contains aspects that illustrate some of the ideas discussed above. His multilayered compositions provide a glimpse into how post-mannequin alternatives might look and can be seen as forerunners to a kind of heroism in contemporary figurative sculpture.

To begin with, and after what was said, reflecting on composition as a way to reorganize affects within a material landscape cannot be clear-cut and distinquished from existing objects. In fact, in the context of contemporary art it does not seem possible, or desirable to ignore the logic of the ready-made, but there is also no reason why existing sources should be limiting in terms of what is available to work with. So the task of composition today seems to pass through combining what already exists with the creation of something new. Furthermore, whilst the notion of fragment is part of contemporary vocabulary and has strong potential for composition, it seems equally important to address the question of the whole and object continuity. That is to say, not only to re-compose, re-combine, re-distribute or re-assemble, but also to work directly with the material causes of objects, or in sum,   to originate objects.

Hence, we can say the problem of composition is one of combining a mode of *finding* and a mode of *making*. And in the sense that *making* allows for a higher level of invention and commitment, as I have suggested before, we can also affirm that *making* ought to take precedent over finding. This is, of course, not to be taken as rule but instead as a useful general principle.

Mark Manders intertwines these two modes of composition with the logic of what we've come to call *composition-without-essence*. A connection that one might gather by looking at how he establishes associations that change the original function, and we can add the original meaning of objects. He changed, for example, the meaning of pens, glue tubes, rulers, erasers, and so on, when he first used these items to define a floorplan in *Inhabited for a Survey (First Floor Plan from Self-Portrait as a Building)* from 1986, as well in later works such as *Unfired Clay Figure,* from 2005-2006 (fig. 14). Artworks, put another way, where it's not what objects are but what objects do in association to other objects that

establishes value and that seems to count the most. In fact his is a practice that continuously experiments with how meaning is produced by juxtaposing objects.

Mark Manders's figures, more specifically, rely more on modes of *making* than on modes of *finding.* There are also a few sculptures of animals but let us focus on the human figure, which I think is the central element to his work. Apart from the aspects of his figures, one of the most visible elements in Manders's figuration is process. Normally modelled in Clay, then cast in bronze, aluminium or resin and painted to look like clay again, Manders' figures often appear unfinished or in the process of *coming-into-existence* or *out-of-existence*. This idea is even more emphasized when he shows figures together with thin plastic sheets, which are similar to those used to prevent clay from drying during the process of modelling. But what is most relevant here is how Manders incorporates different materials and in fact, different objects into those figures: these being mostly pieces of wood, or parts of furniture that are used, not so much for what they are but for what they do, which in most cases is to offer some sort of physical support to the figurative element.

Additionally, by exposing the way that different elements can support the figure - whether or not this would actually be necessary, since the final material looks like clay, but is not clay, which means it can support itself - Manders is able to balance the importance of structure and of the figurative element by making the first part of the latter, for he recurrently opens the inside of figures to externalize and make visible the structural elements. This can be seen in works such as *Unfired Clay Figure* (Fig.13), where the figure is literarily divided by its structure. In fact, like most of Manders' figurative work, *Unfired Clay Figure* presents the human form around a *core* but refuses the idea of *essence,* which is undermined by the affirmation of the process of construction. Significantly, the *core*, or more exactly the 'structure' of the figure, does not register predetermination, but rather another modified and modifiable element of composition. These ideas are also visible in works such as *Composition with Blue* from 2013 (fig. 15) where the artist presents a game of interchange between interior and exterior, and where the figurative element is dissected by, and rests in-between its own support. In sum, Manders' figuration appears indissociable from the material conditions of process and construction.

14. Mark Manders, *Unfired Clay Figure* (2005-2006)
Iron chairs, painted epoxy, wood, and various materials
88 3/5 x 59 x 118 inches

In addition, Manders denies us the familiarity of a known tradition of figuration. His figures could either be male or female and as Penelope Curtis has described them, at once Greek, African, or Etruscan[212]. Manders literally re-invents the human body, appearing as a hybrid, impossible body, that is just enough 'like us' to allow viewers to think about themselves, but crucially, where there is no direct relation to anatomy. Mimesis is clearly absent from Manders' project in terms of resemblance but also in the sense that the body is composed with different, heterogenous elements that form the body as a conceptual body. As Manders himself has suggested in speaking about his own work: "After all,

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212 Penelope Curtis, "Mark Manders and the (after) life of sculpture" in Mark Manders, *Short Sad Thoughts*, exh. cat. Gateshead: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2006,10

what am I? A human being who unfolds into a horrifying amount of language and material by means of a very precise conceptual constructions"[213].

Another interesting aspect in Manders' work is the way it achieves what we could describe as an 'almost-complete-figure', or alternatively, quasi-autonomous figures. Figures that have a 'completeness' that can only be achieved with the presence of different elements – that become part of the figure - and where the human form remains recognizable as such. Put another way, it is a form of figuration defined in terms of the association, or assemblage, between different procedures and elements, where any initial function and meaning that these may have had is transformed in function of their physical use for composing the figure. It is also a figuration where it exists invention and commitment to the human form as it is materialized internally in artworks, as oppose to being simply suggested by the use of objects with anthropomorphic qualities. Furthermore, although Manders plays with the idea of the figure coming in and *out-of-existence*, one can sense that this is not the sort of figuration that can be decomposed at any time.

In comparison to Rachel Harrison's work, that present objects as if with a social life of their own, or Isa Genken, who sharply exposes the contradictions of a world where material abundance coexist with the threat of collapse without defining an alternative to it, Manders invents the body and recruits materials and objects for composing the figure; elements that are physically and conceptually transformed through a functional association with the human form.

213 Mark Manders, [artist's webpage], < http://markmanders.org/works-b/drawing-with-shoe-movement-two-consecutive-floor-plans-from-self-portrait-as-a-building-may-21-2002/?wire=f091f1811048fb60b45daea>
[Accessed September 26th 2015]

15. Mark Manders, *Composition with Blue* (2013)
Wood, painted wood, painted epoxy
9 x 13 x 12/5 inches

So how, in the end, does the work of Mark Manders show us an alternative to the logic of the mannequin? The first distinction is that he upholds the work of figuration in terms of construction. He affirms it as process. Furthermore, he conciliates the origination of new forms with the language of the ready-made, which is equivalent to the distinction I made earlier between the mode of *making* and the mode of *finding*, but with the proviso that *making* and the human figure take precedent over the second. Indeed it does not seem possible to conceive an alternative to the logic of consumerism without an address of making. Manders' current practice offers us a new, or at least a distinct, vocabulary for the relation between the human and the non-human – an artistic project that demonstrates how once seen in terms of *composition-without-essence*, figuration might work as a medium of negotiation for what constitutes matters-of-

concern and matters-of-non-concern. This, by depicting the human figure and revealing the process of its construction while involving a range of different procedures and objects; that hence show it is possible to attribute meaning to different elements according to their function within the composed figure, or in other words, that is possible to change and subordinate the meaning of objects to the human figure.

In addition to this, we are never very far from the idea of death with Mark Manders' work, be it because his figures that as mentioned, are often presented as if in the process of *coming-into-existence* or *out-of-existence*, thus perhaps reminiscent of mutilated bodies, or because he joins objects, the human and animal form, in something of a fictional archaeology, where again, the idea of death can easily be recognized.

That being said, concerning the notions of heroism I outlined earlier, gesture is absent from his figures who seem incapable of doing anything. It is therefore complicated to associate Mander's practice with the idea of heroism in a direct way. And yet, the association is not completely out of sense. One could say his project sketches a different type of heroism in sculpture as one that is not concerned with describing what heroism is, but with positing the human figure around the very idea of its construction. A proposal that invents the body and locates in the figure the main source of meaning of different elements. Meanwhile refusing, exactly because of process and construction, a direct identification with the mannequin and crucially, out-of-the-shelf subjectivities. With this in mind, in the next chapter I return to the question of politics and ask how the hero and sculpture may challenge the way we understand the formation of the ethical-political subject.

FOURTH CHAPTER: The subject of figurative sculpture

Introduction

I will now return to Simon Critchley and more specifically to his take on contemporary forms of political resistance and ethical subjectivity. In fact this last chapter relies heavily on Critchley, following on from the fact that with his theories on, he allows me to summarize what was previously discussed in connection to a present day scenario. While at the same time, he opens the discussion in a different direction - that being, the connection between the concept of hero and figurative sculpture in relation to the way Jacques Derrida has asked us to think about democracy, as it appears in *The Politics of Friendship*. Here Derrida considers democracy as something that always remains to come and that belongs to the space and time of a promise. Too general to be discussed at once, this will be unfolded firstly through Critchley's answer to Derrida's last chapter titled "For the First Time in the History of Humanity", where the author simultaneously concludes and reopens the theme of friendships and politics, and secondly, through Critchley's updates on Derrida's ideas in terms of anti-heroism and humour in the book *Infinitely Demanding. Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. In contrast to the position of the latter, I will reason that the subject of the hero opens into an experience of *decidability* and *presentability* and that these allow us to connect figurative sculpture to an idea of ethical commitment.

The space of the promise and the public utility of Deconstruction

True democracy, Derrida suggest, would have to include the search for the common together with a demand of the fellow citizen, that he calls (a) friend, beyond affiliation or reciprocity. It would require this friend not to be reduced to one's own idea of the friend, and furthermore, that friendship itself would be open to the point of accepting the friend as the enemy he might become[214] - an

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214 Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*. London, Verso, 2005, 81-82

asymmetric and unconditional friendship orientated to the demand of 'the other' qua other, that refuses normativity and to frame 'who' the friend is.

This is underlined in a literary dialogue Derrida offered first with Maurice Blanchot, suggesting that pure friendship refuses the knowledge of 'who' the friend is and allows one to speak to the friend but not about a friend; and with Friedrich Nietzsche, offering the theory that such friendship would have to be forgotten[215]. Derrida, in short, wants to deconstruct the association between friendship and affiliation at the heart of an understanding of politics based on the formation of circles of allies that he thinks betrays the principles of democracy. In other words, Derrida asks us to think about friendship without ties. A form of equality without fraternity based not on similarity or on what the friendship means to the individual, but on the singularity of the other - on what the other is that will always remain unknown to me - in a way that refuses to bring down the friend to a usable, instrumentalizable idea. A friend who again, is someone " to whom one speaks (if only to tell him or her that there is no friends), but of whom one does not speak about"[216].

And yet, by asking us to consider friendship on the lines of a boundless bond, Derrida also proposes that we part with the dogma of belonging in order to bring friendship closer to a claim to universality that he identifies with democracy as a political system that is supposedly for all. A proposal, that in involving the complexities of a mutual demand for singularity and universality, or a break with the singularity/universality divide, implies that both democracy and its subject remain as pure, unresting thought, for they are coherent only insofar as they stay *un-presentable*. In Derrida's own words:

> For democracy remains to come; in its essence in so
> far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely
> perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but,
> belonging to the time of the promise, it will always
> remain in each of its future times, to come: even when

215 The exchange between Blanchot and Nietzsche is long but Derrida articulates this in a few pages. See: Ibid., 294-295
216 Ibid., 294

there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present,

it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept[217]

So what I propose to do is follow Derrida but attempt to go beyond the idea that it is possible to consider a democracy of the promise, and particularly the notion of a subject-to-come, only insofar as they remain *unthinkable* and *un-presentable*. In other words if, as Derrida thinks, the promise of democracy requires us to include the demand of a *subject-to-come*, how can we actually think and include those we might one day call friends beyond the limitations of what Derrida only sees in a space of indeterminacy? What if, instead of the thinking in terms of the friend, we consider the hero? And what are the implications of figurative sculpture for this scenario?

Let us start by considering at length Simon Critchley's reading of Derrida together with his attempt to displace a heroic paradigm. This will allow us to return to some of the claims made earlier on in regards to using the figure of the hero as a conceit of figuration and to question the possibilities of determining the (sculptural) hero for a non-foundational relation between, what in a free use of the terms, we might call the aesthetical and the political.

In the chapter titled "Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?"[218] Critchley takes an indirect route to the problem of the un-presentable political subject found in Derrida's theory via Rorty. He reminds us that Deconstruction and Pragmatism overlap insofar as the latter attempts to deconstruct any form of intellectual and political foundation, displace the belief in truth as a form of correspondence between mental representation and external reality and furthermore posit a conception of meaning as a function of context. But he also argues that Deconstruction is not pragmatist all the way through and that the difference between the two theories carries ethical and political implications; that the first retains something that cannot be deconstructed or pragmatized, and contrary to Rorty's claim, that Derrida's work, in particular, has a direct public utility[219].

217 Ibid., 306

218 "Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?" is an essay published in both Simon Critchley, *Ethics. Politics-Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought,* London, Verso, 2009, 83-105; and Chantal Mouffe, eds., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, London, Routledge, 2009, 19-40

219 At the same time that Rorty expresses his admiration for the work of Derrida on several occasion, he says: "Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to

He starts by noting how Rorty divides Derrida's work in terms of two distinct phases. An earlier phase is defined by works such as *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*, where, in the opinion of the latter, Derrida focus on trying to overturn metaphysics. The later phase is exemplified by works such as *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond,* and *Glas,* that Rorty considers more relevant, being as he sees it, involved in a dialogue with preceeding philosophers. With the latter, the task of thinking about dialogue itself, which assumes a form of world disclosure that blurs philosophy and literature and is able to challenge, re-describe and replace conventional philosophical vocabularies. This is what Rorty sees as *ironic theorizing*, that is, the building of non-argumentative and disposable philosophical language that returns philosophy to the status of writing[220]. Critchley notes on the matter:

> For Rorty, Derrida, 'has done for the history of philosophy what Proust did for his life story': he has achieved autonomy though art. The consequence of this development thesis [i.e. the description of Derrida's work in two phases] is that Derrida's work has no ethical, political or public significance insofar as it has given up on the attempt to reconcile theoretically the public and the private. It is this claim, that I [Critchley] want to challenge. [221]

Which he does by arguing that Derrida's work has a public utility constituted around a profound preoccupation with justice for the Other, that being, the unknowable other who for that reason posits a demand for justice that can never be completely met. In fact, Critchley identifies justice as the condition of Deconstructivism that can never be pragmatized. This in turn means that, if we accept that justice must be done, then justice must allow an experience of *undecidibility* and stay on the level of infinity for it is only then that the demand of the other, which remains infinite, can be answered to. Put another way, it is through the experience of this infinite ethical demand that we can say that

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form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics" in Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 83
220 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 122-137.
221 In Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics –Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas & contemporary French thought,* 95

justice is being done towards the other, *qua* other and not towards the other as an object of cognition. In this scenario, true justice can never become a regulated decision-making practice, institutionalized or be bound to affiliation or territory. As Critchley puts it:

> The undeconstructible condition of possibility for deconstruction is a commitment to justice, defined in terms of an ethical relation to the other, a response to suffering that provokes an infinite responsibility and the attempt to minimize cruelty. Such an ethical conception of justice can never be fully instantiated in the public realm, nor can it be divorced from the latter; rather, justice regulates public space, making politics critical Utopian and radically democratic[222].

The idea that justice is an imperative that cannot be deconstructed or pragmatized, that it ought to regulate public space but never be regulated by it, suggests a necessary disembodiment and deterritorialization of justice itself: "A deconstructive approach to politics (…) leads to what one might call the dis-embodiment of justice"[223]. Hence, it is the performance of a disembodied sense of justice, that Critchley recognizes in the work of Deconstruction that proves the public utility of the latter and more exactly of Derrida's work. Which he finally asserts in connection to Rorty's criteria of what is the public obligation when acting within liberal democracies, i.e. to reduce suffering[224]. So to summarize, Critchley proposes that deconstruction theory has a public utility that corresponds to a disembodied and continuous performance of justice, realized beyond the normalized space of the law and in a form that allows for an address of the singularity of the other to be formed, precisely, after *ironic theorizing*. Of course we could say that this is not so far from Rorty's claim that the priority of

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222 In Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics–Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas & contemporary French thought*, 102
223 Ibid., 101
224 The claim that the task of liberal democracies is to reduce suffering comes in line with Rorty's definition of the liberal ironist: "someone for whom cruelty is the worst we do". Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 85

philosophy ought to be re-description rather than inference, and what is more that democracies need literature more so than philosophy[225] .

But there is indeed an important difference. Rorty reasons that a direct conciliation between the private and public spheres is unproductive. In his view the wellbeing of a given democracy is related to the possibility of a separation between these two spheres, or more precisely, on the attempt to conciliate the two without cancelling out one or the other. Put another way, Rorty argues that it is politically necessary to develop a socio-cultural context that creates the conditions for irony, that is, the conditions for self-improvement and for a continuous process of doubting and rewriting one's own vocabulary; and furthermore, that it is pivotal for the structures that support these conditions to accept being changed by ironic procedures, but crucially, without becoming ironic themselves. As he suggests along the following lines, the perspective of extending irony to the public sphere would seem to open into a pernicious scenario where one could no longer expect to trust the very idea of democracy: "I [Rorty] cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter"[226]. It is perhaps worth remembering that Rorty is better defined not as an ironist but as a pragmatist who is interested in the use-value of irony, as described above, and in the work of thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida, who in his opinion have used irony as a process of circumventing and redefining the philosophical vocabulary.

This is where Critchley has a point that I wish to relate to. In the framework of Rorty, practices of self-improvement and the development of empathy may or may not lead to a form of justice. He hopes it can, he hopes someone who is aware of his or her own contingency will be a more just individual, but then again fails to predict a way to move from a community of readers who improve

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225 Rorty argues about the importance of literature over philosophy throughout his work. However, the argument is perhaps more explicit in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity,* where he directly aligns literature and the development of new vocabularies, with the emergency of social hope and solidarity. Here's an example: The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me ludicrous. What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes. The vocabularies are, typically, parasitic on the hopes - in the sense that the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about future outcomes with compensate for present sacrifices.
Modern, literate, secular societies depend on the existence of reasonable concrete, optimistic, and plausible *political* scenarios as oppose to scenarios about redemption beyond the grave. To retain social hope, members of such a society need to be able to see no insuperable obstacles to this story's coming true. Is social hope has become harder lately, this is not because the clerks have been committing treason but because, since the end of World War II, the course of events has made it harder to tell a conniving story of this sort." in ibid*., 86*
226 Ibid., 87

their vocabulary by playing figures against figure, or more exactly through the work of literary criticism, towards something we might call a politically organized community. Adding to that, there is the question of territory that repeatedly, and problematically, comes to the fore in Rorty's often too optimistic and uncritical views on western, predominantly American, liberal democracies. Views too often sound condescending towards the political structures that don't exactly comply with what he considers to be the liberal obligation to attempt reducing suffering; this being a crevice that makes clear the need to bring to question, if not to ridicule, the legitimacy of the political institutions that supposedly represent *everybody*. Hence a necessity that moves into the sort of potentially positive internalization of political irony that Critchley argues can be found in the work of Derrida. In contrast to Rorty, Critchley believes that Derrida is "still seeking to fulfil the classical philosophical project of reconciling the public and the private"[227].

To summarize, Critchley shows that Deconstruction has a public utility, which he describes in terms of a performance of a disembodied and deterritorialized justice. This follows from a demand of the other, at once singular and universal, that can never be exhausted and for that reason must accept an experience of *undecidability.* A possibility that Derrida anticipates by rethinking the relationship between politics and friendship in terms of a radically opened, hence at heart a public space found in constant renovation. The space of a contingent, transitional and forever improvable condition where, as Derrida reasons, what is relevant is "no longer a matter of founding, but to open out to the future, or rather, to the 'come', of a certain democracy"[228]. It can be concluded that the importance of an experience of *undecidability* for the question of justice, its disembodiment and deterritorialization, is related to the ideas behind the claim that democracy and the democratic subject is unpresentable concepts, that they belong to the space of the promise, that they remain to come.

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227 In Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics–Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas & contemporary French thought*, 102
228 Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 306

The problem of decision in Derrida's idea of promise

In "The Other's Demand in Me: What Are the Politics of Friendship?"[229] Critchley addresses the political abstraction left by Derrida's proposal (that of a promise that stays unthinkable and un-presentable) and asks if it is possible to retrieve from the politics of friendship an understanding of political decision, that is, if it is possible to deduce politics from the ethics of friendship.

Critchley starts with a familiar question that Derrida makes to Blanchot: "What is to be done?"[230]. A question that is political in content and form and the utterance of which seems to refuse an idea of political foundations - for as long as the question is asked, one assumes there is no normative answer and that we are not yet sure what is best or the more important way to progress but that, however, there is a will to do, or at least the awareness that something has to be done. The question seems to posit the openness of democracy as I have outlined and at the same time the necessity to move from the undecidability found therein towards "a responsible decision [that] must be taken – here and now, again and again – without any transcendental guarantees, without any ontological foundations (…)"[231].

Critchley returns the problem back to Derrida and asks if there is a non-normative passage between the space of friendship and political decision: "Might there not be a hiatus between friendship and politics, that far from inducing paralysis or resignation, perhaps opens onto an experience of political decision?"[232] The following two slightly longer quotations show how he prepares

229 Simon Critchley, "The Other's Demand in Me: What Are the Politics of Friendship?" in Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas & Contemporary French thought*, 254-286

230 Famously attributed to Lenin after his political pamphlet, "What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Time", published in 1901. The question, which became something of a recognizable sign of left-wing thinking and art, belongs in fact, in terms of its printed original, to Nikolay Chernyshevsky and his novel with the same name. A novel published in 1863, where the author promotes ideals of socialism through a plot, which is typical of Russian narrative literare, involving complicated family relations and in this case, the theme of emancipation from family ties combined with a praise of a cooperative-based forms of subsistence. It is relevant to note that Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, referenced in chapter two, is well known for mocking the utilitarianism found in Chernyshevsky's novel. In Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*, it appears in the following context: "The question is not only the one which brings on semantic vertigo, but the one which asks: 'what is to be done?': what is the be done today, politically, with which and its necessity? What is to be done with the 'what is to be done?'? And what other politics –which would nevertheless still be a politics, supposing the world could still resist this very vertigo –can this other communality of the 'common' dictate to us?" In Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 297

231 In Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics –Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas & contemporary French thought*, 275

232 Ibid., 272

and answers the question - that he suggests is already answered in Derrida's *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas:*

> (…) ethics is left defined as the infinite responsibility of unconditional hospitality. Whilst on the other hand, the political can be defined as the taking of a decision without any determinate transcendental guarantees. Thus, the hiatus in Levinas [the gap between the understanding of ethics as hospitality and the politics of hospitality in Levinas' work] allows Derrida both to affirm the primacy of an ethics of hospitality, whilst leaving open the sphere of the political as a realm of risk and danger. Such danger calls for decisions or what Derrida, citing Levinas, calls 'political invention', an invention taken in the name of the other without this being reducible to some sort of moral calculus[233]

And then:

> Derrida emphasizes how the very indeterminacy of the passage from ethics to politics entails that the taking of a political decision must be a response to the utter singularity of a particular and inexhaustible context. The infinite ethical demand of deconstruction arises as a response to a singular context and calls forth the invention of a political decision. Politics itself can here be thought of as the art of response to the singular demand of the other, a demand that arises in a particular context – although the infinite demand cannot simply be reduced to its context –and calls for political invention, for creation[234].

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233 Ibid., 275
234 Ibid., 276

Whilst the two commentaries establish how the possibility of deducing politics from ethics lies within the singularity of a decision, they do not move in the direction of rendering the political subject thinkable, which is necessary in order to understand the relationship between the democratic process as a philosophical theme, the criticism and presentability of it. In connection to this Critchley agrees with Derrida and considers that the 'who' of democracy must remain undefined, while also proposing a slightly different theory through a model of subject formation - a model that as it will soon become clear, focuses on the question of decision, on the reason why a subject is affected by the demand of the other, or what he calls, *the approval of the demand*[235] - more importantly, on knowing whether or not political invention can be extended to the question of the subject him or herself. Below I will discuss the way in which Critchley attempts to extend and translate Derrida's thought into the reality of the political process, through the articulation of an ethico-political subject. This will allow me to introduce a few ideas that will later be used as reference points, or more exactly as points of contrast, for a speculation on the wider implications of figurative sculpture.

In *Infinitely demanding; Ethics of commitment, Politics of Resistance*, Critchley argues that a contemporary ethical subject must be constituted against a tragic heroic paradigm and against the orthodoxy of autonomy in western thought. A problem that he connects to contemporary tactics of resistance and in particular, with a form of neo-anarchism "concerned with the mobilization of politics"[236], that he regards in terms of a common front united under a shared feeling of wrongdoing that subjugates freedom and self-autarchy (his words) to responsibility; a form of anarchism that furthermore refuses violence while maintaining humour rather than tragedy, as the associated work of sublimation. Put another way, he asks how an ethical subject can be formed, "the way in which a self binds itself to some conception of the good and shapes its subjectivity to that good,"[237] in a time of deep political disappointment. A disappointment caused, as he diagnoses rightly in my opinion, by contemporary liberal democracies being incapable of sufficiently motivating their citizens.

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235 See Simon Critchley, *Infinite Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso, 2012,14-37
236 Ibid.,147
237 Ibid.,10

So he proposes a model, chiefly constructed around Badiou's logic of the event, or more precisely around the idea of a fidelity to an event[238], where he establishes the centrality of a commitment to the singularity of a situation and the premise that an ethical demand, i.e. the demand of the other, is internal to subjectivity but can not be completely fulfilled. Additionally, that the ethical subject is divided between an infinite ethical demand and the impossibility to meet that demand –corresponding to something we might call a *dividual*[239].

We are also told that the load brought upon consciousness by an infinite demand asks for the work of sublimation, which, against the tragic-heroic-autonomy paradigm (that he recognizes for instance in the work of Heidegger and Lacan), Critchley proposes should be considered in terms of humour and comedy - "the practice of a minimal sublimation that both maintains and alleviates the division of the ethical subject"[240], which is not structured around practices of self-mastery, but rather constituted around an experience of conscience responsibility: " an inauthentic humours self that can never attain the autarchy of self-mastery"[241].

Arguing that the development of capitalism has not lead to the simplification of class structures into the antagonistic poles of bourgeoisie and proletarian, as Marx thought it would[242], but rather to its complexification, Critchley furthermore maintains that we can no longer conceive of emancipatory politics and the condition for "a new militancy and a new optimism"[243] using simplified ideas such as that of the Proletarian; that instead, we need to consider the sense of dislocation introduced by global capitalism, and drawing from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the multitude as the contemporary form of radical political subjectivity[244]. Critchley also suggests that radical politics asks for a "meta-political ethical moment that provides the motivation force of propulsion into political action"[245] and that includes a situated, yet non-territorial claim to

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238 "The idea of the subject committing itself in fidelity to the universality of a demand that opens in a singular situation but which exceeds that situation." In ibid, 40
239 Critchley takes as principle that the subject " shapes itself in relation to a demand that it can never meet, which divides and sunders the subject." Ibid.
240 Ibid.,11
241 Ibid.
242 See, for instance ibid., 103-105
243 Ibid.,102
244 Writing on the influence of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Critchley says: " [the] multitude in the sense of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri is a new political name. This is clearly the implicit ambition of the powerful analysis of the emergent form of the network sovereignty given in the hugely influential *Empire* from 200, an ambition made explicit in the 2004 sequel, *Multitude*, which argues that the multitude is the new political subject and political alternative that grows within empire". In ibid.,104
245 Ibid., 13

universality. A claim that he associates with the idea of neo-anarchism and that he ties in with a disturbance of the political status quo: that being, a form of anarchism predicated not on individual freedom or an heroic self, but on responsibility, anonymity and non-violence, and that appears associated with spaces that create interstitial distance from the state[246]. These being, semi-autonomous spaces of resistance "within and against the state" where democracy and a demand for each other can be re-enacted and people can care for each other, and where there might be the possibility to connect to an idea of good. These are spaces that Critchley associates with everyday 'meta-political' settings, where alternative forms of communal life can be rehearsed and forms of political opposition organized around non-violent warfare tactics of resistance, typical joyful, humorous and even carnivalesque behaviour, as epitomised by some NGOs and by activism groups such as Clownarmy. Spaces and groups that, in Critchley's view, provide a glimpse into new forms of political subjectivity; a glimpse into what can be done, when nothing seems possible to be done and into forms to maintain and alleviate, but significantly not to formalize ways to answers to a demand for justice.

Summarily then, starting with the idea that we live in a time of deep political disappointment caused by contemporary western democracies being unable to sufficiently motivate their citizens because, devoid of a strong concept of good, Critchley argues that the main question for philosophy today is the question of ethics and politics, or precisely: how to connect to a concept of good and the discovery of what to do. Returning to Derrida's non-foundational politics for a moment and to the way in which he suggests that one thinks of democracy as an informal space of friendship and infinite critique, in effect contemporary forms of protest can be seen as the radicalization of critique with the stakes of an anonymous and humorous ethical subjectivity. A particular understanding of ethical-political subjectivity that completes Derrida's un-presentable democratic subject and the idea that a demand for justice can only be approached through the deconstruction of structures of power.

Now, the decision to run the text through this unusually long passage on Critchley was made on the basis of his reading of Derrida and Rorty, on his

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246 By using the term 'interstitial', Critchley means to describe a space that is both within, and distanced from, the state. Writing on the matter: "Politics, then, is praxis in a situation that articulates an interstitial distance from the state and allows for the emergency of new political subjects who exert a universal claim." Ibid., 92

negative take on the heroic paradigm and crucially because his writings are in the spirit of recent events and express a positive, and somehow dominant, view on contemporary tactics of resistance. In fact, written in 2007, before the Occupy movement, *Infinitely Demanding. Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* anticipated much of the practices put in place, for instance during Occupy Wall Street which, again, was characterized by non-violent and often joyful, non-hierarchical leadership approach to organized strategies of resistance.

With, through and contra Simon Critchley

Critchley's philosophical architecture is successful in terms of describing an ethical experience and the possibility to connect to a concept of good in the current politically challenging climate. However, the argument outlined above also risks providing a form of comfort ethics in that it focus more on the possibility of having an ethical experience and connecting with a concept of good than on finding ways to undo the wrong that causes disaffection. It is an argument that as mentioned, updates Derrida's association between justice and the impossibility to 'institutionalize' justice by formulating the question of decision in terms of a situated and singularly conceived decision, which is aligned with a chance of maintaining an ethical demand, that being one that does not try to map the possibility to introduce difference and somehow meet such demand.

In my opinion this is a problem that has to do with how notions of resistance, emancipation and the ethical subject are being thought of in terms of a position taken against an enemy - alternatively defined in relation to the state and the financial corporative world – and that while determining the ethical experience itself, seems to undermine the very possibility of a self-determined, self-empowered ethical subjectivity.

Put another way, Critchley proposes us to think about ethics along the necessity to debunk and react against, the oppressive forces of the state, multinational corporations and political misrepresentation. Yet this also means the ethical subject as such is presented in negative terms, in the sense that it remains

dependent on an opposing 'evil' force against which it can be defined as being ethical. This negativity can also be found at the heart of the logic of *critique* - a process of thought that deconstructs a given issue in order to reveal its flaws or understand its implications, but without ever arriving at the positivity of a process of construction, and what is more, that never fully departs from what it wishes to disturb or examine. The sense given by the expression "within and against the state"[247], that Critchley uses to described the 'interstitial' spaces where a moment of political disturbance is possible, conveys in fact the idea of dependence and opposition rather well. It also brings to mind, that in the framework we've been discussing, ethics has to do with problems of justice and appears associated with the logic of critique.

And as shown, humour is never too far removed from critique. Humour can battle almost anything and as a form of sublimation that maintains and alleviates the weight of an infinite demand, it could hardly be more important - it is as important as happiness is. But humour and laughter appear as a release of energy that is not easy to reconcile with the possibility to introduce difference. If only to use a caricature, one cannot laugh and speak clearly at the same time. But the problems with the marriage between ethics and humour, and we can add political irony, don't stop in formal difficulties, so to say. It is in fact, problematic to project an ethical subject as a comic self, for it risks undermining the very possibility of finding an ethical subjectivity.

Returning to Rorty's point concerning the danger of political irony, while it is easy to laugh at political decisions, it seems to me, that to conceive politics in terms of humour is to accept that politics can become trivial; that a scenario where we would welcome the idea of taking political decisions conceived as being laughable from the outset is not only an evasive scenario but one that carries an invitation to political subterfuge and lack of responsibility. In other words, it seems precarious to discuss serious issues through humour unless the aim is to make a joke or to use laughter as a political tool for criticism, which in turn means you actually want to be taken seriously. Humour, in short, is a promising proposition in terms of maintaining and alleviating an ethical demand as Critchley has shown us, but seems limited in terms of allowing for an ethical decision beyond the immediate moment of that decision.

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247 Ibid., 148

A similar problem appears with the anti-heroic. On the one hand, the anti-heroic is a paradigm capable of dissolving and ridiculing authoritative norms. A mode of thought, let us say, that introduces a conscience of the insufficiency of what is either imposed or achieved, and that in being associated with modesty, feeds the continuation of a given task. Yet on the other, it is difficult to conceive of the anti-heroic as an ethical model outside a retrospective direction of thought. One cannot claim that an action or invention is anti-heroic and ethical at the same time without undermining one of the two terms - for if an action is said to be ethical, than surely it will be closer to heroism than to anti-heroism, whereas by contrast, if an action is said to be anti-heroic it can only be ethical insofar as we accept that the anti-heroic and the heroic are interchangeable. That is, that the anti-heroic has something belonging to the heroic.

However, once again the anti-heroic as with the concept of humour, seem to pertain to ethics, firstly in terms of criticizing models that do not include the demand of the other, like an aristocratic model of heroism in its most individualistic version; and secondly, as an attitude of modesty that finds it insufficient, indeed laughable, to think that such demand can ever be met. But then there is a contradiction in saying that we can, or ought to, articulate an ethical subject in terms of a future anti-heroic subject, for it is in the attempt to be the best one can be, rather than the negative of this, that will allow for the subject to work upon the self ethically and thus potentially respond to the other's demand.

Let us move into a different direction. Protest, and in particular the Occupy movement, have marked an important and most of all, a positive moment of resistance against the influence of corporations on politics. Here is an example when a collective voice of discontent has been heard and the hope that something can perhaps be done, has sufficiently been expressed. Protest has, and one could say will, always allow for the promise of democracy to manifest itself. To a large extent, Cricthley's model has anticipated and does reflect the reality of contemporary tactics of resistance, staying true to a school of thought that says true democracy is that of a lively informal condition and infinite critique - never to be framed or fixed in some inert form. A school of thought that logically privileges the living fabric of a community as a changing, non-hierarchical and anonymous form, and that considers the space of democracy as one and the same as that of the promise, or as Judith Butler has put it in her

now famous speech delivered during Occupy Wall Street, as a space of "impossible demands"[248].

But the point where the problems with humour and the anti-heroic almost seem to disappear is the point at which other problems revealed themselves. A promise without a promise, "impossible demands", or in fact anonymity, produces an unrealized energy that lacks a capacity to, or more exactly that refuses to organize forms to overcome what stands in the way of emancipatory possibilities. And it does not seem possible to reconfigure the very mode of living that has brought us to a point of rupture using humour, anonymity and the everyday – modes that resist but do not revoke – because these are unable to guarantee, to put it in Lacanian terms, that a gesture made against the 'service of goods' will not pull us back to a life determined by, and reduced to, economic interests.

In fact there is a perverse side to the way protest itself ends up speaking the same language and identifying with what it wishes to attack. Consider the 99% percent slogan for the Occupy Movement, or the 'branding effect' of the Tunisian revolution modelled after Gene Sharp's highly influential book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, or even, if we push this a bit further, how anonymity, non-hierarchic, de-centred forms of organization, and an absence of clear demands, end up repeating the abstraction and fluidity of globalized financial markets. Is it not possible to say that singularly conceived decisions and the idea of infinite unclear demands, disorientate rather than orientate? And isn't the incapacity to make decisions with a sense of traction and the difficulty in constructing an idea of the future exactly one of the problems today? A kind of neo-liberal zombism that refuses to die but lingers on with no sense of direction or alternative. Is it not true that the new spirit of capitalism and the corporative world are feeding precisely on creativity and adaptation? On everyone being always under the pressure to adapt to the demands of the market and its variations, to constantly change - change jobs, change cities, change partners – and at the same to live in a constant limbo; on unexamined adaptability and the impossibility to commitment beyond the instant of a provisional moment?

248 A transcription of Judith Butler's speech at OWS, and a video, can be found at Verso Books web page. Judith Butler, "Speech at Occupy Wall Street", Verso Books [publisher webpage], < http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/765-if-hope-is-an-impossible-demand-then-we-demand-the-impossible-judith-butler-at-occupy-wall-street-video> [Accessed September 26th 2015]

Surely the reawakening of protest has oxygenated western democracies, but it has also shown how corrupt they have come to be. There is of course, a direct economic cause for the state of precariousness and disaffection, and in more recent years, to a politics of austerity. This is fed by the paradox of a belief system structured around acts of consumerism whose logic asks for an increasing economic growth that in turn, leads to the erosion of the conditions and value of labour. But what also seems to exist is a symbolic cause created by an absent ideological plane where a concept of good can be located beyond consumerism itself, and that despite allowing for everyone to connect to an idea of good, contemporary tactics of resistance are yet to offer a real alternative and unblock the invention of emancipatory political subjectivities beyond the subject of protest itself - a subject that is at once produced and weakened by consumerism[249].

Counting as one of the many thinkers who joined the protest in New York in 2011, Slavoj Žižek voiced an alternative opinion to Critchley's concerning the Occupy movement. Writing for the *Guardian* later in early 2012, he argues that what the protest movement has revealed is a necessity to consider a replacement for what is causing the problem and that:

> The emergence of an international protest movement without a coherent program is therefore not an accident: it reflects a deeper crisis, one without an obvious solution. The situation is like that of psychoanalysis, where the patient knows the answer (his symptoms are such answers) but

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249 In connection to this, the art world has largely joined the voices of protest, but it has also appropriated its forms and preoccupations. From Mark Wallinger's *State Britain,* from 2007; passing through Peter Weibel 2011/1012 curatorial project that investigates 'the global contemporary' and the idea of *"global activism as the first new art form of the 21st century"*; and projects such as The Bernadette Corporation that not only glamourize protest and political activism but also play a double game of critique and promotion of consumerism in works such as the video piece *Get Rid of Yourself*, from 2003. Whilst this is not so much at play in the first two examples, the last one gives witness to how the romance between protest and art, as well as other endeavours found in the so-called 'creative industries', can take a route run dangerously close to the commodification of both critique and protest itself, by bringing together advertising, politics, fashion, art exhibitions, publications and so on, all gathered under the allure of the 'young' and 'cool' spirit of protest. For Weibel's citation, see: Peter Weibel, global aCTIVISm: global citizen", [ZKM Blog], <http://blog.zkm.de/en/editorial/global-activism-global-citizen/> [Accessed September 26th 2015]

doesn't know to what they are answer, and the analyst has to formulate a question. [250]

Žižek detects the absence of a "coherent program" as a symptom that simultaneously offers a possible answer to its cause, that is, the idea that we need to formulate a question, and it could be added, to articulate a new subject. So my claim here is that, in the face of the crisis, it is important to ask not only what can be done, but also what kind of subjects we can all become, individually and collectively. For what the 'unrealized' subject of protest reflects, the subject of anonymity and "impossible demands", is a necessity to rethink the way we live today and, following Žižek's notably Lacanian intimation, a necessity to return to the question of desire, meaning, a necessity to examine, and find alternatives to the neoliberal lifestyle that feeds the paradoxical nature of the crisis and is also used as justification of several of the political decisions that have brought us all here[251]. This includes the importance of thinking about the day of tomorrow, about what stays along with what is to come, which in short translates as the importance of placing contemporary reality in relation to a time that is not its own, as a way of orientation for the task of re-imagining the subject beyond the now proven false promises of an economy-driven life.

However, before moving on I believe it necessary to provide a brief summary of what has been presented up until this point. Derrida explains that democracy requires a radical openness and never-ending critique, that it remains an unpresentable concept and that it cannot be defined without undermining the very openness that constitutes it. The same goes for the subject. Critchley in turn has reminded us that the question of justice is at the heart of Derrida's theory, and that because justice for the other can never be truly met, the theory

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250 Slavoj Žižek, "Occupy Wall Street: what is to be done next?", *The Guardian*, 2012, [newspaper], <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/apr/24/occupy-wall-street-what-is-to-be-done-next>[Accessed September 26th 2015]

251 In the wave of publications dedicated to the Occupy movement, the fall 2012 edition of *October* was dedicated to OWS. Here Mignon Nixon establishes a parallel between the events of 2011 and Yayoi Kusama's performance *Anatomic Explosion* staged on the sidewalk outside Wall Street during the year of 1968 in protest to the Vietnam war. In this performance the artist "directed four professional dancers, two women and two men, accompanied by a conga drummer, to strip and frolic with Rite of Spring-Like abandon in front of the Stock Exchange". Nixon concludes: "that the artist proposed a more speculative mode of political resistance to war, one that asked, in effect: what makes us make the state make us make war?" On a superficial level, what Nixon establishes here is a parallel with today's controversy surrounding the US use of drones, viz. the inhumanity of drones versus arguing for their utility on the war or terror and security and, therefore the effect on the economic. The point she finally makes is, to my mind, very similar to Zizêk's point: that there is a need to rethink desire, which in its relationship to consumerism is what endorses (or at least helps to justify) states around the world allowing for economic and social injustice notably associated with precarious working conditions. In Mignon Nixon, "Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street" in *October*, 142, Fall 2012, 3-25

asks for an experience of *un-decidability*. In this framework, irony appears as an important instrument of political critique and the problem of decision is thought in terms of provisional and situated decisions.

As I hope to have shown, these ideas present the dynamics at play in recent forms of protest, namely in the Occupy movement. But the origin of protest also reveals that there exists a necessity for reconfiguring the social/political reality beyond the promise of protest itself and that the moment of its occasion - a necessity to imagine what is to come, or, what action to take and what kind of subject to be beyond what is right here and right now. Openness and critique, the performance of justice and in the end the possibility of an ethical experience appear as necessary and yet insufficient conditions for figuring alternatives forms of living because schematically, their logic is that of deconstruction and critique. Thus, in the end, it is also a question of structures of thinking.

My contention is that asking 'what is a hero?' offers an equivalent to the problem that Žižek suggests we need to formulate. A proposal made under the principle that to gather under a shared feeling of wrongness is less motivating than, borrowing from Rorty once again, working towards "one's hopes for one's grandchildren"[252], for which it seems necessary to create versions of a reconfigured world and of what a meaningful life could be in individual as well as collective terms. On that note, and just before moving on, it is relevant to remember that even if the 'subject' presents him or herself as being one with the collective, ethical subjectivity connects to the experience of something that happens to the individual, i.e., something that 'I' and 'I' alone, can choose to commit to, and for which in the end, I have to allow to put 'my' body, 'my' life, at risk for. Concluding that it is difficult to separate the ethical subject from an embodied, necessarily individual subject completely.

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252 As Rorty explains, he uses the expression from Hans Blumberg to describe the central development of modern thought: "willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward was transferable from individual rewards to social one's, from one's hopes for paradise to one's hopes for one's grandchildren." In Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 85

**From the mode of the '*perhaps'* and '*maybe'* towards that of the '*as if'*

For the purpose of discussing the mode of hero as way to re-imagine the subject, let us move away from the preoccupation with the experiential side of an ethical experience and the question of justice, and focus instead on trying to locate the notion of a subject-to-come beyond the space of indeterminacy introduced by what Derrida and many Derrideans after him, have seen, in my opinion, only in the mode of *maybe* and of the *perhaps.* The key to this is to show how the figure of the hero opens into an experience of *decidability* that involves invention and that introduces singularity, but where the problem of 'decision' holds a dimension of time that extends further beyond the moment when the decision is made, and crucially, one that engages with the question: what kind of person one wants to be.

Briefly returning to the second chapter for a moment, as I outlined Lacan explains that to think through the concept of the hero is the equivalent of asking ourselves whether we have acted according to our desires, by which he means, in the direction of true desire, the desire for the other, the desire of being. A form of desire that in being opposed to by the *real* asks for a commitment that can only be met when separated from the living body. We've also considered Plato's theory of the hero and how this theory is structured around ideas of virtue and courage, defined by him as the "knowledge of what is and is not to be fear"[253] which in the framework of his proposal also means the knowledge of what is morally more important. In combining this idea with Lacan's approach, it becomes possible to think about the hero as a figure of someone who is capable of a meaningful gesture - made along the lines of what is morally, or better said ethically, more important - knowingly of the consequences. That is, in conscience that a commitment always comes with a price: a price that the latter describes as a second death, or symbolic death. So if Plato establishes a connection between heroism and the metaphysical world (even if as it was suggested, we can read Plato in a non-Platonic way) for Lacan, heroism is always inter-subjective while not quite belonging to life as we might know it either. Both positions are relevant to my argument, but it is the second that I am

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253 Plato in *Protagoras*, as cited in Angela Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero. Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*, 9

most interested in because of this inter-subjective aspect and the possibility to associate the notion of symbolic death to that of a symbolic body.

In this scenario, to think through the notion of the hero requires questions to be asked concerning what is most important and what counts as courage, that being the willingness, which is also a commitment, to pay the necessary price in order to access what one might consider the most important aspects of life. Thus we can say that thinking through the hero, i.e. what counts as heroism, provides a moment for an experience of *decidability* based on courage as the knowledge of the consequences of a commitment; which in turn suggests that the question of the hero works as way to channel, and therefore reconfigure, 'what is more important'. This implies that the hero, unlike the anti-hero, lends him or herself to a redefined sense of worth through courage, which in the present context also means a willingness to break unequivocally with the comforts and wonders of a consumer-orientated lifestyle and pay the price associated with such a decision. The very notion of the hero, in short, is associated with the sort of commitment that clarifies and sublimates 'what is more important'.

Furthermore as seen earlier, to think through the hero, means to use an intensified idiom of thought, and in that sense, to be able to invent, construct, or indeed compose a subject capable of introducing difference beyond the condition of the individual. Found between the individual and the collective, the hero appears as a conceit of figuration connected to the knowledge of new possibilities and hence as an opportunity to probe new forms of describing individuals and to organize collective meaning.

But the hero does more than prepare ground for the new. The hero's positivity is that of an inscription that seeks to locate the human in relation to what is meaningful beyond the community formed by those living in the present space-time continuum. It is a concept articulated with the contingency of a specific situation whilst connecting at the same time with what is past such contingency. We also need to remember that it appears associated with the construction of a narrative involving a speculation about a subject capable of changing the conditions of what is possible to everyone beyond the condition of the individual. The hero is therefore a figure, or a conceit of figuration, through which ideas about what constitutes a meaningful act can be rehearsed and renewed. This is

what I refer to with the 'as-if' in the title of this section: a mode that, unlike that of the 'perhaps' and the 'maybe', and unlike the anti-heroic, allows for a positive affirmation and opens into problems of *decibility* based on the interrelation between 'what to do' and 'who to be', where the first can still be conceived in terms of contingency and as ever-revisable decision, but not without changing the second; not without implications for being.

So it is a controversial and potentially dangerous concept that needs to be understood alongside a constant dialogue with reality, along negotiations, non-metaphysical negotiations, concerning what counts as heroism, and that yet represents a positive affirmation and the possibility to imagine a subject capable of answering to an ethical demand. This, with the proviso as Lacan has told us, that it exists separately from the living body and therefore beyond the time of an experience. It is on this basis that the hero comes into being as a symbolically realized concept that makes it possible to speak of *presentability*.

Before ending this point and moving on to sculpture, it is necessary to make two more observations. The first, that even if contemporary tactics of resistance are viewed as anti-heroic, this does not mean that these do not bring forth acts of great courage. In fact, one could say that the difference in choosing to describe such acts as anti-heroic results largely from the specificities of a moment in time when we have come to have reasons for questioning the heroic figures. And yet, as soon as one starts to build a narrative around the importance of a particular movement or event, one is already attempting to make sense of such occurances, wanting more than the experience itself, and which, to my mind means reflecting on what counts as heroism. The anonymous protester is a figure one might associate quite easily with that of a hero and in fact this has already taken place. *Time Magazine* for example, elected the 'Protester' as person of the year in 2012. Even Critchley's passionate, indeed romanticized position on movements of political resistance - starting from his early interested in the Punk movement to this recent interest in the Occupy movement - denotes a desire to heroicize the figure of the political dissident. Along what was drawn above, however, it is difficult to describe the figure of the protester as a hero because he or she is opposed to power and moves with the space of what is yet to come but leaves this space unarticulated.

Which brings me to the second observation. It is safe to align protest with the general disaffection experienced today in western democracies. But disaffection can also give rise to forms of extremism in face of which the anti-heroic model can expect to find tough competition coming from calls for more active, and sometimes violent, forms of participation in processes of political rupture. A problem that connects to the question of motivation but also the question of meaning, or rather with what is more meaningful, which the anti-heroic model of ethical subjectivity along the lines outlined above, does not engage. The anti-heroic is concerned with justice, not with the question of meaning. On this matter, Critchley makes an important distinction. He tells us the crisis in justice has a political root, whereas the question of meaning has a religious root [254]. And yet, it is difficult to completely separate justice from meaning. We can say, for instance, that questions of meaning are directly related to the political process, both on a level of the ideological wars that have become a reality again, and in the way feelings of self worth and therefore self-meaning, are culturally constructed around acts of consumerism that in turn endorse inequality particularly in working conditions and access to wealth. A simple association of ideas that goes to show that meaning carries a connection not only to politics but also to justice. There is, one might add, also a crisis of meaning in western democracies.

And it is in this scenario that in saying we need practices of redescription and self-improvement seems particularly relevant. For even if these do not guarantee a direct engagement with problems of justice, they present the means to rethink matters of meaning, and with reference to Rorty, bring to question the mutual impact between private obsessions and social hopes. Along these lines, it seems possible to say that the concept of the hero can be used as a way to rethink the political imaginary and how this imaginary appears under the principle that democracy is not only a space for justice, but also a space of meaning. On that note, and just before returning to sculpture and bring this thesis to an end, I want to anticipate a short conclusion in the form of a summary.

For the most part of this chapter, we have moved around a negative understanding of ethics. Negative because in the terms discussed along with

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254 See Simon Critchley, *Infinite Demanding; Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, 1-13

Critchley, ethics stands for an attempt to reduce forms of evil and correct problems of political misrepresentation. In those terms, ethics fundamentally corresponds to an ethical experience defined in terms of the possibility for the self to connect to an idea of good. Earlier on, however, Badiou allowed me to introduce the positivity of ethics, which in turn corresponds to a state of nonconformity to the world as it is, and more importantly, to a capacity for developing emancipatory practices that may lead on to something new. Badiou, in short, tell us that the moment when a subject is formed is always a positive moment, not a negative one.

I've also talked about Lacan, who similarly to Badiou, reasons that the ethical-subject cannot be conceived of by using everyday discourses because ethics asks from the subject a capacity to describe himself or herself without the principles at work in everyday life, those being: work, success, the accumulation of wealth and so forth. In other words, Lacan argues that ethics demands us to find something within ourselves around which an idea of authentic life can be constructed. The word 'something' here registers as desire, which Lacan asks us to consider in terms of a pure desire, this being, a desire realized through its own impossibility and for that reason, one that needs to be sublimated. He also tells us that ethics and the construction of an authentic self comes at a price, and that the willingness to pay this price, which in an extreme situation correlates with a capacity to put one's own body at risk, represents the conduct of an ethical being and its construction.

During the present chapter I focused more on the negative approach to ethics, for reasons that as I've explained before have to do with an attempt to establish a dialogue between my argument and recent events, However, what I have tried to do throughout this thesis was, on the whole, to show that the positivity inherent to the concept of hero, makes it particularly adequate for the task of reimagining the ethical and the political subject.

Along the way, it was demonstrated that the very notion of hero ties in with invention and the construction of narratives and that it presents itself as an articulation of the ethical-political subject based on questions of meaning, or rather, on the question of what is meaningful. My central claim was that it is useful to couple this articulation with sculptural figuration, which constitutes as it as were a technical support for an invented, impossible body, where ideas about

heroism can be rehearsed. A body whose relevancy can be expressed beyond the limits of the biological body, and crucially, beyond the dimension of the individual; an 'incarnation of the impossible' that can, if only tentatively, be seen as a physical counter part to the Lacanian 'petite object a' - the withdrawing, fleeting, unreachable object of 'desire', that sculpture, as a kind of transitional object, is capable of doubling and make attainable by means of externalization.

Indeed, if we consider Lacan's argument saying that an infinite ethical demand requires a commitment that cannot be completely realized through a living body, it is perhaps not completely out of sense, one might claim, to consider figurative sculpture as a medium through which an articulation of ethics and politics can be carried out. With a nod to *Antigone* and how death is the vehicle of Antigone's ethical being, it is important to bring to mind that the body in sculpture, a body without life, carries a relationship with the idea of death, or more exactly with the anticipation of death. This because it enables us to think of human beings as objects and therefore operates as a reminder of the condition of the body as being that of a future object.

And yet, the theme of death does not exhaust the body in sculpture. This body can work as a reminder of mortality for sure, but it also represents the possibility for composing and inscribing ideas in a material support and in that sense the opportunity to engender a body that represents life by means other than life.

This is related to composition, which for the most part I have discussed in Chapter Three. I used the neologism *composition-without-essences* to describe the principles of composition in terms of functional coherence, as opposed to formal coherence, and also to describe how this allows for a consideration of the body as being composed of heterogenous parts. What amounts to the claim that figurative sculpture lets us build a dialectical becoming-object precisely through its capacity for making us think about the human being as an object and the possibilities opened by composition; these being those associated with the opportunity to reinvent the body and change the meaning of different objects through a series of interactions established with the human form. Meanwhile, using the figure of the hero as a conceptual framework for composition means that attempts are being made to articulate the ethical and political subject and rethink the value of objects outside the logic of consumerism. Thus, what figurative sculpture is capable of doing is, in conclusion, to present the subject

not to himself but to rearticulated versions of himself through its materiality. This brings us to the question of presence and hence to space, which is the theme of the next and last section of the chapter and thesis.

The space of figurative sculpture

In order to speak about the space of figurative sculpture, I need to keep the connection with Derrida's notion of democracy as a space of promise going on, so let us first consider this: in *The Spectres of Marx* Derrida associates this notion with the theme of hospitality, notably illustrated with a parable of democracy as a house with a room always ready to receive the absent friend, that being, the friend-to-come. As the title of the book indicates, the question is related to the condition of the spectral and to the necessity to invoke and conjure, indeed to house, the many spectres of Marx. Significantly, Derrida seems to suggest that there is a necessity for some sort of language of spirits at the heart of a democracy; a language to speak with, and give voice to those who are no longer here and those that are not yet here, thus somewhere between being and non-being. Furthermore, the centrality of *Hamlet* in *The Spectres of Marx*, which is a play concerned predominantly with the themes of revenge and injustice, leaves no doubt of the continuing importance that justice plays for the author. However, the book is also about apparitions and its spaces, and therefore, about representation and representability – or more exactly, about the right of what only exists in the form of spectre to have some form of political representation. Taking this as a cue, I will now talk about figurative sculpture, which in a way is also a form of apparition caught between being and non-being[255]. I will consider this with reference to the question of space, referring mostly to urban, exterior spaces that have public access.

A discussion about public space is perhaps not the most obvious way in which to engage and support the ideas of sculpture as presented thus far. This

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255 It is in *The Specters of Marx* that Derrida coins the now over-used term 'hauntology' - which he uses to describe the paradoxical condition of 'the spectre' existing between being and non-being, as well as the idea of 'present' as existing in relation to a time that is not only that of the 'present'. Writing on the matter, Rorty has observed that the term suggests an attempt to trace the authority of what is 'hunting' and in that sense betrays Derrida's own project by not evacuating "all theology, all ontology" (for citation source see below). Despite the currency of the term and its potential use to describe figurative sculpture's 'hunting' affect, in agreeing with Rorty's point I have made the decision not to use the term. For more on this see: Richard Rorty, "Deconstruction and circumvention" in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and others. Philosophical papers. Vol. 2.*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 91-99

connection risks sounding outmoded and does, indeed, carry several problems regarding production and rights to engage with public space - problems that appear under the guise of legal questions of use, funding and therefore relations of power. These problems are outside the scope of the discussion here but the question of space itself cannot be completely ignored. In fact, we know the weakening of the material and historical legitimacy of figurative sculpture coincides with the decline of the monument at the beginning of the 20th century, and crucially, with a progressive disinvestment in legitimate public spaces after that.

Significantly, one of the things the Occupy movement was able to show was that physical space still matters. That despite all the new platforms of public-ness that exist today, notably those being Internet-based, and despite the bankruptcy of a notion of public space as a place for free speech and unconditional access - as demonstrated by the often violent, and yet legal actions taken against non-violent protesters during the Occupy Movement - urban spaces still play an important role as a stage for gatherings and civic representations. Working along the recognition that public space still matters but also that it is now a half artificial concept, what I propose next is something of a thought experiment, or more precisely a speculation, on the implications of figurative sculpture using the paradigm of space.

So let me first formulate a question. Writing on the aftermath of Occupy Wall Street and the events that occurred at Tahrir square, W.J.T. Mitchell has suggested that the image that best captured the iconography of non-sovereignty and the refusal of an individual face in favour of the multitude, is the image of the empty square[256]. An image that furthermore fixes the refusal to describe in detail what was attempted there, and that hence remains appropriately, like the events, in a state of potential: that being, in a continuous and inexhaustible preparation for a democracy to come. At first, one might assume this image of an empty square to have little, if anything to do with sculpture. However, when considering the history of modern sculpture describing the passage from an idea of the sculptural without plinth to that with a space without sculpture, that being a space that involves the viewer in a direct and immediate way, then it is

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256 See William J.T. Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation" in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 39. N° , Autumn 2012, 8-32

perhaps possible to establish a parallel between an empty square and the historical dematerialization of sculpture.

Now, thinking of a comparison between this image and Derrida's parable of democracy as a house that needs a guestroom, what would happen if we challenge this dematerialization and add the perspective of sculptural figures to the claim that spaces of democracy are informal and open spaces of potential occupancy? What might this alternative approach mean in terms of how we consider those spaces?

Two authors will help me to establish a quick transition here and to prepare for a discussion on what sort of work sculptural figures do in space. The first is the American poet Wallace Stevens, who can be frequently found in the writings of Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley, and more importantly, who writes beautifully about the concrete world of things. He is both a poet and a phenomenologist often writing about and through metaphors of statues and the condition of public space[257]. For instance in *The American Sublime*, a short poem from 1936, he begins by asking his reader to consider how one might pose a statue aiming to convey an idea of the sublime, when knowing of the vulnerability to "the mockers, The mickey mockers"[258]. At first he appears to dismiss the idea, telling us that all the sublime requires is the "landscape and that (…) The spirit and space, The empty spirit In vacant space"[259]. Yet, and right at the end of his poem, Stevens suggests we need some form of symbolization posing questions such as, "what wine does one drink? What bread does one eat?"[260]. In a later publication titled *The necessary angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination* from 1951, he picks up the question of public sculpture once more, of the equestrian statue to be more precise. Here he starts again by recognizing the danger of anachronism when referring to the connotation with the idea of nobility found in sculpture, but then moves on to argue about the importance of "an interdependence of imagination and reality as equal"[261] for the necessity to think about what poetry can be in a given time: in this case, in a country like America dealing with the Great Depression and scars remaining from the First World

257 For more on sculpture in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, see: Michael North, "The American Monument: Stevens, Berryman, and Lowell" in Michael North, *The Final Sculpture. Public Monuments and Modern Poets*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, 185-228
258 Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, London, Faber and Faber, 2006, 112
259 Ibid.
260 Ibid.
261 Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" in, Wallace Stevens *The necessary angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1951, 27

War. In other words, despite recognizing that sculpture infringes the attention for the ordinary that substantiates a great part of his own work, he argues that statues represent important vehicles in order to construct and edify collective meaning, by bringing together the poetic and the material.

The second author I wish to reference is Henri Lefebvre, who in *The Urban Revolution* from 1970, which is recognised as a precedent to his better-known *The Production of Space*, speaks of the value and challenges brought forth by the problematic condition of the monument in the post-industrial environment of the 1960s and 1970s[262]. He writes for and against the monument, against the repressive nature of the monument that creates a space essentially "colonized and oppressed"[263], that presents symbols to "social awareness and contemplation (passive) just when those symbols, already out-dated, are starting to lose their meaning"[264]. Speaking for the monument, he recognises it as being antithetical to the fluidity of modern life, but also as an object that provides the opportunity for figuring collective hopes that have not succumb to the logic of capitalism and that go beyond the desire to reinstall elements of a traditional urban environment, calling it "the only conceivable or imaginable site of collective (social) life in the modern world"[265].

Neither Stevens's nor Lefebvre's position rely on an appearance/reality distinction but instead focus on the fact that sculpture is capable of making appearances part of the unity of reality. In other words, they do not present the sort of preoccupation with truth, about what sort of object a sculpture is as may be found in other writings on sculpture, but instead are concerned with what these sculptural figures are capable of doing for a given society. As both authors point out, this involves a potential to symbolize and politicize space.

However, both do speak of the dangers associated with figurative sculpture, and in so doing, suggest that the presence of sculpture in public space demands for attention to be given not only to the construction of sculptural figures but also to the possibility of their destruction. Writing on this matter, Howard Caygill has argued that, despite the dominant aesthetic tradition being one that considers

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262 Here I am relying on an introduction to Lefebvre's text published in Jon Wood, David Hulks, Alex Potts, eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader,* 297
263 Lefebvre, quoted from an exceprt published in the volumed citated above. Ibid.
264 Ibid., 298
265 Ibid.

the artwork primarily in terms of its coming-into-existence, we cannot ignore the fact that artworks, from the outset, exchange energy with the surroundings and therefore are in a permanent state of going-out-of-existence: a process that on the one hand can be controlled and decelerated through the work of preservation, and on the other, radically accelerated in moments of destruction[266].

Thus, alongside the priority of truth and the evacuation of illusion, the absence of narratives on the perspective of destruction has left the importance of sculpture in key moments of political emancipation and change largely unwritten in the history of art. One can conclude that this is another factor that contributes to a negative assessment of sculptural figuration. The long history of attacks on sculptures and the polemics that almost always takes place when it comes to installing sculptural figures in public space, still today after over two centuries of modern thought - if we are to consider the French Revolution as the inaugural event of Modernity –shows that the presence of sculptural figures in a space shared by people is not taken lightly. Of course one can also be unconcerned about preservation or the destruction of these artworks, but sculpture continues to show the contrary. At some point it seems that the un-quite stillness of these objects cannot be ignored and that, in fact, sculptural figures ask to be noticed and at the same time carry an invitation to an attack on their parts.

Centuries of scientific thought and attempts to extinguish magical thinking were unable to put an end to the capacity sculptural figures have to disturb people who share space with them. This raises a focal question, that question being, if sculptural figures are indeed unimportant, dumb objects of illusion, how might we understand all the effort that goes into attacking or erecting sculptural figures in the first instance? Surely sculptures have no spirit – nobody is there to upset us and everyone knows that – so why do we struggle when negotiating the presences of these objects? Parallel in a way to what happens with the importance of physical space, what we do know is that the materiality of figurative sculpture has kept a capacity to bring to question and shake political feelings.

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266 See Howard Caygill "The Destruction of Art" in, Diarmuid Costello, Dominic Willsdon, eds., *The Life and Death of Images. Ethics and Aesthetics,* London, Tate Publishing, 2008, 163-173

Hence why it is necessary to attempt to understand better the implications of the spatial relations produced by figurative sculpture. We know that sculptures in space produce a figure/ground relation that exists without the logic of a fixed frame (and where it is the figure itself what operates as a field to organize formal relations and meaning). They can be seen from different distances and offer views from varying sides depending on the relative position of the viewer. More importantly, this means that although the figure, that being the idea being represented, comes into being imaginatively, it also shares with the viewer a common space.

To comprehend the specificities of figures in space, I would like to borrow some ideas from Heidegger who turned to sculpture in a latter phase of his work in order to reflect upon and discuss the relations between bodies and *space*[267]. Heidegger has taught us that space is a medium of exchange and that we can identify three types of space in a situation of cohabitation between humans and objects: the first being the space internal to sculpture; the second, the space internal to the body; and the third, the most important in my view, being that of the surface of the sculpture[268]. This introduces a notion of limits, not as the place where objects end but rather where they begin - that which allows for objects to be introduced to the surroundings and participate in the multiple relations found therein. It is through this third space that an object appears and radiates throughout a multiplicity of relations.

Recognising the limitation of objects - the division between matter and the void that defines the shape - in terms of a beginning rather than of a confinement, implies that even if bodies and objects have their own internal space, they always exist in relation to each other and therefore, that there is always a common space between two or more elements, which mutually influence the other through a series of interactions. According to this view a work of art, indeed the *thingness* of an object, can never really exists as a thing-in-itself. Its condition instead, is that of being in the world as a matter of relations and relating to the presence of elements, objects and bodies around it, which is consistent with another important idea found in Heidegger's theory, that the origin of the work of art runs from *work* to *origin* rather than being the other way

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267 Andrew J. T. Mitchell gives a concise and valuable account of the relationship between Heidegger's thought   and sculpture in Andrew J.T. Mitchell, *Heidegger among the Sculptors. Body, Space, and the Art of Dwelling*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010
268 The relation between object and space in Heidegger is easier to read in texts such *Art and Space*, *The Origin of the Work and Art*, and even *The Question Concerning Technology*.

around, thus from what it does instead of from what it is[269].

In this sense, it is complicated to say that objects that one might think of as being self-contained exclude context. Instead we might say that objects are in tension with their spatial context and are able to influence the scheme of relations existing around them. It is this dynamic, between the body of viewers and figures in space, together with the necessity to negotiate the presence with the latter, that I think can explain, partially at least, the psychological affect and the reactions that figurative sculpture can produce on a community.

This leads us to appreciate the difference between the spatial dynamic produced by figurative sculpture and the neutral space of minimal art, where different viewers engage with the work in a similar way, that is, purely on a physical basis and without predetermining differentiating factors. This is the kernel of the claim that minimal art achieves a democratic form of presentation. An argument that has found its urban equivalent in the non-historical, normally abstract, monuments one is likely to find in plazas next to office buildings in westernized metropolis – and that came to proliferate in cities during the 1980s when a renewed interest in the condition of the monument took place, and significantly, during a so-called time of economic prosperity. Like the gallery counterparts, these works also claim a sense of neutrality and a universal condition. Indeed, somewhere located between the category of sculpture and urban furniture, such works, which to all intent and purposes are sometimes purely decorative, could be located anywhere without much difference.

In fact, at this point we might consider how, in her seminal essay titled "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" Krauss locates the historical origin of the double-negativity that she believes has come to define the condition of post-modern sculpture as non-landscape and non-architecture. She reasons that the appearance of multiple editions of the same artwork in different places and the loss of the plinth during the turn of the 19th century, jettisoned the logic of celebration traditionally associated to a specific place and event; paving the way for an almost self-referential sculpture which determines its own conditions of meaning.

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269 I am of course referring to the general thesis gathered in the abovementioned essay *The Origin of The Work of Art.*

One crosses the threshold of the logic of the monument, entering the space of what could be called its negative condition – a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. Which is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monumental as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential[270].

There is no question that the use of the plinth and the presentation of a unique sculpture upon it found in a specific site establishes a strong relation with the given space it is situated in[271]. But even in the absence of these conditions, the body in sculpture establishes a relation with space that is very different to that produced by a minimal type of artwork. The figure can create a tension with a cultural context, because the human form, one might say, is a universal signifier and is capable of saying something to everyone, but not in the same way, everywhere. And even in the absence of its historical function to symbolize a specific site, figurative sculpture maintains a capacity to politicize space, because it produces a scene where the viewer has to negotiate his own presence with the subject "embodied" in plastic form and with what it arrives at representing (even if unspecific or anonymous) within that given context. In

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270 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 280
271 In connection to this Auguste Rodin's famous work *The Burghers of Calais*, 1884-95, is often regarded as the marker for the abolition of the plinth and the logic of fixing figures to a specific site. Different editions of the work can be found in various places around the world and are normally presented in a similar conditions to what documents reveal Rodin intended for the display of the work: that being, at ground level, - rather than the conventional height reserved for figurative sculptures representing ideals of religious orders or the authority of rulers. However, we also know that the commission set by the city of Calais finally decided to go against Rodin's intention and in 1895 publically display the work for the first time on top of a 5ft base. More importantly, several existing photographs show that Rodin himself experimented with different heights for the work to be display, all the way from ground level up to the level of a two-story building. In other words, the development of the work underwent a series of artistic experiments as well as negotiations with Calais city authorities. In a recent publication, theorists Eva Grubinger and Jörg Heiser, have established an interesting comparison between the negotiations that took place and the height of this work*, establishing what they call the negation of negotiation with site and audience in Minimal art, as it manifested in the bureaucratic procedures leading up to the installation of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arch* and in the process leading to its removal (1981-1989). A comparison between a work that marks the transition to a "self-reflexive communication –a negotiation- between the artist and the citizens about their respective status" and another that "staged the crisis of the symbolic function of the public artwork as a severe traumatic rift." Eva Grubinger, Jörg Heiser, "Introducing Sculpture Unlimited", in Eva Grubinger, Jörg Heiser, eds., *Sculpture Unlimited*, Berlin, Stenberg Press, 2011, 7-18

essence, it is a question of cohabitation that again is maybe easier to understand in its negative sense by bringing to mind the weight of having to share space with a figure that has become oppressive.

So maybe figurative sculpture does in fact stand opposed to the fluidity of the modern world. But one might also claim that this, in a way, is also its strength. As I have already observed, figurative sculpture asks viewers to activate a mode of deceleration, to alter their rhythm, as they traverse space, thereby working against the acceleration of life as experienced under the conditions of neo-liberalism, but still there is more. While it is not necessary to discuss these questions in detail here, it remains relevant to note that figurative sculpture resists the logic of circulation because of difficulties associated with transport, and more importantly, because sculptural figures, who don't accept all meaning, challenge the sense of local belonging that a given community might have; standing directly opposed to the relatively passive circulation of commodities.

And at the same time that it denies an immediate, instantaneous, perception of forms (and not being flat is of a course a determinant factor here), a figure in space invites the viewer to move around it, and in so doing begs attention, which means it slows down one's rhythm when crossing this space. Imagining this against a contemporary urban scenario and we might conclude that figurative sculpture is indeed in conflict with the accelerated rhythms of the cityscape. Likewise, we can also say that because it is not frontal, sculpture is antagonistic to public advertising billboards and the presence of screens that have come to dominate the visual landscape of the city.

With this being said, a short detour is required to make an important connection between the question of representation and what I discussed at the beginning of the thesis. On the first pages, I made a reference to *Corner Relief* from 1913 (fig. 1), and how in this work Vadlimir Tatlin presented a radical gesture, which consisted of moving shapes from the pictorial space into the real space, thus grounding a refusal of representation that would put sculpture on the path for the sort of concrete materiality later explored by Minimalism. In the words of Benjamin Buchloh, *Corner Relief*, which acts as the antecedent project for the more well-known *Monument to the Third international* from 1919-1920, and Marcel Duchamp's Readymades, established two main poles of sculptural reflection in Modernism and ultimately defined the conditions leading to the

dissolution of the material and historical legitimacy of sculpture as a separated discourse. Then further suggesting that post-modern sculpture represents nothing more than a regressive analysis of these same conditions, which it is unable to overcome. Speaking of these two moments:

> They recognize the dialectics of sculpture from
> now to be operative either as a model for the
> artistic production of reality (e.g. sculpture's
> transition toward architecture and design) or as
> an epistemic model that investigates the status
> and conditions of aesthetic objects production
> (the ready made, the allegory, the fetish).[272]

Minimalism conciliates the two models Buchloh speaks of. It explores the material specificity of objects and rethinks the status of the aesthetic object by evacuating representation and stripping works from the paradigm of originality. Having established how the refusal of representation in art, i.e. illusion, appears associated with a preoccupation with truth and an attempt to demystify the sculptural object - a reflection that leaves out the question of what sculpture is capable of doing, along the lines of what Buchloh tells us it seems logical to conclude that the question of truth is at the basis of sculpture's loss of legitimacy as a separated discourse.

A possible inference here is that sculpture, as a specific discourse, depends largely upon figuration. For we can recognize in the capacity of sculpture to represent something in space a possibility that distinguishes it from other material-related disciplines, such as design or architecture. A capacity that offers a certain autonomy to objects, an autonomy seen in terms of the opportunity to organize meaning through elements of plastic form and part/whole relations, and thus to attribute such object, such composition, with an intelligence that becomes proper to itself; which inversely is also a capacity that takes away such autonomy by allowing for an object to relate to something other than itself.

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272 Benjamin Buchloh, "Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modern Sculpture" in Jon Wood, David Hulks, Alex Potts, eds., *Modern Sculpture Reader,* 359

Once we depart from the self-reflexivity of sculpture to focuses on the physical structures of objects as a mode of analysing the real, then a third dialectical way is open for sculpture, which specifically, in terms of the human figure, becomes operative as a mode of rearticulating the subject through the materiality of sculpture. Furthermore this allows for the juxtaposition of different materialities and procedures whilst creating a chain of signification around the human figure; a chain where the meaning of the first can be modified, composed, and subordinated to the latter, to human concerns.

Additionally, in contrast to the neutral space and the kind of democratic presentations proposed by minimal art, or minimal-inspired art, figurative sculpture re-enacts the idea of democracy understood as space of constant negotiation, allowing for the possibility of disagreement. But perhaps what makes figurative sculpture more relevant in terms of its (here speculative) relation to urban space is this: it is antithetical to the way spaces with public access are increasingly used to organize habits of consumerism, because it engenders the possibility of the reimagined subject to be represented in a shared space, whilst functioning as a potential site for conflict of opinions regarding who, or more exactly what, is being represented. In other words, the stubbornness of the sculptural figure introduces, and one might say literary, a sense of gravity in a time of urgency.

Having said that, I would like to come back to the question raised initially, that being, what figurative sculpture might mean in terms of how we consider what constitutes the democratic space. It seems to me that part of the meaning sculptural figures acquired once located in a public space results largely from the fact that these figures function as a declaration of importance and as a metaphor for a public type of being. Having this in mind, what I have attempted to show is that we can think about the hero as a concept for figuration – as an idealism necessary to re-enchant the world in disappointing times – in the sense that it registers a passage from questions of action to question of being, from what to do, into who to be for instance, without connecting to a claim to truth. A passage that as previously discussed with reference to Critchley, is not about understanding how ethical subjectivity can be experienced but rather, how the ethical-political subject can be re-described beyond the time of an experience. And it is under those terms that the hero, which as established is an impersonal but not abstract notion that opens into an experience of *decidability,* seems to

help us to deal with the impossibility to be a subject capable of meeting an infinite demand. This being again, as a conceit for the task of producing the vocabulary for drawing what a meaningful life might look like in terms of being an alternative to the instrumentalizing conditions of neo-liberalism.

Sculpturally, what translates ideas about heroism is the combination of the human form with operations of composition, with different materials, procedures, plastic form, gesture and so forth. But sculpture of course, has a capacity, to make "redescriptions" available through concrete materials, and thus to compose a body-without-a-body, a body between being and non-being through which versions of a subject capable of introducing difference can be rehearsed, a commitment to this subject posited beyond the living body, and more importantly, staged in real space. This is what distinguishes sculpture for instance from literature: it literalizes what was established before as *presentability* and it is at once capable of inventing and physically externalizing ideas about the human subject.

Before ending, I need to pick up a different thread. There is a profound divorce between present-day figurative work produced for outdoor, shareable spaces, and the debates one recognises to be driving the contemporary art world. It is important, therefore, to underline some key differences between what we commonly understand by 'public space', and the physical and discursive space of the gallery.

Let us consider public spaces as areas of free access, with no physical barriers to prevent access and with no restriction in terms of the schedule of their access. As such, public spaces are fundamentally open spaces, where exchanges – symbolic and otherwise – can take place in a general manner. The space of the gallery, by contrast, is not always open and is normally connected to specific cultural circles and, therefore, to more restricted and more selective audiences.

Hence, it is in public spaces that sculpture gains a true political consequence regardless of whether it involves some sort of political analogy or reference. It has political consequences simply because it occupies a space that is supposed to belong to all. Furthermore, in the context of this thesis, the problem of public

space becomes pivotal since it is there that the questions debated in relation to the hero – posited as a public type of being – gain a more clear expression.

Yet, insofar as the art world constitutes a legitimate platform by which to measure the success of sculpture in the public realm, and let us assume it does, we can speak about a failure of the latter.

As previously intimated, this failure can be associated with the deterioration of a legitimate notion of public space; more than that, it also registers a regression of artistic languages. Often limited to local homages, most figurative sculptures produced today appear dissociated from debates taking place within the field of art (which inversely reduces artistic legitimacy). In addition to this, the human form is frequently treated with an outmoded naturalistic approach that is often, if not to say most of the time, clearly compromised and impoverished by a lack of formal sophistication (not to mention the general absence of elements of questioning the very use of that language and not another).

Two aspects stand out in this regard: present-day figurative work shows an increasing tendency to reduce the attention to volume, and a general lack of movement. Both aspects are emphasised by an exaggerated frontality, which furthermore compromises what I described above as sculpture's resistance to the flatness of screens found throughout cities.

The work of Stephan Balkenhol, a prolific artist in both the universe of art galleries as well as in that of art for public spaces, is an exception from whom we might take a few notes. His figures – most of them directly carved in wood by hand – have a great capacity to respond to the limitations and compromises of such a context with a surprising treatment of plastic form, inventiveness and understanding of the human figure. They clearly depart from the pseudo-naturalistic languages so often found in outdoor figurative works. It is also important to note that Balkenhol develops his artistic investigation for the public sphere through the idea of the anonymous common man and common woman; this is often pointed out as his work's most distinct and relevant quality.

More than this, Balkenhol's figures show a capacity to respond to the specific demands of different sites. Indeed, they normally show a great capacity to create a sense of site with adaptations of scale and of the viewing conditions,

while departing from the logic of celebration associated with important people or official events. This is further emphasised by Balkenhol's recurrent choice of unlikely areas to place his figures, as notably exemplified by his 1992 project *Head of a Man / Figure on a Buoy*, shown in London, where Balkenhol made use of a bridge over the River Thames, and a buoy in the middle of it, to place his work.

Furthermore, Balkenhol's practice gives witness to the possibility of developing an artistic project based on figuration, without losing touch with key artistic debates. As Jeff Wall has noted[273], Balkenhol's practice can be aligned with major sculptural developments along two main poles over the last half-century: that of the sculptural object as a unified structure, epitomised by Minimalism; and the regime of the fragment, developed mostly by Art Povera and Art Povera-inspired art, with its interest for dismantling historical contexts and art's universalising pretension as crucially expressed in the monument. The latter is a problem that Balkenhol precisely addresses with his continuous exploration of the human body – a form where the whole and the fragment coexist – and with his investigations into the condition of the statue – or more exactly: with his non-historical, non-universalising and non-individualised figures.

We might also remember again the work of Mark Manders, who, despite having no expression in the outdoors, offers us a glimpse into different possibilities for the integration of figures in space and the use of sculptural procedures. These possibilities have to do with the mechanics of Manders' figuration; this, as suggested in the previous chapter, is distinctively achieved by his use of different elements and the overlapping of the conceptual and the physical function each element has for the construction of the figure as a whole. In turn, this is reinforced by the way Manders often lets the process of construction remain visible, and more specifically, the way he plays with the idea of figures in the making.

The manner in which Manders combines what I've described as 'a mode of making' and 'a mode of finding' seems equally promising. Firstly, because similarly to what occurs in Balkenhol's practice, Manders' figurative work is largely achieved through the expression of manual work, and, inasmuch as

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273 see Jeff Wall, "An outline of a Context for Stephan Balkenhol's work 1998" in Jean-François Chevrier, Thierry de Duve, Boris Groys, eds., *Jeff Wall (Contemporary Artists Series)*, London: Phaidon, 2002, 94-101

manual work can be characterised by an opening to the accident and the unplanned, it then opens the way for the occurrence of the new. Secondly, because, following the use of different procedures – including assemblage and collage – Manders is able to combine made and invented forms with pre-existing sources; in that sense, he produces unexpected juxtapositions of different material realities.

This seems relevant in terms of rethinking the figure for outdoor scenarios precisely because it maps out a strategy for putting the project of figuration in dialogue with the historical contingencies of today's complex material reality. Adding to this, or rather arriving from this, the inventiveness with which Manders reworks the human form – freeing it from the rigour of anatomy – posits what could be well seen as a materialistic approach to representation in the sense that it never separates the figure from the (heterogeneous) material reality that composes it. In fact, in the context of Manders' work, representation should be called figuration since it involves the construction of figures without attempting to correspond to something or someone that exists or existed. In parallel to this, by composing figures with the use of non-figurative elements, like furniture items or simple pieces of wood, Manders demonstrates how the human form can work to influence the meaning of objects and materials and subordinate these to the idea of the human.

It is also important to underline that the space of the exhibition in Manders' work, where figures often appear as if in a state of coming-into-being or coming-out-of-being, operates on a metaphorical level as a space where viewers are invited to the place and time of the making of figures. It is a space where figures are still the promise of figures but where there is already something being brought forth, said and proposed in real space. By simply imagining an outdoor version of Manders' work, this sketches the possibility to overcome the association between figurative sculpture and the monument, and to replace it with another association between figurative sculpture and the event of art. This is an association that posits sculptural figuration as a project that is never quite finished or final, and where, in parallel to the affirmation of figures in space, what is proposed is the possibility to introduce the new and, therefore, change.

Appreciating the level of formal and conceptual sophistication found in the work of Balkenhol and Manders reveals some of the options available for

contemporary figurative sculpture thought for public space; these are options that come after post-minimal developments in the field of sculpture, as these were developed in more experimental spaces for art such as galleries, alternative exhibition spaces and sometimes even museums. Specifically, in terms of what I have suggested to be the marks of the general failure of public figurative sculpture, both show attention to volume and – this is particularly true of Balkenhol – attention to surface values; this reduces the frontality of figures and invites viewers to move around sculptures. In other words, Balkenhol and Manders help us to map out some ideas concerning how to rethink the language of figurative sculpture for public spaces and increase its artistic relevancy.

However, in the terms being developed here, this map, as it were, is not completely satisfactory; it leaves out the question of local belonging, and a sense of gesture is still missing. Balkenhol's figures, for example, reference a Western code of dress but don't allow associations with specific places. And while it requires no effort to link Manders' figures to ideas about life and death, an exploration of gesture – a gesture that would connect with the tragic sense of life and create an alternative space to the everyday – is absent.

Before describing how thinking through the hero might change this, let us quickly go over some of the general aspects discussed in regards to the work of figurative sculpture. To begin with, it was established that the medium carries a connection with the tragic, which has to do with the way a figure presents itself as a body without life, and therefore announces death. In other words, figurative sculpture connects with the finitude of life but also with a form of existing beyond life; this expresses what I've called the 'becoming-object' of sculpture.

It has also become possible to view figurative sculpture as a medium whose plasticity renders possible an artistic articulation of the subject through the reinvention of the body; this is to say, it makes it possible to imagine the body beyond the limits of the living, biological body. This is quite different from situations, such as situations of protest, where a subject is formed by the interrelation between an event and the living participants of that event. It is a process that, in being entirely dependent on the presence of living subjects and hostage to the duration of the event itself, hinders the affirmation of ideas being rehearsed beyond the time of the rehearsal itself. Sculpture, instead, is capable not only of rehearsing and proposing ideas but also of manifesting a subject in

its materiality and in that sense of answering to the separation between being and non-being, as well as to that between being and being-here. This pertains, of course, to the fact that sculpture produces a situation of cohabitation between living and non-living beings, where ideas about the subject can be rehearsed and become part of the material world and, borrowing from Latour, part of the social world as well. Under these terms, it was possible to say figurative sculpture combines transcendence and an immanent world. It was also reasoned that the figure operates as a vehicle for the transformed meaning of the different elements that compose it, while subordinating such meaning to the idea of the human.

Along with ideas introduced with Stevens and Lefebvre, it was reasoned that sculptural bodies lend themselves to communal meaning by instantiating in real space (and therefore in a plane that enables sharing) that which imagination alone can produce. Stevens suggests that this holds relevancy because it allows for the figuring of collective, symbolic meaning. In turn, Lefebvre intimates that sculptural bodies are relevant because they give way to potential conflict and because their sculptural condition is antithetical to the acceleration of life and to how urban space is increasingly organised to facilitate acts of consumerism.

In this scenario, using the hero as platform to rethink the possibilities of figurative sculpture – possibilities that are amplified and crucially brought into question in public areas – involves an attempt to give form to a collective narrative and, at the same time, to introduce some form of difference; this, in turn, means without avoiding potentially controversial ideas. In fact, as previously discussed, the very notion of the hero is formed in culture, where it registers as a reflection of the instable and non-universal condition of meaning, which is to say, on the changing and always contextualised implications of what we mean by saying that something is meaningful. This also suggests that using the hero as a conceit of figuration involves searching for the significant new, the relevant gesture and, crucially, for ways to translate this into plastic form.

It was reasoned that the problems of the hero could be translated into four principles of composition. At this point, it is sufficient to say that apart from answerability, which has to do with the way the hero works as a situated concept, these include the more self-explanatory principles of difference, negotiation and intensity. In addition to these principles and how they might

influence the practice of sculpture (where one might consider the hero as a methodology of work – or more exactly, as a principle of sculptural research), it is relevant to underline here again the importance of gesture and, therefore, at least in a sense, of movement. This seems vital for a renewed understanding of figurative sculpture and specifically for breaking free from the neutral, inactive, even pacified attitudes that seem to inform and dominate today's compositional understanding of sculptural bodies (especially those found in public spaces).

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the very notion of the hero, hence the present approach to sculpture, depends on a continuous process of negotiating what constitutes heroism and because of that, that the hero has to be nominated. On the other hand, it also seems right to say that the connection between heroism and sculpture is not exhausted with nomination because such connection always depends on narrative; rather, it depends on the sort of narratives that are constructed, over and over again, around the question of what the word *hero* actually signifies and, therefore, on the stories this or that sculpture presents. In a way, figurative sculpture always stays dependent on narrative, or to be more precise on language; this is because, although it works through the use of referents, plastic form cannot fully determine the meaning of a figure.

Surely, something similar could be said about minimal art, which, as observed in the first chapter, is supported by a complex work of theory and is thus also dependent on the use of language. However, there is an important difference: although we may view both minimal art and figurative art as being intertwined with the use of language – be it in terms of theoretical thought or narrative – unlike the first, the latter lends itself to redescription and therefore to creating versions of the rearticulated subject. More than this, figurative sculpture allows for such redescription to take place through the physical world of objects. In so doing, especially if we consider the case of public space and the encounter that can potentially be staged therein between living people and non-living subjects, it also allows the inscription of such a subject in a space of symbolic exchanges where it can produce either influence or the will to overcome that which is instantiated in space.

Using terms closely associated with the writing of Rorty, we can say that the utility of using the hero as a conceit of figuration consists of introducing a priority

to invent, and make available, a vocabulary for the extraordinary (which, as I hope to have demonstrated, constitutes a political necessity) within processes of redescription. This utility can also be explained in terms of replacing the logic of critique – and its preoccupation with truth and deconstructing the structures of the real – with a positive affirmation that simultaneously presents itself as a way of investigating and rehearsing alternative forms of what meaningful life might involve. As seen more recently, this investigation is produced along the experiences of *decidability* and *presentability* found at the heart of the concept of the hero. So, in short, the latter constitutes a form of idealism that opens into the possibility to exchange questions about what reality is, for questions to do with what reality, or more exactly what the subject of reality, could be.

Once we consider the context of public space and its political dimension, the marriage between the problematics of the hero and figurative sculpture turns into an opportunity to give a body to a subject of collective meaning; this presents an opportunity to articulate a subject-to-come, to make this subject public and to invite it to the scene of politics. This is close to what, earlier on, was named sculpture's third dialectical way. Furthermore, because of the concept at play, this articulation asks for the work of figuration to be situated, and for the rehearsing of compositional gestures where concerns might be brought into question and recomposed through a dialogue between the human form and the material world.

So, introducing the hero as a strategy to rethink figurative sculpture adds to how artists such as Balkenhol and Manders are helping us to redefine the language of contemporary figurative sculpture in the following ways: it implies a non-personal mode of figuration and, at the same time, departs from the idea of anonymity (which, as previously suggested, represents a subject that is not yet articulated). Put in different terms, thinking through the hero involves an articulation of, or at least an attempt to articulate, a subject and, more specifically, a subject capable of introducing difference. This implies not only an attempt to situate the work of figuration but an effective search, as I have been insisting over the last few paragraphs, for a relevant gesture that, on the level of the human form, announces movement. If we think about the figure as a heterogeneous structure, then using the hero as strategy for the work of figuration presupposes a choice of elements that may somehow relate to

important questions and necessities (and that may help to question and redefine those necessities).

Now, just before finishing, I need to take a second to try and answer two questions that are inevitably raised by what I have proposed. The first question has to do with the criteria used to distinguish between good and bad sculpture. In the present context, this is equal to the problem of knowing which sort of sculptures would correlate to the idea of heroism and how this could be successfully achieved.

Defining stable criteria, which could somehow lay the basis for aesthetic judgement, was not the aim of this thesis. What has been attempted here appears, instead, as a territory for rethinking figuration, through a concept that undermines the notion of representation as correspondence and replaces it with representation or, more exactly, figuration as construction. This territory, as it were, was also considered for reflecting upon the political implications of figurative sculpture and, hence, on what sort of work it creates outside the scope of art.

That which I have discussed points towards a situated figuration and involves, therefore, the collapse of any fixed rules for the definition of good and bad sculpture. On the other hand, one could also mention the capacity that a given figure has to enter a dialogue with the context in which it is located – a capacity to somehow disturb and propose something new as a form of criteria, albeit one that is permanently changing.

Thus, what was attempted was a framework that invites the project of figuration to be considered and, in a way, evaluated according to its ongoing capacity to bring into question problems of meaning and create versions of the rearticulated, or recomposed, subject. This, according to its capacity to speak the language of its time, to take on board debates central to such a time, and to answers, in a no regulated way, to a given context by rehearsing meaningful gestures.

Now, in an age of cultural contingency such as our own, where contexts are permanently changing, it seems necessary to think about strategies that may be used to avoid the threat of a continuous disintegration of artistic discourses. This

brings us to the second question, which somehow has a more immediate answer and has already been anticipated in what is discussed above. It seems impossible to predict a way for artists to avoid such a threat and, following all that has been established, this would not necessarily be a good thing either; not if one assumes that art ought to be accountable to life and, therefore, ought to relate to the changing realities and contingencies of its time.

In fact, once seen as a conceit of figuration, we can actually identify the hero as a strategy for (not) avoiding the threat of a discursive collapse. This is because it presents itself as a mode of investigating questions of meaning that necessarily looks for what introduces difference while involving a form of negotiation concerning what constitutes significance within a given historical 'site'.

So if I'm to generalize hugely, which I believe I can at this concluding stage, what I have done here amounts to a move away from the prevailing idea of art as life into another mode of thinking about art as capable of providing an answer to life: a move built on the notion of representation as construction and process. Hence in this context, the word 'idealism' signifies something that is immanent – a kind of idealism that comes to the fore as a positive affirmation through processes of construction and non-metaphysical negotiations about what counts as heroism. And sculpture is well capable of underscoring this immanence for its materiality affirms its own artifice. In other words, the combination of the hero and figurative sculpture constitutes an immanent form of idealism that never takes *you* out of this world – because the materiality of figurative sculpture is never fully suspended – and that instead enables the creation of physical versions of a reconfigured world.

In conclusion, the potential of figurative sculpture to politicize space is perhaps more visible in negative terms, in moments when figures come under attack and become a means of overcoming collective trauma. In fact I cannot stop thinking that given the shortage of new figurative projects such opportunities will soon be exhausted. But whilst attacks on figures might prove the vitality of sculpture as a discourse in its own right, my concern here has been with the positivity of the hero as a concept of figuration and its possible uses for the construction and reconstruction of collective narratives. With the thesis coming full circle with Derrida's ideas presented at beginning of this section, together the hero and sculpture constitute a form of rearticulating and give appearance to a subject-to-

come, someone who might no longer be here or not yet here, a subject that might include the human as well as the non-human and with whom it might be important and useful to speak with, to conjure, and most of all, to share space with. A means, in other words, of politicizing space and considering who is to be considered and what is a concern by staging a physical and dialectical encounter between humanity and what symbolically represents that humanity beyond itself.

Thus, if only by using a fictional approach to the question, the implications of figurative sculpture for an understanding of public space might perhaps be described in terms of the possibility presented by sculpture, to stage scenes of cohabitation between living beings and artistic articulations, or more exactly artistic attempts to articulate ideas, in this case, about the ethical-political subject.

Admittedly, this proposal and this thesis in general, have limitations, and more importantly, some provisions. The first limitation is this: the hero needs to be nominated and this limits what is possible to achieve in sculpture. More than that, nomination, and narrative it can be added, cannot refer to the name of specific individuals because this will sit within a personal category. Additionally, the hero represents a positive affirmation but also something found in a constant dialogue with reality, therefore in a constant need of revision; thus being, a positive affirmation within a series of substitutions. A similar movement, so to speak, is reflected in the history of assaults on sculptural figures, which brings me to the provisions. Schematically: if at times figurative sculpture presents itself as a privileged means for overcoming and substituting a symbolic order, or at least, for expressing a collective will to do so, then destruction cannot be ignored as a sculptural procedure. Furthermore, composition and destruction need to be seen as two poles of the same logic. Inversely, this implicates the challenging scenario where it is possible for those who might encounter figures in space to somehow contribute to their composition[274], that is, to become

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274 In the same article where W.J.T. Mitchell speaks about the empty square as the iconic image of protest, which is mentioned earlier in the main text, the author reminds us that the large figure, i.e. *Goddess of Democracy,* made by art students during the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen square. Thus suggesting that, in opposition to the image of the empty square this icon of the events worked as a form of refusing the government that turned protesters, i.e., the mass of people, into a living sculpture with no alternative but to act as one. Regardless of anything else, the example gives witness to a form of figurative sculpture created by protesters against the order of power in place, with public visibility. For more See William J.T. Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation" in *Critical Inquiry*, 8-32

subjects of composition.

Furthermore, my proposal is based on an idea of representation seen in terms of construction, whereupon the body can be viewed as a heterogeneous concept that accepts the juxtaposition of different materials and procedures. Lastly, because the legitimacy of figurative sculpture as mode of thinking upon which we might rearticulate the political depends on the space where it can be realized, it stays hostage to a reconfigured public space. With these provisions, one might say that the task of composing a figure for a new type of heroism through the medium of sculpture might function as a platform for a nearly impossible compromise between imagination and reality, art and politics.

At this point, I think I am done. I intimated that the reasons behind the evacuation of the human figure by minimal art are related to questions of truth. I have discussed how the hero departs from questions of truth and can be regarded as a conceit of figuration, and considered some of the theoretical and practical implications of the latter for composition. I concluded with a reflection on the combination of the hero and figurative sculpture, and how this challenges how one might understand the formation of the ethical-political subject.
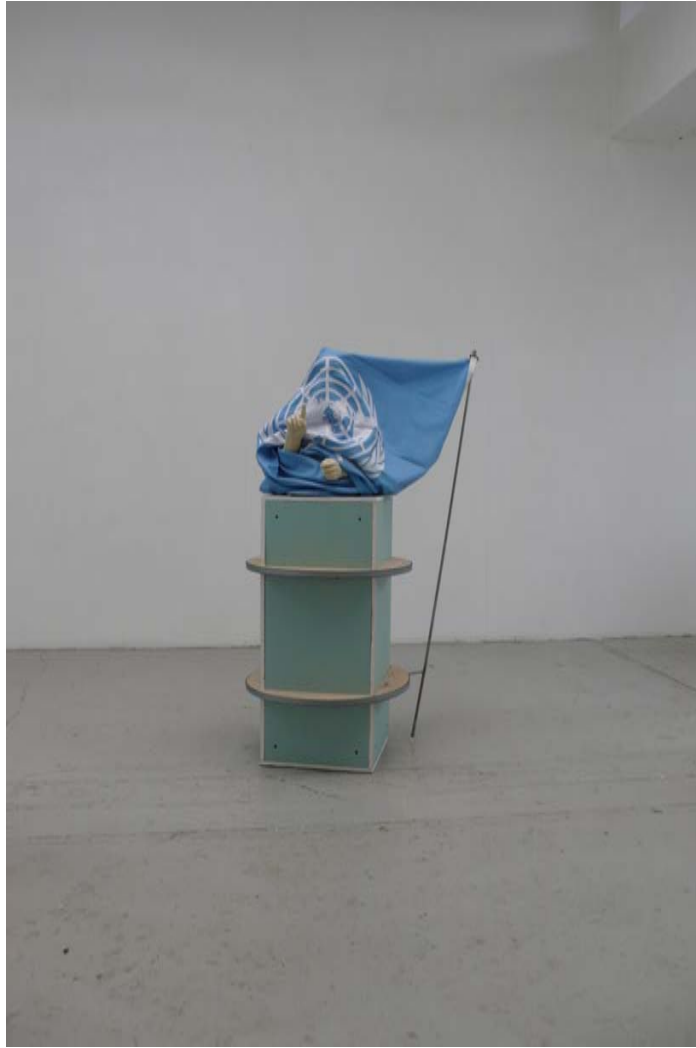
Artworks

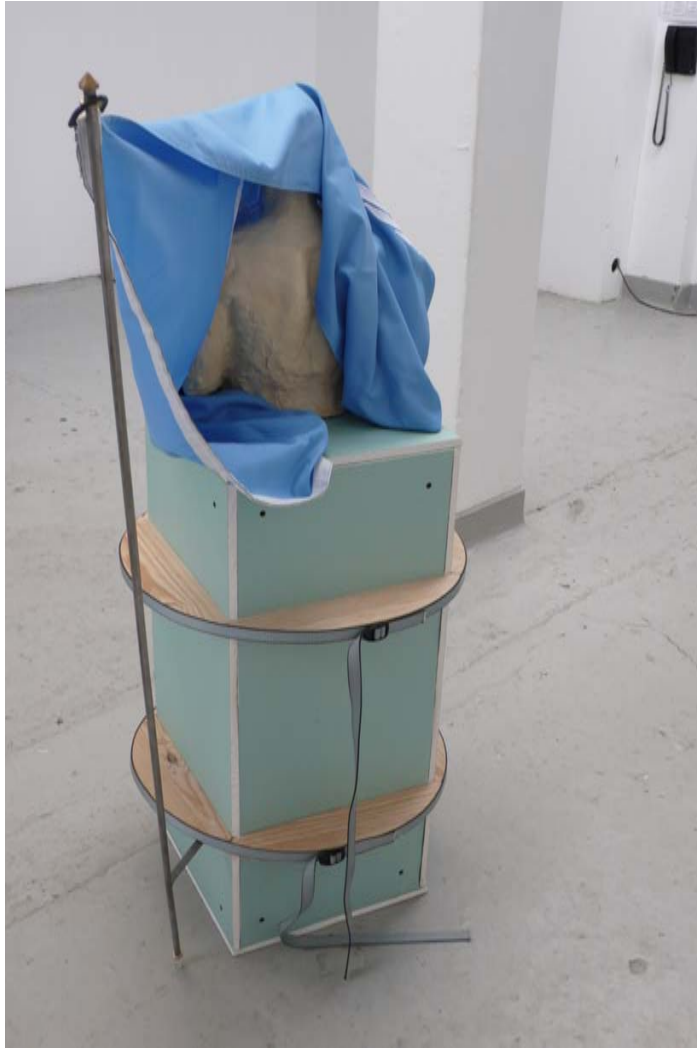16. João Gonçalves, installation view (2011)

17. João Gonçalves, [installation view], (2011)

18. João Gonçalves, *Critical melancholia* (2009)
Plexiglass, wood, valchromat, steel, wax, aluminium, cardboard, engine oil, oil paint
118x73x27 inches

19. João Gonçalves, *Where's the rest of us?* (2009)
Plasterboard, wood, flag, steel, polyurethane, straps
27x53x35 inches
[view 1]

20. João Gonçalves, *Where's the rest of us?* (2009)
Plasterboard, wood, flag, steel, polyurethane, straps
27x53x35 inches
[view 2]

21. João Gonçalves, *Where's the rest of us?* (2009)
Plasterboard, wood, flag, steel, polyurethane, straps
27x53x35 inches
[view 3]

22. João Gonçalves, *Tactics for global variations – the internal horizon* (2009)
Steel, cement fondue, styrofoam, high-visibility fabric, duck-tape
20x53x20 inches
[view 1]

23. João Gonçalves, *Tactics for global variations – the internal horizon* (2009)
Steel, cement fondue, styrofoam, high-visibility fabric, duck-tape
20x53x20 inches
[view 2]

24. João Gonçalves, *Maria Doroshenkova* (2009)
Steel, plaster
24x37x59 inches
[view 1]

25. João Gonçalves, *Maria Doroshenkova* (2009)
Steel, plaster
24x37x59 inches
[view 2]

26. João Gonçalves, [installation view], (2011)

27. João Gonçalves, *A material experience on the differences between sculpture and cinema* (2011)
Sports jacket, found mannequin, cardboard, polymer clay, acetate transparent prints, notice board
31x55x20 inches / variable
[view 1]

28. João Gonçalves, *A material experience on the differences between sculpture and cinema* (2011)
Sports jacket, found mannequin, cardboard, polymer clay,
acetate transparent prints, notice board
31x55x20 inches / variable
[view 2]

29. João Gonçalves, *A material experience on the the differences between sculpture and cinema* (2011)
Sports jacket, found mannequin, cardboard, polymer clay,
acetate transparent prints, notice board
31x55x20 inches / variable
[view 3]

The image on the next page is a visual rendition of a work that asks for a short explanation.

The work brings together different materials and juxtaposes found objects with objects produced using contrasting procedures.

The scale is close to that of the human body. As a reference, the figurative element identifiable in the image, is made of unfired clay and stands at an initial height of two metres. The image is proportional to reality.

The work also includes a physical computing and hydraulic system, developed during this research project, and that gives the work a capacity to react to the presence of viewers according to two factors: the distance to the figurative element and the number of people found moving within a spatial perimeter defined around that element. The interaction of these two factors is translated into levels of water pulverization in the area immediately around and over the figure, which varies from an absent to an intense pulverization. The proximity to the work and a larger number of people means more intensity and vice-versa.

A prolonged inactivity of the system will lead on to the clay drying out, fracture and at its limit, to the destruction of the figure. In turn, any excessive activity will lead to the clay dissolving to eventually disappear.

I was interested in exploring the idea of figuration as a process, to consider ways of leading the very act of viewing to affect the physical conditions of the work, and inversely, in the potential of making viewers affected by what determines the possibility of the process of the work, e.g. the pulverization of water. In short, I was interested in producing a sculptural situation defined in terms of a constant negotiation between a changing audience and the preservation, modification, or destruction, of the initial conditions of the work and figure.

30. João Gonçalves, *Untitled* (2014)
clay, wood, steel, cement, aluminium, zinc, rubber, plastic boxes, electronic proportional valve, computer, web camera
maximum height: 87 inches / other dimension: variable

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