

“THE IMAGINARY SPACE OF THE WISHFUL OTHER: THOMAS HIRSCHHORN’S CARDBOARD UTOPIAS”

A text by
Rachel Haïdu

Paper given at USS conference, Porto, 8 July 2004

To arrive at Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Musée Précaire Albinet*, one takes Paris’s fast train to its first stop outside the city: La Plaine/Stade de France, the site of Paris’s soccer stadium. When you exit the station, you find a few arrows cut from unpainted wood attached to signposts. They are the first sign that we are in Hirschhorn-land, where a defiantly casual graphic style belies an extraordinary outlay of planning and development. The arrows, citing merely the words “Musée Précaire Albinet,” point you past a shantytown directly opposite the stadium. With no other explanation or advertisement for the uninformed, they give little guidance in what is sure to be an otherwise disorienting place.

Hirschhorn himself lives around the corner from the *Musée Précaire Albinet*, in Landy, a largely Malian, North African and white neighborhood of working and unemployed people. Whereas the artist likes the fact that his Museum’s distance from central Paris means that “there are not too many visitors,” many of his neighbors praise the manner in which the project, drawing outsiders, has shown these visitors that the neighborhood is neither as dangerous nor frightening as its reputation. They have written: “What the neighborhood lacks is an opening onto the outside. The museum will perhaps allow inhabitants to leave and see things elsewhere. Here two worlds coexist: the Stade de France with all its technology and the neighborhood of Landy which has stopped evolving.”¹

Up for eight weeks this spring and summer, the *Musée Précaire* project is simple in its essence. Two years ago, the



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Musée Précaire Albinet (construction)*, 2004. All photos by Evangéline Masson / Emilie Lamy

Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, a municipally-funded arts organization working within the larger Parisian suburb of which Landy is a small part, invited Hirschhorn to plan a project. He suggested a "museum", a structure that would be somewhat different from the monuments, altars, and pavilions he has been erecting in public spaces since the 1990s. Usually dedicated to a single figure, some of these prior public art projects have been built and manned collaboratively—that is, with the paid help of local communities. But none to date has served as a site for the exhibition of art, nor has any aimed so clearly to serve the community of its emplacement. This past April, the *Musée Précaire Albinet*, built and manned by Hirschhorn and the inhabitants of Landy, began an eight-week program of temporary exhibitions. With original works borrowed from France's public collections, the *Musée Précaire* features a different artist—Duchamp, Malevitch, Mondrian, Dali, Beuys, Le Corbusier, Warhol, and Léger—each week. Seven events rotate over the course of each week: Monday, the works from the previous weeks are taken down and the building refreshed; Tuesday, new works are picked up from their warehouses and installed in time for an opening with free food, drinks, and open-mic rap. Wednesday afternoons the French organization *La part de l'art* produces "ateliers d'enfants," in which neighborhood children observe aspects of an artist's work through related activities—such as making costumes inspired by Fernand Léger's paintings. Thursday afternoons, invited authors lead a writing studio for neighborhood adults; Friday evenings there is a public debate—on the subject of "Jews/Arabs," "Europe/USA," or "Literature/Drugs," for example—again led by an invited

speaker. Saturdays, an art historian lectures on that week's featured artist, and Sunday evenings a "communal meal," cooked by the women who also run the "buvette," is offered to the community and visitors. Almost all of the invited speakers at these events are women, re-marking the exclusively male selection of featured artists and underscoring the intersecting lines of interest, influence and annexation that art can invite.²

Hirschhorn gives a simple rationale for his museum's rigorous schedule: he wants his work to "produce" something daily. "It's not passive—a *patrimoine*: the works are here to develop an activity."³ The concept of the *patrimoine*—an aggregate of physical and non-physical "goods" *inherited by and belonging* to a person or a group, but most significantly allied with the state—is put very precisely into question by the *Musée Précaire*. The inhabitants of Landy are invited not to merely repossess art, to *see it in their own neighborhood*, to gain, however temporarily, a legacy usually denied them. Rather, they are invited to *run and man the institution in which this art can be seen*. It is they who built the *Musée Précaire*; who were trained in advance at the Centre Pompidou in security, handling and media exposure of works of art; who took over the *buvette* in order to make a little money from concessions.⁴ It is they who constructed and dismantled the museum, manned and guarded it, and shared, however hesitantly, responsibility for its "success," as was abundantly clear from their attitudes towards outside visitors. Thus one can imagine their *looking* at the works of art on display to be infused with an activated sense of collective participation. The labor

¹ The second volume of the "Journal des Laboratoires," a journal published by the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, contained a report written by seven teenagers of the Landy neighborhood. In *Le Journal des Laboratoires*, n°2, p.70.

² Two friends of Hirschhorn's, the authors Christophe Fiat and Manuel Joseph, invited the authors for the "Ateliers d'écriture". They wrote texts that were made available at the Musée Précaire to explain and perhaps advertise their choices, e.g.: "Sabine Prokhoris is invited to the MPA during the week of Le Corbusier to animate a writing workshop and a debate on the themes 'Utopias/ Ideologies' because Sabine Prokhoris 1. is a writer and a psychoanalyst. 2. has written a book entitled "Sex prescribed, sexual difference in question." 3. because Sabine Prokhoris works with dancers. 4. Because Sabine Prokhoris writes: "From masculine to feminine, for example, in the impulse that is imprinted on the extension of the body very slightly balanced on one leg, that is born from rising onto very high heels, very simply. And this arrives not thanks to the help and recourse furnished, even if in parody, by the panoply of genre—the solution of the drag queen—but by the simple feeling of a state of the body." 5. because Le Corbusier is also interested in the state of the body when he writes that a house is a machine to be inhabited and that a couch is a machine for sitting..."

³ Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn by the author, 9.6.2004.

⁴ A certain number of residents were invited to work in the "world of art" in various capacities in the months leading up to the Musée's opening: 11 youths worked at the Biennale of contemporary art at Lyon in September 2003; 3 assisted Hirschhorn in mounting his exhibition "Chalet Lost History" at the Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris in December 2003; and 6 completed a 7-week internship at Beaubourg on aspects of museum work including public relations, security, and art history.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Musée Précaire Albînet*, (inauguration of the Beuys week), 2004.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 228.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

they give to the Musée, paid and unpaid, and whatever they gain from it—even in simply sitting around its open-air *buvette*—enlarges the definition of their audience-hood, defines it as a solidly "participatory" kind of art-spectatorship, different from the placid acceptance of a *patrimoine* that is the usual mode of institutional spectatorship. But, one wants to ask, what is the significance of the fact that this participatory audience comes together in the form of an *institution*—however "precarious"? Does Hirschhorn's work outline a new role for "institutions" such as museums, and how does the *précarité* of his Musée indeed define that institutionality, set it apart from or align it with existing forms of institutionality?

Exactly sixty years ago in the course of a paper given in Paris at the Institute for Fascism entitled "The Artist as Producer," Walter Benjamin quoted his friend and chief muse, Bertolt Brecht: "...Certain works ought no longer to be individual experiences (have the character of works) but should, rather, concern the use (transformation) of certain institutes and institutions."⁵ The question of institutions thereby raised is left alone for the rest of the paper, in which Benjamin appears more concerned with what he calls the "techniques" of literary and artistic work. For my purposes today, I will dwell on this unexplained aspect of Benjamin's essay, the question of the role of institutions in defining artwork's relation to its spectators. Or, put alternatively, the role of the institution in

relegating the work of art to a more or less "autonomous" relation to society.

The fundamental point of *Artist as Producer* is that the techniques of the literary, theatrical, or artistic work of art must be taken up in enjoining the work's audiences to produce, *themselves* and also to "produce themselves"; to take up the means of ideological production and make them their own, thereby shifting their own position within society. The work thus functions not to create a mere sense of solidarity between the artist-author and his public, nor to "fill the public with feelings, even seditious ones," but rather to "alienate" that public "in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives."⁶

Thus, the reinvention of the means of production as techniques literally in the possession of the *spectator* becomes, for Benjamin, the only guarantee of the work's authenticity. And thereby is the field of production opened not only to new collaborators, but to new means of production that have been splintered apart from what Benjamin, qualifying Brecht, called "individual experiences (the character of *works*)." This—the beautiful ghost of a collective spectatorship rising from the ashes of "individual experience"—haunts the utopic adventures of many of the avant-gardes; it may be worth noting that it surfaces in the work of most of the artists featured at the Musée Précaire. Yet there is a clear distinction between



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Musée Précaire Albînet*, (set-up of the Duchamp exhibition), 2004.

the utopias designed by Malevitch and Mondrian, or even Beuys and Warhol, and that building up around Hirschhorn's *Musée Précaire*, and in that distinction lies perhaps the Musée's most Benjaminian aspect. In no case among the historical or neo-avantgardes was a collectivity so clearly marked as the very stakes of a project, not even in Warhol's rather dystopic Factory productions nor in Beuys's "Free Information Office" of 1972.⁷ This appeal to the community not as a site nor as "passive, silent entity,"⁸ but indeed as an force constantly called upon to re-charge itself, was to a large degree guaranteed by the "ephemerality" of the Musée itself.

Insisted upon by the rigor of the Musée's weekly schedule, this aspect of *précarité* is written all over its physical structure as well. Though it is essentially no more than a simple 3-room construction (of exhibition space, studio, and library) made of plywood planks, wood beams, nails and construction tape, the Musée is at the same time—like all of Hirschhorn's work—visually overwhelming. It is covered in graffiti, press, photos, and a superabundance of windows that let in light and also views of the housing development opposite and the grassy lot on both sides. The tags repeated over and over on its walls, as well as work-schedules posted in plain sight, repeatedly "sign" the Musée as "belonging" to the inhabitants of Landy that work and play in its structures. Even the massive amount of press coverage of the Musée photocopied and taped all over its walls are, as visitors from the

"outside" quickly realize, there for the benefit of the residents, who delight in finding themselves in the daily pages of the Parisian press. Fulfilling an apparently *wanton* desire for ornamentation, the Musée shows how its own architecture, apparently so simple and workmanlike, is transformed into ground for that ornamentation. This utterly Hirschhornian system, plays on the transparency of the Musée's walls: the plastic-covered windows let in views and light while serving as mirrors, for *some*.

These are the ways that the Musée appears to match up to Benjamin's utopic vision. A collective spectatorship's repossession of the means of production takes place as a consciousness of the limited time-frame of that repossession, which is in turn inscribed in its physical forms. Only thus (on amazingly contemporary terms⁹) does the collectivity prescribed by Hirschhorn's project participate in the generation of new means of cultural production and in so doing, realize its own defining contingency. That "contingency," it is worth noting, does not necessarily fit the dismal prognoses for immigrant populations in Paris as well as other Western (and Northern) capitals: it can be, as the Musée demonstrates, a space of elated discovery, not to say self-discovery. Yet the very ways that the project "fits" Benjamin's theory also demand investigation of the terms on which that theory survives, today. If the collectivity that Hirschhorn's project defines is one that aligns itself so completely with the aspect of *précarité* chosen by the artist to

⁷ In the "Information Office of the Organization for Direct Democracy Through Referendum" Beuys discussed a variety of political "dilemmas" for a community of transient art-spectators. This rather unproblematic assumption (on Beuys's part) of a "consultant" role portended not only his future bid for public office but indeed a major trend in both politics and artistic authorship.

⁸ Kwon Miwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art And Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002, p.144.

⁹ In the sense that the repossession of the means of production, envisioned by Marx as a permanent effect of revolution, needs rather to be reformulated in relation to the new grounds of fragmented and ephemeral communities.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Musée Précaire Albînet*, (adult writing workshops by Oscarine Bosquet during the Beuys week), 2004.

10

I also imagine this “utopic” angle of collective spectatorship to be rather different from the role that Jürgen Habermas has assigned to the public sphere.

11

For “New Man,” cf. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, CleanBodies* (MIT Press, 1995), and particularly her overvaluation of the “real” as opposed to the “cultural” for locating sites of change in the ‘60s.

12

Cf. Daniel Sherman, “Quatremère/Benjamin/Marx: Art Museums, Aura, and Commodity Fetishism” in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 123–143.

define his project, then the notion of institutionalization guaranteed by his Museum would seem to run against the very values—of permanence and continuity, universality and classification—on which institutions such as museums are built. Does his institution then ensure a different kind of (institutional?) legitimacy?¹⁰ How does his institution define itself in relation to his identity as an “author-subject,” as one who negotiates that aspect of *précarité* with the community? And finally, what is the relationship between this projected “new” institution and its actualization? Like the “New Man” projected in the France of the ‘60s, it would seem to be simultaneously a fiction—a dream, projected onto the screen of a society, however delimited in this case—and a fiction portending its own actualization.¹¹

I won’t have time to answer these three questions, but I can hope to sketch out some pathways I think could be fruitful not only in discussing Hirschhorn’s work (or “public art” generally) but also the continued validity of a theory such as Benjamin’s, tied as it is to the era of its development.

Part of the problematic that is incorporated into both Benjamin’s and Hirschhorn’s frameworks is that of art’s “autonomy,” that classical invention *re*-sponsored in 19th century France by the emergent Republic and its new public art museums. There, the discourse of the “autonomy” of art served as an essentially hypocritical fiction veiling the State’s interest in gathering works of art as emblems of its own power—and by extension,

as parallels to the State’s own republican mandate or, indeed, “autonomy.” Conceived thus, the essentialization of “autonomy” within the sphere of art guaranteed it a safe distance from the vicissitudes of markets and technologies;¹² the only need that remained was that of a physical structure—a museum—to defend, and indeed *incorporate* that autonomy. At the *Musée Précaire*, as I’ve discussed, the physical structure incorporates something apparently rather different: the reflection of and permeability to its sustaining community in the form of a mostly transparent structure and plenty of press-coverage. Yet, the maze of weekly activities on which the *Musée* also depends incorporates plenty of *other* “institutions,” from the Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers and the Centre Beaubourg to, for example, the association of residents at Le Corbusier’s *maison radiouse*, which consulted with a group of Landy residents on the occasion of the Corbusier exhibit. Thus is the *Musée Précaire* deeply engaged not only with a network of institutions but with the full system of (very French) values that support and sustain that network. The Musée’s physical “transparency,” or indeed the physical manifestation of its mutual aspect of contingency with its community, is inflected with this other contingency, linking one community with another—or, more to the point, one kind of community with a very different kind.

At the same time, the Musée both relies on and even seeks to *demonstrate* art’s transcendental values—precisely those

conditions that every Marxist analyst from Benjamin to Debord has problematized.¹³ Hirschhorn's project has an enormous stake in art's retention of its "meaningfulness" across its own multiple temporal and geographic displacements. This is self-evident in the activity schedule, for example, where the artwork is posited as a matrix of meanings that unfolds over different media, times and spaces.¹⁴ We can even consider Hirschhorn's avowed wish that this autonomy *exceed* that which is "prescribed" to a work of art "from above." He has written, à propos of his "Sculpture Directes," which are simultaneously "models" and "critiques" of monuments, that his "critique comes from the fact that the idea of the monument is imposed from above [...] and its forms correspond to the will to lead the people to admire the monument and along with it the dominant ideology."¹⁵ Thus, fantastically, Hirschhorn seems to want to set up the work of art to prescribe its *own* framing; that is, claims its autonomy.¹⁶ Something that has historically been prescribed not only "from above" but as a guarantee of state power is sent instead to reside in the artwork itself.

Of course, all this can only be accomplished by the strange, even perverse transformation of artwork into institution. More than a "collaboration" as Benjamin seems to have envisioned it, more than even a "repossession" of the means of production, Hirschhorn's anti-museal museum proceeds with cautious courage. That is perhaps its most strikingly "utopic" aspect: its *mood* that sits between garrulous challenge and lazy

self-containment, not justifying much at all. With so much to justify—with such a concretely "revolutionary" agenda—the *Musée Précaire Albinet* succeeds precisely, in the old formulation of seduction, by not appearing to try at all.

Rachel Haidu is an art historian. She teaches in the Department of Art and Art History and the Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester (USA).

13

"The "Musée Précaire Albinet" does not want to show what is "possible" or "impossible". The artists' freedom and the autonomy of art are not serving a cause... This project must constantly assert its *raison d'être*, and defend its autonomy as artwork." Thomas Hirschhorn, *About the Musée Précaire Albinet* handout available at MPA; text published in *Le Journal d'Aubervilliers*, p. 67.

14

Hirschhorn himself would deny any triumphalism associated with the project: his manifesto, handed out at the museum to visitors, ends with the statement "I shall never say that the *Musée Précaire Albinet* is a success, nor shall I ever say that it is a failure"—although he did repeat on numerous occasions at the end of his project that he would "never again say anything is impossible," begging the question of what defines a success. However, when asked, he admits to being pleased by the fact that a majority of the Landy audiences favored Duchamp—the first of the eight artists shown, whose exhibit came at the moment when Hirschhorn himself encountered the greatest degree of difficulty organizing his staff. This fact signifies to him that the artwork survives in the residents' memories separately from their recollection of economic, social, and political problems associated with the *Musée*; that it gains, in other words, a kind of autonomy.

15

Thomas Hirschhorn, "Statement: Sculpture Directe," in *Public Art: A Reader*, ed. Florian Matzner (Hatje Cantz, 2004), p. 250.

16

"The artists' freedom and the autonomy of art are not serving a cause. If an artist is told for what purpose he should work, then the work is not art." Hirschhorn, *About...*, *ibid.*