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# Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys\*

STEFAN GERMER

*One fact is certain: commentaries on Art are the result of shifts in the economy. It seems doubtful that such commentaries can be described as political.*

— Marcel Broodthaers

## I.

Walter Benjamin suggested that in order to establish the political tendency of a work of art one should establish its *position within* the relations of production rather than its *attitude toward* them. In this way political commitment is linked to *artistic technique*. An engaged artist is expected to show more than mere partisanship: a reflection upon the conditions in which he produces must be made part of his artistic project.<sup>1</sup>

## II.

In an open letter of October 3, 1972, Marcel Broodthaers demanded that Joseph Beuys reflect on the conditions of his production. He reminded Beuys that artistic production is inseparable from its institutional framework, which—far from being something marginal—determines the work of art in its very

\* I wish to thank Hans Haacke, Anne Rorimer, and Bettina Ruhrberg for their suggestions and support. I also want to thank Julia Bernard, without whose insistence this essay would not have been written.

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, pp. 297–309 (this text was originally delivered as an address to the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris on April 27, 1934).

structure.<sup>2</sup> Broodthaers wrote his letter on the occasion of an exhibition of works by artists from Amsterdam, Paris, and Düsseldorf held at the Guggenheim Museum that year, in which works by both Beuys and Broodthaers were featured.<sup>3</sup>

Broodthaers found participating in a Guggenheim exhibition problematic, and in fact eventually withdrew his works, because the museum had cancelled Hans Haacke's first American museum show the year before.<sup>4</sup> In a by now notorious incident, the museum cancelled the show when Haacke refused to exclude two documentations of Manhattan real estate holdings and a poll of the museum's visitors. In a letter to the artist, Thomas Messer, the museum's director, justified the cancellation:

We have held consistently that under our Charter we are pursuing esthetic and educational objectives that are self-sufficient and without ulterior motive. On those grounds the trustees have established policies that exclude the active engagement toward social and political ends. It is well understood, in this connection, that art may have social and political consequences, but these, we believe, are furthered by indirection and by the generalized, exemplary force that works of art may exert upon the environment, not as you propose, by using political means to achieve political ends, no matter how desirable these may appear to be in themselves. We maintain, in other words, that while art cannot be arbitrarily confined, our institutional role is limited. Consequently, we function within such limits, leaving to others that which we consider outside our professional competence.<sup>5</sup>

Even though Messer stated that he had no intention of restricting artistic practice, he formulated the conditions that a work of art had to fulfill in order to be acceptable within the museum space. Following the idealist concept of the autonomy of art, art is seen as distinct from the social, and the museum is defined as a neutral, nonsocial, apolitical institution.

The work of art is expected to confirm this fiction and thus to appear as the result of a process of production which, in its *artistic* character, differs from other

2. Marcel Broodthaers, "Mon cher Beuys," Düsseldorf, September 25, 1972; published under the title "Politik der Magie? Offener Brief von Broodthaers an Beuys," *Rheinische Post*, October 3, 1972; reprinted in Marcel Broodthaers, *Magie. Art et Politique*, Paris, Multiplicata, 1973, pp. 8–12; and reproduced in Birgit Pelzer, "Recourse to the Letter," *October*, no. 42 (Fall 1987), pp. 174–176.

3. See *Amsterdam-Paris-Düsseldorf*, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1972, nos. 108 and 109 (Beuys) and nos. 110 and 111 (Broodthaers).

4. For the fullest account and analysis of this incident, see Rosalyn Deutsche, "Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate and the Museum," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986, pp. 20–37.

5. See Thomas M. Messer's letter to Hans Haacke of March 19, 1971, published in, "Gurgles around the Guggenheim," *Studio International*, vol. 181, no. 934 (June 1971), pp. 248–249.

forms of social production. Far better than any restriction of content, this institutional insistence on the specificity of artistic practice neutralizes all political implications of an artwork, since it forces the artist to depoliticize his work in his choice of means. Only in a generalized and unspecific way is “outside reality” accepted into the museum space; the boundary between art and society is thus kept intact, while the social determination of the artwork remains unreflected and the political character of museum decisions unacknowledged.

Haacke’s works did not follow these rules. Extending the project of Marcel Duchamp—who had demonstrated the degree to which the concept of the aesthetic autonomy was dependent upon the institutional mechanisms of exclusion—Haacke introduced systems into the museum space that challenged its alleged neutrality. These were systems that functioned in accordance with physical, biological, and social laws of change, growth, and exploitation. Haacke described the effect of this confrontation:

If you work with real-time systems, well you probably go beyond Duchamp’s position. Real-time systems are double agents. They might run under the heading “art,” but this culturalization does not prevent them from operating as normal.<sup>6</sup>

While Duchamp took the *separation* of cultural and social spheres as his point of departure, demonstrating that it was not the specific quality of an object but only the place and form of its presentation that decided its status, Haacke insisted on the *continuity* between both spheres, thereby unmasking the interests governing the seemingly neutral museum space, and thus making the political uses of culture apparent. While Duchamp *used* the concept of the autonomy of art, Haacke *attacked* it.

### III.

The cancellation of Haacke’s exhibition made apparent the extent to which the museum expected its specific mechanisms of exclusion to be respected. This meant that an artist’s political practice would have to take into account the institutional limitations of his role. Without consideration of the political character of the institutional framework within which a work of art is presented, the work is in danger of being neutralized, absorbed, and turned into an insignia of power. Broodthaers defined this very threat:

Art is a prisoner of its phantasms and its function as magic; it hangs on our bourgeois walls as a sign of power, it flickers along the peripheries of our history like a shadow-play—but is it artistic?<sup>7</sup>

6. Jeanne Siegel, “An Interview with Hans Haacke,” *Arts Magazine*, May 1971, p. 21.

7. Marcel Broodthaers, “To be *bien pensant* . . . or not to be. To be blind.” (1975), trans. Paul Schmidt, *October*, no. 42 (Fall 1987), p. 35.

From this vantage point it would be foolhardy to rely on the “magic of art” or to believe in its power. Whoever speaks of the power of art deceives himself about the true character of political power and the actual function of art in society. Wishing to find aesthetic answers to political questions, he believes that, by inventing rather than analyzing social conditions, he could actually contribute to their change. Certainly the most important recent exponent of such a belief was Joseph Beuys.

When the show of the Düsseldorf artists opened at the Guggenheim, it became clear how quickly and easily Beuys’s political messages could be absorbed by the institution. Beuys showed a primitive flag and a fur trunk, an ensemble he named *Gundfana of the West—Genghis Khan’s Flag* and an object that detailed the social program of his *Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung* (“Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum”). Both pieces, which the artist explicitly characterized as political, were shown in the very museum that had banned Haacke’s work because of its political nature.

Sensitive to the political reasons for the museum’s inclusion and exclusion of artists, Broodthaers decided to withdraw his works as an act of solidarity with Haacke.<sup>8</sup> Beuys, meanwhile, remained indifferent to the Guggenheim’s act of censorship. Beuys’s position led to the suspicion that there was in fact a *connection* between his definition of art and politics and his indifference to an actual political conflict; and therefore Broodthaers raised precisely this issue in his questioning of Beuys’s equation of art and politics.

#### IV.

To Broodthaers the situation had an exemplary character, and he therefore renounced the idea of a direct polemic against Beuys; instead he formulated his critique in the form of a historical fiction. In his open letter, Broodthaers reports that he has found, in a dilapidated Cologne slum tenement, a letter addressed to Richard Wagner from Jacques Offenbach; and he has decided to copy this letter and send it to Beuys in lieu of his own.<sup>9</sup> In the fragmentarily legible document, Offenbach comments on the difference between his and Wagner’s conception of the relationship between art and politics and expresses his doubts regarding Wagner’s receiving the patronage of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. In the historical fiction the allusion to recent New York events becomes clear:

King Louis [Ludwig] II had Hans H. sent away (from) his castles. His Majesty prefers you to this specialist of compositions for the flute.

I can understand—if it is a matter of artistic choice. But is not

8. According to the Guggenheim Museum’s wall-list, Broodthaers’s works were still shown in New York, but withdrawn from the subsequent presentations of the exhibition.

9. For Broodthaers’s open letters, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Open Letters, Industrial Poems,” *October*, no. 42 (Fall 1987), pp. 67–100; and Birgit Pelzer, “Recourse to the Letter,” *ibid.*, pp. 157–181.

the enthusiasm that His Majesty displays for you motivated by a political choice as well? I hope this question disturbs you as much as it does me. What ends do you serve, Wagner? Why? How?<sup>10</sup>

Offenbach and Wagner are more than merely alter egos for Broodthaers and Beuys respectively. They represent two fundamentally different conceptions of the social role of the artist. Broodthaers labels the identification of art and politics *Wagner*, and has Offenbach say:

Your essay "Art and Revolution" . . . discuss . . . magic . . . politics . . . which you must be aware of. The politics of magic? of beauty or of ugliness? . . . Messiah, . . . In this struggle against the degeneration of art the musical drama would thus be the only form capable of uniting all the arts. I can hardly go along with that contention of yours, and at any rate I wish to register my disagreement if you allow a definition of art to include one of politics . . . and . . . magic.<sup>11</sup>

Broodthaers refers here to events that immediately preceded the New York exhibition. At Documenta V in Kassel (June 30–October 8, 1972) Beuys had set up an "Information Office" to propagate the ideas of his *Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung*. The program of that organization was characterized precisely by the confusion or conflation of art and politics that Broodthaers criticizes in his open letter. At Documenta, Beuys had stated:

In the future all truly political intentions will have to be artistic ones. This means that they will have to stem from human creativity and individual liberty. This is why I concern myself mainly with the problem of schools, with pedagogy. But mine is a model of freedom that must be understood as revolutionary. It is a model that issues from human thinking and the education of man in this sphere of freedom . . . this cultural sector, of which the institutions, the means of information are part. There would be a free press, free TV, and so on. They must be free from all state intervention. I am trying to develop a revolutionary model that formulates the basic democratic order in accordance with the people's wishes, because we want the rule of the people. . . . I want an area of freedom, which should be recognized as the area that breeds revolution, that changes the basic democratic order and then restructures the economic sector in a way that will serve the people's needs and not the needs of a minority that wants to make its profits. That is the connection, and this I define as Art."<sup>12</sup>

10. Quoted after the reprinted letter in *October*, *ibid.*, pp. 175–176.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

12. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys*, Cologne, Dumont Verlag, 1973, p. 163ff (my translation).

In this conception the position of art is secure, and the role of the artist is unquestioned. By identifying political and artistic practice with one another, Beuys avoids the issue of the social relevance of his activity, since he borrows for it the aura of the political. The necessary precondition for this is the aestheticization of the political. Abstracting from actual conditions, Beuys in effect invents state and society, thus making both into artistic creations. In this aestheticization of politics Beuys follows Rudolf Steiner,<sup>13</sup> who, in his series of lectures entitled *Über die Bienen* ("On the Bees," 1923), had presented the organization of bee communities as a model for human society. Steiner defined this organization as the result of two *formative processes*: the "crystalline-anorganic" construction of the honey-combs, and the "organic-energetic" production of warmth within these combs. By analogy, Beuys could declare state and society (or, as he called them in a telling biologicistic metaphor, the "social organism") to be *works of sculpture*. In this fashion artistic practice was made the paradigm of all human activity, and creativity was presented as the means to shape and change society.

Consequently, Beuys defined the artist's task as one of making people aware of their creativity, as a demonstration of the possibility of change by employing creativity, and finally as the initiation of the necessary changes. The goal of this sculptural-political process was defined as a reorganization of society in a fundamentally democratic fashion.<sup>14</sup> Beuys's political program thus combined ideas as different as Steiner's definition of state and society, the concept of extended creativity put forward by the Fluxus movement, and the political demands formulated by the 1960s *Ausserparlamentarische Opposition* (APO, or Extra-parliamentary Opposition).

The intention of the Fluxus movement had been to free creativity from its confinement to the "artistic field" by generating an awareness of creativity inherent in every activity, and was thus directed at the abolishment of the distinction between artistic and nonartistic practices. As Fluxus's principal organizer, George Maciunas, declared:

The aims of Fluxus are social (not aesthetic) like the LEF Group—1929—in the Soviet Union—and are directed to: step by step elimination of the Fine Arts. . . . This motivates the desire to redirect the use of materials and human ability into socially constructive purposes. . . . So Fluxus is strictly against the artist with an income. At most it can have the pedagogic function of making clear how superfluous art is and how superfluous the object itself is. . . . Secondly, Fluxus is against art as a medium for the artist's ego . . . and tends

13. For the impact of Steiner's ideas on Beuys, see Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, New York, The Solomon Guggenheim Museum, 1979, in particular *SaFG-SaUG* (1953–58) and *Honey Pump*. In connection with Beuys's political actions, see *ibid.*, p. 269.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 265ff.

therefore towards the spirit of the collective, to anonymity and ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM . . . the best Fluxus composition is one which is most strongly impersonal and ready-made.<sup>15</sup>

Beuys shared the Fluxus movement's definition of extended creativity; his own practice, however, differed from the conception sketched by Maciunas to such an extent as to appear almost as its opposite. The difference was intentional: Beuys criticized Fluxus artists for what he considered an obsession with negating the traditional definition of art. Beuys insisted that instead of repeatedly demonstrating the futility of the separation between the artistic and social spheres, artists should apply their conception of extended creativity directly to society:

They [the Fluxus artists] depended on a dramatic mise-en-scène of materials, without wanting to specify concepts. They were lacking a theory, an epistemological substructure, so to speak, with a clearly defined goal. They held a mirror up to the people without any effect and without any improvement of the situation.<sup>16</sup>

Beuys believed that Steiner's theories provided him with the "epistemological substructure" he found lacking in Fluxus events, while the idea of "direct democracy" was the "clearly defined goal" that would permit him to go beyond dadalike actions—to genuine political action.

The concept of direct democracy had initially been formulated by the extraparliamentary opposition in the late 1960s. In those years West Germany's two major parties—Social Democrats and Christian Democrats—had formed the so-called Great Coalition, which encountered only weak opposition within parliament. This meant that any real reflection upon crucial political issues—the suspension of fundamental rights in a "state of emergency," the monopolization of economic power in West Germany, the country's relationship with the U.S. during the Vietnam war, continuities between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic—was left to the student movement, which understood itself as part of a larger extraparliamentary opposition.

Peter Brüchner and Johannes Agnoli analyzed the failure of the representative, parliamentary system in their book *Die Transformation der Demokratie* ("The Transformation of Democracy"). The authors demonstrated how the parliament functioned as an agency for capitalist interests, excluded the majority of the people from political decisions, and was both unable and unwilling to control increasing monopolization in the economic sector. As a solution, the authors called for the formation of a *Fundamentalopposition*, which would organize itself

15. From a letter to Tomas Schmit of January 1964, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 84.

16. Beuys, in Adriani, Konnertz, Thomas, p. 53 (my translation).

in a system of councils that were to supplement and eventually to supplant the parliamentary system.<sup>17</sup>

Beuys borrowed the jargon but not the analysis of the extraparliamentary opposition when he formulated his political program. Thus his various organizational attempts—which ranged from the formation of the *Studentenpartei* (Students' Party, 1967) to the *Organisation der Nichtwähler* (Organization of Non-Voters, 1970) to the *Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung* (Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum, 1971) appear more as a mimicry of politics than an actual attempt to politicize artistic practice. In no respect do the programs of Beuys's organizations correspond to political realities. Instead of following the extraparliamentary opposition in its analysis of the economic structures of West German society, Beuys declared the "abolishment of the two-party dictatorship" his main goal, and—adapting one of Steiner's ideas for current purposes—demanded the "tri-partition of the social organism" in order to liberate individual creativity. Taken as a whole, the mixture of Steiner's ideas, the Fluxus concept of extended creativity, and the slogans of the extraparliamentary opposition formed less a coherent political program than a monumental apology for the artist. What had appeared as a radicalization of the Fluxus position was in fact a regression from it, since for Beuys *only the application, not the concept of art* seemed problematic. His enterprise is thus ultimately a conservative one, aiming only at restoring to the marginalized artist a central social role. This explains Beuys's insistence on the importance of *individual* creativity.

It was this concept that had most fascinated Beuys in Steiner's thought. Steiner declared creativity a transhistorical quality of man, which enabled him to shape the world according to his desires. For Beuys, as for Steiner, change is a question of subjective volition:

If one is willing to enlarge art—the concept of art—to such an extent that it would also comprise the concept of science, and thus the whole of human creativity, then it follows that change of the conditions is a matter of human volition, . . . which means: if man realized the power of self-determination, then starting from it he will one day build democracy. He will abolish all nondemocratic institutions simply by practicing self-determination.<sup>18</sup>

17. Johannes Agnoli and Peter Brückner, *Die Transformation der Demokratie*, Frankfurt/Main, 1968.

18. Beuys, in Adriani, Konnertz, Thomas, p. 154 (my translation).

## V.

Belief in the power of creativity is both utopian and reactionary. *Utopian* because this concept gives back to the individual his labor power and thus opposes the division of labor characteristic of capitalist societies. *Reactionary* because it makes this reappropriation appear as an act of individual volition, independent of all social preconditions.

The historical context for Beuys's hypostasis of individual creativity can be determined in a more specific fashion. Post-World-War-II West German ideology has been characterized by de-historicization and concentration on the labor power of the individual. In an attempt to repress the memory of fascism, all historical context was obscured and all energies were directed to *Wiederaufbau* ("Reconstruction"), represented as the achievement of individuals. In this perspective, the economic restoration appeared as a *Wirtschaftswunder* ("Economic Miracle"), and the work of the individual assumed mythical status.

In true Herculean manner, Beuys defined his own biography as a sequence of "works" and made all historical reality disappear behind a self-created myth of the artist-hero. This self-mythification begins with the crash of Luftwaffe pilot Beuys in the Crimea and his acceptance by a local group of Tartars, who shelter him with felt and fat.<sup>19</sup> The myth continues in the invention of state and society. In the end, Beuys's audience is presented with a system of interconnecting links and mutually supporting interpretations and definitions that no longer permit a consideration of anything outside the system. This system can only be understood through its own carefully constructed "evidence"; it is especially in this respect that Beuys's procedure resembles that of Richard Wagner.

The composer had attempted to compensate for the social marginalization of the artist by extending the aesthetic realm to encompass the whole of society. In his exile in Zurich—following the failure of the Revolution of 1848–49, in which Wagner had played an important part—he elaborated this concept in the essays "Art and Revolution," "The Artwork of the Future," and "Opera and Drama."<sup>20</sup>

Taking Greek tragedy as his model, Wagner envisioned the "artwork of the future" as the center of a cult in which the people as a whole would take part and which would fundamentally affect every individual. Originally, Wagner linked the creation of such a *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the overthrow of the capitalist system, and particularly to the abolishment of the division of labor. Once the preoccupa-

19. For a demystification, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Beuys—The Twilight of the Idol," *Artforum* (June 1980), pp. 35ff; and, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim," *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980), pp. 3–21.

20. Richard Wagner, "Kunst und Revolution," in Dieter Borchmeyer, ed., *Dichtungen und Schriften*, vol. III, Frankfurt/Main, 1983, pp. 273ff. See also Rainer Franke, *Richard Wagners Zürcher Kunstschriften*, Hamburg, 1983.

tion with everyday needs had ceased—Wagner wrote<sup>21</sup>—all activities of liberated mankind would assume artistic features; thus the whole society would become a work of art.

But while the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was in this manner first conceived as the consequence of successful revolution, its meaning changed as Wagner's disappointment with the political situation grew. Eventually, Wagner envisioned the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as merely the *prophecy* of revolution and ultimately as its *substitute*. Even though none of its social preconditions were given, Wagner still insisted on realizing his *Gesamtkunstwerk*; he wanted to reconcile aesthetically what had remained irreconcilable in society. In order to do so he had to change both his own status and that of his work: while at first he wanted to express the dominant tendency of his epoch and thus conceived of his work as part of a universal social change, he now claimed this universality for his art. The precondition for this claim was de-historicization, and thus Wagner's work finds its content in the prehistorical world of German myth.

Mythology permits the artist to style himself as a creator who is unbound by historical conditions and is able to shape the world according to his own desires. To be convincing, however, this fiction depends on the exclusion of every remnant of historical reality. In Wagner's work this operation took the form of an aesthetic substitution: in order to make the social totality disappear, the work itself had to assume a totalizing character. The artist thus forced music, poetry, and dance together, pretending that these media converged in the same project, while their amalgamation was in fact achieved only by his volition, not by any inner necessity. The combination of media is supposed to form a coherent work of art, which in its perfection and its overdetermination of aesthetic means anxiously conceals the process of production behind the spectacular appearance of the product. Adorno defined Wagner's formal principle as precisely this attempt to conceal the conditions of production behind the appearance of the product, and continued in his description:

This is the objective explanation for what is generally thought of in psychological terms as Wagner's mendacity. To make works of art into magical objects means that men worship their own labour because they are unable to recognize it as such. It is this that makes his works pure appearance—an absolutely immediate, as it were, spatial phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

The “magic of the artwork” resembles the phantasmagorical appeal of the fetish: instead of counterbalancing its attraction, the work of art mimics the

21. See Borchmeyer, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, p. 301.

22. Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans., Rodney Livingstone, London, New Left Books, 1981, p. 83.

commodity. Like the commodity it is worshipped because the labor, the society, and the history that produced the work of art are concealed behind its spectacular effects. Wagner's aesthetic ideology kept him from realizing the congruence between his practice and the fetishization of commodities. Having stylized the aesthetic realm into a totality and thus remaining unable to determine his position in relation to the conditions of production, Wagner did not realize that, in concealing the social determination of his works, he followed that very determination.

## VI.

Beuys was the victim of a similar illusion. Unlike Wagner, however, he could no longer maintain the credibility of his production by presenting the work of art as a self-contained, autonomous whole separate from society, since he worked in a period not only in which the commodity status of the art object had become apparent, but in which avant-garde practice constituted itself through a reflection upon that status. In this situation, Beuys renounced the fiction of the work of art as an autonomous whole and attempted to escape the social restrictions of artistic practice by regressing to a presocietal state, archaically defining his work through the *presence* of the artist. This displacement proved to be a very efficient strategy for avoiding the question of the social relevance of artistic practice, because it allowed Beuys to acknowledge the particularity of his art objects while still claiming universality for his practice as a whole.

The fragmentary character of Beuys's objects is thus deceptive: although they mimic the allegorical form by inviting the beholders' participation, their understanding is always already preestablished within the totalizing system of meaning that Beuys supplied for them. It is within an interpretative discourse emanating from the artist himself that meaning is assigned to the individual works. The beholder's role is thereby restricted to ratifying a *Gesamtkunstwerk* whose logic of production eludes him, since it stems from the artist's volition. Beuys's concept thus required an interpretation that reduced critical commentary to a tautological repetition of his ideas, an interpretation thus incapable of assessing the artist's claims about the social and political implications of his work.

As in Wagner's case, the political is replaced by a totalizing aesthetic concept. But the emphasis with which Beuys's objects insist on *being something other than just art objects* betrays the act of repression necessary to maintain that fiction. Moreover, the more Beuys refused to acknowledge the social conditions of his practice, the more he fell prey to them. The concept of universal creativity prohibits the artist from recognizing the actual social function of artistic practice, since it blurs the boundaries between art and society, thus making it impossible to reflect on the institutional limitations of artistic production.

## VII.

Broodthaers takes these institutional limitations as his starting point. By choosing Offenbach as his example, he indicates that artistic practice is less a mythical act of primal creation than the result of the necessities of the culture industry and the pressures of political censorship. The artist's political engagement cannot consist in expanding art into society, but only in reducing art's claims through the deconstruction of those mechanisms that establish and maintain "the artistic" as different from other social practices. Instead of supplying the market with so-called "political art," which would maintain the illusionary belief in the power of art, Broodthaers undermined this confidence in art through strategies of ironic affirmation.

Jacques Offenbach's work provided an example for such an intellectual subversion of the apparatus of production, which the composer neither owned nor controlled; thus it seemed to Broodthaers a suitable strategy for those forced to cater to the culture industry. Like Wagner, Offenbach operated in the reactionary period following the defeat of the 1848 revolution, but unlike Wagner, Offenbach could not take refuge to a mythical past, since his genre—the operetta—required cooperation with existing forces and conditions. Offenbach provided his audience with the entertainment it believed art to be; but he entertained his public with a parody of its own social mores and expectations. Offenbach's operettas could thus become a powerful instrument of oppositional critique. Siegfried Kracauer, who during his exile from Nazi Germany wrote a biography of the composer, was especially interested in this oppositional strategy:

In a time characterized by the hardening of the bourgeoisie and the almost complete impotence of the Left, Offenbach's operetta became the decisive medium of revolutionary protest. It provoked laughter that penetrated the prescribed silence and excited its audience to opposition while seeming only to entertain it.<sup>23</sup>

Broodthaers realized the usefulness of Offenbach's strategy of ironic affirmation in a situation in which a self-mystification such as that of Joseph Beuys tended to obscure the actual social position of the artist. Like Offenbach, Broodthaers undermined his audience's expectations of art by fulfilling them—a strategy already evident in his declaration that the desire to make money and invent "something insincere" stood at the beginning of his artistic career.<sup>24</sup> Art is

23. Siegfried Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976, p. 280.

24. I am, of course, referring to the first exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels in 1964 and the statement published by the artist on that occasion. For a discussion of Broodthaers's statement, see Buchloh, "Open Letters," p. 73ff.

refused any quality that would separate it from the commodity, and thus the actual status of the arts in the era of universal commodification is defined:

I doubt, in fact, that it is possible to give a serious definition of Art, unless we examine the question in terms of a constant, I mean the transformation of Art into merchandise. This process is accelerated nowadays to the point where artistic and commercial values have become superimposed. If we are concerned with the phenomenon of reification, then Art is a particular representation of the phenomenon—a form of tautology. We could then justify it as an affirmation of existing conditions, which would at give it a suspect character.<sup>25</sup>

25. Marcel Broodthaers, "Über die Kunst—Im Sinne einer Antwort an Jürgen Harten," *Magazine Kunst*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1975), pp. 73–74.