

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Foster, Hal, "Crossing Over," *The Berlin Journal*, Spring 2011

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CROSSING OVER

The precarious practice of Thomas Hirschhorn

By Hal Foster

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE avant-garde is faced with a state of emergency, whether real (when the rule of law is actually suspended) or imagined (when it only seems to be)?

Modernist movements like Dada were marked by the chaos of world war, to be sure, yet in many ways our own present is also one of emergency. If there is a condition that has governed recent art, it is a precarious one.

Almost any litany of the machinations of the last ten years will evoke this state of uncertainty: a stolen presidential election; the attacks of September 11 and the War on Terror; the deception of the Iraq War and the debacle of the occupation; Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and rendition to torture camps; another problematic presidential

Perhaps our political bond – whether we call it the "social contract" or the "symbolic order" – is always more tenuous than we think; it was certainly precarious long before September 11. Prior to Bush and Blair, Reagan and Thatcher led the charge of neoliberalism with the battle cry, "There is no such thing as society," and the lives of the most vulnerable (the underclass, gays and lesbians, immigrants) have become ever more precarious since. It is this heightened insecurity that some art has attempted to manifest, even to exacerbate. This social instability is redoubled by an artistic instability, as this contemporary practice foregrounds its own schismatic condition, too, its own lack of shared meanings and methods. Paradoxically, then, "precarity" is almost constitutive of some art today.

challenge and change? Can the precariat be pried from its victim status and developed as a social movement? At least one thing is certain: it is not a unified class. As Raunig argues, there are "smooth forms of precarization" for "digital bohemians" and "*intellos précaires*," on the one hand, and "rigidly repressive forms of labor discipline," for migrants and *sans papiers*, on the other.

THE SWISS ARTIST THOMAS Hirschhorn, who represents Switzerland in the 2011 Venice Biennale, has long used the term *précaire*, though its full significance was not always apparent. Initially the term denoted the insecure status and limited duration of his pieces, some of which, such as *Travaux abandonnés* and *Jemand kümmert sich um meine Arbeit* (both 1992), were made up of odds and ends left on the street to be picked up by others. In a conversation with Alison M. Gingeras, Hirschhorn stressed the commonality of his means:

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election; Katrina; the scapegoating of immigrants; the healthcare crisis; the ecological disaster; the financial house of cards, and so on. For all the discussion of "rogue states" elsewhere, our own government has sometimes operated out of bounds. It is little wonder, then, that the concept of "the state of exception" (developed by Carl Schmitt, in the early 1920s) was revived, that this state once again appeared to be "not the exception but the rule," as Walter Benjamin wrote in his 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," and that as a consequence one could assert that the camp was "the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet," as Giorgio Agamben did in 1994.

Precarity has come to figure in sociological discourse, where it is used to describe the situation of a vast number of laborers in neoliberal capitalism whose employment (let alone healthcare, insurance, and pension) is anything but guaranteed. This "precariat" is seen as a product of the post-Fordist economy; though, historically, precarity might be more the rule, and the Fordist promise of relative job security and union protection the exception, as Gerald Raunig points out in *A Thousand Machines* (2010). It is a tricky category. What might be lost in a discursive shift from "proletariat" to "precariat"? Might the latter term normalize a specific condition, a "society of risk," a condition that is subject to chal-

What I've got around me is some packing material; there's some aluminum foil in the kitchen and there are cardboard boxes and wood panels downstairs on the street. That makes sense to me: I use the materials around me. These materials have no energetic or spiritual power. They're materials that everyone in the world is familiar with; they're ordinary materials.

For a while, Hirschhorn merely distinguished the precarious from the ephemeral. He told Gingeras,

My work isn't ephemeral, it's precarious. It's humans who decide and determine how long the work lasts. The term

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THOMAS HIRSCHHORN, *EUROPA*, 1999, MIXED MEDIA WALL SCULPTURE, 181 X 221 X 6 CM

'ephemeral' comes from nature, but nature doesn't make decisions.

Soon enough, however, the precarious came to figure less as a characteristic of his work than as a predicament of the people addressed by *précaire*, with ramifications both ethical and political.

Is there a way to cross from our stable, secure, and safe space in order to join the space of the precarious? Is it possible, by voluntarily crossing the border of this protected space, to establish new values, real values, the values of the precarious – uncertainty, instability, and self-authorization?

This is a question that Hirschhorn has probed in all three of his "monuments" to date, which take the form of makeshift

centers of homage, assembled with the help of local inhabitants, where discussions, readings, performances, and more casual encounters can occur.

The first monument, dedicated to Baruch Spinoza, was set in the red-light district of Amsterdam, in 1999; the second, to Gilles Deleuze, was located in a mostly North African quarter of Avignon, France, in 2000; and the third, to Georges Bataille, was placed in a largely Turkish neighborhood in Kassel, in 2002; a fourth, the last, dedicated to Antonio Gramsci, is planned for Queens, New York, in 2012. This practice of "the precarious as a real form" has also guided Hirschhorn in his other projects, such as his *Musée Précaire Albinet*, set in the Aubervilliers banlieue of Paris, in 2004, and his *Bijlmer-Spinoza Festival*, located in the Bijlmer project of Amsterdam, in 2009.

What does this precarious practice entail? "The truth can only be touched in art in hazardous, contradictory, and hidden encounters," Hirschhorn asserted in a text for his 2006 installation *Restore Now*. This suggests a first principle, an actual sharing in the conditions of social risk lived by a precariat in a particular situation; to this end, Hirschhorn has sometimes adopted the guise of a squatter on-site (in effect, he also "squats" the work of the artists, writers, and philosophers chosen for his altars, kiosks, and monuments). "In order to reach this moment I have to be present and I have to be awake," Hirschhorn continues. "I have to *stand up*, I have to face the world, the reality, the time and I have to risk myself. That is the beauty in precariousness." Alert to the Deleuzian caveat about "the indignity of speaking for others," Hirschhorn does not stand in

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place of a precariat; rather, he insists, in an essay for *Musée Précaire Albinet*, he wants "to engage [in] dialogue with the other without neutralizing him."

In fact, Hirschhorn does not always seek solidarity with this precariat, for such solidarity might only come of a forced union of very different parties. To the benign community imagined by relational aesthetics, he counters with the principle of "Presence and Production," which names his double commitment to be present on the site where he produces his work and acknowledges that the result might be antagonism with residents as much as fellowship. In this way, Hirschhorn updates the argument in "Author as Producer" (1934), where Benjamin finds the political use-value of a work less in the attitude of its content than in the import of its production.

PRECARIOUS DERIVES, THE OED tells us, "from the Latin *precarius*, obtained by entreaty, depending on the favor of another, hence uncertain, precarious, from *precem*, prayer." This defi-

nition underscores that this state of insecurity is a constructed one, engineered by a regime of power on whose favor the precariat depends and which it can only petition. This means that to act out the precari-

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF THE PRECARIOUS SHADES INTO THE ETHICAL.

ous, as Hirschhorn often does, is not only to evoke its perilous and privative effects but also to intimate how and why they are produced, and so to implicate the authority that imposes this "revocable tolerance," as his sometime collaborator, the French poet Manuel Joseph, defines *précarité*. The note of entreaty lodged in the word "precarious" is strong in many Hirschhorn projects, where it often also carries the force of accusation.

Here the political dimension of the precarious shades into the ethical. "To give a form to the precarious," Hirschhorn comments in his 2009 essay "Théâtre précaire

pour 'Ce qui vient'," is to attest to "the fragility of life," awareness of which "compels me to be awakened, to be present, to be attentive, to be open; it compels me to be active." In "Precarious Life" (2004), her brief essay on Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler writes in a similar vein: "In some way we come to exist in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails." Here Butler explores the notion of "the face," which Levinas posed as the very image of "the extreme precariousness of the other." To respond to a face and to understand its meaning, Butler argues, "means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself." This is the face often put forward by the precarious art of Hirschhorn, who refuses to turn away. ☞

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