Autonomy as *Lebensform* or, the Situational Comedy of Art

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Who believes in the self?

The scene is familiar: Seated on a shallow stage with a microphone placed in front of them, five women look out at the audience, with a projection screen filling the background. Clearly, we are looking at an academic or public panel which is taking place, for instance, at a university or art venue. As we tune in closer, it becomes apparent that the panel members are discussing the legacy of feminist activism during the early 1970s. One speaker sets the theme for the event by quoting a passage from *The Handbook of Women's Liberation* by Joan Robbins (1970):

> Consciousness-raising, in which you will talk about personal experiences without broad analysis, will accomplish the following:
> 1. Clean out your head.
> 2. Uncork and redirect your anger.
> 3. Teach you to understand other women.
> 4. Discover that your personal problem is not only yours.[1]

But then we realise that something is slightly off, as another panel members begins to describe the situation as if she is providing a voice-over narrative:

> Five women, sitting in semicircular formation, attempting in their own way to relive the glory days of early seventies feminism.… Five girls, V-girls, nice girls, white girls, not boys. They sit before you as daughters, staking a claim to a revolution they only barely remember from childhood, from photos, or from books. Of course, they retain certain fragments of the feminist past: a certain vocabulary of consciousness (false or true), of male supremacy, the dialectics of sex, abortion on demand. Freedom now! Sisterhood is powerful! Women of the world unite![2]

1 Marianne Weems, Jessica Chalmers, Andrea Fraser, Martha Baer and Erin Cramer, "V-Girls: Daughters of the ReVolution", in: *October* 71 (Winter 1995), p. 121.

2 Ibid., p. 122.

As the monologue continues, a wistful tone sets in. The bright fervour of an earlier phase of feminist struggle lights up, shining with the emancipatory belief in a common, feminist struggle that would forge deep bonds of solidarity among women. However, in the present, any access to such an egalitarian vision appears to have become blocked:

> Envious, we read about the good times, hard times, and political frenzy of groups that began in the late sixties or early seventies: Cell 16, The Feminists, The Furies, Redstockings, New York Radical Feminists, WITCH. We, too, would like to join a struggle, to struggle, to backstab, to schism, to compose a manifesto, to question the composing of a manifesto, and ultimately, if at all possible, to overcome. In spite of the eighties. In spite of our compulsion to problematize. In spite of our charming skepticism, our reluctance to attend demonstrations – or, well, if we attend them, our reluctance to join right in, the way we stand off a little, a reluctance to meld our individual identities with the mass.[3]

How are we to interpret such a discourse, which, as is stated, is marked by a "compulsion to problematize", yet whose critical attitude is disarmed in the very next sentence as but the expression of a "charming skepticism" on the part of five female academics? Sincerity and irony begin to run together.

As the panel continues, its members begin to reflect upon feminist techniques of consciousness-raising, even, to a certain extent trying their own hand at it, as the opening monologue predicted they would:

> You see them here, sitting before you sincerely, in homage, trying their hand at consciousness-raising. With their CR guidebook in hand, with their practice also humbly in question, what they are hoping is that, somehow, they, too, might achieve what was so feelingly called 'Liberation'.[4]

They pursue their own dim memories of the political struggles of their mother's generation, while giving an account of their own mixed experiences with female groups. But, then, at one point, a panellist interjects in a slightly exasperated fashion:

> What are we doing here? Are we acting out some kinky fantasy of wholeness? Do we really believe that consciousness-raising will restore us to some authentic self? All right, before we go any further, I want to ask you guys something: Does anybody here actually believe in the self?[5]

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 122.

5 Ibid, p.126-27.

A stunned silence sets in among the group and then, hesitatingly, another speaker raises her hand and responds: "Uh, I do. Not *my* self. But I believe in some of yours."[6]

I draw this episode from the performance, *Daughters of the ReVolution*, which the V-Girls presented in various academic as well as artistic venues between 1993 and 1996. The V-Girls started out as a feminist reading group but soon morphed into a performance art group which was active for over a decade, lasting till circa 1999. During this period, its members – Martha Baer, Jessica Chalmers, Erin Cramer Andrea Fraser and Marianne Weems – staged a series of mock panels on art history, such as *Academia in the Alps: In Search of the Swiss Mis(s)* (1988-1991), which used a mock-analysis of Hannah Spyri's novel as a surreptitious device to address the position of women in academia, and *The Question of Manet's Olympia: Posed and Skirted* (1989-1992), which followed a similar strategy in relation to Manet's painting of a courtesan, which during the 1980s had been transformed from a harbinger of modernist aesthetics into a test case of representation theory with its interrogations of class and gender relations. In fact, Jessica Chalmers has periodised the V-Girls in a very precise manner in relation to the discursive context of academic theory. As she observes, the V-Girls were the product of a specific shift in feminist art and theory away from representation theory, and its focus, in the early to mid-1980s, "on the dynamics of male spectatorship" and the "clichés of the feminine" as investigated in the work of a preceding generation of female artists, such as, Martha Rosier, Dara Birnbaum, Yvonne Rainer and Cindy Sherman. The V-Girls were caught up in a slightly different dynamic: "By the time Judith Butler came out with *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990, the focus of feminist art and criticism had begun to shift from images of male desire to the construction of identity through gendered behaviors, and from film to performance."[7]

It is the *performativity* of identity, therefore, in its gendered as well as academic guise that the V-Girls put on display in their mock panels. Performing at a time, as Chalmers notes, when universities were only beginning to hire female staff in earnest, their act would have seemed slightly 'out-of-place' at the academic conferences, such as the MLA or CAA, that they participated in. In such settings, they presented a virtuosic impersonation of a set of ambitious young academics who become engaged in an obsessive form of reflexive thought and word-play as they mimic the critical strategies of deconstructivist and Lacanian theory. Their pursuit of formal reflexivity, indeed, seems to know no bounds, submitting everything within reach to a kind of subversive logic. In a self-interview staged for the journal

6 Ibid., pp. 126-27.

7 Jessica Chalmers: "V-Notes on Parody", in: John C. Welchman (ed.): *Black Sphinx. On the Comedic in Modern Art*, Zürich 2010, p. 213.

October, for instance, it is the social *form* of the academic panel itself that becomes the fodder of their caustic wit:

> *Baer*: I myself, incidentally, have written on the subject of the structure and value of the panel. In a paper entitled "Missing Floorboards: Surfacing Panels in Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature," I called the panel discussion, if I remember correctly, "the scene in which dialogue and pedagogue are one." I think that's quite apt, don't you?
> *October*: That was in your panel on Johanna Spyri's Heidi, "Academia in the Alps: In Search of the Swiss Mis(s)."
> *Baer*: Right. Later, in our panel "The Question of Manet's Olympia: Posed and Skirted," I wrote, "The panel is an ideal pedagogical vehicle, which effectively counters the usual signifiers of individual expertise and demands a long table."[8]

In the best tradition of stand-up comedy, the communication between the panellists is constantly disturbed by misunderstandings, sudden digressions, non-sequiturs and lapses in decorum. From one moment to the next, for instance, a performer's supreme mimicry of academic authority will give way to painful confessions of self-doubt and insecurity. Jessica Chalmers apologises to the audience during *Academia in the Alps*: "My paper is really bad. Should I go on? You're going to hate it, but I will read it really quick." As a rule, the V-Girl's act collapsed at the end in what they called the 'breakdown' during which their "carefully woven stream of serenely delivered short speeches become even more broadly ludic, fragmentary, and mutually disruptive."[9]

For sure, the purpose of parody for the V-Girls was not to submit the "other academic" to ridicule: "Within a traditional joke structure, the object of the jokes on our panels would be 'the other academic.' In laughing at our jokes, the audience would be identifying with us at the expense of another academic."[10] Yet, the V-Girls insist that their act "doesn't work so simply." Their *concrete* impersonation of an academic on a panel, if rather extreme, "makes it less a joke in the traditional sense than a grotesque representation that provokes instead a crisis of identification."[11] And they themselves are implicated within this very crisis, since it is their *own* academic and artistic milieu, or "form of life" that the members of the V-Girls, who consisted of young artists and graduate students, were struggling to accommodate themselves to.

8 The V-Girls: "A Conversation with October", in: *October* 51 (Winter 1989), pp. 115-16.
9 Chalmers: "V-Notes on Parody", 2010, p. 207.
10 Andrea Fraser in "A Conversation with October", p. 123.
11 Ibid.

This notion of a form of life, or *Lebensform*, has a complex origin and even more controversial legacy, which I shall not be able to explore in full here.[12] Although I will come to delimit my reference frame more closely, I have used the term above in a rather general sense, and it could easily have been replaced by the notion of (artistic or academic) *institution*. As a matter of fact, Rahel Jaeggi, has argued that the two concepts are closely related, referring to normative modes of social practice.[13] However, if an institution in the strictest sense of the word is regulated by codified, even juridical rules of 'proper' conduct, a form of life concerns a more informal process of habitualisation. In other words, a form of life provides a socio-historical context in which a certain set of actions, gestures and words may appear to be meaningful, however the form of life does not fully *determine* in advance which rule of speech or behaviour applies to which situation. This difference between institution and form of life is played out, to a certain extent, in *Daughters of the ReVolution*. The V-Girls represent the contemporary university system as an institutionalised social form, deeply patriarchal in structure, which enforces certain standards of behaviour, but also as a form of life that not only generates an *undercommons*, but the possibility for alternative modes of community to emerge:

> *Erin*: I was very caught up in feeling inferior about the status of women in the university. I took it very personally. I think that Women's Studies balanced out all the feelings that I was having about the theory that I was reading – I think I felt sort of disabled by it on a certain level, so the department became this empowering space where I could be with other women.[14]

A form of life may concern, therefore, a hegemonic, institutional mode of existence – "the modern family", "the bourgeois way of life" – but can also indicate an alter-

12 The roots of the term, as Stefan Helmreich and Sophia Roosth have shown, are in the Romantic, vitalist *Naturphilosophie* and life sciences of the nineteenth century. (Stefan Helmreich, Sophia Roosth: "Life Forms: A Keyword Entry", in: *Representations* 112, no. 1 (2010), pp. 27-53.) It became part of the German discourse on *Lebensphilosophie* during the 1920s, which contained both progressive and reactionary strains. The term has been revived in the context of a critique of biopolitics (Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito) and post-operaist theory (Paolo Virno.) On the connection of the notion of biopower to *Lebensphilosophie* (and its subsequent exploitation by Nazism), see Nitzan Lebovic: *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics*, Basingstoke 2013, pp. 183-185.

13 "Both forms of life and institutions are examples of habitual and normatively charged social practices, …[yet] if in the case of institutions, the corresponding practices tend to be fixed and codified, they tend to be more malleable and informal in the context of forms of life… One does not enter into a life form – as with a labor union or a marriage – by means of an application form or by giving one's word of consent, rather one belongs to a life form, often without wanting to." Rahel Jaeggi: *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, Cambridge, Mass. 2018, p. 74.

14 "V-Girls: Daughters of the ReVolution", p. 126.

native or emancipatory form of communal life. *Daughters of the ReVolution* engaged in an archaeology of such experimental life forms, centring on the group-formation techniques of consciousness-raising that were practiced within the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s. More recently, Paolo Virno has returned to this trajectory of ontological politics, or, what he calls *anthropogenesis*, in stressing the emancipatory or, in his terms, 'innovative' dimension of the *Lebensform* concept. And, like the V-Girls, Virno locates this political potential in the disruptive potential of laughter that is not based on the victimisation of an other, but directed at the very conviction of the 'autonomous' self.

What I propose, then, is to adumbrate a post-war genealogy of the autonomous self as it fades into and out of existence within specific environments or forms of life. Any aesthetic system, such as the formalist doctrine of modernist art, which is thoroughly invested in the illusion of absolute autonomy (of the object, subject, and institutions of art) will adopt a rhetoric of 'seriousness' according to which the relation of viewing self to viewed object is one of complete 'conviction' or mutual 'acknowledgment' of each other's self-identity. Nevertheless, this relationship of absolute trust, which constitutes the autonomous self, is paradoxically rooted in an attitude of permanent distrust: How do I know, for sure, the object is not deceiving me? A famous, insurmountable problem of formalist criticism was, for instance, the 'infra-thin' distinction between the monochrome and the blank canvas (as readymade). And thus we may take the comic or parodic element in art – my examples shall range across painting, performance and theatre – as more than a simple gag (although in many cases that is all it is), but as the possible symptom of a crisis in a form of life in which the prior meaningfulness of certain gestures and words drifts off into absurdity.

What prompts me to connect the dual notions of autonomy and forms of life, which is not how these terms have usually been addressed, is the fact that the concept of forms of life has been practised within the post-war discussion of autonomy in mod-ernist aesthetics.[15] It shows up, specifically, in the writings of the philosopher Stanley Cavell, who shared similar views on modernist painting as the formalist critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. In fact, Fried and Cavell would often refer to each other's work during the 1960s. An avid reader of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Cavell picks up the notion of *Lebensform* from the former's *Philosophi-*

15 For brevity's sake, 'modernism' refers in the following to a *formalist* model of modernist art based in the post-war writings of Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell.

cal Investigations, where it is mentioned three times.[16] Cavell tailors the concept to help shore up that autonomous subject of modernist aesthetics whose "singleness and separateness" predicates his connection to other subjects, contrary to the 'authentic' self that was to be engineered in the CR sessions of feminist groups-in-fusion. As the "known member" of a "known community," the serial *Lebensform* of the modernist subject was mirrored in the serial form of modernist painting, those "abstracts of intimacy" as Cavell dubbed them without irony.[17] Four decades later, Virno would dust off the same concept of Wittgenstein's, but he takes it in a radically different direction. Whereas for Cavell it is the seriousness of a form of life (i.e., modernist culture) that needs to be preserved in the face of the corrosive effects of capitalism, for Virno the opposite is the case.

"A form of life withers and declines," Virno writes, "when the same norm is realized in multiple ways," which is precisely what Greenberg, in strictly negative terms, claimed is the source of the phenomenon of kitsch.[18] But whereas for Greenberg this liquidation of an 'authentic' form of life, could lead to a desolate world stacked with piles of death-like, kitsch objects, for Virno the depletion of forms of life does not necessarily have to end in a blighted, capitalist landscape of recycled stereotypes and clichés. In their decrepitude, to recall Charles Baudelaire, cultural forms may open onto different horizons. But how is that not in itself a platitude? Virno, for sure, does not wish to repeat some banal point about 'rebirth through destruction,' which modern critics have been prone to do or, for that matter, to follow those economic pundits who, more recently, seek to praise the benefits of a start-up economy in reciting Joseph Schumpeter's doctrine of 'creative destruction.'[19] Virno, rather, wants to stake out another terrain, based in part upon a familiar, post-operaist theory of the biopolitical organisation of post-Fordist society and in part on Wittgenstein's vaguely anthropological notion of *Lebensform*, which is to

16 Wittgenstein does not specify his source for the term, but it probably derived from the German discourse of *Lebensphilosophie*. I don't agree with his statement that *Lebensform* "is not a pivotal concept in Wittgenstein's philosophy," and P. M. S. Hacker provides an introduction to Wittgenstein's use of the term in P. M. S. Hacker: "Forms of Life", in: *Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, Special Issue on Wittgenstein and Forms of Life (October 2015): pp. 1-20.

17 Stanley Cavell: *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition, Cambridge, Mass. 1979, 117-18. The difference between a *serial* collective and the *group-in-fusion* is articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre in Jean-Paul Sartre: *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, London 2004.

18 Paolo Virno: *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti et al., Los Angeles 2008, p. 151.

19 As a matter of fact, Virno's notion of 'innovation' runs close to the entrepreneurial discourse of Joseph Schumpeter, as he admits himself. However, I shall not be able to pursue this problem in the present text.

provide a kind of wedge within capitalist logic, which finds ever new ways to strip the human species of its defining, political character.

If modernist aesthetics was invested in the continuity of history, and thus in the survival of its life form, then Virno is more interested in the phenomenon of 'crisis' in which a form of life is not so much extinguished as suspended. Following Wittgenstein, Virno argues that once a set of conventions (such as the modernist 'medium' of painting), which otherwise provide a form of life with its intelligibility, become exhausted or discredited, the world does not collapse into total absurdity. Rather, human beings are thrown back onto the regularity of a so-called "common behavior of mankind" [*gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*] which consists of the most basic and common modes of human conduct and speech: a kind of anthropological "bedrock" which marks the liminal zone between the human species as biological life and political being.[20] Both Virno and Cavell attribute this stripping down of cultural forms of life to the levelling forces of capitalism, even if their diagnosis differs on other points.[21] Whereas Cavell rushes to build up the defences of the modernist subject, Virno, remarkably, speaks out "in praise of reification."[22] It is only, he maintains, when a form of life enters a state of crisis that human life as such enters "on the verge (but only on the verge) of assuming one form or another" and, as a result, we might confront "the problem of *shaping* life in general."[23] Where Cavell dreads an upending of the seriousness of cultural norms, Virno joyously celebrates a multiplicity of life forms yet to come. Unlikely bedfellows, Cavell and Virno ultimately share a similar view of human finitude: a half-submerged 'bedrock' upon which the polity is built, with Cavell retreating to ever higher ground, trying to keep his feet dry, while Virno waits for such superannuated defences to be washed out to sea in order to start building anew.

The seriousness of modernist art

Parody, according to Chalmers, was highly suitable to "the mood of our generation" and the verbose antics of the V-Girls were particularly adept at amplifying the wordplay of post-structuralism, pushing its anti-foundationalist logic to the

20 Virno: *Multitude*, 2008, p. 115. Virno is referring to §206 and §217 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: "If I have exhausted the justifications [*Begründungen*] I have reached bedrock [*den harten Felsen*], and my spade is turned." Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford 1997, 82e, 85e.

21 It would take us too far afield to detail how Virno's argument intersects at this point with Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical notion of the 'state of exception'.

22 This is the title of a chapter in Paolo Virno: *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*, trans. Giuseppina Mecchia, South Pasadena 2015.

23 Virno: *Multitude*, 2008, p. 151, emphasis in original.

limits. The distrust of all figments of 'presence' and 'authenticity', has turned the parodic attitude inward, leaving the abandoned 'self' on the comic stage in a state of bewilderment, searching for something, some other, to believe in. The academic master of deconstruction, who wished to excel at manipulating the very rules of the semiotic chessboard, has in the speech acts of the V-Girls become fatefully entangled in the spidery web of language. Yet it would be a disservice to the brilliance of the V-Girls' act to state merely that they were able to *literalise*, as it were, the poststructuralist games with figurative or metaphorical speech. Their performances are inscribed in more complex history. As Adorno once proposed, parody, in its most emphatic sense "means the use of forms in the era of their impossibility."[24] Adorno does make an important stipulation, however, which stems from his dialectical approach to history. The critical efficaciousness of parody not only depends on its ability to exhibit the obsolescence of the formal conventions of a certain artistic medium or genre, but also on its capacity to alter these outmoded forms and to redeem a lost potential of art. However, what concerns me here is not any regenerative function of parody, but Adorno's basic observation that that parody, necessarily, stands in a relation of belatedness to history; it comes after the fall, as it were, of a 'living art form,' extracting its mortifying sense of humour from the stultified remnants of a formerly esteemed species of art.

Parody loves seriousness, writes Chalmers. For her generation, "authenticity was out, inauthenticity was in," rendering the endless self-doubt of late modernist artists, such as Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, which was compensated by a masculine rhetoric of heroic posturing, to seem no more than a laughable quirk of former times. In the post-modernist present of Chalmers the parodic impulse had seeped, as it were, into all pores of existence. Alenka Zupančič has (dismissively) referred to this pervasiveness of a parodic attitude within postmodern theory as the performing the comedy of a *metaphysics of finitude*, which proclaims not only that we are limited, divided, exposed beings, but that we must accept this human state of finitude, thus blocking any real possibility of transcendence or emancipatory politics.[25] Rather than confirming this state of affairs, however, *Daughters of the ReVolution* shows a mounting dissatisfaction with the limits of subversive humor:

> By 1994, the notion of parody seemed used up and the Vs were in the throes of what we viewed as a group creative impasse… Daughters of the ReVolution (1993–1996) was a way for us to negotiate the friction, as well as harmony, between the personal-political feminism of our teens during the 1970s; the theoretical

24 Ibid., p. 259.

25 Alenka Zupančič: *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Cambridge, Mass. 2008, pp. 49-51.

> feminism of our schooling; and a feeling that we had, in 1994, of needing to rethink both our relation to feminism and to performance.[26]

Daughters of the ReVolution not only jokes about the manners of its times, but also expressed a kind of belatedness in relation to the former "good times" of feminist activism. Chalmers: "If we were the ones with comedy on our side, it was not a light-hearted or hopeful affair."[27] And thus *Daughters of the ReVolution* was different from their previous performances in one important aspect: it not only mimicked the competitive form of the academic panel but also the reconciliatory form of the feminist group. In the first case, the V-Girls played havoc with the rules of the game, but in the second case, this ruthlessness gives way to a kind puzzlement as to *how* rules come into existence: "Yes, we are deeply committed to 'something,' have put our faith, sincerely, in 'something.' And so, you find us here this evening, semicircular in the attempt to raise this 'something,' a ghost from the past, that obscure object, the thing called 'consciousness.'" What jointly repeated mantra could conjure such a collective spirit?

Modernist aesthetics attempted to give its own answer to this conundrum: How does a form of life 'freely' give itself a form without, that is, submitting itself to an external set of rules or code of norms. And the formalist critic, as we know, resolved this problem by a kind of bootstrapping device: The modernist work of art was to provide its own formal laws of generation; in a word, it was to become self-organising.[28] Cavell calls this the *automatism* of a medium, which not only means that an individual work must seem to happen of itself, without the subjectivity of the artist, his or her personal touch, overshadowing the work, and, furthermore, that the medium itself is conceived as a potentiality which will constantly draw forth new instances of its aesthetic power. And this power, when it comes to painting, consists in the manifestation of the "total thereness" of the work. Take the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, which are said to be "wholly open to you, absolutely in front of your senses, of your eyes, as no other form of art is."[29] This is Cavell talking, but it could just as well have been Michael Fried or Clement Greenberg.

This appropriation of the notion of automatism by Cavell in service of a modernist aesthetic of contemplation is nothing short of astonishing. For earlier theorists of human behaviour, such as Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, automa-

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26 Chalmers: "V-Notes on Parody", 2010, p. 214.

27 Ibid., p. 216.

28 For more on this topic, see Peter Osborne: "Theorem 4: Autonomy. Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?", in: *Open 23* (2012), pp. 116-26. Also: Sven Lütticken: "Neither Autocracy nor Automatism: Notes on Autonomy and the Aesthetic", in: *e-flux journal* 69 (January 2016). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60614/neither-autocracy-nor-automatism-notes-on- autonomy -and-the-aesthetic/

29 Cavell: *The World Viewed*, 1979, p. 109.

tisms operated below the threshold of self-consciousness, they consisted of those involuntary tics and ingrained habits which, when exposed to the unflattering gaze of others, provided the substance of most jokes. André Breton would subsequently transform automatism into a technique of 'free association' as the spiritualist movement of the 19th century had already done before. Yet, Cavell was unapologetic in detaching automatism from its roots in mediumist and surrealist practices. Divested of its psychical dimension, automatism was to render the modernist work of art into a purely optical phenomenon, but formalism could never quite shake itself loose from the spectrality of the mediumist séance. It had, after all, to conjure something out of nothing, just as Cavell argued that automatism had never been a Surrealist invention but had always already been there: "using automatism to create paintings is what painters have always done." (Cavell, 108). No doubt, there is something phantomic about such a history of automatisms. To begin with, like any phantom, the automatisms that make up a form of life inhere in both an actuality (i.e., a concrete instance of a medium) and a virtuality (i.e., the pure potentiality of a medium). Furthermore, automatisms hold sway like some benevolent spirit, "an authority without authorization" (Cavell, 118), infusing human life with its form in order "to free me not merely from my confinement in automatisms that I can no longer acknowledge as mine… but to free the object from me, to give new ground for its *autonomy*."[30]

For this spell to work, however, trust must seem to precede the law. Consider, for instance, how Cavell explained his admiration of the *Unfurled* series (1960-61) by Morris Louis, which were produced by pouring separate, coloured bands of acrylic paint onto the canvas. These stain paintings, which removed any immediate signs of the artist's hand at work, provided Cavell with a prime example of automatism. What the critic relished was their optical effect of complete "openness," the "instantaneousness" of their appearance, which he understood as a form of "frankness" on the part of the object. Here was a painting that seemed strangely self-sufficient and needed no audience to confirm its identity. But what kind of candour might this be? How can there be a question of trust if there no mutual sense of liability or obligation? To imagine a form of life in which there is no debt to be settled, where no interest will ever become due, is to imagine an art of reconciliation, which, as Theodor Adorno has noted, remains intolerable in the face of an "unreconciled reality."[31] And it would not take long for the *Unfurled* series to undergo an act of desublimation. In 1969, Edward Ruscha created a portfolio of works on paper, called *Stains*, which were given such factual titles as *Salad Dressing (Kraft*

30 Ibid., p. 108.

31 Theodor W. Adorno: "Trying to Understand *Endgame*", in: Adorno: *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, trans. S. W. Nicholson, New York 1991, p. 248. I shall return to this text below.

Roka blue cheese) or *Gasoline (Mobil Ethyl)*. Literalism without reprieve is what the modernist critic abhors the most.

Cavell was aware, of course, that he could not place *endless* faith in the automatism of a medium. The conviction in a medium and the conventions of a medium go hand-in-hand and, therefore, conviction is a much a historical category as conventions are. Both will dissipate in time. The "total intelligibility" of art is based on an "implied range of handling and result," as Cavell wrote, and through its "continuing and countering" of painterly conventions, modernist painting was able to constitute a continuous, historical series.[32] But any such series will and must come to an end, the conventions of its medium exhausted. All this is well known, but perhaps less familiar is a second idea of Wittgenstein that Cavell draws upon to clarify his notion of the medium. An idea that will help us to further deepen our grasp of concept of *Lebensform*.

The relevant idea is that of Wittgenstein's language game and this idea, in turn, raises the question of the rule and its application. To play a game, one needs a set of rules, however there is no rule to "obeying a rule": a rule can always be applied correctly or incorrectly. How, then, do we know *how* to apply a certain rule? How can we be certain that the application of this rule is appropriate to a certain situation? And under which circumstances will the application of a rule seem to lack sense? Or, as Cavell would say, how does a convention become exhausted? The problem requires, first of all, that we do not to make an inventory of the rules that govern a specific game, but that we take a step back, as it were, from any particular instance of a game. Before we can learn the rules of any game, Wittgenstein points out, we must *first* recognise the general human activity of playing a game. Playing games, guessing riddles and telling jokes are as much part of our "natural history" as walking, eating or drinking.[33] Accordingly, Cavell holds that whether we follow a rule correctly or incorrectly is "not a matter of rules (or opinion or feeling or wishes or intentions.) It is a matter of what Wittgenstein… describes as forms of life."[34] Indeed, to imagine a language, as the latter proposes in his *Philosophical Investigations*, means to imagine a form of life.[35]

What all of this boils down to is that a language game, or *Lebensform*, does not operate as a kind of calculus with fixed rules. Language games cannot *prescribe* what to say or how to act in a certain situation. We learn to use words in a particular

32 Stanley Cavell: "A Matter of Meaning It", in: Cavell: *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge: 1976, p. 221.

33 See, for instance, Virno: *Multitude*, 2008, p. 115.

34 Stanley Cavell: "Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in Cavell: *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 1976, p. 50.

35 Cavell is alluding to §19 of *Philosophical Investigations*: "To imagine a language, is to imagine a form of life [*Und eine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen*]. Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, 1997, 8[e].

context and then must proceed to project them into new situations, yet nothing guarantees that these projections will make sense to others. If, on the whole, we do reach an understanding with others, Cavell notes is because we share "routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and fulfillment… all the whirls of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.'"[36] In short, a language game can only generate sense for a community of speakers if it is embedded within a normative background that indicates not what must be done, but how it can be done.[37] That is why Cavell might state that the application of a rule is not *decided* upon by a community by means of some rational calculation, but that conviction *expresses* the fact that a community agrees upon the proper application of a rule. Which is just another way of reiterating Kant's assurance that the freedom of aesthetic judgment does not weaken its claim to universal validity.

So, what happens when a particular language game or form of life runs its course? When, specifically, a modernist series has come to an end? Rosalind Krauss has once sketched how she underwent such a moment of disenchantment upon visiting an exhibition of Frank Stella's *Wolfeboro* series in 1966. She became struck by the procedural character of his painting; its promise as a modernist medium depleted.[38] Has the work at this point reverted to no more than a "Sight Gag" as Stella himself would name one of his paintings a few years later? Cavell was not as willing to throw in the towel. Instead, he remained brutally dismissive of those artistic practices that ridiculed a modernist aesthetic of autonomy. In Cavell's opinion, the claim of such "anti-art movements," such as pop art or minimalism, to *know* that the ambitions of modernism were null and void was simply a case of sour grapes. It was not modernism that had failed, he asserted; rather, anti-art practices provided only shallow "gratifications" that were no substitute for the seriousness of modernist art. If only the public had ignored pop art, he complains, it could have done no harm, "but it was not made to be left to itself, any more than pin ball games or practical jokes…"[39] There was, however, one moment, Cavell allowed, in which

36 Cavell: "Availability", 1976, p. 52.

37 In the title essay of *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell discusses the difference between prescriptive and normative statements. Likewise, Rahel Jaeggi has emphasized the normative structure of life forms: "[Norms] first define and establish the conceivable modes of behavior within a form of life by normatively structuring the space of possibilities of action itself that is given with this form of life, by dividing up the domain of human action into right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, intelligible and unintelligible. Normativity in this sense does not first come into play with the evaluation, but already with the identification of possible modes of behavior." Jaeggi: *Critique of Forms of Life*, 2018, p. 95.

38 Rosalind Krauss: "Pictorial Space and the Question of Documentary", in: *Artforum* 10, no. 3 (November 1971), pp. 59-62.

39 Cavell: "A Matter of Meaning It", 1976, p. 221.

modernism, in touching on the limits of its *Lebensform*, had a use for comedy, if only in a very attenuated form. It is towards this moment that I shall turn next.

The situational comedy of art

"We're not beginning to… to… mean something?", Hamm wonders out loud in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. His servant Clov scoffs: "Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!" With the near extinction of the world, leaving Hamm, the blind shop owner, and his servant Clov behind in their shelter, a form of life nearing its final stage, the language game has also almost come to a close, the two continuing to engage in a desultory exchange of wits with faltering energy, an automatism that will not quite wind down, even though their words seem to wander off into unknown directions, their application uncertain. Hamm wonders: "Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough." In their empty room "something is taking its course," but lacking a normative context following the annihilation of the human society, the characters exist in a state of constant bafflement, lacking full awareness of the sense they *might* be making, while remaining cognizant of such basic customs or "conventionality" of human nature, as Cavell put it, such as the making of a joke. Even if their heart is not in it: "Don't we laugh?" asks a character in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. The response: "I don't feel like it." Do they not feel like it because their circumstances are no laughing matter or because everything seems to be already said, all jokes sounding like cliché? Or are they beginning to lose the ability to recognise humour as such? Even Hamm dimly realises that it would take an alien 'rational being' observing this bunch of half-wits to start the language game up again.

If for Cavell as modernist critic the seriousness of modern art is no laughing matter, it precisely because it must defend against the becoming-cliché of its conventionality. Why then his interest in Beckett's play which, as he acknowledges in a lengthy text, which he wrote on *Endgame* in 1964, has its roots in comedy: "The medium of Beckett's dialogue is repartee, adjoining the genres of Restoration comedy, Shakespearean clowning, and the vaudeville gag."[40] Obviously, Cavell is drawing attention to the fact that for a formalist critic the history of any medium, whether that of painting or comic theatre, is one of continuity, not interruptions or breaks, in its conventions. But it seems important to him that hilarity is not simply laughter, as in parody, at the obsolescence of certain stereotypical forms, but that it regenerates such clichés through laughter. Cavell describes, for instance, a

40 Cavell: "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*" in: Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, 1976, p. 127.

moment in Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief* where the sexual excitement of the female character is displaced a camera movement towards a fireworks display. His first response to this stock film image, Cavell writes, "is a laugh at the laughability of the movie cliché," but then he realises that the movie director has used a conventional symbol to indicate the very conventionality of the woman's imagination. However, with Beckett the question of laughter is rather different. What we have in *Endgame*, according to Cavell is an "abstract imitation of ordinary language" which seems to imply that Beckett has achieved an extreme formalisation of everyday speech. In fact, Cavell draws an extensive comparison between Beckett's use of language and the program of analytic philosophy. The playwright is said to share with the logical positivists the ambition to cleanse discourse of "connotation, rhetoric, the noncognitive, the irrationality and awkward memories of ordinary language"[41], in short, to achieve a literalness of language. But whereas logical positivism sought to anchor language in a directly verifiable present, Beckett shows that language can never be reduced to a set of protocols, to a pure calculus. The literalisation of language in Beckett creates a certain madness or schizophrenia on the part of its characters, who are no longer in control of their own meaning due to the unfixing of the commonplaces of language, its clichés and idioms. Yet Cavell does not grasp this unmooring of language as its total disintegration and thus as an expression of the meaninglessness of the universe, according to what he calls a fashionable theory of existentialism. Rather, even from the edge of its extinction, language rebounds and manifests a kind of resilience, because Cavell is *convinced* that Beckett's language presents us with a kind of puzzle, which requires that we see "the syntax [in] a new way,"[42] against the grain, avoiding a conventional reading of a certain familiar phrase.

Cavell gives ample examples of his own inventiveness in reviving the moribund language of Beckett's characters, rescuing language from its own literalisation. (We should recall, at this point, how Michael Fried would incriminate minimalism as *literalist* only three years later). But I shall pass them over here, moving straight on to what I take to be his major conclusion. Words have been isolated, in Beckett's theatre, from their ordinary function of providing the characters with an individual motivation. In fact, there are no characters in Beckett's play in any ordinary sense of the word as Cavell, and several other commentators, have pointed out. We listen in on the dialogues as that visiting, rational being from another planet:

> Words, we feel as we hear them, can mean in these combinations… But what do they mean, and what in us, who in us, do they speak for…?[43]

41 Ibid., p. 120.

42 Ibid., p. 128.

43 Ibid., p. 130.

The answer to that question, as Cavell implies, would be to provide the words with a proper *medium*; to assimilate them into a *Lebensform* where subjects seem able to control the meaning of their own words and actions. Subjects who appear supreme in their conviction that they know how to project their words into new situations. In Beckett, however, the words have a tendency "to lead a life of their own" and that, in the end, is unbearable to Cavell. Therefore, he argues that the true "drama of the play" is not that of the characters slow drift into nothingness, but consists of the audience's own struggle "to own [the words], to find out who says them, who can mean them when." And this, as well, is nothing else than the drama of modernism in which an autonomous subject seeks to be in full command of his own words and actions, but can do so only within the automatisms of a medium, within the normative context of a *Lebensform*. Otherwise, this subject would be in danger of dying of laughter.

He continues to view comedy as mostly external to modernist culture. However, this cannot be said of Theodor Adorno's own take on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, which was presented in a lecture of 1961, eight years previous to Cavell's reading. In his "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," Adorno fashions a marvellous pun on the existentialist trope of the liminal situation or *Grenzsituation*, suggesting that what Beckett's characters enact is, above all, a *situational comedy* of the philosopher. Similar to Cavell's emphasis on the "hidden literality" of Beckett's play, Adorno argues that in this play the metaphysical abstractions of existentialism, its "doctrinal universality" have come crashing down to earth. Language is reduced to the level of senseless clichés, and this meaninglessness cannot be redeemed by any existentialist moment of absurdity; a moment that ought to spur subjects to transcend the facticity of their situation in a radical affirmation of their personal freedom. Indeed, as Adorno wryly notes, such an existentialist act of pure negation when taken to its extreme can only produce catastrophic effects. Existentialism, then, does not provide an escape from the bondage of capitalism, but only accelerates its mechanisms, abandoning Beckett's characters to a reified "state of negative eternity." *Endgame* allegorises the concreteness of an existence, situated in the here and now, which has become incapable of universality: it "assumes that the individual's claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility."[44] The transcendental subject is tripped up, like the ridiculous character of the king that falls into a puddle of mud; the abstract and the concrete are juxtaposed, converting philosophy into comedy.

In his essay, Adorno outlines how *Endgame* creates a mise-en-scène for quasi-autonomous subjects, who in mirroring themselves fully in the self-same object, had, in fact, actualised the 'non-identity' of the subject with itself. Beckett's characters, thus, become the one who can perform nothing more than the function of

44 Adorno: "Trying to Understand *Endgame*", 1991, p. 249.

the 'last man,' who exists in a liminal state where all human figures behave "primitively and behavioristically," exhibiting "a pathogenesis of the false life."[45] *Endgame* thus becomes, in Adorno's reading, an allegory of a future capitalist wasteland, its anomic subjects inhabiting a bleak, post-catastrophic world. But for all its gloominess, Adorno's text also acknowledges a comic element to Beckett's play, although he, like Cavell, also insists that Beckett's theatre is not a matter of laughing out loud. Adorno describes *Endgame* as "that panicky and yet artificial derivation of simplistic slapstick comedy of yesteryear."[46] To laugh all-too-easily *at* the pretensions of the individuated subject would be to find comfort where none can be forthcoming. And, as I noted above, Adorno was steadfast in his conviction that there is no place of reconciliation in post-war reality from which one might laugh and declare things harmless. In short, for Adorno, from his viewpoint at the outset of the 1960s, the politics of comedy had itself become ridiculous. Nevertheless, true to dialectical form, he did not simply oppose seriousness and humorousness as two ossified modes of cultural experience that cancel each other out. As he puts it in a later essay, "Ist die Kunst heiter?" (1967), jocularity "inheres in art's freedom from mere existence" so that even in the most desperate works the moment of humor is not expelled but "survives in their self-critique"; that is, it survives as an unfunny "humor about humor."[47]

Comedy as anthropogenesis

For Adorno, Beckett's comedy presented a specific historical diagnosis: the *pathogenesis* of a false life. But what are we to make today of Adorno's bleak vision of a post-autonomous trash heap of a world inhabited by the undead victims of capitalism? Hasn't the future taken a very different turn? The neo-liberal regime of capitalism that emerged in the 1970s has subsumed all language games, all life forms, to its processes of valorisation. And so rather than objectifying the autonomy of the bourgeois subject, it has called upon the new, post-Fordist variant of the *homo oeconomicus*, the entrepreneurial subject, to endlessly flex its language skills, to engage in the production, marketing and monetising of new life forms. Indeed, it is, as if capitalism has pushed through, rather than transcended, the *Grenzsituation* of existentialism, coming out on the other side. We are not living an end game (at least from the perspective of neoliberalism), but a competitive game without end, a gaming economy that is to be played in perpetuity. Yet, of course, this game

45 Ibid., pp. 128, 124.

46 Ibid., p. 130.

47 Theodor W. Adorno: "Is Art Lighthearted?", in: Adorno: *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, trans. S. W. Nicholson, New York 1992, p. 252.

is still bounded by certain rules of profit-making and only creates a semblance of freedom or personal autonomy.

This a diagnosis of our current predicament that has been promulgated by Italian, post-operaist theory. How is it possible for a post-autonomous subject to escape from the biopolitical apparatus of capture if, contrary to Cavell or Adorno, the *Lebensformen* of everyday life have lost their distinct boundaries of sense? What if we have come to inhabit an ever-expanding, ever-modulating regime of control, which is regulated by an array of psychotherapeutic technologies of the self? In other words, what if we have become accustomed to living in a state of permanent suspension of norms, a constant variation of life forms? If this diagnosis is valid, then what is required to escape this condition, Virno observes, is no longer a classical Marxist recipe of appropriating the means of production, but a means to appropriate the (de-)formation of language games.[48] That is to say, one needs to develop a technique that is capable of disturbing the assimilatory operations of language games – to set the production of sense spinning off into deviant directions:

> to provide some account of the logicolinguistic resources requisite for the linguistic animal, in order for this animal to be able to change the very context in which a conflict takes place, rather than remaining within that conflict and acting in accordance with one or the other of the behaviors intrinsic to that conflict.[49]

And these resources, Virno goes on to claim, "are the same that nurture jokes (and paralogistic inferences) characterised by displacement, that is to say, by an abrupt deviation in the axis of discourse." At which moment he shares a joke with the reader, drawn from Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious:*

> A gentleman in financial distress obtains a small loan from on acquaintance. When his benefactor chances upon him the next day in a restaurant eating salmon and mayonnaise, he is reprimanded resentfully: 'Is that what you used your money for?' 'I don't understand you,' comes the reply, 'if I haven't any money I can't eat salmon mayonnaise, and I have some money I mustn't eat salmon mayonnaise. Well then when am I to eat salmon mayonnaise?'[50]

What Virno wants to demonstrate by this example is the fundamental structure of jokes in general. In essence, he maintains, jokes mimic a basic form of deductive

48 To be more precise, we should distinguish between a capitalist liquification of all language games (i.e., Marx's 'general intellect' or Wittgenstein's 'bedrock' of the *Lebensform*) and a capitalist production of new, surrogate 'ways of life.' A very pronounced example of the latter would be social media type of the 'influencer.'

49 Virno: *Multitude*, 2008, p. 149.

50 Ibid., p. 88.

reasoning; namely, the syllogism. However, a joke subverts this logical mechanism by faithfully applying its rules to the combination of two incompatible thoughts and thereby arriving at an absurd conclusion. This is what in stand-up comedy frequently takes the form of a non sequitur: a conclusion that does not logically derive from the premises. In short, the joke produces a kind of deductive fallacy, which is what Virno identifies as the *paralogical* principle of the joke. Returning to Wittgenstein, one might also think of the joke as highlighting a gap between a logical or behavioural rule and its 'correct' application. The result of such a hiatus is not only to render the application of a rule uncertain, which creates a comic effect of puzzlement, but it may also to multiply the possible modes of application, giving rise to missed encounters, malapropisms, and mistaken identities.

Where Virno differs from Cavell is that the former discusses the notion of the language game in terms of its *innovative*, rather than its *improvisational* character. Whereas for Cavell what was essential was to find new ways to apply existing conventions, to extend the life of the modernist medium, for Virno what is important is the capability to develop new language games as such; that is to say, new, emancipatory forms of life. Autonomy, in this context, is not expressed in relation to the normativeness of a particular life form, but in terms of a crisis of a life form:

> At the exact point where a form of life cracks and self-combusts, the question of giving shape to life as such is back on the agenda. During the crisis, human praxis positions itself again near the threshold (an ontogenetic but also transcendental threshold) where verbal language hinges on nonlinguistic drives, reshaping them from top to bottom.[51]

Virno is, then, a deeply utopian thinker who conceives of anthropogenic passage beyond the control mechanisms of capitalism. Rather than an aesthetic ontology of the medium, he proposes a political ontology of the subject.

I don't wish, however, to speculate on the prospects of such a politics of comedy in the present, which strike me as rather dim. What interests me, rather are the genealogical roots of Virno's ontogenetic conception, which may be traced to the 1960s model of cultural revolution; that is to say, the revolutionary endeavour to politicise life and to 'give form' to alternative modes of collective existence.[52] Which connects us back to the case of *Daughters of ReVolution*. As the V-Girls point out, the consciousness-raising sessions practice by feminist groups at the time were in fact directly

51 Ibid., pp. 159-60.

52 I cannot expand upon this theme here, but one might argue that the 1960s witnessed a politicisation of life on the Left that is the counterpart of the 1920s 'discovery' of biopolitics. For more on this subject, see Sven Lütticken: *The Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice after Autonomy*, Berlin 2017.

modelled upon Maoist struggle sessions with their techniques of 'speaking bitterness,' which were meant to 'mobilize emotions' in the revolutionary transformation of group consciousness.[53] In the feminist groups, the serious work was undertaken to reshape, as Virno writes, the 'nonlinguistic drives' – the inculcated patterns of heteronormativity – from top to bottom. Yet, we must also note how in the postwar period the genealogy of the autonomous self became increasingly braided into an expanding, "psychotherapeutic territory," to quote Nikolas Rose. This territory of self-governance puts in place various mental routines by "which one problematizes one's existence…, acts upon one's dilemmas … and intervenes upon oneself (alone or with the assistance of others) in terms of psychological norms and techniques – through self-inspection, self-problematization, self-monitoring and self-transformation."[54] And it need not be belaboured that this psychotherapeutic regime of individuation coincides with the entrepreneurial subject of neo-liberalism, who is constantly enjoined to 'realise' his or her potential, to achieve *personal autonomy*, with career coaches and team-building exercises always monitoring one's ability and willingness to become more efficient and flexible.

Harun Farocki's *The Interview*, which filmed application training courses in 1996, provides us with a chilling look into this neo-liberal variant of the struggle session. The *Daughters of the ReVolution*, on its part, reached back to the feminist CR session, transforming its micropolitical scenario into a kind of situational comedy, which keeps the irreconcilable attitudes of longing and scepticism in suspension. Describing themselves as "a group that meets to question ourselves and others" the V-Girls parodied the language games of academia. But they also 'realised' themselves as 'members' of the academic organisation, assuming the very authority that post-structuralist theory was meant to place under erasure, if in a highly precarious fashion. As Chalmers noted: "Merely sitting there in the position of the-ones-who-are-presumed-to-know, we were a rebuke to the academic system and its cast of old-boy characters. In retrospect, I imagine we also seemed a bit like talking dogs."[55] The V-Girls demonstrate that academic discourse itself had transformed into a perpetual act of self-monitoring, self-questioning, self-validation despite, or perhaps even due to, its deconstructive language.

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53 "Central to the women's movement was a program for liberation based on the concrete realities of everyday life. Adapting the Maoist practice of 'speaking pains to recall pains,' consciousness-raising developed in small groups and became both a method for developing feminist theory and a strategy for building up the new movement." V-Girls: "Daughters of the ReVolution", 1995, 124. See also, for instance, Elizabeth Perry: "Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in The Chinese Revolution", in: *Mobilization* 7, no. 2 (2002), pp. 111-128.

54 Nikolas Rose: *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge 1999, p. 90.

55 Chalmers: "V-Notes on Parody", 2010, p. 207.

In sum, the V-Girl's performance addresses the conundrum of a metaphysics of finitude, to quote Zupančič again; a conundrum which concerns the antinomies of a neo-liberal subject, which must resign itself to a lack of transcendence within the everyday. One might also call this, following Adorno, a further, more insidious stage of the false reconciliation between subject and reality in the post-war era. If aesthetic autonomy was a mere semblance, then the personal autonomy of today is a mere sham. The tragi-comedy of the V-Girls was to perform a specific form that the blockage of emancipatory politics took in the course of the 1980s. What took its place was an economisation of the "imperative of the possible": a market-driven logic of endless self-fashioning.[56] Responding to this situation, while reaching back to the sixties, Virno's political theory of paralogic speech, and its anthropogenic power, may seem a bit toothless and not all too well-attuned to the debates on decolonisation and racial politics that currently roil the art world. However, it does give cause to think what an art history examined in terms of *forms of life*, and their moments of *crisis*, might have to offer to a discipline that for too long, perhaps, has confined itself within a discursive web spun between such terms as medium and autonomy.

56 Zupančič uses this term to indicate the contemporary "redoubling of a description by prescription, in the passage from "We are limited, divided, exposed beings" to "Be limited, divided, exposed!" (that is to say, you must accept this)…Despite numerous references, in this ethics, to the possibility of change and of emancipatory politics, this possibility is largely blocked precisely by the imperative of the possible." Zupančič: *The Odd One In*, 2008, p. 51.