Disordering the Establishment

Woodruff, Lily

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In 1971, Hervé Fischer began a project of self-destruction. It started with shredding his recent paintings, then moved on to photographing anticlimactic scenes of suffocation. By 1974, he was ready to expand the sphere of ruination to the art world as a whole, so he sent out a mailer inviting other artists to send him their artworks, which, free of charge, he would tear up, combine with his own destroyed art, and return so that the participants could then toss them in the trash. Titling this series *Hygiène de l’art* (*Hygiene of Art*), the project was a cleansing of the degraded academic art of the 1960s. The art world fascinated Fischer, yet in the years following 1968, salon culture and its discursive styles seemed socially irrelevant places for pessimistic intellectuals, as he put it, to “argue like mandarins over the genitals of angels.” If the salons represented the metaphysical, intangible, and immaterial, then, by contrast, the street was the site in which much of the visible and popular debate on what he considered the real problems of the present were taking shape in direct action. In the wake of his hygienic destruction, the street and the public that it metonymically represented provided a privileged site in which Fischer, along with Fred Forest and Jean-Paul Thénot, could experiment under the banner of the group that they created in 1974, the Collectif d’Art Sociologique (*cAS*). Acting as investigators, the artists carried out participatory projects based on questionnaires, documentary video, and mass media, as well as direct critiques of the art world to engage a public on a mass scale.
In their turn toward participation as a panacea of artistic democratization, the CAS built on decades of experimentation by other artists, yet unlike the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV), Daniel Buren, or André Cadere, they rejected traditional painting and sculpture to shift emphasis onto their audience by making artwork that required the public to complete it. Their critical engagements with art-world institutions had a pronounced populist streak. Rather than paint or steel, the public itself was to be the primary material of facture, as the artists worked to “make the reality of the social relations appear concretely” where they had otherwise been obscured by the “dominant ideology.”

By inventing new opportunities for encounters among their audience-participants, they hoped to change the facts themselves and thereby create social change beyond the art world. A self-observed consequence of this was that the artists ended up privileging ethics and methodological innovation over aesthetic concerns, which they rejected as the purview of salons and academicism. Simultaneously, the artists rejected the instrumentalizing processes of their adopted social science, thereby cutting themselves free of disciplinary constraints that require methodological rigor. This is not to say that their work was without logic, however. Constant
experimentation led the artists to develop an ever-evolving range of formal strategies, yet their approaches to producing artworks that fostered their social ambitions corresponded with forms that were consistently specific to democracy itself. Notably, the artworks they presented to the public often took shape as empty spaces, whether in the form of unanswered questions or the aftermath of iconoclastic destruction. Their works not only effaced the authorial specificity of the artist, but also made space for the constant renewal that defines democratic participation.

Hervé Fischer: Clearing Space

Sociology was a highly conflicted field at the time when Fischer, Forest, and Thénot were turning to it as a source of their art production. As discussed in the introduction to this book and in chapter 1, French sociology had evolved significantly during the years following World War II, as it developed from a primarily philosophical field to one that was heavily influenced by positivist methods of quantification imported from the United States. In spring 1968,
sociology students at Nanterre, where Michel Crozier, Henri Lefebvre, and Alain Tourain had recently been hired, were responsible for instigating the movement of students and workers that developed during the spring, and their own discipline was a primary target of their critique. The students were dissatisfied with the way that sociology was taught in the university, as it provided a lack of practical training in empirical methods and did not prepare the students for careers in the field once they had completed their formal education. During this time, Fischer was reading texts published by the Situationist International, in whom he discovered a form of “new sociology,” one that rejected quantitative and industrial methods and ambitions. These texts and the ethos of the period led him to abandon the paintings that he had been amateurishly copying from the models provided by books and galleries. “Bad derivative painting,” as he put it, was abundant at the time, but he came to interpret this as a sociological fact and a form of “spectacle” that followed the market forces that determined what counted as successful artistic practice. The mass reproduction of works of art and their consequent ubiquity, he argued, had led to the point that painting had become irrelevant to a project of social change. Joining with the ethos and politics of the May Movement, then, he decided to break from art based on the logic of reification, to instead make art that “valORIZED THE LIVED” as he turned decisively toward public engagement.4

Fischer’s first project dedicated to living was based on erasure. Later, in 1973, Pierre Restany would introduce Fischer to the work of pop artist Martial Raysse and his ongoing project “hygiene of vision,” started in 1959, for which the artist assembled cheap plastic cleaning products and cosmetics into obelisks and shadowboxes that confronted the materials used to scrub and conceal an imperfect world. Rather than taking on vision broadly as Raysse had, Fischer’s focus narrowed on the art world, seeking to cleanse it of the artist and his works. In 1972 he produced a white plastic serigraphed sign with red lettering that read “DéFENSE D’ART-FISCHER”—a pun on the signage posted on walls around French cities warning “déFENSE D’AFFICHER,” or “no posting.” Positioned between large brightly colorful easel paintings from the leftist pop movement New Figuration, Fischer’s sign humorously rejected itself as an example of “art by Fischer,” while antagonizing the art around it by implicitly denouncing the artistic authorship on which they stylistically made their names, as well as the appropriateness of hanging artworks within the space of the exhibition. In form, tone, and institutional implication, it recalled the 1967 Salon de la Jeune Peinture demonstration of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni, at which the artists rejected painting and exhibition as an attack on the passivity of an audience seeking entertainment. Five years later, paint-
ing and exhibition had not waned, yet the variations for its contestation continued to evolve.

Fischer’s plastics came in the form not of disposable commodity fetishes, but of clear plastic bags that could be used to dispose of artistic excesses, such as their work or, seemingly, themselves. Fischer used small bags for the sanitized display of destroyed art, put a larger one over his head, posed as though in the tranquil act of suffocating, and slid himself corpse-like into another the size of a body bag as though dramatically literalizing Roland Barthes’s “death of the author” thesis. Like the ironic alchemy that Barthes had imagined for the do-anything material in his *Les lettres nouvelles* essay, later reprinted in *Mythologies*, Fischer saw plastic as “an ideological vector that signifies modernity, hygiene, conditioning, and the ersatz universal,” but he also foresaw “the final use of vinyl chloride for the dead, the conditioning under plastic of the individual in the 20th century.” If plastic served as a metaphor for postindustrial subjectivity, its ability to asphyxiate and sequester also made it the proper material for his antiformalist rejection of aesthetic experience in art.

His 1974 invitation to have other artists send him their art combined his hygienic destruction of demystification with the optimism of networked community as practice through the mail art that had developed among Fluxus artists of the 1960s. Influenced by communication theorists Marshall McLuhan and Abraham Moles, Fischer understood mail art as a way for an international subculture to express itself through an everyday system. As an alternative to the centralized authority of television, the democratized accessibility of the postal service made it a mass medium that allowed for a decentralized art practice that could take place on the margins of the art world. Fischer was surprised when approximately 350 artists—many of whom were internationally prominent—responded to his call to participate in his “prophylactic campaign” and have their work destroyed as well. While he had conceived the project as an attack on easel painting, unsurprisingly the artists who participated were themselves largely invested in rejecting artistic convention, and as a result a wide variety of other media arrived at his door, including prints, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and videos, but also poetry, a manuscript, a manifesto, and other more experimental artworks, including a computer drawing, a skeleton, and seemingly used feminine hygiene products. One artist sent a portrait of Fischer for him to destroy, and numerous others, including French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, the decorative artists Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne, and Daniel Spoerri, returned Fischer’s own invitation either preshredded or for Fischer to destroy himself. Contributions from Arman, Ben, César, Gérard Fromanger, Jean-Jacques Levêque, and François
Morellet confirmed the relevance of destruction among the most prominent artists in France, while contributions from artists like Americans Ken Friedman, Ray Johnson, and Fred Lonidier, German Wolf Vostell, Brits Genesis P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti, and Argentine Nicolás García Uriburu indicate that this process of auto-iconoclasm had an appeal that was not just international, but relevant to practices as diverse as punk performance, documentary, and feminist and ecological art.

Closer to the specificity of Fischer’s adopted process, décollage artists François Dufrène, Mimmo Rotella, and Jacques de la Villeglé all sent in examples of their artworks. The torn posters that Villeglé contributed highlighted the recent history of tearing as an art form, in particular one that could be said to have “sociological” sympathies, given the way in which they document the public gestures upon which their compositions are based. As discussed in chapter 2, décollage used tearing as a signature artistic practice that referenced street vandalism, mechanical anticompositional gesture, and pop culture, sometimes while commenting on the politics of the period. Unlike décollage, which Buren was drawn to for the way that it opened up new avenues for painting, and retained its public/private dialectic in order to make work that was still ultimately for the art world, Fischer’s tearing did not seek to produce a new form of painting, or point to the contingencies of its legibility, but to eliminate such practices altogether. He did not use this project to employ the idea of public space but was oriented within an imagined community of artists for the purpose of eradicating insular artistic practices before turning decisively away to make work in collaboration with the general public. For this reason, Fischer considered the participation of many of the artists to be hypocritical because they were not committing to a rupture with their previous practices.

In process and as a finished ensemble, Fischer’s project was intelligible to the artistic conventions he sought to abandon in the way that it created visual unity among the heterogeneous assortment of objects that he received. Artworks of diverse materials and textures became uniform quantities of scrap that fit into identical 10-by-4.5-inch transparent plastic sacks. The sacks removed the opportunity for visual pleasure of the things destroyed by sealing them off from the viewer, yet the fragments gratify in all their vivid color and in the conspicuous display of the familiar signatures of their famous makers. Each specimen was carefully hand labeled, signed, and dated by Fischer, and was identically imprinted with a bureaucratic rubber stamp that read “Hervé Fischer–Hygiène de l’art–La déchirure” (an artifact of the rubber-stamp aesthetics that he associated with mail art). Adopting the display strategy of the
easel painting that he sought to cancel out, the sacks then hung in neat rows on gallery walls, signaling the artist’s intention that these specimens be considered part of a project that was self-consciously a work of art. Before Villeglé and the décollagistes, Henri Matisse and Jean Arp had made the organization of torn fragments a standard avant-garde compositional practice, while categorization had developed among conceptual artists as a form of postindustrial deskilling. For Fischer, the tearing was as much creative as it was destructive, recuperative in the way that it communicated its message to an audience and “testified to the consciousness raising of the mystifying character of art, recognized by the artists themselves.” Nevertheless, the truly radical act, he observed, would have been to just dispose of the works without intervention or exhibition. Instead, his hygiene combines the pathos of handmade destruction with a taxonomic sampling of the artistic milieu—a combination of the rational and affective that would characterize much of the CAS’s efforts to merge art with social science.

As Fischer argued, this institutional conformity was a necessary contradiction for the project that aimed to be intelligible within an art-world context that he was not looking to reject as much as reform. Echoing André Cadere’s critique of the false Western freedoms generated by an exclusionary market, Fischer expressed disappointment in a gallery system in which artists who claimed to be militants against the bourgeoisie frequented the most stylish art openings in order to be seen, seek rich clients, and flatter critics. “What assures the success of mediocrity,” he concluded, “is the quantity of people that it concerns and satisfies.” In opposition to this art-world mass that was sufficiently large to support derivative bourgeois art, however, he posed another mass, that of the general public beyond the art world, whose existence falsified the democratic claims of supposedly committed artists. The same year as his prophylactic campaign, he spoke to the boundary between these worlds by enlisting students from the École des Beaux-Arts to glue serigraphed paper disks that he had produced to all of the “no parking” street signs around the Saint-Germain-des-Prés gallery district. The signs blended in with municipal signage, advertising, graffiti, and street interventions from other artists, such as Buren, Cadere, and others, who had made the same streets their canvases in recent years. Rather than providing the assurance of information or direction, however, Fischer’s sign, titled Douane culturelle (Cultural Customs), announced the entry point to a district called “ART,” and asked, “Do you have anything to declare?”—an effect he managed to illustrate in a photograph of the work that fortuitously captured a pair of police officers who unknowingly play the role of border guards. Here, the civilian at the frontier of the arts district and
the amateur without expert knowledge were asked to confront their absence of high-culture baggage and either stay out or acknowledge that they tread in territory that was undeniably foreign to them. Attuned to sociological data on the subject of cultural literacy, Fischer noted that a 1972 survey conducted by the French Society of Inquiries by Survey—one of the new statistical analysis firms founded at the turn of the 1960s—reported that 71 percent of French people claimed to have never visited an exhibition of modern art.11 With these early works, then, he offered a manifesto of his critiques and intentions, and he cleared the field of posturing and debris. Reactions that his tearings received from his audience included accusations of nihilism and fascism and confirmed for him the division between insiders who understood contemporary art and were able to identify its references to recent practices, and those left baffled by the seemingly gratuitous destruction and censorship.

As Fischer explained to critic Bernard Teyssèdre in a 1974 interview, one of his aims with this work was to highlight the class division of the contemporary art world. Rather than embracing what he considered to be the “dandyism” of the leisure class, whose historical-avant-garde ambitions aimed to conflate art and life, he stated that his ultimate goal was “cultural disalienation.”12 “I am struggling,” he explained, “to develop a materialist practice of art, not in the sense that I reduce the works of art to their material waste, but rather in the sense that I work from a materialist theory of culture and that I search to make evident the social functioning of artistic ideology in the class struggle, which is artistic, as well as economic and political.” In some instances, however, he suggested reducing what he considered cultural waste to a waste product: “I suggest, if you have the means, to attack a Vasarely, a Mathieu, a Carzou, a Bernard Buffet, etc. cultural pollution of the bourgeoisie.”13 A key strategy of this project, which he considered to be a form of pedagogy, was to break down the barrier, as he put it, between the “sacred” space of institutions and the “profane” extra-artistic world by introducing the profane into the space of the sacred. “With the desacralization of society [in modernity],” he argued, “the symbolic separation between the sacred and the profane becomes more imperious, up to the point where today the desacralization of art itself implies the suppression of the separating frame.”14 That is, artworks that become “autonomous,” thanks to the market in capitalist society, continue to guard their privileged status, but now it is not by association with church patronage or the ruling elite, but by producing new discriminatory sociocultural cleavages. “Today,” he wrote, “it is the role of the museum or gallery to isolate the art from the profane, reserve its usage for the privileged, to found a system of founding values and guarantee respect, in the service of
Figure 4.3. Hervé Fischer, *Douane culturelle*, summer 1974. One of fifty serigraphy signs pasted over existing street signage in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood of Paris. Archives Hervé Fischer.
the power of the elite.” “Hygiene,” somewhat ironically then, meant a form of categorical pollution and the valorization of the profane. Fischer’s process of destroying art symbolized the destruction of the idea that art is sacred, but, moreover, he sought to expose the class relations that he saw implied in the separation of art from society.

If hygiene suggests health, then his Pharmacie Fischer & Cie, which was ongoing since 1972, was a way of turning to society to help cure its ills. Dressing in a pharmacist’s lab coat and sitting at a table within a public place like a bookstore or town square, Fischer would talk individually with people about problems ranging from personal annoyances, such as their intolerance of listening to a family member practice the violin, to common but life-changing matters like their desires to have children (or be assured not to), to serious national political conflict. In response, Fischer would proscribe them “pills”—white Styrofoam pellets that he packed into small plastic boxes and labeled with the required cure. “We all have problems!” Fischer later stated about this project. “And it is known that in France, pharmacies are the most developed commerce aside from neighbourhood cafés. The quantity of pills that people take is increasingly enormous as statistics show.” Indeed, already in 1965 a group of amateur sociological activists in the suburbs of Paris had seized on the symbol of the pill to protest the external denigration of their city as the source of the disease “sarcellite.” The inventive “sarcellomycine” that they paraded through town symbolized the various neighborhood organizations that one could join in order to combat the alienating effects of living in a half-developed new city. The figure of the pill served as both symptom and response to the general medicalization of society, yet the cure that Fischer offered through his pharmacy was not an impersonal, quick chemical fix, but as with the Sarcelles activists, the personal contact offered by conversation—one that, indeed, resembles the intimacy that can develop on the French model between neighborhood pharmacists and regular customers seeking relief for minor ailments. The pill boxes acted as a sort of talismanic reminder of the encounter with the artist who invited people to publicly air their personal grievances.

In his 1977 book Theory of Sociological Art, Fischer described his ambition for his Hygiene of Art projects as freeing himself “of the heavy cultural bazaar that others have called the supplement of the soul, the musée imaginaire, masterpieces of human genius that stick to our soles.” Evoking André Malraux’s 1947 essay, in which he praised the ability of photography to make artworks from around the world and across millennia accessible to the masses, Fischer joined a critique of the minister of culture developed by artists and
intellectuals alike who saw his vision as conservative and out of touch with the cultural practices of everyday people. Fischer understood the mechanical reproduction of auratic artworks not as the democratizing force that Walter Benjamin envisioned, but as a clog in the imagination, since a limited number of broadly distributed ideals prevented the public from being able to experience the world vividly and without expert vetting. Fischer’s critique echoed Buren’s frustration with the cultural dominance of models provided by artworks such as Turner’s that supposedly eclipsed the fog of London itself. Like Buren and the GRAV before him, Fischer’s strategy for coping with the weight of past influences was to reject historical precedent and focus on the present by developing works that would reveal the ideological mechanisms of art in society. Whereas the GRAV and Buren emphasized the importance of the viewer’s immediate experience of the artwork itself, Fischer (like Forest and Thénot discussed below) sought to create the greatest possible direct contact among the public, often by reducing the presence of an identifiable art object and replacing it with an event, action, or experience. Destroying the artwork was the first step in this evacuation.

In Fischer’s acts of negation—the destroyed artworks; the performances of suffocation; the confrontational, identity-stripping street signs—Teyssèdre nevertheless recognized a humanism. Explicitly opposing Michel Foucault’s vision of a posthumanist future when “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea,” he saw in Fischer’s attempt to reclassify artistic knowledge an effort to re-center man. Specifically, he saw the “pedagogical” way in which Fischer sought to reveal truths of contemporary art to be a demonstration of optimism and a commitment to society. Rather than interpreting the destruction in Fischer’s work as a nihilistic act of erasure, Teyssèdre recognized its effort at positive transformation. In a similar turn away from the structuralism of the foregoing decades, Fischer also rejected the influence of Barthes’s degree zero, which had come to define the previous generation’s experiments in painting, such as those of Buren. For Fischer, the idea of neutrality—“writing in the indicative,” as Barthes described it—was an “idealist trap of bad bourgeois consciousness.” “It is contrary,” he later said, “to a productive socio-critical work, that aims to be active, politically effective.” The sociological method that he would come to embrace echoed a methodology that had been developing since the 1950s with the work of Henri Chombart de Lauwe and later Edgar Morin. Retaining the importance of eliminating models through destruction, he referred to the activist strategy of sociological art as a “negative utopia” or “negative pedagogy.” In an article titled “Sociological Art as Utopian Strategy,” which he published
in the final issue of the radical leftist conceptual art publication *The Fox*, he argued that the “negation of the negation (negation of bourgeois society by Marxist theory itself denied in its totalitarian and bureaucratic effects) gives way to *critical theory*, a questioning of society which affirms the possibility of *another* society without wanting (or being able) to specify the model.” Rejecting the technological and empirical sociologies that he saw manipulating a passive contemporary society, he wanted to create a form of art that would raise social consciousness by teaching critical thinking rather than promoting a new leftist dogma. Drawing from the linguistic model current in conceptual art, he imagined sociological art as a communicative message that passed dialectically between artist and the public, but one that was based on negative interference rather than positivist efficiency. In the early “hygiene” works, participation was limited to the donation of personal property, a silent response to an unfamiliar question, or a one-on-one conversation. Fischer’s iconoclasm, however, cleared space for later art projects that developed the therapeutic pharmacy into efforts to open channels for communication across fractured community groups.

**Fred Forest: Media Spaces**

Like Fischer, Forest organized his earliest work around the participation of his audience, yet he devised schemes by which the masses could appropriate the communications networks of the media. Forest drew inspiration from his background working as a telephone operator in the 1960s, where he discovered an invisible connection between communication media. As a popular television show reached its end, the switchboard would light up as the show’s audience decided to simultaneously place its calls. All of a sudden, the television and telephone did not just convey information to, or between, their users, but in their convergence they revealed the behavior of their audience. A sociological image of the region’s population appeared as the television, which otherwise unidirectionally conveyed information from network to viewer, could be seen to be one node in a conversation among viewers thanks to the more explicitly dialogic medium of the telephone. The invisible, atomized television audience suddenly illuminated in their unity appeared to flock around the temporal space created by television programming. Forest took an interest in visualizing the relationship between communication, media, and society, but also in restructuring it through processes that empowered the voices of the anonymous masses.

In order to address an audience that represented a cross-section of the public, Forest made and exhibited his photography, video, television, and
newspaper projects both within and beyond sites intended for the display of art. *Portrait de famille* (*Family Portrait*; 1967) was one of his first explicitly sociological projects, as it took as its subjects the residents of the Grand Ensemble housing project of Vallée au Renard, which was constructed in the southern Paris suburb of l’Hay-les-Roses—a city whose population quadrupled in the three decades following World War II, and where Forest himself lived at the time. To initiate contact with his subjects, he distributed a flyer titled “Game-Poll” to nearly seven hundred residential mailboxes, explaining that the project consisted of collecting photographs that they felt represented their clan, which Forest would then post as an artwork in the communal cultural center. In amiable language, he referred to participating in the project as “play” and reassured residents that the “technical or artistic quality according to conventional criteria has no importance here! What counts above all is the personal interest that you attach to this family document.” Forest used the language of common sense to universalize their particular experiences and communicate that he understood their worldview. He imagined that he would therefore fix a problem that he anticipated they must all have. Echoing Henri Lefebvre’s dissatisfaction with technocratic efforts to purge boredom from France’s new housing developments without making space for spontaneity, as discussed in chapter 1, Forest wrote, “In a rather boring world that offers us so rarely the occasion to participate in an action ‘different’ from our routine chores we thought that this experiment would possibly interest you.” He went on to doubly validate the individual families’ affective attachments by referring to their photographs in the language of art, while democratizing that art by arguing, “Contrary to what one generally thinks, Art and Games can be accessible to everyone.” This project shared with Fischer’s *Hygiene of Art* a process based on soliciting contributions from the public that would then appear as a sociological group through their common display. If Fischer’s project sought to clear a space within the realm of artistic production by undercutting the primacy of the traditional artistic subject, Forest’s filled in such a space with a populist content. All of the residents would be able to see their own photographs surrounded by those of their neighbors, thereby creating an opportunity to visualize a community that may otherwise have been fragmented by the absence of spaces for shared public culture. The effect of doing so was not to make the public take the place of the artist, but to redefine the concern and practice of the artist in terms that approached those of the sociologist.

Rather than evidencing an art photographer’s aesthetic interest, the images that Forest gathered from the residents of Vallée au Renard embody the notion of the medium’s social value, such as Pierre Bourdieu elaborated in *Pho-
tography: A Middle-brow Art (1965). With their range of levels of technical and artistic competency, the candid images exemplify sociological expectations of what middle-class photography is supposed to look like. The conspicuous snapshot quality of the photographs distinguishes them from those by professionals who are commissioned to pose their subjects for public display, and yet some of these private photographs are only minimally different from an official group portrait in that they adhere to a set of unstated social conventions. Perhaps it would seem futile to attempt even to produce anything different since, as Bourdieu observed, “there are few activities which are so stereotyped and less abandoned to the anarchy of individual intentions,” and indeed, it is telling that Forest proposed to photograph his subjects in a dinner table set-up, and that this was the very genre of scene that at least one family had on hand to turn over. The fact that the same snapshot was taken during the exceptional circumstance of the holiday season and that it featured children further conforms to Bourdieu’s class determinism. Indeed, the project’s very conception is predicted by the sociologist. As he argued, “Photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of its family function or rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life, in short, of reinforcing the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity.” For Bourdieu, the psychological benefit of togetherness, however, is only the effect of social causes. Social causes allowed photography to exist, determined its limitations as a documentary medium, and, consequently, determined its psychological import. Class structures guarantee that close-knit families and the portraits they display will be
more important to lower- and middle-class people than to the wealthy, who statistically prefer images of landscapes to relatives.26  

Forest’s exhibition strategies further underscored his use of the medium as a transparent mode of communication, as he mounted the photographs and other documents that the families elected to provide in a series of exhibitions, the first of which took place in the central hall of the Vallée au Renard complex. His use of documents to secure tighter community bonds recalls the responses of villagers Bourdieu interviewed who considered photography a tool functionally equivalent to direct verbal communication. Dismissing the idea of using photography to create a new mode of interaction between familiars as “not worth it!” a peasant from the hamlet of Lesquire explained that the reason photography is not practiced in the village is because “we’ve seen each other too many times already! Always the same faces all day. We know each other down to the last detail.”27 By displaying the photographs at the community center, Forest’s project would aim to re-create a hamletlike intimacy in a suburban environment known for its social alienation. If the intimacy of Lesquire obviated the need for photographic practice, then perhaps photographic practice could substitute for its face-to-face original.  

The photographs themselves, however, do not provide a critique of public expectations of the visibility of private lives. In this case, arguing for the artistic validity of the middle-brow instead meant only further undergirding the functionality of the photographic documents as sociological evidence. The family photographs reveal the humanity of individuals in the candid exchange of regards between family members or in the desire to smile at the camera for posterity, and their public display sought to expand this intimacy to a community. At the same time, there is the risk that their public display would cause the photographs to be reduced to figures of a type. For the same reason that years later Barthes refused to publish the Winter Garden photograph in Camera Lucida for an audience for whom it will have no aching resonance, these family photographs also, displayed to an audience presumed not to know them, would no longer represent intimate fragments that stand in as shorthand for a host of particular known traits that animate a person in the mind of another. Instead, the images of anonymous family members would have been alienated from the affection that the authentic family snapshot conveys to those for whom it is intelligible as more than just a sociological fact.  

While Family Portrait affirmed the lighthearted identity of subjects who were sociologically known quantities, the projects that followed took place across newspaper, radio, and television and consisted of the artist selecting a venue into which he would insert a “space” without determining what would
fill it. Titled *Space-Media*, these works eliminated the sociological expectation of the prior project’s given context. On January 12, 1972, he published a nearly blank space in the art pages of *Le Monde* titled 150 cm² of *Newspaper* in an effort to “explode the graphic structures of the information page” and “project a scalable content into this ‘liberated’ surface.” A “true multiple” printed in an edition of 489,557 copies, the newspaper was composed by juxtapositions of columns of text, image, and advertisements on all variety of subjects. “The environment of contemporary man,” he wrote, “appears as a compact mosaic where the anarchic multiplication of sonic and visual messages weave an increasingly dense network.” Taking inspiration from John Cage, he attempted to break the typographic “asphyxia” with a “visual silence” that would make room for “possible contents.”

A ludic combination of graphic and literary elements would create a sort of rebus of “pure imagination.” Sociologist Jean Duvignaud poetically likened the *Le Monde* project to the spaces left blank on old geographic maps. “*Terra incognita*,” this was the land of reflection.

Breaking free from the strictures of artistic convention necessarily meant retaining certain signifiers of artistic practice in order to make the break legible as such. This rectangle of unprinted space surrounded itself with printed material that coached the viewer in how to understand and respond appropriately. The title of the work appeared above the blank, and, below, text explained that this was a communication experiment that the reader should seize with written or drawn self-expression. “The entire page of this newspaper will become a work. Yours,” he declared, while suggesting that the reader might cut out his or her contribution to that day’s news and dignify it with a frame. Such a recommendation doubly ironizes first on the fact that the viewer should chaotically intercede in a space of rational professionalism, and second in elevating the cultural status of the cheap newsprint by juxtaposing it with a frame. As Forest conceived of the newspaper exhibition as a radical departure from institutional conventions, he invited the reader to reinscribe the project within the conventions of artistic exhibition in a gesture that apparently held on to the idea that the proper place for two-dimensional work would be framed on a wall. While imagining the work framed might have simply been a conceit to further nudge *Le Monde* readers to conceptualize 150 cm² as art, the proposition counteracts the immediate and ephemeral aspects of the moment of participation. Forest argued that “the necessary presence of the title: ‘*Le Monde,*’ at the top of the page, and the date of publication, contribute to authenticate the work, to complete it” in its quest to unite art and life. The clearly printed publication date, “12 janvier 1972,” became then not just a mark of the present, but it also prepared the moment for its own archiving. In a
display strategy resembling that of *Family Portrait*, Forest invited the reader to mail his or her filled space back to him, in which case it would find its place in a collaborative “painting display” that the artist later mounted at the Albertus Magnus Center in Paris.

Over seven hundred individuals sent Forest their creative handiworks, which included paintings, collages, cartoons, mathematical equations, abstractions, and written statements expressing approval and abusive retort, in political and personal registers. Many of the responses demonstrated aesthetic or theoretical accord with the project in illustrations of color and compositional balance, and statements directly congratulating Forest on a brilliant idea. A particularly remarkable affirmation of the project’s populist character came from a participant who cut out and pasted text from another newspaper simply reading “*le sans-culottes de la peinture*.” Others were more critical. One used mathematical formulas to calculate the true surface area and show that with the frame’s rounded corners, the work was fewer than 150 cm². Another display of geometric guile linked this false literalism to another of the work’s central, yet uncertain, claims: that the page somehow belonged to the reader. This respondent was careful to note precisely that the work included 38 mm² of “Fred Forest,” the printed name within the lower right corner of the blank space where one would expect to find a signature. The various *Space-Media* works would be valued, Forest noted, by the imaginative way that they engaged with current events, but also with the fact that they were authored by an artist with a recognizable name. Authorship offered another convention by which the work framed itself as art, as well as an encouragement that participating individuals valorize themselves and their place in the public sphere.

Those who submitted their participation to Forest received a response in-
viting them to discuss the meaning of art in the context of their collective display. “What is art today?” the invitation asked. “What will it be tomorrow? We know nothing of it—in any case, all is to be reinvented. Our era sees the multiplication of the technological means of communication, while in a paradoxical fashion, the individual remains isolated amidst the multitude. Perhaps the job of ‘the artist’ simply consists then in creating ‘situations’—in creating structures within which, and by which, exchange is newly rendered possible at the human level.”

In fact, as with many of the projects that Forest conducted independently, the work that he would later carry out with the CAS was based almost exclusively on the creation of events that sought to create dialogue among groups of individuals gathered together, often with the stated purpose of trying to recuperate the socially transformative capacities of the documentary media with which he worked, including photography, sound recording, and video. As Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser, Forest’s occasional collaborator and interlocutor, put it:

The point of view of the journalist is reflected by the point of view of the reader, which is reflected by the point of view of the visitor to the exhibition which is reflected by the point of view of the journalist who writes, and thus follows in a circular progression that is practically infinite. Such
a labyrinth of reflecting and reflected reflections is an excellent tool for the ethical, aesthetic and existential intellectual comprehension of a situation, because it destroys established points of view (ideologies) and it permits the situation to reveal itself in multiple facets. It permits that is, choice.32

Flusser’s phenomenological approach resonates with Jean-François Lyotard’s contemporary writing on art, such as on Daniel Buren, as discussed in chapter 2. According to the theorists, Buren and Forest both decentered the artwork by emphasizing the fragmentation of perception, which would decenter the power of any single institution and encourage thoughtful reflection on the part of the audience. Whereas Lyotard interpreted this fracturing as a way of highlighting the instability of direct immersive experience, Flusser argued that these kaleidoscopic refractions of various points of view would empower readers to overcome the threat of propaganda. Less a critique of mediation for its own sake, then, this was an appropriation in which those media more or less disappeared so as to elevate the gesture of the populace. Duvignaud likened the project to the writing that appeared on the walls of buildings in Paris during the May 1968 uprising.33 “Forest offered them, modestly, an occasion to address to us a sign of intelligence,” Duvignaud wrote.

All passes as if on these white walls where a flâneur draws a line, a sign, a trace that a second stroller prolongs. Another passes who adds another trait. Then others . . . And from all this disorder, from all this chance is composed a complete figure, often abstract but significant, a figure that cannot be different from what it is, and that imposes itself as such. The responses received by Forest constitute thus a coherent ensemble, a “good form” in which each message was unconscious. Whatever do we not do in this way, once we allow ourselves to be invaded by objective chance—that, in the end, of Breton.34

Unlike the Surrealist exquisite corpse, none of Forest’s projects actually allowed for the progressive piecemeal accumulation of a collective creating together, but they did attempt to instigate imaginative projection through the coalescence of the chance that arises from collectives who thereby proliferate the choice that Flusser describes, perhaps even toward greater social transformation.

At the same time, however, it was not clear that Forest necessarily envisioned a revolutionary role for his work. Inverting Buren’s appraisal of the “security valve” function of art as an escape from the reality of institutional domination, Forest used the same language but inversely, observing that the
Space-Media works would have an “eminent therapeutic function constituting a sort of security valve” for “the anxiety that feeds off of a generalization of information that makes each individual live all the dramas of the world.” “Wedged on the news page between political crisis and tragic news-in-brief,” Forest envisioned that “‘space-medium’ will play a securing role, giving the page the possibility to be apprehended differently.” The work then evoked interpretations that oscillated between revolutionary disruption and salubrious appeasement. While Forest’s appropriation of the media performed a sort of ideological critique, his democratizing gestures were often more about creating a space akin to writing letters to the editor or public access television than about exposing and undermining the mechanisms of media and institutional power.

While artists of the 1960s and 1970s celebrated mass media for its potential as a democratic site for public debate, the same were also frequently criticized from both the left and the right for their lack of neutrality and promotion of vacant prattle. Those responsible for television’s development in France, however, had lofty and socially progressive aims that resonated with the ambitions of the CAS. French television in the immediate aftermath of World War II was largely influenced by the Resistance and spirit of the Liberation. Despite the fact that in these early years, there was only one channel, which was controlled by the state, television’s mission was to provide a public service that would aid in human progress through the creation of informed citizens of a “république de télévision,” in which one could participate in democratic action without leaving the couch. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, data indicated that as the number of televisions in French households increased from 39 percent in 1965 to 83 percent in 1975, and the number of available channels increased from one to two in 1964, then to three in 1972, there was a simultaneous decline in readership of books and the popular press. As historian Philippe Poirrier concluded, by the end of the 1960s, “the merchandising of programs and wishes of telespectators testif[ied] to the failure of TV as tool of democratization.” State control over television was not able to prevent it from turning into another source of consumerism, nor apparently was it able to guarantee that any particular political message was received. If, on the one hand, Charles de Gaulle orchestrated meticulously controlled televised spectacle-ceremony to secure a visual image of himself as the incarnation of the state, he also understood that television could be his enemy. Once fortune turned, it was this same medium that he blamed for the “conditioning of public opinion by the press” and the “passivity of the masses” leading to dissent. In the years following 1968, state media underwent multiple changes.
as people in France stopped listening to the national French Radio-Television Agency programming, preferring instead peripheral stations independent of government control. This forced the government to institute a number of information reforms aimed at decentralizing television.

It was in this environment of diversification that Forest began working with mass media as a pedagogical artistic material in order to create a stronger sociality. Artistic projects using media structures reversed paternalist diffusion by instead inviting the viewer, listener, or reader to participate directly in their processes, while he also began appearing on discussion programs to present his work in conversation with critics for a mass audience. Forest sought to transform the democratic “action” of passively reading the newspaper or watching television by making spaces within media into which the viewer could envision his or her own existence as part of the daily variety. A week after his *Le Monde* publication, the television iteration of *Space-Media* aired on *Tele-Midi 72*, a variety television program that emerged from the partial loosening of state control on television, and that regularly featured performances by artists and musicians. Cutting from a shot of the stage-set band playing jazzy filler music, Forest’s piece was introduced by the program’s host, who referred to the *Le Monde* work. Then the screen switched to a tape of a nearly blank surface in the lower corner of which the identifying logo “tm72” appeared. Hardly a pure emptiness, the blank space was additionally filled with the sound of Forest speaking in a robotic and hypnotic tone reminiscent of an early twentieth-century radio play.39 “Attention, attention,” he said as the shot zoomed in to eliminate the logo, “your television is not broken, your antenna is not broken. You are participating live in the *Space-Media* experiment to bring the world to its original beginning. The white returns to zero, to begin, to begin again, to invent as you like, as you wish. Empty space, free space, space free to be filled.” The screen went black, and the voice repeated “space free to be filled, space free to be filled, space free to be filled”—as though in a more entertaining, amiable, populist version of Buren’s objective of confronting the viewer with nothing, so that he or she might become more thoughtful. In its references to zero, emptiness, new beginnings, and in its use of the monochrome, this experiment recalls postwar efforts by artists such as those associated with the German-based, international ZERO network to create a new optimistic world that embraced technology, while shifting away from painting and toward communications media. This broadcast video, according to Forest, was not about “the real” of blankness, but about its diffusion via television and the “contemporary world marked . . . by the development of media and the circulation of information.”40 In this way, it also recalled Nam
June Paik’s 1969 address to American public television viewers of his *Electronic Opera #1*, in which Paik announced the project’s status as “participation TV” while instructing viewers to close their eyes. Forest’s work, however, was both less mysterious than Paik’s surreal abstractions of contemporary cultural imagery, which made sophisticated use of cutting-edge editing equipment, and more journalistic in its request for concrete response. While the space was already filled with Forest’s instructive message, he also hoped that the absence of visual information would have provided the viewer with the occasion to respond with his or her own subjective plenitude. Returning to the image of *Tele-Midi 72*’s set, the host spoke to the viewer, explaining that Forest invited everyone to send in their comments, what they imagined during the experiment, any drawings that they might have produced, and so on, during the twenty seconds in which he coaxed the audience to fill the space. The televisual flow then turned to three men talking about how the environment was being destroyed by Japan’s industrial boom.

Forest’s projects took part in the period trend among artists to find inspiration in the writing of Marshall McLuhan, whose *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* was translated into French in 1968.41 Forest’s work, like McLuhan’s, focused on the media as tools that did specific cultural work independent of their content. Forest was less interested than McLuhan in how medium specificity influenced the message communicated. Instead, he applied an identical logic to each medium in his efforts to harness their broadcastability as seemingly transparent transmitters of any given content, which would themselves function as the message. Whereas McLuhan argued that all media could be arrayed along a hot-cold spectrum depending on the amount of participation that they demanded of their user, Forest manipulated the media so that television, newspaper, and radio would be as “cold” as the telephone by demanding that users provide all of the imaginative content.42 The undefined open space of Forest’s voids served as a sort of populist public sphere, as they made room among content that was determined by media professionals. It would seem, however, that in order to make a void recognizable as positive, intentional content amid a flow of miscellanea, it was necessary to frame and annotate it with instructions ancillary to the work itself. While Guy Debord had critiqued the instruction-based participatory art of the *GRAV*, reducing spontaneous engagement on the part of the public and thereby weakening the radicality of the potentially disruptive action, the instructions were necessary to explain Forest’s unconventional intentions, and, like the questionnaires that the *GRAV* had used, they did not foreclose critical feedback from the audience, as was made clear by the responses to 150 cm$^2$ of *Le Monde*. 
In 1973, however, Forest’s work’s challenge to politics came into sharper focus when he was arrested for making sociological art at the twelfth São Paulo biennial. Flusser served on the planning committee for the biennial that year and invited Forest to exhibit under the newly formed rubric of “Art and Communication.” Flusser, along with a team of other intellectuals, introduced this theme as part of a program to help the biennial recover from the 1969 boycott, during which artists from around the world, and in particular France, withdrew their participation in order to protest Brazil’s repressive military government. In addition to importing his blank spaces to São Paulo newspapers and inviting the public to bring their drawings to display at his stand in the Ciccillo Matarazzo pavilion, Forest extended his contribution beyond the exhibition hall, to take a group of biennial goers and other artists on a premapped “sociological walk” of the popular, but gentrifying, neighborhood of Brooklin, where they visited the local barber, grocer, and cobbler, among others. He also mimicked the form of a political protest by inviting members of the public to march through the streets carrying blank protest signs in a project called Le blanc envahit la ville (White Invades the City). As a consequence of this action, he was apprehended by the military police, who ushered him into a car and drove him back to headquarters for questioning. During the late 1960s, artistic expression was menaced by the forced cancellation of exhibitions, destruction of overtly political artworks, and arrest of exhibition organizers. The most repressive measures in Brazil came with the decree of the Institutional Act #5 in December 1968, which attempted to eradicate a tradition of strong left-wing popular politics by overriding the constitution, thereby allowing the state to arrest and torture anyone it saw as threatening the stability of the regime. Highlighting technology, mass media, and youth at the 1973 biennial—those very categories that had been targeted in previous years—functioned as propaganda that would demonstrate, in biennial president Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho’s words, “that artistic creativity always found freedom, unrestricted, uncensored.”

Audience participation was supposed to draw large audiences to the exhibitions, while Matarazzo imagined that the artwork that the biennial courted would make didactic use of communication media in order to condition the viewer’s relationship to it. For his activities at the biennial that year, Forest was awarded the Grand Prize in Communication.

With White Invades the City, however, Forest crossed an invisible line. The fake protest march began just outside the Department of Education, which was the site of many protests in preceding years. From there, the marchers proceeded through the streets of a shopping district, continued through Republic Square, across a viaduct and on to Cathedral Square, also a common protest
site, where they were apprehended by the police. Photos documenting the event show a group of anonymous people blending with a crowd as they walk down the street. It is not clear who is carrying a sign and who is not, thereby seemingly expanding the ranks of the protestors by adding in all accidental proximate pedestrians. The signs that they carry are clearly blank, yet they manage to read differently according to the situation. When passing down streets heavy with the signage of private businesses and advertising, they appear to have the hygienic effect of blocking out excessive visual noise from the cityscape, whereas gathered in Cathedral Square and surrounded by a crowd of onlookers, they read more as protest group.

The performers, in fact, were a group of only about a dozen people whom Forest paid to participate. They were residents of the Barra Funda slums located not far from the starting point of the march, and he offered them each CR$15 to hold the signs, although upon realizing that they would also be required to walk with them, one performer engaged in a bit of real protest asking that they be paid an extra CR$5, a request that Forest readily obliged. Taking a quasi-sociological interest in the participants, the press described them as ranging from parents seeking money to feed their children, to unskilled handymen. When asked what they would write on the signs, their responses were as diverse as the group. Some wanted to represent the colors of their soccer team, others wanted to protest to demand “a lot of beautiful women,” while some leaned political, saying “Brazil, count me,” or asked for more schools for the poor. One fake protestor commented directly on the condition of marching with the blanks directly, saying, “I just feel that we cannot fill these posters with things we feel and are in fact embittering the Brazilian people.”

In receiving newspaper coverage for his event, Forest attracted attention to a marginalized group that was excluded from news coverage, as they did not fit into headlines about the “economic miracle” that sectors of the country were enjoying, and they were among the least likely to mix among the public on the biennial grounds. Indeed, the low-tech form of direct street action contrasted sharply with the new national television networks that the state was establishing at the same time, while being covered by the press effectively transformed the unique presence and live spontaneity of street events into multiples like his Space-Media blanks, confirming that their presence in the public square would resound through the public sphere. The instability of this participatory work provided a mode to access the everyday crisis situation of life under a military dictatorship in terms that were specifically contingent, and the blanks that he used to open up spaces of communication provided sites for the expression of any content, free of censorship. The form-as-absence
of his blank works was constantly shifting, constantly adapting, and, in its essence, it refused any idea of a truth that was not relative to the position of the person speaking it, or the context in which it is spoken.

Jean-Paul Thénot: Statistical Subjectivities

Fischer theorized that allying sociology with art would provide an irrational corrective to an overly rationalized field and that the questions that would arise from the contradiction between these two positions would lead to cultural demystification. While Forest’s Space-Media projects invited an anarchistic intervention into those rigorously organized spaces that were designed to promote the rational absorption of knowledge in the public sphere, the conflict between the rationality of sociology and the irrationality of art found its most striking expression in a series of public opinion polls that Thénot organized in the early 1970s. He began sending questionnaires through the mail, and he asked people to return them so as to collect data that he could then organize into graphs and percentages that would form data portraits of society at large. Like a proper pollster Thénot used population information from the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) to distribute polls to the general population, then compile and present the information at exhibitions. Consistent with the qualities of good polls that Bourdieu identified, Thénot’s appealed to a broad population in their subject matter, they evaded interest-driven bias in the ways that they posed their questions, and they left themselves open to the chance of receiving any possible response. Unlike statistics-compiling political analysts, he further promoted this openness by refusing to interpret the data that he collected, arguing that he preferred to leave them to the future interpretation of his audience.

The result of all this openness was questionnaires that were “marvelously useless,” as art historian and critic Jean-Luc Pradel put it. One of the first poll-based projects, titled Identifications (1972), instructed participants, “Fill out the following questionnaire attentively,” only to follow up with the nonsensical: “If you had the opportunity to be transformed immediately into an animal, what animal would you like to be? Why?” Similarly pressing decisions would then have to be made about plants, words, celebrities, and gestures among other things. Such questions were determined by critics to “ultimately serve nothing,” yet many had the effect of revealing personal values and opinions that individuals form around even the seemingly most mundane objects and activities by using humor and creativity. It is not insignificant, for example, that similar responses could be grouped around the question from Identifications (a later poll) of what type of construction one would like (or not like) to be.
The ornamental and highly iconic Eiffel Tower generated the greatest affirmative consensus (9 percent), while a greater number of respondents (17 percent) could agree that they would not want to be the multifunctional immeubles whose simple density promotes a high level of social contacts in urban areas. Following this were prisons (7 percent) and, only slightly less disagreeable, the mass housing units on the outskirts of major cities, the habitations à loyer modéré (6 percent). On the other hand, a poll he conducted in 1972 on color tested the ways that perception influences interpretation by varying between visual and linguistic modes of conveyance. This poll vaunted the visual as distinct in the quality of its evocations by showing that participants looking at the color gray received an impression of clouds, whereas those who simply saw the word were more likely to think of sadness. Similarly, the range of flowers, fruits, and abject associations were more specific and diverse when the respondent was presented with yellow card stock than with the catch-all generality “yellow” printed in black on a white background. While honing his message through linguistic and numerical data that signified the scientificity of sociological study, Thénot retained the rich imaginative impact that comes from visual experience.

As with Fischer’s and Forest’s community-dialogue projects from around the same period, Thénot compounded this openness by sending the compiled results back to those who responded with a note encouraging the recipient to “reinsert your response in the collection of results and to situate yourself in relation to the ensemble of the group, to think of yourself in regard to others, whether to find a conformity of opinion, or to affirm an original attitude.” Critics concurred that what was important were not Thénot’s “idiot questions,” but the fact that the participant would stop in his or her daily life for a moment of self-objectifying reflection. This secondary process of self-analysis with regard to the collective was that aspect of the work that exemplified this exercise’s artistic-sociological value in the sense that it sought to transform the social material on which it worked. Jean-François Lyotard, under whom Thénot worked as he was receiving his doctorate in clinical psychology, elaborated on this in his essay “Preliminary Notes on the Pragmatic of Works,” an essay that took as its primary examples works by Buren, but which included comments on the work of the cas as well. The pragmatic of a work described the actual or possible effects specific to a given artistic process, whether based on painting, cinema, or language. Because interpretation both gives meaning to a work and transforms it, Lyotard considered interpretation to also be a pragmatic. Further, he argued that artworks only have an effect through their interpretation, and that as the work itself dissolves into the in-
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interpretation from which it becomes indistinguishable, “the recipient himself becomes a metarecipient, and the pragmatic of the work a metapragmatic.”

Buren’s work carried out an analysis of the metapragmatic by calling attention to the reverse side of the canvas and the margins of display, and Thénot’s work did so by making the responses to his questionnaires both constitutive of the work and the interpretation of the work.

At the same time, however, Thénot was interested to show that the responses that the polls garnered were themselves already influenced by social discourse. To this extent, Thénot attempted to separate out genuine individual response from those that appeared to be influenced by conditioning. For example, in reporting the results for the question about what animal the participant would like to be, he lists tigers, horses, and elephants individually along with the number of respondents who volunteered these responses. “Original” responses were not listed individually, but rather were lumped together as a category of nonconformity. To further this point, numerous of these early works were more than just polls, but were “competitions” whose results would be posted along with the results of the polls on gallery walls. But how could one possibly win at a game for which there are no right or wrong answers? Ironically, by being the least original in one’s response. The winner was the person who could be said to be the most average representative of the society to which he or she belonged. Without judgment, Thénot noted that the results “show that the reactions with regard to each word, image, or thing, are not uniquely subjective, but are inscribed, among others, in the social field.”

In this case, active participation in the questionnaires and in society is measured by degree of socially conditioned automation. As Thénot suggested, “The questioning, like the work of analysis that follows, which does not claim to establish laws, makes evident in a given socio-economic and historic context, the conditions, reflexes, and attitudes, coming from social determinisms.”

His stated ambitions seemingly call attention to the fact of conformity without arguing that anything should be changed.

The majority of polls that Thénot sent out, however implicitly or explicitly, reflected back on art or the art world. A competition poll that he sent through the mail in 1972, asking “where should art take place?,” resembled the questionnaires that the GRAV had asked six years earlier, while adding the weight of public opinion by integrating the results. The multiple choices included “in unspecialized public places,” “in cultural places,” or “anywhere.” As with the other majority-rule polls, one’s answer might be seen as correct according to consensus opinion, which would in turn determine the meaning of a work of art according to its conditions of reception. Numerous art-world polls that
Thénot conducted in the years 1973–1975 set out to demonstrate the division between the art world and the public. The poll that most clearly focused populist sentiment was one from 1974 titled *La cote des œuvres: Sur les implications socio-économiques de l’œuvre d’art* (The Ratings of Works: On the Socio-Economic Implications of the Work of Art). This poll presented images of modern and contemporary artworks, such as Paul Cézanne’s *Landscape at Midday* (1885), Arman’s *Cello Rage* [Colère de violoncelle] (1973), and Vasarely’s *Vega Pal* (1969), along with their titles, media, and dimensions, and then asked respondents what they imagined the monetary value of the works to be. The majority of respondents undervalued each by tens of thousands, if not millions, of francs. Thénot then asked how they made sense of the price for which the works had actually been sold, to which the respondents offered up explanations including “egotism,” “capitalism,” “speculation,” and “stupidity.” Some justified that a Cézanne simply can be expected to command millions of francs. Others expressed disgust at the fact that such quantities of money were being spent on art when they could otherwise be used to feed the poor. Several said that they would be content with a reproduction. Thénot then asked the respondents how they would choose to spend their wealth if they commanded such sums (2,640,000 francs for the Cézanne, 72,100 francs for the Arman, 10,500 francs for the Vasarely). While the majority of the itemized nonoriginal responses expressed champagne wishes and caviar dreams of investment properties, yachting, and their lustrous regalia, a few had philanthropic aspirations. Only 2 percent reported that they would spend the money on art. The project could be said to play off of somewhat facile expectations that the majority of people would be shocked by the exorbitant amounts spent by the wealthy on objects whose only value is aesthetic or intellectual, as well as the responses that, given such quantities of money, they would spend it on nouveau riche fantasies of rich and famous lifestyles. Nevertheless, Thénot’s poll valorized this perspective by posing questions that anticipated miscomprehension and shock from his audience, which consequently expressed as valid, due to the weight of public opinion, the point that the art world is alienated from society. While the questions implicated institutions, they were consistent with the group’s general trend in producing work that was critical of art, but in its social and cultural receptions and perceptions, rather than through explicit institutional critique. The questions were ultimately more about art’s audience than its venues.

While his polls on the costs of artworks drew a distinction between two different populations—those who belong to the art world and those who do not—a poll Thénot conducted the following year attempted to create a bridge between them. Echoing the focus on object interpretation in subjectivity in
the project Identifications, his 1974 work Identities brought this concern to artworks. Thénot assembled two publics: a group of randomly selected nonspecialists whose diversity made them representative of the larger population, and a self-selecting group of visitors to the Mathias Fels gallery—a public presumably familiar with contemporary art. Thénot provided the former group with artworks from specific individual artists as well as questionnaires that directed them to give their opinions of them. These descriptions alone were then displayed in the gallery, where the specialist public had to guess the artists’ identities. The nonspecialists’ responses were sufficiently accurate in providing formal descriptions of the works that a considerable majority of respondents were able to make out the contours of works by Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren, Arman, and Jean-Pierre Raynaud. They were somewhat less in agreement on descriptions of work that might have been by Gina Pane in one case or Marcel Duchamp in another. In the instance of artist “#3,” no two responses were alike. Commenting on the relevance of public perception, Thénot reflected that the description given by the public “is the image that the creator gives to be seen socially, willingly or not, consciously or not. It is the ‘character,’ analogous to the mask that the actor wears in classical theater.”

Whereas Buren’s stripes then functioned like a “mask” that branded the artists with a clear “identity,” unidentified artist #3 could be said to have no iden-
tity whatsoever. His or her work projected no image of a creator. Achieving the anonymity that other artists of the period sought, it could be assumed that this work did not exceed itself, but existed in itself.

At the same time that it put individual identities in question, the Identities project also put the concept of identity into question. As Thénot implied, the identity of the artist is not tied to any discrete entity that is unique to an individual artist and somehow representative of the person that the artist is. Rather, “identity,” such as the project demonstrates it, is determined socially and is contingent upon reception and interpretation as much as the projection of the individual. Thénot’s work shows that identity is a process that remains dynamic and relational as it depends on public intelligibility, yet it does not question the possibility of being able to more or less fix an identity to an individual. Moreover, the project puts into question not only the identity of the artists, but also the identity of those who do the identifying, since Thénot addressed the two different publics according to each group’s presumed area of competency. For the nonspecialist group the questions have no right or wrong answer, as they are asked merely to describe. These were consistent with the previous polls, as they pose questions no more demanding than “what does wood evoke for you?” Whereas the specialists’ responses could be considered “right” or “wrong,” they showed, according to Thénot, “the non-specificity of schemas and mental conflict, inherent in everyone as a function of their life conditions and the polyvalence of the ‘identity’ of these portraits.”55 Just as the artists’ identities are fractured through the kaleidoscope of public opinion, so those who interpreted the questionnaires entered into a relational process that relativized their way of seeing and interpreting. As Thénot put it, “What was attempted, . . . was to re-propose to the public, with the purpose of recognition, the image of a character, such as another public perceived it. And this without the prejudice that this image would be its own.”56

The same year that Thénot began sending his public opinion polls through the mail, Bourdieu wrote an article about the technique of polling, provocatively arguing that “Public Opinion Does Not Exist.” The presupposition that there was such a thing was, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it resulted in a system that testified to public opinion polling as a legitimate method of study. For Bourdieu, the problem with this is that such polls are based on three false assumptions. The first is that all people have opinions about all things or that they are capable of forming them. Many topics, Bourdieu points out, are simply not interesting to certain individuals, and many people do not have the competence necessary to form an opinion on subjects for which the polls are most often put to use, which is to say, politics. Second, he notes, one cannot
assume that all opinions are valid. When asking people to express opinions, in particular about subjects on which they are not informed, these opinions may have no real force behind them. Third, he argued that by asking the same questions of all people, opinion polls imply that there is a consensus among the types of questions that are worth asking—that the questions posed are the ones that are important to everyone. One of the things that makes opinion polls untrustworthy, moreover, is the fact that they are typically used to prove a political point. The mode of questioning has the capacity to translate ethical questions into political ones and generate legitimacy for policies and programs. The types of questions posed can determine, in advance, the conclusions that will be drawn such that those conclusions will, in most cases, be erroneous.\textsuperscript{57}

The result is that polls oppose the political process that the idea of considering public opinion would purport to serve. “The opinion poll is, in the current state,” Bourdieu wrote, “a political action tool; its most important function consists perhaps in imposing the illusion that a public opinion exists as a purely additive summation of individual opinions; to impose the idea that something exists that would be like the average of opinions or the average opinion.”\textsuperscript{58} Polls function, then, as consensus-generating machines, as they aggregate many individual opinions into what appears to be a unified mass opinion. Furthermore, by posing questions that have a limited range of responses, and to people who might not fully understand the implications of those offered, they encourage respondents to organize themselves into groups that may not actually represent their individual private opinions. “The ‘public opinion’ that is shown in the first pages of newspapers under the form of percentages (60\% of French are favorable to . . .), is an \textit{artifact} pure and simple whose function is to dissimulate that the state of opinion at a given moment in time is a system of forces, of tensions,” and, according to him, “there is nothing less adequate for representing the state of opinion than a percentage.” The tyranny of the majority in this case is not the opinion of the masses, but that of the technocrats who design the polling process to conform to their own political opinion. In opposition to the implicit understanding of “opinion” offered by the public opinion poll, the sociologist proposes a definition that is potentially more democratic. For him, “opinions are forces and relations of opinions are conflicts of force between groups.”\textsuperscript{59}

With their lack of political consequence and attention to sensorial experience, Thénot’s statistical work retained some of the subtlety of the way that people experience the world, while ironizing its normalized representation. In some ways, however, the polls perfectly resemble those that Bour-
dieu described. Importantly, those who received Thénot’s polls were just as ill-equipped to respond as Bourdieu’s imaginary public would have been. The respondents had no reason to anticipate the arrival of the polls, nor would they necessarily be disposed to respond to the variety of questions posed. Like political polls, Thénot’s caught the audience off guard by asking them to reflect on questions that they would probably not be inclined to ask themselves, yet here there was no threat of producing misleading results since the content was largely inconsequential. Instead, Thénot attempted to produce a situation of candid reflection. These polls did not manage to evade the problem of artificial grouping; rather, they demonstrated the fact that people tend to fall into groups, not by force of will to express the correct opinion, but through the unconscious, irrational, yet commonplace adoption of cultural trends. In revealing invisible consensuses, Thénot’s polls put the concept of public opinion in doubt by demonstrating that something like private opinion may not exist at all. Rather than corrupting sociology through art, his polls confirm that the public itself resembles a manufactured readymade as rationalized as lists of births, deaths, and incomes.

Accepting Thénot’s work on its own terms ended up posing a problem for at least one critic. For Jean-Marc Poinsot, the fields of sociology and art were fundamentally irreconcilable. On one hand, he argued that it would be impossible for an artist to produce sociology because the artist would inevitably turn data toward an end for which data are not intended (basically the same argument that Bourdieu made for why pollsters could not do sociology). On the other hand, sociologists could not be capable of making art because their aims are normative. For his part, Thénot seems to have been convinced of the scientific standards by which he obtained his data. His use of INSEE and his frequent reference to the law of large numbers, as well as his occasional insistence that the work does not take place by chance, testify to this. If Poinsot did not see Thénot’s work as sufficiently scientific, however, he also did not see it as sufficiently artistic. As he protested, the artist did not go far enough, because he failed to draw interpretive conclusions from the results of his polls. Somewhat bizarrely, Poinsot’s own writing on Thénot’s work seems to seek to make up for this perceived lack, as Poinsot himself goes about interpreting the data—a strategy to which various critics turned in attempting to make sense of the group’s work. Writing that Thénot’s work “aims less to provide an artistic image than a legible and understandable aspect to research concerning the relation to sensory, social and imaginary experience,” Poinsot seems to have categorized this work as sociological study based on the understanding that art should be associated with imagery, rather than with the irrational
deformation of the processes of other disciplines. Instead of seeing the polls as being about polling or public opinion, then, he took them at face value and consequently attempted to perform exactly the role of the sociologist that the group sought to critique.

Thénot’s most sustained project with statistical polling and analysis was *One Hundred Readings of Marcel Duchamp: It Is the Viewers Who Make the Canvas* (1974). On the one hand, the project was an homage to Duchamp as a figure whose supposed turn away from retinal art had influenced later conceptual artistic practice such as Thénot’s. On the other, it was yet another critique of the more esoteric and alienating elements of artistic establishments. For the project, Thénot again used INSEE data to select one hundred representatives of the general public. In addition to presenting them with images spanning Duchamp’s career, he also repeated an earlier poll about raw materials, this time asking exclusively about those used by Duchamp, and additionally, he asked people to respond to a series of dates that corresponded to significant moments in Duchamp’s career. As with the other polls, here again he asked what these various dates, materials, and images evoked, and to what degree the respondents liked or disliked them. Just as the previous polls emphasized the importance of interpretation, so too in this case, Thénot noted that it is the one who looks who determines the meaning of the work of art.

The project was published in book format in 1978, just following the Centre Pompidou’s inaugural Duchamp retrospective. In light of the fact that the bibliography on Duchamp was already large, including radically different views from historians and critics who analyzed his objects and his writings, and who speculated on works that he never even made, Thénot opened his own book by asking “Must we still speak of Duchamp?” For Thénot, it was the extreme diversity of projection onto his work that made it a relevant subject for his own polling, and that legitimized his addition to the larger discourse. In a preface to Thénot’s publication, François Pluchart—an early advocate of his work, and editor of the avant-garde art magazine *Artitudes*—observed that Thénot’s response to Duchamp’s postwar renaissance regarded the artist with the same distance from which Duchamp himself looked at the world around him. To be sure, Duchamp’s strategy of challenging early twentieth-century artistic conventions by addressing the ways that an audience perceives an art object provided a clear precedent for Thénot’s own forefronting of public perception. As Duchamp famously stated, and as Thénot cited in the title of the book itself, “it is the viewers who make the canvas.” Attention to the discursive determination of the meaning of any object provided a reason for Thénot to compile his public opinions about various objects, while extending this
to the artistic context gave him license to revisit Duchamp’s work through these very same audiences. If, as the anonymous author of “The Richard Mutt Case” suggested, plumbers were responsible for America’s greatest art, then, as Thénot would add, they might also be art’s greatest audience.  

Importantly, however, Thénot replaced Duchamp’s readymade object with a readymade methodology, situation, and population. As with Thénot’s Identities project, again in One Hundred Readings, he had two major audiences: the first of which he used to produce the “sociological study,” and the second audience for whom the first served as material for reflection on the issues that concerned them as specialists. While his method of interpretation allowed Thénot to consider the nonspecialist audience as legitimate interpreters of Duchamp, he also used interpretation for the specifically Duchampian purpose of calling upon the specialists to reconsider what they include in the category “art.” Duchamp’s readymade challenged public opinion by providing an object upon which artist and audience alike could reconsider artistic process and institutional categorization. Thénot’s challenge to artistic reception, in contrast, combined canonized objects with experimental processes to question reception, as he replaced objects incongruous to the art context with questions incongruous to the objects interrogated and the art context both. Preexisting items and concepts, like “glass” or “1914,” function like art objects in that they provide instances of rumination for those polled. It is to the second audience that sociology appears, again in Duchampian fashion, as a sort of readymade methodology with its readymade populations of study that Thénot presents for aesthetic contemplation, even though he himself has played no part in their manufacture, but, rather, has nominated them so as to create a critical situation. Just as Duchamp had chosen his readymades according to chance and the given constraints of a predetermined day and time when they would be selected, so Thénot chose a selection of objects and a representative population, and the resulting poll filtered out from there. The randomization of audience and types of questions that Thénot chose to ask made his reportage functionless and absurd, somewhat like a urinal might have seemed in an art salon fifty-seven years earlier.

In response to the Duchamp polls, Pluchart pointed to the public’s inability to identify “major works of the twentieth century,” and its difficulty in simply recognizing the subjects of the work at all. While one could hardly reproach the general public for failing to pick out the “Malic Molds” or the “Halo of the bride” in Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (1915–1923), one might have expected that more than 21 percent of the population in 1974 could have identified a bottle rack or more than 17 percent a
urinal, even when turned on its side. For Pluchart, the polls pointed to “a fairly strong incapacity to decode the image, itself somewhat surprising in a century where the visual has supplanted (temporarily?) writing, but which is owed precisely—by a curious counter phenomenon—to a saturation of images and notably those of television, absorbed without being chewed.”

Anna Dezeuze has pointed out that one of the distinctions between Duchamp’s readymades and participatory art is the shift from past participle of the “made” to the performative imperative “do.” While Thénot invites his public to “do” by looking critically, and reflecting on the results, he also demonstrates the persistent conservative inertia of an already “made” “public opinion” informed by conventional and habitual media consumption.

The CAS in the Field

In 1974 Fischer, Forest, and Thénot united their diverse practices to form the CAS. The three met at a salon that the body artist Michel Journiac held at his apartment for artists interested in the relationship between aesthetics and social engagement. After several months, however, they decided to break off from the group and write their first collective manifesto, which they published in the October 9, 1974, issue of *Le Monde*, and they distributed it at the following meeting as a way of announcing their split from the rest of the group. The 220-word manifesto emphasized their specific commitment to sociological content and methodologies in the form of a “new sensibility of social data, tied to the process of massification” that would appeal to “the methods of social sciences” and attract attention to “the channels of communication and diffusion.” Unlike the technocratic sociological practice to which they were responding, the artists endeavored not to mold society into a particular shape, but to create new experimental situations through which people would come to see themselves and their communities differently. Their strategy for creating sociological works would involve, as Fischer put it, “triangulating the analysis of the social real in constantly changing the point of view.” This triangulation incorporated a critical perspective on economic and institutional factors, but, foremost, it integrated the society that provided both the audience and material for the artists’ projects as a necessary part of its interpretation. Making artwork sociological would involve breaking down the disciplinary, economic, and cultural boundaries that divided the public from art, from sociologists, and from other publics.

Emerging from this same time period, and with a similar interest in methodological connections between sciences and art, Lyotard’s book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) looked back on the previous decades
to contrast two new and opposing phenomena: technocratic methodologies of social engineering, and increasingly pluralist and open social practices. He argued that after World War II, the “grand narratives” that had organized traditional social values across social and cultural fronts declined: people lost faith in communism as a project of political emancipation, social unity gave way to the valorization of the individual, spirituality was replaced by the rise of consumerism. Then, during the 1970s, people became more flexible as they began changing careers and relationships more readily, engaging in what Lyotard called “temporary contracts.” While some of his contemporaries, like Lefebvre, lamented the perceived loss of an organic society, Lyotard embraced postmodern pluralism as a potential source of agency. Whereas the grand narratives that dominated the industrial age had been impersonal, the new “local” narratives could be relevant to contemporary everyday life. Fundamentally at odds with these progressive trends, however, technocrats were pursuing what Lyotard saw as an outmoded Habermasian grand narrative based on the idea that rational individuals could construct society as a “functional whole.” Such consensus building, he argued, was antipathetic to the self-determination of the general public. “The technocrats,” he observed, “declare that they cannot trust what society designates as its needs; they ‘know’ that society cannot know its own needs since they are not variables independent of the new technologies. Such is the arrogance of the decision makers—and their blindness.” A paternalistic attitude allowed the technocrats to self-identify as representative of society as a whole, the homogenization of which would serve the goal of increased efficiency. Accompanying this cultural reduction came a counterproductive instrumentalization of scientific knowledge. Studies of populations were indispensable to solving problems like housing, but echoing antitechnocratic thinkers like Lefebvre, Chombart, Bourdieu, and Tourain, he insisted that by drawing on research in order to inform policy decisions, technocrats reduced the range of experimentation so that outcomes would conform to objectives. Experimentation was further narrowed by funding allocations that limit the range of projects, thereby resulting in what Lyotard called “an equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth.” Drawing on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, he countered that “invention is always born of dissention,” and that knowledge advances not by filling out all the entries in a universal encyclopedia, but through experimentation, the assertion of counterexample, and—as the GAV had promoted—the pursuit of instability. Taking a particular interest in the technology of rationalization, he concerned himself with the effect that cybernetics—a tool of technocratic efficiency—would have on knowledge production, and concluded that it was
not a threat to the heterogeneity of experience and communication in itself, but that the information stored in computers would need to be freely available in order for knowledge to remain inexhaustible. Performing the openness he promoted, Lyotard concluded by noting that his book was “the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown.”

Such an antitechnocratic politics of inconclusive potential describes the work that the CAS had been producing across the previous decade. This particularly took form in their interdisciplinary embrace of the social sciences, the pluralism of the communities with which they engaged, their commitment to openness through dialogue, their resistance to interpreting the information they collected, and their rejection of limiting aesthetic regimes. Formally, the work they produced often resembled the conceptual art of the previous decade, as their self-reflective videos, newspaper publications, and generally “journalistic” projects prioritized communicating “social facts.” The artists specifically distanced themselves from conceptual art, however, seeing it as too idealist and tautological, not sufficiently critical of its ideological context. In substitution for Joseph Kosuth’s exploration of “art as idea as idea,” Fischer suggested that an appropriate characterization of sociological art might be “art as ideology as ideology in the sense,” he explained, “that sociological art that questions the ideological meaning and function of art in society, does not itself escape the ideological statute of all discourse, of all practice.” Fischer argued that sociological art is a form of realism, and he recognized that this “real” was dialectically interdependent with the modes through which it was communicated, that it was a product of society. In contrast to Lyotard’s technocrats, who imagined that society could not know its own needs, Fischer aimed to level this hierarchy by recognizing the performative impact of local narratives as sources of ideology and art alike.

Fischer’s, Forest’s, and Thénot’s writings were marked by the language of the period as it was defined by Gaullism, the May Movement, and the influence of Maoism. Along with many other artists and critics at the time, the group expressed a suspicion of dominant institutions (in particular, the art market of New York), which they saw as exercising too much control. They sought instead to empower “the people” through a focus on the provinces, marginal media, and strategies that remained necessarily vague enough to encompass the wide range of needs and issues pertinent to a diverse population. Their watchwords, “participation” and “autogestion [self-management] of thought,” borrowed directly from the rhetoric used during the May Movement. In a text titled “Third Front,” the group proposed to “develop a socially
based practice through which artists [could] provide a critical contribution in a social transformation towards an ‘autogestive’ power base.” The expression “third front” was itself heavily marked by politics, as it recalled numerous attempts throughout the twentieth century to invent alternatives to the Cold War regimes of communism and free-market capitalism. Most recently, and in the French context, the term that the artists chose recalled de Gaulle’s 1966 Phnom Penh speech, in which he pledged French nonalignment, pointedly in opposition to the US involvement in the war in Vietnam, as well as the “third way” that de Gaulle had proposed in response to the protests articulated during the uprisings of 1968.

The CAS’s own third front did not, like de Gaulle’s, attempt to temper political radicalism. Instead, the group aligned their rhetoric with that of the left, making references to Mao Tse-tung in their writings as a model for collectivity and grassroots action through deliberation. In Fischer’s Theory of Sociological Art (1977), he draws on Mao’s Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art (1942) in order to underscore the primacy of artists in the formation of the type of social cohesion necessary for a political groundswell. Artists and writers from across classes and political affiliations could, by this vision, join together to build the foundation necessary to combat a political enemy. For Mao, as for the CAS, art would be an essential element in the dialectical transformation of the material base of society. As Mao noted, art was never hermetic, but always informed by class and politics. “Social life,” he proclaimed, and as Fischer quoted, “is the sole source of literature and art and it surpasses them infinitely in the living richness of its content.” While Maoism provided one theoretical foundation for the group, their work departed significantly from the socialist realist art of China’s Cultural Revolution. Indeed, Fischer wrote specifically against propagandistic communist art of any national origin, insisting that the contradiction between the old-fashioned representations of socialist realist art and revolutionary activity could not be overcome. The art of the Cultural Revolution prescribed a narrow range of aesthetic correctness consisting largely of traditional modes of representation against which artists were at pains to counterbalance their own self-expressivity.

Nevertheless, the collective did not embrace artistic self-expression, but considered it a problem to be eliminated, as Fischer had explicitly sought to do with his destructive Hygiene of Art series, and as Forest and Thénot had done with their shifts toward blank spaces, found family photos, and questionnaires. The group’s anti-art practice included proscriptions against both self-expression and against aesthetic activity generally. Once an aesthetic is set, Fischer argued, artworks become predictable, cease to evolve, and instead
enter into a symbiotic relationship with the market. The retention of any aesthetic program, he argued, would necessarily be repressive, as it promotes the interest of a dominant class as universal truth.\textsuperscript{79} In this way, their critique of aesthetics echoed Lyotard’s critique of technocratic uses of knowledge—both lacked the disinterest that would allow for experimentation. Like the GRAY, Buren, and Cadere, who rejected the expectations of dominant institutions, the group’s anti-expressive gestures pushed against the idea that art would be a reflection of (in this case, bourgeois) economic forces. “In a class society,” Fischer wrote, “the individual is a broken mirror.”\textsuperscript{80} It is dialectically composed of contradictions that include, and speak back against, the society that produces them. Such a viewpoint retains the “art” in anti-art, while believing that their synthesis has a creative potential to improve the conditions of everyday life. In contrasting aestheticism against the real, they attempted to create a practice that eliminated image production and took society itself as its material.

In their incorporation of sociology into artistic technique, the artists echoed the populist aspects of political movements to appeal to a broad general audience. As Margaret Canovan has pointed out, “participation” and calls for referendums, such as de Gaulle used to consolidate power, were typical of governments based on populist appeals for support.\textsuperscript{81} Whereas this form of manipulated populism that Canovan describes is typically disparaged as vague, imprecise, and transient, the CAS’s efforts at public engagement communicated its ephemerality and openness as aspects of their process that would serve the community instead of a strong leader. Ernesto Laclau argues that populism should not be understood as a political ideology, but as “a constant dimension of political action that necessarily arises (in different degrees) in all political discourses, subverting and complicating the operations of the so-called ‘more mature’ ideologies.”\textsuperscript{82} Populism, in Laclau’s understanding, is a moment in politics that resembles Lyotard’s desire for the unknown. If populism is imprecise, it is so purposefully as it aims to group the largest number of people under a heading defined by pure opposition. Broadly, the CAS affirmed that its “cultural activity” would have a “dynamic interrogative role” opposing “the power base” and the “cultural hegemony reflected in the international art market, which appropriates art as a commodity to bolster capitalist ideology.”\textsuperscript{83} In their artworks, this populism froths in opposition to market determinations that create aesthetic consensus.

The largest-scale and most successful of their joint efforts was a community-based project in the border city of Perpignan, France.\textsuperscript{84} This project, which was largely coordinated and animated by Fischer, took place over two weeks
in 1976. During this time the artists worked with thirty young French and German people who came from the Franco-German Youth Office, as well as a fleet of local specialists, including a sociologist, an economist, a historian, a worker’s union leader, a pharmacist, a Roma bishop, a gallery director, a bar owner, a merchant, and a journalist at the local newspaper, the Independent. Together, they tried to repair a sense of collective belonging among the divided populations of the city by using techniques that combined the community documentation of Forest’s Family Portrait with the multimedia of his Space-Media projects and with Thénot’s questionnaires. Even as the artists embraced small-scale group communication as their ideal, they were suspicious of the village as a model. In fact, just as the villager from Lesquire found photography unnecessary, given the sufficient forms of communication that already existed, so the CAS turned specifically to what would be seemingly unnecessary documentary media to demonstrate to what degree they might, on the contrary, augment communication specifically by demonstrating the degree to which even small neighborhoods fail to communicate. Just the previous year, the group had turned their interrogative cameras on the residents of the small village Neuenkirchen, Germany, to ask “Is Neuenkirchen really a paradise?” This line of inquiry echoed Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s 1961 film Chronicle of a Summer, in which the anthropologist and sociologist probed Parisians with the question “Are you happy?,” thereby revealing the complex mix of joy, anxiety, boredom, and historical traumas that subtended a period of supposed peace and prosperity.

If Lyotard provides a theoretical framework for understanding the perseverance of outmoded grand narratives under technocracy and the optimism of postmodern pluralism, the “multidimensional” sociology that Morin pioneered during the 1960s provides a model for an alternative methodology that could break away from technocratic restrictions. As Morin wrote in his two-volume work of 1975 titled Spirit of the Times, the new sociology that he envisioned was based on a temporality that privileged the present over extended duration, experience over theoretical frameworks, and it embraced the contingency of permanent disequilibrium rather than imagining that events such as those that transpired during the May Movement were inexplicable anomalies. In practice, Morin’s sociology involved entering into what he described as the “observer-phenomenon dialectic,” in which the sociologist would abandon any conceit of objectivity and embrace the relational aspect of the research process. The “sociology of crisis,” as he called it, would be “phenomenological,” by which he meant “more attentive to registering the event on the extreme side of participation,” through attention to “psychology, affect, practice,” than it
would be “to re-establishing the theoretical coherence” that had been “dis-
pers by the tremor.” Describing the “phenomenographic” methodology that
he employed while studying the effects of modern life on the remote Brittany
village of Plodémet in his 1967 book translated into English as The Red and the
White: Report from a French Village, Morin argued that researchers should adopt
a “Balzac-like” approach to observing gestures, dress, houses, and so forth in
order to create a “sociological snapshot.” The result was a sociology that cor-
ruped technocratic data with literary and ethnographic inspiration in order
to “rise beyond fragmented disciplinary knowledge,” and “reassemble a theo-
retical body of hypotheses in order to embrace and structure the phenome-
on.” In this way, the sociologist would discover holistic pictures of human
subjects by analyzing social phenomena because those phenomena would be
understood as contingent and unstable.

Morin’s phenomenographic approach followed on a trend that Paul-Henry
Chombart de Lauwe, discussed in chapter 1, helped to pioneer. As Jeanne Haff-
nner reveals in her book The View from Above: The Science of Social Space, Chom-
bart focused on everyday practices in relation to spatial organization in order
to understand how people use, and are influenced by, the places where they
live. Of particular interest were the lives of the rural working classes, whose
traditional ways of life he considered both more authentic and threatened by
modernity. Promoting a sort of populist excellence, Chombart argued that
the cultivation and discernment that characterized French culture was found
not in books, but in everyday life experiences that were themselves rooted in
their relationships to space and the natural environment. In order to develop
a perspective and methodology suitable to this conviction, he called on aca-
demics to return to the countryside in extended trips to the École des Cadres
d’Uriage, a school for the French elite that had been established during World
War II in order to promote Vichy’s National Revolution. Chombart’s populism
was ideologically opposed to the fascism of the war years, yet it envisioned a
way to adapt the technocratic rule of the “cadres” to the interests of “the peo-
ple” that he sought to ennoble through respectful study. Chombart believed
that by escaping urban centers that were not in touch with the experience of
the majority, the researchers would come to understand the relation of human
practices to the landscape through sentimental response that would privilege
“real” experience over theoretical abstractions. Adapting the techniques of
war, he developed street-level and aerial photography-based practices that al-
lowed him to survey the spatial behaviors of his subjects. Lefebvre condemned
this move, arguing that Chombart’s studies of space asserted the dominance
of the eye and therefore the spectacle culture that participated in abstraction
away from the real of everyday life. Chombart’s surveying, however, resulted in a suite of demographic maps that he published in his 1952 book *Paris et l’agglomération parisienne*. These included a study showing the itinerary of a young female resident of the sixteenth arrondissement who, over the course of a year, moved primarily between home, school, and her piano lessons, while her impressions of the rest of the city remain, as Chombart put it, “vague and impersonal.” Guy Debord took Chombart’s map as evidence of spatial alienation and social fragmentation, which he sought to stitch back together through the practice of the *dérive*, or drifting through the city. Illustrating this problem, Debord borrowed another of Chombart’s maps of Paris, cut it into literal fragments that excluded large areas of undiscovered white space, and then reconnected a somewhat more socio-geographically diverse distribution with dynamic, arcing red arrows in a lithograph that he titled *Naked City* (1957). The CAS did not have the means to undertake such an extensive study of Perpignan, but they followed in the traditions established by Chombart, Morin, and Debord by studying social fragmentation though spatial displacement with the intention of repairing fractured relations by dispensing with theoretical abstractions in favor of direct “real” encounters.

By 1976, Perpignan was not a village but an ethnically diverse city of more than 100,000 inhabitants. In order to conduct their socio-psychological therapy, the artists began by conducting an initial survey of traffic circulation, the locations of social services, places of employment, different types of housing, and other socioeconomic and cultural factors. Following from this data, they chose to focus on three regional zones, each of which had populations that were diverse in age, nationality, ethnicity, and cultural practices and preferences. The “popular” Le-Moulin-à-Vent was a suburban neighborhood dating to 1962 inhabited primarily by retirees, French citizens returned from North Africa, upwardly mobile young managers, and university students. The “immigrant” community of Saint-Jacques consisted largely of Arabs, Catalans, and Roma, while the seemingly ex-nominated “residential” La Real neighborhood suffered the conflicted relations between a crumbling bourgeoisie and an encroaching population of poor immigrants. The sociological action performed involved training twenty-five young people including students of Fischer’s from the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and interns from the Franco-German Office of Youth. The group ventured into Perpignan’s neighborhoods to pose simple questions such as “What do you do here? How long have you lived here? Where do you work?” and take photographs, videos, and sound recordings documenting the individuals’ physical appearance, their built environments, locations of leisure, gestures, and their local media, in-
cluding street posters, television programs, magazines, and so on. As they collected information, the groups acted as sorts of “enquêteurs en derrière” (drifting pollsters), who “preferred to orient themselves in these ‘spaces’ with things other than maps and plans.” Indeed, like the drifting Situationists of the previous decade, the sociologist’s purposes were specifically to mark out the effect of the built environment by moving through fragmented urban spaces in order to stitch them back together.

Perpignan’s newspaper, the Independent, supported their work by publishing articles that explained who the artists were and provided information about their practices and aims. The newspaper published announcements on where sociological art activities would be taking place, and the artists’ attempts to integrate into the community were guided by the paper’s journalist, Jacques Queralt. Contact with the locals was not always easy, however. The teams of sociological artist-volunteers that visited Le-Moulin-à-Vent met with what would seem to be an appropriate measure of social estrangement for a community suffering from the typical suburban problems of excessive noise, poor public transportation, and inaccessible lawns. Community centers promoting sports, culture, and youth activities were here, as in similar semi-urban constructions, no match for the alienation produced by the isolating architecture. Residents were scarce, and in the end the groups were only
able to interview representatives from the construction society, the priest who planned to abandon the parish, a pharmacist, a librarian, and the gendarmes whose barracks, Fischer noted, “resembled a tennis club villa.”

That is, they were able to access those whose jobs involved being accessible to the public.

At the local pharmacy, the group hung boards with photographs and excerpts from recorded conversations from the community members with the tag line “do you agree?” Some had referred to the community as perpetually violent, while others insisted that the neighborhood was nearly perfect. Quotations about the neighborhood’s chic dogs and police presence appeared in equal number. The project managed to incite discussion between the young and old, who complained, as one might expect, about each other’s respective racket and stodginess. Yet, despite what would seem to be an inviting and relatively more trafficked location and comprehensive advertising by posters and loudspeakers, few showed up to the local exhibition of documents. The public who did stop in would react with what Fischer described as distrust when presented with images of themselves.

Many more people came to participate at the study of La Real, where the team was able to borrow the stand of a fishmonger in the central square. Several of the public participants were so enthusiastic about making their voices
heard that they even chose to project their “communication-interventions” through the group’s bullhorn. Similarly, in Saint-Jacques the groups met with Roma children who were eager to have their photos taken, and parents who were keen to chat and interrogate the interrogators about their intentions. In Saint-Jacques they were also able to reach the larger population by speaking at the community’s Mass. The group exhibited the hundreds of snapshots that they took in a shack that was under construction, and again they circulated comments among the inhabitants in order to spark discussion. The Roma’s vivid interest to participate by walking off with the photographs of their friends and children required the group to spontaneously invent the new sociological-art strategy of bartering. In exchange for the photographs, then, participants were asked to leave a personal token, such as a cigarette, a bus ticket, a flower, which, as the traces of everyday life, became themselves data of sociological interest.

Throughout all of this, the team used film and video cameras as recording devices whose subjective reflexivity affected primarily the operator, and in this instance, the cameras, as participant Michael Vater pointed out, became a tool of animation. “For the inhabitants,” he observed, the video camera in particular “had . . . a magnetic character as a new technological medium.”93 Similarly, in a subsequent report on the experiment, the Saint-Jacques team commented.
Figure 4.15. Collectif d'Art Sociologique, Saint-Jacques neighborhood, untitled community project in Perpignan, France, 1976. Archives Hervé Fischer.
Figure 4.16. Collectif d’Art Sociologique, Saint-Jacques neighborhood, untitled community project in Perpignan, France, 1976. Archives Hervé Fischer.

that the camera seemed “to serve as a medium between them and us and it is in this perspective that we have adopted it.”94 As a tool of mediation, however, the camera potentially separates as much as it unites. One wonders about the potential alienation that the camera might have produced—especially in light of Fischer’s observations about Le-Moulin-à-Vent inhabitants’ reactions of distrust at the sight of their photographs, and the fact that Saint-Jacques parents expressed suspicion at the camera-wielding interrogators. Even as the group attempted to be as inviting of candid participation as possible, the media that they introduced into the lives of those who would not otherwise be habituated to seeing them would have most certainly produced a range of effects—not all of them consistent with their objectives.

Vater noted that judging this work would be a question not of results, but of process. “We were not in Perpignan in order to present results, but rather to reunite with the members of a society, to clarify problems, and analyze desires,” he concluded. In the end, however, it was among the Roma that the group had the most evident impact, as the project managed to tempt them to break from their habits and enter into Perpignan’s Palais de Congrès, a public building at the city center that most of them had never entered. Fischer observed that it was much more difficult to get people to attend this final indoor event. Whereas the street activities had easily drawn the attention of passersby, previous participants were less inclined to venture into, as Fischer described, “a large, somewhat official building, closed by a door, glass even, situated at the center of Perpignan, but outside the neighborhoods where our experiments took place.”95 The Palais de Congrès might as well have been a museum by the way that Fischer described it. Even as the group did not analyze their results, it would seem that they produced an unanticipated item of sociological evidence in the force of inertia that led each of their experiments to be relatively successful, not by virtue of the strength or weakness of the artists’ plan or execution, but according to the preexisting social dynamics that characterized each neighborhood. In the years that followed, Fischer would undertake similar projects built around community interaction, politics, and self-concept in Amsterdam; the village of Winnekendonk, Germany; Montréal; and, most spectacularly, Mexico City.

Although the ambition of the group was to improve social relations across communities, their final failure to make people alter their typical behavior is, perhaps, evidence of a project well planned and executed, because the artists took diverse communities of Perpignan as they were rather than attempting to manipulate them in order to prove a point or advance their own careers. The project reflects greater problems of community-based art that attempts to
unify disparate groups into an ideal community. The collective, in this way, reflects Miwon Kwon’s characterization of many community-based artists who “covet images of coherence, unity, and wholeness as the ideal representation of a community.” Yet, as they had demonstrated with their Neuenkirchen project, the artists did not naïvely believe in a falsely nostalgic, conflict-free image of small-town paradise. It was their sensitivity to the very grievances that they sought to air, and thereby dispel, that prevented them from thinking they might be able to significantly shift social dynamics. The habits and lifestyles of the various communities were deeply rooted and based on culturally distinct modes of communication and ways of using public and private space. Despite the artists’ utopian ambitions, in Perpignan they functioned as what Kwon calls a “collective artistic praxis,” that is, their work was provisional and operated relative to the contingencies of the given situation. Kwon draws on Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of the community as dés-oeuvré, or inoperative, unworked, and organic to suggest that questioning a community’s legitimacy is the only legitimate position to take. The CAS’s Perpignan project identified and exercised the community’s conflicts without artificially “working” them into a work of art. Instead, they provided a system that resembled the postmodern community that Lyotard envisioned, as their various interventions offered nodal points on a communication circuit through which individuals could come into contact. At the same time, the project did not so much question to what extent a community is unworked as it demonstrated that in some cases communities were formed of little more than a coincidence of people co-occupying space.

As Thénot insisted, the group did not “claim to establish laws,” yet their relationship to methodological convention was ambiguous. Methodology was a point of indetermination for the artists and became the central focus of a 1975 interview with critic Otto Hahn, who, after repeatedly asking what their methods were, finally suggested that perhaps their work was arbitrary and, in provocative contest to the artists’ claims, simply based on their own psychology—an implicit challenge to their claim that their work is based not on the artist, but on the public. While the dynamic “real” that the artists embraced was heavily colored by populist opposition, their abandonment of style meant that they were not employing the full range of political expression. Rejecting aesthetic motivation, Fischer argued that “sociological art has no style,” suggesting instead that it would be determined by its ability to incite communication. Communication as production was central to a “real” that was not based on representation, yet their rejection of aesthetic concerns resulted in a lack of aesthetic self-consciousness that leads to a sort of socio-
logical realism, as they conformed to sociological expectations of how media function. The work’s rhetoric of neutrality naturalized an image of society in which the self-expressions of ethnographic subjects are taken as the “real,” while what is actually documented is a symbolically codified fulfillment of social expectation.

Refusing to draw conclusions from the data they collected resulted in the production of two forms of realism. Within the terms of the artists’ own intentionality, it allowed them to maintain that their work presented society as it really is. As the artists intended, raw information would eschew the rationality of sociological processes, and the resulting “irrationality” would provide the basis of their anti-aesthetic of nonintervention. Conscious abstention from aesthetic manipulation of sociological data then provided one argument for accessing “the real” and therefore a realism based on its ideological opposition to aesthetics. Additionally, the social realism they created using the methods of sociology simultaneously presented the “real” of sociological interpretation.

Posthistorical Media

The pedagogical aspirations of the group reached their most institutional form when Fischer proposed that they start the Interrogative Sociological School in May 1976. For two years Fischer’s home and studio served as a space for artists and academics coming from as far away as East Asia and Latin America, and including local prominent figures such as Flusser, Lefebvre, and Restany, to give lectures on topics dealing with art, society, politics, and communication, while Fischer produced three issues of a publication called the *Cahier de l’École Sociologique Interrogative*. In the school’s inaugural year, Flusser presented on the shift from a period in which the imagination could be said to have a historical dimension to what he saw as the “post-historic” period of the “technoimaginary.” World War II marked the turning point. Communication in the prewar period, Flusser argued, had been dominated by linear codes such as the alphabet, whose very structures contained a historical inclination in the fact that their process of signification unfolded progressively. The postwar era, in contrast, he read as two-dimensional surfaces, whose signification was “scenic,” synchronic, and posthistoric, and whose forms corresponded to the abandonment of the types of overarching meta-narrative whose decline Lyotard also observed. This temporal immediacy of the postwar visual environment was augmented by an ambient color saturation. Whereas the prewar period was tinged with gray text, gray photographs, and gray buildings and clothing, the postwar period, Flusser argued, was suffused with brilliance. Gesturing to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages...
as evidence of a period that was equally resplendent, he notes that these were still products of artistic imagination. Postwar pageantry, in contrast, was the potentially threatening product of “technicians”—from whence he derived the term “technoimaginary.” “We must learn to master these techno-imaginary codes in order to avoid being manipulated by them, to struggle against the post-historic totalitarianisms that announce themselves on the colored surfaces that surround us,” Flusser exclaimed. As the CAS noted, however, it was unclear what it would mean to reach the end of historical consciousness, and whether or not the “techno-imaginary adventure” would warrant its loss. “What,” they asked, “would its political structure be?”

The proposition of abandoning history posed a conceptual quandary for the artists. The idea that the age of nuclear energy and space travel had reached a sort of time beyond history was not new, yet the tactical suggestion of empowering oneself by adopting and mastering the “imaginary codes” of posthistoric technicians did not provide a self-evident set of answers for how one might retain any agency in a technocratic culture. To the contrary, empowering the worker by seizing history was the central ambition laid out by revolutionary Marxism, and the history of this tradition was explicitly materialist in its efforts to create a movement based in a common and equal access to its development and narration. In its materialism and bottom-up organization of power, Marx’s deep “history of humanity” was the opposite of Flusser’s surface techno-imaginary, or Lyotard’s end of grad narratives. The very divisions of labor produced by technocratic efficiency would alienate individual interest from that of the communicative community the collective was seeking to nurture. The division of labor, as Marx theorized it, would reform “collective history” as an “illusory communal life” that benefitted from the real ties that exist between people while imposing a “general” political interest that only alienates those it claims to represent. For Marx, alienation could only be abolished through a universal movement of disaffected masses who would join in the “world-historical” force of revolution. “The proletariat can thus only exist world-historically, just as communism, its activity, can only have a ‘world-historical’ existence,” Marx insisted.

Fischer shared Marx’s commitment to the central importance of community and cooperation in the development of consciousness, yet he sought to eliminate its historical development and replace it with a focus on the present. In the second issue of the Cahier, Fischer attempted to theorize a society that would overcome alienation by embracing a posthistorical position. For Fischer it was history itself that was alienating, since he saw it not as the accumulation of material engagements, but as a mythic narrative that separates
man from everyday lived experience. “What characterizes all myth,” he wrote, “is that it is a colorful explanation of origin, or of the end, a pseudo-explanation considered as efficient cause.” Specifically, the myth that he elaborated was a psychoanalytic metaphor of historical progress based on the Oedipus complex. According to Fischer, nineteenth-century man killed the Father—whether in the form of the king or God—and replaced him as the motor of history, while at the same time seeking a “forbidden” union with nature, or “Mother,” that industrialization would seem to contradict. Whereas the previous historical period was oriented toward a mythic point of origin in the past, the period following has been directed toward a vanishing point of a future perfection that will be accomplished through historical progress, a progress that defines human value and existence and gives it meaning. Fischer draws this narrative of progress back to the Renaissance and identifies it as having a space-time structure that can be defined by the conical diagrams of linear perspective. The past origin begins at a single point and widens out toward the moment at which nineteenth-century man became master of his own destiny. At this point, a symmetrical cone begins to contract toward a future point at which history will be realized: there will be no more need for art because man will have reached the apotheosis of his creative potential in his replacement of God.

Fischer's determination to escape history then is based on the observation that its narrative organizes the relationships between every object that falls within its scope according to a single overarching logic. The positivism of scientific and technological advancement that dominates nature in its efforts to perfect humanity is just as much an “optical illusion” as the mathematically harmonious painted cityscape. With a pessimism that threw off balance Rouch and Morin's ambivalence, he argued that there is no such thing as progress, and that, in terms of happiness, we were no better off in the 1970s than we were in antiquity—a position that in later decades he came to reject. In an argument that contradicted the optimism of the Thirty Glorious Years that had just come to an end in 1973 as a result of the global oil crisis and subsequent stock-market crash, Fischer argued that the slave of yesterday may have been no more miserable than the line worker (ouvrier à la chaîne, or, literally, “chain worker”) of modern times, and famines, concentration camps, fascist prisons, and nuclear arms are evidence that the force of destruction is as present now as it has ever been. He observes that, in a sort of self-perpetuating cycle, it is the very force of this destruction that inspires the narratives of progress that have legitimized it, and that this remained true even of the communist countries whose thought promoted the seizure of history by the proletariat.
As with the Hygiene of Art series in which Fischer attempted to undermine aesthetic mystification by tearing up works of art, so, in terms of history, he proposed a “mental hygiene” that would attempt to understand contemporary society without myth-oriented explanations. In seeming response to the questions inspired by Flusser’s techno-imaginary, Fischer comes to suggest that one can only achieve an unalienated consciousness by abandoning schemas that organize the present according to the past or future, proposing instead that society live fully in the present. In his rejection of progress, Fischer then embraces McLuhan’s metaphor of the interconnected “tribal man” who lives not according to temporal models of determinism, but according to spatial relations. Thanks to the engineered capacities of the techno-imaginary era, McLuhan’s “global village” could be composed of far-flung spaces linked electronically. Fischer proposed then that it would be possible to replace conical geometries of linear time with a present of corporeal, sensitized immediacy that would put aside the “incest of the imaginary” suggested by his Oedipal model of history. “On a planet transformed into a global village,” Fischer wrote, “man would regain his unity with nature, technologized like our bodies onto which cling all sorts of technical extensions that become our second nature: glasses, computer, car, etc.”

McLuhan’s vision allowed for the embrace of technology, but it did so in order to promote communication among individuals who could, as Restany said, “plug into the short waves of the present.”

It would seem that in this present moment the technical would become more than an extension of a man’s eyes, hands, or legs. Restany, who collaborated with Forest in a live video performance in 1974 called Restany dine à La Coupole (Restany Dines at La Coupole), suggested that communication technology might become the “supplement of the soul” that Henri Bergson had said nearly half a century earlier would be necessary to balance man’s technological overextension. Forest’s practice, according to the often-enigmatic Restany, “provokes the suture between the real and reality,” by collapsing time and extending presence spatially, because video allows one to be seen in numerous locations at once. The artist and critic humorously demonstrated this proposition by staging a performance at the Montparnasse brasserie famous for its art-world habitués in which Restany dined in sync with a prerecorded video of himself eating, which appeared on a monitor at another table several feet away. Technology then would create a reality “a bit more true than nature” and lead to a “modular consciousness of phenomena.” In words that echo Flusser’s, he agrees that “writing is memory and the screen is forgetting,” and he insists that the purpose of communication is not to provide historical memory, but
evidence of the present, since humanity is based not on being recorded, but on interactivity. It is specifically through stopping time, then, he argues, that work such as Forest’s creates a “humanism of the masses.” If Flusser’s technocratic imagination was oriented toward maximizing progress, the collective instead proposed an integrated imaginary that restored event-oriented communication to the center of lived experience. Similar to the GRAY’s labyrinths, wearables, and environments, which, I argue in chapter 1, combat the alienation of the statistically defined Gaullist world by immersing the user in destabilizing sensory stimuli, the technology and community-based works of the CAS sought to produce a phenomenological artistic production whose saturation of the senses would, as Fischer proposed, “overwhelm the reductive structures of our schemas, stereotypes, values.” This immersion in the present moment would involve a perpetual becoming through action, thereby creating an intensity that recalls the saturation of the ambient fields of color.
that Flusser described, and importantly, it would create what Fischer refers to as a “temporal autonomy.”

In treating the same historical period that concerns Flusser and Fischer, however, Debord provided an understanding of time and history that would make the idea of temporal autonomy seem like an unrealizable, and potentially self-defeating, fantasy. His model, like Fischer’s, distinguishes between historical and nonhistorical time, yet Debord saw the benefits of the latter as being merely illusionistic in spectacle society. Prehistorical cyclical time, in Debord’s writing, resembles the time of McLuhan’s “tribal man” in that it is defined by the change of seasons and rich kinship bonds, while linear time is narrativized by those who claim the power to write history. For Debord, the division of labor at the onset of industrialization and the consequent rise of the bourgeoisie democratized access to the narrativization of history while providing the illusion that the worker is not alienated from it, but is intrinsic to its progress. What really takes place, according to Debord, is that the only history that remains in this phase is the dead history of laborers who produced commodities available to be consumed in the present. For him, ahistorical time is not a preferable intensity of immediacy that escapes narrative myths of history; rather it is the fact of daily existence for alienated workers. Instead of active engagement of the lived daily present with the forward movement of time, Debord suggests that individuals experience a “pseudo-cyclical” time that provides the illusion of real participation, while substituting ersatz reified representations of time-as-commodity for issues or experiences. In spectacle society, moments of life become compressed and intensified, and sold as vacation packages at locations set aside and developed for the purpose of leisure alone. Rather than driving history, the individual lives in an “estranged present,” cut off from direct communication, instead becoming a spectator to the products of forces determined elsewhere.

What Debord described then is the confluence and conflict between two modes of temporality and the reason why something like temporal autonomy would be impossible. An ahistorical present cannot truly exist because it produces what those driving history see as a temporal “surplus” ready to be poached and sold back exactly in the form of a world imagined by technicians. Fischer recognized, in fact, the ultimate impossibility of escaping art history altogether, and conceded that the best one could hope for might be to offer an alternative to the “alienating obsession with adding to it another linear segment,” which is, he observes, the tradition of avant-garde practice. Nevertheless, Debord insists on the importance of historical engagement and
imagines that even the false image of the worker’s participation in determining historical development might stoke the revolutionary process. He argued that “by demanding to live the historical time that it creates, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and every attempt to carry this project through—though all up to now have gone down to defeat—signals a possible point of departure for a new historical life.”

Rather than imagining that it might be possible to return to a cyclical time of social involvement, it will be necessary to embrace the historical vision of an irreversible time, but it must be a historical time without alienation. It is a time that must be playful and humanized.

Conclusion

The interpretive openness that the Collectif d’Art Sociologique invited resonates with the importance of the unbounded imagination as a tool of social critique and cohesion, and speaks to Forest’s appeal to the members of the public to inject themselves into the media. Duvignaud’s likening of *Space-Media* to May ’68 for the way that it collected together unconscious expression, to be sure, recalls graffiti from the movement that spoke of “power to the imagination,” the need to “imagine the lack” rather than “lacking imagination,” or, citing Breton, that “the imagination is not given, but an object of conquest par excellence.” If the artists were going to eliminate aesthetic interest as the artistic reason of their work, then they would replace it with another form of “irrationality”: that of raw data left unanalyzed, which was already an expression of unbounded fantasy. By emphasizing encounters, the imagination took precedence over the image, such that everyday life seemed to escape the reification of society based on preestablished narratives, whatever their temporal structure.

The invitation to the residents of Perpignan to, essentially, imagine the lives of their neighbors through mediated dialogue extended this openness. In this instance, the artists moved away from the determined structures that characterized the individual artists’ earlier work. Here, discord became the mark of “the real” of social interaction. In Thénot’s invitations to identify with a type of construction, or Forest’s exhortations that viewers project themselves into the newspaper or television, the artists sought to turn the imagination toward therapeutic ends that involved first establishing individual investment in the project and then reconsidering one’s choices as those that might be either original or of a piece with the larger society. In Perpignan the imagination was not focused around an artificial conceit, but derived from
the everyday lives of the people who lived in the city. While the artists’ open-ended process resulted in a sociological portrait of the city as it was rather than trying to engineer a community, the ultimate impact of the experiment seems to have been low, as the projects simply revealed existing insular communities and social divisions. Even as participants were invited to interact in whatever spontaneous way they might, they ultimately reproduced another turn in a cyclical temporal narrative.

By refusing to analyze the results, the artists allowed the public to ostensibly speak for itself. Holding open this place between the real and sociology, or the rational and irrational, as Fischer put it, may have produced a demystifying negative dialectic that challenged artistic and sociological conventions. Yet it also risked producing a rhetoric of realism that collapsed the representation of the group onto the group itself, thereby affirming the community’s identity. The artists created a sort of populist art in the sense that it availed itself of broad categorizations to speak with the voice of the masses, yet it did not go so far as to unite those voices under a single identity category, thereby constituting “the people” as a historical actor. Instead, it confirmed the idea that communities are plural, and realistically demonstrated the limits to communication. Borrowing from the language of Laclau then, the artists did not forge an “equivalential chain” between the members of an experimental community. Even as the artists reached out to the largest possible audience, across differentiating boundaries of age, class, and ethnicity, and beyond the central locations of art consumption to geographically and discursively peripheral sites, they were unable to unite the community in terms of either a positive relation of the community-in-itself, or a negative way via the opposition that the artists conceived between the public and art institutions.

The CAS’s rejection of aesthetics meant that they themselves declined to speak for others, instead seeking to empower the masses by allowing them to speak for themselves. Unlike Buren or Cadere, who rejected any equivalence between their paintings and bars and any photographs of them, Fischer, Forest, and Thénot accepted a fluidity between immediate lived experience, its documentary representation, and self-conscious aesthetic manipulations. Such nondifferentiation presents a sort of media populism in its aggregated heterogeneity and flattening of hierarchies, be they of authorship (of artist or public), of degree mediation, or of kinds of materials used. This process risked naturalizing the concept of the real as immediately transparent, and, consequently, the sociologically mediated methods by which that real is perceived as methodologically and technically objective tools of transcription. Yet, as Flusser, Fischer, and McLuhan argued, each in their different ways,
phenomenologically and ideologically, the means of communication are difficult to tease apart from the messages they communicate, and they themselves become elements of the realities that they represent. Such fluidity matches the free play of language that the artists invited to collect around their activities, and in this way, they created instances in which the general public could self-identify as relational if not quite as collective.
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