

# Art of the Possible

FULVIA CARNEVALE AND JOHN KELSEY IN CONVERSATION WITH JACQUES RANCIÈRE



Chris Marker, untitled (Paris, April 2006), black-and-white digital image, dimensions variable. From the series "The Revenge of the Eye," 2006.



that make up forms of political subjectivization and artistic invention. So I reexamined the dividing lines between the modern and postmodern, demonstrating, for example, that “abstract painting” was invented not as a manifestation of art’s autonomy but in the context of a way of thinking of art as a fabricator of forms of life, that the intermingling of high art and popular culture was not a discovery of the 1960s but at the heart of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Nevertheless, what interests me more than politics or art is the way the boundaries defining certain practices as artistic or political are drawn and redrawn. This frees artistic and political creativity from the yoke of the great historical schemata that announce the great revolutions to come or that mourn the great revolutions past only to impose their proscriptions and their declarations of powerlessness on the present.

**CARNEVALE:** Has your work been received differently by the philosophical public, as it were, than by the contemporary art audience?

**RANCIÈRE:** Personally, I don’t speak for philosophers. I don’t speak for the members of a particular body or discipline. I write to shatter the boundaries that separate specialists—of philosophy, art, social sciences, etc. I write for those who are also trying to tear down the walls between specialties and competences. This was the case with certain philosophers in the ’60s and ’70s, but it isn’t the case today, and it is generally not what academia promotes. On the other hand, the contemporary art world may be more receptive, because contemporary art is, quintessentially, art defined by the erasure of medium specificity, indeed by the erasure of the visibility of art as a distinct practice. So what I have tried to theorize, under the name of the aesthetic regime of art, is the general form of this paradox wherein art was defined and institutionalized as a sphere of common experience at the very moment that the boundaries between what is and isn’t art were being erased. Moreover, if my work has garnered special interest in contemporary art, it may be because I have tried to create a little breathing room with respect to the established divisions between modernity, the end of modernity, postmodernity, and so on. By complicating those relationships, by reestablishing an element of indeterminacy in the relationship between artistic production and political subjectivization, I have tried to free artists, curators, and other actors implicated in this world from the atmosphere of guilt wrought by the historical mission of art—a mission at which it would necessarily fail—or, alternatively, from a utopia of art that would have led to totalitarianism.

**JOHN KELSEY:** And was your idea of “equality”—the notion of the equality of intelligences that you put forward in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [*Le*

**FULVIA CARNEVALE:** Your work has taken a very particular trajectory. It starts with archival research on workers’ struggles and the utopias of the nineteenth century and ends up in the field of contemporary art, aesthetics, and cinema. Do you see ruptures or continuity on your philosophical path?

**JACQUES RANCIÈRE:** I’m not a philosopher who has gone from politics to aesthetics, from liberation movements of the past to contemporary art. I have always sought to contest globalizing thought that relies on the presupposition of a historical necessity. In the 1970s I conducted research in early-nineteenth-century workers’ archives\* because the May ’68 movement had highlighted the gap between Marxist theory and the complex history of the actual forms of workers’ emancipation. I did it to counter the return to Marxist dogmatism on the one hand and, on the other, the liquidation of the very thought of workers’ emancipation in the guise of a critique of Marxism. Later I weighed in on questions of contemporary art, because the interpretation of twentieth-century art movements also found itself implicated in this manipulation of history. Contemporary art was taken hostage in the operation of the “end of utopias,” caught between so-called postmodern discourse, which proclaimed the “end of grand narratives,” and the reversal of modernism itself, as modernist thinkers ended up polemicizing against modernism, ultimately condemning emancipatory art’s utopias and their contribution to totalitarianism. It’s always the same process: using defined periods and great historical ruptures to impose interdictions. Against this, my work has been the same, whether dealing with labor’s past or art’s present: to break down the great divisions—science and ideology, high culture and popular culture, representation and the unrepresentable, the modern and the postmodern, etc.—to contrast so-called historical necessity with a topography of the configuration of possibilities, a perception of the multiple alterations and displacements





This page: Jeremy Deller, *Battle of Orgreave*, 2001. Performance view, Orgreave, England, 2001. Opposite page, from top: Josephine Meckseper, *Aviso*, 2006, aluminum, mirror, Plexiglas, lights, glassware, scouring pad, glass ball, feather duster, metal stand, plastic frame, paper, lace, Aviso sign, jewelry, and acrylic painted hand sculpture, 89 x 46 x 18". Jean-Luc Moulène, *Objets de grève, la poêle des 17 de Manufrance*, 1999–2000, color photograph, 14 3/16 x 18 1/2".

*Maître ignorant* (1987)]—a means of moving between early modern revolutionary discourses and the open question of subjective emancipation through contemporary art practices today?

**RANCIÈRE:** The very idea of Art—of the aesthetic experience—as defining a specific sphere of experience was born in the late eighteenth century under the banner of equality: the equality of all subjects, the definition of a form of judgment freed from the hierarchies of knowledge and those of social life. This equality that Kant, Schiller, and Hegel spoke of is neither equality in a general sense nor the equality of revolutionary movements. It is a certain sort of equality, a certain form of the neutralization of hierarchies that in other respects govern sensible existence. This aesthetic equality mingled with or confronted others. The idea of the equality of intelligences—which I borrowed from Joseph Jacotot, an early-nineteenth-century university professor whose largely forgotten educational philosophy inspired *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*—is a criterion that allows us to test the various thoughts and practices that lay claim to equality. It is clear, from this point of view, that art in and of itself is not liberating; it either is or isn't depending on the type of capacity it sets in motion, on the extent to which its nature is shareable or universalizable. For example, emancipation can't be expected from forms of art that presuppose the imbecility of the viewer while anticipating their precise effect on that viewer: for example, exhibitions

that capitalize on the denunciation of the "society of the spectacle" or of "consumer society"—bugbears that have already been denounced a hundred times—or those that want to make viewers "active" at all costs with the help of various gadgets borrowed from advertising, a desire predicated on the presupposition that the spectator is otherwise necessarily rendered "passive" solely by virtue of his looking. An art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops *wanting* to emancipate us.

**CARNEVALE:** Let's return to the question of aesthetics and politics, terms paired with increasing frequency of late and with which your work is so closely associated. How did this odd couple become so fashionable?

**RANCIÈRE:** It's not a question of fashion. It represents a shift in the traditional formulation of the relationship between art and politics. In the time of politically engaged art, when critical models were clearly agreed upon, we took art and politics as two well-defined things, each in its own corner. But at the same time, we presupposed a trouble-free passage between an artistic mode of presentation and the determination to act; that is, we believed that the "raised consciousness" engendered by art—by the strangeness of an artistic form—would provoke political action. The artist



who presented the hidden contradictions of capitalism would mobilize minds and bodies for the struggle. The deduction was unsound, but that didn't matter so long as the explanatory schemata and the actual social movements were strong enough to anticipate its effects. That is no longer the case today. And the passage to the pairing of "aesthetics and politics" is a way of taking this into account: We no longer think of art as one independent sphere and politics as another, necessitating a privileged mediation between the two—a "critical awakening" or "raised consciousness." Instead, an artistic intervention can be political by modifying the visible, the ways of perceiving it and expressing it, of experiencing it as tolerable or intolerable. The effect of this modification is consequent on its articulation with other modifications in the fabric of the sensible. That's what "aesthetics" means: A work of art is defined as such by belonging to a certain regime of identification, a certain distribution of the visible, the sayable, and the possible. Politics, meanwhile, has an aesthetic dimension: It is a common landscape of the given and the possible, a changing landscape and not a series of acts that are the consequence of "forms of consciousness" acquired elsewhere. "Aesthetics" designates this interface. But this interface also signifies the loss of any relationship of cause and effect between "representations" considered artistic and "engagements" considered political. At the heart of what I call the aesthetic regime of art is the loss of any determinate relationship between a work and its audience, between its sensible presence and an effect that will be its natural end. Now we must examine the very terrain of the sensible on which artistic gestures shake up our modes of perception and on which political gestures redefine our capacities for action. I am neither a historian of art nor a philosopher of politics, but I work on this question: What landscape can one describe as the meeting place between artistic practice and political practice?

**CARNEVALE:** We have a diagnosis you might not agree with: As soon as there are political subjects that disappear from the field of actual politics, that become obsolete through a number of historical processes, they are recuperated in iconic form in contemporary art. Many contemporary artists and curators seem to share, for example, a certain nostalgia for the countercultures of earlier generations. We are thinking of all the things centered around the labor movement, for instance, not only in the work of Jeremy Deller but also in that of plenty of other artists who use this sort of iconic code—Rirkrit Tiravanija, Sam Durant, Paul Chan. How do you explain this process? Is it a delayed reaction of contemporary art in relation to the present or is it a form of absorption?

**RANCIÈRE:** We have to go beyond too simple a relationship between past and present, reality and icon. Your question presupposes a certain idea of the present: It accredits the idea that the working class has disappeared, that we can therefore speak of it nostalgically or in terms of kitsch imagery. Artists might reply that this is a vision borrowed from the dominant imagery of the moment and that, furthermore, the reexamination of the past is part of the construction of the present. The question then is whether by reconstructing a strike from the Thatcher era, Jeremy Deller is proposing a break in relation to the dominant imagery of a world where there would otherwise be nothing but high-tech virtuosos or the occasional amused glance at the past, which is complicit with this vision. The retrospective glance at the counterculture of the past in fact covers two problems: first, the relationship to the militant culture of the years of revolt, which is not necessarily nostalgic. It is, rather, acidic in the work of Sam Durant, for example, to say nothing of the work of Josephine Meckseper, who tries to show protest culture as a form of youth fashion. Second, the relationship to popular culture, which seems to me to be the object of a new mutation. In the era of Pop art and the Nouveaux Réalistes, we gladly used popular "bad taste" to destabilize "high culture." Martin Parr's photographs of kitsch follow in this tradition. But there is a more positive attempt today to give form to a continuity between artistic creativity and the forms of creativity manifested in objects and behaviors that testify to everyone's capacities and to our inherent powers of resistance. Works like Jean-Luc Moulène's photographic series *Objets de grève* [Strike Objects, 1999–2000] or the installation *Menschen Dinge* [The Human Aspect of Objects, 2005] created at the Buchenwald Memorial by Esther Shalev-Gerz around objects repurposed and refashioned by detainees of the camp are just two examples—examples that suit my argument perhaps too well. In any case, this way of relating to popular culture or to countercultures from the point of view of the capacities they set in motion and not the images they convey seems to me to be the real political issue of the present.

**KELSEY:** Or maybe contemporary art is the official scene now. We could argue that many artists today promote the belief that certain modes of resistance are now obsolete. But in what ways do you see contemporary artists opening this question of the constitution of our world? Do any examples come to mind?

**RANCIÈRE:** I would rather talk about dissensus than resistance. Dissensus is a modification of the coordinates of the sensible, a spectacle or a tonality that replaces another. Sophie Ristelhueber photographs



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and some legal threats, everything is relatively quiet. In any case, there are other stages on which to practice and verify equality. Art, for instance. This is not to suggest that all art is equally good, or bad, or meaningful, or political. Rather that, in practice (in my practice, anyway), both the visible and invisible materials used to make work are all equidistant from becoming either form or content in the process of making. The wordless shivers I feel from a

## Liberty is not given; it is taken. This is one of the many lessons of Jacques Rancière.

sentence by Pauline Réage rub against a ripped piece of black pastel paper and the metallic blue light of a video projector without a hierarchy having determined in advance which elements entering the compositional space ought to bear the heavy burden of meaning. The work works when all the constituent elements are equally tense and it becomes an apparition that hovers between our space and the space of its own making, enunciating without speaking the unsolved antagonisms of reality in the only language it knows: the syntax arising from immanent problems of form.

That is practice. But how do we verify, following Rancière, the efficacy of our practice? How do we test the work so that we know it is something made that has become more than something simply made? If we use Rancière as a departure point, perhaps a confrontation is in order. That is to say, the place to verify the practice of equality in the pursuit of a form of freedom (which seems to me like a pleasing if wonky definition of art) might well be a confrontation with a force of order that divides and partitions the ghostly whole back into measured forms of understanding and consumption. If the work is indeed a work, it will resist this partitioning at every turn and claim for itself the autonomy that can come only from the practice of imagining the presence of this now not-so-secret equality in every line, shape, color, and sound. Confronted with such a presence, the police order that longs to divide in order to own can only blush: out of frustration, out of confusion, perhaps even out of fear. But tell me—honestly—when was the last time you blushed looking at art? □

PAUL CHAN IS A NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST.

barricades on Palestinian roads. But she doesn't photograph the great concrete wall that petrifies the gaze. She photographs from a distance, from above, the little handmade barricades made of piled stone, which look like rock slides in the middle of a tranquil landscape. That's one way of keeping one's distance from the shopworn affect of indignation and instead exploring the political resources of a more discreet affect—curiosity. Alfredo Jaar made an installation about the massacres in Rwanda, but he didn't show the bodies. He showed the eyes of a woman in which the spectacle of the massacre had been fixed, or the consoling gestures of two children. Pedro Costa made three films—*Ossos* [1997], *In Vanda's Room* [2000], and *Colossal Youth* [2006]—concerning the fate of a group of marginalized drug addicts in a slum in Lisbon. In *Vanda's Room* bulldozers can be heard throughout the film demolishing the neighborhood. Costa tries to highlight all the sources of beauty concealed within this miserable world, all the capacities of speech and thought that exist in these drifters, who shuttle between odd jobs and drug use. In this way, he blurs the established relationships between the popular and the noble, between documentary and fiction. These are a few examples—not models to imitate but illustrations of what “dissensus” might signify: a way of reconstructing the relationship between places and identities, spectacles and gazes, proximities and distances. When asked about the relationship between the necessities of engagement and the risks of escape, Paul Chan spoke of an “empathetic estrangement,” referring to Brecht. As for me, I would speak of a lightening, an alleviation, rather than a distancing. The problem, first of all, is to create some breathing room, to loosen the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility, bodies within an estimation of their capacity, and possibility within the machine that makes the “state of things” seem evident, unquestionable.

**KELSEY:** Hybrid forms, “open works,” multimedia, multitasking, “relational aesthetics,” artists who also write or curate, etc., not to mention positioning all these new forms and behaviors within traveling group shows—these are some of the contemporary, “democratic” means by which competences and specificities are redistributed in the art world today. But it's not so easy to locate the point at which this kind of mobilization of activities becomes challenging to the existing order or its need for shows.



Sophie Ristelhueber, *WB #7*, 2005, color photograph mounted on aluminum, 47 1/4 x 59". From the series "WB," 2005.



**RANCIÈRE:** Radical challenges to the existing order don't depend solely on artists. But in fact the precincts of art lend themselves more readily today than other fields to a redistribution of roles, which is to say, to a redistribution of competences as well. The artist and his productions move between several statuses. The precincts of art are visited by populations that construct their own pathways through the art and appropriate artists' work according to their own needs. Disparate and polymorphous artists, like the militant-student-professor-artist-curator, elaborate circuits and logics that divert or reroute the simple institutional and market circuit. And we must not limit the precincts of art to galleries, museums, and fairs, which are only the most visible venues: There are also art schools, which train both the favored artists of tomorrow and the activists of altermondialism; there are forums for the discussion and presentation of work, research projects and fieldwork financed by various institutions; there are activist artists who live in squats, actors who work as social educators, parallel circuits of musicians, video makers, and Internet artists developing all over the place. This is a world in search of something, a world that asks what it means to make art today and therefore

crossbreeds competences, combining media—photography, text, video, drawing—a world that puts the status of art alongside precarious forms of freelance work rather than in the great activist tradition and that therefore is also less sensitive to the nihilism that has afflicted the intellectual class. This “multimediality,” this uncertain circulation between craft and activism, may engender a certain amount of uncertainty or naïveté. But it is also the terrain of political reflection and debate—a bit more tonic than that found on the official political stage. And one cannot confuse it with the commotion of the great multimedia spectacle or with the market's need for “spectacle.” The “needs” of the market fluctuate, and today it seems to be betting on “the return of painting” over the development of hybrid forms. The idea of emancipation implies that there are never places that impose their law, that there are always several spaces in a space, several ways of occupying it, and each time the trick is knowing what sort of capacities one is setting in motion, what sort of world one is constructing.

**KELSEY:** I would say that no matter how nonspecific their practices or the products they make, all artists today still have a very specific job to do. The professional artist's task is to



This page: Pedro Costa, *Juventude em marcha* (Colossal Youth), 2006, still from a color video, 155 minutes. Ventura. Opposite page, from top: Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (detail), 1996, light table, slides, slide magnifiers, and light text on wall, dimensions variable. Walid Raad, *I Only Wish That I Could Weep*, 1998, still from a color video, 7 minutes 35 seconds.



produce and circulate values as efficiently as possible. Art fairs and museums demand this professionalism. So I guess this is a question about the specificity of art as a profession. . . .

**RANCIÈRE:** Yes, but precisely “to produce and circulate values” does not in and of itself define a profession. There are many ways to produce value and many professional competences that fail to produce it. If we shift our gaze from the darlings of the art market, we see that an artist today makes several types of work and has several types of income. In this respect he is closer to the general condition of labor. The movement of freelance artists and entertainment-industry workers in France translates this mixed reality well. We do not live in a world defined by a single law. The practices that give rise to commodification also define the cross circuits and modes of appropriation with respect to market circulation.

**CARNEVALE:** In any case, it's not a question of extracting oneself from market circulation. Does anyone still believe in the search for exteriority in relation to the commodity today? Antonio Negri, for example, argues precisely that there is no possibility of standing outside the market, and through this Marxist reading he concludes that transformation therefore must arise from within capitalism itself. But in any case, there is no true outside. Do you believe that an aesthetic practice that critiques and subverts the becoming-merchandise of art is still possible?

**RANCIÈRE:** To ask, How can one escape the market? is one of those questions whose principal virtue is one's pleasure in declaring it insoluble. Money is necessary to make art; to make a living you have to sell the fruits of your labor. So art is a market, and there's no getting around it. For artists as for everyone else, there's the problem of knowing where to plant one's feet, of knowing what one is doing in a particular place, in a particular system of exchange. One must find ways to create other places, or other uses for places. But one must extricate this project from the dramatic alternatives expressed in questions like, How do we escape the market, subvert it, etc.? If anyone knows how to overthrow capitalism, why don't they just start doing it? But critics of the market are content to rest their own authority on the endless demonstration that everyone else is naive or a profiteer; in short, they capitalize on the declaration of our powerlessness. The critique of the market today has become a morose reassessment that, contrary to its stated aims, serves to forestall the emancipation of minds and practices. And it ends up sounding not dissimilar to reactionary discourse. These critics of the market call for subversion only to declare it impossible and to abandon all hope for emancipation. For me, the fundamental question is to explore the possibility of maintaining spaces of play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus—that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, and competences. Godard said ironically that the epic was for Israelis and the documentary for Palestinians. Which is to say that the distribution of genres—for example, the division between the freedom of fiction and the reality of the news—is always already a distribution of possibilities and capacities: To say that, in the dominant regime of representation, documentary is for the Palestinians is to say that they can only offer the bodies of their victims to the gaze of news cameras or to the compassionate gaze at their suffering. That is, the world is divided between those who can and those who cannot afford the luxury of playing with words and images. Subversion begins when this division is contested, as when a Palestinian filmmaker like Elia Suleiman makes a comedy about the daily repression and humiliation that Israeli checkpoints represent and transforms a young Palestinian resistance fighter into a manga character. Think also of the work of Lebanese artists like Walid Raad, Khalil Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas, Tony Chakar, Lamia Joreige, and Jalal Toufic, who, through their films, installations, and performances, blur the interplay between fact and fiction to establish a new relationship to the civil war and to the occupation, by way of the subjective gaze or the fictive inquiry, making “fictional archives” of the war, fictionalizing the *détournement* of a surveillance camera to film a sunset, or playing with the sounds of mortar shells and fireworks, and so on. This very constructed, at times playful, relationship to their history addresses a spectator whose interpretive and emotional capacity is not only acknowledged but called upon. In other words, the work is constructed in such a way that it is up to the spectator to interpret it and to react to it affectively.



For me, the fundamental question is to explore the possibility for play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus—that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, competences.







A political declaration or manifestation, like an artistic form, is an arrangement of words, a montage of gestures, an occupation of spaces. In both cases what is produced is a modification of the fabric of the sensible, a transformation of the visible given, intensities, names that one can give to things, the landscape of the possible.



From top: Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988, porcelain, 42 x 70 1/2 x 32 1/2". © Jeff Koons. Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades, *Shit Plug*, 2002, glass bottles filled with feces and baby oil, stainless steel closures, on plastic containers. Installation view, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich. Photo: A. Burger.

**CARNEVALE:** In "The Emancipated Spectator," a talk you gave in Frankfurt in 2004 [see pages 270–71 for the complete text], you say that emancipation "begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection." That is, of course, linked to this idea of the distribution of the sensible, but how does this type of looking that you are describing now allow us to disengage from various types of actions through other processes of subjectivization or through the transformation of objects? Do you see this more as a process of subjectivization or as a materialist process of action on the environment?

**RANCIÈRE:** I am trying to reexamine the idea that certain types of material arrangements have automatic effects in terms of subjectivization or, on the contrary, political alienation. For example, one condition typically thought necessary for the politicization of art is the becoming-active of the spectator. This way of thinking already implies a judgment—namely, that to be a spectator means to be passive. But to look and to listen requires the work of attention, selection, reappropriation, a way of making one's own film, one's own text, one's own installation out of what the artist has presented. What artists and curators present are places where one circulates differently between things, images, and words; there are tempos, a slow pace, a pause; there are arrangements of signs, a bringing together of distant things, schisms within united things. We should not simply ask how representations will translate into reality. Artistic forms are not purely subjective while political acts are objective realities. A political declaration or manifestation, like an artistic form, is an arrangement of words, a montage of gestures, an occupation of spaces. In both cases what is produced is a modification of the fabric of the sensible, a transformation of the visible given, intensities, names that one can give to things, the landscape of the possible. What truly distinguishes political actions is that these operations are the acts of a collective subject offering itself as a representative of everyone, and of the capacity of everyone. This type of creativity is specific, but it is based on modifications to the fabric of the sensible, produced in particular by artistic reconfigurations of space and time, forms and meanings. In any case, a process of subjectivization is certainly a "materialist process of action on the environment."

**KELSEY:** You use the word *police* to identify all the social and political forces that constantly try to keep things, activities, and people in their proper places. Police is whatever impedes the crossing of boundaries and disciplines. But doesn't it sometimes

seem that in our times "police" might describe instead the forces that demand and facilitate constant circulation, that promote the efficiency of a boundary crossing that no longer produces problems for the existing order? A circulation where nothing really moves? In any case, some might say these are the conditions under which contemporary art attempts to define and think itself.

**RANCIÈRE:** There are two questions. One has to do with the concept of the police in general, the other with the way one might describe the forms of power currently at work in our societies. I myself say that the catchphrase of the police is "Move along! There's nothing to see." The police define the configuration of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible through a systematic production of the given, not through spectacular strategies of control and repression. Which also means that policing is exerted through all sorts of channels in the social body as well as through the managerial organisms of the state and the market. That said, your question refers to the somewhat too easily accepted thesis that today everything is becoming liquid; that soon the only thing capitalism will produce is life experiences for narcissistic consumers; and that the state's only function will be to usher in the great flood. One has even read—in Zygmunt Bauman's writings, for example—hallucinatory declarations that states now restrain themselves from any will to military expansion and control, and that while they may sometimes send "smart" missiles discreetly over populations, that is only to open the floodgates wide to new "fluid, global, and liquid" powers. Frankly, the people of the Middle East would be happy if that were true, and undocumented immigrants would be really happy if the police "obliged" them to cross borders en masse. The truth is that we live in a world of absolutely material things produced by forms of work that are closer to sweatshop labor than to high-tech virtuosity. In this world, the borders are as solid as the inequalities, and, until there's proof to the contrary, the United States doesn't envision tearing down its wall but adding a thousand miles to it. The truth is, above all, that the police order is always at once a system of circulation and a system of borders. And the practice of dissensus is always a practice that both crosses the boundaries and stops traffic. In this sense, there is a whole school of so-called critical thought and art that, despite its oppositional rhetoric, is entirely integrated within the space of consensus. I'm thinking of all those works that pretend to reveal to us the omnipotence of market flows, the reign of the spectacle, the pornography of power. I think of the statufication of media icons à la Jeff Koons's *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* [1988]. I think of Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades's spectacular





This page: Chantal Akerman, *De l'autre côté* (From the Other Side), 2002, still from a color film in 35 mm, 102 minutes. Opposite page, from top: Chris Marker, untitled (Paris, April 2006), black-and-white digital image, dimensions variable. From the series "The Revenge of the Eye," 2006. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Blast Furnaces 1970–1995*, 2005, twelve black-and-white photographs, 66 3/4 x 73".

2002 installation *Shit Plug*, which placed the excrement of visitors to Documenta 11 in containers to show us the gigantic waste of the society of the spectacle and to reveal the participation of art in the empire of merchandise and spectacle. I think of all these recycled objects mixed with advertising imagery, quotations of social-realist imagery, fairy tales, and video games that go from fair to fair, to the four corners of the world. If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point, it's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle, etc. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation. The work of dissensus is to always reexamine the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical. That is what I was just saying about Pedro Costa's films. I was also thinking of the portfolio of images by Chris Marker published recently in these pages ["The Revenge of the Eye," *Artforum*, Summer 2006]—pictures of French students in the spring of 2006 protesting against a law that would have made working conditions for young people less secure. By proceeding in two modes, through filming and through manipulated screen captures from the video footage, Marker created a sort of fabulous population out of groups of real protesters. I'm thinking in particular of an image of a group of young people in hooded sweatshirts. During the riots in the Parisian *banlieue* in the fall of 2005, these hoods, covering the heads of Arab and black youth, became a stigma: They were compared both to terrorists' masks and to Muslim girls' veils. The hoods became the symbol of a population locked up inside its own idiocy. Now,

in "The Revenge of the Eye," they transform the young people into medieval monks, bringing to mind Saint Francis's companions in Rossellini's film. The protestors become a "fabulous" population in Deleuze's sense. It's as if the capacity of art brought to bear on the figures were actually a property of the figures themselves. That's an example of a reversal of perspective. And I think what art can do is always a matter of the reversal of perspectives. Police consists in saying: Here is the definition of subversive art. Politics, on the other hand, says: No, there is no subversive form of art in and of itself; there is a sort of permanent guerrilla war being waged to define the potentialities of forms of art and the political potentialities of anyone at all.

**KELSEY:** When I saw those Chris Marker images, I immediately thought of police surveillance methods. Identifying individuals in a crowd of demonstrators, isolating their faces—it's a similar technique.

**RANCIÈRE:** It's not a technique for identifying individuals. It's a tactic for blurring identities. The ambition here isn't to locate individuals but to blur roles, to extricate characters from their documentary identity in order to give them a fictional or legendary cast.

**KELSEY:** Speaking of surfaces, you have described the modernist surface as a paratactical space, or a site of exchange, where language, images, and actions collide and transform one another. In a hyperactive world of surfaces, can we still say that the surface is a public or common space? Or would you say that the nature of the surface has changed in the meantime?

**RANCIÈRE:** Contrary to the modernist thesis, the surface has not been a boundary, isolating the purity of an art, but, rather, a place of slippage between various spaces. Mallarmé gives a persuasive example of this when he defines dance as a form of writing on the surface of the floor and seeks to transpose this choreographic writing to the written page. The great artistic effervescence that



modernism wanted to bend to its paradigm of separation was on the contrary determined by this slippage of surfaces from one to another: the page, the canvas, the musical score, the dance floor. Today the “surface” has a bad reputation: The Marxist critical tradition that called for seizing the reality hitherto concealed from us morphed, by way of Debord and Baudrillard, into the idea that there is nothing behind the surface, that it is the place where all things are equivalent, where everything is equivalent with its image, and every image with its own lie. Thus the dogmatism of the hidden truth has become the nihilism of the ubiquitous lie of the market. And suddenly we valorize all these installations that monumentalize the screen or place it in a dark cube and thus allow us to uncover its lie once again. But the media screen is not flat. The anchorman who occupies its surface ceaselessly reports on the depth of a world that he unfolds and refolds, a “profound” world that testifies to him and that he confiscates. Critical pretension then risks constructing a space homologous to that of the consensual police. On the other hand, surfaces of cinematic projection in theaters or museums might exert a critical function with respect to the depth of the media, by returning the image to the fragility of its surface and letting it linger over fragments of the world and discourse about the world where conflict and injustice take time to appear and express themselves. I think of the time that a filmmaker like Chantal Akerman takes to glide along the wall of a Mexican border in her film *De l'autre côté* [From the Other Side, 2002] or to allow the discourse of those who want to leave and the discourse of those who are defending their space against them to unfold. Here the screen performs a separating function that maintains the border in question precisely, the border that, by crossing it constantly, the to-and-fro of information makes disappear. The flattening of the surface takes on the function of a divide. It's not an overwhelming subversion. But the politics of aesthetics involves a multiplicity of small ruptures, of small shifts, that refuse the blackmail of radical subversion.

**KELSEY:** And of course the surface is now also completely integrated into the space of work. When we work, which is to say, when we communicate, we are mostly sliding on these surfaces.

**RANCIÈRE:** There again we must relativize the idea that everything has become immaterial, that work is nothing but screens, and that screens are a surface of slippage, etc. I don't have a lot of sympathy for Santiago Sierra's actions, but when

he pays immigrant workers minimum wage to dig their own graves or to get tattoos that signify their condition, he reminds us at least that the “equivalence” of an hour of work and its effect on the body is not the so-called equivalence of everything that slides across a screen. The screen is neither Big Brother nor a network of collective intelligence representing the power of the “multitudes.” A screen is not so much a surface of reproduction as the site of a construction, not a mere surface of equivalence on which we slip but a place where a process of transformation occurs. The problem lies in knowing what types of surfaces to construct in order to disrupt the normal functioning of surfaces and depths. What happens in video projections that cast a spectacle of solitude on the white walls of museums—as in the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, say—or of everyday misery, as in that of Gillian Wearing? If we change the dimensions, if we go from the TV screen to three images simultaneously projected on the walls of a room, will we disrupt the logic of the production of the everyday? That remains to be seen, but in any case the surface, like the image, is not the amorphous destiny of things—it's a process of art that changes the coordinates of the given.

**KELSEY:** Video installations tend to reproduce the everyday activity of window-shopping. I rarely feel emancipated in a video installation.

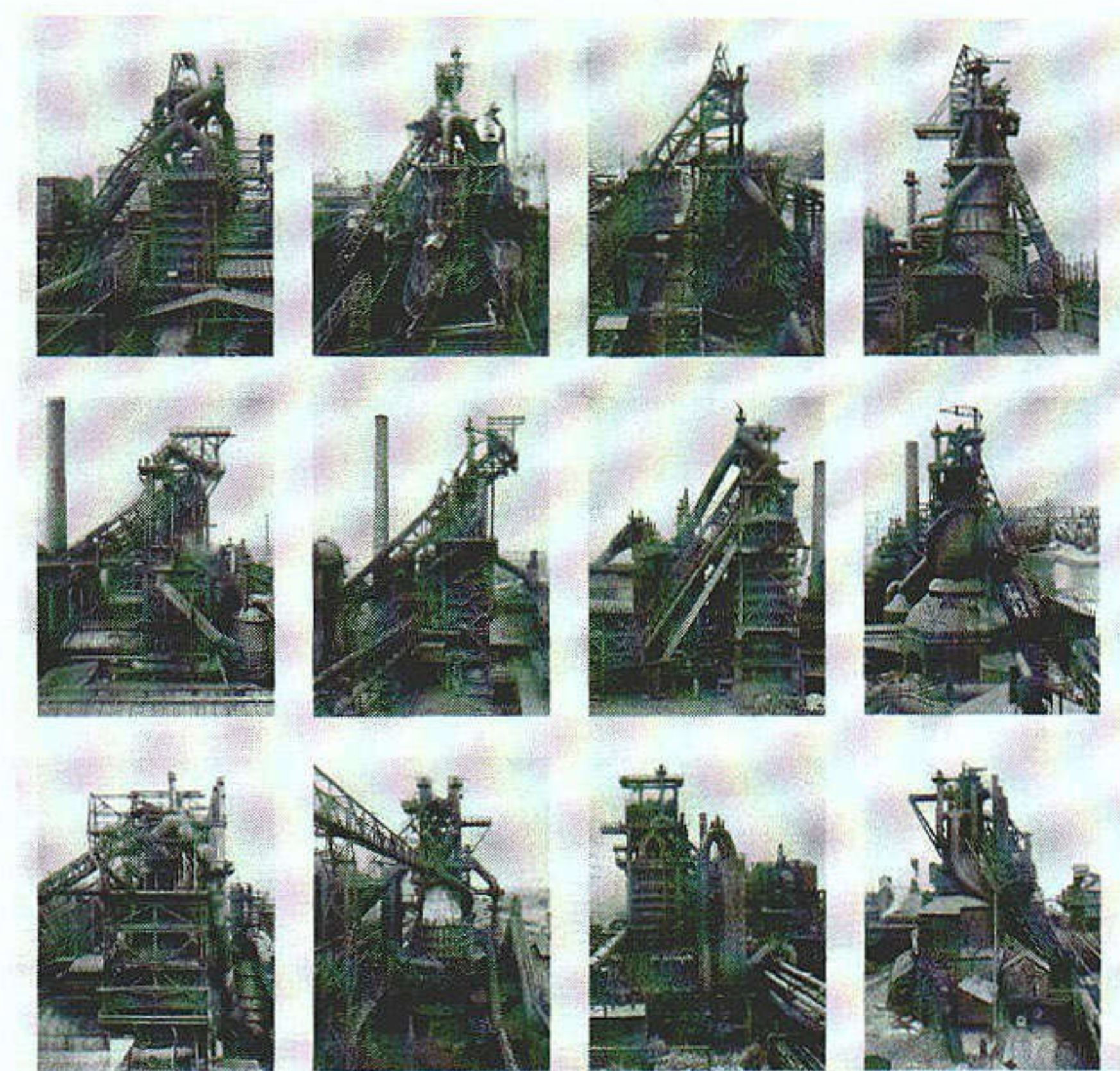
**RANCIÈRE:** There is no reason to be emancipated by a video installation. But we must refuse the logic that says the video projection, the TV screen, and the shopwindow are the same thing. No surface produces emancipation in and of itself. The problem is to define a way of looking that doesn't preempt the gaze of the spectator. It's true for spectacular installations, but it's also true for the photographs of blast furnaces or of warehouses and shipping containers that anticipate a new objective gaze as a product of objective framing against blank backgrounds. We cannot escape the slippages of the surface and the gaze. Emancipation is the possibility of a spectator's gaze other than the one that was programmed. This goes for the critical artist as well as for the window dresser.

**CARNEVALE:** So, another question about the surface: Can one properly receive a reflection on all these themes inscribed in a space that is half-filled with ads for galleries and half-filled with articles that serve to sell what is being shown in the galleries?

**RANCIÈRE:** We have to refuse the false choice between “collaboration or exodus” demanded by contemporary thinkers like Paolo Virno. There



If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point, it's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation.





are, no doubt, artists in search of intellectual legitimacy, curators and gallery directors who think it's good for sales to organize panel discussions at art fairs or to publish theoretical texts in magazines that promote the artists on the market. There are also artists and curators who think it's necessary to subvert the status quo from within the institutions and the market. This creates mixed spaces where people interested in the "latest" art and those interested in the subversion of the existing order can meet. In any case, the art market today passes through these places of speech and thought, which it does not really dominate. The question then becomes, What can we do there? I am doing this interview for *Artforum*, where it will appear among ads for galleries, just as I spoke two years ago at the Frieze Art Fair, where, as at all fairs, there were galleries selling their wares, but also visitors who constructed their own pathways through the labyrinth of merchandise—young artists, freelance curators, directors of alternative institutions, who came looking for ideas or to share experiences. This defines a particular circle in the circle of circles that make up the fair, one of these indeterminate spaces whose own possibilities can be amplified. I try to say what seems true to me and what I think might be useful in structuring this space of discussion. At Frieze, I participated in a forum on "Art, Politics, and Popularity." For me, it was an occasion to reflect on the kinship or distance between two notions of popularity: one tied to the idea of serving a popular cause and the other tied to the idea of satisfying a broad public. In certain art institutions, there is a

tendency to equate the two, to give political value to the types of exhibitions that, by installing a lot of fun installations in a post-Pop style, are likely to attract the "outer-borough youth" and therefore to produce a positive political effect. At Frieze there were a lot of discussions about all this with artists, critics, and curators. As to the effect that might have, that's the affair of those who listen to me or read me and who decide on the power to accord my words. Emancipation is also knowing that one cannot place one's thinking into other people's heads, that one cannot anticipate its effect. I've said what I've had to say, and people will make of it what they will.

**KELSEY:** Did you give them good ammunition?

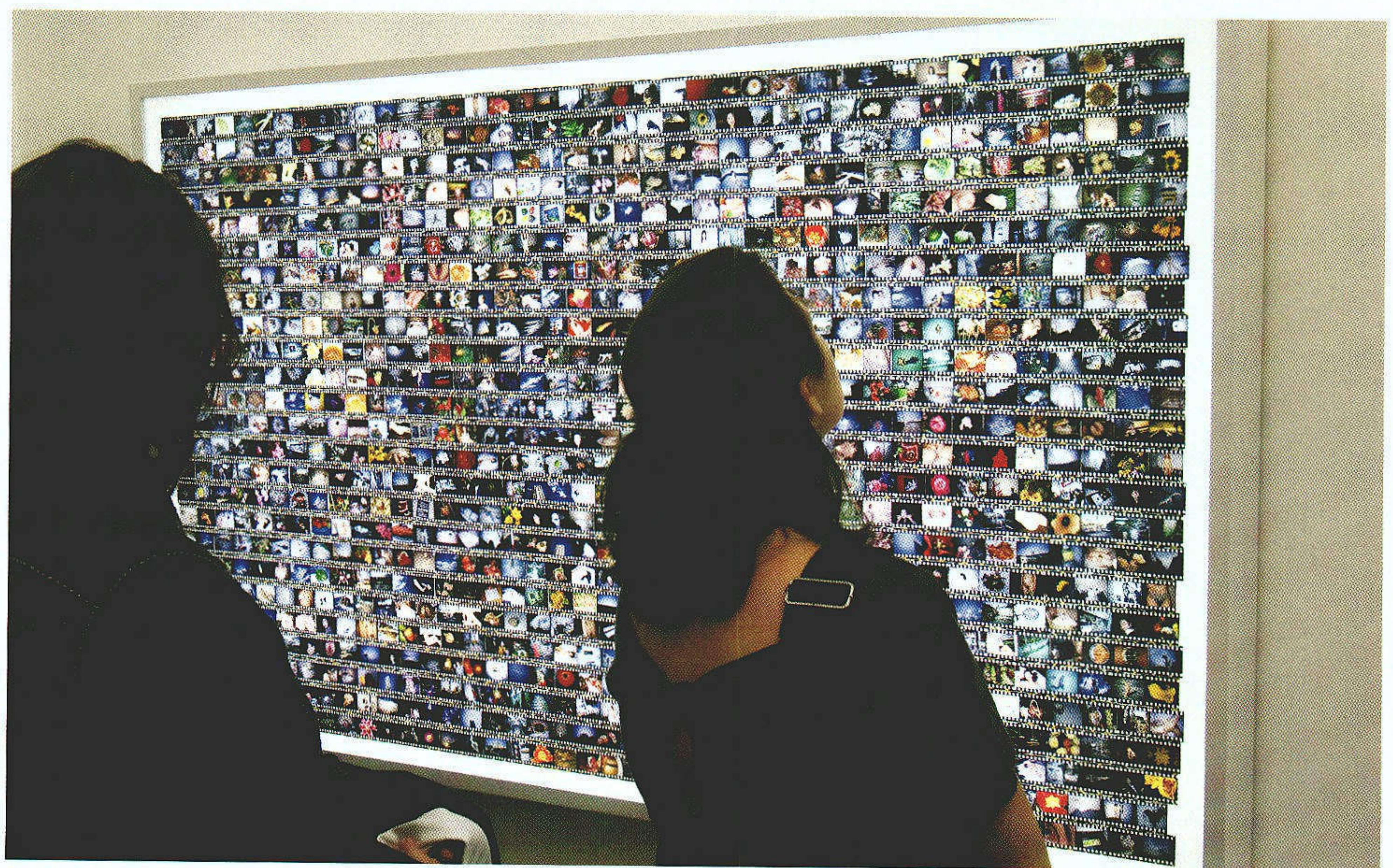
**RANCIÈRE:** I don't have any silver bullets. There aren't any, in any case. My role is not to supply weapons but to help invent other criteria for reflecting on the works of art, methods, and types of diagnostics that constitute art's present. I never say what should be done or how to do it. I try to redraw the map of the thinkable in order to bring out the impossibilities and prohibitions that are often lodged at the very heart of thought that imagines itself to be subversive. □

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*Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.*

\* See Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).



Frieze Art Fair attendees viewing artwork by Nobuyoshi Araki, October 2006. Photo: Mark Beachell.