

**How to use Parasites:
Notes on Contemporary Art, Curating and the Work of the Context**

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I. Contextual Makings

Let us not commence by openly declaring a context for this text. Not that we could ever avoid the context. There is always already a context, somewhere. We could say that there is no running away from the context; we are always already 'in context'. Inadvertently, it sneaks itself in from the periphery of our words as it were. But let us at least defer the obvious and put learned academic behaviour aside for the moment. To get the context of one's argument 'right' is proof of one's scholarly rigour. It attests to the fact that I do my work not just in the way I like to but that I do it 'in context' so as to minimize the contagion of subjective arbitrariness. It is a methodological ruse to proclaim the contextual parameters in the opening paragraphs of one's essay to establish its topical scope and steer the work towards an 'objective' line of reasoning.

In serving the context, we hope to pin down our arguments, to keep them together so as to render them into an impression of exactitude. Serving the context: let us re-ambiguate these words. Is the context only serving that which is 'in context' in order to hold it together strong enough to function as its support on which we like to rest? To serve the context is to consolidate the constructions of meaning put forward. And it consoles the constructor in his/her attempt to piece together a 'meaningful' field. But, in doing so, the context serves itself too. It can legitimize itself, rendering itself as an indispensable methodological vehicle. Without it, what would there be 'in context'?

To put the argument – this argument – in context: to avail oneself of a context is an academic convention for setting out the field in which to embed one's research. It is an endeavour of setting the borders, of encircling one's argumentation so as to seemingly enclose it and hold it in place. To do so, one notices, the context prefers to give itself in the consolidating fashion of the singular. It is, hopefully, *the* context. Proclaiming itself in singular, it can proffer itself as a unifying support. To think it otherwise, it would risk unravelling its own signifying conception. It would fall out of its semantic field. It would risk betraying itself. Of course, we can multiply it into contexts but that entails a loosening up of what we declare to be our contextual construction, of where the text is supposed to *lie*. Several contexts may not simply add up into one all-embracing context without leaving behind their contextual specificity for which they were established and needed in the first place. While not necessarily contradicting each other, they pull that which they hold 'in context' into different directions, that is to say, into their own contextual frame of signification. Within this play of contextual forces, it becomes less clear what the 'ultimate' context might be. Indeed, we could yet again lose sight of it.

It is a *judicious* move to hold on to a context that rests in the singular rather than in a multitude of potentially disturbing contexts.¹ One could say that what is symptomatic of the context is its reluctance to become pluralized. In approaching the context in its

singularity, we keep it ready to hand. We have confidence in it because we can presuppose it, locate it, use it. Yet, ‘at the same time,’ to give the word to Derrida, ‘a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription’.² This internal *force de rupture* of the sign within the written text brings the work of the context and its proclivity for a consolidating semantic enclosure into trouble. The sign is perfidious because it effects its work outside the moment and environment of its inscription, albeit that its effects do not remain the same. Upon inscription, it is left to drift because it ‘possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it’.³ It is here that the context begins its contracting work anew, as an advocate labouring towards that signifying setting that the drifting sign has left behind.

Thus, there is no running away from the context. As Derrida puts it concisely: ‘no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation’.⁴ If what we could call the ‘ideological work’ of the context seeks to embrace signification so as to enclose it and ‘sedate’ it, then it does so by masking its own limiting work as that of its own justification. The context turns its limiting effect into a promise of stabilizing and saturating the frameworks of signification, even though it will never reach complete saturation. That is the deal – which brings us back to the need to set up the context.

II. Studying the Contextual

If we have become more susceptible to the context and its concept, then this attests also to a Poststructuralist practice with its sceptical enthusiasm for the context and its de/saturating work. To those cultural theorists and producers sharing a critical fascination for the problematics of the context and its deconstructive work, the issue of the context cannot be settled easily. The context persists. It unsettles as much as it settles. Any theoretical or historical engagement with a cultural signifier that seeks to uncover some of the ‘original’ or otherwise contextual parameters of a particular work is also a question of actively assembling the context – it demands that we make it.⁵

Cultural producers working in the contested arena that constitutes contemporary art⁶ and its dialectical appetite have long been working with the context, employing in their productions its generative effects. For those who are initiated in the discipline of the history of art the proper name of Duchamp is an obvious starting point to discuss the work of the context – a point, one should say, that the history of art has granted itself so as to make this theoretical and historical ‘start’ possible.⁷ Whereas the issue of the context is at stake in any signifying practice, the historical and theoretical discussions around Duchamp have much invested into the status of the context, turning his artistic persona into an emblematic exponent of such practices that resort to and shake up the realm of ‘contextual’ in their work. While Duchamp’s *Fountain* enabled a subversion and transformation of the conventions and politics that shape theoretical definitions of ‘art’, the work of art that is at work in the sign-object of the urinal is arguably indebted to a rendering acute of the context.

Among the many things an artist can do, one is to set the sign-object in a new chain of

signification. By placing it into a ‘new’ context, by literally displacing it, it can assume another meaning. With the centenary of Duchamp’s presentation in New York in 1917 not so far away anymore, we have become accustomed to the long history of such artistic work, to things being displaced, scattered, recycled, assembled, etc. by artists in ever new contexts.⁸ Such strategies require, however, that the spectator takes account of the context so as not to miss it. Thus, seen from an art curatorial perspective, the spectator ought to ‘see’ the context of the sign-object, s/he ought to comprehend the work yet again ‘in context’ – otherwise would s/he ‘see’ the artwork? In the institutional exhibition space of museums and galleries but also on artists’ websites, in their documentations and in other frameworks of display and distribution, emphasis is laid on ‘thematizing’ the sign-object’s contextual parameters, of giving space to the context – be this a modernist strategy of decontextualization that likes to place the sign-object-cum-art against a nothingness of white and thus mark the context through its symbolically represented absence, or be it a postmodernist approach of selective (re-)contextualization utilizing a patchwork of formal citations and allusions to a wider system of signs. In either case, we could say, that contemporary art’s presenting of a sign-object requires that the context, as a physical and conceptual space, is amalgamated to the artist’s chosen sign-object – it is *co-presented*, coming more and more to the fore.

The sign-object’s co-presentation with the context becomes apparent in the growing currency of documentary installation shots that add ‘contextual material’ to the sign-object but it is also evident in art curators’ ever-expanding concerns of how to communicate the context of the work and which, I think, one could also call inversely the work of the context. Seen from this angle, a great deal of the ‘curating’ profession’s attention to contemporary art and its sign-objects revolves around the work of the context, whereby the activity of curating is not solely restricted to a conventional preservation of the art historically accepted context of the work. It exceeds an engagement with such a preserving context because the artwork we are concerned with here props itself up purposefully against the context. In this way, it is not just the case of displaying the work; it is also a case of making the case for the context itself, for displaying the context in its own right. It is a question of keeping up (with) the context and its deconstructive work.

The institution of the art museum, as a major player in the legitimizing contestations of contemporary art, is of course the keeper of art. It is also the keeper of its context. Typically, this is done by employing traditional means such as leaflets, labels, catalogues. By way of drawing on art historical sources, we are provided with the moderate textual and visual materials aimed at helping us ‘explain’ the work. Such contextual work is common everyday practice of those who curate artwork. But much contemporary art entering the space of the exhibition seems to be calling out for a need of getting even closer to the context, because, as I have argued, on our journey through the territory of contemporary art we could fail to attend to its sign-object *as* art. It is the context that can provide the map. This context is not just the disputable notion of something called ‘the art-world’ – as an institutional theory of art would have it – conferring the status of art on what would otherwise be just anything but an artwork.⁹ The work with or through the context has also become the artist’s purposeful tool to ontologically lift the sign-object into an art-object. In bringing the context of the sign-object into the ‘work of art’, we come to understand it not solely as an effect of the artist’s authorization (‘This is art because I say so’) or because the art

institution decides to select it as art. We come to understand it as an effect of the (changed) contextual space that the artist appears to have integrated in the structural tropes of (re)presentation of his/her sign-objects, rendering them thereby legible as art. This is how we can understand the inclination for the need towards 'installation', and related to it, the 'installation shot' as its documentation. As Boris Groys has convincingly argued, we are more likely to encounter art first through its documentation and other sites relating to the artwork, thus giving effect to an array of productive interplays between the artwork and its documentation. 'The transformation of the artwork into art documentation by means of its own archiving also enables art today to draw on, in an artistic context, the immense reservoir of documentation of other events and projects that our civilization has collected'.¹⁰ But documentation is also something that the artist uses strategically for the creation of the artwork, or put conversely, we conceive of the artwork from within the artist's documentation. For example, we begin to engage with an artist's work through his/her website rather than the actual work. Or, in photographic documentations of artworks, the artist pays a great deal of attention to what we could call the contextual space surrounding the sign-object. The right framing and cropping, for example, is key to this. But our attention goes also to the adequate surfaces of exposition and the spatial organization of the sign-object's setting. Thus, by engendering the right 'context', by studying its potential forms, artists can strategically make art out of it.

Moreover, studying the contextual is not only what the regular visitor of an art space is invited to do or what the art institution is dedicated to but it is also an obligation for the aspiring artist undergoing academic training. In art education, modules under the heading of 'contextual studies' are meant to provide students with a critical framework primarily drawn from art historical and theoretical curricula so as to render the making of art academically acceptable and to streamline it into a university discipline.¹¹ This contextual add-on to the student's preoccupations in his/her work in the studio claims to offer students with a better understanding of their historical positioning as artists and a self-critical awareness of their artistic concerns so as to be able to formulate this in their 'practice'. One pedagogical fixation lies thereby on the student's ability to produce an artist's statement, usually beginning with strong subjective tones such as 'In my practice I explore ...'. It is as if without this statement we would lose track of the artist's work. Or again, without it, one might not legitimize the artist as artist. The artist's requirement to submit such a statement (typically limited to a few paragraphs) to institutions is indicative of such contextual framing, and indeed, production, of the artist's work.

III. Parasitical Art

The work that is placed as 'out of context' deflects us back to the conceptual space of the context that surrounds the work – a context that is shaped, of course, also through the significations that the work brings with itself from within. The work of art, both as the sign-object exhibited as well as the signifying practice that constitutes the sphere of art, begins to draw its signifying work distinctly from the context. It sits 'in context', in the sense that the work – if it is to become a work of art – must call firmly upon the context (and we shall comfortably bracket off what it is that is being held in context) to find its meaning. We could describe such strategic working out and in of context by the artist as 'parasitic'. As we come to perceive the context as that on

which the work is set up by the artist so as to set in motion a ‘work of art’, then we cannot but keep looking for the work’s context. The artistic strategy of intentionally shifting signifiers can perform a theoretically meaningful artwork because the work of the context is taken up and hemmed into the ‘overall work’ that the artist has placed for us. The sign-object, shifted by the artist into a new context, is a parasite as well as being a para-site. Firstly, it is a parasite because the sign-object has to wilfully draw on the substrate of the contextual to engender its art theoretical meaning. Thus, the space of the contextual becomes the sign-object’s fertilizing host to which the work can resort – much like a parasitical organism would do for its own growth. Without a certain premeditation of the context, the sign-object would cease to perform its task as a work of art. And secondly, the sign-object outlines itself as a site in parallel to the contextual, an off-centre so to speak. It is a para-site because the site of the signifier is a decentred nucleus that is not treated as a self-sufficient entity any longer. That which the artist has put in context – and of whatever object(s) this might be constituted – is leaking. It leaks quite self-consciously into the contextual frame and in doing so, offers itself as a focus out of focus. What we, as spectators, are led to focus on initially, cannot be perceived without entering the sphere of the context, without doing a contextual detour as it were.

It is in this way that the site of the context is plugged into the para-site of the sign-object – an artistic activity that *makes sense of its ‘making art’ by ‘working in context’*. Yet, this is not just to be understood relationally in the sense of being mindful of the contextual parameters; rather, it is a topological working *in* context, to use the site of the context itself to generate art. A mass-produced material object such as a urinal, for example, is in this way a para-site because its signifying site as a work of art is instituted alongside – in parallel – with the context. While the object might grab our attention at first, as a site of spectatorial focus, it can only begin to appear as a work of art once we begin to move our considerations away from it.¹²

Given that such work is activated first and foremost in conjunction with the context, a sign-object such as the urinal hinges on our comprehension of this contextual space if we are to grant it the status as an ‘effective’ work of art. In the typological realm of the readymade we find perhaps most distinctly a work of art that is such a para-site, presenting a focus that comes into focus only *via* the context. Indeed, the readymade, as a sign-object, radiates such a radical force because it recoils unreservedly to the space of the context from where it can take up its work as the art theoretical ‘readymade’. As the readymade is not based on artistic creation in the traditional sense of individualistic expression but is instead ‘created’ out of a process of selection and legitimization by the artist, it follows a logic of presenting the same as the same. That is its outrageousness. The creative act of the artist transmutes into a matter of presentation. In this situation, we have learned that an object, any object indeed, can become art.

IV. Sampling

The readymade art object relies on the context to get its work done. What else could there be left? Of course, it also relies on the persona of the artist who makes the selection and is the first sanctioning agent of the work. The artistic trait of the signature, as a performative act, is one such vehicle through which the artist’s position

as authorizer is reaffirmed and the work's approval literally confirmed. But the economy of the readymade and its conceptual offspring which are founded upon mass-produced objects and reproductive technologies (such as practices that entail the (re-)utilization of photographic and filmic artefacts, printed matter, digital work, audio recordings, for instance), permit the artist to concentrate on the work's selection and presentation so as not to need contributing anything further. It is in the sampling of sign-objects that the artist finds his/her occupation. As John Roberts proposes: 'The readymade relieves the artist of the burden of *mere representation*. Why replicate an object, sign, notice, when you can place such things directly before an audience?'¹³ For the contemporary artist, so much is already there – the artist does not need to 'make' objects as such any longer. Rather, s/he can make their context. Expression through selection, creation through differentiation.

Selection used to be the working domain of the art curator who judges what is allowed to enter the sphere of art. S/he selects a work of art that s/he believes to be of some art critical, economic or socio-historical relevance (or, in the ideal case, a combination of all these factors) so as to make a case for its collectable and/or exhibitable status. Nowadays, an artist too selects works as part of his/her artistic practice. Thus, we begin to understand the work of the 'artist' in terms of what s/he might choose for an exhibition. In its orchestration, we are made to believe that we can glimpse the work of the artist. Or again, employing an economics-oriented model of 'outsourcing', the artist hands over the work of selection by nominating others as selectors: artists, visitors, curators, locals, etc., are invited to carry out the work of selection. The contemporary artist is of a truly versatile nature, responding to situations, setting up scenarios, adapting scenes. Thus, we have become familiar with an image of the artist as curator, but also with the artist as mediator, educator, appropriator, publicist, therapist, chronicler, comedian, collector, researcher, campaigner, environmentalist, activist, commentator, impromptu farmer, etc. – the list of potential tasks to be taken on for the contemporary, that is, tendentially 'site-specific', working artist is long indeed.

We enter an environment where a practice of 'sampling' prevails; the artist becomes a 'sampler', to borrow a useful term from the field of music.¹⁴ As in the music practice of sampling where fragments are recycled and replayed to form something 'else', sign-objects are sampled and brought into play through contextual cross-contamination so as to turn on their semantic and aesthetic productions. Yet, in this space of convergence and overlapping roles, artists' practices become samples in their own right. Not only sign-objects are sampled but also other artists' practices are referenced, performed, mimicked and so on.

But we are far from losing sight of this multi-tasking artist when slipping in his/her various roles. Even though in this momentary space of 'convergence'¹⁵ of traditionally separate roles, the convergence remains a marked one. Contextually, we are made to recognize it so as to appreciate that it is (just) a convergence. In the case of the recently propagated 'curating artist', for example, his/her exhibition is not likely to be curated by a curator but rather by an artist-as-curator or regularly referred to as 'curated by the artist'. Thus, we are led to comprehend this exhibition as curated by the artist. Here, behind the more obvious staging strategies of the curating artist, we find another supplementary work of curation that will secure the ground for bringing us closer and making us aware of this convergence of artist and curator, but without

fusing them so that they would be beyond an individual recognition. Hence, it becomes possible to attend to the curation by the artist.

The artist does not simply disappear in the business of curating. S/he also keeps on working as an artist because the convergence between professional roles remains just that: a convergence, that is to say, in this negotiated setting the divisions of labour can persist as an undercurrent – thus, we are still able to distinguish between a curating artist and a curating curator. The institutional art space entrusts ‘others’ with the responsibility of occupations that it had ideologically secured as its own. However, this convergence remains an expedient one. What the spectator is presented with in such an exhibition is precisely the ‘convergence’, a space for the exchange of roles and labour definitions where the artist is potentially permitted to take on any job. In this sense, it is the convergence itself that attracts our critical attention. In its promise of allowing the swapping and merging of roles, we could say that what makes the appeal of such an exhibition is largely the convergence itself. We are permitted to realize – or indeed, can become participating artists or curators ourselves as participatory art would insistently invite us to – the exhibition as a space of converging roles.

What we are then ‘looking’ for here is not exclusively the actual sign-objects in the exhibition. Of course, they are there too and form a part of the show, that is to say, the function as the exhibition’s ‘tools’. But the stirring momentum lies in the work surrounding these sign-objects – the contextual processing they undergo. In this instance, one could say that it is the site of the context that holds the potential for moving art ahead. For this kind of work, we are perhaps less concerned with what it is that *is* ‘in context’ than how to fabricate and keep a context albeit one that will always ask us to fall back on that which we seek to keep in context. One might say, naïvely for sure, this is yet a further gain for the ‘autonomy’ of art where artists begin to be more in charge of their own productions – an impression of ‘independence’ from all those non-artists. But it is also a parasitical state of affairs where ‘artistic practices’ are brought together and benefit from each other. Artists can make their work by curating other contemporaneously working artists. And the curated artists are given thereby an opportunity to show their work. But this also gives effect to their branching out from each other. What this attests to is another instance of a dialectical splitting of the artist into one who considers it to be important to dispense with the making of actual things and into one who is (still) content with getting lost in the making.

V. The Presentation Complex

The artist makes art through and with the context which, in the most radical case one could argue, remains the sole indicator of the artist’s creative agency. The features of the sign-object are the same as before the artist has taken care of it – it shows no difference. Like a written sign, it does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription.¹⁶ It subsists. If we are, then, to grasp the work of the artist, we also have to move beyond the immediate exhibits. What we are therefore ‘looking’ for is not exclusively the actual sign-objects in the exhibition which, as a whole one could say, appears again as a para-site of the artist’s work locus so that s/he can labour productively. Thus, exhibitions also declare themselves to be not just simple ‘exhibitions’ since the artist’s work might not be ‘on display’ at all. Indeed, the work

might yet still be in production or might possibly never exist at all. Exhibition spaces have expanded therefore conceptually to be more than mere spaces of display: laboratories, stages, project spaces, workshops, testing grounds, research environments, etc. are the synonyms under which the contemporary art space advertises itself to the public. Thus, the museum as the institutional ‘home’ of art has also shifted from merely facilitating a display and having an archive function to a site of production and its documentation.¹⁷

We can interpret this timidity of the exhibition to be ‘just’ an exhibition as an indicator of the museum’s changing role, whereby its spaces become improvised workshops for art-as-work-in-progress and temporary stages for the ongoing flow of sign-objects. The museum’s age-old obsession with bringing a defining order into things has given way, at least at first glance, to enabling a platform of indefiniteness that appears to be open to chance and ongoing change. On this platform nothing is fixed but everything is offered on stage. Things are created, shifted, disposed of, talked about, documented, etc. Under such conditions, ‘the artwork today does not manifest art; it merely promises art’.¹⁸ And as a consequence, the artist develops a special need: his/her sign-objects need to enter this stage if they are to become artworks. Or again, it is enough to put one’s sign-object on this stage.

What counts, one could say, is that the artist *presents*. If s/he exposes sign-objects on this stage, art can be made. And that we are dealing with art here rather than sign-objects is confirmed in the artist’s documentation. Hence, s/he will be particularly attentive to conveying the work as always through the (contextual) parameters that the installation provides. The ‘installation shot’ has become a prominent vehicle to effect this. Its formation, as a genre in its own right, attests to the artist’s preoccupation with presenting – a kind of ‘presentation complex’. It allows us to see the work as artwork, because we can see it always installed, on the ‘stage’ of art as it were. What the artist then needs and, indeed, has to produce is evidential material that indexes his/her work in relation to the work’s presentation. It is by such means that the artist must incorporate this demarcation of the work’s context, i.e. its installation in a specific space and institution, in his/her ‘artistic’ space of activity. Thus, what the artist seeks to communicate and substantiate through such means is the claim that the sign-object has indeed been presented.

VI. Contextual Intensifications

As this text gives a reflective space to the context, it can also be seen as symptomatic of a current preoccupation of the field of contemporary art with the context. If the context of artistic productions has been conventionally associated with the work of the discipline of art history as it attempts to situate artworks and of which, let’s say for example, a catalogue gives material testimony to, then we can observe how such work has been taken up as the work of the artist as such. The context got out of hand and is now in the hands of the artist who is the producer of his/her own research journals, explanatory notes, photographic documentations, etc. Such work is, of course, nothing new and must be seen in conjunction with the changing forms of artistic labour. And I will refrain here from making an essentializing claim of where or what the artwork might be among all these arte-facts. But what I would like to suggest is a certain ‘intensification’ of the contextual space, a certain prominence given to the contextual

outputs surrounding the artwork. The context undergoes a calculable reification that becomes the guarantor of the artwork. It is in this sense that we can say, although I am aware of how slippery this might sound, that *before* the artwork, we wish the context to prevail.

Before the work, then, the context. In the same way, we could also describe the curatorial structuring of the spectator's encounter with the artwork in the institutional spaces of display. Indeed, one could say that we have become expectant of being brought to the artwork *via* the contextual material (or reluctant to see it without) as it manifests itself in a variety of forms – the supplementary material panoply of introductions, para-texts, brochures and flyers, documentary works, biographical evidence, virtual simulations, etc. The context keeps realizing itself around the artwork in ever more material forms. A word of caution though: I am not calling for a dreamy isolation of the artwork that considers any contextual work a disturbance because it believes it ought to suspend any 'outside' interference with the work so as to keep the work in the illusory space of 'purity'. Nor is it plausible to dogmatically sever the artwork from its contextual surroundings. Rather, we are looking for a productive exchange between what is held to be the text and what is held to be the context. In this way we can say, that the more contextual layers the work evokes, the more it is capable of producing and sustaining our engagement with it. And the contextual materials speak of this interest – materials, however, that cannot oblige us to find in them the 'definite' as they are themselves in circulation.¹⁹

Around artworks, the context and its material forms instigate at once fears and hopes. There is the fearful belief that the artwork might not be strong enough on its own and thus, that it needs the context but which might thereby also interrupt again the work. On the other hand, the context speaks of the fear of the artwork's loss of meaning whereby we hope to find in the context the means to keep the work together so as to fix it in its signification. There can't be a swift reconciliation between these two poles. It is rather by working through them, alongside the context, that we can attain new positions around the work of art. And while Derrida in his influential essay 'Signature Event Context' of 1972 is broadly concerned with the textual,²⁰ it makes sense for us to consider his words here again, and take up the challenge of the context in our context:

a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of 'communicating,' precisely. One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or *grafting* it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it.²¹

Notes

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¹ The emphasis on the word 'judicious' is not without deliberation, given its etymological relation to the work of judgement as in the space of the judiciary, which constitutes another realm where the work of the context is both highly praised and

contested. Jonathan Culler draws our attention to this: ‘while meaning is context-bound, context is boundless. This is something lawyers know well; context is in principle infinitely expandable, limited only by their resourcefulness, their clients’ resources, and the patience of the judge. There is always more evidence that may bear in some way or another on the meaning of the act or words at issue. [...] Context is often thought as a given, but lawyers know that it is produced, and that it is not saturable. Contextualization is never completed, rather one reaches a point where further contextualization seems unproductive’. Jonathan Culler, ‘Deconstruction and the Law’, in *Framing the Sign. Criticism and its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp.139-52 (p.148).

² Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’ [1972], trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp.1-23 (p.9).

³ Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, p.9.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘Living on: Borderlines’, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom *et al* (New York: Seabury, 1979), pp.75-175 (p.81).

⁵ See Norman Bryson’s essay ‘Art in Context’ to which I am clearly indebted here. Norman Bryson, ‘Art in Context’, in *The Point of Theory. Practices of Cultural Analyses*, ed. Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer (New York and London: Continuum, 1994), pp.66-78.

⁶ The field of study that is commonly identified as ‘contemporary art’ spans now actually several decades, usually beginning in 1945 and ‘ending’ in our present times. Understood in this way it is a historically ambiguous field under distinct negotiations. While we might lose the field’s contours in the ‘contemporary’ where they nonetheless continue to grow, they remain at the same time contemporaneous to our lives and tangentially close to the historian’s work of interpretation. For a brief reflection on the challenge of the historical framing of the field of contemporary art, see Amelia Jones’s introduction ‘Writing Contemporary Art into History, a Paradox?’, in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), pp.3-16.

⁷ The recurring scholarly take-up of the ‘Duchampian moment’ can be seen as an index of its significance for art historiography, given that we seem to credit this (modern) moment also as one where the artwork continually throws us back to our work of judgement of the very thing we are intending to judge. Thierry de Duve concludes: ‘The readymade doesn’t tell us what the essence of art is, but for that matter it doesn’t tell us that art has no essence. It abandons us to our own ignorance. It doesn’t tell us what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for any object, absolutely any object, to be art. But for that matter, it doesn’t tell us that art is without conditions [...] Well, in art there is precisely nothing but judgement. To make is to judge, and this judgement carries an obligation with it. To make art is to judge – not what is art but what it ought to be’. Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996), pp.347-48. Or again, Benjamin Buchloh: ‘Beginning with the readymade, the work of art had become the ultimate subject of a legal definition and the result of institutional validation. In the absence of any specifically visual qualities and due to the manifest lack of any (artistic) manual competence as a criterion of distinction, all the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgment-of taste and of connoisseurship – have been programmatically voided. The result of this is that the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and an

institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste)'. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, 55 (Winter, 1990), pp.105-43 (pp.117-18).

⁸ For a discussion on the art historical categories of the 'found object', the readymade and the role of the photograph, see Margaret Iversen, 'Readymade, Found Object, Photograph', *Art Journal*, 63:2 (Summer, 2004), pp.44-57.

⁹ As with regards to the 'limitations' of an institutional approach to the theorization of art, Richard Wollheim's differentiating account, although specifically dealing with the tradition of painting, can be our guiding point here: 'Another way of putting the [institutional] theory is to say that for a painting to be a work of art the representatives of the art-world must recognize it to be one: and with the theory put this way, the trick is to grasp how we are supposed to understand "recognition". What "recognition" does not mean in this context is that, before the representatives of the art-world appear on the scene, the painting already is a work of art and this fact about it leads them, being so knowledgeable or so discriminating or both, to see it, and think of it, as one. On the contrary: what the theory tells us is that, first, the representatives of the art-world must think of the painting as a work of art, and then, in consequence of this fact – this fact about them – the painting becomes a work of art. [...] For what the theory manifestly does is that, by laying upon them legendary powers, it grossly enlarges the self-esteem of those tempted to think of themselves as representatives of the art-world. Painters make paintings, but it takes a representative of the art-world to make a work of art'. Richard Wollheim, 'What the Artist does', in *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp.13-42 (p.14).

¹⁰ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2008), p.99.

¹¹ For a to the point overview of the evolution of art education in post-war England and its entry into Higher Education, see Charles Harrison and Fred Orton's section 'The Modernisation of English Art', in *A Provisional History of Art & Language* (Paris: Fabre, 1982), pp. 5-13.

¹² While I refrain from providing individual examples of artists and their practices to illustrate my points – trusting the reader's personal experience with the language of contemporary art – I shall, however, return here to Robert Smithson's articulation of the exhibit's site in the exhibition space as a 'non-site' deflecting the spectator back to the 'site' outside of it: 'The site represents the world itself, the unedited text with all its complexities and possibilities, vast and remote – evocative but without *logos*. The Non-Site represents the focused articulation of part of the site which to some degree comes to stand for the site itself; but which like all metonymic tropes takes on a life of its own and becomes a form of speech: "It is by this three dimensional metaphor that one site can represent the other site which does not resemble it – thus *The Non-Site*," he wrote in 1967. [...] The Non-Site to some degree brings the site from the geographical, psychological, and social margins to a "centre" – be it the artist's studio, an art gallery, a museum, or a page of a book'. See Jack Flam, 'Introduction: Reading Robert Smithson', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp.xiii-xxv (p.xviii).

¹³ John Roberts, *The Intangibilites of Form. Skill and Deskillling in Art After the Readymade* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p.49. [Italics are Roberts'].

¹⁴ That this has also given new potential forms of authorship beyond the unique artistic signature is discussed by Groys as 'multiple authorship' (*Art Power*, pp.93-100) and by Roberts as 'situational authorship' (*The Intangibilites of Form*, pp.165-

99).

¹⁵ I take this term from John Roberts who sees in the professional coming together of artist and curator an ‘intra-professional identification between the labour of the artist and the labour of the curator. [...] Thinking of yourself as a curator as an artist, in other words, is a response to how the image of your demanualized labour is shared by your professional collaborator. This makes the unity between artist and curator the expression of a historically specific kind of convergence between artistic and non-artistic skills as part of the wider interpenetration of artistic and general social technique’. John Roberts, *The Intangibilites of Form*, p.185.

¹⁶ ‘A written sign, [...] is a mark that subsists, one which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription and which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it. This is what has enabled us, at least traditionally, to distinguish a “written” from an “oral” communication’. Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, p.9.

¹⁷ We could describe this situation as one in which the museum allows and accommodates the artistic production of its own critique from within: ‘[...] as the critique of the museum is built into the production of art, and more art circumvents the museum at the point of distribution, the museum must, above all else, *be equal to its own demise*. That is, it must be equal to its own critique at the point of display and production if it is to remain in a position to call itself a modern museum of modern art at all [...]. This is why museums have become increasingly committed to the idea of themselves as sites of artistic production and *devolved* sites of display in a network of sites of display [...]. The museum is revealed to be a place where values and judgements are not just imposed, but produced in collaboration with artists, who *have no investment in the museum*. [...] Whereas artist and curator talk about a democratic dialogue inside the circuits of authorship, the museum now talks about wanting to bring this dialogue into the museum. What this actually means in relation to an engagement with issues of social and cultural division remains painfully limited, but something no doubt has shifted in the boundaries of the old bourgeois culture, or rather, in terms of how the old bourgeois culture wants to be seen’. John Roberts, *The Intangibilites of Form*, pp.187-89.

¹⁸ If we go with Groys, it is the production of the documentation of the ‘artwork-in-exhibition’ on which the (contemporary) artist can rely: ‘As long as an object is not yet exhibited and as soon as it is no longer exhibited, it can no longer be considered an artwork. It is either a memory of past art or a promise of future art, but from either perspective it is simply art documentation’. Boris Groys, *Art Power*, p.98.

¹⁹ For a sympathetic exhibition commentary on the growing mobility of contemporary artworks with regards to both their production and exposure, and the potentiality of refiguring the problem of the artwork’s ‘local contexts’ not as trying yet again to ‘fix’ another location but to embrace it as one of enabling a space of criticality, see Irit Rogoff’s essay ‘The Where of Now’, in *Time Zones*, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), pp.84-98.

²⁰ As Derrida has argued, text is not really containable to itself as it were and thus, there is also always the possibility of some ‘text’ around artworks: ‘Now, because there cannot be anything, and in particular any art, that isn’t textualized in the sense I give to the word ‘text’ – which goes beyond the purely discursive – there is text as soon as deconstruction is engaged in fields said to be artistic, visual or spatial. There is text because there is always a little discourse somewhere in the visual arts, and also

because even if there is no discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization. For this reason, the expansion of the concept of text is strategically decisive here. So the works of art that are the most overwhelmingly silent cannot help but be caught within a network of differences and references that give them a textual structure. Jacques Derrida, 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. Laurie Volpe, in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, ed. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.9-32 (p.15).

²¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p.9. [Italics are Derrida's].

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