

## Restaging the Revolution: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Question of Collective Action

Alan Sikes

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” So claims Karl Marx in the last line of his “Theses on Feuerbach.”<sup>1</sup> With this dictum Marx sets the stage for the historical unfolding of an international communist movement, a movement that Marx will crucially characterize in terms of collective action: “WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” Marx exhorts in the final line of “The Communist Manifesto.”<sup>2</sup> As such movements made their appearance on the horizon of global politics, however, subsequent Marxist artists and critics debated not only the fruitful possibilities, but also the potentially dire consequences invested in collective political action. In the article that follows, I want to trace a single strand of these debates, focusing particularly on the legacy of the Frankfurt School and its shifting commentary on the relations between political action and artistic practice. The frontispiece to my argument invokes the works of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht; writing in the shadow of the Second World War, both authors promote the use of art to foster revolutionary political programs—the former with his view of history as a cycle of catastrophe requiring collective action for its cessation, the latter with his *Lehrstücke* or “Learning Plays” presented to promote such action. The centerpiece of my argument examines the work of Theodor Adorno and Heiner Müller, who chronicle the abuse of revolutionary fervor after the descent of the Iron Curtain over Europe; both voice suspicion over the call to collectivity endorsed by politically engaged art, a reticence that appears to preclude the employment of art in any collective political program. As an afterpiece to my argument, however, I note that the end of the Cold War and the ensuing triumph of global capital demands a reconception of art and politics—a project that acquires a new urgency now that the cycle of catastrophe theorized by Benjamin visits violence on first and third worlds alike; I look to the World Wide Web—a virtual terrain nurtured by global capital itself—as a site for an intersection of art and politics that maintains the possibility of collective action even under the regime of the New World Order.

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In his famous 1940 text “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin describes the course of history as an eternal recurrence of disaster; writing during his exile in Paris after the Nazi seizure of power in his native Germany, Benjamin responds to the rise of Fascism in Europe by opining that this cycle of catastrophe will end only through a form of revolutionary messianic intervention, a divinely inspired insight into earthly affairs that will rend the fabric of history and thereby incite the proletariat to collective action. Contrary to the common notion of history as a series of steps toward the progressive perfection of civilization, Benjamin views history as an endless repetition of atrocities: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.”<sup>3</sup> The task of the historian, therefore, is to rescue the fleeting moments of the past before they fall victim to the illusion of historical progress: “The past,” claims Benjamin, “can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”<sup>4</sup> For Benjamin, this seizure of the past—itsself characteristic of the divine view of history—offers the only chance to expose history as eternal recurrence, to shock the masses out of their complacency and inspire them to create a future free of domination: “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action.”<sup>5</sup>

Like Benjamin, the playwright Bertolt Brecht also advocated the incitement of the masses to collective action; his *Lehrstücke* or “Learning Plays” were designed to provide the proletariat with a flash of insight into the past and thus with a new vision of the future. To be sure, the *Lehrstücke* were written in a more optimistic era than the “Theses” of Benjamin: the former was composed shortly before the suicide of its author during the Nazi occupation of France and reads as a desperate attempt to preserve hope in revolutionary action; the former, however, were composed during the heady days of the Weimar Republic, when such action appeared imminent and artists like Brecht oriented their works to revolutionary ends. In the 1930 *Lehrstück The Measures Taken*, for instance, Brecht champions collective political activity over the limited action available to the individual; here the death of a young Party worker is depicted as a sacrifice for the glorious revolution to come. The play takes place before a Party Tribunal—an adjudicating body portrayed by a Chorus of performers. As the play begins, four Party Agitators step forward and announce to the Tribunal that they have murdered a comrade in arms and tossed his body into a lime pit; the Agitators implore the Tribunal to forgive their crime, and the play unfolds as they relate the events that led to the murder. The Agitators begin their story with their arrival in the Chinese city of Mukden, where they were assigned to foment rebellion by educating the masses in the teachings of Communism. A youthful supporter of the revolution, called the Young Comrade in the text, agrees to serve as their guide, but before the group begins

their operations they are urged by the local Party Leader to hide their identities—an action indicated in performance by the donning of masks. The Agitators, therefore, sacrifice their individuality to the revolution; as the Party Leader informs the Agitators: “You are not Karl Schmitt from Berlin, you are not Anna Kjersk from Kazan, and you are not Peter Sawitch from Moscow. All of you are nameless and motherless, blank pages on which the Revolution writes its instructions.”<sup>6</sup>

As the Agitators commence their activities, however, they realize that the Young Comrade cannot view his fellow countrymen as “nameless and motherless” figures in a larger collective. The Comrade thus commits a series of rash actions designed to alleviate individual suffering; such actions, however, merely threaten to expose the Agitators, who spirit the Young Comrade from the city. At last concluding that their only hope to escape detection is to shoot their Comrade, the Agitators ask their companion to consent to his own death—to sacrifice himself for the revolution. The Young Comrade agrees to his execution, and in the final scene of the play the Agitators justify their actions to the Tribunal:

IT IS A FEARSOME THING TO KILL  
 But we will kill ourselves and not just others if necessary  
 Since only by force can this dying world be changed  
 As every living man knows.  
 It is not granted to us, we said,  
 Not to kill.  
 At one with the inflexible will to change the world  
 We formulated  
 The measures to be taken.<sup>7</sup>

As the play draws to an end, the Tribunal delivers its verdict and exonerates the Agitators of their deeds; as the Chorus comments, the death of a single individual—however lamentable—cannot be allowed to impede the impending revolution:

Your work was successful  
 You have spread  
 The teachings of the classics  
 The ABC of communism:  
 To the ignorant, instruction about their situation  
 To the oppressed, class consciousness  
 And to the class conscious, the experience of revolution.  
 In yet another country the revolution advances  
 In another land the ranks of fighters are joined  
 We agree to what you have done.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Measures Taken*, then, Brecht advocates collective political action even if such action results in the death of individual subjects; only through the mobilization of the masses will the anticipated revolution take place. Significantly, such faith in the efficacy of collective action is suggested not only in the plays of Brecht, but also in the commentary on his plays by Benjamin, an ardent supporter of his work. In his 1939 essay "What is Epic Theatre?" Benjamin details a number of Brecht's theatrical innovations, all of which are geared toward the promotion of collective political action among the audience. Perhaps the foremost effect of epic style is the evocation of a certain "surprise" or "shock" within the spectators—shock at the fact that oppressive social circumstances, usually taken for granted, continue to exist to the present day: "The art of epic theatre consists in producing astonishment rather than empathy. To put it succinctly: instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function."<sup>9</sup> This shock to the system exposes history as a cycle of catastrophe, one that will incite the individual to break the cycle through revolutionary activity. Significantly, however, according to Benjamin this individual awakening always entailed participation in collective action; observing that viewers of the *Lehrstücke* frequently played roles in the productions, Benjamin remarks that this participation was designed to instill a collective spirit among the spectators. Benjamin comments further upon this participatory theatre by noting its effects upon the performance space. For Benjamin, the orchestra pit that separates the performer from the spectator has become an abyss that prevents audience participation; epic theatre strives to eliminate this barrier: "This abyss, of all elements of theatre the one that bears the most indelible traces of its ritual origin, has steadily decreased in significance. The stage is still raised, but it no longer rises from an infathomable depth; it has become a dais. The didactic play and the epic theatre are attempts to sit down on a dais."<sup>10</sup>

By the time Benjamin composed his "Epic Theatre" essay in 1939, however, the hopes for an imminent revolution had been dashed—at least in Germany; the advent of the Second World War confirmed his view of history as an eternal recurrence of disaster, a theme likewise elaborated by his Frankfurt School colleagues Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their landmark 1944 text *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Like Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer place their faith in a flash of inspiration that will illuminate history; crucially, however, the pair argue that the revolution it incites must be cognitive rather than political, for in their view any attempt at collective political action seemed doomed to collapse into the very barbarism it seeks to overcome. Adorno and Horkheimer define the enlightenment as the attempt of the individual to differentiate itself from the swampy morass of a nature that engulfs it; for this task the individual employs reason, which subjects nature to the force of will: "The system that the enlightenment has in mind is the form of knowledge which copes most proficiently with the facts and

supports the individual most effectively in the mastery of nature. Its principles are the principles of self-preservation."<sup>11</sup> Problems arise, however, when the dynamic force of reason freezes into static concepts; the instrumental application of such concepts promotes the collapse of subjects into a mass identification that perfectly replicates the morass of nature itself: "Everything—even the human individual, not to speak of the animal—is converted into a repeatable, replaceable process, into a mere example for the conceptual models of the system."<sup>12</sup> Thus rather than fostering a reconciliation of the subject with nature, the enlightenment project devolves into a series of despotic regimes that return the subject to a state of nature by subsuming the individual into a mass collective: "Through the mediation of the total society which embraces all relations and emotions, men are once again made to be that against which the evolutionary law of society, the principle of self, had turned: mere species beings, exactly like one another through isolation in forcibly united collectivity."<sup>13</sup>

Despite the gloomy tenor of their text, however, Adorno and Horkheimer preserve hope for a final rapprochement of individual and collective, which would occur not through the ossification of thought that collapses the former into the latter, but instead through renewed attention to the unfolding of thought that imbricates the former within the latter. This unfolding, in other words, would promote a continual movement of individual thought through collective cognitive structures, rather than its entropic decline into stasis with those structures. Such a movement would then precipitate a cognizance of history as a cycle of catastrophe, overturning ossified notions of historical progress that blind the subject to its total subsumption by the masses and thereby impede their mutual reconciliation. Such an overturning of history is evident in the 1970 Heiner Müller play *Mauser*, a reworking of *The Measures Taken* that exposes the betrayal of revolutionary action behind the Iron Curtain; here revolution is portrayed not as a glorious turning point in history, but instead as an endless reign of violence that enslaves the very subjects it attempts to liberate. Much like its antecedent, *Mauser* is dominated by a collective Chorus—in this case a Tribunal that sentences enemies of the Revolution to their deaths. As the play opens, the Chorus addresses its own executioner, who now ironically faces execution in his turn. This figure, identified only as "A" by the text, had assumed the role of executioner when the previous bearer of the title—called "B" by the text—objected to the performance of his office; as "B" remarks: "Why the killing and why the dying / If the price of the Revolution is the Revolution / Those to be freed the price of freedom?"<sup>14</sup> An ardent supporter of the Revolution, "A" is dispatched to execute "B" and inherits his office, yet for "A" as well a suspicion of barbarism soon arises from the scene of human suffering:

... I spoke the command  
This morning just as in the first morning

## DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION

And dispensed death, yet my voice  
Spoke the command like it wasn't my voice and my hand  
Dispensed death like it wasn't my hand.<sup>15</sup>

Chastised by the Tribunal for his anti-revolutionary sentiments, "A" returns to his grisly duties, but is eventually overwhelmed by the task at hand and mutilates the corpses in a frenzy of violence; the Tribunal notes:

After he had shot again and again  
Through the bursting skin into the bloody  
Flesh, at cracking bones, he voted  
with his feet against the corpse.<sup>16</sup>

The Tribunal condemns his actions, stating that the dignity of the individual—even an enemy of the revolution—constitutes the very presupposition of the revolution itself:

But when your hand became one with the revolver  
And you became one with your work  
And had lost any consciousness of it  
That it had to be done here and now  
So that it won't have to be done any more and by no one  
Your place at our front became a gap  
And no place for you at our front any longer.<sup>17</sup>

A cruel irony, therefore, emerges as the Tribunal upholds human dignity while simultaneously effacing it; bewildered by this paradox and its perpetuation of the regimen of violence, "A" at last consents to his death and even gives the signal for his own execution:

. . . and he didn't ask any more  
But went to the wall and spoke the command  
Knowing, the daily bread of the Revolution  
Is the death of its enemies, knowing even the grass  
We must tear up so it will stay green.  
DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION.<sup>18</sup>

Written a year after the death of Adorno in 1969, *Mauser* embodies his suspicion of collective action; indeed, the play seems to embody his engagement with contemporary art itself, particularly in its relation to political activity. For Adorno,

art appears as a crystallized moment of thought that, despite its frozen status, manages to gesture toward its freedom. Crucially, however, the use of art for specifically political ends tends to stifle this gesture. In his 1961 essay "Commitment," Adorno argues that any call to political action operates in a sphere of cognition at least implicitly endorsed by the prevailing political system; even the most subversive artworks are, therefore, complicit with the status quo. Adorno accordingly distrusts the projects of artists like Brecht, for such appeals to collective action involve an administration of individual thought that echoes the strategies of the current political regime. Specifically addressing *The Measures Taken*, Adorno claims that the justification of murder that it offers merely replicates the cycle of catastrophe initiated by the logic of capitalism—in this case applied to the very movement that attempts to dismantle it: "The wild roar of *The Measures Taken* drowns out the noise of the disaster that has overtaken the cause, which Brecht convulsively tries to proclaim as salvation. Even Brecht's best work was infected by the deceptions of his commitment."<sup>19</sup> Political investment, therefore, debases art, which in the overwhelmingly administered world of Cold War politics can maintain its integrity only by refusing to engage that world. To be sure, every artwork must make its appearance within the reality from which it seeks to distance itself, for every individual thought is always embedded within collective cognition. In seeking its freedom, however, the artwork signals the desire of the individual to refuse the lockstep of the collective; given the increasing administration of the world, this refusal preserves the only hope for an ultimate integration of individual and collective. For Adorno, then, a truly effective artwork promotes political freedom precisely by refusing any political program: "Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden 'it should be otherwise.' . . . As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, including literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life."<sup>20</sup>

The contemporary art promoted by Adorno thus offers a challenge to the ossification of thought through attention to its potential for unfolding; such artworks provide an alternative to those manufactured under totalitarian regimes, which grant the subject a specious sense of liberation even as they guide that subject to blind acceptance of its domination. Certainly with *Mauser*, Müller condemns such ossification of thought, suggesting that the GDR regime, ostensibly devoted to freeing the subject from its enslavement by capital, has fallen victim to the same instrumentality that plagues capitalism itself; here revolution has collapsed into eternal recurrence of domination, and thus its promise of liberation is endlessly deferred.<sup>21</sup> This deferral is perhaps best embodied by the consent of "A" to his own execution; the ossification of thought that transforms liberation into domination is made manifest when "A" relinquishes his individual existence and willingly joins the collective ranks of the slaughtered dead. Curiously, however, despite its cautionary content, *Mauser* itself seems to risk falling into ossification, specifically

through its reference to the *Lehrstücke* form. In a series of stage directions that accompany the play, Müller notes that any viable production of *Mauser* requires the participation of its spectators: "Performance for an audience is possible if the audience is invited to control the performance by its text, and the text by its performance, through reading the Chorus part, or the part of the First Player ("A"), or if the Chorus is read by one group of spectators and the First Player by another group of spectators."<sup>22</sup> With *Mauser*, then, Müller recalls not only the narrative content of *The Measures Taken*, but also its participatory form—the same form that Brecht used to incite viewers to mass political action. At first glance, therefore, the text seems to war against itself, as the communal spirit that it fosters contradicts the very warning that it issues.

Müller adds a twist to the audience participation employed by Brecht, however, for this participation appears to signal not a subsumption of the individual into the collective, but on the contrary a desire to refuse such subsumption. Müller continues his stage directions by remarking that audience participation must be predicated on "the non-synchronism of text and performance, the non-identity of speaker and performer."<sup>23</sup> In other words, Müller recommends a certain doubling of the several roles in the text, with one participant speaking the lines of a given role and another doubling that role through embodied gesture. Crucially, these doublings suggest a shifting relationship between the individual figure "A" and the collective Chorus; the Chorus may double "A" or, conversely, "A" may double the Chorus. Müller, in fact, lists several strategies for achieving this doubling effect: "The Chorus provides to the First Performer ("A") for certain speeches a performer of the First Performer ("A1"); all Chorus performers either at once or one after another perform the part of the First Performer; the First Performer speaks certain segments of the Chorus speeches while "A1" performs his role."<sup>24</sup> This oscillating position of the individual vis-à-vis the collective Chorus suggests the desire of the single subject to escape the gravitational pull of the masses—its continuing search for freedom of voice, freedom of action, freedom of thought. Thus even in its depiction of history as a cycle of catastrophe, *Mauser* encapsulates the desire for the liberation of thought, one that maintains hope for the ultimate rapprochement of individual and collective; here thought would appear not as a series of static concepts that inevitably propel the subject into mindless mass identity, but as a dynamic unfolding that signals the mutual imbrication of the subject and the greater social structure.

Thus while *Mauser* depicts the deadly effects of ossified thought, it also invokes the radical potential of its continual unfolding, preserving the political promise of *The Measures Taken* and the entire *Lehrstücke* tradition by overturning its basic presuppositions. Such an approach to art is in fact advocated by Adorno himself. In his essay "On Tradition," Adorno argues that a play like *Mauser* may carve out a free space for thought on the basis of its critical relation to an earlier artistic tradition. Adorno identifies a polarizing tendency in twentieth-century artistic

production vis-à-vis the traditions of the past: while some artists and critics align themselves with tradition in the name of eternal or absolute values, others depart from tradition in favor of movements that spring, as it were, from the head of Zeus. For Adorno, both of these positions merely reinforce the power of the status quo, for both necessitate an irresponsible form of forgetting. On the one hand, the deliberate rejection or forgetting of tradition is commensurate with the forgetting of past injustices—an unconscionable crime. On the other hand, however, the rigid adherence to tradition also enacts a form of forgetting, for the mere reiteration of the past inevitably effaces the painful memories embedded in it: “To insist on the absolute absence of tradition is as naive as the obstinate insistence on it. Both are ignorant of the past that persists in their allegedly pure relation to objects; both are unaware of the dust and debris that clouds their allegedly clear vision.”<sup>25</sup>

As opposed to either of these two approaches, Adorno maintains that a conscious negation of tradition is the only means to preserve its insight into the past for use in the amelioration of the present. For Adorno, the artwork must paradoxically refute tradition as a rigidified relic of the status quo, while simultaneously referencing that tradition as the very source of its emergence; as Adorno states in the conclusion to his essay: “Whoever seeks to avoid betraying the bliss which tradition still promises in some of its images and the possibilities buried beneath its ruins must abandon that tradition which turns possibilities and meanings into lies. Only that which inexorably denies tradition may once again retrieve it.”<sup>26</sup> Following Adorno, I would argue that *Mauser* attempts to recapture the blissful promise of its antecedent by relinquishing that promise the moment that its fulfillment is revealed as a failure. In other words, the element of hope within the text emerges from its simultaneous thematization and problematization of tradition; the play provides a fleeting glimpse of the utopian revolutionary moment, even as that moment emerges from the dystopian vision of ongoing revolutionary calamity. *Mauser* thus upholds the valuable insight of Adorno and Horkheimer that the eternal recurrence of history is apprehended only through the continual unfolding of thought itself. In overturning the history of revolution, *Mauser* likewise suggests an overturning of the history of thought; only this could do justice to the tradition of revolution it has inherited.

Adorno, to be sure, wrote most of his important texts at the height of the Cold War, and his response to the global battle of ideology was to promote a freedom of thought that could resist rigidified political positions. Significantly, however, the end of the Cold War and the seeming triumph of capitalism suggests that the time is ripe to rethink this response; while the collapse of Soviet power spurred democratic advances in some parts of the globe, the political domination and economic exploitation of the Third World by the First has continued unchallenged by systematic international resistance. What political program could recognize that the triumph of capital precipitates another turn in the cycle of catastrophe, and

how could it preserve the hope for revolution? Of course, Adorno refused to advocate any political program, arguing that individual freedom is degraded by the collective structure of political action. Recalling his own reflections on tradition, however, I maintain that the most effective way to uphold the legacy of Adorno is through a revolutionary overturning of his precepts. Might one conceive a political program that actually promotes individual freedom within its collective structure, and how might art participate in this program? The radical art collective Critical Art Ensemble or CAE has recently addressed such questions; like Adorno, CAE endorses an art that preserves individual freedom, but unlike Adorno CAE does not seek the isolation of art from the political sphere.<sup>27</sup> CAE argues that art can no longer be viewed as a crystallization of thought that somehow gestures toward its liberation; for CAE, no such crystallized thought could contain this gesture, for global capital now monumentalizes every work of art by assigning it a position within its code of value: "In the end, monuments, even ones created with radical intentions, reinforce the status quo by reinforcing the audiences' disposition for visual ingestion of rigid codes and stereotypes."<sup>28</sup> CAE thus views art not as a crystallized moment of thought but as the unfolding of thought itself, and the freedom of thought it promises lies not in a refusal of politics, but in an always shifting engagement with politics. Calling its shifting practice nomad art, CAE observes that "the voice of the nomadic cultural worker insinuates itself into a given situation at a given moment, only to dissipate in the next."<sup>29</sup> Nomad art, therefore, posits a space of individual freedom that exists both within and without the collective structure, and it is within this space that the possibility exists for dynamic artistic action: "Nomadic action occurs in the spatial cracks that separate the forces of micromanagement, and in the temporal gaps between autonomous action and punishment, because it is in this liminal location where the possibility for dialogic cultural action is found."<sup>30</sup>

This new vision of art as nomadic action suggests a search for a new field of resistant artistic practice; while such a field is never free from complicity with the regime of capital, it nonetheless offers occasion to call attention to the contradictions lodged within the regime itself. The World Wide Web, for instance, may seem an unlikely venue for resistant art, given its thorough imbrication in the networks of global capital. Recently, however, a widely circulated exchange between Nike Corporation and an individual consumer demonstrated how such an exchange could constitute not only a form of resistant political practice, but also a form of nomad art; a closer examination of the exchange will reveal both its political and artistic implications. Nike offers an online service called NIKE iD that allows consumers to personalize their shoes through the addition of a word or phrase stitched underneath the Nike corporate logo. Jonah Peretti, a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wished to utilize this service to call attention to forgotten labor invested in the production of Nike products; Peretti sent the

requisite \$50 for the service and requested that Nike add the word “sweatshop” to his pair of shoes. Nike quickly responded with an email refusing Perretti’s request:

Your NIKE iD order was cancelled for one of the following reasons:

- 1) Your Personal iD contains another party’s trademark or other intellectual property.
- 2) Your personal iD contains the name of an athlete or team we do not have the legal right to use.
- 3) Your Personal iD was left blank. Did you not want any personalization?
- 4) Your Personal iD contains profanity or inappropriate slang, and besides, your mother would slap us.<sup>31</sup>

Undeterred, Perretti replied to Nike by refuting the four reasons given for the cancellation of his order. The email from Perretti reads, in part, as follows:

The Personal iD on my custom ZOOM XC USA running shoes was the word “sweatshop.” Sweatshop is not:

- 1) Another party’s trademark,
- 2) The name of an athlete,
- 3) Blank, or
- 4) Profanity.

I chose the iD because I wanted to remember the toil and labor of the children that made my shoes. Could you please ship them to me immediately?<sup>32</sup>

Increasingly anxious to justify the refusal of Perretti’s request, Nike responded by noting that “your NIKE iD order was cancelled because the iD you have chosen contains, as stated in the previous email correspondence, inappropriate slang.”<sup>33</sup> Again, Perretti replied by refuting the argument offered by Nike. His email read, in part: “After consulting Webster’s Dictionary, I discovered that ‘sweatshop’ is in fact part of standard English, and not slang. The word means: ‘a shop or factory in which workers are employed for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions’ and its origin dates from 1892.”<sup>34</sup>

Nike was finally forced to invoke the legal jargon installed upon its website, presumably placed there for exigencies like these; the final response from Nike cites its own “rules for personalization” to the effect that “Nike reserves the right to cancel any personal iD up to 24 hours after it has been submitted.”<sup>35</sup> The email then notes that some iD requests “may contain material that we consider inappropriate or simply do not wish to place on our products,” then concludes with

a bald refusal of Perretti's request: "With these rules in mind, we cannot accept your order as submitted. If you wish to reorder your NIKE iD product with a new personalization, please visit us again at [www.nike.com](http://www.nike.com)."<sup>36</sup> As an ironic capstone to the exchange, Perretti at last concedes defeat, only to make another "inappropriate" addition to his order: "Thank you for the time and energy you have spent on my request. I have decided to order shoes with a different iD, but I would like to make one small request. Could you please send me a color snapshot of the ten year old Vietnamese girl who makes my shoes?"<sup>37</sup>

Realizing that his encounter with Nike usefully exposed the deliberate obfuscation of its corporate labor practices, Perretti forwarded the email exchange to his circle of friends; each friend in turn forwarded the exchange to others, and soon the story traversed the globe, reaching untold numbers of readers through networks of email correspondence. As a student of Media Studies, Perretti himself is able to offer an astute analysis of the email exchange, its global dissemination, and its political repercussions. In an April 9, 2001 article for *The Nation*, Perretti notes that while giant corporations like Nike exploit powerful mass media outlets to promote their products, micromedia outlets such as email networks are in fact capable of challenging corporate promotional strategies: "It takes so little effort for each person to pass the message to multiple recipients that an idea can almost seem to be spreading on its own, like a self-replicating virus."<sup>38</sup> Moreover, these email exchanges not only constitute forms of political practice, but forms of nomad art as well, inasmuch as they maintain a space of individual freedom within a collective structure. Consider that a recipient of the Perretti email may decide to contact Nike in order to request a similarly subversive personal iD. Here, there is a danger that such acts may congeal into a mass response that resembles the mass marketing strategy it seeks to overturn; if all recipients requested the "sweatshop" logo, the request would lose its force. The format of the exchange, however, allows the activities it engenders to proliferate in multiple and unanticipated ways, enabling recipients to stage individual interventions under the aegis of a collective response: Each recipient, for instance, may request a different logo from Nike and thereby challenge any evasive maneuver the company makes. Perretti, therefore, concludes his article by noting the disruptive potential of such responses. Indeed, the activities promoted by the article may suggest a new conception of revolutionary action itself: "The dynamics of decentralized distribution systems and peer to peer networks are as counterintuitive as they are powerful. By understanding these dynamics, new forms of social protest become possible, with the potential to challenge some of the constellations of power traditionally supported by the mass media."<sup>39</sup>

What forms might this reconceived revolutionary action take? Crucially, this action would not promote a rigidly ideological, political program that tends to subsume individuals into a mindless collective. Nor would this action preserve individual freedom by eschewing collective political programs altogether. Rather,

revolutionary action would consist of shifting political struggles that seek the liberation of the individual within the collective sphere itself. Meanwhile, those artists and critics aligned with the new revolutionary project can take a history lesson from their forebears, maintaining the revolutionary promise of their work by overturning their basic presuppositions. This revolutionary art would not be the art of Brecht and Benjamin—a flash of individual inspiration that incites a collective turning point in history. Neither would it be the art of Müller and Adorno—a crystallization of individual thought that refuses the collective lockstep of the masses. The work of Perretti and CAE, however, goes some distance toward conceiving a new revolutionary art, one that will embody the unfolding of thought in an ongoing process at once individual and collective. The processual nature of this art will encourage the overturning of ossified views of history as progress or development, allowing art to resist regimes of domination while also resisting a fall into the very strategies of domination that it challenges. Such an art, to be sure, would respond to the political demands of the day and will inevitably fall into obsolescence in its turn. Yet it would seem to offer an alternative to the new jingoism of the United States and the rest of the developed world as it faces the recent escalation of global terrorist attacks. Here history indeed appears as eternal recurrence, the cyclical eruptions of violence representing the repercussions of foreign policies predicated on manipulation and strong arm tactics. Against this backdrop of global exploitation, on the one hand, and the threat of global terror, on the other, I argue that the need for new forms of revolutionary artistic and political practice have attained a new urgency. While the dream of such a practice seems dim indeed, I maintain that the ability to “think otherwise” holds hope for a future in which we may “live otherwise,” a future founded upon the continued freedom of thought itself.

#### Notes

1. Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 145.

2. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 500.

3. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 257.

4. 257

5. 261

6. Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken, The Jewish Wife and Other Short Plays*, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove, 1965) 81.

7. 107.

8. 108.

9. Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?" *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 150.

10. 154.

11. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1999) 83.

12. 84.

13. 36.

14. Heiner Müller, *Mauser: The Battle: Plays, Prose, Poems*, trans. Carl Weber (New York: PAJ Publications, 1989) 125.

15. 126.

16. 129.

17. 131.

18. 132.

19. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. and ed. Ronald Taylor (London: NLB, 1977) 187.

20. 194.

21. The failed promise of revolution and the desubjectification attendant on it is the topic of other texts by Müller as well. For instance, the very title of his play *Hamletmachine* (trans. Carl Weber, [New York: PAJ Publications, 1983]) suggests the mechanization and, therefore, the dehumanization of the most famous subject in the history of Western drama. In *Hamletmachine*, the erstwhile heir to the Danish throne makes his first appearance at the funeral of his father. But how can Hamlet—a representative of the state apparatus—ever lay claim to his own identity within a political structure that thoroughly evacuates any depth of meaning from its figureheads? Indeed, the text opens with Hamlet's confirmation of his own demise: "I was Hamlet. I stood at the shore and talked with the surf BLABLA, the ruins of Europe in back of me. The bells tolled the state-funeral, murderer and widow a couple, the councillors goose-stepping behind the high ranking carcass's coffin, bawling with badly paid grief" (53). Later, the actor who plays Hamlet refuses his role entirely, the truth content of his role having been reduced to shadow play upon the stage: "I'm not Hamlet. I don't take part anymore. My words have nothing to tell me anymore. My thoughts suck the blood out of the images. My drama doesn't happen anymore" (56). Crucially, Müller suggests that the communist revolution, which promised the final liberation of the subject, has fallen victim to the same instrumentalizing impulse that characterizes the capitalist world. In such a scenario, the revolutionary moment has collapsed into the eternal recurrence of catastrophe, again inhibiting the potential invested in collective action. Even the scenery seems a mocking tribute to the hollow victory of revolution, as the actor formerly known as Hamlet notes: "The set is a monument. It presents a man who made history, enlarged a hundred times. The petrification of a hope. His name is interchangeable, the hope has not been fulfilled" (56).

22. Müller, *Mauser* 133.

23. 133.

24. 133.

25. Theodor Adorno, "On Tradition," *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought* 94 (1993-94): 78.

26. 82.

27. In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997]), Adorno concedes that art, at least in its current conception, faces imminent extinction. Adorno reiterates his assertion that contemporary art can only preserve hope for a rapprochement of individual and collective by refusing any program that promises this hope; any such promise, maintains Adorno, will fall prey to the administration of thought: "That art enunciates the disaster by identifying with it anticipates its enervation; this, not any photograph of disaster or false happiness, defines the attitude of authentic contemporary art to a radically darkened objectivity. . . ." (19). Adorno wonders, however, if art can survive the negation it imposes on itself; commenting upon the quandary faced by aesthetics upon the threatened demise of art, Adorno remarks that "aesthetics is compelled to drag its concepts helplessly behind a situation of art in which art, indifferent to what becomes of it, seeks to undermine those concepts without which it can hardly be conceived" (339). Seeking a more optimistic outlook for the role of art in a changed political landscape, I argue not the death of art, but its reconception; rather than a frozen product open to immediate commodification, this reconceived art appears as a shifting process that resists commodification even as it is implicated within the commodity regime.

28. Critical Art Ensemble, "Resisting the Bunker," *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (New York: Autonomedia 1996) 49.

29. 49.

30. 51.

31. Email exchange between Nike Corporation (nikeid\_personalize@nike.com) and Jonah Perretti (peretti@media.mit.edu), Jan. 2001, received from Tamara Underiner (under009@tc.umn.edu) 1.

32. 1.

33. 2.

34. 2.

35. 2.

36. 3.

37. 3.

38. Jonah Perretti, "My Nike Media Adventure," *The Nation* 9 April 2001: 19.

39. 22.

[The following text is extremely faint and illegible due to low contrast and scan quality. It appears to be a list of references or a table of contents, possibly including names like "Brecht", "Grotowski", and "Artaud".]

## PRAXIS

