

# Mediations

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## House and Field: The Aesthetics of Saturation

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This essay is situated seasonally within the context of autumn, with its own seasonal discontents. Autumn here indexes not a respite from the anticipated relentlessness of winter, but rather a decay or a waning. These "signs of autumn," rather than the free play of signs, articulate something about a major form of contemporary experience and its recent history: not an experience of slippage, disjunction, or difference, but of suffusion and density — of saturation and stasis — that unfold as decline. Autumn marks what feels like a terminal sense of crisis and contradiction that permeates contemporary life in the age of late capitalism.

The term "Signs of Autumn" is drawn from the French historian Fernand Braudel's claim that an economic stage of financial expansion — the transfer of investment from production to speculative finance — is a "sign of autumn." That is, that the growth of speculative capital or financialization is not a sign of the increasing strength of the economic order, but is rather symptomatic of a development precursive to the onset of terminal decline. The growth of speculative capital is correlated to *saturated* conditions of the real economy: conditions of overproduction and over-accumulation from which "fictitious capital" provides an escape valve by offering an expanded field of investment. In other words, the redirection of capital to financial markets indicates a saturated field of productive processes. Such a relation is characteristic of what Robert Brenner calls "the long downturn" from 1973 to 1993, during which the declining rate of profit in the industrial sector was offset by the growth of financial markets. Arguably, it is the relation of this financial expansion to the real economy that ultimately resulted in the bursting of speculative technology and housing "bubbles" in 2002 and 2008. As Giovanni Arrighi has argued, the economic hegemony of the United States may have now reached a terminus at which the speculative market upon which it relied is reined in by persistent contradictions of the real economy that unfold as crises. In other words, the financial expansion of the economy — which compensated for over-production and over-accumulation in the first instance — is itself saturated.

Autumn, then, means something different now; it functions a-seasonally. It does not

foreshadow the brutal discontent of winter nor anticipate the emergence of the cruel optimism of spring. While we might, as Jameson notes, have become accustomed to the rhythms of boom and bust, “to a recurrence from which the system always recovers in a new way, stronger and more unforeseeably prosperous than ever before,” what Marx is describing when he describes the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation, as Aaron Benanav and *Endnotes* argue,

is not a “crisis” in the sense usually indicated by Marxist theory, i.e., a periodic crisis of production, consumption, or even accumulation. [Rather] in and through these cyclical crises, a secular crisis emerges, a *crisis of the reproduction of the capital-labour relation itself*.<sup>1</sup>

For the latter, for labor, this means that more and more unemployed workers will be unable to reinsert themselves into the reproduction process becoming absolutely redundant to the needs of capital. For capital, this crisis registers not just as overaccumulation but as an overconcentration of capital in circulatory technologies, rather than as an expansion or restructuring of production as such. Indeed, as Jasper Bernes notes in the recent collection on *Communization and its Discontents*, “circulation no longer shrouds production in the mystifying forms of false equivalence, but penetrates it, disperses it laterally, and submits it to complex mediations” via finance, education, health care, and information technologies.<sup>2</sup> The double-bind of an autumnized capitalist totality, in other words, presents itself topologically not just as unevenness but as a limit at which the reproduction of labor-power figures secondarily to the more immediate imperative to circulate. In other words, the very form through which capital and labor relate — i.e., production and reproduction — reaches terminal saturation. And what turns out to have reached terminus for Bernes is not just the figurability of a radically different future, but even continuity as such.

But what Bernes and *Endnotes* identify as a fairly recent economic phenomenon has for quite some time posed for Jameson a problem for art, or more specifically the “end of art,” a problem at least logically if not temporally linked to a claim about the “end of history.” If, as Jameson wrote in his 1994 essay “‘End of Art’ or ‘End of History’?”, the suffusion of the world by the market figures as a fabric sewn shut (“the entire world... suddenly sewn up into a total system from which no one can secede”), then to think a rupture of that immobilization of our imaginative capacity insists upon a material intervention, an attention to the thread of the fabric and its forms of binding.<sup>3</sup>

We can turn here to an instance of a formal engagement within the spatial dilemma identified by Jameson. Operating within a context entirely subsumed by an economic logic that violently discards anything or anyone that does not contribute to the profitable deployment of surplus, a context referred to as the housing crisis, or here perhaps, the *crisis of the house*, Rachel Whiteread builds a cube.

## House

*House*, installed in 1993, is the cement casting of the interior of a condemned three-story Victorian house located on 193 Grove Road in East London.<sup>4</sup> Rachel Whiteread constructed the work by spraying liquid concrete into the structure's empty shell before its walls were removed. It remained the final house on the street; the other properties on Grove Road had already been demolished to make way for redevelopment. The street was due for demolition when Whiteread, in conjunction with the commissioning body Artangel, and with the permission of the local council, took over the last remaining empty house and turned it into a mold for a sculpture. She won the annual Turner Prize for best young British artist in 1993 — the first woman to win the prize.

*House* engages in a logic of spatial occupation — the construction of a momentary material intervention in capitalist time and space — through the construction of a total barricade, a cement shell structure defending an interior void space against an outside that brings an imminent dematerialization as devaluation. It arrests the loss that the house already-is through a construction of the *form* of its disappearance: spraying cement into an inside to preemptively trace the subsequent peeling away of its exterior materials. But even this tenuous distinction between inside and outside fails to hold. The hollowness of Whiteread's cast suggests the insufficiency of its own defensive covering; merely a shell, a surface, it remains vulnerable to both the useless vacancy of its domestic interior and to the awaiting bulldozer equipped to flatten this unprofitable site that momentarily paralyzes future accumulation.

*House* does delay the bulldozer. Unambiguous in its insufficiency, however, *House's* intervention is *not merely* the exposure of the contradictions of exploitation, though the abstract grey cube does formally engage us with the contradictions of urban development through capital projects, of the residual materials of gentrification, and of the real consequences of economic crises that jeopardize the growth of capital. *House's* intervention is also *not* an intervention; that is, it does not represent an attempt to move outside the realm of art into some supposed "real world" in which it challenges the proposed demolition of 193 Grove Road. Rather, as Jacques Rancière cautions in *Dissensus*: "Displacing art's borders does not mean leaving art, that is making the leap from 'fiction' (or 'representation') to reality" because "practices of art do not provide forms of awareness or rebellious impulses *for* politics," nor, Rancière continues, "do they take leave of themselves to become forms of collective political action."<sup>5</sup> For Rancière, in other words, art's interventionist capacity is immanent to the spatial fabric of "art's borders" as such. *House* figures its attention to the pressing issues raised by the house through a close aesthetic or formal consideration of them. And thus its form is figured as the house's persistence, the persistence to and exacerbation of the crisis to economic growth that it represents: an aesthetic persistence that affects the landscape of the visual by materializing the residue of a house that is both *really* absent, and that *really* remains in our field of view.

The formal persistence of the house, the cement materialization of its

dematerialization, is marked, significantly, by the heaviness and stillness of its posture. It indexes its own uselessness, its immobility, attempting to occupy a temporality inconsistent with the accumulative logic of the flow of capital. 193 Grove Road presents a material barrier to such accumulation that, while it stands, blocks reinvestment and redevelopment on its site. Growth necessitates its devaluation or destruction because it has been deemed dead capital; because it no longer functions in the housing market as profitable; because it presents a barrier to growth; because it indexes excess. As Marx states in Part 2 of *Theories of Surplus Value*,

[M]achinery which is not used is not capital. Labor which is not exploited is equivalent to lost production. Raw material which lies unused is not capital. Buildings which are either unused or remain unfinished, commodities which rot in warehouses — all this is destruction of capital.<sup>6</sup>

So 193 Grove Road is this kind of rotting outside of the profitability of property. And Whiteread's cast of the space formally registers this stasis, the momentary loss to capital. Her literal concretization of the house makes visible art's relation to a logic of circulation.

The density of Whiteread's material indexes a resistance to growth. There is an explicit structural closure here which does *not*, however, indicate that "there is no alternative" to an economic logic which dictates that these houses in East London on this particular street need to be destroyed to make way for capital redevelopment. It is a closure that does *not* indicate that we are closed to the imagining of any other possible alternative to such logic, but precisely that *closure is itself an alternative*. That closure, formalized here as density, blockage, immobility — *as cement* — indexes a kind of sabotage, a threat posed by the halting of movement, a refusal to get out of the way for the inexorable logic of capitalism. In rendering solid the residue of 193 Grove Road, *Whiteread's House* as a house registers a withdrawal from value. For Marx, devaluation is value that is at rest in any particular state for more than a moment; this momentary stoppage to circulation, here due to the superfluity of a property which no longer yields profit and which stands in the way of a redevelopment project, is countered by its necessary destruction. Then, growth can resume, equilibrium can be re-achieved, accumulation can begin again on the very site of what has been destroyed. To withdraw then from this particular unfolding logic of overaccumulation-devaluation is either 1) to exacerbate overaccumulation by multiplying the presence of those unused, rotting material residues, that which is no longer capital, or 2) to arrest or suspend that motion or metamorphosis through which capital circulates and which always includes necessary devaluations to counter the tendency towards overaccumulation.

We might argue, of course, that *House* merely constructs another object of value, an art object, inside of, or as a replacement to, what has been devalued, and thereby

immediately re-enters the unfolding economic logic at work.<sup>7</sup> *House*, that is, withdraws from the housing market to enter the art market with its own logics of circulation, its own investments in gentrification and speculation, its own intimate embeddedness in financial and cultural capital. But there is an insistence here that presses upon us to think *House* as *a house* in its unrelenting and absolute proximity to the domestic residence whose site it occupies. And we might say then that it was the resoluteness of this proximity, cemented there, its realism, that demanded the ultimate destruction of Whiteread's work. That insofar as *House* was still that house on 193 Grove Road, it too interrupted the flow of redevelopment, it too represented an overaccumulation that was blocking a certain economic progress, and it too necessitated demolition. In Whiteread's formal reconfiguration of the house into, simply, "raw material which lies unused," she has not explicitly altered the scale or the form of this already uninhabitable architecture, but has rendered material the impossibility of the structure's existence outside of the logic of value-form.

On January 11, 1994, Tower Hamlets London Borough Council voted to tear down the structure. *House* was demolished by a mechanical digger in two hours.

## Field

By way of conclusion, we turn briefly to *Sunflower Seeds*, a field of one hundred million porcelain "seeds," each individually hand painted by 1,600 Chinese workers, and strewn across the vast floor space of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. The piece was conceptualized by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, commissioned by the Tate Modern, and opened in October 2010.<sup>8</sup>

Ai Weiwei's instructions for engaging with the piece insisted on the visitors' full immersion in the landscape. The field of seeds could be touched, run through, laid in, held, stolen. This relational approach is typical of the art commissioned for the space which often involves the viewer's full sensory interaction, and is further characteristic of the turn in contemporary art toward what Nicolas Bourriaud calls *relational aesthetics* (1998). In his central text that defines relational practice in art, Bourriaud describes the possibility of a *relational* art as one that takes as its "theoretical horizons the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space."<sup>9</sup> Insisting on art's intervention in and effect on human intersubjectivity, Bourriaud argues that "art is the place that produces a specific sociability" because it "tightens the space of relations."<sup>10</sup> What is implicit is a belief that collaboration and participation *as such* are political practices that can directly alter the field of social relations.

Within forty-eight hours of the opening of *Sunflower Seeds*, the installation was restricted by a roped perimeter delimiting the proximity to the piece. The Tate offered a statement:

It is no longer possible to walk on the surface of the work, but visitors can

walk close to the edges of the sunflower seed landscape on the west and north sides. Although porcelain is very robust, we have been advised that the interaction of visitors with the sculpture can cause dust which could be damaging to health following repeated inhalation over a long period of time. In consequence, Tate, in consultation with the artist, has decided not to allow members of the public to walk across the sculpture.<sup>11</sup>

The seeds are deemed hostile to the subject. The shards of porcelain dust can become lodged in your lungs if you breathe them in, and eventually kill you. The institutional imperative here, under the auspices of protecting the subject's health and well-being, is an enforced disengagement from any direct relation with the materiality of the art. The irony is that the Tate refuses to recognize that the fatal force immanent to the porcelain seeds, even if unanticipated, cannot simply be withdrawn from the installation; their toxicity is at once a radical critique of the unquestioned positive effect of relational aesthetics, and, a formal materialization, in the reproducible homogeneity of the seeds, of the specter of abstract labor with a total indifference to the concrete usage of the objects produced. The Tate protects its viewers against this unforeseen rupture.

In its direct intervention on the viewer's corporeal conditions of viewing, the museum is exposed as not merely a symbolic ligament to the regime of the sensible but rather as a force regulating both what and how people see and, more to the point, what they can and cannot do with their bodies. On one hand, then, it's impossible not to recognize the Tate Modern and its counterparts as in a strong sense biopolitical — if you breathe the dust you'll die, so don't breathe the dust. On the other hand, though, the realization of this force is first and foremost spatial — like a painting, you can only look at the seeds from a distance. In the injunction to stay back, then, what the Tate insists upon is an abstracted whole of what the Chinese workers serialized into bits.

Abstraction here, as enforced by the Tate's defensive regulation on the viewer's posture, protects the museum not only from potential liability as well as the highly likely theft of the porcelain seeds (a mountain of 100,000 seeds sold at Sotheby's in London for over half a million dollars), but also registers a latent commitment to abstraction as an aesthetic and regulatory practice grounded in consensus. Juliet Bingham, the curator of the show, articulates with sweeping neutrality and the annulment of dissensus how abstraction functions as little more than a safety valve:

Ai Weiwei's...commission, *Sunflower Seeds*, is a beautiful, poignant and thought-provoking sculpture. The thinking behind the work lies in far more than just the idea of walking on it. The precious nature of the material, the effort of production and the narrative and personal content create a powerful commentary on the human condition.<sup>12</sup>

But in its real abstraction as an uninhabitable field of grey, Ai Weiwei's piece returns us to the abstraction of the grey liquid cement of Whiteread's *House*. In *Sunflower Seeds*, however, there are at least three registers of abstraction: 1) The flat horizontality of greyness saturating the floor of the Turbine Hall figures abstraction as saturation; that is, the totalizing homogeneity of the structure, its generalizable greyness, when viewed from the permitted distance, formalizes a conception of suffusion or exhaustion; 2) The abstraction of the multiplicity and reproducibility of the endless porcelain seeds indexes the abstraction of labor, or, in other words, the appropriation of human activity into empty performances of abstract time wherein all forms of labor are reduced to the same kind of labor until all they have in common is that of being the expenditure of human labor power in the abstract; 3) Abstraction as form. The prescribed uninhabitability of the field of seeds reconfigures its surface as an abstract plane. Insofar as it can now only function as a deserted, vacant landscape, rather than a series of individualized encounters, the piece withdraws from instrumentality while marking the limits of aesthetic practice.

And it is precisely at the juncture of these three abstractions that a certain utopian impulse can manifest itself as a refiguration of space through a thinking of unemployment as exploitation and a pressing upon the closed logic of profit that saturates all possibility. On December 9, 2010, in central London, thousands of students and others gather to protest as Britain's Parliament narrowly passes a proposal to raise university tuition fees significantly — nearly tripling them — as part of a set of austerity programs that target education. That same day a group of the student protestors march into the Tate Modern and, without asking, walk onto the uninhabited grey abstract field of Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*. This is not a self-presentation as a space of democracy, participation, and openness. Nor is it a direct engagement with the regulating policies of the Tate Modern; that is, it is not a negation of the prohibition against immersion in the art space. The unanticipated occupation of the space by the students, in its unambiguous traversal of the site, is also a traversal of the very questions of participation or immersion *as such* when prescribed from within the borders of art and posed as singularly relevant to aesthetic practice.

The demands of the students are not directed toward the existing powers at work here, but rather constitute a marking of the symbolic limits of the struggle. This is not a performative gesture of subversion. The cut in the smooth abstraction of *Sunflower Seeds* on the order of students as labor — students whose future labor has already been sold in the form of debt, students whose future employment has already vanished, students who are unemployed before ever having been employed — that cut reconfigures the flat field of Turbine Hall through a practice of polemics that does not unfold as dialogue or negotiation, but that is itself already what is to be said, and how it is to be done. Occupying the space of Turbine Hall is a generalization of the students' occupation of the streets of London; the urban geography of the city is re-mapped such that, whatever area the students find themselves in becomes a potential political site,

a space to be seized. It is a spatial escalation wherein property is rendered that which belongs to everyone. The circle cutting across and constituting a re-formation of the given field is a subtraction from the logic of circulation that governs the space. The unanticipated effect of this subtraction, like the subtraction from devaluation that Whiteread's *House* figures, makes clear the contradictions between content and form by traversing the legibility of demands that remain entrenched in a symbolic logic. Their non-demand is more than an accident: it is the expression of their commitment to non-identity, to understanding struggle as an opportunity not to affirm the identity "student" or "indebted" but to negate its premise in property. Thus without content, their practice politicizes the very forms of urban distribution: the city becomes a field for struggle, rather than a map of what delimits it. The students' formal intervention is contingent on their collectivization of aesthetics, as is their self-negation.

## Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011) 147-48, and *Endnotes* and Aaron Benanav, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," *Endnotes 2* (April 2010).
2. Jasper Bernes, "The Double Barricade and the Glass Floor," *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2011) 161.
3. Fredric Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History'?" *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998) 91.
4. See <<http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/rachel-whiteread#/images/48/>>
5. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010) 149.
6. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value: Volume 2* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1969) 495.
7. For elaboration on some of the recent debates around the financialization of art, see Andrea Fraser, "There's No Place Like Home / L'1% C'est Moi" (*Continent 2* [3] [2012]: 186-201), and Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011). Fraser elaborates an argument for an art discourse situated within a deeply conflictual social field wherein "the apparent contradictions between the critical and political claims of art and its economic conditions are not contradictions at all but rather attest to the vitality of the art world as a site of critique and contestation, as these practices develop in scope and complexity to confront the challenges of globalization, neoliberalism, post-Fordism, new regimes of spectacle, the debt crisis, right-wing populism, and now historic levels of inequality" (29).
8. See <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>>. See also Christian Sorace's "China's Last Communist: Ai WeiWei" (*Critical Inquiry* 40:2 [Winter 2014] 396-419) in which he discusses Ai Weiwei's celebrity status in the Western art world and the ways in which the reception of his work has simplified the contradictions of his project. "Ai's branding as an icon of liberalism and multiparty democracy," Sorace writes, "reveals more about the fantasies the West harbors toward China than it does about Ai's own political-aesthetic interventions" (396).
9. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002) 14.
10. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* 15-16.
11. Juliet Bingham, "About the Exhibition (Update: Friday 22 October 2010)." <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>>
12. Juliet Bingham, "The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei" <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>>.