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Between Kitchen Semiotics and the Privatised Public: How is the Personal Political in Art Today?

The Agamben quote selected as the epigram for this conference describes private life as like the 'stolen fox' hidden under the boy's clothes, that cannot be confessed to even while it tears at his flesh. What an extraordinary image this is by which to imagine our most private selves; alien and self-attacking, hidden and guilty, yet beautiful, precious and animal. Let's try and keep this image in mind as we move through a few brief scenes in the last century of western autonomous art in order to extract something with the general usefulness of an aphorism from so many foxes under so many shirts. But we should also be aware of how, in the following paragraph, Agamben develops this cryptic image – he writes:

It is as if each of us obscurely felt that precisely the opacity of our clandestine life held within it a genuinely political element; as such shareable par excellence – and yet, if one attempts to share it, it stubbornly eludes capture and leaves behind it only a ridiculous and incommunicable remainder.
(xxi)

To this caution we could add that not only is private life in the last instance something incommunicable, but that whenever it is shared it is always assimilated to another, often alien, purpose. Agamben, in *The Use of Bodies*, this momentous last instalment of his biopolitical saga *Homo Sacer*, gestures towards a utopian politics situated on the threshold between the public and private, the political and biographical, *zoë* and *bios*. In gesturing towards this, however, he always cautions how any such politics runs the dual danger of 'making shipwreck' in the private or, conversely, in attempting to externalise autobiography, of falling into 'idiocy'. Here he alludes to our simultaneous living of life and its live-casting over social media, though he'd never deign to actually call it by its name. While Agamben has a tendency to render his concepts transhistorical, a tendency to find analogous forms across history, we can, I think, derive different, more directly political insights when we think of this politicisation of private life in historically dialectical terms – the effect of historical events upon each other. If we look at a direct historical sequence of events, however impressionistically, whilst applying his conceptual framework, we can witness how intimate, dissonant or confrontational expressions of private life by artists in modernity are continuously, and today more than ever, appropriated, commodified and put to use.

In my book *Art and (Bare) Life*, I attempt to trace such a dialectic in relation to the interlinked development of biopower and autonomous art more broadly. I am interested in how the modern scientific and political conceptions of 'life itself' – life taken as an autonomous value – are immanent to biopolitical government and art's

turn towards life, its vitalisation, corporealisation, or *blurring with life*. I track these two courses in order to think about how biopower, which works largely by way of a *positive* not negative or negating relation to life, finds such a transformed art extremely valuable and acts to assimilate and instrumentalise it for a variety of ends. This can be closely related to the danger Agamben points to in the stalled dialectics of private life's politicisation, as well as to the stalled dialectic of 20th century avant-garde art's realisation as a praxis of life.

For our task today however, I want to think more specifically about the relationship between different historical moments of the artistic engagement with what we are calling private life – but could also call the personal, lyrical or biographical – and those alien or external forces that structure, surround and devour such expressions the very same moment. Far from solitary beads strung on a necklace though, these moments of art history are more like the spirals of a corkscrew whose sharp end drives into an unknown future. There seems to be an equal and opposite motion, a double helix perhaps, between an art that gives representation to private life, often working towards abolishing the distinction between art and life, and those political and economic forces that aim to enclose and norm the interior life of capitalist subjects. Such power renders life-expressions useful to its programmes while using their vitality to bestow upon itself the appearance of something natural, spontaneous and life-like. This is certainly one way of thinking about the self-devouring aspect of the fox under our clothes. This othering of self can be illuminated further by reference to one of Agamben's key conceptual pairs: the doubled term 'form of life' written with and without hyphens. The life of subjects, he argues, is continuously rendered a 'form of life', a way or style of living proper to an individual or group (*bios*) whose precondition is its biologically determining substrate (*zoë*). Here he gives the example of such figures as the HIV sufferer, the housewife, the refugee and the porn star. For of life without hyphens is the split and hence depotentiated relation between flesh and identity. To this Agamben rather confusingly contrasts the very same term 'form-of-life', only this time the term is hyphenated, to express a life that is free of any such scission between its corporeality and its way of living. Form-of-life, written with hyphens, crucially factors *thought* into the relation between the way of living and individual embodiment, because it is only through thought, he argues, that one develops a *use of oneself* by which life's defining potentiality is restored. For Agamben, it is only by restoring this potential to affect oneself, and "to be affected by one's own receptivity" (210) that we can become a '*form-of-life*, in which it is never possible to isolate something like a bare life." (211) This does indeed present a puzzling predicament for that art which potentiates life through self-affection, and in this very act seems to unfailingly produce new and labile surfaces for life's assimilation into biopolitical forms of capitalist control. This is a predicament I hope to develop as I move through three art historical scenes: the subjectivism of early 20th century expressionism, the objectivism of the '60s and '70s 'life performed' genre, and the

contemporary genre of immersive artworks which reach deeply inside us, harnessing our psychobiological capacities in fully biopolitical, technologically enhanced ways.

The first art historical scene I would like to address is that of early 20th century Expressionism and the ensuing Marxist debates of the 1930s that unfolded within the uneasy atmosphere of mounting European fascism. These debates most famously raged between the former friends and revolutionary communists Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács over the allegedly hidden or disavowed solidarity that exists between Expressionism and fascism – debates which people are revisiting today with interest amidst what appears to be a contemporary return of fascist politics and its signature themes of racism, anti-immigrant fervour, paranoia and nativism. But how is it possible to imagine that the subjectivist nature of this movement could be accused of complicity with totalitarian societies and their tendency to, in Hannah Arendt's words, 'annihilate the individual'? Herein lies the crux of the debate which was kicked off by anti-fascist cultural critics. Writing in left wing journals such as *Das Wort* and *International Literatur*, the likes of Bernard Ziegler and Georg Lukács claimed on the one hand that Expressionism, if taken to its logical ends, leads to fascism because it opens the door to a regressive atavism.

The main argument levelled by this faction, many of whom advocated a neo-classical model of painterly social realism close to Hitler's own preferred style, was that subjectivism is vulnerable to fascism because it abandons the Enlightenment project of reason and its attempt to produce knowledge systems adequate to the totality of capitalism, a feat best perfected by thinkers such as Hegel and Marx who had provided the Left with immense intellectual resources. Instead of dedicating art to the socialist cause by advancing objective representations of the world in the teeth of decadent bourgeois individualism, Expressionism's critics accused it of rejecting any unified notion of the totality. Lukács described its conjunction of multiple perspectives, mixing of styles and periodicities as "junk clumsily glued together." He also cautioned that "their creative method could without distortion be pressed into the service of that synthesis of decadence and atavism which is demagoguery and Fascism." While taking the diametrically opposed position, Ernst Bloch in his 1938 essay 'Discussing Expressionism', does concede that expressionist painting can be accused of amorphousness, often remaining "incomprehensible to the observer" (26). Yet this incoherence is, for him, the risk and vulnerability exposed by those wanting to confront the totality of dominant social representations. "Any art," Bloch wrote, "which strives to exploit the real fissures in surface inter-relations and to discover the new in their crevices, appears in Lukács' eyes merely as a wilful act of destruction. [Lukács] thereby equates experiments in demolition with a condition of decadence." (22) We should note here, then, that for Bloch social critique in this historical moment is connected with the aesthetic multiplication of subjective experiences and its displacement of consensual and unified representations. This has

the paradoxical effect, however, of turning the stakes of the argument inside out in order to claim that the putatively personal is nevertheless oppositional and thus de facto political. In this sense subjective expression is seen by both sides of the debate as serving a collective political purpose, whether fascist or emancipatory.

Here we are reminded of how the terms of the debate established by Bloch in the 1930s would later be reversed by art theorist Benjamin Buchloh who, in 1981, condemned the international resurgence of expressionism, the Neo-expressionist movement, as being culturally regressive due to its market-compatible misrepresentation of the generic nature of gestural painting as something uniquely expressive, where instead it is "a coded structure which cannot be an unmediated 'expression.'" (56) It seems important to add that the '80s return to large canvases, historical and psycho-sexual themes, and gestural painting developed largely in reaction to the complex and cool deconstructions of the personal that could be grouped under the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political' in the Happenings, Fluxus, Conceptual and Performance art of the 1960s and '70s.

These post-war experiments in 'performing life', as Alan Kaprow called it, will serve as my second art historical scene for thinking through autonomous art's relationship to private life. As with first-wave Expressionism, the artistic engagement of private life that we find in the art of this time inhabits a paradoxical topology. On the one hand, and progressively, the private 'form of life' (no hyphens) which artists acted upon and through in this moment was rendered something alien and converted into a general material upon which to perform a series of self-estrangements. The collective proposition was something like: 'life as it is lived becomes the artwork, and through recursive receptivity the artwork opens this closed form of life to transformation'. In many ways this neo-avantgarde exploration of life pre-empts Judith Butler's circular theory of (gender) identity as being a performance that produces the very referent to which it is made to refer; a circuit that can be opened up to different performances. On the other hand, and problematically, this act of bringing embodied life directly into public attention as the artwork also and involuntarily, we might say, produced a spectacular image of the artist as living an *exceptional life*. In rendering the artist's life a medium of art making, this generation helped effectuate the hypostasis of the 'artistic life' within an expanding consumer society. To illustrate this direction of travel, we can think of the shift in Marina Abramovic's practice from her 1973 piece *Rhythm 0* in which she cedes control of her life to the audience for 6 hours as a way of making manifest the power relations in the room, compared to her 2012 work *The Artist is Present*, in which she offers up the hallowed aura of her artistic being to an endless tide of spectator-cum-pilgrims. I want to try and relate this transformation of 'life performed' from a critical gesture into an affirmative, market compatible one to the simultaneous transformation of social democracies, with their collectivised forms of

protection and social insurance, into the neoliberal society of individualised risk and self-reliance, and think about how private life is transformed in the process.

But first, let's look at some examples to get a deeper sense of this dialectic. In his 1979 text 'Performing Life' Alan Kaprow introduces his proposal for an artwork with a recap of the Happening's evolution, explaining how he wanted to make art without reference to pre-existing artistic genres or means. To this end he claims to have eradicated art media, contexts, audiences, plots, acting, repeated performances and, eventually readable scripts. In the absence of models, the attention and receptivity that are as essential to art as to Agamben's fully potentiated form-of-life turns inward, focusing on largely unconscious activities which comprise everyday life, from breathing, to getting dressed in front of the mirror, to catching the bus. He explains: "When you do life consciously, however, life becomes pretty strange – paying attention changes the things attended to [...] A new art/life genre therefore came about, reflecting equally the artificial aspects of everyday life and the lifelike qualities of created art." (195) The proposition itself centred on focused attention on what is normally relegated as unconscious activity, especially breath, and conversely repressing, through recordings, headphones and amplifications, what might otherwise be natural objects of attention such as the sound of the ocean. Kaprow's proposition is to scramble the codes of life as a continuous project of scrambling the codes of art, and vice versa.

The self-alienating objectification of forms of life (no hyphens) through a retraining of attention onto private life during this period became a conspicuous activity for feminist artists and artists of colour. Martha Rosler's 1975 video work *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and Chantal Ackerman's 1976 film *Jeanne Dielmann, 23 Quay de Commerce, 1080 Brussels* deliver us dissections of the occluded female domestic sphere reduced to a deadpan grammar. Here, in the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism's celebration by the post-war consumer culture, we see a rejection of any expressionist shattering of the totality and an almost reverse image of a self that has been manufactured by totalistic social forms. This produces representations of the self as other, or othered by society. Expression is replaced by what we could call social abstraction; a patchwork of behaviours, objects, gestures and spaces which devolve upon a subject whose identity is merely an effect of social forces rather than a centre of agency and expression. Rosler's blankly parodic demonstration of kitchen equipment confronts us with the deadeningly repetitive tasks of the housewife who she performs as seething with latent violence as she slices the air with a knife or stabs at a metal bowl with a chopper. In the closing sequences of the film she enacts the shapes of the letters U, V, W, X, Y with her arms and torso before jaggedly slicing the air with a knife to draw the letter Z. Embodiment of social codes stores up a residue that threatens to revolt; there is a stifled self in there somewhere. Ackerman's 3-hour 45 minute movie *Jeanne Dielmann* is a head-on, durational account of a single

mother's domestic existence as a care-giver and prostitute. Ackerman has explained that she chose to cast the well-known and glamorous actress Delphine Seyrig as Dielmann because she wanted the viewer to watch what would otherwise be unwatchable. As Dielmann peels potatoes, massages mincemeat into meatloaf, lays the table and washes herself without love in real-time cinematic sequences, we live the repetition of her chores with her, become attentive to her skilful touch, suffer her unrecognised labours and reflect on our own. The film excavates the interiority of the viewer through the suffering durational experience of its subject. We are 'freed' from the action of narrative cinema to reflect on the architecture of our own lives which entrap us.

These artistic renderings of private life into a legible grammar combine the exposure of life's social construction with the prospect of its re-grammaticalization, the possibility of its being rewritten by that self-same life and those of others. This feels very close to Agamben's utopian image of the politicised private life. Yet how does this apply to the black experience forged by the bloody history of plantation slavery for which the only subjectivity allocated by a racist society is one of objecthood? This is the contradictory existence suffered by the 'commodity that speaks', the ironic term Fred Moten has given to slave life. Here African American artistic deconstructions of being, in Fanon's words, 'an object among objects' in the aftermath of the US civil rights struggles seem pre-armed against the pitfalls of the art/life genre's assimilation to the spectacle of exceptional individuality. Amidst a predominantly white and male artworld, for instance, Adrian Piper's paradigmatic 'metaperformances' experimented with the catalysis of states of consciousness which she deliberately induced but withheld from being directly shared. In her 1970 *Performance for Max's Kansas City* she entered the super hip New York downtown nightclub wearing a black eye-mask, earplugs and gloves, in order to resist the co-optation of her consciousness into the 'art self-consciousness' of the club. In her words, 'I presented myself as a silent, secret, passive object seemingly ready to be absorbed into their consciousness as an object. [...] My objecthood became my subjecthood.'

This last sentence seems to summarise something of this entire era of art-as-life experiments which had moved so far from Zola's description of art as 'nature seen through a temperament', reversing it into something closer to 'temperament deconstructed by art'. While for some, such as Abramovic, the use of the artistic life as an exemplar segued easily into the exemplarity of the life of the artist, for a female African American artist such as Piper the double consciousness required to hold this stance had a different history and a different aim. Although the auto-affective life performances of this period should generally be thought in relation to the struggles for civil rights and social equality that crucially form its context, nevertheless the black experience of being programmatically denied subjecthood creates a more complex doubling of the act of self-alienation as life performance. Piper's embrace of

objecthood as subjecthood directly subverts the interiority that, arguably, Rosler and Ackerman's works imply as a zone of hidden desire and latent fury; a coiled subjecthood that belies sexist objectification and can strike back with knives. Strangely, perhaps Piper's work may come closest to Agamben's utopian 'form-of-life' in that she seems to reject the socially imposed scission between her zoë, or biology, and the life it apparently authenticates by embracing her reduction to a thing as a gesture of social defiance. My thingness, she seems to say, can become an object pointed at you and there's nothing you can do to reach me.

The representational precision of the personal as political that we find in these works, shares in the political empowerment and relative social equality that peaked during the late 1970s in the US and across Europe. As Melinda Cooper states in her recent book *Family Values* on the biopolitics of US welfare regimes and the social engineering of Fordist and post-Fordist populations, 'By the 1970s then, the New Deal's major social insurance program, Social Security, had expanded in quantitative terms to include both women and African Americans – Fordism's non-normative subjects – and to keep pace with rising wages.' She also explains how a succession of legal suits 'repeatedly struck down the panoply of written and unwritten rules that had served to enforce sexual normativity throughout the Fordist era' and the conditionality of its welfare regime. (122) The representational precision of both political and artistic deconstructions of white patriarchal capitalism during these times had unleashed, a general *social amorphousness* that terrified social conservatives who had discerned a connection between welfare democracy and the breakdown of the traditional family. They were storing up a neoliberal and socially conservative backlash the climax of which we are undoubtedly living through today. As we have seen, Bloch's notion of exploiting 'real fissures in the surface inter-relations' in order to discover new possibilities is not an aesthetic activity restricted to a subjectivist genre. Yet if Expressionism levelled 'amorphousness' against a false totality, here we can see how the reverse strategy which aimed precision blows at the social production of identity can and did help to unleash the amorphousness that must come from experimenting with new forms of life.

For many of these movements, political and artistic, non-identity was the utopian horizon they continuously tracked. Jonathan Katz explains how the sexual liberation movement above all elevated "not difference but commonality, indeed, universality to defining status", so much so that by his account it "warred" with other social liberation movements in its quest, "to the point of attempting to erase embodied, biological differences." (220) The progressive art politics of the '60s and '70s seem also to have attempted a passage through difference into commonality, moving from the precise deconstruction of identity's syntax into the liberation of amorphous identity. However, the process has clearly made shipwreck in our current regime of ubiquitous identity specification, drifting far from any sense of a utopian end goal.

The enigmatic 'smile without the cat', as Foucault put it in relation to the happy play of emancipated sexualities, has turned into a *cat without a smile*. This, it seems to me can, at least in part, be explained by neoliberal capitalism's ability to accommodate and reify non-normative identities within its expanded regime of credit-backed 'asset welfarism'. In other words, its dismantling of the welfare state and collectivised forms of insurance was ultimately achieved in the '90s through the inclusion of women, queers and people of colour into regimes of debt from which they had formerly been excluded. Now able to access credit, those without social power or wealth were ejected from welfare dependency into the 'ownership society', a mass migration that stored up the subprime crisis and its austere aftermath. Today we have a combination of individualised risk, precarity and weakening social representation to which the increased presence of 'minorities' within the spaces of culture, and to a lesser degree the political realm, seem to pose little threat. The efficiency of neoliberalism's siphoning off of collective wealth to the 1 percent via a waiving of taxes for the rich, the privileging of family inheritance over social ownership and attacks on progressive forms of social redistribution has seen the public sphere sold off and hollowed out. The reciprocal image to this is the increased subsumption of our self-relation, our sexuality, our creativity and private life into market exchangeable goods. This internal space excavated by progressive identitarian art and politics has come to provide some of the principal surfaces for speculative value extraction within late capitalism.

I want to turn, finally, to a scene that can hopefully give a clear sense of how the dialectic of power and resistance is legible in artistic treatments of private life today. As the biotech industry and data capitalism discovers the infinite plasticity of biological and social life, the life/art genre is darkly following suit. There is a prevailing tendency towards the use of immersive environments, re-enactments, fictioning, live action role play (LARPs) or real game play (RGPs), and what the art collective OMSK Social Club call 'bleed' between life and game. There is an appetite to explore and critique the paper-thin interface between our habitual sense of reality and a 'lucid world of play' (OMSK). The artistic interest in these mutative experiences comes at a time of capitalism's programmatic blurring of the distinction between materiality and simulacral hyperreality – in the culture industry, the military-industrial complex, life science and medicine, and the algorithmically driven financial markets. One of many questions we might pursue here is how these breaches seem to entail a crude divorce of mind and body on the one hand, and a subtler remapping of self-relation continuous with life's reflexive relationship to thought? We are suspended between forgetting and mutating the flesh.

Immersive projects, which have become the order of the day, seem equally to dwell in this uncertain zone. Here we can think of Jeremy Deller's 2001 historical re-enactment of the 1984 Battle of Orgreave, a pitched battle between striking miners and police in which some of the historical participants were made to replay this

chapter in their own lives. Or Ed Fornieles's 3 day LARP from earlier this year, involving 10 participants enacting an alt-right online gamer group who meet-up IRL and which purportedly investigates the construction of masculinity. The participants are 'released' from the rules after the first two days and, surprise surprise, don't know how to return to their own identities. And finally the OMSK Social Club's darkside rave-cum-LARP's which flirt with real life game-play's bleed into everyday existence. In the words of OMSK, 'reappropriating life allows the human mind to be disrupted and brought into the state of the uncanny, enabling it to hack its common nodes of perception and identity.' But who is doing the reappropriating here? It seems clear that there is a shift from artists' deconstructions of auto-biography to contemporary artists' more direct and manipulative experimentation with the internal state of participants, drawing upon their psychological and somatic capacities to produce contagious states of altered reality. The audience become what Foucault calls, in relation to human capital, 'abilities machines' that serve as material for the artwork, and they seem to be inclined to participate because the reality effects of these works are spellbinding. To conjure Agamben's terminology again, this strikes me as a case of the stalled self-affection of life by thought, in that these works hijack the receptivity of living beings but suspend its capacity for self-affection. Receptivity, which is linked to life's plasticity, is divorced from the life it resides within.

It seems clear that the invasive over-presence of immersive artworks is a reflexive response to the hollowing out of the self by digital neoliberal capitalism. When every move we make can be data-tracked and commodified as much as our personal conduct used to peg our position on the fluctuating human capital index, calculating on one's self-relation and personal behaviour has become the ultimate target of contemporary power and the sweet spot of value creation. For this reason the assertion of minoritarian identity is no longer necessarily a challenge to hegemony, but a niche within an endless spectrum of market augmentations. Art, as always, dwells within these social forces and relations of production, and just as expressionism and fascism emerged as responses to industrial capitalism, hallucinatory experiments in identity morphing have emerged on the cusp of capitalism's arrival at the new frontier of speculation on 'life itself'. Yet the crude abandonment of care for participants' freedom of experience, the Dionysian crashing of their mechanisms of self-control and self-recognition seems to me to signal a new type of amorphousness within the artwork. This is no longer the rejection of false totalities, as in expressionism, nor the prospect of life liberated from biopolitical specification, as glimpsed in the art/life genre, but the amorphousness rendered by a new appreciation of life's plasticity. Mutation is not the slow emergence of natural evolution and ontic self-affection, but capitalism's programmatic drive. As with credit markets, diverse identities are not included so much as rated, seen as the sum of their capacities and abilities, not as the nucleus of their own emanations.

The reduction of the individual to a hackable lucid gamer is reminiscent, for me, of Hannah Arendt's description of totalitarian regimes who work through the destruction of individuality. "For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events" The reliance of these sensuously seductive and engulfing works on our psychobiological receptivity, which must necessarily freeze the spontaneity of thought in order to take full-effect, are locked into the self-same biopolitical logic they claim to disturb or disrupt. It is now the spectator's experience of their own vitality and self-relation which becomes profoundly amorphous and thus depotentiated. Through this uncanny misrecognition of the self, our interiority can seem quite impersonal. The life-hack these works perform, then, is ultimately analogous to the datasets formed by surveillance capitalism that congeal around our everyday behaviour, modelling it in order to predict, influence, model and control it. Here I am left wondering whether this is the fox under our clothes that has become entirely hostile, or whether it is in fact a quite different animal who we mistake for ourselves.