Art and Negativity

Questioning the Critical Potential of Activist Performance Art through an Adornian Critique of the Transborder Immigrant Tool

Aisling Marks

Student number: 4207270

Thesis submitted for MA Theatre Studies, Utrecht University

10th August 2015

Supervisor: Chiel Kattenbelt

2nd Reader: Konstantina Georgelou

*"I am blind and I know nothing, but I see
there are more ways to go; and everything
is an infinity of things."*

Jorge Luis Borges, The unending rose[1]

---
[1] Borges (1979)

Contents

INTRODUCTION

This thesis discusses the critical potential of art when it has been characterized as being in a state of disintegration[2] (Stakemeier 2012: 16). Interrogated more specifically is the identification of art with activism[3] as the prime instance in which art has assumed a socially-engaged practice in an effort to shape, influence, and criticize society. This is most poignantly felt in the current phase of neoliberalism, in which the emptying out of art into everyday life situations has motivated art to identify with society, which allows for artistic and cultural institutions to build a self-image upon responsibility and value to society, which is – as this thesis argues – falsely recognised as critique. Instances of dissent and artistic 'disobedience' are converted into an industry and used to mask deep-rooted, underlying socio-political problems. As such, the escape of art into everyday life, in efforts to directly intervene in the social, is less akin to Marx's desire for a society of free producers[4], and more towards the recuperation of art through corresponding systems of value in order to substantiate its role in a society that has lost all reason for its self-evidence.[5]

The central question of this thesis asks the extent to which art-activism[6] in contemporary neoliberal society is capable of posing a threat to global capitalism. Can it provide weapons for cultural resistance, or simply modest, affirmative gestures for ameliorative social healing? The status of art's critical function is at stake when, since the

---

[2] Stakemeier follows Theodor Adorno's notion of *Entkunstung* as the 'de-aestheticization' of art, inspiring Adorno's analysis in *Aesthetic Theory* (1997). For this thesis I understand the disintegration of aesthetic quality through artistic acts and performances of an explicitly social character.

[3] Activism is understood here to refer to public acts that attempt to communicate positively with society in order to instigate visible change.

[4] In *Capital*, Vol. 1, Marx imagined "a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common," and of "production by freely associated" individuals, that is "consciously regulated by them." (1867)

[5] The opening sentence of *Aesthetic Theory* is, "nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist." (Adorno 1997: 1). Fast-forward fifty years, a comparison can be drawn with Marina Vishmidt's contention that anything within the closed system of art institutions "is converted into art by the sheer fact of its appearance in proximity to other objects so designated." (2008: 263)

[6] 'Artivism' is the popular term used to denote the trend wherein art and activism blend their tools under mutual identification (see: Milohnic 2005). However, for the purpose of this dissertation I prefer to separate the words art and activism so as to stress their non-identity.

decline of the avant-garde, the crisis of art is reflected in its inability to express the development of society (Jappe 1999: 102) and artistic activity is "severed from an emancipation project" (de Duve 1996: 434), expressed by Claire Bishop as the "loss of a collective political horizon." (2012: 193) In order to develop these points, an Adornian framework is employed. The concept of negativity is made central to this framework and is used throughout to argue for art that critically negates society, rather than attempts to provide the cohesive glue for society's repair.

It can be observed that socially-engaged and interventionist art tactics abandon the dialectic of art and society, seeking to initiate emancipatory potentials. This is performed through direct injection into social situations and discourses; pragmatically, for promoting social change away from exploitative and alienated relations (capital, power), in favour of transgressive freedoms (freedom for unmediated inter-subjective relations, freedom from capital). Through an Adornian lens, there are reasons to be suspicious of this logic. Clues from *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) contend that, "If art tried directly to register an objection to the gapless web [of society], it would become completely entangled" (182-3). In other words, art, along with its emancipatory potentials, would dissolve in the grip of the all-consuming 'culture industry', which Adorno's critical theory of society is embedded in. Art would become merely another mechanism of domination. The only remedy is for art to "attack" (183) itself, to be critically self-reflexive by transforming the materials of historical tradition into new configurations, and resisting society's overwhelming capacities for subsuming all opposition. According to Adorno, this is how art criticizes society, rather than directly.

Chapter 1 begins with a genealogy of performance art as a way of exploring its identification with activism. This route is chosen due to performance art's conceptual resemblances with activism (presence, immediacy, embodiment, and, often, political motivations) and its tendency for addressing social concerns. The problematic conflation of art and activism is here defined as such: activism tends to be more immediate, positive and communicative with society, whereas art (through Adorno) is negative to society, at a distance in order to be critical of it. This is the core problem that informs the content of this thesis. In assigning performance art proximity with activism, it is necessary to stress the

importance of non-identity over identity thinking[7] as a core concept of Adornian thought. Nonidentity is invoked so as to argue for more "demands [to be] placed upon the cognitive subject, upon its unfettered strength and candid self-reflection." (Adorno 2007/1966: 31) In other words, intellectual depth in artistic experiences rather than the "empty depth" (Adorno 2008: 183) of didacticism is central to the critical potential of art.

Among the fluctuations between various forms of action art, performance art and avant-garde art of the 1960s, '70s and '80s towards the present day (1.2.), it can be posited that the radical gestures of performance art are set apart from the 'socially-engaged' works of current practices due to association and entrapment inside artistic circuits of value, presentation and exhibition. However, process-based ephemeral forms within a commodity-system, accompanied by the issue of identity-thinking, curtail the potential for critical thinking. As such, another core consideration of this thesis asks whether an ephemeral art-form (performance art, for example) can also be an object that is simultaneously resistant to the commodity form. The Transborder Immigrant Tool[8] is made a central case-study in this instance, due to its conflicting areas of outreach: as a conceptual performance that is manifested in a concrete object, aestheticized in a gallery while being intended for use in the Mexican-U.S. borderlands of the Sonoran desert.

TBT is positioned as exemplary of the proliferation of art-activisms alongside other "cultural practices and scientific methodologies… performed as art." (Stakemeier 2012: 25). This seems to suggest that art is critically engaging with pivotal social and political issues. On the surface, art has never before been so politically motivated, nor so thoroughly enthused by society in its efforts to 'engage' with it. On the contrary, Stakemeier takes this as evidence of art's unparalleled expansion, insinuating that art is becoming merely a "formal reference." (ibid) If this were the case, why not thoroughly abandon art as a formal category, if indeed its liquidation has finally manifested? Perhaps the quick answer is that the avant-garde utopia in which art would dissolve into life has instead become warped.

---

[7] The terms identity and non-identity are used in relation to subject and object (see 2.4.) as theorized by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* (2007/1966).

[8] See appendix for an image of TBT. For an extended description and analysis of the project, see Chapters 3 & 4.

Chapter 2 expounds Adorno's theory, exploring negativity as a core perspective for the critical capacity of art. Adorno's method of negative dialectics is employed to dynamise concepts, and the notion of negativity is given primary importance in arguing for art's oppositional character. Negativity is invoked to propose that critique is an anti-social function, and that art becomes critical as an antithesis to a socially poisonous administered reality. Art says 'no' to assumed social truths and instead carves its own. In order for art to be a critical force, it breaks away from society to propose a counter-reality which is crystallised in the artwork itself. As such, it is expressive of the *lack* in society, rather than affirmative of it. The Adornian exposition of the critical function of contemporary performance art-activism also demands engagement with notions of mimesis (2.3.), semblance (2.3.1.) and the subject-object relation (2.4.) as central facets of Adorno's considerations upon modern art, in preparation for a critique of the Transborder Immigrant Tool.

Chapter 3 introduces and explores the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT) as expressive of the combination of performance art, conceptual art, and activism. It analyses its claim for "broadening the concept of performance art"[9] in combination with the tool as a potentially life-saving art-device: it performs solidarity with the suffering of Mexican and Central American border-crossers as they traverse extreme desert conditions in the attempt to illegally enter the United States. These contentions within the tool are unpacked and considered in light of conceptual performance art, in which theoretical ideas stand in for the act itself. Furthermore, the concept of ephemerality is challenged in light of the object of an artwork and the ubiquity of the commodity form.

Finally, Chapter 4 consolidates the previous chapters into an extended Adornian critique of the Transborder Immigrant Tool. In so doing, it commands the concepts from Chapter 2 to travel into contemporary areas of relevance and requires the continued application of negative dialectical thinking. TBT's dual production sites are taken into consideration, alongside the framing of spectatorship and the 'delivery' of social criticism. The discussion is then opened out to incorporate Henri Lefebvre's theory of "moments"

---

[9] See: Cárdenas, M., Carroll, A., Dominguez, R., & Stalbaum, B. (2009)

(1947/2014: 526) (4.4) so as to frustrate Adorno and initiate a more hopeful potentiality. The main aim of this thesis is therefore to critically examine the relation of art and society by questioning the fusion of art and activism.

CHAPTER 1: PERFORMANCE ART AS CRITICAL ARTISTIC PRODUCTION?

This chapter engages with the genealogy of performance art as an embodied artistic practice that emerged as a protest against the commodity-form (Bishop 2012: 6, 229). In so doing, it situates performance art within the capitalist mode of production at the same time as it attempted to break from it, and understands it as an attempt to explicitly re-politicize artistic production and align itself with activism. Activism is defined in terms of positivity (a direct contribution within civic engagement) and immediacy, whereas art is defined -in the Adornian sense- in terms of negativity, as anti-social, signifying the *lack* in society and as the embodiment of critique. Herein we are presented with a core problematic whereby performance art is conflated with activism and the critical potential of performance art is thrown into question.

The chapter begins by outlining the radical beginnings of performance art and its core concepts. Meanwhile, the intentions of performance art as a vehicle for social critique will become apparent. Performance art is addressed primarily in terms substantiated by Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006) as the medium for a new aesthetics, in which the representation of reified objects -as in non-performative artistic production- is rejected in favour of an experience of intensified embodied communication between artist and audience (137). The resemblance between the rejection of the commodity form and the rejection of a reified object is made explicit in this discussion. Performance art is subsequently contextualised within the broader developments of post-World War II society, during which performance became a mode of production and discipline in the social factory, and an object of examination and analytical model in academia. As such informed, it can be suggested that performance art developed as a critical form aiming to frustrate its own conditions of existence. At the same time, these conditions can be said to hamper the form's capacity for critique.

Following on, the critical potential of performance art is discussed through its alignment with activism. The similarities between performance art and activism are discussed through a desire for more explicit socio-political engagement. To proceed,

Adorno's notion of critical negativity is briefly invoked, before being developed more fully in Chapter 2 in order to provide theoretical tools for a critical substantiation of performance and the commodity form.

1.1. FROM RADICAL BEGINNINGS TO POPULARITY

We begin in the 1960s. Fischer-Lichte has noted that at this time, "Western art experienced a ubiquitous performative turn" (2008: 18), which emerged parallel to an avant-garde desire to resist art, even to make anti-art, in order to counter the capitalist commodity spectacle[10]. Performance art was generally perceived as an antagonistic experiential practice that, as Lehmann contends, "sought the transgression of socially repressive norms" (2006: 140). The ephemeral performance event could not be contained, reproduced or exhibited. This was central to performance art's radical resistance to commodity capitalism (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 162). It favoured the immediacy and primacy of the body in a highly affective and transitory experience, in which the "gesture of self-presentation" (Lehmann 2006: 134) of the performance artist was paramount. Emerging in tandem with poststructuralist theories of deconstruction and feminist theories of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, - but also, separately, in the communist Eastern bloc - performance art sought to destabilise the dichotomies of mind and body and subject and object, emphasising the immediacy of bodies in space, and duration and uniqueness (ibid) in place of a reproducible object. The body of the performer in immediacy or physical interaction with an audience radically reshaped notions of spectatorship and staging, sometimes by using non-traditional art venues, such as the streets. The development of art from an object to a dematerialised performance was predicated upon the subversion of existing forms, contributing to an institutional critique. As such, performance art sought to criticize society through its form as an ephemeral event as well as its presentation of socially controversial content.

---

[10] Parallels in this period can be drawn with the free-jazz innovators in the 1950s such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane and Sun Ra. Theirs was an aesthetic protest that was implicitly political, breaking from structured, formal modes of playing, and expressing deep anti-conformity with white America – to conceive of blacks playing 'free' music was deeply antagonistic to hegemonic white supremacy. On commodity spectacle see: Guy Debord (1967/2005)

However, since these beginnings, performance art has been involved in the contemporary expanding domain of art. The restructuring of arts policies introduced into neoliberal reforms ensures that arts practices are complicit with aims to promote (false) 'inclusion' and 'participation', and given responsibility over activating passive publics in lieu of a collective political project (depoliticisation) (Bishop 2012: 193). As such, performance has become the umbrella term for a host of overlapping visual, theatrical, and social art practices (Jackson 2011: 238), generating hype as symbolic capital (Auslander 1999: 58; Bishop 2012: 229-230) due to the fetish for its perceived experimentalism as much as, in some instances, for the marginal identities of "outsourced" participants.[11] Furthermore, it is often the case that what was once transgressive is now banal, once radical now an established canon.

Indeed, it could be argued that performance art failed to sustain itself as a radical art form because it never truly began as such. According to Jon McKenzie (2001), Herbert Marcuse stated that performance became a paradigm, bursting into the academies as a "mechanics of conformity" during the post-World War II period in the United States. This post-war period of late capitalism saw the "mass production and mass consumption of undifferentiated commodities, commodification of art and culture, repetitive activities in factories and schools, imposition of homogeneity in hospitals and jails." (Bonnet 2009: 46) Performance concomitantly became a "mode of domination...a certain technological rationality and economic alienation into all social organizations and, through mass culture, into leisure activities and private life." (Mckenzie 2001: 161) It can therefore be proposed that the popularity of performance art during the second-half of the twentieth century – as with the dominance of performance in the postdramatic mode of theatre – emerged alongside its corresponding analytical paradigm as a new mode of social control. Thus, the critical capacity of performance as an artistic form for the critique of society was caught in the double-bind that art finds itself uncomfortably situated; its "double character", both "autonomous and *fait social*" (Adorno 1997: 7, emphasis the author's), both disobedient and complicit, is nowhere more visible in the arts than in the art-activist performance hybrids that developed through and alongside performance art.

---

[11] For an excellent analysis of this phenomenon, see Chapter 8, 'Delegated Performance' in Claire Bishop (2012)

1.2. THE MERGE WITH ACTIVISM

The performance art that grew in prominence in the 1960s began as a protest to dominant, repressive social structures, and as resistance to a pervasive commodity-form. The negative criticality of (performance) art here asserts itself as "the social antithesis of society" (Adorno 1997: 10), hijacking society's dominant mode of production and representation for purposes of subversion. In so doing, it pertains towards a mode of *performance activism* that, through action, hopes to raise the public consciousness upon issues of representation and expose hierarchical power-relations. Cultural activists have sought to either rescue art from the officially sanctioned and designated spaces for artistic production by bringing attention to undervalued contexts, or used art as a tactical weapon to reveal instances of hypocrisy in authoritarian societies. Some movements such as Dada intended to use such forms to destroy art. Both instances involve the strategic displacement and repositioning of signifying materials so as to add potency to otherwise 'taken for granted' objects and situations. The turn to activism in the present therefore has a historic lineage and has become increasingly popular among collectives and individuals at a point where explicit social engagement is deemed a social and political necessity against widespread disaffection, broadening the scope of art to envelope other forms of cultural production and civic engagement.

Artists and creative activists in Europe, the Americas and Japan are notable examples of performance activisms in the struggle against oppressive political systems, and part of a wider cultural movement. These range widely from the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys in Germany, to guerrilla tactics of 'rebel clowning' found in the anarchist social movement 'Orange Alternative' (*Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*) in Poland[12], to Group Kyushu in 1950s Japan (none of whom were trained artists), whose experimental approach included performance, sculpture and paint and often involved the violent destruction of their materials. Others in performance and visual art were specifically engaged in the politics of gender and labour, including Martha Rosler, Mierle Laderman Ukeles (Maintenance Art),

---

[12] It is significant that the Happenings and rebel clowning associated with Orange Alternative was in no way associated with art. These were playful and serious activist tactics for making the police and other authorities look ridiculous. Similar guerrilla groups in the UK, such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, can be seen as following in this tradition.

Valie Export and Cindy Sherman, who were aligned with the second-wave of feminism in the United States. Meanwhile in music, jazz and hip-hop distinctly emerged in the United States from a history of racial slavery and the ensuing cultural exclusion of black people from white-dominated institutions. In the United Kingdom in the 1980s, anarcho-punk bands, such as Crass, offered exigent anti-authority participatory aesthetics against Thatcherism. These examples delineate a small handful of *de facto* 'engaged' cultural practices from the second half of the last century that responded to socio-political conditions via critical negativity, maintaining antagonisms between itself and society through critical aesthetic distance, by practicing an altogether alternative vision.

1.3. CORE PROBLEMS OF PERFORMANCE ART-ACTIVISM

Art and activism together are premised not as two separate domains of activity in temporary coalition, but rather as a hybrid platform for dissent, antagonism to the state, and to raise awareness of politically sensitive and urgent issues. Parallels between performance art and activism can be drawn theoretically in terms of immediacy and rejection of semblance, and practically through direct social engagement with the intentions of social change. On these grounds, the combination of art with activism presents itself as a specific mode of reconciling the antagonisms in society; socially-engaged activisms in the established art world seek to close the gap between art and society, responding rationally to civic engagement.

However, if art is necessarily critically and socially engaged, even if through its *asociality*, as Adorno contends, then the emergence of self-proclaimed 'engaged' or 'critical' art in the past twenty years becomes up for debate. In *Artificial Hells* (2012), Claire Bishop, wonders if these explicit forms of social engagement and commitment could be considered the avant-garde of today (13). However, she reveals that arts policies in the UK and the Netherlands determine innovation in the arts, whereby participatory and 'socially-engaged' artworks become part of a rationalizing instrumentality to promote neoliberal ideologies of

participation and creativity in lieu of social welfare[13]. This has been taken further to suggest that artistic production "brings art close to capitalism."[14] (Kunst 2012: 118)

As such, problems arise for the critical potential of performance art upon conflation with activism through explicit social engagement. Boris Groys has articulated the apparent contradiction: "Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place—but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists." (2014, *e-flux)*. Groys' main concern here is with the notion of aestheticization. He distinguishes between aestheticization as design, which he equates to an efficient and seductive product intended for *use*, and artistic aestheticization which, to the contrary, is "defunctionalisation… [and] the violent annulation of… practical applicability and efficiency." (ibid) As such, similarities could be drawn between Groys' stance on contemporary art as the deliberate sabotage of use, and Adorno's position on art as a protest against the economically administered world of capitalist imperatives. It would follow that art's alignment with social activism creates art that is purposeful, useful, and thus aggregate

However, when Groys argues for contemporary art's *uselessness*, it would be a mistake to conflate this with Adorno's notion of purposelessness and autonomy, i.e. that it assumes no function. This is where Groys departs from Adorno. Even so, Groys' stance also indicates a point of contradiction between the supposed uselessness of contemporary art, as he understands it, and the socially-engaged, politically interventionist tactical-media performance projects, ultimately *useful,* or better, *purposeful*, art-projects, many of which are dependent upon art institutions and public funding. That these projects are state-supported is a crucial contradiction within a critical performance art projects, as it compromises their claim to the critical, and will be important for the analysis of the Transborder Immigrant Tool as later discussed.

While Groys articulates a potential problem of art and activism as one of social utility, the conceptual dimension of the performative in art is left unacknowledged. At stake is the critical potential of performance art projects that conceptually rely upon ephemerality as their claim to evading the pervasive commodity-form. It is widely understood that these claims to ephemerality "now seem increasingly hard to maintain" (Jackson 2011: 38), but the

---

[13] See Chapter 1: 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents.' in Claire Bishop (2012).
[14] See Section 2.4. 'Subject and Object' for an analysis of a performance that evokes neoliberal ideology.

contradictions can also be demonstrated through Adorno. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) we find the following sentence: "Movement and standstill is eternalized in the instant, and what has been made eternal is annihilated by its reduction to the instant." (1997: 118). The poetic depth of this assertion captures the question of object-ness and ephemerality that simultaneously mobilises and destabilises the power of performance as a critical art form. In exploring this relation, we can come closer to understanding the conflict between performance art and activism as the as two separate activities that unite only at the threat of diluting their individual achievements, or, whose differentiated praxes can converge as an attempt to either destroy art or immeasurably expand its domain to embrace everyday life; in either instance, art as it is conventionally understood is obliterated.

CHAPTER 1; CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced performance art as a critical practice through resistance to the commodity-form and engagement with socio-political issues. However, it argues that performance art falls prey to various factors intrinsic to its ephemerality, which are then exacerbated by its merge with activism through immediate social engagement at the expense of critical aesthetic distance.

At this point, the critique posed by Adorno comes into the discussion. His critique of performance art is analysed in an essay by Andrea Sakoparnig (2014), in which she illustrates that Adorno condemned performance art due to its rejection of aesthetic semblance, a critique he also geared towards the avant-gardes. He criticised performance for side-stepping the dialectics of subject and object[15] and insistence upon an all-too-literal direct intervention in reality, thereby negating the "critical distance" necessary for art to perform criticism through performance and action itself. Hence, it comes about as a worthwhile endeavour to extend Sakoparnig's analysis (2014) on the importance Adorno grants to aesthetic semblance by incorporating ideas upon non-identity of subject and object, mimesis and negativity. In order to develop an analysis of performance art in its expanded contemporary form, it is necessary to explore Adorno's notion of critical negativity and draw out some key concepts.

---

[15] In constructing his aesthetic theory, Adorno set out to "reconstitute the dialectical relationship between subject and object which he believed to be the correct structural basis for all human activities - knowledge, political praxis, and art." (Buck-Morss 1977: 123-4)

CHAPTER 2: "THE FORCE OF NEGATIVITY IN THE ARTWORK." (ADORNO 1997: 15)

The following Chapter builds the theoretical framework through an exploration of Adorno's notion of critical negativity. It argues for the relevance of Adorno for a critique of performance art-activism (2.1.) and situates his negative dialectics within the dialectics of art and society. In so doing, the Chapter asks the reader to consider the critical potential of performance art in light of Adorno's philosophy of art. It is acknowledged that performing arts have their own set of aesthetic terminologies and trajectories, which is important for avoiding crude applications of Adorno's work. As such, the Chapter begins by outlining Adorno's project of negative dialectics as the theoretical thread for the duration of this dissertation (2.1.1.). It then identifies four inter-related aspects of Adorno's theory of aesthetics (Adorno 1997).

First to be addressed is the dialectic of art and society (2.2.), where it is demonstrated that art embodies a negative relation to society. The Chapter then proceeds to discuss Adorno's concepts of mimesis (2.3.), the "crisis of semblance" (1997: 139) (2.3.1.) and the subject-object relation (2.4.), aspects of which will be put to use in Chapters 3 and 4 for a critical analysis of the Transborder Immigrant Tool. It will become clear that these four identifiers are all implicated in Adorno's theory of negative dialectics and important for discerning the critical capacity of the artwork, and that *Negative Dialectics* (2007) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) should be seen as "a single project" (Holloway *et al*. 2009: 11).

Grounding this theoretical pursuit is the resurgence of interest in Adorno from the perspectives of performance philosophy (Daddario, Gritzner 2014) and separately in political activism (Holloway *et al*. 2009). Moreover, a recent symposium called *Performing Dialectics*, held at Queen Mary University of London (January 2015) affirmed a promising correlation between (negative) dialectics and current trends in performing arts, which at present remains an "underdeveloped area of scholarship."[16] In bringing these areas together, with critical tools from Adorno, we can shed light upon the difficult relationship of performing arts and activism.

---

[16] The symposium held at Queen Mary University London took place January 29-30, 2015.
https://performingdialectics.wordpress.com/

2.1. WHY ADORNO?

Adorno's writings on art have often been criticized for relying too heavily on the text, script, or (musical) score as objects, leading critics to claim that he "fails to provide the conceptual tools needed to grasp contemporary performance art forms." (Sakoparnig 2014: 53). He has been scorned for privileging of the object of an artwork over and above process-based, ephemeral forms, such as the performing arts. However, this is a misreading of Adorno's own thought process, which, imbricated in his negative dialectic, proposes the perpetual opening-out to yet more possibilities, and for more questions to be posed. The artwork for Adorno is never a closed entity; it lives in its very object-ness and as a realisation of praxis as it continues to perform meaning. As such, an Adornian framework for the purposes of this dissertation is conducive to rethinking the object within the ephemeral form of performance art-activism, giving an illuminating critical approach.

One of Adorno's central questions is "why art matters" (Bowie 2013: 136). Bowie has conceded that out of all the philosophers concerned with analytical aesthetics, Adorno fortifies a unique position in fully addressing art as integral to his critical theory of society (ibid); the "dialectical shifts of his writing" (139) testify to his negative dialectical method as praxis. Indeed, "in all his writings, he addressed questions about the relationship between thinking and political commitment, between art and political commitment, and the place of critique in contemporary mass society" (Heberle 2006: 8), marking him out as a thinker who has potential to further the field of performance studies in unexpected directions.[17]

Adorno's reflections can lend a sharply critical eye towards the performance art practices of the contemporary political moment while challenging our perspectives, never providing a single conclusion but rather providing room for more questions. This is due to insisting upon a *negative* dialectic that grounds his entire canon. Negative Dialectics (2007) was a response to Hegelian idealism, a positive dialectic resulting in synthetic closure, misinterpreted for artificially straight-jacketing all the vast complexities of the world into single binary antagonisms (Holloway 2009: 6). This misunderstanding of dialectics rigidifies dynamic concepts into static opposites, rendering them as absolutes. Aware of the

---

[17] Adorno wrote of his "impulse to account for art and its possibility in the present, where something objective desired expression as well, a suspicion of the insufficiency of naive aesthetic procedure in view of the tendencies of society." (Adorno 1965: 32, cited in Buck-Morss 1977: 234)

misapprehension, Adorno sought to "free dialectics from [its] affirmative [Hegelian] traits without reducing its determinacy" (2007: xix). Thus, he reconceptualised it as "as restless movement of negation that does not lead necessarily to a happy ending." (Holloway 2009: 7)

2.1.1. NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

The theoretical starting point of this thesis is Adorno's stance that art occupies a space of resistance that is negative to society; art negates the proscribed organisation of a society constructed upon "total exchange" (1997: 308), that is mediated by the forces of capitalist production that strips products of their use-value[18]. The "force of negativity" (Adorno 1997: 15) that Adorno ascribes to art's critical possibilities surfaces at an early stage of *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) in the midst of his attempts to circumscribe to art a "*promesse du bonheur*", (ibid, emphasis the author's) - the promise of a better life - lurching towards an alternative reality to that which is given. According to Adorno, this occurs neither in a work's content, its 'hidden' meaning, nor with the intentions of the artist; artworks foreground utopia contained within their immanent form. Within their aesthetic make-up is the crystallisation of a counter-reality, empirically at a critical distance from society, and yet in their autonomy, which emerged with the secularisation of society, a reluctance to serve any ends other than those that they express, which, in part, is that of purposelessness, or the appearance of such. A work of art's claim to truth is expressed not affirmatively but negatively, "opposed to subjective reason's claim to totality" (358).

Negative dialectics is the purposeful refusal of closure, a perpetual critique that does not try to reconcile the contradictions within history – subject and object, self and other, etc., can never form a unity – but rather pursues these contradictions against one another in continual, multiplicited movement[19] in order to avoid the dogma and absolutism derived from static commentaries, which falls into syntheses and thus a false resolution. Embedded

---

[18] Use-value is defined by Karl Marx as "independent of the determinate economic form" (Marx 1859) In other words, a product that used rather than subject to exchange. See:
https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/ch01.htm

[19] For a comprehensive analysis on how this differs from Deleuze's 'rhizomatic' thinking, see Alberto R. Bonnet (2009).

in this negative dialectic is the acknowledgment that we are never able to fully grasp our experiences; the process of becoming, always incomplete, will never truly align with a total comprehension of the world. Explaining this notion in *Negative Dialectics* (2007), he remarks that subject and object, rather than appearing as "states of fact" express,

> "...nothing but non-identity... They are neither an ultimate duality nor a screen hiding ultimate unity. They constitute one another as much as – by virtue of such constitution – they depart from each other... The only possible course is definite negation of the individual moments whereby subject and object are turned into absolute opposites and precisely thus are identified with each other. In truth, the subject is never quite the subject, and the object never quite the object; and yet the two are not pieced out of any third that transcends them... *The duality of subject and object must be critically maintained against the thought's inherent claim to be total*. The division, which makes the object the alien thing to be mastered and appropriates it, is indeed subjective, the result of orderly preparation; but no critique of its subjective origin will reunify the parts, once they have split in reality."

(Adorno 2007: 174-5, emphasis my own)

Here it should be clear that Adorno does not fall for Cartesian subject-object oriented thinking. He suggests the impossibility of fully exhausting the meaning of an object, making space for the continuation of negative dialectical thought. As such, his method strongly resonates with Marx's belief in "looking behind appearances" as much as with Walter Benjamin's "constellational thinking"[20], which advocates the multi-faceted nature of objects in relation with other objects in a process of becoming.

The resurgence of interest in dialectics in contemporary scholarship has therefore arrived at a point where the saturation of post-structuralist and Deleuzian thought crafted alternative ontologies in response to perceived weaknesses in dialectical thought alongside a mistrust of Marxism, despite the efforts and legacies of critical theorists to reinvigorate the project. However, when Adorno wrote that, "dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction" (2007: 11), he was pursuing a Marxian process that post-structuralist tendencies would overlook: reinvigorating dialectics in this case becomes a project with implications for praxis,

---

[20] Benjamin's concept of constellations: "ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept… Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars… It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas." (Benjamin 1977: 34; cited in Eagleton 1990: 328)

for addressing the totality of things without ignoring particularities, for "bring[ing] into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world." (Ollman 2003: 12).

2.2. "THE SOCIALLY CRITICAL ASPECT OF ARTWORKS." (ADORNO 1997: 346): DIALECTICS OF ART AND SOCIETY

For Adorno, the artwork embodies resistance and antagonism to a society that is self-contradictory and self-antagonistic, and it achieves this, he says, "*merely by existing*" (1997: 308). In *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), he presents the perspective of which this dialectic is mounted, which is worth quoting at length:

> "*art becomes social by its opposition to society*.... By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful', *it criticizes society by merely existing*… There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. *Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.*"
>
> (308, emphasis mine).

Within this conception, art implicitly denies itself a social use; it is that which constitutes its "asociality" (ibid). It refuses to be complicit in a society which operates a "blind rationality" (Sakoparnig 2014: 55), a distorted reality that places society under "a ubiquitous delusion" (55). Adorno follows Walter Benjamin in this assertion, who's *On the Concept of History* (1940/1974) is entirely premised upon debunking the historical concept of 'progress'.[21] Indeed, Adorno's "anti-theory" of art (Buck-Morss 1977: 185) was deeply grounded in his critique of enlightenment as mass deception[22] concomitant with the developments of late capitalism: "That art, something mimetic, is possible in the midst of rationality, and that it employs its means, is a response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an over-administered world." (Adorno 1997: 73) Art is here understood as the only refuge of hope in an otherwise hostile environment, which it achieves through its ability to break from the

---

[21] Benjamin's text is a cascade upon the concept of progress that has dominated conceptions of history: "The concept of the progress of the human race in history is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogenous and empty time. The critique of the concept of this progress must ground the basis of its critique on the concept of progress itself." See: Benjamin (1940/1974)
[22] See: Adorno and Horkheimer (2002/1944)

rationality of the modern world. This is not to say that rebellious, oppositional art is irrational by contrast, as this would render a static dichotomy between two absolute categories. On the other hand, it is possible that a main critique of contemporary performance art-activism is that it is too rationalist. This would entail the neglect of sensory experience and transformation of perception so integral to the affectivity of the arts, denying it critical distance.

This paradox that art is against society while unable to escape from it is, for Adorno, integral to its ability to perform continual criticism of the society to which it is condemned to always reluctantly serve. The double-bind of art is one that struggles against this confinement perpetually, advocating for itself an autonomous position while simultaneously being 'social'. It thus performs negative dialectical movement as a direct intervention in reality, and herein contains its critical capacity. Indeed, according to Adorno, even the activity of making art becomes a counter-reality to what is administered through reconfiguring the materials of everyday life towards that which serves no function; it cannot substitute for the lack in society, but rather makes this lack evident. At the same time, he recognises that such 'objects' cannot necessarily escape their entrapment by the value-form and money system, especially through circulation in the art-market. As such, "the socially critical aspect of artworks" (Adorno 1997: 346) is evident through the frustration of an explicitly social function. In their refusal to submit to the demands of state policy, art maintains the antagonisms between itself and society. As Adorno writes, "Society appears all the more authentically in [art] the less it is the intended object." (316)

2.3.   THE MIMETIC IMPULSE OF ART

In *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), Adorno develops a concept of mimesis to insist that "The work of art is a criticism by means of mimesis." (Martínez 2009: 243). As Martínez explains, artworks embody a critique of the "total exchange society" (Adorno 1970: 308) to which the artwork is bound. It has a "critical negativity" (Sakoparnig 2014: 54) exerted upon it due to this faculty of mimesis. Mimesis became imperative for Adorno as a comportment of aesthetic experience for an artwork to expose itself as having been wrested from reality and

manipulated, therefore exposing antagonistic forces at work in its immanent structure. In line with negative dialectical thought, he conceived of art as the negation and "explosion of given forms" (Buck-Morss 1977: 46), rather than a false harmony purporting to either settle or ignore all existing antagonisms. In other words, artworks exert a "modified existence" (Adorno 1997: 150), which implicitly translates into efforts to "achieve a new order" (41).

However, in contemporary society, as in Adorno's time of writing, such a mode of relation is inconceivable without the primary pursuit of capital as its main objective which, as a violent relation of capture and disfiguration, subjugates all life-forms to its rhythms, impulses and fetishes; it transforms the living into the living-dead through unfulfilling, non-creative labour[23]. As such, mimesis, which disguises the artwork as a construction, can only aspire towards the reconciliation of the unfulfilled subject-object relation. It follows that Adorno defines mimesis as "the non-conceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other" (1997: 74), but remained fervent, as his critique of Lukács reveals[24], in his rejection of a synthetic unity between subject and object. According to Adorno, this false unity between subject and object implied that "the reconciliation has been accomplished, that all is well with society, that the individual has come into his own and feels at home…" (Adorno 1965: 176) Civic engagement in which activism is situated, and to which performance art as activism also succumbs, is dependent upon a really existing false unity. As such, art that yields to similar motives exposes its own powerlessness, surrendering its capacity for critique in Adornian terms.

2.3.1. "THE CRISIS OF SEMBLANCE" (ADORNO 1997: 139)

Deeply related to the issue of mimesis is the "crisis of semblance" (Adorno 1997: 139). It has been identified (Sakoparnig 2014; Gritzner 2011) that Adorno's derision of performance art, as he witnessed it briefly the 1960s, was primarily due to what he observed as the "revolt against semblance" (Adorno 1997: 139) in modernism. As Gritzner points out,

---

[23] For more on this, see McNally (2011). See generally: zombie-capitalism.

[24] Adorno's critique of Hungarian philosopher György Lukács is also an essay against idealism and false reconciliation. For example, he wrote that "it is a sheer lie to assert that [the antagonism] has been 'overcome', as they call it, in the states of the Eastern bloc." See: Adorno (1965)

all art, at least in conventional understanding, exists as semblance, appearance and illusion (2011: 109). As soon as this illusory aspect of art is threatened or deliberately placed under siege, as Adorno argued, art relinquishes its capacity to be critical of reified social relations; it melts into the banality of everyday life and therefore cannot wrest itself from it, failing to realise the necessary distance for criticism to be possible.

The notion of semblance is problematic and complicated. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) Adorno posits that semblance in the nineteenth century was so evident in art that it "effaced the traces of their production" (141); art appeared as "fact" and "ashamed of whatever revealed its compact immediateness as mediated." (ibid) This semblance therefore works on two levels: first, the labour behind the 'product' is hidden. Second, the aesthetic construction immanent to the artwork masks its genesis, deceptively portraying itself as closed, sealed and absolute, rather than as amalgams of subjectively mediated objects in a historical unfolding of processes. Parallels can be draw here with Aristotelian theatre before Brecht, in which the 'world' on stage was closed and impenetrable. It seems sufficient to say that Adorno would have strongly rejected this appearance of a closed form as if it were no different to the reified social totality it were supposedly criticizing.

However, crucial to the negative dialectic is the resistance to closure so as to dissolve stasis back into processuality. We hence find ourselves trapped in a strange contradiction when Adorno appears to, as Sakoparnig identifies, "plead for the rescue of aesthetic semblance" (2014: 58), as it would follow that semblance is the artwork's mask to truth. Yet, Adorno clarifies that the desire to defend aesthetic semblance does not rebound to an apology for the 'closed form'. Recognising the dialectics immanent to the artwork, Adorno claims that semblance is necessarily non-identical with its material, otherwise "identification would extinguish the difference or otherness" (Gritzner 2015 [online]) of the artwork from the empirical world of commodified objects, which would result in a false harmony and impotency of critique. Semblance in art allowed for a depth to the work, necessary for the accompaniment of critical thinking. Adorno considered this to be absent from performance art, which evokes the importance of semblance for an artwork to perform negatively to the society it critiques.

As such, performance art finds itself confronted with Adorno's criticism that it "goes too far" (Sakoparnig 2014: 63) in its rebellion against semblance. By turning to Adorno's essay "Commitment", significant parallels can be drawn between his critique of committed art and the defect in the subject-object relation (2.4.) in performance art. Here is a passage that contains the crux of the matter:

> "Once the life of the mind renounces the duty and liberty of its own pure objectification, it has abdicated. Thereafter, works of art merely assimilate themselves sedulously to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral (the very charge made vice-versa by committed against autonomous works) that from their first day they belong to the seminars in which they inevitably end."
>
> (Adorno 1974: 76) [25]

In other words, the 'commitment' of an artwork becomes crystallised into a single driven idea, which is then too easily extracted from the work itself and thoroughly displaced, to the initial idea's detriment. Adorno argues that this is "extreme subjectivism" (ibid), and only serves to vitiate commitment. As Jucan pointedly notes, committed art -and equally, for the purposes of this thesis, performance activism- "does not give time to its object" (2014: 101), the relation of which can now be addressed.

2.4.   SUBJECT AND OBJECT

In *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), Fischer-Lichte concedes that the conventional subject-object relation in performance is placed under negotiation through an enactment of role-reversal (40), implying that it enables a transformation to occur between spectators and performer(s). However, when re-considered in light of Adorno's conception of subject and object, the tendency to negotiate this relation in performance is brought under scrutiny. In Fischer-Lichte's terms, these relations reveal interactions between the artist (the subject) with the material (the object) that is then shaped, through self-conscious activity, into art. However, through Adorno, these terms (subject and object) are not fixed into static roles. The crucial non-identity between subject and object underlies the tensions immanent to Adorno's problematic take on performance art.

---

[25] Adorno's essay, 'Commitment', was composed as a response to Sartre's essay 'What is Literature?' He accused Sartre's "theatre of ideas" for becoming "bad models of his own existentialism." (1974: 78).

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno identifies "the dialectics of subject and object" (2007: 115) as a relation that is mediated through non-identification. In other words, the subject cannot be identical to the object, for this would insinuate the domination of the subject over the object, effectively predicating a naive understanding of a world in which given subjects and given objects remain in fixed, immutable categories, implicitly denying the transformational course of history. Furthermore, the subject-object relation is always mediated. The notion of immediacy, which performance art in particular has boasted as a force of affectivity in and outside of the theatre, "in reality," explains O'Connor, "means a reduction of subject to object" (2013: 68). In other words, immediacy between subject and object, according to Adorno entails violence upon the object, by forcing the object to become identical with the subject. It is not that we cannot ever experience immediacy, but rather that experience is caught up in complex processes of conceptualisation (O'Connor 2013: 69). Arguably it was this excess of subjectivity engendered by an economy of identification that Adorno saw as a threat to the transformative, dialectical relation of subject and object that exists in reality, and which is an important point of consideration for assessing the critical potential of socially engaged performance art activisms.

For example, Buck-Morss elucidates with regards to Adorno's eventual rejection of Surrealism that it "fused subject and object in the art image rather than, as Adorno attempted, making manifest the antagonisms characterizing their mutual mediation." (1977: 128) The following questions then arise: can instances of art-activist performance (in which the *presentation* of the performer overrides representation), that supposedly relapses into reified appearances, be rescued in light of its own autonomous sphere of aesthetic and performative gestures? It could be argued the collapse of subject and object into a singular unit, in performance, allows for the antagonisms between aesthetic material and everyday social reality to become all the more evident. In such a case, the antagonisms are not eradicated but placed elsewhere with different emphases, such as between performer and spectators in direct struggle – physically, such as in the Happenings in the '60s (Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in '69* (1970) is an exemplary case) but also cognitively and affectively as with more recent, experimental modes of performance that challenge (re)presentation and spectatorship. This position is tenuous, however. Staging an assault upon the audience may only further alienate those already alienated. The inversion of this can be illustrated in

the form of participatory utopia that only thinly veils the 'social semblance' which is the world of enforced social discipline:

> "in a geometrically ordered world, everyone has their place and anyone out of his or her place will stand out as sharply as does a misplaced pawn at the start of a game of chess. In utopia, beauty figures as social order."
>
> <div align="right">(Gunn 1989: 2)</div>

An example of such geometric utopia, though significantly *without* the participatory element, is presented in Nicole Beutler's dance performance, *5: ECHO* (2014), in which shared ritual and symmetrical choreography posits an aura of perfection, while simultaneously laying bare (and mimetically concealing) the hypnotic horrors of such obedience similar to Gunn's (1989) description. The power of this performance is in the juxtaposition of utopia and dystopia in shifting proximity, which reaches towards Adorno's privileging of artistic schism over faithful reflection, in the disharmonious forms that never aim to please, but rather seek to unsettle.

By contrast, an example of participatory utopia in performance art which falls prey to Adorno's critique of the crisis of semblance and the false unity of subject-object can be seen in Nicola Gunn's *Hello My Name Is* (2012). This performance can be interpreted as an enactment of community-building in the context of the 'social turn', defined by Shannon Jackson as 'a term that combines aesthetics and politics,... a term for art events that are inter-relational, embodied, and durational...' (2011: 12) Gunn invites her audience into a concentrated, hot-boxed environment, recreating the effects of a community workshop: plastic chairs arranged in a circle, tea and coffee, table-tennis, and name-badges for each audience member. Gunn herself takes on the role of the overly enthusiastic team-leader, of which her navy-blue t-shirt emblazoned with the words, "Please be nice, I'm a volunteer" resounds with nightmares of Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Big Society'[26]. While Nicola Gunn intended to create an experience of togetherness, the thin allure of inter-subjectivity is divorced from an emancipatory anti-capitalist political project. Instead, it neatly complements neoliberal government policies wherein artists take on the role of social workers and 'socially engaged art' circulates as value, adding credence to the notion that

---

[26] 'Big Society' was a political ideology launched in 2010 following the election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the United Kingdom. Its emphasis on community voluntarism came under criticism in the face of State cuts and the withdrawal of support: "Unpaid labour and the charitable and voluntary sectors are due to fill the gaps left by public services, providing support to increasing numbers of poor, jobless, insecure and unsupported individuals and families." (Coote 2010 [online])

"participation, creativity and community... [are terms that] no longer occupy a subversive, anti-authoritarian force, but have become a cornerstone of post-industrial economic policy" (Bishop, 2012, 14). The performance involves a pretention of reconciliation with the world, and the favoured instant at which "recipients [of the performance] forget themselves and disappear into the work" (332) – *mimesis* – is simultaneously that which this immersion is denied.

As such, Gunn's *Hello My Name Is* (2012) becomes an example of performance art at an intersection with social engagement. If performance art here is an *art of action*, the situation remains that the thin line between performance and activism leans heavily towards positivity rather than a "force of negativity" (1997: 15) that Adorno argues is integral to art's critical potential. The collapse of subject and object in performance art-activism thereby also eschews the crucial component of semblance while also being unable to escape from it, because, art "exists as semblance" (Gritzner 2011: 109) The crisis of performance art-activism therefore points towards its crisis as critique, its inability to criticize society.

CHAPTER 2; CONCLUSION

This chapter has considered the "force of negativity in the artwork" (Adorno 1997: 15), extending the argument that "Art keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance... Its contribution to society is not communication with it, but... resistance." (Adorno 1997: 308) In other words, communication entails a form of liberal assimilation with society that always necessarily results in an unfair compromise. Resistance, on the other hand, is a gesture beyond the social order, beyond the very notion of 'society'. This has been explored through several key concepts in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) and *Negative Dialectics* (2007). It has followed Adorno's understanding of the artwork's "inner-aesthetic development" (Adorno 1997: 308) as autonomous from social imperatives, through which mimesis, semblance, and the subject-object relation can be designated as integral aspects.

The chapter has furthermore utilised examples of contemporary performances to demonstrate how semblance, mimesis, and the subject-object relation functions with regards to a performance's critical capacity. The example of participatory utopia in Nicola

Gunn's *Hello My Name Is* (2012) analysed the crisis of semblance and a false unity of subject and object, bearing resemblances to neoliberal ideologies. By contrast, Nicole Beutler's *5: ECHO* (2014) maintained the mask of semblance within its mode of representation, allowing for greater aesthetic, critical distance to be achieved. Critical distance is gained through the negativity of the artwork in its fraught relation with society's claims to rationality and totality: "Nothing in art is immediately social, not even when this is its aim," (1997: 308) Adorno posits.

The following chapter will depart from Adorno's theoretical observations towards an analysis of Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT), as exemplary of the expanded terrain of contemporary performance activist practices. This approach invites a critical perspective to the expanding domain of art, and challenges concepts of ephemerality and duration as counterposed to the object in performance art.

CHAPTER 3: CASE STUDY: TRANSBORDER IMMIGRANT TOOL (TBT); TOWARDS AN ADORNIAN CRITIQUE

So far, this thesis has proposed that the critical potential of performance art is to be held under suspicion through the invocation of Adornian concepts regarding the "force of negativity" (Adorno 1997: 15) in the artwork. It has been suggested that the critical potential of art is manifest due to its critical negativity, its "opposition to society" (308), whereas the merge with activism, by contrast a positive, society-facing communicative endeavour, confuses this dynamic. Within the expanded domain of art, the production of explicitly socially-engaged works places the critical potential of art under threat. As such, it is necessary to further scrutinise performance art as an expanded concept that has merged with activism and as such, favours the political at the expense of critical aesthetic distance.

The case study which will be developed analytically under an Adornian lens (Chapter 4) is the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT). As an art project it exemplifies the tendency of an exponentially expanding domain of art, as it professes to be both an art-object and a broadened concept of performance art. (Cárdenas, *et al.* 2009: 2) In occupying these seemingly contradictory positions the tool enables an analytical grasp upon the ephemerality central to performance art and the object of performance art generally, while interrogating its claims as a critical art practice. As it was developed as an art project, it must be considered critically as art. As such, this Chapter will ask: can a performance be at the same time an object? Can a performance have an enduring life (its object-ness) in spite of its ephemerality? These questions should be kept in mind while encountering the broadened concept of performance art (3.2) in relation to TBT.

This Chapter begins with an explanation of TBT: its purpose and intended aims, how it was able to be developed, and what it ended up as. It then addresses the idea of performance art as a broadened concept, before interpreting the tool as a frustrated critical performance that attempts to criticize the contradictions of society while failing to fully work out its own internal contradictions as an artwork and performance piece. In so doing, this Chapter paves the way for its extension in an Adornian critique (Chapter 4) of the tool wherein Adorno's concepts of the negatively critical artwork are put to use.

3.1. TRANSBORDER IMMIGRANT TOOL (TBT)

TBT was conceived in 2007 at the CALIT2/Visual Arts Department at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) by Ricardo Dominguez, Micha Cárdenas, Amy Sara Carroll, Elle Mehrmand and Brett Stalbaum. The tool was developed as a response and a "counter-aesthetic"[27] to military technologies developed in 1995 by the Border Research and Technology Centre (BRTC), who work with Homeland Security and U.S. Border Patrol to stop the flow of 'undocumented' people crossing the Mexico-U.S. border. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Transborder Grant 2007-8 at UCSD and won the 'Transnational Communities Award' in 2008, an award funded by Cultural Contact, Endowment for Culture Mexico-US and handed out by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico[28]. Furthermore, the art project has toured extensively around galleries, museums and biennales around the United States and Western Europe as an installation.

The project was produced collaboratively between the collectives Electronic Disturbance Theatre 2.0 and b.a.n.g. lab, and a host of other individual collaborators acting as researchers and software developers. The collaboration emerged as an offshoot from the artist and activist collective Critical Art Ensemble, who formed in 1987 to create tactical acts of civil disobedience at the intersections of art, critical theory, technology, and political activism, which they presented with performances, live experiments and exhibitions.[29] The group then dissolved and reformed in 1997 under the name Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT), a collective of cyber-activists, critical theorists and performance artists, known for developing virtual sit-ins and occupations by overloading computer networks and servers, using the internet as a forum for direct action[30].

TBT is the collective's latest art project, a hybrid multimedia performance and activist art project that recycles cheap mobile-phones and deploys them for life-saving purposes. The idea is that these devices are eventually distributed into the hands of Mexican and Central American migrants attempting to cross the Sonoran desert as they traverse the U.S.-

---

[27] http://blog.zkm.de/en/dialogue/border-art-research-visible-borders-invisible-people-transborder-immigrant-tool/
[28] www.oas.org/oipc/english/documentos/MexicoCulturalContactProgramEndowmentforCultureMexicoUSA.doc
[29] http://www.critical-art.net/
[30] http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html

Mexico border. As a performance, the tool requires some imaginative extrapolation. The phones are reconfigured and repurposed, not to make or receive phone calls, nor to take photographs, nor to use the internet; none of these regular features of mobile phones designed for the consumer-subject are apparent. The phones are hacked into with newly developed code and software, which are installed with an app based on a Virtual Hiker algorithm developed by Brett Stalbaum that surreptitiously directs the user through the Sonoran desert -on both Mexican and U.S. territories- towards water-caches and help-centres placed by the local grassroots activist groups, Border Angels and Water Station, Inc. The device features a sonic poetry installation, both instructional and figurative, which aims to heighten the spirit during the potentially deadly journey. The user, delirious and dehydrated, has a limited amount of time to allow the app to help them to safety before the battery runs out. It sounds like a game, but it is actually intended for use and is one of the more conceptually innovative 'artivist', 'hacktivist' and 'interventionist' endeavours to emerge from the U.S. in response to the crisis of migration and displacements engendered by neoliberal economic policies, particularly NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and 'Operation Gatekeeper', the name given to the intensified militarization of the U.S-Mexico border.[31]

One of the more compelling aspects of TBT is its multiple sites of production and reception as a consequence of how the tool was conceived, in reference to its genre and place within the conventions of the art world. As a conceptual art object and a conceptual performance, it allows for dual interpretations, inviting a critical approach to the ambiguity of object-ness and ephemerality in performance art generally. Furthermore, the project itself provides many more potentialities, self-described as:

> "Artivism, tactical poetries, hacktivism(s), new media theater, border disturbance art technologies, augmented realities, speculative cartographies, queer technologies, transnational feminisms and code, digital Zapatistismo, dislocative gps, and intergalactic performances."[32]

Evident here is an evasion of categorisation while maintaining a flux of possibilities. It is also tempting to consider the project in terms of more established, albeit relatively recent theatrical media forms such as mobile theatre, ambulatory performance and site-specific

---

[31] See: Joseph Nevins (2002)

[32] See: Dominguez *et al.* (2013) [online]

performance, and it is viable to visit a recently devised concept, 'nomadic theatre', described broadly as, "a theatre that manifests itself as movement and thinks performance through mobility" (Groot-Nibbelink 2015: 13). However, the numerous attempts at naming and categorising endowed upon the project fall prey to a concern that is 'meta' to its real intentions: as activism it is outward-looking, positive to society in order to help alleviate the suffering of Mexican immigrants and to educate American publics, yet, it simultaneously relies upon validation within the walls of the art world, nullifying its negative critical capacities. This process of validation or valorisation is largely dependent upon recognised and expanded classifications; as such, the next section focuses on the tool's claims for broadening the concept of performance art, from which we can build further towards a critical evaluation of its capacities for a truly antagonistic art practice.

3.2. "BROADENING THE CONCEPT OF PERFORMANCE ART."[33]

Before approaching the claim that TBT attempts to "broaden the concept of performance art" (Cárdenas, *et al.* 2009: 2), first we must ask about concepts in relation to their objects. All concepts are abstractions[34]. In order to conceptualise, the object of inquiry is pulled away from, so that the concepts can be viewed in isolation of their object. Preoccupied with how Marx uses 'abstraction' in his critique of political economy, Bertell Ollman contends that abstraction is used "to refer to a suborder of particularly ill-fitting mental constructs. Whether because they are too narrow, take in too little, focus too exclusively on appearances… these constructs do not allow an adequate grasp of their subject matter." (62) As such, Ollman's clarification can help to inform an understanding (drawing on Chapter 1) of the concepts of performance art.

There are several conventionally understood concepts of performance art: presence, liveness, ephemerality, authenticity, and embodiment. Performances enact a process of self-erasure in their ephemerality, similarly conceived to that of the self-erasure of the movement of the dancing body that Bojana Cvejić has posited as "a paradigm of the

---

[33] See: Cárdenas *et al.* (2009) [online]

[34] The definition used here is found with Bertell Ollman, who defines the abstract as that which "a piece has been pulled from or taken out of the whole and is temporarily perceived as standing apart." (2003: 60).

fundamental condition of performance." (2015: 11) However, performance art, as the object of analysis, in Adornian terms, is non-identical to these concepts. In other words, performance art remains a mutable form premised on concepts which are also in a continuous process of negotiation. Indeed, it has already been established by scholars of performance and art history that these conceptual categories are no longer certain or fixed; Claire Bishop (2012: 108), for example, underscores that the insistence on immediacy and presence were deliberately troubled in modes of performance in the wake of the Happenings in 1960s New York.

With the Transborder Immigrant Tool, it is interesting to note that the experience of the performance is withheld, rather than experienced as documentation. The performance is contained purely as a concept within the object itself. This unusual reversal of systematic procedures reserved for performance art and other performing arts (event takes place, event is documented, documentations are exhibited) sheds light upon the primacy of the concept, rendering the performance itself of secondary importance; it is deferred to the imagination of the receiving subject (the audience/viewer). In this light, TBT can be seen as following the traditions of 1980s conceptual art that was, to quote Susan Buck-Morss, "so heavy on message and so dismissive of the pleasure of sensual experience." (Kester 1997: 39) This is certainly a broadened concept of performance art, beyond the delimited concepts of presence, embodiment and ephemerality, which are always anyway in a continual process of being destabilized and troubled, where boundaries are continually being erased and redrawn.

However, it also departs from performance art and stretches out towards the realm of social and political activism, or of explicitly socially-engaged practices, wherein new concepts are necessary. If TBT is "broadening the concept of performance art" (Cárdenas *et al.* 2009: 2), it inadvertently provides a concrete entry-point into the problematics associated with art-activism, of pertaining towards positivity while valorised and circulated as art. As such, the concept dominates the work didactically, arguably leaving no room for aesthetic experience and the stimulation of empathy necessary for subjective transformation.

3.3. FRUSTRATING THE CONCEPT OF PERFORMANCE ART

The contradictions that reside in the tool as a conceptual performance in the form of an object engender a reading of its frustrated critical potential, which allows for a critical analysis of performance as that circulates as an object in the world of art. TBT frustrates proscribed boundaries and expectations of performance art in ways that strike at the heart of the critical potential of performance, as an art of presence, embodiment and expression, with capacities for the transformation of the subject. Instead of the presence of a real body there are instead disembodied voices that emanate from the phone with code-poetry. A durational performance art piece shrinks to a durational object with limited battery life. The absence of performers is made palpable through the dematerialization of physical bodies in favour of data-bodies summoned by the concept.

It can be observed that some aspects of TBT are reminiscent of the Situationist tactic of *détournement*[35]*.* For the Situationist International (SI), this was central to their ideas of artistic and cultural sabotage, in which "all elements of the cultural past must be 'reinvested' or disappear"[36] (SI 1959 [online]), and significantly, placed "in the service of a real class struggle."[37] (Debord & Wolman 2006 [online]). First, EDT and b.a.n.g. lab provocatively invert the same mapping and tracking technologies deployed by border-officials to police the border zone and to target "suspect movement" (Pinder 2013: 536). Second, the usual Global Positioning System (GPS) is dislocated, removed and reconfigured as a 'geo-poetic system' (gps), simultaneously disabling others from detecting the user's location. The code is open-access and downloadable for other groups to adapt it to their own purposes. Performance Studies scholar Marcela A. Fuentes has commented that TBT embodies "a sort of obscene capitalist utopia of commodities for the disenfranchised." (2013: 44) This envisions TBT's critical potential at work on two levels: the act of hacking and technological *détournement* resituates the purposes of already existing technologies; the devices become instruments of hope that are distributed into the hands of the oppressed. TBT thus emerges as a humanitarian performative tool to raise awareness of the fact that, "the stretch of boundary

---

[35] Anselm Jappe defines *détournement* as "a collage-like technique whereby preexisting elements were reassembled into new creations." (1993: 48)
[36] Situationist International (1959) [online]
[37] Debord, G., Wolman, G. (1956) [online]

between [San Diego and Tijuana] is perhaps the world's most policed international divide between two nonbelligerent countries." (Nevins 2002: 5).

At the same time, it is more compelling to cast a critical glare on to the project that problematises its mode of production as performance art. At once a conceptual art-object and a conceptual performance art, TBT is a performance art-object, displaced from the city in which one may normally encounter it, and relocated to the desert in solidarity with those to whom it professes to serve: the economically displaced, the dispossessed, those on the move. However, to gallery audiences who gaze upon the object in the white-cube, the performance can only be imagined, triggered by the object in a muted, stultified performance. It is thus that a multiplicity of antagonisms manifest within the performance-object: in the mobile phone and its given conceptual task we are faced with expanding and shrinking, presence and absence, movement and stasis, life and death (the survival of the aestheticised immigrant on the brink of an imminent death, who reaches for the "poetic sustenance" (Cárdenas *et al*. 2009: 1) of the phone in desperation). In the object, the self-reflexivity of critique is negated in favour of rousing sympathies for the suffering of the immigrant, which amounts to ameliorative social activism at best. This particular abstraction lends itself to a post-colonial critique of the tool, which although beyond the remits of this particular dissertation, would provide a further angle into an examination of TBT as a critical performance practice.

To this end, the notion of "broadening the concept of performance art" evokes an unsettling dichotomy: the rupture precipitated by the perpetual broadening out of a concept simultaneously runs the risk of collapsing in on itself. While there is space cognitively for this expansion to be understood in unconventional terms, the material object of TBT (the phone) contains only a gesture of performance, muted in its display inside a gallery. The performance of bodies that are expected to move, breathe, sweat and bleed (amongst other abjections) in the presence of an audience in the immediacy of the here-and-now, the "unmediated experience of the real", as Lehmann notes (1999: 34), is sublimated into a mobile phone, a more palatable and socially acceptable form through which to pacify art-audiences. As such, TBT as an art-activist endeavour surfaces as non-threatening.

CHAPTER 3; CONCLUSION

This chapter has analysed the Transborder Immigrant Tool in the context of its claim to "broadening the concept of performance art." (Cárdenas *et al.* 2009: 2) It thus builds on Chapter 1 by explicitly tracing a genealogy of performance art as a contested concept, and returns to Adorno's notion of critical negativity that was explored in Chapter 2. It was demonstrated that while there is evidence of *détournement* in TBT as a subversive tactic, the object is shackled to the concept of performance while being disallowed to perform, which is a consequence of choosing to exhibit and circulate within gallery-circuits as an art object. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the incorporation of social activism into a broadened concept of performance art inadvertently dilutes the critical capacity of the tool, because as an aesthetic experience it gives only information. Due to the primacy of the concept, this falls into didacticism. It can thus be interpreted that TBT fails as an antagonistic art practice, both as a performance and as a device intended for social activism.

The Adornian notion of the "force of negativity in the artwork" (Adorno 1997: 15) is now resurrected and put to use. Adornian concepts explored in Chapter 2 are invoked for a critique of the Transborder Immigrant Tool as a socially-engaged-performance artwork. In so doing, the relationship between performance art and activism will become further cemented in the process of arguing for their non-identity, so as to promote the individual critical powers of each in coalition.

CHAPTER 4: AN ADORNIAN CRITIQUE OF THE TRANSBORDER IMMIGRANT TOOL (TBT)

It has been argued that the direct injection of art into the social negates its critical capacities, demonstrated through Adorno's conception of the "force of negativity" (Adorno 1997: 15) in the art work. This Chapter therefore resumes engagement with Adorno's theoretical preoccupations set out in Chapter 2 and situates them within an analysis of the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT), in order to critically explore a phenomenon that epitomises the confluence of conceptual art, performance and activism. The intention is to allow the relevant Adornian concepts to travel towards an understanding of critical performance practices in the contemporary moment, and thereby be put to use productively to shed new light upon an ever-expanding field.

It builds upon the central question surrounding the critical potential of art in times of neoliberalism, in which aesthetics has –in some cases- been subsumed by explicit politicization. An artwork's content (i.e. Mexico-U.S. immigration, as with TBT) alongside organisations that allocate funding, determines practice. This testifies to an observation of the entrenched role of capital and the state in all aspects of life. As such, it can be put forward that the critical potentials of art are suffocated under a pervasive system of control. This is starkly at odds with the optimism of Marcela A. Fuentes, who contends that "The symbolic work of performance in 'artivist' action underlies the social production of scale, not only as critique but also as constitution of community that prompts embodied resistance and social change." (2013: 7) Fuentes' optimism will be contested through an Adornian interrogation of the Transborder Immigrant Tool, during which it is demonstrated that the work remains trapped within the circulation of particular art-audiences and responding systems of value. In channelling its critique through these institutionalised systems of control and negotiation, TBT prevents itself from becoming an effective mode of activism as well as an effective mode of art.

To deepen the discussion, this Chapter is structured around three areas: first, the Adornian insistence on semblance as the logic of an art work (Adorno 1997: 140) is addressed (4.1.), drawing upon the notion of the "crisis of semblance" (139) (see Chapter: 2.3.1) and the Transborder Immigrant Tool as a frustration upon this logic, further exacerbated by details of funding. This further ties into the aesthetic constitution of the tool,

in which the concept of the immigrant in TBT is produced at the expense of the concrete experiences of actual immigrants (real people), drawing upon the dialectics of subject and object (4.2.) (see Chapter: 2.4.). The discussion then moves towards examining the contradictions of TBT as it is bound by the commodity form (4.3.). It can be brought to the fore that the critical potential of art is severely compromised in its attempts to face society positively, over the aesthetic distance necessary for critique. The argument will then utilize Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'moments' (1947/2014: 526), in order to open out the discussion, frustrate Adorno and re-establish some affirmative potentials in the Transborder Immigrant Tool (4.4.)

4.1.   SEMBLANCE AS THE CRISIS OF THE ARTWORK

In *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), Adorno posits that the logic of art is semblance. It has been established that performance art tends to compromise semblance in favour of direct interjection into the Real. It foregoes semblance in order to bring art back into contact with everyday life, but in doing so, forfeits its capacity for critical negativity. Here is the matter at hand fleshed out more substantially:

> "Every element of artistic semblance includes aesthetic inconsistency in the form of contradictions between what the work appears to be and what it is. Through its appearance it lays claim to substantiality; it honors this claim negatively even though the positivity of its actual appearance asserts the gesture of something more, a pathos that even the radically pathos-alien work is unable to slough off."
>
> (Adorno 1997: 140)

When examined in relation to TBT, the contradiction of "what the work appears to be and what it is" (ibid) becomes apparent. The Transborder Immigrant Tool's actualization is performative, fully realised in the mode of performance out in the Sonoran desert. However, its presence on display inside an exhibition at an art gallery crushes this performative element. As a conceptual art object, TBT remains heavily reliant upon theory as opposed to the critical self-reflection brought about aesthetically through the internal composition of the art work. The theoretical speculations that TBT engages in could arguably rescue the project from accusations of positivity over negativity, insofar as art becoming more theoretical could be acknowledged as foundations for criticism. On the other hand, art and theory while sharing a common space should remain non-identical in order to avoid falling

back into identity-thinking and the subsequent problematics of art becoming identical with activism, or vice-versa. Theory is not meant to see its reflection in practice, nor vice versa, but they ought to feed in and out of each other in continuous dialectical movement.

The appearance of the work as a performative mobile-phone technology is also its semblance-character that automatically takes place within the framing context of the art-gallery. Semblance is denied in the tool's purpose as a device for saving lives at the U.S.-Mexico border, but falls back into semblance due to its display-character. As with Nicola Gunn's *Hello My Name Is* (2012) (2.4.), semblance exists as a crisis of the work itself, exemplifying the difficulty of activist work that is produced as an art-work. With wider implications, it can be stressed that the negativity of art that Adorno places at the core of its critical capacities is capsized to positivity: TBT becomes a public-facing, ameliorative gesture, rather than critical.

Furthermore, the notion of 'civil disobedience' (garnered from the days of Critical Art Ensemble) in this case becomes ironic due to the financial support received for TBT through public institutional money; even more so, it was officially rewarded by an award scheme for cultural connections between the two countries, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico (see Chapter: 3.1.). There can be no doubt that this raises appropriate suspicions regarding which parties have an interest in particular art-projects and activist work and for what reasons, and points to larger questions of state ideology and the maintenance of diplomatic appearances. This becomes clear upon consideration of an interview with the current U.S. ambassador in Mexico, Earl Antony Wayne, where he discusses some of the core missions in the diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico, announcing,

> "a High-Level Economic Dialogue (HLED), in which high-level officials from both governments will work together to: 1) promote competitiveness and connectivity; 2) foster economic growth and innovation; and 3) partner for global leadership."[38]

Meanwhile, research has exposed that as 'illegals', immigrants receive undignified treatment, with further barriers to economic stability and citizenship rights[39]. Indeed, "the

---

[38] See: Lawrence (2015) [online]
[39] Nevins' researches the ideological roots of the term "illegal" as it entered into public discourse, drawing attention to how the language we use reflects the way we think: "The central argument that I make is that we cannot divorce a growing emphasis on "illegal aliens" from the long history in the United States of largely race-

neoliberal agenda embodied by NAFTA would actually lead to an *increase* in Mexican immigration." (Nevins 2002: 191, emphasis the author's). The above contradictions indicate that state-supported activist-art projects amount to gestures of diplomacy between two economic partnerships in co-existence with violent economic policies, giving the appearance of democratic, co-operative pluralism. TBT is endorsed and financially supported by the State, indicating that contradictions exist but are not raised to the level of antagonism. This could be treated as indicative of wider instances of state-supported art-activist projects to see art as ameliorative rather than critical. Therefore, semblance is reinstated upon TBT's implementation as a commodity in art galleries, manifesting as a crisis of the work itself.

4.2. THE IMMIGRANT AS AESTHETIC OBJECT

In addition to the crisis of semblance within the work, the subject-object relation in TBT must also be addressed in adherence to materialist positions upon production processes, as with Walter Benjamin's reminder in *The Author as Producer* (1393/1970) that, "social relationships are determined by relationships of production." (84) Through Adorno, where he expressed unorthodox views upon this relationship, he clarifies that relations of production are not simply between capital and labour, but also between producer and audience, production and reception, subject and object (Buck-Morss 1991: 33). This helps to remark upon an unstable, ambiguous and negotiated proximity between the performance device and its tendentious appeals to particular and univocal subjects: the faceless, unidentified immigrant crossing the Sonoran desert, and Biennale audiences, curators and art-going American publics.

As a conceptual art-object, TBT symbolises the performance of real bodies turned into data-bodies and encapsulated through technology. In the attempts to elevate a potentially deadly experience (crossing a desert in the attempt to illegally cross a militarized border between Mexico and the United States) to the realm of augmented reality, an experience normally reserved for audiences with time and money at their disposal, TBT

---

based anti-immigrant sentiment rooted in fear and/or rejection of those deemed as outsiders, a history that is inextricably tied to a context of exploitation and political and economic marginalization of certain immigrant populations." (Nevins 2002: 79)

treats the issue of immigration as a topic to be criticized, fulfilling the consciousness-raising endeavour of the artwork for the immigrants that are supposedly the subject of this work, who remain invisible and displaced; they are not present in the art gallery. They exist only as a representation and as a construct supplanted by the conceptual artwork.

Indeed, the performance tool is wedded to two sites of production: the tangible white-cube exhibition space, immobile and visible, and the invisible, performed 'elsewhere' in the stage of the Sonoran desert, both fulfilled and unfulfilled as an imaginary, imagined performance triggered from the device. It is fulfilled through its acceptance as a conceptual art object in the homogenous, multiple galleries across the United States; it is unfulfilled as praxis, incomplete in the task to which it was conceived and constructed. As such, TBT in its presentation in art-exhibitions becomes a "death-mask" of its conception (Benjamin 1979: 65); as a broadened concept of performance art, it falters in light of its mission outside the sanitized walls of the gallery, wearing the mask that delineates the death of its intended purposes at the moment of its realization as an artwork. The concentration upon the label 'immigrant' indicates that the tool was made for an American public so as to provoke their moral compasses and engage their sympathies. In attempting to create new, empowered trans-border subjects, the immigrants' experience is nevertheless objectified through technology and reframed as a fetish-character in the gallery, whereby their fight for survival becomes the Western art-audience's aesthetic material. Meanwhile, the immigrants for whom the tool was devised have their identities immediately enclosed, their situation persists, and is only positively resolved as a gesture of amelioration, rather than as a negatively critical act.

4.3. COMMODITY-FORM

The contradictions both internal and external to the Transborder Immigrant Tool discussed above can be considered oppositional while remaining non-antagonistic, which partially accounts for the impotency of critique and gesture of positivity as a public-facing act, rather than one which is negative and pushes away from society, allowing for critical distance. Largely considered, the most damaging effect of instances of artistic activism such as TBT is the identification of art with politics. Kerstin Stakemeier has termed this

phenomenon "the re-appearance of art as politics through the expansion and habituation of its historic conceptual strategies as citable artistic media" (2012: 201) and an "expansion of art into relocations of other fields within itself" (ibid). In her discussion, she asserts that this development has resulted in "artistic gestures of criticality which no longer imply a critique of art itself." (ibid) This in turn implies an "empty depth" (Adorno 2008: 183), in which art attempts to reach beyond itself without first examining its own inner problematics. It is thus that an Adornian critique of TBT as an activist-performance-artwork demands an examination of its conditions under the commodity form.

It had been acknowledged that modernist art was always actively engaged in "re-examining and expanding their forms and means of expression (from land art to Fluxus, installation art, video art, sound art, etc.)" (da Costa 2008: 367) Simultaneously, the influence of technological developments alongside art has been one of the most important historical developments of the 20th century, which Walter Benjamin examined with optimism in *The Work of Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936/2008). In the 21st century, this has brought art, science and technology into close proximity, so much so that the materials available for artists sometimes cannot be distinguished from innovations in consumer-technology, and that this has led to an expectation for new media artists to "become active participants in the ever-expanding information society under capital." (da Costa 2008: 367). New media, of which TBT inhabits as a new-media performance, has been at the forefront of these shifts with the availability and incorporation of digital technologies into artistic innovation. Da Costa points out that the incorporation of digital technology has meant the establishment of "entire programs...even departments...[that are] dedicated to the examination and expansion of these areas." (2008: 367) The methods of artistic production that emphasise process over product (performative works, or works in progress) have not replaced the commodity form, but instead "bring art close to capitalism." (Kunst 2012: 118) Indeed, even with conceptual performances, use-value is still cancelled out by exchange-value, placing ephemeral and temporal art forms into problems; their attempts to escape the commodity-form are reprimanded through capture and channelled through an institutionalised mechanism for the production of aesthetic value and symbolic capital.[40]

---

[40] Pierre Bordieu has defined symbolic capital as a form of cultural authority in "markets in which economic capital is not fully recognized." (1986) [online]

What are the implications for TBT as a commodity? Inspecting Stakemeier's contention – art that expands into new domains only to uncritically feed back into itself implies a vacuity or impoverishment of self-reflexivity and critique – brings us back to the Marxian critique of the value-form, of which Adorno's stance upon "the socially critical aspect of artworks" (Adorno 1997: 346) makes evident (see Chapter 2.2.). In Adorno's time of writing, he supposed that "art responds to the loss of its self-evidence… by trying to pull itself free from its own concept as from a shackle: the fact that it is art." (1997: 24). Conversely, Stakemeier suggests that art probes into other domains while nevertheless remaining fervent in its demand for artistic accreditation (2012: 201). This inversion of the response to the crisis of art invites a renewed dialectical analysis upon the imbrication of art and capitalism since Adorno's observations of modern art, the scope of which is too large for this dissertation.

As such, it can be maintained that in order for artist-activist works such as TBT to have any power, they are bound to accept funding from institutional bodies and be placed within gallery-circuits. Goal-oriented policies and demands of funding for proof of impact ensure that capitalism economically proves itself to be as rational as possible (Kunst 2012: 118). Meanwhile, accruing validation as art widens the criteria for what is possible within art institutions, and likewise, tightens the grip upon art in a society that is struggling to find reasons for its "self-evidence" (Adorno 1997: 24). As Marina Vishmidt remarks, art "expands its reach and its relevance by absorbing and re-presenting in its own domain that which was not previously deemed an instance of art." (2013; *e-flux*) Indeed, Adorno insists that "art is modern through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent..." (1997: 30) In other words, art assimilates itself to the character of the commodity, to which it is implacably bound; it is the inevitable form posed to art in a society of capital. This enhances the need for self-critical responses from works of art, including performances and conceptual performances. It is therefore proposed by this thesis that instances of art-performance-activism that attempt to escape art through explicit social-engagement, and other domains of social interchange, have a weakened capacity for rupture, since they are distanced from their own critical space. As exemplary of this tendency, dissonances contained in TBT are felt through the contradiction between performance as an active, subjective process, objectified in various

art galleries. Relationally, this transforms the experience of the immigrant into an easily commodified, consumable object, diminishing the TBT's critical potentialities.

4.4. OPENING OUT: LEFEBVRE'S THEORY OF MOMENTS (1947/2014: 526)

> "A negative method, however, is not enough. The critique must also pose a project... not only a destruction of the present values, but also a creation of new values; not only a negation of what exists, but also an affirmation of what springs forth."
>
> (Hardt and Negri 1994: 6)

In the spirit of opening out to more hopeful potentialities, Hardt and Negri's observation is a reminder to credit a project for the affirmative currency it puts forward. As such, it is helpful to invoke Henri Lefebvre's theory of moments (1947/2014: 526) in order to re-establish the potentiality in TBT as conceptual performance activist-art. Lefebvre defined a 'Moment' as "*the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility*." (1947/2014: 533, emphasis the author's). As such, it is argued that moments gesture towards total change, insofar as the Transborder Immigrant Tool can promote new ways for an aestheticisation of everyday life beyond gallery circuits, to aesthetically re-imagine the exploited 'illegal' person as an agential subject.

In the speculative performance enacted intimately between the immigrant (the trans-border subject) and the desert environment (mediated by the Transborder Tool), a 'moment' is created out of the displaced everyday life of the border-crosser. The moment partakes in the transformation of the everyday, by making space for the "impossible...to become what is possible" (Lefebvre 1947/2014: 531). The phenomenon of moments according to Lefebvre has a specific duration that is finite: "It wants to endure. It cannot endure... Yet this inner contradiction gives it its intensity, which reaches crisis point when the inevitability of its own demise becomes fully apparent." (530) This can be directly applicable to the functioning of TBT, as a mobile phone that contains a promise but ultimately relies on limited battery life. Nevertheless, if the performance can be adequately imagined from the perspective of an exhibition-audience and from the user of the device in its performative mode in the desert, two subjects are placed in confrontation with each other: the Western gallery-audience and the 'illegal' as a product of neoliberal subjectivity. This creates an antagonism that mirrors real attitudes, and furthermore, dynamically renders

both subjects into objects of the other. In this sense, TBT manages to horrify Western audiences with the image of its negative imprint: the deviant, the Other, the waste-produce (33; Adorno 1997: 43[41]) of capitalism. As such, the performative object registers a confrontation with reality that would rescue its critical capacities.

However, ultimately, a theory of moments for TBT cannot be maintained against the argument for critical negativity. The momentary aspect of TBT, as a device that "artistically transforms the function of cell phones" (Fuentes 2013: 46) from a waste-product of capitalist technological production into a distributed performance for augmenting the prospects of those on the brink of death, is only possible with the suspended belief in what the tool professes to be. Aesthetically constituted as a performative object supported by theoretical analysis[42], TBT relies too heavily on the committed intentions of the producers and, as previously stated (2.3.1), "does not give time to its object." (Jucan 2014: 101) While it has been argued by David Pinder that the most compelling features of TBT is how it "hold[s] open ambiguities, disturbances, resistances and spaces for appropriation" (2013: 34), and that tactical media performances are "vehicles for social critique and cultural irony" (Fuentes 2013: 34), these assertions of its critical potential are questionable upon knowing that TBT was state-authorised, and therefore, "sanctioned subversion" (Vishmidt 2008: 263). As such, the tool's critical potentials amount to a gesture of solidarity; it is used as proof of our humanity, and is little more than a dead weight in the gallery.

CHAPTER 4; CONCLUSION

An Adornian critique has been performed upon the Transborder Immigrant Tool using the concepts explored in Chapter 2. It has been demonstrated that the contradictions of the TBT, as a conceptual performative art-object with activist intentions, allows for a deepened understanding of the problematic confluence of art and activism. It has argued that the semblance-character of TBT reinstates the work as positive and ameliorative rather than negative and critical, compromising its ability to be a "force of negativity" (Adorno

---

[41] As a point of similarity, in Adorno's essay 'Situation', in *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), he writes, "The shabby, damaged world of images is the negative imprint of the administered world." (43)

[42] See: Cárdenas, *et al*. (2009); Dominguez, *et al*. (2013)

1997: 15). Furthermore, the argument progressed to uncover how instances of funding from state-interests can damage an art project's claim to civil disobedience, further arguing for the non-identity of art and activism, as well as for art and theory. It was then suggested that while TBT attempts to highlight social contradictions, it fails to examine its own: as a performative object, instantly there is the shifting status of the immigrant as an active subject while also a passive object as their journey across the desert is concentrated and frozen into the tool. Therefore, it was demonstrated (4.2.) that despite claims to create active trans-border subjects, the dynamism of subject and object cannot be disregarded.

The analysis then proceeded towards an examination of TBT under the conditions of the commodity form, which argued for the necessity of art to be self-critical rather than probing into other domains, summoning the verdict of "empty depth" (Adorno 2008: 183). This was followed by an attempted rescue-mission, invoking Lefebvre's theory of moments (1947/2014: 526), opening the discussion to more affirmative possibilities. However, it was conceded that the weight of a negative critique upon the project denies an affirmative approach, only resulting in a cul-de-sac that preaches positivity for quick solutions rather than deep critiques for undermining the entire social and political system.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has positioned the contemporary identification of performance art and activism as a core problem in the relation of art and society that benefits from a negative dialectical analysis. The objects of inquiry have been contextualised within an expanding domain of art, in which 'socially-engaged' art practices are performed in identification with activism while also seeking artistic validation. Correspondingly, this thesis has sought to question the critical capacities of art in light of these practices.

Chapter 1 suggested that while performance art may have begun as a radical practice, there are reasons to doubt its critical capacities when fused to activism conceptually and in practice. Performance art was thereby understood as a hegemonic form that is used for action and immediacy in areas of social interchange outside of traditional art contexts. After tracing a genealogy of performance art and its fusion with other practices, Boris Groys (2014) was brought into the discussion for the consideration of uselessness as a key facet of contemporary art contrasted with the social utility of activist artworks. This allowed for performance to be placed in comparison to the enduring art-object, from which it was concluded that performance art's critical faculties are potentially threatened.

Chapter 2 built the negative dialectical theoretical framework and developed the "force of negativity" (Adorno 1997: 15) as the theoretical starting point. It argued that art is the embodiment of lack in social reality, and therefore a critique of given conditions. Adorno suggests that criticality is immanent to the artwork and contained within its internal contradictions of semblance and false unity; art is negative to society, and this has implications for performance art of affirmative action, i.e. implying a weakened capacity to pose critical questions. Allusions were made to Nicole Beutler's performance, *5: ECHO* (2014), to emphasize the role of aesthetic distance and semblance for the freedom of critical thought to prosper. Conversely, Nicola Gunn's *Hello My Name Is* (2012) was analysed as the experience of neoliberal social-work performed through art, thus epitomising the crisis of semblance and false reconciliation of subject and object.

Chapters 3 and 4 involved an Adornian critique of the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT), opening out to Henri Lefebvre's theory of moments (4.4) to bring another dialectical unfolding to the argument. Informed as such, it was proposed that the performative

execution of the TBT could engender intimacy between the tool and the border-crosser as it reaches towards new totalisations in the creation of new, empowered subjects. However, it came to the fore that art-activisms "remain inconsequential where they perceive themselves as art and not as politics." (Stakemeier 2012: 200) Therefore, projects akin to TBT compromise their critical capacities by affirming societal politics, merely amounting to "the spectacularization of dissent" (Vishmidt 2010: 5), rather than a negatively critical act.

Overall, it has been argued that the identification of art with activism turns towards the 'social' in an effort to communicate with it, providing ameliorative gestures and insubstantial, short-term solutions, rather than a critical negativity that brings about "a troubling wake" (Bishop 2012: 23), and "leaves a nondigestible residue that won't go away." (Buck-Morss, quoted in Kester 1997: 43) TBT was made exemplary as an institutionalised performance-art-activist project that has a diminished critical potential due to its inner-contradictions, and – contrary to its intentions – perform an affirmation of the status quo.

As such, to conclude, art that identifies with civic engagement is in the business of keeping up appearances with public life. By contrast, autonomous, critical art transforms the perception of the subject, attempting to break down relations of value so as to liberate our capacities for real intellectual experiences.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are several directions this thesis can take in order to provide further critical analysis upon socially-engaged activist performance art. Suggestions here are divided between an extended Adornian approach and further engagement with the Transborder Immigrant Tool.

While the limitations of an Adornian approach are evident due to having extrapolated from his concepts from the art and music of modernism[43], in section 2.1. the reasons for an Adornian approach were, however, justified. It would be fruitful to extend the given research by providing more case-studies in the intersecting fields of performance art

---

[43] Adorno's writings featured extensive theorizing upon Beckett, Brecht, Kafka and Sartre, and Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, and Schönberg (Sakoparnig 2014: 53), among others.
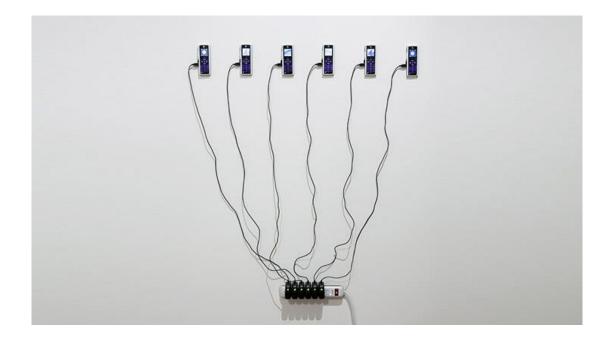
and social practice, for purposes of comparison. This would allow theory and practice to build upon and feed into each other, rather than to be tested and subsequently discarded if theories and concepts are not seen to 'fit'.

Otherwise, further research could draw upon a post-colonial critique of TBT as mentioned in Section 3.3. A post-colonial critique could investigate the claim of creating new trans-border subjects by means of art within Mexico-U.S. relations, while situating the tool within a narrowed field of Border Art and transnational art projects. Furthermore, this could be intensified through an analysis of TBT as a durational walking performance in line with emotional cartographies and bio-mapping devices[44], treading the antagonism between empowered subjects and exploited objects.

---

[44] See: Christian Nold (2009)

Transborder Immigrant Tool installation, photograph[45]

---

[45] http://blog.zkm.de/en/files/2014/02/TBT_04.jpg [accessed 05 August 2015]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adorno, T.W. [1966] 2007. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York & London: Continuum

Adorno, T.W. [1970] 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Bloomsbury

Adorno, Theodor 1974. 'Commitment.' *New Left Review* I/87-88 (September-December)

Adorno, Theodor. [1965] 1980. 'Reconciliation Under Duress.' In *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso

Adorno, Theodor. 1965. 'Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer.' *Die Zeit* (February 12)

Adorno, Theodor. 2008. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a lecture course 1965-1966*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity

Auslander, Philip. 1999. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London and New York: Routledge

Benjamin, Walter [1940] 1974 *On the Concept of History*. [online] Available at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm [accessed 02 June 2015]

Benjamin, Walter. [1934] 1970. *The Author as Producer*. *New Left Review* I/62 (July-August)

Benjamin, Walter. [1936] 2008. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* Translated by J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin

Benjamin, Walter. 1979. 'One Way Street.' In *One Way Street and Other Writings*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: NLB

Beutler, Nicole. 2014. *5: ECHO*. Julidans Festival, Amsterdam. [performance]

Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso

Bonnet, Alberto R. 2009. 'Antagonism and Difference: Negative Dialectics and Post-Structuralism in View of the Critique of Modern Capitalism.' In *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism,* edited by John Holloway *et al*. London: Pluto Press

Borges, George Luis. 1979. 'The unending rose.' In *The Book of Sand*. Translated by Alastair Reid London: Penguin

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. 'The Forms of Capital.' [online] Available at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm [accessed 02 August 2015]

Bowie, Andrew. 2013. *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*. Polity Press

Buck-Morss, Susan. 1977. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute.* New York: The Free Press

Cárdenas, Micha., Carroll, Amy Sara., Dominguez, Ricardo., & Stalbaum, Brett. 2009. The Transborder Immigrant Tool: Violence, Solidarity and Hope in post-NAFTA Circuits of Bodies Electr (on)/ic. *Mobile HCI, University of Bonn, September*, *15*. [online] Available at: http://www.uni-siegen.de/locatingmedia/workshops/mobilehci/cardenas_the_transborder_immigrant_tool.pdf [accessed 23 June 2015]

Coote, Anna. 2010. 'Cutting it.' *NEF* [online] Available at: http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/cutting-it [accessed 06 August 2015]

Cvejić, Bojana. 2015. 'From odd encounters to a prospective confluence: dance-philosophy.' *Performance Philosophy*. Vol.1, 7-23

Da Costa, Beatriz. 2008. 'Reaching the Limit: When Art Becomes Science.' In *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience,* edited by Beatriz Da Costa and Kavita Philip London: The MIT Press

Daddario, Will., Gritzner, Karoline. 2014. *Adorno and Performance*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

De Duve, Thierry. 1996. *Kant After Duchamp*. Cambridge MA : MIT Press

Debord, Guy. [1967] 2005. *Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Kenn Knabb. London: Rebel Press

Debord, Guy., Wolman, Gil J. [1956] 2006. 'A User's Guide to Détournement.' Translated by Ken Knabb, In *Situationist International Anthology*. [online] Available at: http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm [accessed 03 July 2015]

Eagleton, T. 1991. The Ideology of the Aesthetic. Oxford: Blackwell

Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0/ b.a.n.g. lab (2007-) *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (TBT) [contemporary art] [online] Available at: http://bang.transreal.org/transborder-immigrant-tool/

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 2008. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A new aesthetics*. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. New York: Routledge

Fuentes, Marcela A. 2013. 'Zooming In and Out: Tactical Media Performance in Transnational Contexts' In *Performance, Politics and Activism*. Edited by Peter Lichtenfels and John Rouse. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

Gritzner, Karoline. 2011. 'Form and Formlessness Participation at the limit. *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*. 16:4, 109-116

Gritzner, Karoline. 2015. 'Tragedy, Immanence, and the Persistence of Semblance' in *Performance Philosolphy Vol. 1*. [online] Available at: http://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/9/26 [accessed 06 June 2015]

Groot-Nibbelink, Liesbeth. 2015. *Nomadic Theatre: Staging Movement and Mobility in Contemporary Performance*. (Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit Utrecht)

Groys, Boris. 2014. 'On Art-Activism' *e-flux.* [online] Available at: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/ [accessed 24 May 2015]

Gunn, Nicola. 2012. *Hello My Name Is,* Festival de Keuze, Rotterdam. [performance]

Gunn, Richard. 1989. 'A Sentence from Adorno' *Variant*, 6. [online] Available at: http://www.richard-gunn.com/pdf/6_sentence_from_adorno.pdf [accessed 15/04/2015]

Hardt, Michael.,Negri, Antonio. 1994. *Labor of Dionysus: Critique of the State-Form*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press

Heberle, Renée. J. (Ed.) 2010. *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Holloway, John. (Ed.) 2009. *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*. London: Pluto Press

Horkheimer, Max., Adorno, Theodor. [1944] 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, California. Stanford University Press

Jackson, Shannon. 2011. *Social Works*: *Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. New York: Routledge

Jappe, Anselm. 1993. *Guy Debord*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press

Jappe, Anselm. 1999. 'Sic Transit Gloria Artis: "The End of Art" for Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord.' Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. *SubStance,* 28 (3). Issue 90: Special Issue: Guy Debord. 102-128

Joseph Nevins. 2002. *Operation Gatekeeper: the rise of the "illegal alien" and the making of the U.S.-Mexico boundary*. New York & London: Routledge

Jucan, Ioana. 2014. 'Thinking Adorno in Neoliberal Times: Adorno Encounters *Neutral Hero*.' In *Adorno and Performance*. Edited by Daddario, W. and Gritzner, K. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

Kester, Grant H. 1997. 'Aesthetics after the End of Art: An Interview with Susan Buck-Morss' *Art Journal*, 56: 1, 38-45

Kunst, Bojana. 2012. 'Art and Labour: On consumption, laziness and less work.' *Performance Research* 17: 6, 116-125

Lawrence, David. 2015. 'An Interview with Earl Anthony Wayne, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico.' *The Politic*. 11 January, 2015. [online] Available at: http://thepolitic.org/an-interview-with-earl-anthony-wayne-u-s-ambassador-to-mexico/ [accessed 23 July 2015]

Lefebvre, Henri. [1947] 2014. *Critique of Everyday Life*. Translated by John Moore. London and New York: Verso

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre.* Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. New York: Routledge

Martínez, José Manuel. 2009. 'Mimesis and Distance: Arts and the Social in Adorno's Thought.' In *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*. Edited by John Holloway *et al.* London: Pluto Press

Marx, Karl. 1867. 'Commodities.' In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers. [online] Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4 [accessed 28 June 2015]

McKenzie, Jon. 2001. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. New York: Routledge

McNally, David. 2011. *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*. London & Boston: Brill

Milohnić, Aldo. 2005. Artivism. In *"Performing Action, Performing Thinking" (theme), Maska št*, 1-2.

Nold, Christian. (Ed.) 2009. *Emotional Cartography: Technologies of the Self.* [online] Available at: http://emotionalcartography.net/EmotionalCartography.pdf [accessed 05 August 2015]

O'Connor, Brian. 2013. *Adorno*. London: Routledge.

Ollman, Bertell. 2003. *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press

Pinder, David. 2013. 'Dis-locative arts: mobile media and the politics of global positioning.' *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*. 27 (4). 523-541

Dominguez, Ricardo., Carroll, Amy S., Stalbaum, Brett., Cárdenas, Micha and Mehrmand, Elle. 2013. 'Geo_Poetic_Systems (GPS): Fragments, Fractals, Forms and Functions Against Invisibility.' *Trans-Scripts*, Vol. 3., 290-304 [online] Available at: http://sites.uci.edu/transscripts/files/2014/10/2013_03_20.pdf [accessed 23 June 2015]

Sakoparnig, Andrea. 2014. 'Performativization and the Rescue of Aesthetic Semblance.' In *Adorno and Performance*. Edited by Daddario, W. and Gritzner, K. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

Schechner, Richard. 1970. *Dionysus in '69.* New York. [performance]

Situationist International. [1959] 2006. 'Détournement as Negation and Prelude' translated by Ken Knabb. In *Situationist International Anthology*. [online] Available at: http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/3.detourn.htm [accessed 03 July 2015]

Stakemeier, Kerstin. 2012. *Entkunstung: Artistic Models for the End of Art* (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London)).

Vishmidt, Marina. 2008. 'The Cultural Logic of Criticality.' *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 7 (3), 253-269.

Vishmidt, Marina. 2010. *Art in or as Abstract Labour*. [online] Available at: marxandphilosophy.org.uk/assets/files/society/word.../vishmidt2010.doc [accessed 08 August 2015]

Vishmidt, Marina. 2013. '"Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated": Social Practice as Business Model.' *e-flux.* [online] Available at: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/%E2%80%9Cmimesis-of-the-hardened-and-alienated%E2%80%9D-social-practice-as-business-model/ [accessed 16 May 2015]