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Rogoff, Irit. 2016. Starting in the Middle: NGOs and Emergent Forms For Cultural Institutions. In: Johanna Burton; Shannon Jackson and Dominic Willsdon, eds. Public Servants Art and the Crisis of the Common Good. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. ISBN 9780262034814 [Book Section]

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Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture

WE ARE  
the  
PEOPLE

# PUBLIC SERVANTS

ART AND THE CRISIS OF THE COMMON GOOD

EDITED BY JOHANNA BURTON, SHANNON JACKSON,  
AND DOMINIC WILLSDON

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COMMON GOOD

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The MIT Press / Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England

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## STARTING IN THE MIDDLE: NGOS AND EMERGENT FORMS FOR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS<sup>1</sup>

Irit Rogoff

*I get up each morning fully recognizing that my task is to confront capitalism and finish each day fully aware that I am unable to do it—What are the gestures available to me to engage indirectly?*

—A graduate student lament, 2015

I start with a question driven by a recognition that the notion of success, or achievement, or engagement, or significance in the realm of public culture has been hijacked. Currently, these qualities are conventionally measured by visitor numbers, outreach and inclusionary rhetorics, media chatter, market alliances, hypersignification, and celebrity and celebratory performances. On occasion we find performances of engagement that index the major dramas of the day through forms of representation, easily recognized and equally easily shelved as having delivered a reflection upon our joint conditions and mutual imbrications.

A functioning vocabulary has been integrated into the life of these institutions and structures that allows for the easy flow of critical, political effects and attitudes into forms of enunciating, exhibiting, performing, and recognizing. If we are to go beyond this easy flow that takes the form of representations of the woes of the world seamlessly placed alongside the affirmation of traditional aesthetics, what are the potential forms available to us to establish another form of operating? Are there structural possibilities for engaging with new modes of critical knowledge production within cultural life under present conditions that do not tally with the consensus of what the outward indications of achievement might be? Is it possible to develop another language for the potential significance of political aesthetics? If visitors are not simply in search of structures of identification, recognition, and edification, how can their subjectivity come into play within such structures?

I claimed I was starting with a question, but it has inevitably devolved into many questions as I consider a changing landscape in which the structures we work within are no longer a context for our substantive activities. These institutions are not necessarily more powerful than in the recent past—rather, neoliberalism’s formulaic insistence on “provision,” “satisfaction,” and “credit attainment” as forms of supremely sophisticated consumption have left little room for maneuvering. In Hari Kunzru’s story “Raj, Bohemian,” a hip, young man-about-town thinks he is following his superior intuitions about what is new and cool and trendsetting: “Wherever we went would be written about in magazines three or four months later. A single mention on a blog, and a place that had been spangled with beautiful, interesting faces would be swamped by young bankers in button-down shirts, nervously analyzing the room to see if they were having fun.”<sup>2</sup> But eventually, the protagonist discovers that he is, in fact, an instrumental part of an extensive landscape of subtle product placement in which he is instrumentalized rather than following his individual whims. When he confronts a girlfriend about this realization, she says, “Oh, don’t get on your high horse. You don’t work, either. What do you do for cash? If a girl doesn’t want a straight job, she has to monetize her social network.”<sup>3</sup>

Within the condition of rampant neoliberalism that is shaping every aspect of our lives and rewriting our very understanding of education, research, and cultural life—not to mention of pleasure and edification—it is a complex undertaking to see through the enmeshment of bureaucratic and managerial protocols and the upbeat rhetoric of achievement and commodified experience to a set of potential forms that may allow investigation, criticality, and curiosity to ally with a set of unexpected encounters in public culture.

These pervasive conditions and this linguistic enmeshment have led me to think in terms of structures rather than in terms of cultural products or cultural processes. I have been influenced not only by shades of older arguments stemming from “institutional critique” which claim that objects are rewritten and revalued by the environments and the conditions of possibility that frame them—but by the very effect that neoliberal conditions have had on my understanding of the constitutive inseparability of processes, structures, and rhetorics.

In this effort to move away from “the context of our activities,” I have begun to think of how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) might be a model for emergent cultural institutions. This is a concept I find both attractive as a way of changing the rhetoric put out by such institutions and interesting as an idea that potentially offers a new understanding of how to occupy the political without resorting to politics. If we think of how work is done without establishing an institution—educating in refugee camps, as Decolonizing Architecture has

done in Palestine; setting up writing hubs in slums, as the Raqs Media Collective has done in Delhi; producing research intensities, as Chto Delat has done in Russia; or excavating and making manifest the unwritten histories of feminism, as h.arta has done in Timisoara—we understand the scope and scale of possible cultural intervention within crisis situations. These may be ephemeral cultural structures, but they have duration and location, offer access to momentary infrastructures, produce visible products, and have the ability to galvanize community. All of these factors separate them from the operations of simple art projects and position them as offering a proposal that could be continued by other interested parties or could come to a natural end.

I am not setting up a dichotomy between so-called mainstream and so-called marginal activities. Nor am I invoking the NGO model as an instance of work that is barely visible to, or not taken into account by, those who assume they know how to identify power, thereby rendering it “virtuous” according to some alternative set of values. The museums that take up so much space, spend so much money, and loom so large on our horizon do not strike me as more significant than the smaller spaces that operate according to other criteria. Nor is it my intention to imply that smaller organizations in the field are vastly different from more visible groups like Médecins Sans Frontières, Amnesty International, or Greenpeace, as smaller groups enact minor versions of the same heroic narratives. What interests me is the possibility of eking out from the full spectrum of their activities a set of principles that can be applied to thinking about cultural institutions. I am interested in operational logics rather than in accrediting value here or there.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, I am not thinking so much about NGOs’ ability to function and do the work of rescue at the liminal edge, where extreme conditions really do dictate how they can operate. Rather, I am thinking about a different model of the NGO, one much influenced by the writing of Michel Feher and his work on nongovernmental politics.<sup>5</sup> Feher attempts to excavate from NGOs’ material and procedural practices an argument in which it is the governed that govern, not through the bureaucratic mechanisms of political systems, but through imaginative protocols and life-affirming gestures and engagements enabled and necessitated by work on the ground. First and foremost, I want to pose the NGO as a model for contemporary emergent art institutions because an NGO always begins its involvement with the recognition of a problem: not with recognition of a target audience, niche market, or leisure economy, but of an urgency in the world. NGOs—which can be either highly structured or of a looser type, well organized or ad hoc—operate somewhere between society and nonaligned coalitions. Thus they are animated and driven by recognizing problems rather than



by the desire to be legitimated, gaining their identity by immersing themselves in a problem rather than by their membership.

Beyond this entry point of recognizing a problem, NGOs have little preoccupation either with allocating the blame for who created the problem or with who is blocking the possibilities of resolving it and, instead, begin to reshape the landscape through an active network of micro-gestures. Therefore, NGOs offer an instantiation of one of our most cherished principles within either imaginative research or imaginative emergent structures: the right to start in the middle. Not to rehearse the entire structure of the argument and its history, but to go along with it and make it operate differently, operate in *our* time. Therefore, "starting in the middle" does not dismiss previous knowledge but contemporizes it, making it a subject of contemporary engagements and imperatives. If in a conventional cultural institution historical exhibitions attest to that which took place by documenting and exposing it, in emergent cultural institutions that operate similarly to NGOs, the effort to work with past archives might start from present issues: the demise of funding structures that were available, urban spaces that were inhabitable, or political communities that were active.

What is equally interesting to think about across these two types of NGO organization—the structured and the porous—is that they are both new modes of self-organization that rely on new paths of funding and that they put forward less linear and more lateral internal structures. Within these a new set of mobilities across sectors becomes manifest, without outlawing, discrediting, or dismissing one another. In NGOs we can find a fluidity between working for the organization, government, international agencies, charities, and private corporations, combining aid and research with advocacy and practice—all of which perform a mutuality and enact a coexistence of being both *inside* and *outside* of actual governance simultaneously. Likewise, in emergent cultural institutions we can find equal mobility between artistic practice, social organization, academic investigation, study and pedagogy, funded and unfunded research and fieldwork, curricular and extracurricular learning, and consulting and temporary employment in the private sector. Thus, knowledge production and problem solving are no longer opposite ends of the spectrum, and secure institutional employment does not limit one from reaching out and aligning with others on issues that cannot be clearly or exclusively addressed within institutional life.

In thinking about how one could extrapolate from a general understanding of NGOs toward a theory of emergent cultural institutions, one must first recognize that this is political and not governmental work—an important point for Feher. The ability to separate politics and governmentality might allow us to

move with greater ease between a model of aid and intervention and a model of cultural organization.

Conventionally, NGOs are perceived as protecting human rights, providing humanitarian care, compensating for absent resources or structures, and forwarding stakeholders' claims. In other words: aiding, ensuring, supplementing, protecting, and advocating. But we can just as surely argue that NGOs also open up new cultural sites and protocols by finding an entry point and inventing a set of procedures. What I am interested in trying to extrapolate here is a conceptual understanding of how emergent cultural sites operate within the art world while sharing some of the less visible, and perhaps less dramatic, properties of NGOs and their work.

Thus, it is important to think about the concept of governmentality in its Foucauldian sense, both as a governmental effort to produce citizens who are able to live out and fulfill their policies and aspirations, and as the practices and protocols, both rational and emotional, through which subjects are governed from above but seemingly from within. The concept of governmentality allows for a distinctly contemporary understanding of power. Foucault encourages us to move beyond thinking of power only in terms of the hierarchical, top-down power of the state. He widens our understanding of power to include the forms of social control enacted in disciplinary institutions such as schools, hospitals, psychiatric institutions, the welfare state, research institutions, and museums, as well as the forms of knowledge that circulate within them and legitimate their activities. Power can manifest itself by producing knowledge through certain discourses that then get internalized by individuals and guide the behavior of populations. This leads to more efficient forms of social control, as knowledge enables individuals to govern themselves.<sup>6</sup>

So governmentality has to do with the internalization of governance through a whole set of mediating disciplines, protocols, and habits, including that of the transmission of knowledge. This is a fairly simple operational understanding of governmentality, which is at stake when drawing a distinction between work that is political but not governmental, which, as I have argued above, characterizes the work of NGOs. So, for example, this type of work does not represent the institutions and ideological claims of government, the conditioning mechanisms of government, or the imposition of a set of superior values and aspirations by government.

If NGOs are characterized by new modes of self-organization, paths of funding, and understandings of effectiveness, then they are equally characterized by new articulations of who their constituencies might be and how to reach them. Theirs is a language of articulation that does not adhere to the processes

of persuasion determined by a set of hegemonic values, as do the operations of governance. Therefore their fluidity of movement does not have to do with a set of ideological loyalties, which would dictate that one couldn't possibly do this and that simultaneously, but rather is related to a less aligned or identified fluidity that can move around and between these loyalties in ways that are productive and generative. This understanding of NGOs, or of actors within NGOs, as having a fluidity of mobility is precisely due to the fact that they do not have to operate according to one absolutely coherent identity and its signification.

An NGO-like structure would have the possibility of introducing new actors into fields that are locked in on themselves. Earlier in this text, I talked about the impossibility of the either/or: you either belong to this world of multinational corporations like mainstream international museums, or you belong to the kind of marginal alternative culture that works toward a set of counteraspirations.

In organizations that operate along the lines of NGOs, this would be an impossible distinction because you might get your money from international agencies or private foundations, and you might then disseminate it through a whole set of quasi-legal, quasi-legitimate structures that operate through many different economies. Therefore, it is impossible to create a separation of strict and discrete identities that operate to that degree of mutual exclusivity.

Paraphrasing Feher, we ordinarily understand NGOs to be organizations that operate within the areas of humanitarian aid, environmental protection, human rights, and civil liberties monitoring; that serve as watchdogs; that recognize new and emerging entitlements around sexuality, around statelessness, and around the illegality of the state; and that empower new and emergent stakeholders—workers, suppliers, consumers, inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> And so, new actors are brought into fields that are traditionally locked into binary oppositions. What we find here are fluid lines of connecting spheres in which, without moving loyalties or allegiances, one instead moves one's own location and modus operandi from one site to another. Examples include hackers in discussions of civil liberties, squatters in debates on housing, drug addicts in discussions of legal reform, and students in debates about financialization and debt. One of the interesting things I've noticed is that different kinds of modus operandi in different kinds of NGOs *allow—almost insist—*on a porousness between practices that is far less preoccupied with identitarian allegiances and far more interested in the ability for something generative to take place through radical shifts in perspective.

In trying to bring the model of the NGO to the cultural sphere, it is important to note how NGOs have articulated the notion of the stakeholder and replaced concepts of the viewer, the audience, those who attend, those who listen, and those who buy tickets. As a stakeholder, you are bound by a set of economies,

which means that even though the paths of benefit are not always entirely clear, you are nevertheless immersed in that particular economy of which you are a stakeholder. In the arena of spectatorship and the understanding of audiences, we have long been stuck in between a nineteenth-century model of edification—the idea that culture makes us better in some way—and a late twentieth-century/early twenty-first-century model of manic hyperactivity in which we are activated, actualized, fulfilled, and energized, either transported and lost in reverie, or acting out every form of consumption possible within a cultural arena. In contrast to these impossible trajectories, I find the concept of the stakeholder interesting because one is part of the process of production (whatever it may be) as well as its recipient. As a beneficiary, one may provide forms of labor and functionality, but one also provides a set of expectations that in each case are to be determined anew. Thus, stakeholders can be placed in the middle, somewhere in between edification and the manic hyperactivity of participation as part of their very fabric—being producer, consumer, and actor at one and the same time.

One cannot conflate the value of an NGO with the rhetoric of its intentions. As Feher says: "In practice, however, the distinction between governmental and nongovernmental politics proves more complicated than an opposition between top-down arrogance and bottom-up earnestness—or, for that matter, between cold-blooded efficiency and well-meaning irrelevance."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the self-situating of emergent structures, their understanding of their affiliation and constituency, creates a complex and contingent entity—one with a constantly shifting ground of problems and issues that NGOs decide to address, thereby rendering them unable to claim a moral high ground since they do not proffer solutions or recommend policies. Yet they can claim processes that unpack, make visible, intervene, support, and lend an ear, and thus produce a critical language for the urgent issues of the day.

If we look closely and conceptualize or theorize how NGOs operate as a rhetoric rather than as a replacement of top-down determination with bottom-up activities, we see that there are much more complex dynamics in operation. One of these dynamics is the multifaceted indexicality of how NGOs operate: by necessity, links with so many different strata of funding and technology, dissemination, and self-legitimation, that they cannot be simply relegated to either the top-down or the bottom-up schema. Equally important are the ways in which resulting activity may be a set of accidental, informal sociabilities that emerge through encounters within the work but then become the actual fabric of the work. How, then, do we connect notions of informal sociability to notions of effectiveness?

We have, over the last fifteen years, spoken a great deal about the sites of cultural practices as sites of gathering, of conversation, of exchange, of research and study, and of encounters between different kinds of knowledge—we call them sites of knowledge production. The NGO model allows us to think about the relation between the kinds of informal sociabilities that we see within the art world and their possible link to an emergent notion of effectiveness. Obviously, though, this model is not going to be effective in terms of visitor numbers or corporate sponsorship. Our version of new sociabilities in the art world has been developed by insisting on the performance of ideas, by insisting on bringing bodies of knowledge into head-on contact with one another when they do not mix in any other logic, by constituting subjects—rather than reproducing existing ones—through unexpected assemblages, by positing slightly fantastical “what if” scenarios. Much of what creative practices have introduced into public culture is difficult to translate into effectiveness in an institutional culture judged by visitor numbers, favorable reviews, or private patronage and capital investment. But it is absolutely possible to translate into effectiveness along the lines of NGO culture. A hallmark of NGO culture is its ability to fluidly connect spheres within a situation that is confronting a crisis—a moment of criticality that crystallizes a set of problems viewed from both official and entirely informal sets of perspectives. These operations of subjectivity infused with different knowledges, not of expertise but of experience, are what make up the new criteria for effectiveness.

In understanding that new affects are absolutely as important as new institutions, one of the things that we have begun to recognize with an NGO model emerging in the cultural sphere is that we *can talk* about an affective regime or an affective economy that is made up of different components beyond material densities—that rage can be a density, and so can affection and sentiment and loyalty—and that we gauge a situation by the proximity of all these densities. Sets of lateral moves that bring together divergent and often hostile knowledge and *modi operandi* are characteristic of how NGOs operate in the field. Whatever it takes, whatever is to hand, in whatever combination one is able to imagine, in whatever languages one has at one’s disposal, these are things that allow us to think in terms of an “affective regime” or an “affective economy” and not purely a material or technological economy.

All of this has made me think about the Showroom, where I first took up this discussion and an examination of organizations, like this London-based space, that have a catch-as-catch-can approach to resources—taking up space, articulating problems, involving communities, and giving space to half-baked ideas, in order to reflect on what it is that is operating across so many institutions simultaneously. In the landscape of a postcolonial, diasporic, privatized, and capitalized megalopolis like London—a landscape of exceptional inequality of resources

and accesses—an institution like the Showroom is operating as a small, underfunded, agile, and responsive institution. In such a context, what allows it to intervene without making claims to affecting or changing the culture in a declared way, as a policy or as a goal? What does it mean to make manifest archives of former radical moments and to make visible activities of reading together or worrying together, or fantasizing together? These questions are very important for us in London, where we experienced the “Tate effect” at the beginning of the 2000s.<sup>9</sup> What appeared to be an entertainment-machine spectacle was actually the agent of a cultural shift to complete domination by a capitalist logic within the art world in which growth, investment, and capitalization are now the criteria by which institutions measure and celebrate themselves.

For cultural institutions in large urban metropolises that seem to constantly need to expand and get bigger, the getting bigger is usually in direct relation to the disuse of some other entity of public culture, like a library or meeting room or legal advocacy center, that then gets integrated into a set of cultural buildings—such is absolute corporate logic, the logic of the capitalization of institutions. Thus the urgency of trying to think of new notions of being effective, of not being captured within a regime of constant growth and expansion, but nevertheless having some criteria for being effective, having a presence, and making a difference. It is here that an affective regime or an affective economy can become important, because they both counter spectacle, growth, and capital investment with something else that is immaterial but of consequence. An affective regime perceives its achievements through patterns of identification, of engagement, of attention, and of seriousness, rather than through visitor numbers, grants, and celebrity. So when we have a series of small, emergent organizations that are actually able to *show* the quite concrete consequences that come out of, let’s say, a regime of affect, then they lend credence to work that is struggling to come about within the cultural field. This sometimes takes the form of collective public communing and at other times the form of unplanned performative study, as it did during “Regarding Terror: The RAF-Exhibition” at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, in which hundreds of young people sat on the institution’s cold cement floor in the dead of winter and read through the extensive archives of the period that were set up as a marginal extension of the work on display.<sup>10</sup> This is a form of working with and inside a set of conditions rather than ignoring such conditions and replacing them with the reverie, edification, external judgement, or manic hyperactivity discussed earlier. Working inside, within a set of conditions, is one of the foremost characteristics of how NGOs function—they start in the middle, and they research conditions and engage with them, yet they do not write position papers of ideal scenarios or make promises of a better future.



Emma Smith, *PLAYBACK*, 2011. Workshop at the Showroom, London. Courtesy the artist and the Showroom. Photo: Mariona Otero

Ricardo Basbaum, *collective-conversation (re-projecting london)*, 2013. Live reading and recording with Ismail Ali, Ricardo Basbaum, Hannah Clayden, Jareh Das, Henrietta Hale, Daniela Mattos, Massimiliano Mollona (Mao), Emily Pethick, Louise Shelley, and Tom Tlalim. Presented at the Showroom, London. Courtesy the artist and the Showroom. Photo: Daniela Mattos

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Aural Contract Sessions (The Interrogator)*, 2010. Workshop at the Showroom, London. Courtesy the artist and the Showroom



Actie Schone Kunsten (ASK!) and Justice for Domestic Workers (J4DW), cleaning action as part of the Grand Domestic Revolution project by Casco—Office for Art, Design and Theory (2012). Presented in collaboration with the Showroom, London. Courtesy the Showroom

Annette Krauss, *Kittry* (Quintin Kynaston School, London), from the *Hidden Curriculum / (In)visibilities* series, 2012 (still). Video. Produced by the Showroom, London. Courtesy Hidden Curriculum / (In)visibilities and the Showroom

For these reasons, I've been very interested in thinking about NGOs as a way to read both the actual activities and the greater potentials of small, emergent, often ephemeral cultural institutions. I am purposely not using the notion of marginality because I don't think such small institutions are marginal: they are operating at the *edges* of things and are clients both of distributive economies like the Arts Council and of other distributive economies of community interests and critical coalitions. Equally, they give space, credence, and legibility to moments of collective sadness, to a sense of being let down or of not quite being up to the task ahead that so often accompanies the hard work of staying afloat within the public sector—when what one feels is important to do is not valued by funding or evaluating bodies. So, how does one negotiate the fact that we are gaining from several contradictory distributive economies? How does one articulate the fact that there are different and contradictory sets of knowledge at work within the operation? How do we deal with not having an ideal audience in mind, which you want to capture, which you know exactly how to reach?

Part of the way in which one deals with these questions is to identify a larger urgency outside of that institutional logic and to speak to that urgency and not to the demands of the institutional logic. I think it is the agility and versatility of smaller arts organizations and of ad hoc emergent platforms to be able to locate and articulate these urgencies that in turn allow them to operate through another logic. To identify and look at a problem, to expand the range of actors visible and operative within its spheres, to recognize that any given problem is also the site of new knowledge—which we often are unable to name—and to acknowledge that living out a problem with full awareness may be far more important than convincing oneself that it may be solved: such are the logics of many NGO activities around the globe. If cultural institutions could equally recognize that their task is to live out the problems that affect societies both locally and globally at another register, they might have a more convincing *modus operandi* than the triumphalist one of growth, expansion, and the endless counting of hordes of visitors, of excessively activated viewers, and of manipulative marketing strategies. Jean-Luc Nancy has repeatedly spoken of the importance of replacing “having in common” with “being in common,”<sup>11</sup> and it is this model of the NGO that might clarify for us in the art world what “being in common” might mean and what forms it might take.

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“Starting in the Middle: NGOs and Emergent Forms for Cultural Institutions” by curator and writer Irit Rogoff was written in 2015 for this volume.

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## NOTES

1. My thanks to the Showroom, London, for the opportunity to first rehearse these thoughts as a presentation in 2014 and to Michel Feher for two years of exceptional insights and analyses in the lecture series “The Age of Appreciation,” Goldsmiths, University of London, 2013–15.
2. Hari Kunzru, “Raj, Bohemian,” *New Yorker*, March 10, 2008, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/10/raj-bohemian>.
3. Ibid.
4. In a conversation in September 2015, Isaac Julien stated that in his opinion the Studio Museum in Harlem was the most important curatorial training program there is, despite the fact that it does not call itself a curatorial training program. What he meant is that curators of considerable ability who are sustained by a political project and a body of less than universally acknowledged information have consistently emerged from the Studio Museum. Therefore, the institution is making a contribution to the field that is proportionally beyond its own scale—in which case, why would we categorize its position as midlevel or otherwise? It is this very contradiction that makes the Studio Museum so important and that makes it clear that the value of a contribution has little to do with scale and much more to do with replacing spectacle with informed, considered, and critical projects.
5. Michel Feher, “The Governed in Politics,” in Michel Feher, ed., *Nongovernmental Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books/MIT Press, 2007), 12–27.
6. Michel Foucault, “24 January 1979,” in Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 51–73.
7. Feher, “The Governed in Politics,” 12–27.
8. Ibid., 13.
9. See T. J. Demos, “The Tate Effect,” in Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, eds., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums* (Karlsruhe: ZKM, Center for Art and Media, 2009).
10. “Regarding Terror: The RAF-Exhibition,” KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2005.
11. Jean-Luc Nancy, introduction to *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), iii–iv.