Submitted by Stephen Wright on Sat, 2012-12-01 15:06

Toward the end of the 1990s, Zagreb conceptualist Mladen Stilinovic wrote an open letter to art -- not so much a love letter as some words of solace for an old friend in a pinch. The decade had been rough. Yet Stilinovic avoids the question of art's political content altogether. He commiserates about the different forms of capture to which art has increasingly fallen prey -- ideological capture, to be sure, and mercantile capture, in an attention economy where attention-getting is already emerging as the dominant form of capital accumulation. Yet to have the market pay attention at all requires submitting art to institutional capture, since to accept that art's value is merely what the market says its value is, requires accepting that art be what the institution says it is. To distinguish art from the mere real thing, as the champions of institutional theory cleverly put it, to have those objects and actions, all and sundry, appear under the auspices of art, is to submit them to a form of performative capture, through which they are performed as art. And for this reason, Stilinovic suggests, art ultimately finds itself in the grips of ontological capture -- the price exacted for it to be art at all is that it be... just art. It is not so much that art has exhausted the repertory of decoys and feints with which it has been allowed to play, as that all its ploys and sleights of hand have now been mapped out, made predictable.

And, true friend that he is, Stilinovic implies that art has been an unwitting accomplice in the logistics of its own capture. "Art is art," he reminds art, flatly and suddenly without irony, locking art into an ontological predicament that it had always preferred to consider only ironically. "This form of tautology satisfies many people and you are happy in this paralysis."

A difficult operation, and a very risky one

It's hard to imagine how art took that letter. The overall thrust seems ever truer in hindsight. One piece of advice seems particularly prescient -- one wonders, in fact, if art wasn't literally of two minds about following up on it: "I think that the time has come for you to hide yourself and keep a low profile for a while, just tell me where, so that people will no longer be able to find you so easily. This is a difficult operation, and a very risky one, but it might be worthwhile to try. Perhaps they'll even forget you. Then you'll be free, completely." This call to the shadows seems increasingly urgent today. And if indeed art at first failed to heed a friend's advice that it deliberately impair its artistic visibility, there may still be time to act now. But it may well be that art did exactly as Stilinovic suggested, so successfully completing that "difficult" and "risky" operation that no one even noticed that it had made good on its escape. This is a highly speculative reading of an artist's correspondence with art, and a counterintuitive interpretation of the event-strewn field of contemporary art. It looks for all the world as if art has done anything but retreat. But of course, escapes are never supposed to be possible; and yet they occur, and when they do, they often go initially unnoticed. Escape happens. In fact, it can be argued that escape precedes capture, which remains logically subordinate to it. Only a history written from the perspective of power could suggest otherwise, ie., that capture is primary, and determines escape. By any other account, the escapee is already elsewhere, leaving only a cape in the place of the absent body. A whole line of escapological enquiry has developed from this perspective. As Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos have argued in Escape from'. Prior to its regulation, escape is primarily imperceptible."



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This insight has broad consequences -- for practices in all those fields of human endeavour that remain one step ahead of logistical capture, and more locally for Stilinovic's paradoxical suggestion that art "keep a low profile" or even disappear from those modes of being to which it has been assigned. To be clear: this has nothing whatsoever to do with some (Hegelian or other) variant of the "art is over" argument. In escape, art is very much alive. The question is this: what could it mean for art to escape performative and ontological capture? How could art -- apparently premised on foregrounding its exceptional ontological status and maximizing its coefficient of visibility -- escape notice, yet still make its presence felt? Whatever it does, and wherever it goes, if it eludes performative capture, how can it be described as art? Are we not at risk of losing art altogether?

You got away, didn't you babe You just turned your back on the crowd You got away, I never once heard you say I need you, I don't need you I need you, I don't need you And all of that jiving around

Leonard Cohen, Chelsea Hotel No. 2

You are always somewhere

Let us suppose for a moment that art did not immediately heed Stilinovic's advice; that his suggestion has only become audible over time (subsequently we will shift perspectives and consider the hypothesis that the escape has already taken place and art is now elsewhere). If one were to sum up in a single turn of phrase what characterizes the art-historical present, one might describe it as a "de-ontologizing" moment. That may be a philosophically dubious notion, but it has the heuristic advantage of helping us grasp a highly paradoxical situation. Everywhere, art can be seen attempting to sunder itself from itself, seeking to embed itself in the real without recourse to the usual frames of art. It seems as if artistic energies are seeking to self-extract from that ontological edifice known as "art". This escapological moment may be explained by the fact that the conceptual architecture of the artworld, or at least its hegemonic variant, is a leftover inheritance from modernity, and as such poorly adapted to today's intuitions, which it can accommodate only at the price of considerable distortion. By conceptual architecture, one can understand not merely the white cubes and attention-focusing devices of the galleries and museums, where art still continues to be performed, but the entire performative apparatus, including our conceptual vocabulary itself, which determines the advent -- and event -- of art. What are the features of this conceptual architecture, where did it come from, and how did it shift from facilitating art's appearing in the world to policing its very being?

From one perspective, the conceptual architecture of contemporary art remains structured around a kind of holy trinity comprised of objecthood, authorship and spectatorship. Objecthood, not in the restrictive sense of mere objects -- because most contemporary art is only tangentially object based -- but in the broader and apparently self-evident sense whereby art is understood as a growing yet restricted set of objects (symbolic actions and configurations) in counter-distinction to the far larger set of objects that are not art. Art, in other words, is assumed to be a subset of objects within the set of all objects. Authorship, too, must be understood in a sense that has been loosened by decades of experimentation with co-authorship. Nevertheless, what Michel Foucault called the author-function remains a key component of what we might term the "art-function," and one of the underpinnings of the reputational economy and the policing of meaning in the art field. Spectatorship, on the other hand, remains the mainstay of the conceptual edifice of art, inasmuch as it is bound up with how art is performed as such: it is not so much spectators who perform art, as it is spectatorship that is activated by the presence of something, anything, framed as art. It has been said that art history is punctuated by



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adverbs; two in particular come to mind with respect to spectatorship. When some event or object is framed as art, then art it is, *just* art. But when something is not framed as art, it may be seen, heard, enjoyed, but not *sub specie artis* -- only afterward, when some framing device is introduced, is it acknowledged that we didn't *even* know it was art. This framing is often accomplished by the now omnipresent mode of performative documentation -- a kind of catch-all device for belatedly capturing those practices which at first eluded capture. Although the distanced form of relationality to which spectatorship refers is everywhere challenged by a deeper usological shift in art-related practice, it remains virtually unchallenged as the foundation of art-institutional architecture. Which is why artworld ideologues now speak of "participation," but very rarely of usership.

Great show. Great show. Great show.

There is a deep-seated reason for that. If one were to single out one name as "the" architect of the conceptual architecture of the mainstream artworld, it would have to be that of Emmanuel Kant. Through two exceedingly powerful, and paradoxical, concepts, Kant defined the capture mechanisms of autonomous art, some two centuries ago. Art, Kant argued, was characterized by its "purposeless purpose" -- that is, it is not useless or without purpose; its usefulness is its uselessness, its purpose is to have none. In a world hell-bent on cost-benefit analysis and utilitarian rationality, this circularity is not without virtue. But it comes at an exceedingly high cost: it deprives art of any traction, any use-value in the real. And since it precludes usership, it dovetails perfectly with Kant's other architectural brainchild: "disinterested spectatorship," through which he introduced the disinterested spectator as the new heroic figure of aesthetic experience.

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of an increasing number of art-related practices in the absence of objecthood, authorship and spectatorship, which seem to break with the Kantian paradigm altogether. Practices which are on a 1:1 scale, actually being what they are -- house-painting outfits, online archives, libraries, restaurants, whatever -- and at the same time artistic propositions of what they are. They deliberately foreground their use-value and their relationality is premised on some form of usership. They are redundant, in a sense, inasmuch as they fulfil a function, as art, which they themselves already fulfil as whatever it is they are. They could be said to have a double ontology: a primary ontology as whatever they are, and a secondary ontology as artistic propositions of that same thing. The sorts of things Marcel Duchamp once punningly referred to as "reciprocal readymades," which he defined through an ironic example: "use a Rembrandt as an ironing board," thereby giving art a renewed use-value. It was as if the very Kantian Duchamp saw the perils and limitations of the "assisted readymade" as it became increasingly synonymous with contemporary art itself, and speculatively entertained the idea of somehow reinjecting art back into the real.

Not infrequently, in these situations, you were really art

Could this be what Stilinovic had in mind when he called upon art to disappear? It's true that such practices with "double ontologies" do not immediately appear as art, though that is where their self-understanding is grounded. To that degree, at least, they do indeed break with the basic tenets of autonomous art. Whatever its descriptive power, however, the notion of a double ontology has two downsides. Firstly, it is not entirely sure that two ontologies are better than one, even if a double-take of this kind allows for usological and escapological play. In fact, in some ways, it may be twice as cumbersome, and an enormous concession to institutional theory, reinforcing as it does the idea that art has an ontology. Secondly, to describe practices in these terms is to make them inherently reliant on performative capture to repatriate them into the art frame -- otherwise, their secondary (artistic) ontology remains inert, and not so much disappears as fails to appear. From the perspective of institutional theory, this is intolerable: what is not performed as art, is not art, and so is lost to posterity.



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But isn't that precisely the point? To disappear from that ontological landscape altogether? Isn't that exactly what Stilinovic suggested art attempt? But, if art were to escape performative and ontological capture, how would it then continue to have any role in the life of the community? What alternative does art have than to be performed? There are many ways one might answer this apparently legitimate -- or at least power-legitimated -- question. Let us consider two ways, and see if, coupled together, they don't go some way to pointing to art's possible escape route. From this perspective, disappearance is not art's horizon, but its *modus operandi*.

It's just that no one noticed

Let us risk an analogy with linguistics. Noam Chomsky famously argued that any speech act may be understood under two different aspects that stand in a binary relationship: as competence or as performance. According to Chomsky, competence is that inherent capacity possessed by every native speaker of a natural language to distinguish between a grammatically comprehensible speech act and an incomprehensible one, and to produce and understand an infinite number of speech acts in that language. A speech act need not be *performed*, he suggests, in order to be *informed* by linguisitic *competence*, and a speaker need never perform a specific competence in order for it to exist. One need not adopt Chomsky's somewhat idealist perspective (that has trouble accounting for language change, which can only be understood as changes in performance flowing back into competence), because competence can also be understood as something user-informed and historically determined. So, what if we think of art in similar terms -- as something that need not be performed, but which might well exist as a latent competence, an active yeast or undercurrent beneath the visible field of events, all the more potent in that it remains unperformed? Can we not think of art as capable of a self-conscious, Bartelby-like decision to prefer not to (inject competence into the art frame) but instead to bide its time and, perhaps, redirect that competence elsewhere?

The inflationary spread of performativity and performance studies in academia over the past decade has had the unfortunate side effect of occluding the study and even the mention of competence, virtually blinding us to the fact that what is performed is inevitably a competence, and that performance by no means exhausts competence. Certainly, after a century of artistic practice premised on ever more radical deskilling, any talk of competence can be made to sound downright reactionary. But of course we are not talking here about competence in the fine-arts tradition, as métier, craftsmanship or technical skill, but as thoroughly deskilled competence. We might see the relationship between performance and competence in art in terms of Robert Filliou's famous "equivalency principle," which asserts a fundamental equivalency between the well-done, the poorly-done, and the not-done. Not a principle likely to be integrated into management rationality any time soon... The capacity to recognize the equivalency between those possibilities is, in and of itself, an example of artistic competence as well as a clear example of competence's autonomy from performative capture. To think of art in terms of competence is to go some way toward freeing it from the mild but stable depression in which performativity holds it hostage. To speak of art as competence appears somehow premodern, but it is primarily a way to think of art as hanging low for a while, below the performative radar. It is also a way to imagine art in a moment of conceptual migration and epistemic cross-pollination between the fields of linguistics and art-related practice. Instead of seeing art as lacking something until such time as it is performed, it enables us to see it in an entirely different, more consequence-laden mode, enjoying a more fruitful relationship with the other walks of human endeavour with which it collaborates.

Everybody has a right to your name, even if you aren't there

But if competence is not performed, where is it located? In the bodies and minds of artists alone? Though these questions deserve answers, they also disclose a hidden bias, and reveal the spontaneous ideology of art-historical discourse, which has accustomed us to seeing art in terms of events:



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artworks, exhibitions, publications, movements... construing art as an irruptive event, penetrating stable appearance with novelty and all the attendant fireworks. But this is a strangely masculinist understanding of art-historical process. To focus on the epiphany of "events" -- and to see art itself as event -- rather than on fugitive occurrences is to foreground particular moments when a set of material, social and imaginary ruptures come together and produce a break in the flow of history. An escapological perspective is inherently different, as Papadopoulos et al point out:

"An event is never in the present; it can only be designated as an event in retrospect or anticipated as a future possibility. To pin our hopes on events is a nominalist move which draws on the masculinist luxury of having the power both to name things and to wait about for salvation. Because events are never in the present, if we highlight their role in social change we do so at the expense of considering the potence of the present that is made of people's everyday practices: the practices employed to navigate daily life and to sustain relations, the practices which are at the heart of social transformation long before we are able to name it as such."

Though Marcel Duchamp was a nominalist, as well as a masculinist, it just may be that he also provided an escape route from the event horizon of just the kind we're looking for. In a famous eight-minute talk called "The Creative Act," Duchamp put forth the idea of a "coefficient of art," by which he referred to the discrepancy, inherent in any artistic proposition, between intention and actual realization, setting out to define this gap by a sort of "arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed." It is of course this gap that prevents art from being exhausted in the moment of its emergence, conferring on it the potential to evolve in the public time of interpretation. *Coefficients of art...* It is a nice term, but a strange one too, as if there were something "unintentionally expressed" in those words -- as if "coefficient of art" itself had a coefficient of art which was not immediately audible to Duchamp himself. For the intuition that there might be variable coefficients of art may enable us to understand how art has *already* escaped ontological capture. To speak of "coefficients of art" is to suggest that art is not a set of objects or events, distinct from the larger set of objects and events that are not art, but rather a degree of intensity liable to be present in any number of things -- indeed, in any number of symbolic configurations, activities or passivities. Could it be that art is no longer (or perhaps never was) a minority practice, but rather something practised by a majority, appearing with varying coefficients in different contexts? What coefficient of art have we here? Or there? What is the coefficient of art of such and such a gesture, object or practice?

I hear you are trying to find a new name

To the extent that art is functioning at variable coefficients of artistic competence and incompetence, in the shadow of its foresworn performance, it has already eluded institutional and ontological capture. It can even keep its name -- indeed, why yield the monopoly on that three-letter word to those whose use of it is so restrictive? Performing escape is not to escape. Indeed, it is to *not* escape. To take Stilinovic's advice seriously, art had to forego performing its escape, shifting towards an exit from a given organization of social life without ever intending to create an event. Like users, escapees never play on home ice. They don't choose the terms of engagement, but nor do they obey the rules. They change the game. And they do so in imperceptible ways that appear impossible from the perspective of the merely existent. Such that you never really know when an escape is underway.

Stephen Wright

Published on northeastwestsouth.net (http://northeastwestsouth.net)

Re: & then you disappear

Submitted by sarahjones on Sat, 2013-04-27 23:13

Lately I've become nervous about artists, it's a swelling bitterness, like the escalating distrust of youth that might come with age. I'm only afraid of them outside of the gallery. It's ok when they're inside, fascinating and rare creatures, with their counterintuitive lifestyles, paradoxically obstinate about their desperate need to be visible and respected. But who remembers the sheen of the lion's coat when it breaks the bars of its cage? It's when they get out that they make me nervous.

I'm almost as afraid of artists as I am of those Velociraptors in the kitchen in Jurassic Park. I don't want those angry bird related lizards at my barbeque, I don't want them sitting next to me in the park, because they want to disembowel and eat me. That's how I've started feeling about artists. They want to take walks and host dinners that are art, they want to host barbeques that are art, they want to hold fairs, and teach language courses, and play games that are art. They want to live it, and then they want to live it again in the blue-ish light of the projector beam as they play their own lives back to themselves. Then they want to author it, but worst of all, they want you to be part of it.

It's not that I'm anti-social, I'm just nervous about the bureaucratisation of barbeques; maybe it's an Australian thing. Maybe a comparison with Velociraptors seems a little unfair? But to give artists the credit they deserve, the Velociraptors were the most intelligent dinosaurs in the movie, and really, they are only creatures acting on instinct. They can hunt alone, but prefer to do so in pairs or packs. They are neither the biggest, nor the smallest, but they are definitely amongst the most memorable of the carnivores... maybe this is the most contentious point of comparison since there do seem to be a lot of artists who are vegetarian.

Two months ago I heard Steven Wright use the word escapologist. I don't know if it was the dark room, a lack of sleep, or Wright's Canadian accent but the term sounded decidedly Janet Jackson to me. Whilst Janet Jackson jumped and clapped out Escapade in the back of my head Wright articulated, in a reasonable, well researched, and somewhat hopeful notion some of the possible reasons for my freshly formed fear of artists.

Wright talked about art works that could be said to have a double ontology. In an attempt to escape the conceptual architecture of contemporary art, what he refers to as the Holy Trinity of objecthood, authorship and spectatorship, Wright described art works that are, what they are, that are also works of art. '... house painting outfits, online archives, libraries, restaurants...' of which he goes on to say, 'They could be said to have a double ontology: a primary ontology as whatever they are, and a secondary ontology as artistic propositions of the same thing.' And Velociraptors have two sickle shaped claws, what sort of a creature carves their meat with two knives?

Wright is suspicious of the double ontology of these works. The works become '...inherently reliant on performative capture to repatriate them into the art frame – otherwise, their secondary (artistic) ontology remains inert, and not so much disappears as fails to appear.' It sounds like a merciless backwards framing - trophies that bespeak the hunt. The elephant in the jungle has no sense of the double ontology of the hunt, she is not in it for the sport, or the art, she is just in it. The jungle is her local, and the local is the area targeted for the hunt. If she manages to escape the predator's razor sharp claws I doubt she will reminisce about the qualitative value of the experience, you can't really learn to be better, different, or more useful prey.



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Captured by the hunter, the elephants experience will be re-routed, no longer hers, her tusks will be stolen for the ivory and she will not appreciate the irony or the recognition.

Janet kicks up again... she's all about escaping... 'Come on baby lets get away. Lets save your troubles for another day. Come go with me we've got it made. Let me take you on an escapade (lets go). Es-ca-pade. We'll have a good time. Es-ca-pade. Leave your worries behind. Es-ca-pade. You can be mine Es-ca-pade. An escapade...' Janet doesn't mention anything as brutal as hunting or elephants, she's dancing her heart out to invite us to participate in an alternate experience to what we already have, she seems to be inviting everyone, even artists. So why aren't Janet Jackson and Steven Wright scared of artists?

Wright suggests seeing art as a latent competence as opposed to something that is reliant on being performed and then re-framed as art. Furthermore, he proposes that we adopt a Duchampian notion; 'a co-efficient of art.' According to Wright, 'to speak of coefficients of art is to suggest that art is not a set of objects or events distinct from a larger set of objects and events that are not art, but rather a degree of intensity liable to be present in any number of things.' So all of a sudden art is everywhere? This, for Wright, is where art no longer needs to perform its own escape; art turns down Janet Jackson, it's been her backup vocals all along, there's no need to run away Janet, not even on a Friday night after a hard week at work.

So the hunt is over, but for me there might still be an elephant in the room; artists. Wright identifies art as something that is practiced by the majority, rather than the minority. So what does this mean for someone if they identify as an artist? Maybe artists should consider joining an unnamed supergroup of invisible intensifiers of experience that simply... live... undetected in the world? Or are they instead a group, by name only, who simply take credit for living? Or is everyone an artist? Help me Steven Wright... how will I know who not to invite to my barbeque?

Sarah Jones.

Plato's Barbecue

Submitted by Stephen Wright on Wed, 2013-07-24 06:07

Normativity hails and assails us from all sides, but contemporary calls to re-establish a *clearly visible* division of social labour, where everyone forthrightly performs his or her function, invariably fall back on Plato's famous ordering of the City. His normative utopia was set out to prevent the wrong kind of Athenians from showing up at his barbecue, to ensure that his baker didn't try passing himself off as a cobbler, or worse still (since Plato ended up admitting that a certain porousness between trades didn't pose any real threat to social order), that artists didn't try passing themselves off as anything else. A cosmically sanctioned division of labour was to take care of this problem, by assigning a specialist exclusively to each activity.



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"More things are produced, and better and more easily, when one man performs only one task according to his nature, at the right moment, and is excused from all other occupations" (*Republic*, 370c). Didn't he have a knack for wording? Though this productivist mindset would, as Plato must have realized, inevitably lead to a production glut in every sector, it had the signal advantage of locking everyone into their assigned social ontology -- being as they were "excused from all other occupations." Which was precisely the point: occupying them with their occupation, so they wouldn't get into social mischief like turning up unannounced at barbecues. Plato didn't get into the nitty-gritty, but upholding this kind of social partition requires a policing apparatus that prevents too much slippage between assigned categories.

Of course, Plato knew this partitioning was a hoax -- a socially useful lie. Useful, that is, for the status quo, since Plato always used the adverb in that static sense. Ultimately, he knew, anyone could change trades, take up something new, do art, do barbecue... If we think about art as a trade like another (an exceedingly non-Platonic position), even Plato would have to admit that an artist not doing art work is not such a big deal: "Do you think it would greatly injure a state if a carpenter were to undertake to do the work of a shoemaker, or a shoemaker the work of a carpenter, or if they were to exchange their tools and their wages, or if one of them were to get it into his head to do both trades at once, or if all trades were exchanged that way?" (Republic, 434a). "Not much," replied Glaucon. For the real danger lay not in changing trades but in confusing orders (again, for Plato, artists were decidedly not tradespeople). As Jacques Rancière puts it in *The Philosopher and his Poor*: "All that remains is the prohibition. The artisan in his place is someone who, in general, does nothing but accredit, even at the cost of lying, the declared lie that puts him in his place."

It would be very interesting to know how Plato classified double agents in his scheme of social hierarchy, since it is the defining characteristic of doubles agents and spies (along with poets, artists and liars as Plato pointed out) to cultivate ontologically slipperiness. But it is revealing, as well as entertaining, to note that the kind of mild paranoia felt by counter-espionage officials, who suspect everyone they're talking to is a foreign agent -- a frame of mind most vividly typified by General Jack D. Ripper, in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* convinced that the Soviets had been using the fluoridation of water supplies to pollute the "precious bodily fluids" of his compatriots -- is now shared by some artworlders. Though they rarely share Plato's notoriously harsh opinion of artists, they do share his demand that we know who is who, or more precisely, who is what. Artists are fine, but only in their socially assigned sphere: the gallery or the museum, where the art police keeps tabs on them and where they can perform their ontology under suitably policed conditions.

In recent years, the art police has encountered previously unknown patrol challenges because artists (and others) have begun to see their "occupations" less in terms of an assigned ontology than as mere component parts of a more complex way of being, or as indeterminate sets of competences and incompetences within a broader subjectivity. Barbecue is certainly an art form -- one of the most universal, by all accounts. But how much art was there at last night's barbecue? What will the coefficient of art of tomorrow's barbecue be? For the Anti-Platonic contingent, this escapological perspective is the point where they disappear from the event-horizon. Why perform what you do as "art" (even though you think of it that way), if just enjoying the beer and ribs will do as well? Why wear your artist badge on your sleeve if all it means is being captured ontologically by Google and other neo-Platonist agents of the attention economy? Is it not entirely plausible that art is better able to live up to its promises by operating in the shadowy realm of imperformativity, practised outside the visible spectrum of what passes for political activity in event-oriented historiography?

It is at this point that Sarah Jones' concerns gain particular traction. As she implies, many of these "undercover" artists are themselves undercover Platonists... They do not so much seek to escape performative capture as to delay the performance -- and to haul everybody else into the act. I think we all know what and whom Jones is talking about -- artists who want to crowd-source their production process in the everyday, then reframe that



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unpaid, inadvertent labour by performing it as art. Here art is making use of performativity -- contemporary capitalism's dominant mode of accumulation and capture. What is do be done about this development?

Perhaps it is not something we need worry much about. If there really is an escapological groundswell under way, there must be some overarching historical reason for that. Why not see it as a desertion of the imperative that art be seen as either object or as event? Even if the suddenly undercover artists themselves don't see their stealth operations in those terms -- merely waiting for the occasion to performatively document the barbecue back in the art centre -- why not encourage their deterritorialization? They may just never bother reterritorializing; they may get a taste for the profane art of barbecue...

Stephen Wright

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