Spring 1-1-2015

**Affective Ecologies: The Cultural Public Sphere in a Digital World**

Chris Ingraham  
*University of Colorado at Boulder, chris.ingraham@colorado.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.colorado.edu/coml_gradetds](https://scholar.colorado.edu/coml_gradetds)

Part of the [Rhetoric Commons](https://rhetoriccommons.org), [Social Media Commons](https://socialmediacommons.org), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](https://soccultcommons.org)

**Recommended Citation**

https://scholar.colorado.edu/coml_gradetds/21

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Comparative Literature at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Literature Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
AFFECTIVE ECOLOGIES:
THE CULTURAL PUBLIC SPHERE IN A DIGITAL WORLD

by

CHRIS INGRAHAM

B.A., Amherst College, 1999
M.A., University of Chicago, 2002

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
2015
This dissertation entitled:
Affective Ecologies: The Cultural Public Sphere in a Digital World
written by Chris Ingraham
has been approved for the Department of Communication

______________________________
Dr. Gerard Hauser, Committee Chair

______________________________
Dr. Peter Simonson, Committee Member

Date__________________________

The final copy of this dissertation has been examined by the signatories, and we
find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
ABSTRACT

Ingraham, Chris (Ph.D., Department of Communication)

Affective Ecologies: The Cultural Public Sphere in a Digital World

Dissertation directed by Dr. Gerard A. Hauser.

We live in a time when varieties of aesthetic mediation saturate our everyday lives. Personal expressions of taste, too, are nearly ubiquitous. In the digital realm in particular, these things are pervasive: people streaming music and movies, sharing photos over social media, posting links to their favorite fashions or designs, writing reviews of books. Tinker with some buttons and now even amateurs can perform sophisticated edits of photography, record music in their bedroom, produce their own movies. How common it now is for someone to “like” something or “pin” it, to “share” or “rate” it, to “comment” or “review” it. The evidence is clear: our ventures into public life today are colored by unprecedented opportunities for ordinary people to express themselves creatively and to weigh-in about their aesthetic tastes. This realm—where the production of aesthetic cultural goods converges with public discourse about the tastes and ideas that these goods implicate—is the realm of the cultural public sphere, and it is the subject of this dissertation.

The rhetorical tradition dating to antiquity shows that discourse plays a central role in democracy, particularly as citizens come together as publics to discuss matters of shared consequence. All public spheres are rhetorically constituted. Yet, rhetoric always takes place within an ambient ecology of affects, located in bodies and transmitted socially. Affectability is what makes rhetoric and its capacity for salience possible. This study attempts to envision the cultural public sphere, and the rhetorical sociality by which it is constituted, as composed of affective and communicative ecologies alike. Attending to affect poses a special challenge for rhetoricians because it requires moving away from the comfort zone of symbolic registers and toward something far harder to trace. One goal of this project is to recover for rhetoric studies the importance of affect by exploring the ways aesthetic mediation can inspire—and function as—vital modes of public participation in our digital world.

KEYWORDS: Rhetoric, Affect, Cultural Public Sphere, Vernacular, Digital Culture, Art
For Caroline, Mayer, and instance
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would be impossible to recognize and acknowledge everyone and everything that has affected this project and its direction. How to thank the weather, pots of tea, bright rooms, piles of books, the laptop, the jump rope, the shoes on my feet? Directly and unquestionably, though, the guidance and endurance of many supporters deserves thanks. I’ll start by thanking the Department of Communication and the University of Colorado’s Florence Husted Lowe and F. Rex Lowe Arts and Humanities Dissertation Fellowship for the support and funding that bought me the time to do all this. More influentially, my committee: Jerry Hauser, Pete Simonson, John Jackson, Jens Kjeldsen, and Lori Emerson. Lori, thank you for coming aboard this project so blindly, without knowing me or what to expect from it. I am exceptionally fortunate to have your guidance, and I hope that my work is worthy of your commitment. Jens, I’m forever grateful you agreed to play a part in this, overcoming major differences between Norwegian and American norms (and time-zones) to do so. There is no one else about whom I can honestly say that, after each of our interactions, I’ve come away feeling smarter and more uplifted. Here’s to many more. John, nobody keeps me honest like you do. So often in these pages you’re the reader I have in mind as I try to develop concepts I’m not sure even I believe. Your influence on my approach to this field has been immeasurable, and it will remain something for which I’m giving thanks years from now. Pete, you singlehandedly inspired me to pursue the study of rhetoric and culture in the first place, later in life than many others begin, and you made that possible by taking a chance on me early on. Your uncompromising perspicuity and spirit have been my ideal guide ever since. Thank you. And Jerry: Jerry, you’re the sine qua non. I count it as one of my life’s true blessings to have worked with you and to have befriended you and Jean. There’s too much to thank you for here, but how’s this: Thanks for the long rope—and for drawing it in at the right times. Finally, mostly, Caroline: this project has been as hard for you as for me. If labor is the measure, your name belongs beneath the title as much as mine. Thank you for risking our delight. Now you can have me back.
## CONTENTS

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

**PART ONE**  
*Rhetorical Sociality*

Chapter 1.  
Affect: The Softest Bullet Ever Shot ................................................................. 18

Chapter 2.  
The Communicative Ecology of the Cultural Public Sphere ................. 55

Chapter 3.  
The Affective Ecology of the Cultural Public Sphere ......................... 95

**PART TWO**  
*Democratizing Creativity, Curating Culture*

Chapter 4:  
Democratizing Creativity .................................................................................. 134

Chapter 5:  
Curating Culture ..................................................................................................... 167

**PART THREE**  
*Reflexive Publics*

Chapter 6:  
Rhetorical Technicity and the Networked Public Sphere .......... 210

Chapter 7:  
The Affective Register of Vernacular Rhetoric ........................................ 244

Chapter 8:  
Sighting, Siting, and Citing Publics ................................................................. 280

Outroduction ............................................................................................................. 313
IMAGES

1. “Reading is Sexy” ................................................................. 97
2. “Read Motherfucking Books” .................................................. 110
3. Children cranking a mangle .................................................. 122
4. “Intervention to Improve the Conduct of Public Debate” ............. 134
5. A pavilion made of Euro-Pallets .......................................... 140
6. “Muriel’s Over-Curated Life” ................................................ 167
7. Museum Wormianum .......................................................... 176
8. Gallery at Pommersfelden Palace .......................................... 178
9. Düsseldorf Gallery ............................................................... 179
10. Map of Kensal Rise Library and Princess Frederica Primary School .... 253
11. Selected “vernacular voices” from Brent protests ......................... 263
12. The “Brent Council Wall of Shame” ...................................... 272
13. The Kensal Rise “Pop-Up Library” ........................................ 274
14. Tweet announcing Pop-Up Library’s destruction ....................... 277
15. Photo from Michael Wolf’s collection, “A Series of Unfortunate Events” .... 297
16. Photo from Mishka Henner’s collection, “No Man’s Land” ............. 298
17. Photo from Michael Wolf’s collection, “A Series of Unfortunate Events” .... 302
18. Photo from Mishka Henner’s collection, “No Man’s Land” ............. 303
19. Aram Barthall’s Map Project, ground level .............................. 304
20. Aram Barthall’s Map Project, aerial view ............................... 306
21. Staged murder scene in Edinburgh, Scotland .......................... 309
22. “Street with a View” tableaux vivant ..................................... 311
INTRODUCTION

Getting Tingles

At Amherst College in the 1990s, the law professor Austin Sarat was something of a campus celebrity. He had a phrase he used in class: “I’m getting a tingle.” It was his Socratic way of directing students toward the existence of a connection between course topics that was not quite apparent, though a connection was almost there to be made, just a few more cognitive steps away. “I’m getting a tingle,” he would say, and his students knew something good might be coming. The words became a kind of catch phrase among those who had taken his classes. It indicated a premonition, an unformed feeling still inchoate, an intuitive sense, anticipatory and often excited, that something was about to happen: a connection might be made and would emerge, as if from already there just beneath the body’s surface, into something legible and wondrous in the world.

To be getting a tingle is to experience affects. Affects can’t be anything but experienced. As apt as the phrase may be, to say you’re getting a tingle doesn’t “capture” or “represent” affects, which are impervious to signification. But it does come close to describing how they are experienced still in process. A tingle. A shimmer. A glisk. An intensity. In many ways, this dissertation is about getting tingles: it’s a study of the ways our public associations hold together beyond the words for those connections and dispositions that give our sociality meaning and purpose. More particularly, it is a study of our rhetorical sociality. If rhetoric is a non-predetermined social process of making things matter, rhetorical sociality is the irreducible part of being emplaced in a cultured world, a world where we are left to our own devices to ascertain what matters and what
doesn’t, yet are perpetually susceptible to influences ambient in different orders around us.

We live in a time of unprecedented cultural production. Online or off, expert or amateur, sublime or inane: we can all contribute “content” for the public measure. Free market rhetoric encourages, and technology facilitates, the expression of oneself through creative media and the subsequent sharing of that expression with others in a public way. In turn, citizen artists and citizen critics abound. Today’s forays into public life are often given, on one hand, to take broadly aestheticized forms (we post pictures, share videos, dance in flashmobs), and on the other, to involve making public our critical faculties and aesthetic tastes (we review books, create playlists, “like” our favorite fashions). A widespread democratization of creativity is validating and enabling everyone to be an artist or “maker,” while an equally widespread culture of curation is legitimating and encouraging everyone to be a critic or tastemaker.

These trends are deeply entangled. As more ordinary people make aestheticized contributions to the cultural landscape, we have more need to sort through the gallimaufry and determine what’s important. Yet, the increasing value placed on encouraging and facilitating everyone’s contributions runs fundamentally counter to the values implied by the need to curate culture as a way to make sense of it all. The former extols the virtue of “free” individual expression, as if all resultant communication is equally important as long as it comes from one’s true inner voice. The latter, meanwhile, suggests that some types of expression indeed are better than others (they’re more culturally salient, more deftly executed, more aesthetically rich, etc.). As more creative expression circulates, there’s more need to curate it; as curation becomes more important,
curatorial acts themselves become a form of creative expression. In turn, the tension between the different suppositions behind the drive both to democratize creativity and to curate culture gives rise to new forms of rhetorical sociality surrounding public involvement in that class of cultural goods loosely associated with the name of art.

Art may seem like too stately a title for most of what goes on from Flickr to Facebook, YouTube to Pinterest, Spotify to Twitter. In using it, I echo an insight that John Dewey had in 1934, when he wrote that, “The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits.”¹ Dewey’s account sounds curiously redolent of parallel conditions today, when some of the most vital “arts” include viral videos, Photoshopped memes, trending Tweets about the latest reality star. Jazzed music? How pretentious. When referring to art in these pages, then, as when to “cultural goods” or any of various other near synonyms to which I sometimes resort, the aim is not to define a singularly complex category of human production according to any of its supposed values or necessary and sufficient properties, aesthetic or otherwise. Most often, I mean something it would not be much trouble to think of as art at all: music, books, photography, television, painting. My usage equally includes fine and popular arts, high and low, from mere entertainments to works of exceeding difficulty.

The strange predicament we’re in, however, is that the capacitation of all people as artists or critics is making the social modes of our publicness more and more indissociable from the modes of our artfulness. In itself, this may not appear to be a

¹ Dewey, Art as Experience, 4.
problem. Ordinary people are simply engaging with “art” more often and more publicly. 350 million photos are uploaded to Facebook alone per day.² Twitter hosts 500 million daily Tweets.³ 100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube per minute.⁴ It is nothing new to observe that we are now all photographers, writers, filmmakers—or can be, with the easy click of some buttons. Whatever the medium du jour, online and off the sea of “information” around us is so self-evidently vast and immersive that just to mention it is to disappear into the cloudy palimpsest of countless others who have mentioned it before.⁵ While the fact of our arrival here needs no substantiating, the move to our information age follows a particular history of shifting political economies that implicate technology and the arts alike in a complex process of our very sociality’s commodification.

But the consequences of Caesar crossing the Rubicon, so to speak, are not all in. We still don’t know what repercussions our information age might have upon evolving principles of democracy, ideals of citizenship, and the virtues of different modes of publicness. As the creative industries and creative classes rise in the global economy, infiltrating the quotidian exchanges of everyday life, the realm of stranger relationality known as the public sphere converges with a broad range of aesthetic practices, both creative and critical, and reconfigures how ordinary people publicly express and communicate their desires for the good life amid prevailing conditions of precariousness.

² Facebook, “Products.”
³ Twitter, “Company.”
⁴ YouTube, “Statistics.”
⁵ The “information age” as such is not my focus, though it forms the background context for what I will be discussing. Unsurprisingly, much has been written on the topic. For some approaches compatible with my own project, see Schiller, How to Think About Information; Mattelart, The Information Society; and Terranova, Network Culture.
In a world of free market logic, where the digital has become so ubiquitous, public participation in issues of shared attentiveness is changing its communicative form, and nowhere more so than in the cultural public sphere.

**Rhetoric and the Public Sphere**

What is the cultural public sphere? Better yet, what does it *do*? The descriptive category of a “literary public sphere” is the historical precedent for what I will be calling a cultural public sphere (and sometimes abbreviating CPS) in order to accommodate for the broader range of aesthetic practices in the cultural field today. The former can be traced to Jürgen Habermas, who identified as the precursor to the political, bourgeois public sphere, an “apolitical” literary public sphere emergent in eighteenth-century Europe.⁶ For this historical literary public sphere, the arts figured prominently both as a vehicle for addressing society’s common concerns and as a catalyst for discussion about them. For Habermas, the literary public sphere held structural significance as a novel discursive formation because it inculcated rational-critical debate as the standard bearer for public discourse. In his account, for the first time in human history, in coffee shops, salons, and reading clubs of eighteenth-century England, France, and Germany, strangers gathered to discuss matters of concern to them as individuals (such as troubles with their children), as distinct from their concerns as citizens (such as problems with the exchequer).⁷

In the exemplary British case, the “audience-oriented subjectivity” of an epistolary society, coupled with the increasing circulation of such literary arts as the

---

⁶ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*.
⁷ On the exchequer and the formation of public opinion, see Speier (1950).
novel, made this discussion possible as never before.⁸ People could avoid discussing the particulars of their specific circumstances and instead refract their concerns through the safe medium of a story or theatrical performance commonly known by many. Instead, for instance, of talking about the welfare of one’s own daughter, one could address such concerns indirectly through talk about the welfare of Clarissa in Richardson’s popular novel. The political stakes of such conversation may not have been overt, but by diffracting them through works of aesthetic mediation, politics could be left tacit within a more explicit conversation about identifying and achieving the life of one’s desires.

The upshot is that the literary public sphere was important for Habermas principally for its instrumental function of cultivating in people the discursive skills necessary to participate in the open discussion of civil society, which eventually came to take on a political aspect. This framing freezes the literary public sphere in the amber of an eighteenth-century Europe long gone. It finds such a sphere’s importance to be exhausted, having acted as an instrument that made possible the kind of public conversation that “deals with objects connected to the activity of the state”⁹ rather than with intimate or domestic concerns. Perhaps for this reason, as Paul Jones has noted, Habermas is far more detailed about describing the literary public sphere’s historical formation than he is about describing its decline thereafter.¹⁰ It may also be due to its historicization that the literary public sphere itself has received relatively scant scholarly attention compared to its political antecedent.

---

⁸ Ibid., 49.
⁹ Ibid., 49.
¹⁰ Jones, “Beyond the Semantic ‘Big Bang,’” 78.
To be sure, there is a fair deal of excellent empirical research into what are certainly case studies of literary public spheres.11 Moving beyond the literary, too, other work has been done on the intersection of various fine or popular arts and the public sphere.12 These studies and others like them do sometimes step back, typically in introductory chapters, to consider bigger questions about what literary public spheres are and do. More comprehensive theoretical approaches to assessing the function and characteristics of literary public spheres as such, however, are relatively rare (though a smattering of recent articles and chapters on the subject, primarily from cultural sociologists, may be evidence of a growing interest).13

Whatever the scholarly temperature may be, there is no question that the cultural public sphere is alive and well in social practice. Habermas supplanted the literary public sphere with its political successor then bemoaned the bourgeois public sphere’s eventual

---


12 See, e.g., Peter Dahlgren’s work on television’s role in public enactments of citizenship, *Television and the Public Sphere*; Jennifer Barrett’s study of museums as the public sphere’s predominant cultural institution, *Museums and the Public Sphere*; or the fantastic collection that Larissa Hjorth and her collaborators edited on intimate publics arising from digital art in the Asia-Pacific, *Art in the Asia-Pacific*.

13 After Habermas, some notable exceptions include Rosa Eberly’s excellent book, *Citizen Critics*, sections of Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics*, and Jim McGuigan’s *Culture and the Public Sphere* and *Cultural Analysis*, though these last tilt toward studies in cultural policy. For the resurgence of the topic among cultural sociologists, see, e.g., Born, “The Social and the Aesthetic;” Jacobs, “Entertainment Media and the Aesthetic Public Sphere;” Jones, “Beyond the Semantic ‘Big Bang;’” Roberge, “The Aesthetic Public Sphere.”
disintegration as a result of the political impotence actuated by capitalism’s rampant
cultural production. For Habermas, the political public sphere had sublated the literary
public sphere when rational-critical debate about issues of shared concern made political
action possible. What he misses is that, later, when the possibilities of political action
through such public deliberation were enervated by the very industrial structure that
produces the cultural goods once discussed in the literary public sphere, a version of the
literary public sphere is accordingly what remains even after the political public sphere
has receded. This new version is what I call the cultural public sphere.

In general, public sphere theory, as I discuss intermittently throughout these
pages, is a prolific and diverse area of inquiry that inspires considerable contestation. Let
me say straightaway that, among its many models, I take Gerard Hauser’s as the best
working template because of its insights about the public sphere’s rhetorical nature and
the vernacular role that ordinary citizens play in its constitution.¹⁴ The public sphere, for
Hauser, is “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss
matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them.
It is the locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings.”¹⁵ Since its beginnings in
ancient Greece, Hauser shows, rhetoric has been concerned with the role of discourse in a
democracy: how ordinary citizens influentially communicate their will to those in charge,

¹⁴ Hauser most fully develops his rhetorical model of the public sphere in Vernacular
Voices, where he devotes an entire chapter to critiques of Jürgen Habermas’s seminal
theory of the topic, in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, which is still
the template from which nearly all treatments tend to begin. Michael Warner’s
theorization of publics in Publics and Counterpublics has become a sexy touchstone in
the literature, and for good reason, but Hauser’s theory predates Warner’s while making
many of the same insights the latter is credited with making (the two work from different
traditions and Warner does not appear to be aware of Hauser’s contributions to the
subject).
¹⁵ Hauser, Vernacular Voices, 61.
and how people reach common ground about issues of mutual consequence despite their different prerogatives and opinions. In forwarding a model of the contemporary public sphere based upon five rhetorical criteria—permeable boundaries, activity, contextualized language, believable appearance, and tolerance—Hauser suggests that, while the norms of the Athenian polis are long gone, rhetoric’s role in democratic life today has not diminished; it has merely changed its face.

Rhetoric has always been a topic with many faces. One of these is the practice of producing public discourse. As such, rhetoric has been concerned with those axioms that a communicator needs to bear in mind in order to speak and act persuasively. Taken in this way as a practice (rhetorica utens), rhetoric is a reproducible and purposive art, a techne, whose flexible principles make reliable guides for influential communication across contexts and situations. But rhetoric has also worn the face of a critical study (rhetorica docens), a framework for recognizing the ways we are influenced and persuaded by others. As a critical lens, the rhetorical tradition offers a vocabulary for thinking about the leveraging of power and the manipulation of truth (perhaps its very “creation”) through the influence actuated by social relations and cultural practices. In both faces, utens and docens, practice and theory, rhetoric is central to the ways people try to fulfill their desires or respond to the desires of others being foisted upon them.

Heretofore, rhetoric’s long tradition has taken its basis in the presumption of humanity’s symbolic wiring. On this view, it is because of our intrinsic capacity to be enchanted by language, or what Kenneth Burke called “symbolic actions” generally, that rhetoric can exist at all. Short of sheer force, that is, it is the artful tongue, the

---

16 Ibid., 77-80.
17 Burke, Language as Symbolic Action.
sidelong glance, not always the argument that’s best, but the one that most moves its audience— in a word, it is rhetoric—that draws people to form their beliefs, reach decisions, cast judgments, dispense praise or blame, and, ultimately, to act. A rhetorical model of the public sphere supposes that these symbolic-discursive associations are the means by which citizens come together around issues of common import and reach a sense for what matters most in order to act amid the contingencies of their social interdependence. Indeed, Hauser describes rhetoric as “the symbolic inducement of social cooperation,” linking his thinking explicitly to the prevailing view that rhetoric is possible because its symbolicity suits the innate human disposition to respond to symbols.

What Carole Blair has called this “tendency to equate rhetoric with the occurrence of symbols,” however, deserves to be challenged. In Blair’s telling, the emphasis on rhetoric’s symbolicity reached a tipping point at the Wingspread Conference in 1970, and has since found rhetoric “treated definitively, even exhaustively, as symbolic.” As a result of this stress upon rhetoric’s symbolicity, Blair observes, “meaning—the referential resources of symbols—would become rhetoric’s principal domain.” On one hand, then, the focus on symbolicity greatly widened the cultural purview of rhetorical studies to include “all forms of human communication, not exclusively public address nor communication within any one class or cultural group,” as Douglas Ehninger and his collaborators prescribed after Wingspread in the influential Prospect of Rhetoric.

---

18 Hauser, Vernacular Voices, 14.
19 Blair, “We Are All Just Prisoners Here,” 31.
21 Blair, “We Are All Just Prisoners Here,” 32.
the other hand, though, symbolicity’s predominance has led to the extreme narrowing of rhetorical studies to an interest in the *meanings* and *effects* of rhetorical production. Doing so, Blair argues, misses rhetoric’s “capacity for consequence, and its partisanship.”

Like Blair, who concedes that she does not want “to suggest that it is somehow wrong or incorrect to attend to rhetoric’s symbolicity and its capacity to generate meaning,” I share her proclivity to see what an emphasis on symbolicity misses, while recognizing that it also accounts for an outright formidable part of human sociality. Certainly, where the public sphere is concerned, Hauser’s focus on “rhetorically salient meanings” reveals a strong predilection to privilege rhetoric’s symbolic character. What this dissertation tries to do is envision public spheres, and cultural public spheres in particular, beyond the symbolic-discursive aspects of their rhetorical constitution, yet without losing the insight of their fundamentally rhetorical nature.

Thomas Rickert provides some precedent for such a project by suggesting that Hauser’s emphasis on rhetorical salience doesn’t tell the whole story, “that what is public is as ambient as it is salient, indeed, that to get at salience, we already reach for and work within what is ambient.” Rickert wants to show that the pre-symbolic ambience created by our embodiment among an ecology of other bodies, nonhuman things, places, sounds, environs, and so on, affects our public lives just as much as the meaning or importance we customarily hold only human agents accountable to produce through the whole range of rhetorical symbolic action. I’m sympathetic to such thinking. When reading Rickert,

---

24 Ibid., 19.
though, it can seem as if Hauser’s insights, along with the vast majority of the rhetorical tradition’s basis in symbolicity, would not much be missed if left to fall away like a molted husk. This is harder to swallow.

What is needed—the challenge I’m trying to take on—is a way around this baby-for-the-bathwater dilemma: how to conceptualize public spheres as organized beyond their symbolic-discursive registers without at all abandoning the crucial importance of the symbolic-discursive in their constitution. In an attempt to do so, this study assesses and theorizes the contemporary cultural public sphere as an affective space where public dispositions are formed and the conditions of rhetoric’s persuadability emerge. It asks, In what ways does the current field of cultural production, which is open to the ordinary person as never before, lead us to speculate about how the very materiality of our social interdependence, and not only its symbolic content, has a “rhetorical” character without possessing any of the symbolicity that is traditionally held to be rhetoric’s purview?

Attending to affect poses a special challenge for rhetoricians because it requires moving away from the comfort zone of symbolic registers and toward something far harder to trace. One goal of this project is to unconceal the importance of affect to our rhetorical sociality by exploring the ways aesthetic mediation can inspire—and function as—vital modes of public participation in our digital world. These pages, in brief, are on a hunt for tingles: for what comes before rhetoric, the pluripotent ambience from which rhetorical meanings emerge and without which they would not be possible. I will call this pluripotent ambience an affective ecology, and I will argue that, although affective ecologies are what make rhetoric possible, paradoxically, they exhibit rhetorical qualities themselves.
A Brief Tour of What’s to Come

The interdisciplinary scope of this study calls for unconventional organization and methods. This is not a social scientific project. It is a theoretical study, guided by the principle that we should bring all of our available knowledge to bear on the problems we hope to understand. Rather than frontload a discussion of theoretical principles, then, I will introduce theory throughout the text as it becomes relevant to the discussion. My method will be to practice a post-hermeneutic mode of rhetorical criticism; though, as I discuss in Chapter One, the nature of affect requires, when it is taken as an object of study, that such a study be constantly sensitive to the problems of its own methods. Rather than frontload a discussion of methods, then, it too will be a topic broached periodically as methodological concerns become pertinent. To put all this differently, insofar as this dissertation is a study of theory and, to a degree, of method, relegating such issues to small sections of the text would gainsay their importance to the whole.

With the foregoing in mind, the following pages proceed in three parts. Part One, “Rhetorical Sociality,” includes three chapters that attempt to layout the theoretical framework for thinking about rhetorical sociality with regard to cultural public spheres. Chapter One introduces the central concept of an affective ecology. Drawing from a range of literatures and critical vocabularies, including affect theory, Charles Taylor’s “social imaginaries,” Pierre Bourdieu’s “cultural field,” and Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling,” this chapter lays out the main argument that our rhetorical sociality consists in two rhetorical orders: affective ecologies and communicative ecologies. The next two chapters then apply this framework to thinking about the cultural
public sphere. Chapter Two does so by discussing ten screens used to distinguish the
unique characteristics of a cultural public sphere’s communicative ecology, each one of
which alone offers only a partitive understanding of what such a sphere is, how it
functions, and to what ends. Together, though, I suggest, the ten screens begin shaping a
model of the dynamic factors at play in a cultural public sphere’s communicative
ecology. Chapter Three then speculates about the implications of a cultural public
sphere’s affective ecology. Exploring what thinking affectively ecologically implies for
modes of public subjectivity and engagement, theories of the rhetorical situation, and the
purpose of public discourse around the arts, I suggest that affective ecologies help to
reveal publics that have a reflexive character.

Part Two, “Democratizing Creativity, Curating Culture,” details over two chapters
some conditions of our historical present that, when paired together, offer a basis for the
importance of recognizing the superposition of affective and communicative ecologies
today. Chapter Four considers the phenomenon of democratizing creativity by
articulating recent changes in the art world with some contemporaneous developments in
digital culture. The concurrent rise of so-called relational aesthetics and the participatory
affordances of Web 2.0 indicate a trend of enlisting and valorizing the creative expression
of ordinary people—*citizen artists*—in turn making the everyday experience of sociality
and of art increasingly indistinct. Concomitantly, though, as Chapter Five discusses, a
related trend of enabling and encouraging ordinary citizens as curators of cultural
goods—*citizen critics*—has emerged as an abiding cultural logic. This chapter examines
how varieties of curation have historically evolved, concluding with a short study of “the
“mixtape” to show how technology conditions the possibilities for vernacular curation’s meaning.

Part Three, “Reflexive Publics,” brings the dissertation to a close with three chapters devoted to specific case studies. Applying the framework developed in Part One, and situating each case within the cultural conditions of our historical present as described in Part Two, these three studies provide empirical examples in support of the claims I have advanced up to this point. Chapter Six looks closely at a controversy over argumentation norms on the literary social media site, Goodreads.com, taking the case as an illustration of the rhetorical technicity underwriting networked public spheres. Chapter Seven investigates the affective register of vernacular rhetoric displayed by protesting citizens after the threatened closure of their local libraries in the London Borough of Brent, England. And Chapter Eight turns to the example of Google Street View photography as a way to show how publicness can be produced as visual presence through a host of creative practices, hacks, and culture jams surrounding Google’s mapping technologies. These three studies—one online, one off, one in-between—illustrate the deep entanglement of the affective and communicative ecologies that comprise our rhetorical sociality, in cultural public spheres especially.

Affective ecologies—the social dispositions that generate, among other things, the capacity for art to have public salience—are inseparable from the communicative modes of our sociality in public exchange. Although the digital age has meant that our rhetorical sociality sometimes takes more monological, trivial, and recessive forms (what Jenny Rice calls “distant publics”) if we recognize that the affective ecology of the twenty-

---

26 Rice, *Distant Publics*. 
first century is different in kind, and not just degree, from its antecedents, then we must also reorient our understanding of the public sphere and appreciate that aesthetic mediation now actuates novel but no less powerful forms of civic communication. Rather than deliberate rhetorically in the interest of reaching politically actionable consensus, however, cultural public spheres often work affectively, sharing aesthetic experience with strangers as a way to spread visions of the good life and build the commonwealth.
PART ONE

Rhetorical Sociality
CHAPTER ONE
The Softest Bullet Ever Shot

On or About December 1910

In 1923, not long after the publication of her third novel, *Jacob’s Room*, Virginia Woolf found herself the unassuming target of public criticism. Arnold Bennett, a best selling British author and elder literary statesman, had published a strident claim denouncing “young novelists” for emphasizing cleverness and originality in their work instead of vivid characters. True-to-life characters, for Bennett, were the novel’s stock in trade. “If the characters are real,” he wrote, “the novel will have a chance; if they are not, oblivion will be its portion.”27 Naming Woolf in particular, he praised *Jacob’s Room* on several counts—it was “packed and bursting with originality” and “exquisitely written”—but ultimately, because “the characters do not vitally survive in the mind,” oblivion would be its portion.28

Woolf’s response is one of the more audacious rhetorical moves in literary history. Rather than admit to any personal failings in portraying character, she claimed famously that “on or about December 1910 human character changed.”29 She was portraying true-to-life characters; people now were just fundamentally different. The outmoded Mr. Bennett simply hadn’t noticed. To illustrate the issues at the core of this dissertation, let us begin with some speculation: What would it mean to take Woolf seriously?

27 Bennett, “Is The Novel Decaying?”
28 Ibid.
People who study rhetoric might note that the unstated premise of Woolf’s position, its enthymeme, is that art must change to meet the changing human condition from which it emerges. Ostensibly, it’s a causal logic: if human character changes, then artists must represent it accordingly. And, of course, this implies a still deeper assumption. Namely, that the duty of artists (novelists) is to represent reality (human character). Many artists and philosophers of art would contest this premise outright.

Woolf could viably have refuted Bennett’s critique by claiming that portraying vivid characters wasn’t even necessary for good fiction. But she didn’t. Instead she agreed with Bennett about what good novelists do and made a less supportable, but far more provocative claim. Why?

Among Woolf scholars, it is widely believed that in choosing December 1910 as the turning point in human character she referenced a controversial art exhibit in London at that time, called “Manet and the Post-Impressionists.”30 This was the exhibition that first brought Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Cezanne, and a pre-cubist Picasso to a generally unprepared public. From our vantage today, Woolf’s planting the stake for a turning point here accords well with a widely held account that positions the artistic movement known as Modernism, and the historical avant-garde it includes, as producing the most comprehensive reconfiguration of Western culture since Romanticism.

Retrospect certainly makes it easier to deign marking the signposts of major shifts in Western culture. But Woolf’s bold claims weren’t about culture, at least not overtly: they were about human character. If human character had ever changed, how would we know? Even then, how could it be proved?

---

For Woolf, it seems, art provides the evidence. But here we strike a problem. Did the Post-Impressionist artists *initiate* the change in human character, their work infecting the public like a virus? Or, having already undergone such change in character, did these artists merely *express* it for the public with their original new work? Even granting Bennett’s prescription for the artist’s duty, the relationship between art and the public that receives it is far from clear. The linearity Woolf implies is too simplistic. Art emerges *from* a peopled world, yes, but it also emerges *into* a peopled world, where it influences private and public lives in demonstrable ways (one of which is to inspire subsequent artistic production). We thus miss something if we neglect the latter side of this dialectic and suppose it sufficient to say that art *reflects* the human experience. Certainly it can and does. But art also *creates* the human experience when it enters public life and elicits conversation, understanding, and affective experiences not possible before. One task of this dissertation is to understand this chicken/egg dialectic of reflection and creation relative to the historical present in which we now live.

To do so will require developing a better vocabulary than Woolf’s to talk about the chiasmatic relationship between art and the public. In all likelihood, in times when we do find ourselves in a differently felt reality—and I think today is one such time—the difference is probably not, alas, best explained as an alteration in the intrinsic, hardwired nature of human character (as if we could even agree what that was). And we can probably stop short, too, of imagining a reconfiguration in the fundamental nature of art (as if that were settled either). So what is the prize to eye? Was Woolf evoking something closer to a change in global culture? Were the changes material? Superstructural?
Political? Aesthetic? Was she talking about a zeitgeist? A feeling? “And this, and so much more?”

What I want to introduce, in this chapter at some length and then as a recurrent touchstone hereafter, is the concept of an affective ecology—a new way to think about the historical present and the “conditioning conditions” that give our rhetorical and often aesthetic practices, such as a speech or photograph, their capacities to influence, mean, and attain some measure of social purchase. As Woolf intimates, the human relationship with art is an essential metric for identifying—fingering the pulse of—any historical present. Affective ecologies are what we might hope to put our fingers on: the permeating skin of social potentiality that art and the strangers united publicly by attention to it both enter in and emerge from.

But affective ecologies aren’t just about art. They’re about social relations, human and nonhuman, in their perpetual state of becoming. Affective ecologies are unknowably complex, and their complexity is only heightened by their referring to something, as we’ll see, that defies description. Indeed, it turns out that the immunity of affective ecologies to description is part of why they’re so important. Even in writing at length on the subject, then, I have often found my only recourse in speculation, metaphor, diacritical emphases and partial glimpses that, while true to the ontological nature of what I think affective ecologies are, may be unsatisfactory for a reader wanting the concreteness of “a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood.” Nevertheless, I will try to make the concept tall enough to reach the ground, and that will start by saying more about why we need to think affectively ecologically, and why now is the exigent time to do so.

---

Affective Ecologies

Why do we need this theory intervention? Why add to an already bloated critical lexicon yet another abstruse category? The first answer is a bit like Woolf’s bold claim: while it may not be human character that quite has changed, *something* is happening today that is giving rise to new attachments and proclivities, new visions of the good life, new fears and anxieties about the impediments to our desires, and all these are becoming manifest in our public exchange as never before. There are many ways to characterize what Brian Massumi calls this “happening doing” of our historical moment—the process and activity of being in the midst of changes we are both helpless to resist and complicit in creating. Part Two of this dissertation endeavors an accounting for what is happening doing today. But the point for now is that the impalpable and strange newness of our times is making affective ecologies, which must always have existed, suddenly more perceptible, if only in a vaguely intuited way. The need, then, to improve how we understand what they are and do derives above all from the emic basis of an actual world.

But the need for thinking affectively ecologically has also been urged upon us in different guises, over the last several years, by academics across multiple and diverse fields. The “Affective Turn” in the humanities and social sciences may no longer be news (though its implications remain to be sussed out, particularly for communication scholars), and ecological thinking has been valiantly trudging along for years (with a light footprint, of course) and making occasional provocations: Lovelock’s *Gaia hypothesis*, Naess’s *deep ecology*, Guattari’s *ecosophy*, Maturana and Varela’s *autopoiesis*.

---

Nevertheless, critical theory has reached a peculiar impasse. The tools that have enabled our critical assessment of the world, many of them inherited from Marxist and post-Marxist variations on ideology critique, are beginning to “run out of steam,” as Bruno Latour has noticed. Instead of attending primarily to the symbolic inducements issuing from sites of power in all their manifold capacities for silencing and suasion, scholars are engaging more materialist critical practices that turn away from symbolism altogether in favor of considering those conditions that make symbolic action possible in the first place.

I am not suggesting that so-called materialist scholarship is anything new. Marxist materialism, in its many incarnations, has of course been around for some time (which perhaps goes some way toward explaining its trending “decline”). Rooted in economic and political concerns, its various strands of critique tend all to be grounded in the supposition of discrete subjects whom, whether as agents or the acted-upon, reinforce undesirable lines of power and difference. For this reason, such materialist projects can be said to drive toward social justice. In distinction from Marxist-influenced varieties of materialism, however, some “new materialisms” have emerged over the last decade. These are rooted in ecological and political concerns, with various strands of critique that tend all to be grounded in the preconditions of subjection, hence in the supposition of a distributed agency among human and nonhuman things. For this reason, new materialist projects drive toward sustainability and survival.

---

33 Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”
34 For more on New Materialism, see the edited collection by Coole and Frost, New Materialisms. Their introduction is especially helpful for distinguishing between the ontological, bioethical, and geopolitical strains of new materialist scholarship.
Academics are often calling for more critical attention to such-and-such: We need more of this, we need more of that. These calls often go unheeded. But one reason for thinking more affectively ecologically is a direct response to the exhortation of Peter Simonson, who urged in 2014 that, “we need to conduct studies and develop theories that account for symbolicities and materialities alike, making use of both the fundamental categories of critical studies dating to the 1970s and emerging post-humanist vocabularies.”

Doing so in an international scope (Simonson’s other plea) is something that thinking affectively ecologically also necessitates. Following Simonson’s call, then, in the remainder of this chapter I outline the theoretical infrastructures—first from some “emerging post-humanist vocabularies” and then from some “critical studies dating to the 1970s”—that support the concept of affective ecologies.

If there is one essential kernel to the concept it is this: affective ecologies are the site of circulation for the ineffable orientations that condition the capacity of all things—from words to stones—to mean. Meaning itself—which I take here generally as perceived significance, whether implied, explicit, interpreted, or merely thinkable—does not exist as such in affective ecologies. Rather, to think affectively ecologically is to endeavor the challenging task of identifying how meaning might be possible in a given social formation; it is to characterize those conditions that precede the vast realm of symbolic actions that define us, according to Kenneth Burke, as human. If, as Burke says, humankind is the “symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing animal,” then to think about the preconditions of symbolicity is, at heart, to think about the socio-material formations that enable our humanity.

---

36 Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, 6.
Thinking Affectively

I accidentally touched my head
And noticed that I had been bleeding,
For how long I couldn’t say.
What was this, I thought, that struck me?
What kind of bullets have they got?
The softest bullet ever shot.

– The Flaming Lips, “The Spark that Bled”

Affect theorists warn against the temptation to conflate affect with emotion or feeling. The difference between these terms can be illustrated with a simple example. Suppose you’re in the kitchen cooking dinner. Without warning, you give a fright.

You’ve just noticed that you’ve burnt your hand on the stove. But the pain comes with a strange realization: your hand must have been there for some time before you felt the pain. Cursing and wincing, you run your hand under cold water and look to assess the damage. In this scenario, the pain you experience is a feeling. It’s private, personal, biographical. Because the same stimulus might cause one person more pain than another, the feeling is only your own. But your visible reaction—the fright, the cursing and wincing—is an emotion. It’s social, perceivable, representational. Because your face and noises and bodily comportment convey to anyone watching a sense of what you must be feeling, emotions are semanticized forms of communication.

So where does that leave affect? If feelings have a private character and emotions a social character, what is affect’s character? In this example, affect is what you’ve

37 See, for instance, Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 27; and Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” paragraph 1. The distinction between affect, emotion, and feeling is important in part because one of affect theory’s contributions to the study of culture is the development of a more refined vocabulary to discuss topics that, while not exactly new, have remained tacit in critical discourses for some time, for want of the appropriate language.
noticed only too late: the strange realization of an interval between when the flame began touching your skin and the registration of its pain as a fright. Alternatively, following this section’s epigraph, it’s what your body is doing during the gap between getting cut and noticing you’ve been bleeding. In the calculus of this experience, its division into the sum of its feelings and emotions, affect is the remainder. It is what will have been noticed, in the form of a feeling, and expressed, in the form of an emotion, though it is neither of those things so much as their incubation. In this sense, affect is pre-personal, non-conscious, asignifying, non-representational. Affect is independent of meaning. And yet, affect is a kind of bodily reservoir wherein the potential for incipient meaning pools up, until, overflowing, it becomes personal in the form of feelings, social in the form of emotions. Affect, then, can never be accessed; it can never be expressed; it is only ever a state of becoming, a pooling up of intensity that potentiates the innumerable ways, wincing and flailing, we might feel and emote our way through the world.

This, anyway, is the position of affect theorists in a tradition flowing from Baruch Spinoza through Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, the most prominent figurehead today being Brian Massumi. Massumi’s earliest work on affect builds its argument through neuroscience. He cites John Horgan’s account in *Scientific American* of an experiment that hooked volunteers into an electroencephalograph (EEG) machine and asked them to flex a finger at a moment of their discretion. The experiment found that the EEG

---

38 In using these two examples, the flame and the cut, I do not mean to suggest a necessary link between affect and pain. Affects are also what make it possible for automobile traffic to function without constant accidents, as our bodies unconsciously process external stimuli in ways that prepare us to jerk the wheel or slam the breaks before we would be able to do so were there no affective gap between proprioception and conscious action.

consistently registered activity in the brain half a second before one even thinks about moving the finger. The body, this seems to suggest, precipitates action more than our conscious will, organizing our decisions to act in particular ways before we’re even aware of making these decisions. Massumi locates affect within this half-second, prior to conscious cognition.

Yet, there is a difference between the impulsive reaction one has to a flame—Eeek!—and one’s conscious decision to shriek. In *The User Illusion*, for instance, Tor Norretranders observes that reaction times can be

> a lot shorter than 0.5 second. It does not take a half a second to snatch your fingers away when you burn them! So how can it take half a second to move of your own free will? … Well, it can because reactions are not conscious…. Our reaction time is much shorter than the time it takes to initiate a conscious action.⁴⁰

Norretranders’s bigger point, similar to Massumi’s, is that the body needs time to process all sensation, and hence that our consciousness is not a perfect reflection of an empirical situation, but a virtual simulation approximated by our unconscious brain. Inevitably, this simulation—the “virtual” for Massumi⁴¹—misses phenomena beyond our conscious perception. For Norretranders, the result is nothing less than the possibility of communication itself. As he sees it, only through the unconscious process of creating potential worlds by discarding irrelevant information, which leaves what he calls the *exformation* people share as a baseline context for their sociality, is communication possible.⁴²

---

⁴⁰ Norretranders, *The User Illusion*, 221.
⁴¹ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.
⁴² Henri Bergson’s concept of *attention* is relevant here inasmuch as he posits memory as a sort of mental feedlot of the body’s perception, making attention that which draws us to
Affect theory invites us to recognize that this unconscious process establishes the whole basis on which our sociality might attain its various potentialities. In other words, the concept of affect, when used as distinct from feeling or emotion (or, for that matter, from percepts or concepts\textsuperscript{43}), acknowledges that all conscious volition has a basis in autonomic bodily process that are blocked from consciousness yet responsible for organizing the whole realm of potential actions that guide how we find ourselves situated in the world. As Nigel Thrift describes the missing half-second, it is “that small but significant period of time in which the body makes the world intelligible by setting up a background expectation.”\textsuperscript{44} I want to suggest that affective ecologies—not just individual bodies—are where this notion of a “background expectation” gets formed; and it is such a suggestion that begins to locate the importance of affect for studies of the public sphere, rhetoric, and culture.

The crucial move for doing so, though, is to make a leap from the individual to the social (the solitary to the shared, the private to the public, the personal to the collective). In other words, although affects operate as autonomic bodily responses on individual bodies, it is also possible to imagine that the proprioceptive stimuli that affect our bodies are shared between others through affective atmospheres. Teresa Brennan describes this at the start of her book, \textit{The Transmission of Affect}, by evoking the familiar feeling of entering a room of bodies and immediately sensing the tension inside. All at once, that tension is impressed upon us—better still, Brennan would say, the tension is

\textsuperscript{43} I will not discuss perception or concepts here. For more on their distinction from affect, see Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{What is Philosophy?}, 163-199.

\textsuperscript{44} Thrift, “Still Life in Nearly Present Time,” 34.
impressed in us—before we can even know its basis. For Brennan, affect is something transmitted socially. Entering a tense room (or wherever we move) literally changes our biological makeup as our bodies are constantly responding, beyond our conscious control, to the various pheromonal, physiological, and psychological stimuli—consciously sensible and not—that our sociality inevitably entails. Brennan takes this hypothesis as a basis for theorizing an affective sociality, whereby we all absorb one another’s negative or positive affects, which both build a “me” in singular plurality, and a “we” in plural singularity. In turn, affects have the power to change whole cultural attitudes.\(^{45}\)

It’s unclear, however, exactly how this supposedly happens beyond intangible energetics. Brennan concedes that, “At present we only have a rudimentary language for connecting sensations, affects, and words, for connecting bodily processes and the conceptual understanding of them.”\(^{46}\) In reading affect theory, I’m often left to wonder if we don’t have the language or don’t have the science. William Connolly has tried to explain the social transmission of affects roughly as electrical-chemical charges that travel between people and things, activating vibrations in the nervous system and holding us in a sort of transneuronal connectivity, but to my admittedly inexpert ear, I just don’t know.\(^{47}\) Maybe it’s enough to say, following this section’s epigraph, that affect is the softest bullet ever shot.

There are valid reasons, certainly, to be suspicious of the claims made for affect. The psychologist Margaret Wetherell, for instance, has noted that the problems posed by

\(^{45}\) For Brennan, this physiological impact is literally contagious, and accordingly even explains how sickness and some mental syndromes (e.g., depression) can spread.


\(^{47}\) See Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 150-151.
the missing half-second have spawned an interest among neuroscientists and psychologists in “automaticity,” producing a growing body of literature that does not, however, support the conclusions that affect theorists of the Spinoza/Deleuze/Massumi lineage seem to imagine. Wetherell worries that, while such affect theorists are firmly opposed to positivist thinking, positivism underwrites the assumptions of the neuroscience and psychology on which their arguments tend to rely. Even so, it’s the science that gets it right, she says, taking “a very different line” about affect than its critical theorists endeavor.

But even if the pre-conscious, affect-as-excess theory were true, it poses, Wetherell suggests, “a major insolvable methodological conundrum” in that affect in itself would reside “below the threshold of representation” and therefore could not be accessed for study. That’s quite a conundrum: it is why I have described my project as speculative, much as Kathleen Stewart opens her book, Ordinary Affects, by describing it as “an experiment, not a judgment.” From a metatheoretical standpoint, though, the methodological puzzle reveals the real rhetorical cleverness of affect theory: that relegating the affective to a pre-symbolic register, outside representation, makes such theories impregnable. The impossibility, the purported paradox, of describing affect at all may mean that such affect theory can never be proved, but it also means it cannot be

48 For a review of this work, see Bargh, Social Psychology and the Unconscious.
49 See Wetherell, Affect and Emotion.
50 Ibid., 57.
51 Ibid., 61.
52 Wetherell, Affect and Emotion, 61. Wetherell also cites Bondi et al., “Introduction: Geography’s ‘Emotional Turn,’” who make similar critiques by asking, “How can we represent that which lies beyond the scope of representation?” (11); and, she cites Pile, “Emotions and Affect in Recent Human Geography,” who worries that affect “cannot, by its own account, be shown or understood” (9).
53 Stewart, Ordinary Affects, 1.
refuted. Grounding these theories in neuroscience, though, lends a quasi-empirical credibility to their claims, while still leaving the “out” of an argument to the effect of, “Well, what I’m talking about can’t really be seen or read; to try is to miss the point.”

Ruth Leys is another who finds reason to be cautiously skeptical about the claims being made for affect by critical theorists and neuroscientists alike, though she nicely articulates what they share:

> a commitment to the idea that there is a gap between the subject’s affects and its cognition or appraisal of the affective situation or object, such that cognition or thinking comes “too late” for reasons, beliefs, intentions, and meanings to play a role in action and behavior usually accorded to them. The result is that action and behavior are held to be determined by affective dispositions that are independent of consciousness and the mind’s control.54 (My emphasis.)

Think about that. It’s quite a notion: that affect (which is inaccessible to us) and not our conscious thought or meditation (which we control) is what determines our action and behavior. Despite what at first blush seems to be a devastating indictment of free will, the idea of “affective dispositions” suggests, I think, not that we can’t choose our actions through volition, but that when we do, we are choosing from a prior set of potential choices constrained by dispositions that are beyond our control, let alone our ability to know or inventory.

Affective ecologies, which account for this complex distribution of affective dispositions, create the potentialities underwriting all social relations. Affective dispositions, then, are not a dour death knoll for free will; they are hopeful potentialities of social life, which, because transmitted unaccountably through an interconnected ecology—bodies, shades of light, soundscapes, odors—cannot be reduced to any

---

54 Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 443.
individual agent. We always already act together. As the site of circulation for such potentialities-of-togetherness, affective ecologies provide what Eve Sedgwick calls the “texture” of our world, texture here referring to how we perceptually experience our sociality when embodied within it, across our senses and at different scales. To extend the metaphor, we might say that this texture provides the traction or grip necessary for all the traceable forms of symbolicity, not just emotion but language, to hold its purchase in human relations.

Theorizing affect as a social phenomenon, as thinking affectively ecologically does, allows us to imagine a kind of social formation not predicated upon the content or signifying processes of discursive communicative interaction. Not that discourse does not issue in forms of sociality. Of course it does. But that insight is well established. More incisive is the discovery that, beneath discourse, before it and irreducible to it, affects circulate—on both interpersonal and international scales—to orient our socialness and form affectively cohesive sodalities. One of the key ramifications of this, at least the one this dissertation endeavors to explore, is a necessary expansion of how we conceive of the public sphere.

**Thinking Ecologically**

Almost all theories of the public sphere, certainly as inherited from Habermas, rely on a clear differentiation between two spheres of activity: what the Greeks called the *oikos* (the private realm of the household) and the *polis* (the public realm of political

---

activity). In this “great dichotomy,” the private sphere is treated as home to the free but essentially hidden interactions of the domestic realm, and the public sphere is held to accommodate the open interactions of free citizens in the political. At least three different meanings can be attached to the distinction: *society versus individual; visibility versus concealment; and openness versus closure.* The public/private divide, in other words, raises problems about the relationship between collective and personal interests, the transparency or opacity of social relations, and whether such relations are accessible or sealed off to others.

It is telling, then, that the term “ecology,” originally written *oecologie,* derives from the Greek term *oikos.* Ernst Haeckel, the German zoologist credited with coining the word in 1866, described it as “[der] Haushalt der thierischen Organismen”—the household of animals. So, as Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax describe its etymology, ecology has from the start been regarded as “the science of the household of organisms, i.e., of their relation to their biotic and abiotic surroundings.” Notice here that the concern with the “household” is not with *private* spaces—the den of the bear, the nest of the bird, the rabbit’s burrow, and so forth—but rather with a house of many mansions: the natural world itself, under whose heavenly roof all things coexist. The rehabilitation of the Greek concept of *oikos* at the very advent of ecological thought, in other words, enlists it for a decidedly different purpose than to draw a divide between domestic privacy and public activity. To think about public spheres ecologically in this way is therefore to broaden their figurative household—as I suggest, in a way that troubles

---

56 Somers, “Romancing the Market, Reviling the State,” 24.
57 Susen, “Critical Notes on Habermas’s Theory of the Public Sphere,” 40.
58 Schwarz and Jax, “Etymology and Original Sources of the Term ‘Ecology,’” 147.
traditional notions of a public/private divide and includes both discursive and affective forms of sociality.

Gerard Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere privileges the assumption that communication, including the conditions in which it is realized, makes public engagement with issues of common significance possible:

Humans constitute their issues through communication, and communication regulates the responses of a populace with the potential to become active as judges. Our communicative environment conditions our publicness, defines how we experience ourselves in a milieu of strangers, and shapes the character of those publics that actually do form. The communicative ecology shapes our public spheres.59

Hauser’s formidable contributions to public sphere theory are often associated with (at times unfortunately reduced to) what he takes as their constitution through discourse: the varieties of symbolic communication between strangers that make public spheres fundamentally discursive formations. One of his less appreciated insights, though, is encoded in the language of the passage above, where he refers to a “communicative environment,” a “milieu of strangers,” a “communicative ecology.”

It is not just discourse, in other words, that matters for Hauser, but the relational conditions of such discourse, their “associative network.”60 He develops the point in service of his “reticulate model,” which envisions public spheres coming together around the discussion of issues61 but breaking off as corollary topics gain salience or different

59 Hauser, Vernacular Voices, 60.
60 Ibid., 67.
61 Here, Hauser follows both Walter Lippman and John Dewey, early theorists of the public who, despite their well-documented quarrels, agree that issues are what bring publics into being. For more on this shared tenet of Lippman and Dewey, see Marres, “Issues Spark a Public into Being.”
interests evolve around alternative narratives. For instance, a public discussion originally oriented around Pope Francis’s suggestion that celibacy vows should be scaled back for Catholic priests might well spur a related but separate sphere of discussion about child molestation problems in the church.

Hauser’s reticulate model—which conceptually imagines public spheres resembling the merging and unmerging orbs of a lava lamp—allows for the permeability of discourse topics and participants from one sphere to the next. It’s a model that recognizes the topically mercurial and shifting nature of public discourse, a discourse that is always “joined” and hence already existent, though to join it is itself to shape it into its emergent formation. While discursive symbolicity still remains the public sphere’s vital currency for Hauser, then, he is also committed to recognizing that the “rhetorical salience” of symbolic exchange—that which gives a public sphere its capacity to achieve consensus and reach its functional telos of critical judgment—requires a context of shared assumptions and commonplaces. Hauser calls that larger distribution of such contexts a communicative ecology. I’m suggesting it is always also paired with a corresponding affective ecology.

If it didn’t imply a false equivalency, it might be helpful to say that affective ecologies and public spheres operate in tandem, like a two-seater bicycle. Each propels the other. Unlike the public sphere’s communicative ecology, though, which can be pointed to as some more or less empirical thing—an amalgam of news reports, op-eds, conversations, speeches, photographs, forwarded emails, and so forth—an affective ecology cannot. As affect theory reveals, attempting to see or describe affects is like

---

62 Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 57-81.
reaching to grasp a shell glimpsed at the bottom of a seabed: in doing so, one stirs the sediment and obscures its location. Public spheres, however, particularly those emergent around the arts, offer one of the best ways to experience affective ecologies and to map their social manifestations.

In that regard, a better analogy than the tandem bicycle would be to think of affective ecologies as the atmosphere, and public spheres as the clouds. The atmosphere enables the constitution of clouds, but it is clouds that move through and influence the atmosphere in which they’re situated. We can’t see our social atmosphere anymore than a fish can see the water, yet it potentiates all manner of our communication and, accordingly, makes possible the ways we most often endeavor to reconcile our differences and navigate the challenges of our social interdependence amid conditions of radical plurality.

To better envision the ecological aspect of thinking affectively ecologically, imagine you’re meeting a friend out for dinner. You arrive early; and, opting to wait outside, find yourself standing near a motorcycle someone has parked on the sidewalk. Not wanting to annoy whomever might be its owner, nor for strangers to think you’re someone who parks your bike on the sidewalk and loiters nearby it, you move elsewhere. Now you find yourself standing by a parking meter, around which someone has leashed a dog. But the dog isn’t yours; it looks hungry; and you’d rather not bother it, so you move on again. Instead of occupying the center of the sidewalk, where you’d impede pedestrians, you find a streetlight and lean against it. Now you’re the forlorn loner leaning against streetlights! Finally, then, you manage to find a place in between: not too
close to the motorcycle, not too near the dog, not impeding pedestrians, and not against a streetlight. You’re suspended.

In this scenario, none of these things—motorcycle, parking meter, dog, sidewalk, streetlight—has any ontic meaning. The most that could be said of them is that they invite inference, they imply. But they do so—and here’s the crux—only in relation to their emplacement within the ecology of that corner, where you’re waiting for your friend. This is slightly different than the astute proposition that meaning is always contextual, the way it’s different to brush one’s teeth at the kitchen sink than it is to do the same thing in the bathroom. The example rather illustrates that things, including people, always exist in a state of suspension relative to one another. They cannot be separated from this suspension; they are their medium. The way one can’t see shadows when they overlap with other shadows, we overlap with one another; we are subsumed.

A number of theories have tried to describe what I’m getting at, each bearing different names: assemblages (DeLanda), rhizomes (Deleuze and Guattari), meshwork (Ingold), actor networks (Latour), entanglements (Hodder), swarms (Parikka), and any of various other object-oriented ontologies. Though different, all these theories are associated with “post-humanist” vocabularies less because they disavow the human than because they refuse to take anthropocentric perspectives upon how the world holds together. Insofar as affect theory calls us to bracket symbolicity and signification in favor of their pre-personal potentialities, Kenneth Burke’s _homo symbolicus_ also gets

---

63 Graham Harman is the name most often associated with Object-Oriented Ontology. See DeLanda, _A New Philosophy of Society_; Deleuze and Guattari, _Anti-Oedipus_; Ingold, _Being Alive_; Latour, _Reassembling the Social_; Hodder, _Entangled_; Parikka, _Insect Media._
bracketed, and without symbolic communication as the primary feature of our humanity, we are humbled into the distributed agency of our affectability.

**Affectability**: the disposition to affect or to be affected. For Spinoza, *affectus*: “the affections of the body by which the body’s power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked.”⁶⁴ In the argument I’m advancing, affectability is the pure potential, the precipitate, of **persuadability**: the corollary potential, through symbolic action, either to inspire rest or movement in another, or to be so inspired oneself.⁶⁵ We are already familiar with the rhetoricity of persuadability; even mentioning it borders on tautology after 2,500 years of rhetoric and persuasion being so conceptually associated. But what about the rhetoricity of **affectability**? If affect is pre-symbolic and asignifying, if it is beyond meaning—at least, beyond meaning without meaning being reified into a semanticized form that it doesn’t take in its “purely” affective register—then what ability does it have to persuade? Is it viable to think of affect as a rhetoric?

Others are asking similar questions. Diane Davis and Thomas Rickert come to mind in particular. Both equate affect and persuadability. In a quotable passage from her Introduction to *Inessential Solidarity*, for instance, Davis writes that her “goal is to expose an originary (or preoriginary) rhetoricity—an affectability or persuadability—that is the condition for symbolic action.”⁶⁶ Rickert writes similarly, in his *Ambient Rhetoric*, that “Affect, or persuadability, already inheres, both materially and meaningfully, and is therefore prior to rhetoric. It is the condition of possibility for rhetoric’s emergence.”⁶⁷

---

⁶⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Definition III.
⁶⁵ Here, my movement/rest loci are gestures toward Spinoza as interpreted by Deleuze. See Deleuze, Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze. *Sur Spinoza*.
Both their books do some heavy lifting, Davis’s principally through Levinas, Rickert’s through Heidegger. While their projects are quite different, then, if a commonality unites them, it is the desire to acknowledge that language is not the only show in town when it comes to the rhetorical. The non-symbolic, “metaphysical” identificatory capacities of affect create the very conditions whereby rhetoric is possible.

To superpose the public sphere’s communicative ecology with the counterpart of its affective ecology is to engage a similar project: recognizing the origins of the rhetorical in affective registers that would traditionally fall outside of rhetoric’s ken, but also thinking about how communicative practices and affective dispositions mutually inform one another in public life. In that case, we are back to a version of the problem troubling Virginia Woolf’s provocative claim. Woolf’s contention that a wholesale change in human character occurred around December 1910 gives reason to think about how art and human character mutually create and respond to one another. In a parallel way, if we even speculatively accept the claims about affect made thus far, then we are equally given to speculate about how affective ecologies and communicative ecologies might enable and influence one another.

Perhaps the best “sites” for doing so are those at the intersection of art and public exchange: namely, in the cultural public sphere. In the Introduction I explained some of the historical trajectory of the literary public sphere through Habermas’s account thereof, and suggested that the cultural public sphere is its broadened contemporary outgrowth. The cultural public sphere makes an exceptional site for exploring the interplay of affective and communicative ecologies because the arts are that realm of human production that is most disposed to affectability. When people attend to art through
discussion and other means, we are able to “see” affective ecologies and communicative ecologies working in tandem. The next two chapters will follow this reasoning by exploring more deeply both the affective and communicative ecologies of cultural public spheres.

But first, with the cultural public sphere now named as our object, it may be possible to better characterize affective ecologies and what it means to think affectively ecologically. Recalling Simonson’s exhortation for more scholarship dealing with both symbolicity and materiality, and having already tried to follow his call to ground such work in post-humanist vocabularies, I turn now to articulate the concept of an affective ecology with some more well-worn but no less perspicacious critical categories. Specifically, the social imaginary, as theorized by Charles Taylor, the cultural field, as described by Pierre Bourdieu, and the structures of feeling that Raymond Williams sought to trace through art, all share some affinities with affective ecologies as they relate to the cultural public sphere.

Social Imaginaries

If affect precedes rhetoric, creating the conditions for rhetoric’s salience, then what precedes public spheres? To the extent that public spheres are rhetorically constituted, one answer is affective ecologies. Another is the idea of a social imaginary. Social imaginaries, Charles Taylor (2004) explains, refer to “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative
notions and images that underlie these expectations.” Social imaginaries are not the same as social theory and the attempt to understand society’s organization. Unlike theory, which is the privilege of an academic set who, as Yeats says, “all cough in ink / all wear the carpet with their shoes,” social imaginaries are shared by the multitude. They’re accessible. Indeed, their commonness is the reason for their importance. Taylor emphasizes, “The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of society” (2002, 91). It is also what makes possible the public sphere.

One of Taylor’s insights is that modernity has given rise to a particular version of the social imaginary, and that this modern social imaginary is what has enabled (by making conceivable) the very possibility of the public sphere’s historical emergence. In this sense, there’s something of a “you can’t achieve it until you can dream it” mythopoetics to Taylor’s thinking, though he’s careful to separate the social imaginary from more identifiably explicit beliefs or ideas. It is “not in the realm of explicit beliefs, but through shifts in background understanding and the social imaginary,” he’s said, that “the understanding which constitutes the public sphere can arise.” Nor does change come about through new ideas, even those actually executed in the realm of social practice. Before beliefs or ideas can even potentially actuate change—or, we might say, before they can attain their persuadability—a transformation in the background understanding that constitutes the social imaginary must occur. Society evolves, Taylor says, “not through conceiving new ideas and then acting on them, but through the coming

---

68 Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries, 23.
69 Yeats, “The Scholars,” 141.
70 Taylor, Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere, 227.
to be of new forms which are partly constituted by, and hence help to spread, new background understandings and a new social imaginary.”

While the emergence of a public sphere may not historically have been possible without a “mutation” in the social imaginary, then, Taylor also seems to imply a sort of feedback loop, once such a social formation has emerged, which goes on to inform the ongoing development of the social imaginary. Affective ecologies share a similar quality. If affect is what conditions the possibility of rhetoric, and if public spheres are rhetorically constituted, then, like social imaginaries, affective ecologies capacitate a public sphere’s communicative ecology. Yet, the influence is not just linear: a public sphere’s communicative ecology in turn feeds back upon our affective ecology, such that one informs the other in a self-sustaining way.

But Taylor’s idea of social imaginaries—or, for that matter, its precedents in Cornelius Castoriadis and Benedict Anderson—is not quite the same as what I have in mind with affective ecologies. For Taylor, social imaginaries are representable in that they are “carried in images, stories, and legends.” Affective ecologies are not. Affective ecologies don’t traffic in signification and therefore can’t be interpreted as an expression of anything but themselves. If affective ecologies are “carried in” anything, art is the best possibility. Yet, it would be futile to approach an artwork hoping through interpretation to derive an insight into an affective ecology that the work somehow represents. We just can’t access affect as a deliverable (the best it offers is the “experienceable”). That is

71 Taylor, Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere, 243.
73 See Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society; and, Anderson, Imagined Communities.
74 Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries, 23.
why, rather than a study of art itself, exploring affective ecologies is better accomplished by exploring art’s intersection with people who interact with it communicatively, in all kinds of ways, in the cultural public sphere.

The Cultural Field

Given what I’ve said so far, one of the best ways to get your head around affective ecologies may be through the sociology of art. Although there are many vectors to this broad field, Pierre Bourdieu is at its heart. Always resistant to essentialism, Bourdieu offers one of the more complex—and, though he doesn’t frame it this way, ecological—was of thinking about art’s relation with its social world. For Bourdieu, cultural production happens in a “field” of radical contextuality where literary and other works of art must be understood relative both to structures of power that are objective and economic, and relative to human agents that are subjective and social.75 Extolling “the heuristic efficacy of relational thinking”76 he suggests that works of art always be understood dialectically as emergent in the relationship between labor production and the social process of making meaning:

Given that works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized . . . the sociology of art and literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e., the production of the value of the work. . . It therefore has to consider as contributing to production not only the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.) but also the producers of the meaning and value of the work – critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such.77

75 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production.
76 Ibid., 29.
77 Ibid., 37.
In short, for Bourdieu, and for the program known as the sociology of art more generally, the arts can only be explained in full through an analysis of the structural and historical trajectory of the fields in which they emerge, fields in which agential and structural struggles over symbolic and cultural capital are always socially in play.

It seems likely, then, that Bourdieu would neither have been satisfied with the claim that the Post-Impressionists from the December 1910 exhibition initiated a change in human character, nor that they responded to such a change. The only way to understand that provocative exhibition or Woolf’s claim about human character (or, for that matter, *Jacob’s Room* or Arnold Bennett’s novels) would be to scrutinize the relationship between works of art and the people who perceive and discuss them in social contexts marked by variable forces of thought and material influence.

For instance, it would have mattered to Bourdieu that the Post-Impressionist exhibition occurred in London’s Grafton Gallery instead of the Royal Academy or National Gallery, that critics in major newspapers derided it as (for instance) “a widespread plot to destroy the whole fabric of European painting,”78 that one of the show’s main patrons, Sir Charles Holroyd, who directed the National Gallery, removed his name from any association with the exhibit after seeing what it contained, and that all this publicity gained the exhibit more public attention. No one of these factors, on its own, let alone any aesthetic properties of the artwork itself, could explain the influence that the artworks had on the public mind or, conversely, the way the public perception changed the symbolic value of the paintings. Only together do all these material and social factors,

---

along with others that cannot possibly be traced, produce an artwork’s various kinds of value and social impacts.

Bourdieu wanted to trace and chart these factors as sociological phenomena. But they can also be understood as rhetorical—as non-predetermined ways of making things matter. In that case, Bourdieu’s take on cultural production can itself be contextualized within another, larger frame: one that sees rhetoric as an architectonic art organizing and structuring all other disciplines and arts. Seeing rhetoric as architectonic invites analysis not just of the dialectic between artworks and their discursive circulation in public life, but between rhetoric and culture itself. Understanding rhetoric and culture as mutually implicated means recognizing, as Stephen Tyler and Ivo Strecker have put it, the “fundamental chiasmus that leads us to explore the ways in which rhetoric structures culture and culture structures rhetoric.”

Bourdieu himself does not discuss the rhetorical dynamics of art’s sociological origins, but his theories are deeply amenable to such a reading. Yet, that is not because he subscribes to a linear vision of artist-as-rhetor, an individual whose artworks are discrete texts akin to speeches or other forms of public address and through their rhetorical properties persuade the audiences who encounter them. For Bourdieu, rather, the symbolic value of works of art cannot without gross reduction be attributable to their “apparent producer”—the individual painter, composer, writer, or, generally, what is traditionally called the “author” of a work of art. Instead, symbolic value is produced by

---

79 For more on rhetoric as architectonic, see McKeon, “The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age;” and, Hauser and Cushman, “McKeon’s Philosophy of Communication.”
81 Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief,” 263.
an entire “field of cultural production” that includes such “cultural businessmen” as art dealers, publishers, and talent scout “discoverers,” as well as critics and customers, whom together “consecrate” a work of art as a social product. In effect, this distributed field of producers suspends art and its public uptake alike within an entire ecology of “rhetors,” human and not, the aggregate of which both produces the symbolic value of artworks and reconfigures their social context through the innumerable, multi-directional vectors of influence propelling art’s circulation.

**Structures of Feeling**

Despite the help provided by the *social imaginary* and *cultural field*, the extant critical category that probably evokes the nearest analog to an affective ecology is what Raymond Williams called a “structure of feeling.” A structure of feeling is Williams’s oft-cited conceptual mechanism to describe the feeling of being alive in a particular time and place. More than that: it is a “social experience *in solution,*” that is, a lived and felt experience *while* it is lived and felt, before it has been semanticized as identifiably past or as precipitate for what is yet to come. Because the felt experience of any social totality is only accessible retrospectively, at which point the feeling is calcified and gone, structures of feeling operate methodologically rather as a “cultural hypothesis” about a “social experience which is still *in process.*” In this sense, as Sianne Ngai channels affect theory in pointing out, the “feelings” Williams is after are not to be equated with emotions since “the former are defined as formations that are still in process and barely

---

82 Ibid., 263-264.
83 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133.
84 Ibid., 132.
semanticized, while the latter have distinct histories and come heavily saturated with
cultural meanings and value.”85 But if a “structure of feeling” then designates an
ambiguous and, even then, not yet fully emergent configuration of the social, what good
is it?

Williams—in his constant sensitivity to the historical baggage of words—has
acknowledged the inadequacy of his term. Already in his 1954 Preface to Film, where he
first introduces the concept, he recognizes its shortcomings, but says his term is more
accurate “than ideas or general life” because there is a difference between how we study
particular aspects of life and how we experience them (he strives to understand the
latter).86 Later, in Marxism and Literature, his most extended treatment of the topic, he
admits: “The term is difficult, but ‘feeling’ is chosen to emphasize a distinction from
more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology.’”87 And, actually, he goes on to say,
“experience” would make “the better and wider word.”88 In this way, over time, by
situating the “structure of feeling” concept within this constellation of related terms—
ideas, general life, world-view, ideology, experience—Williams has offered an
associative map of its contours. Doing so marks the concept, paradoxically, as at once
both excessive and insufficient.

This liminal position—between too much and not enough, between past and
future, between the complex whole of a social totality and the particular forms of its
materialization—is what makes the concept alluring as a heuristic for cultural inquiry. By
promising only speculation, it never reduces the cultural field to “belief-systems,

---

85 Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 360.
86 Williams, Preface to Film, 33.
87 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 132.
88 Ibid., 132.
institutions, or explicit relationships,” though these are part of what a structure of feeling means to designate. Instead, Williams aims to expand the range of cultural analysis by identifying a felt register of sociality that, as both a traceable structure and elusive register, can accommodate his materialist project.

But identifying what he described as the “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time” is exceptionally challenging. There is always a differential remainder between what lived experience feels like and our ability to articulate it. Art, though, makes up some of that difference. “It is in art, primarily,” he writes, “that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling is expressed and embodied.” The arts show, Williams writes elsewhere, that “in the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon.”

_The actual living sense. The deep community that makes communication possible._

What he’s talking about is what I’m calling an affective ecology. But affective ecologies do not just differ from structures of feeling in name. Williams supposes that there is a close but not perfect concinnity between art’s representation of how social experience is lived, and how social experience is organized in the ideological structures of the dominant imagination. In his arithmetic to find the remainder, though, artworks have the larger portion: “when one has measured the work against the separable parts,” he writes, “there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element

---

89 Ibid., 133.
90 Williams, _The Long Revolution_, 47.
91 James Aune notes on this regard that, “The most interesting aspect of studying culture is the most difficult to achieve.” Aune, _Rhetoric and Marxism_, 99.
92 Williams, _Preface to Film_, 33.
93 Williams, _The Long Revolution_, 65.
… is what I have named the structure of feeling.” Affective ecologies differ in being irreducible. Because affective ecologies do not ontologically accommodate the a priori possibility of representation, but rather account for how that possibility comes about, we cannot turn to art in the same way, by looking for the residue or remainder it leaves from engaging the space between lived experience and our ability to formalize it materially. At least, we can’t do so and hope to “realize” an affective ecology accordingly. Affective ecologies oblige no remainder; they have no “external counterpart.” Ultimately, then, the biggest challenge to studying them is methodological.

**Method’s Method**

So where does that leave us? We might have expected that post-human provocateurs would make hard-to-follow guides on our quest toward an affective ecology, but even the experienced guidance of such stalwart concepts as social imaginaries, cultural fields, and structures of feeling have directed only by indirection. What next? I will close the chapter by proposing that the greatest challenge of thinking affectively ecologically is the challenge of figuring out quite how to do so. The study of affective ecologies, in short, is always also a study of method.

Given the theoretical nature of my project, most generally its method will be, first, to develop a framework for how to think about affective ecologies and the corresponding conditions of contemporary life that organize our rhetorical sociality, and second, to test this framework through particular cases from the cultural public sphere where varieties of aesthetic mediation have been the subject or means of public discourse. But doing so gets

---

94 Williams, *Preface to Film*, 33.
far more complicated in practice. What is the method for a study of method? If it needs a
name, call it post-hermeneutic criticism. Rather than locate meaning in instances of
discourse or symbolic action—speeches, protests, texts, monuments, etc.—and rather
than undertake to interpret such meanings according to a predetermined system of
theoretical assumptions, I will try instead to identify the conditions of a given context that
make meaning possible in the first place. This is not at all to denigrate the robust critical
practice directed toward the interpretation of rhetorically created meaning—the “what
does this mean?” and “why should I care?” of traditional rhetorical criticism. I am
rather interested in what meaning cannot convey, and I believe this can be located in the
constraints of meaning-constitution that exist materially in the affects that orient our ways
of being in the world.

Insofar as affective ecologies are the site of circulation for the asignifying
affective dispositions that potentiate the rhetorical, they are not amenable to interpretation
the same way most texts are. Margaret Wetherell was right when she observed the
methodological quandary posed by affect’s inability to be represented. How can we
possibly access in an interpretable way something that emits no signifying content to
identify, and even if we could, how would we then represent it in a way that does not
contradict its immanent unrepresentability? I have suggested already that the cultural
public sphere is a rich source for instances of art’s affectability giving way to rhetorical

---

95 For more on the importance of these questions to rhetorical criticism, see Edwin
Black’s landmark book, *Rhetorical Criticism*, where he notes that the twofold task of
critics is to translate the object under critical inquiry into terms an audience can
understand, and to educate an audience about the object and its value: “This dual task is
not an ancillary function of criticism,” he writes, “it is an essential part of criticism” (6).
Similarly, echoing Black’s model of critics as translators and educators, David Zarefsky
sees rhetorical criticism as a project “guided by two master questions . . . ‘What’s going
on here?’ and ‘What about it?’” (“Reflections on Rhetorical Criticism,” 385).
practice. If affective ecologies are what potentiate such a sphere’s more empirically traceable communicative ecology, then making the cultural public sphere the object of study might by diffraction illuminate the affective ecology that propels it.

But I’m not sure this can be accomplished by following Williams and treating artworks as representations of intimately lived experience so that we might gain insight therefrom about the otherwise untraceable affective dispositions of a given social milieu; and it may not be accomplished by following Bourdieu and tracing art’s symbolic value socially through its many cultural producers. Both of these are valuable methods, but they accomplish different ends than my own. The post-hermeneutic criticism I undertake instead takes its guide from the likes of Hans Gumbrecht and Friedrich Kittler, each of whom follows a materialist model of communication in the interest less of exploring what communication potentiates than what potentiates communication.

Gumbrecht’s big methodological move is to advocate a shift “from interpretation as identification of given meaning-structures to the reconstruction of those processes through which structures of articulated meaning can at all emerge.”\(^96\) This shift reorients critical inquiry (in the humanities, for instance) away from the traditional concern with “interpretation” and toward a new concern with “meaning constitution.” As Gumbrecht explains, “different from interpretation as meaning identification, the project of analyzing the processes of meaning constitution literally obliges us to take into account those ‘nonspiritual’ phenomena that used to be excluded from the thematic field of the

\(^96\) Gumbrecht, “A Farewell to Interpretation,” 398. Emphasis in original.
humanities.” As mystical as they may sound, affective ecologies fit this “nonspiritual” bill.

Kittler shows us how. Influenced by Shannon and Weaver’s cybernetic thinking, in which all communication processes and technologies strive to eliminate noise in order to isolate a signal, Kittler’s work observes that digital technologies offer communication’s optimal medium: they reduce all noise. “In simple terms,” as Jeremy Packer puts it, “ones and zeros can’t be mistaken for one another.” The post-hermeneutic aspect of Kittler’s work derives from digital technology’s indifference to signification in favor of the brute facticity of what data are selected, stored, and processed. Rather than critiques directed toward the meaning or content of communication, he attends instead to the material-technical constraints of something much more akin to media’s persuadability.

Because methodological concerns are part and parcel of affective ecologies, I will return to Gumbrecht and Kittler at more length as my inquiries advance in the pages to come. I will add now, though, in conclusion, that one way I have methodologically built from their insights is in the move of pairing affective ecologies with the communicative ecologies that are constitutive of public spheres. Gumbrecht wants an engagement with art beyond its meaning, in one’s presence to the work. In the cultural public sphere, where exposure to art gives rise to communication (and where even this communication sometimes takes an artistic form), affective ecologies accumulate their greatest potentiality in these moments of presence when one experiences art. Privileging such experience, as pragmatist aesthetics also entreats us to do, offers a methodological

---

97 Ibid., 399.
opening to follow Gumbrecht in attending to something other than art's meaning. This method requires bracketing the content of artworks, or speech for that matter, and focusing instead on whatever else it might present.

Similarly, Kittler provides a methodological template for escaping the ideological content of text, where meaning presumably resides. Living under conditions in which the digital has become of widespread consequence is no longer new (the so-called digital age is nearly 30 years old). The indifference of digital technologies to the information they are capable of processing into binary code—which now includes nearly all kinds of information: sound, pictures, video, text—blunts the edge of ideological criticism that is inattentive to this indifference by focusing only on what is said rather than the conditions that make it sayable at all.\(^99\) Insofar as affectability makes communication possible, Kittler’s focus on the a priori technological constraints that potentiate mediated communication offers a method to access the affective.

Ultimately, then, the question is not whether affective ecologies make possible communicative ones, either through experienced presence, as Gumbrecht would suggest, or through discourse networks, as Kittler would say. Rather, the question to ask is whether the ways that affective ecologies condition rhetoric’s possibility are themselves rhetorical. I think they are. Where that leaves us, then, is with two rhetorical orders to comprise our rhetorical sociality: the affective and the communicative. While the latter is

\(^99\) For more on this argument, see Packer, “Epistemology Not Ideology,” 297-298. Packer gives the example of the advertising industry, an ideological criticism of which would focus on the content of ads and the way their material existence rationalizes consumption. Digital culture and its “big data” model, however, make the content of ads irrelevant, emphasizing instead such quantifiable measures as how often people click, purchase, or spend time on a site where the ads are present. The indifference of Google (for instance) to an advertisement’s message now makes epistemological criticism about the conditions of a message’s possibility more urgent than ideological critiques of its content.
no stranger to hermeneutics, the former brooks no interpretation. By toggling between each order, I hope to reveal their deep relationality. The next two chapters begin this work by exploring, in Chapter Two, several important aspects of the cultural public sphere’s communicative ecology, and in Chapter Three, some implications of such a sphere’s affective ecology.
CHAPTER TWO

The Communicative Ecology of the Cultural Public Sphere

Texts and Talk

Mo Yan wins the Nobel Prize in Literature amid protests about his allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party. Members of Pussy Riot, the feminist Russian rock band, get jailed for a song about the Orthodox Church. Jonathan Franzen snubs Oprah’s book club. Nine concertgoers are trampled to death at the Danish rock festival, Roskilde. Mapplethorpe and Serrano are banned from American museums. Censorship trials: *Ulysses*, *Howl*, *Lady Chatterley*, *Huck Finn*. Others. The final season of the TV series “Breaking Bad” airs each episode followed by a live after-show, “Talking Bad.” Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini puts a *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie’s head. Miley Cyrus gives a scandalous performance at the Grammy’s. Gamergate. Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* sculpture is removed from its site-specific public plaza for blocking pedestrian traffic. A Danish newspaper publishes 12 cartoon caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. Sony cancels the release of a movie called “The Interview,” a cockamamie comedy about the assassination of Kim Jong-Un, after North Korea threatens terror attacks. Ai Weiwei is detained for months in Beijing. Conspiracy theories surround Denver International Airport’s murals and sculptures. An Austrian public reacts to Thomas Bernhard’s will, which forbids his plays and unpublished writing ever again being staged or published in Austria. A Keith Haring impersonator is arrested in Florida. Bob Dylan is accused of plagiarism. The British Museum loans the Elgin Marbles to Russia. A K-Pop girl group performs in Nazi armbands. Crowds camp out ahead of the final Harry Potter installment.
These and many other examples from around the world are instances of the field of cultural production known widely as the arts inspiring public attention. Each in their own way, issues such as these have given rise to cultural public spheres: the affective-discursive realm in which strangers interact in ways that reorient the dispositions and commonplaces occasioned by art and its lived experience. This chapter further extends the proposition that there are two orders of rhetoric, those in an affective ecology and those in a communicative ecology. If both are made especially evident through cultural public spheres, as I’ve suggested, then by theorizing how cultural public spheres correspond with their respective rhetorical orders, we should be able to illuminate how each organizes its rhetorical sociality. Doing so for the communicative ecology of such spheres will be the goal of this chapter; the next chapter will attempt such modeling for its affective counterpart.

In its most rudimentary form, the cultural public sphere consists in texts and talk. The “texts” are cultural (art works, entertainments, aesthetic objects or events) and the “talk” is the discourse these texts inspire (reviews, discussions, interpretations). Though not without problems—what counts as a “text” being as nettlesome as what counts as cultural—in at least this elementary sense, the cultural public sphere would be seen as the process whereby something like public opinion about works of art is reached through public conversations about them. I say “something like” because, as I discuss in Chapter Three, public opinion relative to aesthetic goods is not the same as public opinion in the realm of politics. The cultural field is uniquely implicated in the formation of a *sensus*

---

100 My operative definitions of “text” and “culture” are about as large as they can get. *Text:* any legible or perceivable thing, event, or process. *Culture:* the realm of all things created and done by human kind.
communis about such intimate matters as taste, beauty, and art’s function, among various other ways the aesthetic might intervene in our lifeworld, generate experience, and meliorate life.\textsuperscript{101} As encounters with the arts raise discussions of intimate lifeworld concerns, and as these discussions gain pertinence for others beyond merely our personal investment—so that the products and processes of the cultural field begin to implicate strangers in shared matters of concern—then a cultural public sphere begins to take shape.

This understanding can be called the texts-and-talk model. Roughly: an aesthetic text is published or otherwise released; it inspires discussions or interactions between strangers; these interactions take place before audiences in specific contexts; these audiences and contexts delimit the “available means” of effectiveness; the rhetorical arguments thus delimited in turn help to achieve, from amid the antagonisms and contingencies of our heterogeneous world, a trend of opinion about that aesthetic text’s meaning, value, or implications. Such, anyway, is the model of cultural public spheres that follows from a traditionally rhetorical paradigm.

And it has much to recommend it. Certainly, for instance, a texts-and-talk model is the template that Rosa Eberly works from in her seminal study of twentieth-century literary public spheres, when she defines them as “discursive spaces in which private

\textsuperscript{101} I will not discuss sensus communis or the lifeworld at any length. On the former, see Schaeffer, \textit{Sensus Communis}, and Schaeffer, “Commonplaces.” Schaeffer describes sensus communis, via Vico, as “the affective, pre-reflective and somatic quality of language, created when both language and human institutions were formed,” adding, “It is what makes eloquence possible” (\textit{Sensus Communis}, 151). Lifeworld, meanwhile, at least as expounded by Habermas, shares some overlap with the “social imaginaries” I discussed in Chapter One. Here’s a snippet from Habermas to indicate some of that overlap: “The lifeworld forms both the horizon for speech situations and the source of interpretations, while it in turn reproduces itself only through ongoing communicative actions” (“Between Facts and Norms,” 22).
people can come together in public, bracket some of their differences, and invent common interests by arguing in speech or writing about literary and cultural texts.”

There is nothing obsolete or inaccurate about this conceptualization. It reasonably describes what we might think of more broadly as the cultural public sphere insofar as it empirically corresponds with actual communicative practices common in the social fabric. But there is more that it misses. The nature of our sociality around the arts—arts that, by nature, potentiate highly personal experiences—demands a differentiation between the cultural public sphere and theories of the public sphere at large.

Public sphere theory is a vast and interdisciplinary approach to thinking about the public relationship of citizens to one another and, in turn, to the state—primarily in Western liberal democracies. The idea of a public sphere offers a way to understand how problems, issues, and identities emerge within public consciousness, how they become significant and on what basis, and how public opinion is formed regarding those matters held to be important for the common good of society writ large. In short, public sphere theory is a way to think about how civil society organizes desires about the good life relative to the state.

The public sphere thesis is most famously associated with the 1962 doctoral dissertation of Jürgen Habermas, first translated into English in 1989 as The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Already a quarter-century old to scholars working in English, its tenets are widely known but still deeply contested. The fundamentals of the thesis assert the existence of a realm in the social life of liberal democracies that is open to all citizens, unrestricted by institutional influences, and amenable to the sorts of free

---

102 Eberly, Citizen Critics, 9.
and uncoerced discussions that are capable of producing public opinion and bringing it before the state. For Habermas, these discussions attained their legitimacy by exhibiting a rational-critical character—one among many points of resistance for his subsequent critics.

And these critics are manifold. Many have refuted Habermas for conflating a normative vision of the public sphere with “actually existing democracy,” to use Nancy Fraser’s felicitous phrase. Feminist scholars in particular have been keen to identify the historical inaccuracies or discrepancies in his account: arguing, for example, that the public sphere is not really open to all; that its discursive norms don’t meet a rational-critical standard; that there is no such thing as a “common good” acceptable to everyone, and so forth. Their critiques are not alone. Others, inspired by Foucault’s thought, have taken a less deliberative and more agonistic view of the public sphere. Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, for instance, suggests that, “The ideal of a pluralist democracy cannot be to reach a rational consensus in the public sphere. Such a consensus

103 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”

104 This list is not meant to be comprehensive. Reviewing the enormous and still ongoing literature on public sphere theory is not my project. See Calhoun, Habermas and the Public Sphere for several articles representing early responses to the English translation of Habermas’s important thesis, including now-standard versions of the feminist critiques mentioned here, among others.

105 It is widely accepted that a deep philosophical difference separates the respective positions of Habermas and Foucault, the former extolling communicative action-through-deliberation as democracy’s cardinal virtue, the latter a politics of critique undertaken through the genealogical analysis of “governmentality” and the institutional exercise of power through discursive formations designed to sustain the control of those already empowered. Jim McGuigan, in the first chapter of Culture and the Public Sphere, offers a sturdy explanation of the respective differences in the Habermas and Foucault camps relative to the public sphere thesis and its cultural policy implications in particular. For more on Habermas’s mature theory of communicative action, see Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action. For more on Foucault’s central idea of governmentality, see Foucault, “Governmentality.”
cannot exist. We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion."\(^{106}\)

Joining these debates is not my aim. It is worth noting, however, that despite its various critiques, the public sphere thesis has retained a trenchant allure as political theorists, communication scholars, and others have tried to revise or recover its precepts to suit the conditions of contemporary life. As I discussed in the Introduction, I take Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere, most fully developed in the third chapter of his *Vernacular Voices*, as the best and most complete working theory for understanding the public sphere thesis today. While critics of Habermas raise important concerns, the practical wisdom of Hauser’s revision and recovery of the public sphere thesis through a rhetorical tradition based in democracy’s ancient beginnings, leads me to place the burden of proof upon those who would replace or amend his rhetorical model with new alternatives.

Of course, as Pablo Neruda says, “the world is full of however."\(^{107}\) Notwithstanding the viability of a rhetorical model for public engagement, there are all kinds of ways we try to organize our desires about the good life that don’t endeavor an address of the state, that is, that don’t meddle with the formation of public opinion. Public opinion is a tendency of opinion against which there are dissenting views. It may not be a majority view at all—it is not the same as consensus—but may rather be the view most deeply held or forcefully expressed, so to create the impression of how opinion is

\(^{106}\) Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism,” 17.

trending. 108 In theory, at least, the expression of public opinion by citizens engaged in its formation is what liberal democratic states have to go by when deciding the course of actions and policies meant to accommodate the people’s desires. Public opinion legitimates state action. Yet, large parts of our public social relations wager no overt interest in bringing public opinion before the state, despite being deeply invested in pursuing the good lives we desire. The cultural public sphere often takes such a form.

Unlike theories of the public sphere at large, which tend to presume that bald expressions of one’s individuality are suspended by the assumption of a more public role, one befitting the potential to reach decisive action or consensus about substantive shared interests, 109 the exchanges in cultural public spheres are more comfortable with the self-sufficient containment of a participant’s individuality. The problem with transposing a suspension of individuality onto a cultural public sphere is that the arts, while no doubt able sometimes to activate public awareness of shared interests, always activate individual interests in the form of highly personalized aesthetic experiences. In the case of art, that is, it is impossible to separate one’s individual orientation from the public role one may assume in discussing art publicly. In consequence, the cultural public sphere can look like an imposter: merely a collective of individuals who express their personal opinions about art, but show no particular desire for achieving a common orientation in doing so. 110

108 Thanks to Jerry Hauser for the phrasing of this and the previous sentence.
109 See Hauser and Blair, “Rhetorical Antecedents to the Public,” 144.
110 This, incidentally, was one of the predominant critiques of the Occupy movement. Instead of cohesion around a common aim or a shared set of beliefs that led to specific demands, critics said the movement was too scattered: it consisted in a collective of individuals who each championed their own hobbyhorse. The example is one reason to
Ten Screens

If the rhetorical basis of the Text-and-Talk model offers a way to escape that problem it is by envisioning cultural meaning as something negotiated publically through a deliberative process always constrained by its contexts and the affordances they enable. This view, I submit, yields us a cultural public sphere whose communicative ecology can be conceptualized through a matrix of at least ten “terministic screens” delimiting how we understand the cultural public sphere as a particular category of our rhetorical sociality. As Kenneth Burke’s oft-quoted explanation of terministic screens reminds us, “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality.” My hope is to show that each of these ten screens—though, they might also be called facets, factors, frames, aspects, or ways of understanding—offers only a partitive model of the cultural public sphere as a whole. Each, that is, accounts for only a partial truth. Depending on what questions we’re asking, and the phenomenon we’re asking them about, the relevance of each factor changes. Together, though, they begin to sketch a more comprehensive conceptual shape of a cultural public sphere’s communicative ecology. As they do so, what the ten screens leave out begins to reveal the need to recognize something else: an affective ecology that accounts for that remainder.

consider the ways that political engagement, like public engagement with the arts, cannot be separated from personal interest—an interest, I argue, that always begins affectively. 111 Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, 45.
1. Taxonomical

The cultural public sphere can be understood taxonomically as a sub-category of the public sphere writ large. If a public sphere is, broadly speaking, a discursive arena free from state influence where public opinion can be formed through communication among strangers, then an obvious move is to call a cultural public sphere a particularly cultural version of such an arena. Precisely what distinction “cultural” actually designates—for instance, whether it describes the subject of discourse in such a sphere, the inspiration for it, or its quality—is less essential to the taxonomic model than merely recognizing a kind of species-genus relation at play in the concept of a cultural public sphere as such. Simply put, the purpose of a taxonomic screen is to acknowledge that the adjective “cultural” designates an instantiation of public sphere distinct from other kinds.

One of the most resounding critiques of the public sphere thesis as originally formulated by Habermas—which almost all his readers have levied, and which Habermas himself eventually conceded— is the claim that his bourgeois public sphere was too monolithic and exclusive. It didn’t recognize the discursive power of a non-bourgeois class; it left out women; its sense of commonality was a fantasy that denied the actual multiplicity of identities and interests that characterize any complex society. Such critiques have led to the pluralization of the public sphere thesis. Instead of the public sphere, scholars have come to acknowledge public spheres plural, each one unique among others. Michael Warner, for instance, following Nancy Fraser’s idea of “subaltern

---

112 Habermas, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere.”
counterpublics,” has influentially argued that counterpublics are varieties of public sphere that share all the same properties as one another—with the key exception that counterpublics are oriented around and addressed to those who take an oppositional attitude toward the dominant views expressed in the public sphere. Similarly, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have proposed that a “proletariat public sphere” be recognized as a kind of counterpoint to its bourgeois alternative. All told, a wide variety of public spheres are now discussed in the literature, often without much care to think about what distinctions these variations actually serve to designate. The taxonomical screen makes this a problem.

The pluralization that results in a nominal distinction made between the public sphere (the one and only) and a public sphere (one among many) leads to some uncertainty about how to distinguish public spheres from one another or from similar but ontologically different alternatives such as interest groups, discourse communities, and so forth. To speak of “a” public sphere always implies an epithetical modifier even if our terminology doesn’t proffer one; speaking so is thus always to reference a “{   } public sphere,” whether the implied adjective be political, bourgeois, proletariat, literary, black, or any of various others. Conversely, to speak of the public sphere is to speak of those qualities that distinguish “public sphereness” as a general concept. Logically, if the qualities characterizing the public sphere purport to have categorical universality, then any categorization of public exchange that doesn’t meet those characteristics necessarily falls outside the category: it is not a public sphere. At the same time, a pluralistic vision

---

113 See Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”
114 Warner, Publics and Counterpublics.
115 Negt and Kluge, Public Sphere and Experience.
of public spheres—for example, Hauser’s reticulate model or Todd Gitlin’s “sphericules”\textsuperscript{116}—loads all the distinguishing onus on the adjective. Every “\{   \} public sphere” necessarily shares whatever categorical principles accompany “public sphericness” at large (or else they wouldn’t be a public sphere), yet at the same time each variation of public sphere, by virtue of being a variation, claims some autonomy and distinction. This supposed concurrence of the public sphere and a public sphere leaves both concepts doing too much and not enough.

If this were just a matter of the public sphere being a genus in some classification taxonomy—one claiming multiple species of public sphere within it—the problem wouldn’t be so pernicious. The differences between a fox and a whale, after all, do not mean they can’t each be mammals. But because the public sphere thesis posits inclusivity and openness as necessary features for the public sphere’s existence, and because attempts to bracket particular versions of the public sphere are precisely acts of exclusivity and closure, any move to distinguish varieties of public spheres performs a refutation of the public sphere thesis itself. Any “\{   \} public sphere” either possesses some characteristics to distinguish it from the “public sphere” as a concept, or it’s not a public sphere at all. In a way, each of the ten screens I discuss is an attempt to isolate some of the cultural public sphere’s distinguishing characteristics.

2. Historical

At least as inherited from Habermas, the cultural public sphere (what he called the literary public sphere) can be understood as a historical precursor to the more fully

\textsuperscript{116} See Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*; and Gitlin, “Public sphere or Public Sphericules?”
developed bourgeois public sphere that followed it. Serving this function, the literary public sphere once prevalent in Eighteenth-Century Europe thus disappears (at least from Habermas’s account) once public discussion moves away from intimate or domestic concerns and instead deals with state activity—the moment when the politically important bourgeois public sphere is born. The problem with an historical screen is that this story of the cultural public sphere misrepresents it either as having disappeared, or as serving no political function of its own, when in fact people have for centuries continued publicly to produce and discuss art in ways that have an important bearing on our common interests as citizens.

One benefit of a historical vision of the CPS, however, is conceptualizing it as a seminal stage in the practice of criticism as a social act. On this view, if the public sphere writ large is what makes possible social critique and the political legitimation of a society’s members, then the cultural public sphere is important insofar as its space of aesthetic critique is what first gave rise to critique of a more political valence. Such a story involves the divergence of rhetoric and poetics in the Scottish Enlightenment, when literary criticism came to entail the criticism of decorum, taste, and manners, as reflected in varieties of aesthetic expression. Terry Eagleton has developed this history as much as anyone, arguing that criticism was literary before it was political. But other histories tell different stories, not all parts of which are compatible with alternatives.

All historical approaches are limited insofar as they lock the CPS into an origin narrative presumed to position the sphere’s subsequent trajectory for ages hence. Rather than envision the CPS as always emergent or evolving, historicizing the cultural public

sphere marks it as fixed. In that sense, today it is either gone altogether, alive and well, lingering through its obsolescence, or an atavistic fantasy of revivalists. Susceptibilities to revisionism aside, any historical approach to something so amorphous as a public sphere will struggle to reconcile the numerous alternative narratives that might explain its origin.

3. Topical

Commonsense would suggest that one of the best ways to understand the cultural public sphere is through its apparent interest in all things cultural. Q: What kind of public sphere is the cultural public sphere? A: It’s one whose members pay attention to the arts. These are its topics, or at least their starting point. A topical understanding accordingly offers a way to envision the cultural public sphere’s singularity as a public sphere based upon the subject of its discursive attention. The topical understanding of the CPS is thus consonant with a taxonomic model: its cultural emphasis is what makes it a unique species of what is otherwise a common genus.

The topical screen is the default way of conceptualizing the cultural public sphere among those scholars who have given it their attention, Rosa Eberly being the best example. Eberly showed that the cultural public sphere (her adjective is literary) is constituted by what she called (and what I follow her in calling) citizen critics, ordinary people whose public discussion of aesthetic texts acts to shape common interests. The utility of a topical understanding is self-evident: all over the world, the public discussion of literary and cultural texts is so robust that it calls to be distinguished as a category in itself. Indeed, not to distinguish such a category would neglect its formidable place as
part of the public conversation and leave no terminology for referring specifically to those discourses surrounding art and its counterparts in the cultural field.

Yet, making such a distinction on a topical basis is problematic for a couple of reasons. Clearly, the old epithet, literary, is no longer a sufficient category to describe the manifold kinds of creative expression that enter the cultural field and inspire public discourse. What about film or music? Dance or sculpture? Architecture or web design? Even Habermas mentioned drama and visual art in his eighteenth-century literary public sphere, though they were not his focus. Today, the speed of our mediated lives makes film and television far more efficient, not to mention convenient, than thumbing for hours through a doorstopper by Pynchon or King.\textsuperscript{118} Other aesthetic forms than just “literature” have claimed a larger serving of the cultural pie. What’s more, the distinction Habermas makes between the “apolitical” literary public sphere and its political predecessor implies that the literary and political are oil and water: an implication that fails to complicate the always-existing entanglement of the aesthetic and the political.

But the problem with topical screens is not just nominal. I have tried to resolve at least that part of the problem by referring in these pages to a cultural public sphere—and in doing so have swung to the problem’s other extreme of being too capacious. Another shortcoming of the topical screen is that a topical understanding implies that what a given range of public discourse is about ought to serve as the measure of that discourse’s distinctiveness. Two questions follow: Why is the topic of public discourse so significant? And how can a topic be identified without reducing what is likely a multiplicity of related topics into one general category? To designate a cultural public

\textsuperscript{118} This is not to say people no longer read; the evidence rather suggests that more books are being published today and more people are buying them than ever before.
sphere on the basis that its discourse is about cultural or aesthetic expression (disregarding altogether the thorny questions of what count as cultural or aesthetic) is to neglect that its discourse might well be characterized by a host of other salient factors—factors that my “ten screens” are meant to identify.

For example, Habermas identified the bourgeois public sphere based upon the class of those participating. And when Hauser notes, in the first axiom of his rhetorical model, that the public sphere is “discourse based,” he explicitly “relinquishes the class-based apparatus associated with the bourgeois public sphere” and instead “emphasizes the prevailing discursive features in any given body of exchanges.”\(^{119}\) The factors that might distinguish one public sphere from another, in other words, are manifold, and each privileges a fundamental way of understanding that sphere’s uniqueness. The topical approach to the cultural public sphere is both the most predominant terministic screen used to understand it and the most pernicious. But other terministic screens also offer distinctive understandings of their own.

4. Technological

Related to the topical screen but still distinct from it is one that supposes the cultural public sphere pertains not to particular topics but to particular technologies or media. The cultural sociologist Ronald Jacobs, for instance, makes a case that an “aesthetic public sphere” is the best way “to understand the civic impact of entertainment media.”\(^{120}\) His interest in doing so is in part to save such mass entertainment media as fictionalized television programs and films from a history of being relegated (especially

\(^{119}\) Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 61.

\(^{120}\) Jacobs, “Entertainment Media and the Aesthetic Public Sphere,” 320.
by the Frankfurt School in which Habermas was trained) to the status of a frivolous diversion relative to more “serious” forms of art. The aesthetic public sphere Jacobs imagines thus accounts for how mass mediated forms of entertainment can give rise to public discussions important to the common civic good even in their mass mediated forms of mere fun.

It is worth noticing that the technological or media-based screen in the cultural public sphere resists both the “literary” and “cultural” epithets altogether. This is partly because Jacobs wishes to escape the connotations of seriousness and cultural value entangled in either term, but also because he sees entertainment media including more than discourse inspired by forms of aesthetic expression deemed important because they appear in print media or “literature” more broadly.121 Jacobs is looking to recover televised entertainment, including what he sees as the growing confluence of news programming and entertainment programming, as a valuable impetus for public discussion of serious issues, and in that sense his project can be understood to suppose that the “aesthetic” public sphere’s integral feature is the types of media that give rise to its discourse.

One clear advantage of this approach, which Jacobs does not address, is its recognition that aestheticized symbol-use today is hardly limited to print, let alone language, and that digitally mediated technologies have in any case dynamized “print” to include hypertext, video, photographs, data visualization, sound, and other ways of

121 Raymond Williams has traced the historical evolution of the term literature, noting that at different periods it has signified a mark of erudition, a measure of literacy, a quality of discourse, a type of imaginative expression, a variation of nationality, and different kinds of media. See Williams, Marxism and Literature, 45-54; Williams, Keywords, 183-188.
activating the human sensorium. But given the clear pervasiveness and variety of media today, problems with this approach are self-evident. For instance, a direct correlation exists between, on one hand, the increasing porousness of traditional print media with other mediated forms, and, on the other, how problematic it is to understand the CPS based on the discrete media with which it might be concerned. The strength of this correlation licenses a technological approach of regarding the cultural (or “aesthetic”) public sphere as concerned with the socio-cultural impact of media technology per se, and not just with particular variations thereof.

In this sense, if we understand the cultural public sphere to designate discourse characterized by the media of its expression, we are thus left with a conflation of discourses: aestheticized discourse manifest in the materiality of its medium, and the semanticized substance of what that discourse signifies. If one wants to accede that the cultural public sphere pertains broadly to the cultural field, even if such a field only (and only vaguely) includes forms of expression commonly known as “the arts,” then a further problem with the technological understanding remains. Namely, does the cultural aspect of the cultural public sphere refer to a work of art’s medium, or to the medium of the public discussion thereof? Again, the problem is not just nominal, as an expansive approach—one that includes film, music, visual art, and so forth—would merely have to distinguish between different media technologies. Clearly this understanding of the cultural public sphere is problematic, even as it valuably highlights the conflation of different types of expression and response.
5. Industrial

It has long been the case that the arts, and hence individual artists, can no longer thrive independently of the institutions and industries that make them possible. The emergence of the so-called cultural industries dates back to at least nineteenth-century Europe, when, as David Hesmondhalgh explains, “systems of patronage gave way…to the organization of symbolic creativity around the market.”\(^1\) Once funding from individual and private patrons diminished, the arts—and the artists responsible for creating them—were left to survive in a market economy sometimes inhospitable to their sustenance. Circulation became an imperative for art to survive. The “cultural industries” came to be those responsible for vouchsafing the wide-scale distribution and circulation of such “cultural” goods as the arts were thought to provide. These industries are implicated in the cultural public sphere through the ways that they fund, enable, regulate, distribute, produce, and reproduce the arts.

But if the powerful collusion of capitalist imperative and technological innovation leaves no room for reconciling mass scale production with the high-status creativity of exceptional individual talents, it also leaves no room for the possibility of serious or important art being produced on a mass scale. Recoiling against such elitism, some have posited a new model for cultural production and distribution altogether, based upon the refigured category of “creative industries.” Like the cultural public sphere itself, it is not wholly clear what the “creative industries” are or what they do and don’t include. Materially, the impetus for articulating a category called the creative industries has been the emergence of our late capitalist information and knowledge economy, in which new

\(^1\) Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 7.
media technologies make citizens not just passive consumers, receiving fixed texts doled out en masse by industry behemoths, but rather interactive, creative participants themselves in a text’s often localized performance.

Funding decisions are just one of the more obvious issues illuminated by an industrial frame. The delicate balance between government subsidy and market autonomy begins to draw sharp and fast lines between those symbolic goods that survive and those that don’t. More than just a matter of funding this or that art project, how we categorize cultural and creative industries delimits the range of repercussions the included industries are held accountable for having. Such choices then become not just a matter of status, of which parts of culture are “higher” or “lower” than others; these choices also become a matter of ethical imperative, implicating certain industries in wider scales of influence related to the all-too-real influence that the goods they produce may have in local communities vulnerable to, say, the environmental costs of their production and the political dangers of their consumption. The industrial screen, in brief, focuses on the realm of public life invested in cultural policy.

The field of cultural policy concerns how the state regulates the creation and circulation of cultural goods as a means of policing the tastes and values of its citizens. If the cultural public sphere offers an important counterpoint to this powerful influence of the state by acting as the material-discursive realm where public opinion regarding taste- and value judgments about cultural goods can be formed, then the study of both cultural policy and the cultural public sphere is deeply interrelated. If judgment alone were the endgame of a cultural public sphere, though, then we wouldn’t need the construct of a public sphere to get there. We would only need a way to identify the loudest bullhorn and
the strongest biceps. But public spheres challenge the potential strong-arm of the state by emerging as a mediating voice that represents at least a sector of civil society’s common interests. If the notion of judgment is important to any understanding of the public sphere, then it is because it accommodates those voices that may holler at the top of their lungs and still not be heard above the din. By joining a “conversation” in public all such voices gain some power against those institutions and authorities that would silence or ignore them.

The cultural public sphere makes a particularly vivid example because the cultural realm with which it is concerned is so often one legislated by judgments. A whole industry exists around reviewing movies, books, and music. Thumbs up, thumbs down. How many stars did it get? We are constantly giving status to our art. Every cultural artifact worth its salt these days has won some prestigious award or prize. Laurels for everyone! Technology now stuffs us with cultural commodities “recommended for you” based on algorithms that predict our tastes.

It is here that Foucault becomes integral to the conversation, because his idea of governmentality and biopolitics—whereby the state can be understood to police large populations of bodies through surveillance and other powerful means—is effectively what offers the counterpoint against which a public sphere represents its own interests. The existence of any public sphere, however we characterize its connective distinction, is thus integral for the sustenance of free democratic society. It’s no surprise that the field of

123 In The Economy of Prestige, James English traces the incredible growth of arts prizes and awards over the last century as a relied-upon way to measure cultural value. His argument that such prizes “are our most effective institutional agents of capital intraconversion” (10) tightens the knot of public judgment, the arts, and the economy in a way that certainly implicates the study of literary public spheres.
cultural policy studies today is highly influenced by Foucault. In this tradition of
governmentality, Toby Miller and George Yudice have described cultural policy as an
attempt to control the taste of the people.124 Today, this control is typically executed
either through neoliberal policies that say the free market should decide what cultural
artifacts, traditions, works of art, performances, buildings, etc., survive around the globe;
or, it’s executed through policies that champion the importance of only certain such
cultural “goods” by funding institutions and initiatives meant to preserve them, but not others.

The problem in the former case is that not all cultural “goods” can survive the free
market economy; and, in the latter, that those in power would have to decide which
“goods” are worth preserving, inevitably excluding others. The cultural public sphere is
the part of public life that might hope to temper the dominion of such cultural policies
through discourse that stands tall for what judgments and values most represent its
common interests and beliefs. Yet the model of the public sphere inherited from
Habermas offers no way to attend to cultural policies because he abandons the literary
public sphere at precisely the moment when its discussions had anything to do with state
activity. Similarly, the model of cultural policy inherited from Foucault offers no clear
opening to envision a realm of public discourse empowering enough to countervail the
state’s ubiquitous governmentality.

The industrial aspect of a cultural public sphere recognizes that the arts are not
produced in a vacuum. They are influenced by cultural policies from the top (federal
budgetary decisions about how to fund the arts, national broadcasting requirements for

124 Miller and Yudice, Cultural Policy, 7.
domestically produced content, etc.) and by commercial volatility from the bottom (ticket sales, piracy, etc.). Entertainment media and other forms of cultural production, in brief, often rely upon policy and commercial imperatives that influence the nature of art and its public distribution, circulation, and reception. The cultural public sphere’s industrial aspect is one that regards the arts as embattled mediators suspended below policy, above commerce, and the cultural public sphere the realm where issues related to art’s institutional autonomy and dependency are broached and negotiated. Thinking about the public uptake of the arts relative to industrial considerations helps to isolate material constraints upon artistic creation and circulation, in turn revealing what affordances remain for aesthetic goods to gain salience in the public imaginary. These affordances carry intrinsically political ramifications, as they are closely entwined with the state and its influence on market economies where art circulates.

6. National

Another terministic screen for understanding the cultural public sphere might recognize it relative to a particular national interest or to a particular nation’s politico-cultural conditions. Though limited, certainly such an understanding is not preposterous in the tradition modeled from Habermas’s account of the literary public sphere’s formation. After all, Habermas identified such a sphere specifically through its emergence in England, Germany, and France, thereby tacitly inviting the problem of whether the literary public sphere, as a concept, should be understood to be unique from country to country, or commonly manifest across national contexts. Although the national understanding of the CPS can be applied to the historicity of such a sphere’s origins as
well as to its manifestations today, the networked, digital context of our post-Westphalian world makes the national understanding increasingly problematic.

In terms of its historicity, opinions vary. Harold Love argues that music is what created the public sphere in Tudor and Jacobean England. Even as his argument extends the Habermasian account of a literary public to include what was also a musical one, Love confirms the Habermasian supposition that the class of cultural or aesthetic goods known widely as the arts have been an historical impetus for the constitution of discursive publics. But Love does not overreach his claim. He rather notes the importance of recognizing that “different national cultures had very different notions of the public/private distinction and that they acquired these along very different timelines.” On this view, a national understanding of cultural public spheres is preferable to the extent that the idiosyncrasies of their historical emergence in national contexts gainsay any generalizability across borders.

Others see more similarities across nations. Jeong-Woo Koo has observed that many scholars have explored how well the Habermasian account of the public sphere’s emergence translates to non-European and Eastern contexts—and notes strong indications that public spheres arising from literary activity in civil society have historically occurred in parallel throughout parts of Asia. Eiko Ikegami has made the strongest such case for cultural public spheres in particular through her examination of “aesthetic networks” in medieval to modern Japan. Ikegami maintains that rampant literary and artistic communities formed what amount to “aesthetic publics” in Tokugawa

---

125 Love, “How Music Created a Public.”
126 Ibid., 257.
127 Koo, “The Origins of the Public Sphere and Civil Society.”
128 Ikegami, Bonds of Civility.
Japan between 1600 and 1868. Commonplace artistic practices, such as tea ceremonies, “linked” verse, and nō drama, found art and sociality converged in these communities in a way that gave rise to forms of public civility that had hitherto been unprecedented in Japan’s neofeudal political structure.

It is worth mentioning that advances in print technology and literacy—widely regarded as integral to the formation of cultural public spheres in the West—are insignificant in the Japanese context insofar as many of the artistic practices Ikegami identifies consisted in unmediated, that is, embodied face-to-face performances. Her point, though, is neither to describe mass media nor to write a history. Ikegami’s broader argument maintains that, across national contexts and in roughly the same historical timeframe, it is the arts that have given rise to forms of public civility and discourse that are essential in the formation of a public sensibility. While such work recognizes that cultural publics emerge according to local contexts that are unique from nation to nation—salons in France, “za arts” in Japan, and so on—its claims for the transnational significance of the aesthetic also reveal the folly of limiting any understanding the CPS to ideas about its national constitution.

Today, the globalization of culture only makes a national understanding of the cultural public sphere even harder to justify. We live in a world in which it is conceivably unremarkable to sip chai tea while eating phở noodles and watching—on a laptop designed in California, made in China, and produced using tantalum mined in the Congo—a French translation of an Iranian giving a TED talk somewhere in the Brazilian Amazon. The cross-cultural referentiality of our existence, both in its material and discursive-communicative registers, exposes the national understanding of at least the
contemporary cultural public sphere as a sham. Lest we succumb to what Seyla Benhabib has derided as a “reductionist sociology of culture,” neglecting the interplay of intercultural influence on cultural expressivity in the attempt to retain national cultural autonomy, the cultural public sphere calls to be understood in a *transnational* context, though it will have idiosyncratic variations worldwide depending on the discursive norms of the communities in which its discourse circulates.

Arjun Appadurai has identified the global distribution of culture and the discussion it inspires across national contexts as responsible for what he labels “diasporic public spheres” in the age of globalization. Although some diasporic public spheres might maintain nationalistic concerns, their transnational context makes them the “crucibles of a postnational political order.” And, inasmuch as Appadurai identifies the distribution of culture—through film, literature, events like the Olympics, and so forth—as their basis, diasporic public spheres are at once variations on cultural public spheres, albeit cultural public spheres bleeding into the political. While Appadurai never articulates his project overtly with a discussion of the cultural public sphere, then, his diasporic public spheres nevertheless underscore the difficulty of maintaining a national understanding of the CPS in a day when mass media and technocapitalism have spread culture across borders for its consequent issues to attain “local” salience that can no longer quite be described as local.

The Salman Rushdie affair illustrates his point most plainly. The Rushdie affair, as is now well known, was as sensational a literary kerfuffle as the world is likely to see. There were so many juicy elements: the international publication of a major global novel

---

(The Satanic Verses, written in English by a London-based Kashmiri Indian); that novel’s subsequent censorship, even in several “free” democracies; a fatwa placed by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini on Rushdie’s head, forcing him under constant threat of death to assume a fake identity and go both into exile and hiding; an author nevertheless intent on defending the right to and integrity of his aesthetic expression; a publishing industry caught in the middle; religious outrage from all sides; moral outrage from all sides; public demand for the book; public burning of the book; discussions of freedom, democracy, faith; heightened political tensions between the liberal West and radical Islam; criticism of the book as a novel; criticism of the views it espoused; public discussion about the difference between the views of a flesh-and-blood author and those of his characters; the list goes on.

As the controversy played out over several years across nations, cultures, and worldviews, it became clear that no authority—even one conferred by the collective opinion of a local public sphere—was capable of defining the affair’s most essential social problem because its stakeholders were so diverse, and the issues of most salience to some were of less importance to others. In other words, while the Rushdie case clearly raised national matters of concern that differed between nations (no doubt with plenty of local variability therein), to understand the affair’s public uptake nationally, even locally, would grossly limit the dynamism and breadth of the public discourse that surrounded it worldwide. For Appadurai, who regards culture as both what creates and orients us to recognize the differences among us, the Rushdie controversy therefore underscores the deeply transnational and translocal nature of a “diasporic public sphere” whose emergence is a consequence of culture’s globalized flow.
For Appadurai, the mass media are partly responsible for the emergence of the “sodalities” that constitute diasporic public spheres insofar as they make possible conditions of collective reading, criticism, and pleasure, and thereby give rise to a “community of sentiment” among groups of strangers bonded by their ability to imagine and feel things together.131 The importance of such sodalities is not just that they are united by feelings inspired by a shared cultural referent, nor that they have the potential for “moving from shared imagination to collective action” as their public discourse converges around issues of common local import, nor even still that, in the discursive exchanges of these sodalities, “diverse local experiences of taste, pleasure, and politics can crisscross with one another.”132 Appadurai’s central contribution is rather to show that the public discursive associations arising within and between mass-mediated sodalities create inherently translocal and transnational forms of social action itself.

7. Demographic

A corollary of the national screen is one that takes the cultural public sphere’s most significant characteristic to be the demographic make-up of its constituents. Nationality, of course, might be one such characteristic. But others could be equally as salient. Importantly, the demographic model supposes that who participates in such a sphere is of premier significance to that sphere’s uniqueness. Such an approach has empirical value insofar as it points to the failure of most publics, in practice, to be as open and inclusive as a normative ideal would have. To understand the cultural public sphere to be comprised of a particular demographic constituency, then, is also to envision

---

131 See Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 8.
132 Ibid., 8.
that sphere’s significance relative to the discursive opportunities it provides for some people and not others. In turn, like Habermas’s “bourgeois public sphere” or the “proletariat public sphere” that it inspired Negt and Kluge to theorize as its counterpart, the demographic model invites a critical approach to the innumerable lines of inclusion and exclusion that demarcate the public “conversation.”

Privilege—as the work of women’s and ethnic studies scholars reminds us—tends by nature to be invisible and unacknowledged. At its most restrictive, the privilege to participate as a legitimated voice in public discourse requires a level of acceptance encoded at the level of the body, whereby males and, at least in Western cultures, those with white skin, have historically received the most of it. In other words, because public discourse, by definition, addresses strangers, the privilege to participate in it is often not “earned” or “won” through any rhetorical ethos developed within the rhetorical act, as Aristotle says it must be. The privilege to participate at all rather precedes any rhetorical situation altogether. The true privilege to participate in public discussion then is rather the privilege to attempt to earn social purchase among a public audience of unknown strangers through the rhetorical dexterity and wisdom of one’s contribution.

Examples of privilege in the cultural public sphere are manifold. To begin with, the existence of a public sphere emergent around cultural goods presupposes a literate populace. If you cannot read, how can you discuss literature? Literacy, though, is more than mere comprehension at a “literal” level, because despite valid claims going back to

---

133 On the invisibility of privilege, see Mcintosh, “White Privilege.” On the unacknowledged nature of difference, see Tatum, “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”
134 Brad Vivian argues that ethos is what determines who, quite literally, is allowed to speak. See Vivian, Being Made Strange, 192.
Kant’s aesthetics that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, that is, that a disinterested individual’s taste cannot be refuted, the fact remains that some people encounter works of art with more refined sensibilities and a broader experience with the particular genre of cultural artifact at hand. Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital, which captures this refinement of sensibility based on one’s knowledge of the tradition and precedent within a genre of cultural expression, can hence be regarded as a register of literacy. Literacy, in other words, is like a light switch with a dimmer. In the first order, people are either literate or not; the switch is on or off. In the second order, if the switch is turned on, one’s literacy is measured in cultural capital; it can be more or less bright.

But even a dimmer-switch model of literacy is only the beginning of the beginning when it comes to the demographics of those included and excluded in a cultural public sphere. Access is further demarcated along a “digital divide” that describes the difference between those who have more access to or facility with new media technologies than others. A variety of digital divides exist, though scholars tend to conceptualize four in particular: varying attitudes toward digital culture; varying levels of access to it; a range of skills in using and understanding it; and numerous types of usage. Each of these divides, of course, can be further linked to particular demographic constituents, so that class, or income, or race, or gender, or age, and so forth become crucial markers of who can be said truly to participate in the CPS.

Another demographic marker of inclusion and exclusion is the concept of capital, Bourdieu’s term for the different kinds of resources that influence social exchange in the form of status and power. The concept informs his work broadly, but in his most

---

concentrated discussion of the topic, he distinguishes three kinds: economic capital (resources gained from one’s financial assets), social capital (resources gained from one’s interpersonal relationships and support network), and, perhaps most centrally, cultural capital (resources gained from one’s education and exposure to different parts of the world).\textsuperscript{136} Elsewhere, he uses symbolic capital to reference any variety of capital that might be legitimated or valued in the localized context of a particular field.\textsuperscript{137} Capital, in Bourdieu’s framework, is the sociologist’s equivalent of ethos in the rhetorical tradition. Both act as affordances for wielding influence in our social relations.

Taking the desire to achieve more equality in social relations as one motivation for participation in cultural public spheres, Elizabeth Dillon (2004) has compiled what could be called a demographic sense of the cultural public sphere in colonial and antebellum America by linking the broader public sphere to a specifically literary culture, which, she says, “is not only concerned with rational political debate”—as in Habermas—“but with the desire for recognition.”\textsuperscript{138} She suggests that, “in the space of the social, versions of private subjectivity are publicly articulated and individuals seek to emerge into public recognition by deploying publicly available codes of subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{139} Dillon is referring particularly to women, but also to those voices not accorded a say more generally. Her theory of the cultural public sphere, then, is demographic insofar at it attends closely to lines of inclusion and exclusion in public affairs; it is “governed by

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{136} Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital.”
\textsuperscript{137} For more on symbolic capital, see Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief,” 262-263; Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power, 230; Bourdieu, The Production of Belief, 171-183.
\textsuperscript{138} Dillon, The Gender of Freedom, 6.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 6.
\end{flushleft}
desire—by the desire of subjects to emerge into the space of subjectivity or social recognition.”

Today, the work of artist groups like the Guerilla Girls—who use aggressive publicity techniques to highlight the disproportionate ratio of male to female artists in museums, and the equally lopsided representation of female nudes relative to males—could be read as a contemporary iteration of a demographically-oriented cultural public sphere whose purpose is to bring about the emergence of recognized political subjects. Certainly, the much-discussed feminist critiques of Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere jibe with a more demographic approach, though without a particular focus on the cultural, they suggest that lines of inclusion and exclusion are salient for understanding public spheres at large, making the cultural public sphere unexceptional.

8. Spatial

To understand the cultural public sphere spatially is to distinguish it based upon the physical spaces of its emergence. In the eighteenth century, as Habermas observed, English coffeehouses, French salons, and German Tischgesellschaften (or “table societies”) were the sites that accommodated a certain kind of cultural public interested in literary conversation. The spatial understanding, though, brackets such a public’s literary aspects and foregrounds the location of their appearance, as if the “sphere” referenced a particular site whose specificity alone could meet the necessary and sufficient conditions of a cultural public sphere as such. Taking such a view today would likely leave one to recognize the Web as a popular locus of literary discourse, hence as the unique trait of the

\[140\] Ibid., 6.
cultural public sphere, leading to a vision something like Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples’s case for imagining the public sphere as a “public screen.”

The limitation of the spatial terministic screen is that any variety of discursive norms and topics, not to mention the non-discursive varieties of public interaction, could take place even concurrently within any particular space, online or otherwise. Making the cultural public sphere a site-specific concept, however, does rightly attune one to the “capacity” of embodied spaces to delimit and characterize what can and does go on there: in short, to what kinds of meanings and affects a given space can accommodate. Though this attunement to actual space is important, its tacit need to pair space with time means it also adapts the historical understanding, which has limitations already discussed.

For instance, the spatio-historical understanding of the cultural public sphere that Habermas offers—the one tracing its emergence to cafes and reading clubs of the eighteenth century—misses that other spaces at other times have served a similar function. For example, to take the British case, during the early seventeenth century, “Paul’s walk”—the name given to the center aisle of London’s largest cathedral—served what has been described as “a single, vast clearinghouse for news and opinion.”

Londoners looking for discussion among strangers needed go no further than up and down Paul’s walk to discuss the news of the day, including the gossip and rumors about private affairs given publicity through their outward subjectivity. Only after the great fire of London destroyed the cathedral and the Royal Exchange in 1666 did the coffeehouses become the new default site for free public discussion.

---

141 DeLuca and Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen.”
9. Teleological

If a text-and-talk model presumes that some people converse publicly about artistic texts, it also presumes that they don’t just do so idly. They often have a purpose. We are therefore justified to identify another aspect of the cultural public sphere as teleological. This screen recognizes the CPS to be outcome-oriented. On this view, unless public communication circulating around the arts identifiably strives toward an outcome, it does not constitute a public sphere but rather something else: perhaps just the idle animadversions of friends, a community, or an interest group’s conversation. By being directed toward a specific end, public discourse is experienced as purposeful. Eventually, its presumable result will be to achieve some version of public opinion or shared cultural sensibility—a sensus communis—relative to its aims. There are at least three potential aims of a cultural public sphere experienced accordingly: interpretation, aesthetic judgment, and critical judgment.

The interpretive telos can be traced through public discourse recognizable as hermeneutic. It is directed toward a work of art or aesthetic text’s meaning. The long history of hermeneutic philosophy, a history as long as rhetoric’s, attests that there are innumerable methods of textual understanding. The interpretive telos can be identified wherever public discourse is concerned with the meaning that a text represents in its so-called message. Of course, messages can be variable, meaning polysemous, and both

---

143 Whether that meaning is reached or traced, unconcealed or discovered, felt or analyzed, constructed or deconstructed, and so forth, will depend upon the interpretive theory one follows.  
144 Aristotle and Plato both discuss hermeneutics. The text commonly known as De Interpretatione, for instance, Aristotle originally called Peri Hermeneias.
might pertain just as well to a particular text under discussion as to various aspects of the world that a text makes pertinent.

In a sphere concerned with the interplay of aesthetic texts and public discourse, aesthetic judgment is as significant a telos as interpretation. It would be a gross understatement to say that aesthetic judgment has its own long and fraught history, though it is widely held to begin in its modern sense through Alexander Baumgarten’s eighteenth-century repurposing of the ancient concept of aesthesis—which referenced those things perceived through the senses as opposed to those things known through logic (noesis)—with a modern concept of aesthetics as an individual’s ability to judge pleasure and taste through the sensual perception of beauty.\(^{145}\) As the long arc of this tradition manifests in the cultural public sphere, the telos of aesthetic judgment most generally concerns the public expression of our sensual appreciation (our “taste”) for some object of perception, whether or not that object is classifiable as art. Because taste is highly subjective and, as some maintain, the basis for it objective (some things being categorically more tasteful or beautiful than others), contention inevitably surrounds the validity and reach of aesthetic judgments. As a telos of the cultural public sphere, though, achieving a shared sense of aesthetic judgments can be regarded as the purposeful end of public discourse—an end no less problematic than attempting through interpretation to settle a consensus about some text’s definitive meaning.

In addition to the objectives of interpretation and aesthetic judgment, however, the cultural public sphere also accommodates a telos of critical judgment. This can be identified in public discourse directed to evaluating the merits of a text—or, for that

\(^{145}\) Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*. 
matter, the merits of whole classes of texts in a fragmented, information-saturated age. It is here that the objective basis for aesthetic taste, and the status it accords to those objects, is analyzed and negotiated through critical acts that range from the sophisticated arguments of expert scholars to the bald assertions of ordinary “citizen critics.” Books, film, or music reviews, to take just some obvious examples, fall into this discursive class when they are not interpretive but evaluative, as the media industry’s ever-revolving wheel of reviews asks them to be. Identifying the *telos* of critical judgment in various kinds and media of public discourse is not difficult to do, but doing so highlights the narrowness of its teleological aspects for neglecting to focus the cultural public sphere as a whole field of cultural production.

The teleological focus nevertheless accords well with a rhetorical model of the public sphere because, like Aristotle, it takes the *telos* of all rhetoric to be *krisis*: a decisive judgment, reached in contingent situations, less through rational assent than through an affective inclination to value the outcome that will lead to the most happiness (*eudaimonia*) for all.146 As Thomas Farrell has put it, “As near as we have been able to determine, the aim of rhetoric is to *practice* judgment (to enact *krisis*) where certain sorts of problematic materials are concerned.”147 If all rhetoric makes *krisis* its final cause, experiencing the confluence of art and public discourse merely as various attempts to publicly legitimate interpretation, aesthetic, or critical judgment leaves a cultural public sphere either to address what art represents (i.e., its meaning), or to represent art (i.e., its value). Both alternatives neglect the registers of art that go beyond representation and meaning altogether.

---

146 For more on *krisis* and common understanding, see Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 98.
147 Farrell, “Practicing the Arts of Rhetoric,” 186.
For a teleological understanding of the CPS to offer any distinctiveness, in other words, its aim will have to be publicly reaching a judgment about a particular class of “problematic materials”—or else reaching something that is not a critical judgment at all. Where the former solution brings the CPS into its topical understanding (its problematic materials being “cultural”), the latter reminds us how a teleological understanding directed at critical judgment fails to recognize that some things—the arts, for instance—connote at registers beyond what meaning can convey and judgment can address. It is a telltale characteristic of art qua art that artworks enable, among other things, experiences whose affective registers are extraneous from meaning: we get lost in the novel, immersed in the film, swept away in the song. As I show in the pages ahead, these affective experiences are one of the strongest arguments for theorizing an affective ecology alongside a communicative one when thinking about the cultural public sphere.

10. Discursive

In its communicative ecology, it goes without saying that the cultural public sphere can also be understood discursively: that is, as comprised of discourse that abides certain evaluative norms and possesses a certain communicative character that other public spheres do not. Certainly the discursive screen is an easy dance partner with the communicative ecology of a CPS whose potentially distinctive aspects I have been trying to characterize. Distinguishing a cultural public sphere in this way does not necessarily imply that its discourse is always aesthetic, though that’s certainly one way its discourse might be described. The important distinction made by a discursive understanding rather holds the cultural public sphere’s discursive practices to be singular, to differ from those
common and expected in other spheres. It will be noted that this is the view most consistent with the first axiom of Hauser’s rhetorical model—that public spheres are discourse-based—and it imagines the CPS consisting in public exchanges that are intimate, personal, subjective, sentimental, imbued with feeling, and so forth—the kinds of exchanges, in short, content to stake their evaluative legitimacy on the self-sufficiency of an individual’s own reaction to, or private experience of, whatever text or subject is at hand.

A discursive understanding of this sort emphasizes that any public sphere is only as unique as the discourse by which it is formed and sustained. To privilege a finite range of communicative norms or features as definitive is, in turn, to suggest that how we talk about something supersedes in importance what we might talk about, where or when we might talk about it, and why we might do so in the first place as the most fundamental way to make ontological distinctions between varieties of our public interaction. In a similar way that media ecologists in the spirit of Marshall McLuhan maintain that that medium of our communication delimits the potential messages of our communication, and hence can justify differentiating public spheres according to the affordances of their predominant materialities, a discursive approach to the cultural public sphere maintains that the norms of public exchange differ sufficiently from one context to the next as to make the pertinent changes in that context the most meaningful divisor. The resultant problem becomes identifying which contexts invite which discursive features in a way that satisfactorily isolates a cultural public sphere without denying that its purportedly singular discursive features might also exist in different public interactions. What makes the cultural public sphere’s discourse unique?
One answer is that the CPS privileges emotive communication. Jim McGuigan, for instance, whom I follow in replacing the concept of a literary public sphere with the formulation of a broader cultural public sphere, distinguishes the CPS by its affective register. Alas, his affect is not the same as the pre-symbolic affect theorized herein; his is something closer to emotionality or public feeling. But I do subscribe to McGuigan’s insight that the cultural public sphere is precisely an alternative to the space where people engage directly with politics and the larger problems of society, about which they may well feel rather disaffected because such problems are so vast as to perplex, and because people are not confident that their voice will be heard in a way that makes any measurable difference behind the closed doors where political choices are actuated.

The cultural public sphere is instead a site of “keen engagement” with popular culture, about which people of course do feel more emotionally accountable. When such engagement happens, McGuigan suggests, it “more often than not takes a predominantly affective [I would read emotional] mode, related to the immediacy of lifeworld concerns, instead of the cognitive mode normally associated with the experience of a remote, apparently unfathomable and uncontrollable system.” McGuigan’s model of the cultural public sphere is probably the most comprehensive theory of the topic ever produced. To circumscribe the discursive as its only factor does not do it justice, though I conclude by describing his approach accordingly because, despite his discussion of affective discourse, his model remains squarely within the constellation of screens that I

---

149 McGuigan, Cultural Analysis, 15.
have been trying to articulate to explain the cultural public sphere’s communicative ecology.

**Modeling Communicative Ecologies**

Only when taken together as a whole do the ten screens begin to resemble more than a partitive model of the cultural public sphere’s communicative ecology. No one of these ten screens is wholly autonomous in the sense that advocates could be cited who hold fast, say, to a spatial understanding while strictly denying the legitimacy of all others. To the extent scholarship coheres around a unified sense of the cultural public sphere at all, that sense tends rather to amalgamate key tenets of each position into a general notion of the concept. If some screens were to be isolated as most significant or prominent, the topical, teleological, and discursive understandings might combine to form what could pass as the cultural public sphere’s lexical definition. Each nevertheless offers some claim upon the uniqueness of the CPS compared to other varieties of public sphere. Granting the specificities of the CPS that the foregoing inquiry tried to describe, though, the standard bearer for modeling any public sphere’s communicative ecology remains Hauser’s rhetorical model, and the burden of proof lies with those who would seek to upend it.

To engage a speculative project about affective ecologies existing alongside communicative ones does not mean abandoning the latter. It would be foolish to suppose that the cultural public sphere as such—this easily hypostatized term generally referencing the dynamic forms of public sociality emergent around the arts—has abandoned its “traditional” ways of being altogether. It hasn’t. There remains a
formidable part of public life devoted to discussing cultural texts for the purpose of articulating common interests, meanings, and values. There is still good reason, in other words, to understand the cultural public sphere, like all public spheres, as rhetorically constituted.

Nevertheless, as thinking affectively ecologically shows us, traditional understandings of the rhetorical are no longer sufficient to account in whole for the ways that art and discourse interact in public life. A remainder remains. It is possible to perceive this remainder as the precondition, and not just as a supplement, of our social interdependence within an affective ecology. But doing so requires an expansion of the rhetorical to include far more than symbolic actions performed within the constraints of contextual situations. It is an expansion, admittedly, with which many may feel uncomfortable; yet it is indispensable nonetheless.

In the next chapter, I turn to explore what a cultural public sphere’s affective ecology does and what a myopic focus on only the communicative ecology of public spheres blocks out. Only by superposing the rhetoricity of both affective and communicative ecologies, I argue, will the dynamism and polymorphic complexity of the cultural public sphere begin to take conceptual form. In a time when sociality itself has been reified—and nowhere more so than in our regular participation in the cultural field—an ontological project of this sort urgently articulates how the cultural public sphere, by affecting a suspension of the divide between the personal and the social, potentiates our chance to reclaim the everyday good life through the arts.
CHAPTER THREE
The Affective Ecology of the Cultural Public Sphere

Menus and Street Signs

In the late 1970s a reporter asked a young Tom Waits, the gravelly American musician, what he’d been reading. “I used to read Hubert Selby, Kerouac, Larry McMurtry, John Rechy, Nelson Algren,” he said. “My reading now is mostly limited to menus and street signs.”¹⁵⁰ It was the kind of tongue-in-cheek yarning that some musicians have been prone to give reporters since Dylan began doing so in the 1960s. The quip turns on a shared assumption about his recent fare: that’s not reading. But of course it is.

Today the message has moved to tote bags, t-shirts, buttons, and stickers. I ♥ Books. Reading is Sexy (Fig. 1). “Eat. Poop. Read.” Keep Calm and Love Reading. Even, Read Motherfucking Books! We’re a long way from December 1910. Virginia Woolf and Pablo Picasso are now the names of limited edition Mont Blanc pens. Etsy sells leggings printed with Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Penguin, the publishing company, makes lawn chairs, mugs, luggage tags, and dopp kits resembling vintage book covers. As Christine Smallwood has observed, “The merchandising of reading has a curiously undifferentiated flavor, as if what you read mattered less than that you read.”¹⁵¹ Menus and street signs indeed.

Where Chapter Two attempted to model some aspects of the cultural public sphere’s communicative ecology, this chapter attempts to account for its affective

ecology. The story to tell, though, is not just one of art’s commodification and
merchandising, which after all is hardly new. At stake here is something more ephemeral:
a socially dispersed affective disposition toward art that enables and legitimates different
modes of public engagement with it. As the above examples illustrate, some of the
traceable public attitudes toward reading are not about any particular way of engaging
texts, nor even especially about which texts have most value. The disposition is rather to
acknowledge and legitimate the basic affectability of reading itself.

It would be futile to attempt naming and characterizing the myriad and
idiosyncratic dispositions people take toward the cultural field, across artistic practices,
as if anthropologically somehow to identify in social practice a deeper but legible cultural
sensibility. What I hope to do instead is to explore something more akin to
dispositionality as such. But unlike the cultural public sphere’s communicative ecology,
which could be modeled through its various terministic screens, the same method does
not maintain for thinking about how affective dispositions—irrespective of their potential
content—make possible different ways of engaging cultural texts. Such thinking,
nevertheless, is just what’s necessary to access the affective ecology that precipitates the
communicative capacities of the cultural public sphere. To undertake that task, I offer
some meditations upon how thinking affectively ecologically necessitates thinking
differently about public spheres and the discursive activity surrounding art in our
contemporary moment.
Varieties of Public Subjectivity

We do not need to identify a fundamental shift in the post-millennial zeitgeist to sense a change in participatory public life across the liberal West. By some accounts, this change involves a decline that has been in motion for decades. It can be easy to forget, given the uptake of his normative theory, that although Habermas’s early work accounts for the very notion of a modern public sphere, it also accounts for the structural basis of its decline. In Habermas’s terms, “refeudalization” from the late nineteenth century onwards wrested the power of social critique from its rightful place in publicly reasoned debate and put it instead in the hands of mass media, NGOs, special interest groups, and organizations with vested interests not accountable to a discursively formed common good but rather to the imperatives of their own security, which has often meant seeking monetary gains through policies designed to render citizenship something enacted through consumption. To put it coarsely, for Habermas, people quit discussing politics and went out shopping instead.
Richard Sennett has compatibly argued that public life under late capitalism has become the realm of personal expression, particularly in its aestheticized forms, as self-absorption has made the public a stage on which to display one’s fashion and style while remaining privately ensconced in personal concerns. Christopher Lasch, similarly, has characterized public culture as narcissistic, with the consequence that public discourse is no longer directed toward issues of shared importance, but rather toward personal ones, all of us acting atomistically with an inward orientation. Take a look at selfies and moment-by-moment status updates if you want evidence that this attitude lingers in digital culture today.

Still others have identified a rugged individualism as the lesser extreme of the narcissistic desire to be left alone. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues have shown, such individualism, worn like a mink coat among Americans in particular, is characterized less by the selfish avoidance of sociality or communal purpose than by the limitations individualism places on one’s capacity to think and act communally. Alasdair MacIntyre has found a further danger of individualism for public participation to lie in its tacit emotivism, “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.” Individualism’s ethos of self-made determination, which supposes one’s own emotive compass to suffice as the only necessary guide for virtuous action, thus removes any impulse or perceived imperative to privilege deliberation and reason as ways to reach decisions about the

---

152 Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man.*
153 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism.*
154 Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart.*
155 MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 11-12.
shared responsibility of our social interdependence—a self-absorptive perversion that has only been exacerbated since Adam Smith first noticed the Enlightenment’s migration of morality from the demos to the self in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

A correlative to these positions can be found in the political scientist Robert Putnam, who leveraged longitudinal social scientific data to argue, in *Bowling Alone*, that Americans are participating less and less in those civic and social organizations that boost one’s “social capital” and sense of a shared stake in the world’s problems. Putnam’s focus on prototypical mid-twentieth-century American social organizations such as bowling leagues and rotary clubs misses that these organizations may have been vacated less because of a general decline in civic participation than because they offer the sorts of sociality that no longer match the zeitgeist of our digital age. But the implications of Putnam’s work, as with that of these others, suggest the possibility that if civic activity has not disappeared or gone elsewhere, at least our *modes of publicness* have changed.

Imagining the affective ecology of cultural public spheres offers an inroad to see how traditional varieties of our public subjectivity have been reconfigured. Jenny Rice argues that the public/private divide that has prevailed in thinking about democratic life since antiquity is no longer apropos. Instead, she writes, “Today’s key mode of publicness produces subjects that inhabit a kind of public-private limbo,” some eager to participate publicly, others eager not to do so.156 Crucially, for Rice, those who participate actively in public life, shaping and defending the shared stakes of our social interdependence, are no more legitimate public subjects than those who remain altogether distant and absent from public engagement. This is not just a matter of legitimating one’s

---

right to remain inactive in public life, or of emphasizing everyone’s shared stake in 
public issues, whether or not they actively engage it. Rice suggests, paradoxically, that 
remaining distant from public life is itself a form of public engagement. “It is not 
helpful,” she writes, “to think about the nonparticipant as separate from the polis. Instead, 
we are better off thinking about multiple forms of public subjectivity, one of which 
includes the ‘apathetic’ public subject.”

In addition to distinguishing between the public (polis) and private (oikos), the 
Greeks also distinguished between a shared orientation to public life (koinos) and a 
solitary non-engagement with it (idios). What today we call an “idiot” once referred to 
someone who didn’t show up or speak at the ekklesia. Until only very recently, nearly all 
scholarship about the public sphere has maintained these distinctions as essential to 
understanding all public forms of communal action. But Rice collapses these distinctions, 
arguing that understanding public life through a participant and nonparticipant divide 
fails to account for ways that public affairs activate affective registers that sometimes 
leave quite invested and caring people more inclined to remain distant. This affective 
orientation to political activity, Rice argues, makes it easier to “understand how today’s 
key public subjectivity allows us to remain actively and productively distanced from 
intervention, while never being outside of its discourse.”

Rice makes this argument in the context of her book on crises of urban 
development. But more than development crises, and more even than more big hitting 
issues like abortion, climate change, immigration, and the like, it is the cultural field—the 
aesthetic—that brings forth the “public-private limbo” where our affective orientations to

157 Ibid., 56.
158 Ibid., 69.
participation in public life become viable as public actions. As Laurent Berlant writes, “Aesthetics is not only the place where we rehabituate our sensorium by taking in new material and becoming more refined in relation to it. But it provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things, how we manage the too closeness of the world and also the desire to have an impact on it that has some relation to its impact on us.”\(^{159}\) (2011, 12).

Berlant, however, despite recognizing the importance of the aesthetic for shaping our affective disposition in the world, is not so sanguine about the public sphere itself. Placing little hope in any contemporary public sphere to confer an individual’s social-democratic legitimacy, least of all through a deliberative standard of discursive rationality, she has even, in the second book of her trilogy on sentimentality in American public life, rejected the idea of a public sphere outright:

> My first axiom is that there is no public sphere in the contemporary United States, no context of communication and debate that makes ordinary citizens feel that they have a common public culture, or influence on a state that holds itself accountable to their opinions, critical or otherwise.\(^{160}\)

Despite her tendency to conflate the public sphere and national politics,\(^{161}\) Berlant’s bleakness is more about the state’s refusal to listen to citizens than about any want for public subjectivity among the citizens themselves. For this reason, she does commit to an “intimate public sphere” where our public subjectivity might be expressed more

\(^{159}\) Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 12.

\(^{160}\) Berlant, *Queen of America*, 3.

\(^{161}\) The two are not the same. One illustration of the difference can be seen in Karen Tracy’s 35-month study of school board meetings in Boulder, Colorado. At least at the local level, Tracy shows, public spheres do indeed exist in which citizen voices are perceived to matter: people attend town hall meetings, express opinions, and offer refutations, all of which has some bearing upon the state’s action, if not on a national political scale. See Tracy, *Challenges of Ordinary Democracy*. 
recessively. In her intimate public sphere, that is, affective relations precede and outweigh any rational or discursive standards, and hence legitimize the individual on the apparent basis that one’s affectivity, lacking a semanticizable reduction to meaning that could be refuted, is inherently self-legitimizing.

It’s her recurrent orientation toward affect that finds Berlant two books later ceding the existence of public spheres, so long as we recognize that “public spheres are always affect worlds, worlds to which people are bound, when they are, by affective projections of a constantly negotiated common interestedness.”\footnote{Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 226.} Intimate publics, by contrast, are more specifically those in which “matters of survival are at stake.”\footnote{Ibid., 226.}

Echoing but collapsing Hannah Arendt’s way of differentiating public and private spheres (the former, for Arendt, a space of freedom from the latter’s demands of work and daily survival.) Berlant’s intimate public is an “affectsphere,” a public of affectively shared privacy, one mediated aesthetically less through discursive associations than through cultural forms and affective modes of interaction attentive to the ongoing struggle that life’s desires and pains make us alike in always already sharing.

Both Rice’s and Berlant’s separate efforts to collapse traditional categories of public and private into a more liminal state of “limbo” (for Rice) or “impasse” (for Berlant) indicate a change in what it means under late capitalism to be a public subject, someone invested in their common interdependence among others, even if they’re not always so sure of it. What both Rice and Berlant are tapping into is an affective ecology that has reoriented the ways we feel disposed or compelled to participate in public life—or to sit this one out.
No readers will need reminding that we live today under conditions of near planetary collapse. Human population overgrowth is starting to become visible; there are enormous disparities between rich and poor; the political-economic paradigms in place worldwide show few signs of relenting their wont to privilege the elite; and all the while a technological utopianism wafts through the air, promising to empower the people, but only ever seeming to make start-ups rich or big corporations richer. Under such conditions, it is easy to feel helpless, daunted, unsure where even to begin trying to begin making the kind difference that makes a difference.

And things are stacked ahead of me so vast
I sun myself in shadows that they cast.\textsuperscript{164}

Staying in the shadows, practicing a more recessive engagement in public life, becomes less a relinquishment than a differently construed manner of engagement. We might accordingly imagine different public subjectivities being made manifest through different modes of civic participation. I’ll name three, which can be thought of as forward, flat, and recessive.

The forward mode of civic participation is the one most typically associated with the public sphere: it’s often loud, eager, passionate. Forward participation comes from people who are “all in” for a cause. It’s invested. Those who participate in this mode refuse to sit back while society takes a course different from one with which they agree. Not just participants, they are often leaders in what to them must feel like a long and vital struggle. Though their participation might take many forms, public subjectivity takes on forwardness when it actively seeks out social engagement, persists through obstacles, and creatively pursues resolution.

\textsuperscript{164} Maxwell, “My Grandfather at the Pool.”
The flat mode of civic participation is less vociferous but not a whisper either. Those in the flat mode might join the march but they won’t make a sign. Flat participation is sometimes passionate, sometimes loud, but mostly just what one does who wants to be among the participants. Digital culture is filled with flat participation because it doesn’t ask for much investment. Online “lurkers” are flat. Commenting on a message board, sending out a Tweet, liking someone’s feed: these and other mediated activities can be performed in comfort, premeditated or whimsical, regular or occasional. Public subjectivity attains its flatness not from any neutrality to the stakes at hand, but from its contentedness to dabble, to be “just another” – a vote, a voice, a marching body – as opposed to something more ardently committed.

The recessive mode of civic participation is the hardest to identify. It’s recessed, drawn away from public life. In that regard, “recessive participation” may seem like an oxymoron. But to move away from public affairs is as much a participatory action as to move forward into them. To act in a recessive mode is not to be indifferent, but in the face of power to be resigned. Sometimes that resignation manifests in a “whatever” sort of cynicism: *It is what it is*, people say. Sometimes, though, when public subjectivity shows up as recessive, it is just talking in a quieter voice, or on a smaller stage, or with more uncertainty, because the stakes are so high and the odds so low that it’s unclear how making any publicly engaged investment in issues of broad consequence will not be overwhelming or a disappointment.

Certainly these three categories are porous; and they’re not meant to be comprehensive. People comport themselves toward public life in all kinds of ways, and their participation, or lack of it, both varies and takes too many forms to cubbyhole them.
all. But breaking public subjectivity into these three modes does offer a way, following the insights of Rice and Berlant, to acknowledge that ordinary people have different relationships to publicness and, in turn, different ideas about what it means for them to take part in the public sphere. One of the reasons I’m arguing for the importance of affective ecologies to public sphere theory is that affective dispositions clue us in to these different varieties of public subjectivity, revealing the public sphere in a different form than that with which it is typically associated. *Forward, flat, and recessive* modes of publicness will come up again in this dissertation’s third part, where I explore examples of each. For now, though, I want to say more about what sorts of participation happen in cultural public spheres specifically.

**A Moving Bar of Public Engagement**

In a sphere concerned with forms of cultural production—from industrial to vernacular, movies to macrame owls—the motivations and modes of engagement differ from more specifically political public spheres. Two important differences include what the engagement is “about” and what forms it might take. To circumscribe each of these issues by listing what’s in and what’s out isn’t the point. It is not terribly important that we come away able to label certain kinds associative relations and not others as “cultural public spheres.” What does matter, though, is that the shifting public subjectivities are also moving the bar of public engagement and changing what it looks like. Because this is especially true of the cultural public sphere, being able to identify how it operates in practice can tell us more about the ways people are enacting their citizenship, coping
publicly with the perplexity of getting-by, and cultivating the kinds of togetherness that build a democracy’s commonwealth.

1. Aboutness

So, first, what are the associations of the cultural public sphere about? In practice, public discussions surrounding the arts are not always about an artwork. To talk about an artwork is to address its contingency as art: either to experience it or characterize it in a way we would not do without its preexisting status as art, or else to discuss its characteristics in a way that would attempt to ascertain if it meets the criterion (whatever they may be) of the “art” designation in the first place. This last is, in a sense, a metadiscursive conversation. It concerns aesthetics inasmuch as aesthetics can be treated as a term for the philosophy of art or taste. Aesthetic philosophy, of course, has a long tradition of seeking to guide our judgment of—and our taste for—particular aesthetic objects, performances, encounters, and so forth. The point is not that conversation about a work of art is concerned with defining art, necessarily, but that it is concerned generally with the “artfulness” through which the artwork mediates some version of experience.

For art to inspire discourse is another matter altogether. Just because a movie is about the Holocaust doesn’t mean that when we talk about the Holocaust after seeing the movie we are ipso facto talking about the movie. More properly, we are talking about what the movie is talking about. This layer of remove, this double-aboutness, if you will, is not insignificant. To talk about how the movie talks about the Holocaust is to talk about the movie’s ways of representing or addressing the Holocaust: its symbolism, its style, its artfulness, its allusiveness, the whole range of aesthetic and rhetorical strategies
it brings to bear on its subject. This is, in effect, a conversation within the realm of aesthetics.

As Eberly is right to have noticed, though, “Literary public spheres have nothing de facto to do with aesthetics; historically and contemporarily, literary public spheres reflect various publics’ common concerns about the consequences of the news of literary and cultural texts for their collective lives.”\textsuperscript{165} That is to say, often in public life we don’t explicitly talk about such things as an artwork’s artfulness, at least not with the depth and gusto that an expert might give the topic. We rather jump to the step of deducing a meaning we presume to be held within the artwork, ready for extraction. This jump is one we are \textit{inspired} to take by the artwork; our encounter with the artwork encourages our conclusion that the artwork invites such-and-such a meaning for us to process and ponder.

To be sure, many artworks do justifiably (often “intentionally”) inspire that conclusion. When public discourse is so inspired by an artwork, it is less concerned with what \textit{techniques} make the artwork inspiring than with the mere fact of that inspiration to begin with. In short, when public talk is inspired by an artwork it is almost always operating at the level of meaning. Such a level is invested in claims about what are the best or most valuable ways to understand our world and live within it. That makes discourse so inspired by art, in a word, political. It treats of the artwork to the extent that the artwork makes possible, gives impetus to, a conversation with political ramifications that would not have been possible in the same way before experiencing the artwork.

\textsuperscript{165} Eberly, \textit{Citizen Critics}, 9.
Rather than rest content with the notion that conversation in a cultural public sphere is always about artworks, we should remember some of these other ways that the arts and public discourse interact. While distinguishing between discourse about artworks and discourse inspired by artworks may seem to quibble with different conceptions of aboutness, such quibbles are not trivial. A cultural public sphere might be understood as a realm where aboutness is rhetorically negotiated as pertinent to art. The question is not just what something’s about, but how: how should we understand a work of art to be about? The two categories I’ve proposed loosely correspond to these what- and how-questions, which each carry political and aesthetic ramifications, respectively. While that is not to say the political and aesthetic are ever fully separate in any work of art, the discussion of artwork tends to tack back and forth between these lines of interest. If public spheres are constituted discursively thanks to the affective ecologies that capacitate such discourse, then recognizing this distinction in the cultural public sphere is necessary because it shows that its discourse is not predetermined, that not everything is sayable.

2. Form

This brings us to the second issue: what form does participation take in the cultural public sphere? Granting the commonplace that different media can express some things better than others (a photo is hard to dance to), what is sayable will depend upon

---

166 This is a central problem in the discipline of information science, particularly as studied by library professionals who need more comprehensive and efficient ways to categorize their inventory. Here, aboutness is a central problem. Moby Dick, for instance, might be catalogued as a book about sailing or whales, on one hand, but equally about monomania and the search for God on another.
the medium and form in which it is expressed. As varieties of public subjectivity change, the ways that artworks intervene in public life also change. Art may continue trying to tell its audiences about the world, but its relevance is in jeopardy of losing out, from one end, to the increasingly personalized and narrowcasted nature of the cultural field, and from the other, to the aesthetic dispersion that results from globalization.

Individual efforts to portray a particular world, compounded by a free market paradigm that encourages creative self-expression and provides the tools for it, has led to a proliferation of creative arts. Gilbert Seldes’s trenchant study from 1924, about “the 7 lively arts” of popular culture, today needs more fingers to count with. We are now so saturated with lively options that the artist’s onus to decide what’s important in the world and then bring this news to the people has shifted to a would-be audience’s onus to decide which among so many artistic creations are worthy of our attention. Richard Lanham has made this point about our “attention economy,” that as information becomes abundant, attention becomes the scarce resource. The cultural interpellation and enabling of ordinary citizens as creative artists, as I discuss at length in Chapter Four, has only made various forms of creative expression more prevalent still. These forms of expression, from YouTube videos to homemade stickers (Fig. 2), are expanding what counts as public participation, particularly in its affective register.

---

167 Lanham, *The Economics of Attention*. 
Artworks, in short, are not just the starting point of conversations in the cultural public sphere. Today, for ordinary citizens, artworks are themselves legitimate forms of engagement in public life—independent of their emergence as the origin or focus of such discussions. Another way to put this is to say that artworks do not just give rise to conversations; they also respond to conversations already in play. That is, artworks are often instantiations of public conversation in themselves. As more people express themselves through creative arts, these creative expressions become the operative form of public discourse and not just the impetus or subject of it.

If the idea of art as conversation seems tenuous, think of Duke Ellington, composing in a hotel bathtub while his band mates listened from adjoining rooms, each
one adding their instrument’s musical response down the hall from one room to the next. Think of Wes Anderson’s filmic allusions: the nods to Truffaut’s framing, to Welles’s dramatic camera moves, to Hitchcock’s long-takes. Think of the great hip-hop battles, the sampling and lyrical one-upping. Think of the “conversation” happening when a web video goes viral and thousands of others respond by recording their own. The mash-up, the remix, the hybrid: as conversation, art emerges from and in response to other works of art.

An artistic act, in this sense, is part of what Kenneth Burke described as life’s “interminable” conversation. In Burke’s well-circulated analogy, you enter a parlor and notice an in-progress discussion; you listen until you grasp the tenor, then join in yourself; people come and go in the discussion; and, eventually, you too have to leave; when you do you see the discussion is still very much alive without you. If artworks themselves are a variety of public participation in the cultural public sphere, then to make them public is to join in the unending conversation with other works of art, one that has existed before you and will persist after you leave. But if artworks are holding the conversation, then it means something different to catch what Burke called “the tenor of the argument.”

In his influential critical essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot argues that artists need to develop a “historical sense” that infuses their work with “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer.” To catch the tenor of a “conversation” whose turn-taking consists in different artistic acts, on this account, would require

---

168 Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, 110-111.
169 Ibid., 111.
knowing the artistic traditions being joined, knowing the genres, having the aesthetic vocabulary and allusive breadth to participate in something more than an individuated artistic act. Of course, Eliot acknowledges that the historical sense is something obtained only “by great labour”—through reading and studying literary precedent. While there are certainly plenty of artists across media that operate in Eliot’s “traditional” model, usually with the attendant status of doing so, the kinds of “conversations” that creative works join in everyday life tend not to have so high a bar. Nowadays aesthetically mediated texts are rattled off haphazardly with the click of a button. To add a “Vintage” or “Montmartre” filter to a digital photograph before posting it to the social network du jour is, at best, a hallow gesture toward Eliot’s “historical sense,” devoid of any allusive cache. But it is not devoid of affectability. The issue just becomes to what extent affect can be regarded as a discourse.

**Beyond Discourse**

Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere suggests that discourse is the currency of public deliberation.\(^{171}\) Usually it takes the form of written or spoken language. A discursive basis for understanding the public sphere supposes, as Hauser puts it, that “discourse involves symbolic transactions that affect people’s shared sense of the world…although its reach includes symbolic exchanges generally.”\(^{172}\) While discourse may then take many forms and serve many purposes, its chief characteristic is its symbolicity, its *capacity to mean through representation*. That, anyway, is the supposition driving the public sphere’s communicative ecology. But what about the non-

\(^{171}\) Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 61.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 13.
representational, that which falls outside meaning but has affectability nevertheless?

That, I’ve been arguing, is the purview of the public sphere’s affective ecology, a realm for communication that lies beyond discourse’s symbolicty.

So how do we get there? If the public sphere is rhetorical, and if rhetoric concerns the wielding of symbols to inspire cooperation (to induce belief, to make things matter, to produce identification, etc., depending on how you parse the rhetorical), then communication falling outside the symbolic is, in a problematic way, a-rhetorical. And if communication is a-rhetorical, it is unaccommodated to the rhetorical model of the public sphere. The challenge of conceiving the public sphere as both discursive and non-discursive, then, is not minor: overcoming the paradox requires deepening our understanding both of non-discursivity and of rhetoric.

In the literature on the public sphere, attempts to do this have tended to take two directions. In one, the more traditional approach, scholars extend the range of the rhetorical to include, for instance, the body, and more generally, the material “things” of this world among those communications that have rhetorical salience. In the other, scholars recognize the corporeal and material as something else entirely: as things that, in their own ontological sufficiency, lack the representational functions implied by the human tendency to perceive them symbolically, yet have salience nonetheless. If the former approach supposes that fundamentally non-symbolic things have the capacity, in certain contexts, to denote symbolically, the latter approach supposes that non-symbolic things connote precisely through their non-symbolicity.

An illustrative example is the treatment of the body as an argument. Rhetoric’s oral tradition shows a precedent dating back to ancient Athens and Rome of
acknowledging the body’s capacity to influence through representation—for instance, through the display of gestures, posture, and bodily comportment. It’s in this lineage that the first position I’ve described is traditional: although proponents of such a position might acknowledge that the body itself has no inherent symbolism or discursivity, they equally maintain its capacity to mean and influence by being used in symbolic and discursive ways. Hauser, for instance, has observed the body’s intrinsic capacity for symbolism:

The body, as a corporeal entity, is an organism; its biological status is not symbolic. At the same time, limiting our understanding to its status as a biological organism ignores the body’s symbolic significance and the numerous ways in which it is used as a form of signification.\textsuperscript{173}

Recognizing that the body can be “used as a form of signification,” however, is quite different from recognizing that the body itself signifies, that doing so is its ontological nature. The former extends discourse into non-linguistic forms of communication, so that the purview of the discursive now includes not just the body, but spaces and places, sounds, and materiality more generally, the implication being that these things are wielded symbolically by an agent—a hunger striker, architect, musician, etc.—whose intentions activate the instrumentality of whatever extra-linguistic media they use to achieve a certain affect. Inasmuch as rhetoric includes the realm of the discursive, which is to say that which has a capacity to mean through symbols, an extension of the discursive also constitutes an extension of the rhetorical.

It is of note that Hauser gives only peripheral attention to material or bodily rhetorics in the rhetorical model of the public sphere he sets forth in \textit{Vernacular Voices}, which focuses rather on linguistic discourse. Since then, though, his work has attended

\textsuperscript{173} Hauser, “Incongruous Bodies,” 2.
more directly to extensions of the discursive beyond the linguistic: he has asked what it means to think of the body as a discursive site;\textsuperscript{174} he’s advocated for an ethnographical rhetoric involving an anthropological attention to the rhetoric of space and place;\textsuperscript{175} and he’s conducted a rhetorical ethnography at length in \textit{Prisoner’s of Conscience}, which, among other cases, considers Bobby Sands’ hunger strike as an instance of vernacular bodily rhetoric. This sort of work finds complements, of course, and still more committed advocates, throughout contemporary rhetorical studies in those whose research focuses on memorials, cities, visuality, bodies, and the material or visual at large as integral to public memory, public identity, the public sphere, and public activism.\textsuperscript{176}

But against what I see as these incisive yet ultimately traditional approaches to extend the discursive and hence the rhetorical, a latter camp can be identified among those who would cede no distinction between the discursive and the material at all, supposing instead that matter is not \textit{used} discursively, it \textit{is} discursive. This approach is where we might locate an affective ecology. It is often called, after Deleuze, a flat ontology, and while it denies that the material and discursive exist on separate planes, it does so by recognizing an extra-symbolic aspect of material things held to have a salience wholly their own—that is, independent of any signifying capacities humans might ascribe to them. Its extra-symbolic nature vests the material with what, in a different approach,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{174} Hauser, “Incongruous Bodies.”
\textsuperscript{175} Hauser, “Attending the Vernacular.”
\textsuperscript{176} On memorials, see Blair, Dickinson, Ott, \textit{Places of Public Memory}. On cities, see Fleming, \textit{City of Rhetoric}. On visuality, see Hariman and Lucaites, \textit{No Caption Needed}. On bodies, see Selzer and Crowley, \textit{Rhetorical Bodies}. This sampling is merely representative of what is, of course, a much larger group of scholars whose extension of the discursive is explicitly held to be pertinent to democratic public life.
\end{flushright}
would be seen as non-discursive qualities, if not a “discourse” somehow beyond representation, beyond symbolism, beyond signification.

Scholarship in this lineage also attends to bodies, spaces and places, sounds and images, and so on, but it does not attempt to separate their symbolic discursivity from their material reality by inserting an agent (human or nonhuman) whose supposed intentions are what make possible the academic work of rhetorical criticism invested in a hermeneutic project of interpreting symbolic action as a manifestation of such intentions. Instead, such thinking flattens matter and discourse into a kind of a-symbolic (hence, by its traditional model, a-rhetorical) material-semiotics that operate in an affective key: things affecting others through assemblages of relations that are felt or perceived without meaning attached because to attach meaning is to fix and semanticize a set of relations better understood rather as emergent, as only ever “becoming.” On this thinking, affect then replaces rhetoric (in the sense that it precedes it) as the primary register of any public sphere. But the replacement is not total. Rhetorical salience remains the public sphere’s most robust and vital currency. Yet the affective, or what Diane Davis calls “a fundamental structure of exposure,” comes first. Affect, in other words, is the necessary precursor for those orientations to otherness that make rhetorical sociality possible. Only in this sense is affect rhetorical: in that affect always already precipitates the potentiality of a rhetorical world.

Supposing the public sphere to consist in discursive and non-discursive forms of communication poses a special problem in that it challenges the basis for taking discourse to be the public sphere’s fundamental metaphor, and hence challenges the public sphere

thesis at its core. Yet, the introduction of affectability into a rhetorical model of the 
public sphere works so long as the affective is understood as a precondition of the 
rhetorical. The problem here is that relegating the affective to a *pre*condition implies a 
temporal basis of affect that belies the self-sufficiency of its always ongoing becoming. 
Reconciling the discursive and non-discursive, the rhetorical and affective, as compatible 
bases for a revised public sphere thesis accordingly requires acknowledging their 
unavoidably entangled nature.

**From Situation to Ecology**

Superposing the public sphere’s communicative ecology with its less legible 
affective ecology does not just add another “layer” to public life and its complexity. 
Identifying in affective ecologies those conditions of possibility that give rise to 
communicative exchange also means reconfiguring how we understand the distribution of 
those exchanges and their articulation with/in commercial or civil society. Insofar as 
public spheres are constituted rhetorically, that is, held together by the discursive 
attention of strangers to issues and texts, their communicative ecology would seem best 
illuminated by theories of the rhetorical situation—broadly construed as the *kairotic* 
interplay of sender/receiver/text. If the public sphere’s communicative ecology relies 
upon or subsists within a wider affective ecology, however, extant models of the 
rhetorical situation won’t adequately account for the ongoing and porous process of 
articulations between rhetoric and culture for which the idea of affective ecologies hopes 
to account.
Readers familiar with the twentieth-century’s rhetorical tradition will not need another review of what are now rather well known (and several) theories of the so-called rhetorical situation. Suffice to say, I think fairly, that even the more recent of these theories are all outgrowths from a dialectic first set up by Lloyd Bitzer, who coined the phrase “rhetorical situation” in 1968, and his first respondent and critic, Richard Vatz, in 1973.\(^{178}\) In a broad stroke, Bitzer attempted to account for the situational emergence of public discursive exchange brought about by exigent social issues, while Vatz found the situational emergence of exigent issues to be brought about by public discursive exchange. Others have been modifying or refuting these foundational theories ever since. Probably most notable is Barbara Biesecker’s effort to deconstruct each model of the rhetorical situation on the grounds that a preconceived notion of a situationally rooted rhetoric (text) neglects “discourse’s radically historical character,” while a pre-constituted notion of the rhetorical audience (subject) posits subjects that “cannot be affected by the discourse.”\(^ {179}\)

All these theories, though, are concerned with the communicative ecology of public exchange. The superposition of affective and communicative ecologies requires a more porous and dispersed understanding of the “situation” in which rhetoric (in its various manifestations of symbolic action) occurs. Jenny Rice (née Edbauer in this publication) has proposed such an alternative in her turn to a more ecological model of the rhetorical situation. Indeed, it is in Rice’s work on rhetorical ecologies that I first


\(^{179}\) Biesecker, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation,” 110-111.
encountered the term “affective ecologies.” Her argument, though, is that rhetorical situations occur within a wider experiential network, an affective ecology, which makes concepts such as an exigence (an issue prompting rhetorical action), a rhetor (an agent producing such action), an audience (the subjects receiving or co-producing it), and constraints (the factors limiting the available means of persuasion) too neat and discrete for the reality of how “public interactions bleed into wider social processes.” Thinking about public rhetoric within a more widely distributed social field, Rice tries to move away from a “relatively closed system” to imagine rhetorical situations instead “within an open network.”

As always in her incisive work, Rice clearly expresses the stakes of her ideas and grounds them in the nexus of theory and praxis that the rhetorical tradition is unique and indispensable for its ability to navigate. The stakes in this case are how we understand the ways rhetoric circulates through the social field to form public associations that might lead toward a common purpose and movement. The idea is that no single agent, no isolatable exigence, no discrete audience, no specific constraints can alone, in any given case, account for the whole processual complexity of rhetoric’s emergence and distribution through public life. Other more affective factors are in play, and these

---

180 Rice tantalizingly refers to “affective ecologies” (with emphasis!), but only a sentence later supplants the phrase with “rhetorical ecologies” (Edbauer, “Unframing Models,” 9), the former never to return again. She seems to take the two as synonymous. Affective ecologies are never elaborated upon as such in her subsequent work either, though the idea runs throughout. In developing a superposed model of communicative ecologies and affective ecologies in this dissertation, I am inspired by Rice but also weary of her quickness to interchange the affective and rhetorical. The tension that drives this weariness is one way to describe the problem that my project is trying to resolve.


182 Ibid., 13.
distributed intensities are part of the wider rhetorical ecology that gives rise to the public creation of rhetoric around common matters of concern.

Rice supports her argument with the example of urban development controversies in Austin, Texas, where public feelings are expressed materially in the likes of bumper stickers, t-shirts, and graffiti (e.g., “Keep Austin Weird”), which in turn materially comprise and create public feeling. Here public feeling, though, is not just occasioned by or “about” the exigent issue of urban sprawl, but rather a mood dispersed throughout the social field, predisposing the public’s orientation to the constellation of issues surrounding Austin’s commercial and residential development. Rice’s point is that neither the material reality of the overdevelopment itself nor the discourse surrounding it can alone sufficiently account for the circulation of affective dispositions that influence how rhetoric’s discursive manifestations through symbolic action take shape and spread. I would add, crucially, that the “influence” of affective dispositions comes from their preceding rhetoric’s potentiality but also is what makes the affective itself rhetorical, leading to a conceptual circularity that is hard to breach.

Here’s one way to think into the circle. Imagine public sociality as sharing an elevator with a stranger. To do so is not to enter a discrete site of encounter (the elevator cabin) and its context (apartment complex, office building, department store) as if ab ovo, two bodies made proximal and new to one another for a few floors before going separate ways: you know nothing about this person; he or she knows nothing about you. Instead, we bring to the elevator cabin and its surrounding context our personal, social, and cultural histories, our appetites and moods, the whole residue of experience from which we’ve arrived there at that moment, in passage to somewhere else. We cannot not do so,
even if these residues aren’t legible or don’t register consciously to materialize as points of salience within the context of the encounter. The “situation” of being situated with someone in an elevator cabin may well relate to an exigence: getting to the fifth floor, for instance. But the process of getting there, that is, the duration of the ride when two strangers share proximity, is the actual space of rhetorical encounter, and it’s a space that, while appearing boxed in, is actually porous, processual, a movement through space. It is potentiated because of the glomming together of diverse social histories, moods, and bodies—ffects—within that processual time-space.

In short, it is less that the affective residues of the world intermingle in social exchange, than that they “intermangle.” If there is a verb for what affective ecologies do, “to intermangle” is it. The public associations where rhetoric emerges do not just arise from the mingling—the confluence, the mixture, the free association—of different histories and perspectives, the vast plurality of globalization come together over points of commonness or difference. To intermingle does not require any mutual change. Our public associations rather mangle, both in the sense of disfiguring (that is, reconfiguring) the affective orientations we inevitably bring to all associations, and in the sense of wringing away the excess that exceeds what is salient in any given public association, the way a mangle was a hand-cranked machine to wring laundry dry (Fig. 3). To emphasize our intermangling instead of intermingling sociality is to account for the necessity, the unavoidability, that our social interactions and public associations occur within a wide ecology of mutual influence, although these influences, being affective in nature, may not always be recognizable or expressible beyond experience itself.
The intermangling that occurs through affective ecologies has important consequences for understanding rhetoric, particularly its role in the public sphere’s more legible communicative ecology, where discrete people empirically do discuss issues that have shelf lives and serious social urgency for audiences of other discrete people who are equally implicated in the various issues’ consequences. Jenny Rice has noted elsewhere that an affective study of public life means acceding that “‘deliberative spaces’ do not neatly originate with a kairotic exigence that sparks multiple voices responding to each other.”¹⁸³ Public rhetorics surrounding particular issues—say, representations of the

Ottoman empire in the hugely popular Turkish soap opera, “Magnificent Century”\(^{184}\) are “not necessarily born from a single exigence, or even from subsequent conversations,” but from already existing dispositions toward that topic, which may be unknown to us. The result, Rice supposes, is that public rhetoric is sometimes “less conversational and deliberative than it is additive and associational.”\(^{185}\) We bring to our discussion of soap operas and the Ottoman empire a whole history of sensibilities toward the genre and topic, some more entrenched, others still inchoate, and they spiral out toward related topics to which we invariably bring still more sensibilities and predispositions, on and on.

This point brings out one of the reasons it is so important to distinguish between communicative and affective ecologies. In our shared attention to public issues, the knowable basis for our disposition to these issues is how people have discussed them: how the arguments appear to have developed, why some and not others seem to have prevailed, which points are given the most salience and which are sidelined or ignored. These factors all fall within a public sphere’s communicative ecology. Yet, beyond what is knowable, all the participants discussing, for instance, the portrayal of Suleiman or Serbian history in “Magnificent Century,” have affective histories that preconfigure and influence the discussions that constitute a public sphere’s more empirically traceable instantiations.

\(^{184}\) For more on the enormous international popularity and controversy of “Magnificent Century,” see Akyol, “Is Turkey’s ‘Magnificent Century’ a Threat or Asset?,” Fowler, “The Dirt, and the Soap, on the Ottoman Empire,” and Batuman, “Ottomania.” The show has over 200 million viewers and is broadcast across 52 countries, including China, much of Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.

Without acknowledging that our public communication always already occurs within an affective ecology, we miss that affects offer what Nigel Thrift calls “a whole new means of manipulation by the powerful.”\textsuperscript{186} The unknowability of affects, that is, lends a tacit but pervading uncertainty to social relations: we never wholly know the ambient motivations and unconscious orientations that affect how or why communicative ecologies take the shape that they do. While a suspicion of “mere” rhetoric has become a relatively commonplace disposition toward media and strangers, and while many have developed a shrewd ability to see through language and detect manipulation, certainly to be skeptical toward power (often to the extent of adapting a more or less perpetually ironic air so not to risk the vulnerability of actual earnestness\textsuperscript{187}), the faculty of detecting affects is not so easily developed. In the same way a subway might be closed out of fear for a bomb threat that later proves unfounded, the uncertainty of affects can orient us toward others without the assurance of knowing whether their and our feelings and opinions, and the communicative expression thereof, are founded in a material reality that is more than a “virtual” postulation.

\textbf{From Message to Contribution (\textit{sans telos})}

If vernacular variations of the “Keep Austin Weird” trope, for Rice, circulated in a local affective ecology to orient a public toward the issues raised by the city’s development, the still more broadly dispersed variations on the “Reading is Sexy” trope might clue us in to a more translocal public feeling emergent around reading, or perhaps

\textsuperscript{186} Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling,” 58.
\textsuperscript{187} For more on irony as a (dangerous) disposition toward social life, see Purdy (1999), and for more on irony as a (senescent) critical technique of literature, see Wallace (1998).
even the arts at large. If we are thinking affectively ecologically, though, the salience of a “Reading is Sexy” button or a “Read Motherfucking Books!” sticker is not interpretable at the semantic level of either text itself. What any of these specific slogans means or even connotes may well have communicative, persuasive value to some in certain contexts of reception, but finding that value will not be of much help with the public sphere’s affectivity.

Then again, it is possible that the example of pro-reading slogans has little to do with meaning in the first place. That is, to treat them as content-rich and interpretable communiqués may miss their more phatic point. The political scientist Jodi Dean, for instance, has suggested that forays into public discourse today widely find “messages” replaced by “contributions.” Now, she says, “messages are contributions to circulating content—not actions to elicit responses. The exchange value of messages overtakes their use value.”\(^{188}\) Her claim is best exemplified in the context of technology’s virtual space, where people now post/share/forward/save/delete/like/pin “contributions” whose mere circulation constitutes their public value. On this view, whether it’s a video or a blog post, a logo or an advertisement, even a well-reasoned argument, discursive contributions to public life tend no longer to be valued for their substantive content, rationale, or “message,” but for the depth and duration of the attention they receive.

Jenny Rice makes a similar observation: that, “if affect is something produced through interactions between bodies, then public deliberation probably also produces something that does not coincide with the telos of civic judgment.”\(^{189}\) And what \textit{something} is that? The mere production of talk. As Rice explains, this means that, “the

\(^{188}\) Dean, \textit{Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies}, 26.
\(^{189}\) Rice, “The New ‘New,’” 211.
talk itself—attention and investments in the act of communication—is also a telos. This is the ‘affective circulation’ of publics; talk itself becomes a telos even beyond the official content of that talk.”

Four implications follow. First, if thinking affectively ecologically about the cultural public sphere leads us to treat art as a kind of public participation, and not just as that to which public participation might respond, then the public sharing of aesthetic texts sometimes becomes an end in itself: the circulation of a digital snapshot, say, may not have any “point” other than to create incipient tingles in those who perceive them, affective glisks that emerge as poignant or intense moments of attention before being passed over for the next. In such cases, increasingly common in a cyberspace of so much sharing, the creation of these passing moments is the sufficient purpose they serve. Second, the self-sufficiency of affect and of talk indicates that a public sphere’s affective and communicative ecologies may be more intermangled than those studying such things have noticed heretofore. We cannot so easily, in other words, suppose a linear process whereby affect precedes and enables rhetoric, because the process also moves in the other direction: the rhetorical also influences—it affects—how bodies and things orient to one another, which in turn influences how symbolic rhetorical actions gain their salience. Both of these implications will be elaborated in Chapter Four, when I discuss the oscillation between presence and meaning that occurs in our encounters with art. But the third and fourth implications may be dealt with presently.

If, by thinking affectively ecologically, we are given to recognize a greater self-sufficiency in public participation today, then critical judgment may not be the only telos that public spheres will sometimes do without. Public spheres have also been theorized as

\[\text{Ibid., 211.}\]
discursive sites for the formation of public opinion, a means to provide the state a sense of how opinion is trending with regard to issues of common importance. The unique difficulty of disputing aesthetic judgments, beauty being in the beholder’s eye, makes participatory engagement in cultural public spheres an exception to this normative principle, requiring a reevaluation of what public opinion in such a context entails. That’s the third implication.

Now an example. When a web meme goes viral through its circulation among a public attentive, say, to a cat video, its doing so attests to some trending interest emerging around that video’s salience. The salience may well be inane. Indeed, popularity can often be ascribed to the plain affectability of humor or sentimentality—affects deadened by any recourse to discourse. But the video’s popularity attests to its salience nonetheless, and hence to an experienced orientation thereto, even if that orientation remains vague because unattached to any known and substantive public opinion other than mere attention. To put this differently, if some kind of tendency of public sentiment can be identified around viral videos and other web memes, it is not always (indeed, not even usually) because “deliberation” occurred.

In the cultural field today, distribution now displaces deliberation. Videos typically go viral because individuals “Share” or “Like” them in ways that are publicly visible, and less often because we discuss them and their implications. When we encounter a viral video, then, we always encounter it having already gone viral: it always gestures toward the virtuality of the public that has elsewhere ascribed the video with its salience, though at no single point can anyone say when, where, or how a trending
recognition of that salience was achieved.\(^{191}\) We might, however, say that, just by watching the video, we enact that very tendency of public sentiment that, while watching, we experience already to exist around it. For this reason, it would be still more precise to say that, when we watch a video known to have gone viral, that video’s having circulated through a distributed network of agents \textit{represents} the trending of its salience that our attention to it actuates. Only the experience of the weight of public sentiment being represented by the already existing public joined by your attention to it is real; otherwise it is nowhere to be found.

Cultural publics, though far from apolitical, differ from more exclusively political publics because attention to circulating cultural goods is alone sufficient to constitute a kind of “public opinion” about them. In political publics, the corresponding circulation of news events and material conditions affecting public life matters only insofar as it enables discussion of the “issues” these events and conditions raise. For instance, in 2007, news of the higher wheat prices afflicting Egypt circulated around the world in ways that gave rise to publics invested in the implications of these rises. These publics no doubt varied in discussing the implications of higher wheat prices from manifold angles: economic, personal, religious, agrarian, and so on. But the opinions that formed from the special interests of these reticulating publics were not made real merely by the experience of people paying attention to the high cost of wheat. Rather, the circulation of that attention \textit{preconditioned} the public opinion that discussion about that topic’s implications

\(^{191}\) If someone could find a formula for cultural virality then these parts of our rhetorical sociality could be appropriated for commercial gain. But this formula will never be found because its variables are affects.
achieved—a public opinion resulting famously in the broad political uprising that became known as the Arab Spring.

The same structure does not maintain in the cultural public sphere because, in its case, the mere circulation of cultural “events” and “materials”—the release of a film or an album launch, for instance—actuates orienting affects that our highly personal engagement with aesthetic goods permits to suffice without necessarily rising to the discussion that might endeavor forming a public opinion and bringing one before the state about the issues to which such goods give rise. Certainly aesthetic goods may give rise to critical discussion of the issues they raise—as when we discuss the relationship between violent video games and school shootings, or the ethics of a bestselling memoir that turns out to have been a fiction—and these critical discussions may have a telos with implications for navigating the common interests of our social interdependence (safe schools, honest media); but, unless we invalidate the highly personal affectability of the aesthetic—as hundreds of years of aesthetic philosophy has failed to accomplish—we must also recognize that “public opinion” in the cultural public sphere is achieved merely by a cultural text having gained the weight of public sentiment, what sometimes gets called “buzz.”

Thinking affectively ecologically tells us that publics emergent around the arts must also be understood as responsible for creating such a buzz, though never without the concomitant participation of the media, advertising, and marketing machinery composing the field of cultural production. This assemblage or network of actants intermangles affective dispositions toward aesthetic texts or practices (reading, for instance), and it is these intermangled affects that create what we think of as “buzz,” not the drone of
discourse. Habermas’s historical literary public sphere may have been a training ground for the cultivation of critical rationality; today, we are in a better position to recognize that cultural public sphere reproduces the ecology of affects from which it begins in the first place.

**Reflexive Publics**

But what about the fourth implication of the shift in public life from messages to contributions? What else does thinking affectively ecologically tell us about the cultural public sphere? Some final observations: when imagined as an affective ecology, the cultural public sphere consists in *reflexive publics*. A reflexive public is a relation among strangers held together by their common investment in asserting and assuring their own publicness. Often, indeed, *merely* their publicness. That does not mean reflexive publics are necessarily those that protest their *right* to assemble or speak; usually, that right is already enacted or ensured. Reflexive publics are more often concerned with publicness itself, that is, with legitimating enactments of publicness that are in accord with their affective disposition toward whatever inspires their public investment in the first place. Although these investments *may* find such publics emerging in response to social issues or aesthetic texts, the desire to reach a critical or aesthetic judgment approximating public opinion about them is typically not their catalyst or purpose. Reflexive publics arise and are sustained by a desire to claim through participation the importance of public participation itself. In short, what reflexive publics do, above all, is *be* reflexive publics.

The reflexivity of such publics derives from two characteristics. First, a public is reflexive when it reflects upon the conditions of its own coherence: what persuadability
its rhetorical sociality might command, what constraints delimit its will to set the terms of its salience, what mechanisms make it identifiable. But to reflect upon these conditions does not always take the form of meta-communication about publicness as such. The better giveaway is that a reflexive public is sustained by its own recursivity. That is, while the participation of its members may cohere around a goal—recognition, say, or legitimacy—achieving that goal is subsidiary to what is accomplished through the ostensible attempt to achieve it. I’m reminded of the David Bowie line: “And my essays lying scattered on the floor / Fulfill their needs just by being there.” A reflexive public, like the essay in Bowie’s song, may well have rhetorical meaning, a thesis, a telos; but, what it needs most of all is just to be there.

Second, a public is reflexive when it operates like a collective reflex or instinct. Reflexive publics have the social equivalent of the automaticity that neuroscientists study in the body’s autonomic responses to stimuli, which I discussed in Chapter One. As a consequence, reflexive publics differ significantly from those that a rational-critical model of public spheres might envision. In this case, rational communication (following certain norms) is not the basis for the critical judgments, opinions, or actions that the public may achieve through its discursive associations. This is not to suggest that communication or deliberation is absent in reflexive publics. As a reflexive or instinctive formation, its cohesion still maintains a deliberative glue; discourse is hardly lost. But it becomes secondary: not the jerk of the knee but what the knee’s jerk bumps into, that is, the intermangling of affective dispositions that orient our entire sociality.

192 Bowie, “Conversation Piece.”
In Part Three of this dissertation, I will consider three examples of reflexive publics: instances from the cultural public sphere of people cohering around the negotiation of their participatory publicness as such, each one illustrating one of the three public subjectivities identified above, and each involving an aspect of the cultural field. But first, an odd pair of intermediary chapters await in Part Two.
PART TWO

Democratizing Creativity, Curating Culture
CHAPTER FOUR

Democratizing Creativity

Interventions

Over a period of eight weeks in October 2000, the Austrian arts collective known as WochenKlausur staged an art project throughout Bavaria called *Intervention to Improve the Conduct of Public Debate*. The project brought together adversaries in controversial public issues—homelessness, gay marriage, immigration policy, among others—and attempted to facilitate civil and productive conversations between them. In collaboration with the Institut für moderne Kunst, one of the region’s most prominent art museums, WochenKlausur arranged thirty-two such debates in the cities of Fürth, Erlangen, and Nuremberg. Each was two hours long, professionally mediated, and took place around a cramped table enclosed inside one of the small, cube-like pavilions they’d designed specially for that purpose (Fig. 4). Perhaps in a gesture to the public spheres of eighteenth-century Europe, coffee was served.¹⁹³

![Figure 4: The site for one of WochenKlausur’s public debates](image)

¹⁹³ For more on this and other WochenKlausur projects, see Zinggl, *WochenKlausur: Sociopolitical Activism in Art*, 121-126. Also see their website: [www.wochenklausur.at](http://www.wochenklausur.at).
Although billed decidedly as “art” (a label further corroborated by the project’s affiliation with the Art Institute), this was art of a distinctly performative and functional character. After all, it openly endeavored a kind of social change: to improve the conduct of public debate. That meant the project’s substance, perhaps its whole point, was the debates themselves; specifically, their function to help shape the salient issues and inform public opinion about matters of common concern. By creating those conditions whereby adversaries could come together, bracket their differences, and deliberate on matters of shared interest, the project’s artfulness was to organize a kind of “lite” public sphere. In doing so, WochenKlausur mobilized a powerful enthymeme: participating in civil discussion of public issues is a virtuous and important part of democratic life; one of art’s jobs is to make that possible.

In Chapter One, when thinking about Virginia Woolf’s proposition that human character had somehow changed in December 1910, I intimated that there was cause to support a similar claim about a change in the world today. Though “human character” is not where I’d try to pin it, in this chapter and the next I do want to explore a pair of new sensibilities that circulate in our affective ecology today. I ascribe these sensibilities to emergent social phenomena that I call the democratization of creativity and the curation of culture. Together, this section of the dissertation argues, these correlated phenomena help to explain some dispositional changes in our affective ecology that are made manifest in the communicative practices of contemporary public life.

The poet can in verse make the boldest claims, and we’re given to believe.

No one drinks rye anymore, someone said.
No one feels that way anymore.\textsuperscript{194}

\textsuperscript{194} Berman, “Coral Gables,” 70.
Unfortunately, there’s no scholarly method for supporting similar claims about social sensibilities writ large, about how people generally feel. Worse, the claim I want to make is itself a feeling, an intuition. I’m getting a tingle. Yet there are material supports for it, and it is these I will try to rely upon in advancing the argument over this and the next chapter. That argument is not, despite the wonderful lines of David Berman, about changed attitudes toward our liquor. It’s about changed attitudes toward publicness and art.

In this chapter I argue that the widespread democratization of creativity is affectively orienting people toward public life in the capacity of creative participants: potential makers, hackers, culture jammers, DIYers, photographers, writers, filmmakers, musicians, in short, citizen artists. The obvious story to tell in this regard is one of digital technologies capacitating people to undertake aesthetic practices that, for a long time, were the province of professionals alone: editing photographs or video, for instance, or recording one’s own music. Although I will address this side of the story later in the chapter, it will not be my focus. The democratization of creativity is not just about the well-known technological capacitation of people to undertake creative practices (there’s an app for everything), but about a change in cultural attitude whereby the aesthetic has come to be seen as a principle form of public communication for ordinary people. This change is not alone attributable to the advent and spreading of new media technologies and what Richard Florida has called the “creative economy” to which they’ve given
The rise of the citizen artist is also evident in the art world, and changing attitudes about what art does and what relationship it takes with its public audience.

Naturally, to what extent people practice variations of citizen artistry differs a great deal. The idea, though, should not be unfamiliar to readers who have followed the argument along this far. In Chapter Three, when discussing the cultural public sphere’s affective ecology, I suggested that public subjectivity is changing, that art should itself be treated as a form of participation in public life, and not just as a set of practices or texts that sometimes inspire a discursive response. The democratization of creativity thesis grounds these observations in cultural affordances and practices, genres perhaps, that are best evinced through a story of the co-emergence of new media’s participatory cultures and the art world’s embrace of relational aesthetics.

That story may not begin with WochenKlausur’s “intervention,” but the example makes an apposite place to pick it up. Since they formed in 1993, WochenKlausur has been openly invested in serving the public good by performing interventions of the sort that rearrange social relations or precipitate measurable change by introducing new varieties of experience into public life. “Artistic creativity,” they explain on their website,

---

195 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*

196 Lauren Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, takes genre as a basis for her interest in uncovering the historical present. Following the method of Raymond Williams’s structures of feeling—which Berlant calls the “affective commons” (“Affect In the End Times,” 77)—she looks in works of art for residues of “the affectivity of the historical present relayed by an aesthetic transmission” (*Cruel*, 66-67). Berlant lends horizontal breadth to her project, improving her claim upon the identification of a wider socioeconomic ethos, through the analysis of emergent genres in artworks (mostly literary or filmic), rather than through specific artworks that are poignant but not exemplary of any larger trend. The move to genre allows her to escape the pitfall of examining any single work of art as if it were especially indicative of the felt reality of our historical present, which is harder and harder to do under conditions of creativity’s democratization.
“is no longer seen as a formal act but as an intervention into society.” Artworks, of course, have always intervened in society and changed beliefs or inspired action accordingly. WochenKlausur maintains that such intervention is now art’s constitutive feature. The idea of a finite and easily identified “artwork” coming into public from outside, implying a clear distinction between artist and audience, no longer holds if intervention is art’s sine qua non. The audience and its social involvement rather become co-creators of all art. At least for WochenKlausur, art now literally comes to matter, that is, both axiologically and materially, through its intervention among people, places, things, and situations.

To intervene is to come between. Latin: inter- (between) + venīre (come). But in cases where intervention is a work of art’s constitutive feature, what is it that art comes between? For WochenKlausur, art seems to come between its expressive self-sufficiency and its instrumental potential in public life. That is to say, it becomes a form of public work: an enactment of communicative participation that rhetorically and affectively shapes our shared stakes in the world just by emerging within it. Understood accordingly, if the Austrian collective’s Intervention to Improve the Conduct of Public Debate had a message as an artwork, that is, if it was to be seen as a sort of offering that its audience might be expected to discuss, then this message was to be found in its activating its audience’s awareness that deliberation between adversaries is a valuable tool for everyday citizens to come to agreement about the things that matter most in their mutual public life.

197 WochenKlausur, “Art.”
The problem is, in this example the notion of a discrete “artist” delivering an interpretable “message” to a known “audience” just doesn’t fit. WochenKlausur’s intervention facilitated debates, to be sure, some of which ended in deadlock and others in conciliation. But these debates—these public debates—all took place in private. Literally, boxed in. The actual public had no access, but could only look on from outside at the pavilions in which the debates occurred. Who, then, was the audience here, and what was the message? If the conduct of the debates was the point, and only the debaters could observe it, then were they the project’s audience? Perhaps. But then, not quite, because they were also its participants. And, in any case, surely the conduct of the debates alone wasn’t the point, so much as was the instrumentality that well-conducted debates might serve. Was “the public” then the audience, insofar as the debates helped distill understanding about issues of public concern? Again, maybe. But only in the most abstract and removed sort of way. Actual members of this public had no access to the debates or their outcome; so they could hardly be its audience either.

And yet, one can imagine an indirectly addressed “audience” of passerby strolling perplexedly outside the incongruous pavilions that housed the debates (Fig. 5). In fact, WochenKlausur had “strategically located” these pavilions in a way that transfigured the usual public space of their emplacement as a means of gaining more attention. In a sense, then, the project had less an audience than attendants: actual people from a hypothetical public who happened to give it their notice. Michael Warner has suggested that because “a public exists only by virtue of address,” all publics are “constituted by

---

198 Kester, Conversation Pieces, 156.
199 WochenKlausur, “Projects: Public Debate.”
mere attention.” On this standard, a public emerged around the pavilions the moment people gave them their notice. But if this attendant public was the project’s audience, what were they giving attention to?

![Image of a pavilion made of Euro-Pallets](image)

Presumably, they were called to notice the “lite” public sphere that had been activated through the debates inside the pavilions. Yet, because they couldn’t see inside, the project’s attendants were meanwhile fed a clever synecdoche, whereby the containers for the debates stood in for the debates themselves. What would seem to have mattered most—namely, the “rhetorically salient meanings” that Hauser says a public sphere’s debates produce—turned out to be less important in this case than the debates merely happening. This wasn’t about creating a public sphere whose discursive associations served any instrumental purpose or “message.” It was about “contributing” to the assurance that such a sphere ostensibly existed. And that assurance came from the attention to it that both constituted the intervention’s “lite” public sphere and made the intervention a work of art. To wrap the point with a ribbon and bow: WochenKlausur’s intervention tried to make public discussion of social issues into a form of art, and in

---

200 Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version),” 419.
doing so suggested not only that art is a form of social engagement, but that public communication itself is an aesthetic form.

**Relational Aesthetics**

Although I’ve chosen the WochenKlausur example as a starting point because of its obvious resonances with my project’s larger discussion of cultural public spheres, the example is just one of many projects from in and outside the art world, particularly during the 1990s and 2000s, that have begun to demonstrate a more relational or dialogical form of art. Nicolas Bourriaud, in an influential 1998 book of essays (English translation, 2002), has dubbed this theory of form “relational aesthetics.” The common trait of artists who practice relational art is that, in their work, they “all construct models of sociability suitable for producing human relations, the same way an architecture literally ‘produces’ the itineraries of those residing in it.”201 In this sense, relational art is processual. It’s open-ended. It seldom feels like a finished object. Relational art’s interactivity, in other words, is not only what it does or produces, but also what it is.

Relational art, Bourriaud says, takes “as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space.”202 It is *necessarily* a work-in-progress: the artwork is the progress of it being made. “Present day art,” Bourriaud notes at a later point, “does not present the outcome of labour, it is the labour itself, or the labour-to-be.”203

---

201 Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics*, 70.
202 Ibid., 14.
203 Ibid., 110.
The idea of relational aesthetics created a huge stir in the art world because it raised questions about the nature of art, its social function and public character, the aesthetic properties of communication, and how art’s history might need to be revised, among others. What did these social art practices mean for the relevance of museums? Were they impervious to commodification? What were relational art’s possibilities for bringing about actual social or political change? How does relational art change the idea of community? If audiences are what constitute artworks, are we now all artists?

Although not all have accepted or embraced relational aesthetics, there is no denying the uptake it’s had, particularly in a contemporary context in which, as I’m working toward arguing, aesthetic practices are increasingly becoming the purview of ordinary people and presented as a viable way of enacting democratic citizenship.

In Bourriaud’s account, relational aesthetics is a contemporary response to the reification of the social bond and the reduction of all social relations into something marketable. Cultural commodification and social spectacle, of course, were not new in the 1990s when, according to Bourriaud, relational art practices first emerged. What was new at the time was the onslaught of new media technologies creating unprecedented forms of communicative interactivity between humans, between humans and computers, and between computers and computers. These digital communication technologies, as Friedrich Kittler has observed, enable the reduction of all information into code, unambiguous ones and zeroes, achieving a kind of apotheosis of communication’s drive to reduce all noise. Relational aesthetics, in Bourriaud’s seminal account, arose as a

---

204 Ibid., 8-9.
205 Kittler, Discourse Networks. I will discuss Kittler on this and other points more in Chapter Five.
form from within the larger context of a spreading digital culture; its practitioners were interested in achieving through art a form of social interactivity that such a culture could not so easily reify or reduce. In that sense, Bourriaud says, contemporary art becomes “a political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.”

As anyone familiar with twentieth-century art history will note, though, art has taken participatory forms in various ways well before the surge of the 1990s. On or about April 1921 marks as good a starting point as any, during the “Dada Season” that tried to involve the Parisian public in art. One such “artwork” entailed enticing over a hundred people to walk through awful rain to the abandoned courtyard of the church of Saint Julien le Pauvre, where Dada artists gave them a tour of an area important precisely because it wasn’t picturesque, historically relevant, or sentimental. Another project involved staging a mock trial of the writer Maurice Barrès, and inviting the public to serve as the jury. The public provocations of the Italian Futurists, the revolutionary agenda of the Russian Constructivists (“the streets our brushes, the squares our palettes”), Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty: all attempted to reduce barriers between artists and spectators by involving audiences actively in the work of art.

By the 1960s, “conceptual art” had arrived, and with it the “happenings,” “events,” “situations” and anything-goes assortment of participatory, collaborative, and interactive impulses that were largely an artistic response to the emergence of a

---

206 Lev Manovich has made a similar point about the link between participatory art and the rise of new media technologies that make digital participation easier. See Manovich, “New Media from Borges to HTML” and Manovich, “Art After Web 2.0.”

207 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 17.

208 For more on these two episodes in the “Dada Season” of spring 1921, see Demos, “Dada’s Event.”
commodified spectacle society. As the art theorist and historian Claire Bishop has observed, though, there is a difference between, on one hand, the “activation of the individual viewer in so-called ‘interactive’ art and installation” and, on the other, “the social dimension of participation.” In other words, art might move beyond its medium-specific confines and physically engage with its audience, bringing the viewers closer to it; but that isn’t the same as when artists “appropriate social forms as a way to bring art closer to everyday life.”

Examples of art trying to bring the audience toward it with greater interactivity have included exhibits in which visitors get colorful dot stickers to decorate an all-white room (Yayoi Kusama); sidewalk chalk murals that fool pedestrians with 3D illusions (Julian Beever; Edgar Mueller); clouds of 6,000 light bulbs that audiences can individually turn on or off (Caitlind r.c. Brown); walkable roller coasters (Heike Mutter and Ulrich Genth); cinematic flipbook sculptures (Robert Cohen); a virtual tunnel under the Atlantic allowing viewers to see those on the other side (Maurice Benayoun). By contrast, examples of art taking more social forms tend to engage the audience in more impalpable experiences: dancing to funk music (Adrian Piper); eating Thai food (Rirkrit Tiravanija); hanging out in an artist’s apartment (Dawn Kasper); talking politics (Joseph Beuys); talking progress (Tino Sehgal); organizing a garage sale (Martha Rosler); drinking beer (Tom Marioni).

At least for Bishop, this latter tradition is the lineage and model of relational aesthetics. But Bourriaud thinks the relational art of the 1990s is more unique still, writing that, “Its basic claim—the sphere of human relations as artwork venue—has no

---

210 Ibid., 10.
prior example in human history, even if it appears, after the fact, as the obvious backdrop
do all aesthetic praxis, and as a modernist theme to cap all modernist themes.” I am
happy leaving art historians to debate the genealogy. What I want to suggest, however,
is that art is not just taking a more social form; our sociality is also taking the form of
something more artistic. We are living through a widespread democratization of
creativity. Nowhere is it more evident than in our communicative forays into public life.

**Conversation Pieces**

Art historical narratives aside, from a communication standpoint, the original
relational art was rhetoric: that old art of oratory that was not complete without an
audience to shape the form it took. More than just needing an audience there to hear a
speech, an audience creatively determined the speech inasmuch as the artfulness of the
rhetor consisted in shaping his words to suit the audience’s disposition toward the
occasion. In this sense, rhetoric was the relational art par excellence. If public spheres are
held together rhetorically, if cultural public spheres are those surrounding artistic
practices, if artistic practices are becoming more relational, if rhetoric is a relational art…
There’s a challenging circularity to studying the cultural public sphere in its
contemporary context, at a time when relational aesthetics has made its mark, because, as
the WochenKlausur example illustrates, the lines between art-as-text and public sphere-
as-discursive space are blurring.

---

211 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 44.
212 For some excellent variations of the story, see Bishop, “Introduction/Viewers as
Producers,” Friel et al., *The Art of Participation*, and Hand, “A Struggle at the Roots.”
The art historian Grant Kester has identified in the art world of the 1990s and 2000s many of the same forms that Bourriaud labeled relational aesthetics. Kester called them dialogical aesthetics. For Kester, dialogical art necessitates redefining what we take art to be. More than just an individual or private experience—the model of aesthetic encounter that follows from the visual/sensory paradigm that has dominated thinking about art for centuries—Kester wants us to think about “the work of art as a process—a locus of discursive exchange and negotiation.” Artworks, as the title of his book suggests, are best treated as *conversation pieces*: both things to discuss and the discussion itself. The suggestion doesn’t stop at its implications for our understanding of art. The more radical move that Kester makes is an argument that communication itself is aesthetic. Citing an impressive array of dialogical art, he shows how art that takes a dialogical form can become a communicative practice that builds community and actuates social change. When it does, the line between works of art and the public sociality of everyday life begin to blur.

Dialogical art, however, engages a different sort of “conversation” than the version I presented in Chapter Three. There, the conversation was between art and art, principally in allusive practices that keep a fence around art and separated its public audience, who merely observe art’s conversation with itself. What dialogical and relational art do, at least according to Kester, is bring the conversation to the people; the social forms that art adapts tear the fence down, putting people and art in conversation with one another. And not just metaphorically. Dialogical art is dialogical because it

---

213 Kester, *Conversation Pieces*.
214 Ibid., 12.
215 Kester’s *Conversation Pieces* is where I, and apparently many others, first learned about WochenKlausur.
involves dialogue: actual people talking or socializing together. It is both a conversation and a conversation starter. Curiously, this is the same claim I have tried to make about the cultural public sphere’s aboutness and form: that the art it takes as its subject is also one of the communicative forms that constitutively holds such a sphere together.

As Kester is right to observe, however, “it is clearly not sufficient to say that any collaborative or conversational encounter constitutes a work of art.” To that I would add the inverse proviso that it is equally insufficient to suppose any work of art constitutes a conversational encounter. “What is at stake in these projects,” Kester notes, “is not dialogue per se but the extent to which the artist is able to catalyze emancipatory insights through dialogue.” Another proviso and we are nearly to the crux. Kester’s standard of “emancipatory insights” doesn’t quite get it right, at least not when thinking affectively. Better to say an artist creates “emancipatory experiences” which might, upon reflection, lead to emancipatory insights. Although the difference may seem trifling, it is important to what I’m going to argue next: that the arts are uniquely disposed to create affective experience, and that the creation of these sorts of experiences, more than the insights or meanings potentially derivable from them, are what people are being capacitated to create when I say that creativity is being democratized.

**Art and Experience**

At public readings, the American satirist Kurt Vonnegut liked to send his audience away with homework. Go home, he’d advise, and spend the night writing. Whatever you want: poetry, fiction, an essay, jibberish. Put your heart into it.

---

216 Ibid., 69.
217 Ibid., 69.
Concentrate. Do your best. But then, when you’re finished, take what you’ve written, the whole marvelous thing, this document you’ve sweated and bled over, and throw it away. Get rid of it for good, so that neither you nor anyone else will ever see it again. Then ask yourself, Didn’t you already get everything you needed from the writing just by doing it? Wasn’t the process its own reward?\(^{218}\)

Relational and dialogical aesthetics privilege process as what constitutes the work of art. There is no tangible text or artwork ever to approach, return to, or throw away; the artwork is the experience that the process of its co-creation enables, which is to say, the creation of experience is the artwork, though it might also educe a reflection upon that experience once one is no longer drawn up in it. Vonnegut’s entreaty asked people to create private experiences. Relational art creates public ones, forms of sociality that are their own reward. In that case, the “meaning” or “message” of these artistic practices isn’t their point. Such meaning as they offer can best be described as a Vonnegut-like entreaty to go out and produce more of these social experiences. They’re intrinsically good; that’s the lesson. By privileging experience over contemplation, the *vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa*, relational and dialogical art engage in an affective project.

The reason the cultural public sphere makes an especially good access point into affective ecologies (though affective ecologies must certainly be understood to pervade all manner of public affairs and exchange) is that the arts elicit affective experience more than any other communicative form. Again, though, to elicit affective experience is not the same as to represent affect through signifying processes. Affects, as the Deleuzian art

\(^{218}\) I heard Vonnegut make this entreaty at the end of a reading he gave to a packed house at the Chicago Public Library in 2002. Others have told me he’s made the same remarks elsewhere.
and affect theorist Simon O’Sullivan reminds us, are “not to do with knowledge or meaning; indeed, they occur on a different, asignifying register.” Affects, he adds, are “the stuff that goes on beneath, beyond, even parallel to signification . . . You cannot read affects, you can only experience them.” O’Sullivan is only one of many to point out that art has a particularly affective quality. But he’s most incisive in this last observation of a connection between affect and experience. Indeed, he suggests, what relation we take affect to have with experience, and how art intervenes in that relation, is precisely “the crux of the matter.”

In O’Sullivan’s description of affect as what happens “beneath, beyond, even parallel” to communication, he characterizes the relationship I am trying to articulate between a public sphere’s affective and communicative ecologies. The challenge, as he reminds us, is that affects cannot be read in the same way that communication’s signifying functions can. But if we can at least aspire to experience affect, and if art is, if not uniquely then at least intensely capable of eliciting such experiences, then art becomes a medium for accessing affect in process. In turn, the role of art in public affairs gains a critical—or, less sharply, a “functional”—capacity for making people present to, that is, for actuating experiences of, the affective orientations that in turn prefigure rhetorical action and the whole discursive realm through which the cultural public sphere carries out its empirical business. The question becomes, how does the affective

---

220 Ibid., 126.
221 See, just as a start, Altieri, The Particulars of Rapture, and Panagia, The Political Life of Sensation.
experience that art makes possible translate or “jump” to the level of rhetorical exchange?  

The first step toward an answer is to point out a similarity, which could probably be called structural, between art and affect itself. O’Sullivan writes, “Art is less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world. Less involved in knowledge and more involved in experience, in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experienced.” From an affective perspective, in other words, what artworks represent or mean is of less consequence than what sensations or experiences they produce. (For this reason, Deleuze and Guattari theorize art as a “bloc of sensations.”) As a corollary, and taking a cue from pragmatist aesthetics, the affective position also holds that what artworks are about matters less than what they do in terms of actuating experience. This distinction is important because it moves away from an ontology of what art is and closer to a praxis of what art does—a crucial step toward the rhetorical insofar as rhetoric always shares a close relationship to praxis.

Experiences are central to any public interaction with art because they suggest a process that is both active and inactive. To experience is to act in a way that brings forth, as John Dewey put it, a “heightened vitality.” But such heightened vitality only comes

---

223 A number of other questions might follow as well: How does art elicit affective experience? What is it about the aesthetic that has such affectability? If affect precedes rhetoric, making persuadability possible, then does the aesthetic’s affectability mean the aesthetic also precedes rhetoric? These and other questions, though important, would all require digressions too significant to undertake here—alas, another “beyond the scope of…” gesture.


225 Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy?, 164.

226 Dewey, Art as Experience, 18.
from being “washed over” by something else in the course of being made present to our relation with it. In order to “have” experience, that is, we must both “bring forth” the presence of a relation and be “washed over” by it. I must perceive the smokestack alongside the sunset that its pollution makes beautiful, and receive the confluence of these things as unfolding in a present moment, the unity of which I will only recognize as “an experience” after participating in it. Experience thus unfolds in a perpetual “what will have been.” The fundamental tension of all experiences—a tension caused by a suspension—between action and inaction, actor and patient, future and past, is what makes experience a vital heuristic to understand how participation and nonparticipation can coexist in the same public orientation.

For Dewey, the quintessential expert was the artist who brings news to the public. “Artists,” he writes, “have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening itself which is new, but the kindling of it by emotion, perception, and appreciation.” That artists figure so prominently for Dewey’s sense of the public makes his account of art central to the cultural public sphere in particular. Dewey, however, never differentiates a cultural public sphere as a distinct kind of public. The artist’s role is paramount to the public writ large, not just to a class of public or those with particularized “literary” or “artistic” interests. Still, extended to its logical end, Dewey’s later interest in situating art in the context of everyday experience suggests that the so-called expertise of artists is rather an ordinary disposition, hence not expertise at all.

---

Another way to put this is to note that one legacy of American pragmatism vis-à-vis the arts has been to define art in the perceiving subject, not in the art object itself. In doing so, pragmatist aesthetics grounds art firmly in the context of everyday life, from which it cannot be separated without losing its capacity to habituate an improved lived experience—art’s highest purpose. As Scott Stroud explains, “the insight of Dewey’s work on art is that what makes art aesthetic is not any particular property of that particular human practice, but rather its tendency to encourage the sort of absorptive, engaged attention to the rich present that is so often lost in today’s fragmented world.”

This sort of attention to the present is not, however, a matter of art depicting or representing issues of contemporary importance, to which an artwork’s audience then pays close attention. The pragmatist line on art is that art improves human experience in our vital encounter with it, in the absorption of being present to the work in everyday life, and not, or not primarily, in what comes after the encounter or in what it meaningfully “contains.”

The second step in the “jump” from art’s affective experience to a rhetorical register is in this notion of presence and what it might mean for art’s relation with the political. To this end, Jean Luc Nancy has observed that all art is “contemporary” in the moment of its emergence. He says, though, that since Duchamp’s ready-mades (the urinal, the comb, the snow shovel, etc., all repurposed as art), what has come to be called “contemporary art” can “be defined as the opening of a form that is above all a question, the form of a question.” That question asks, “What is art?” In other words, for Nancy,

---

229 Nancy, “Art Today.”
230 Ibid., 94.
contemporary art “is an art that asks how it is possible and how it is desirable to give a form to the world.” In this sense, art is *directly and immediately* political and not, as is often understood to be the case, a gesture of signification understood to be a political gesture. Nancy’s concern is that we not “transform art into some kind of production of signification.” To avoid such a transformation, however, requires attending to art’s immediacy, its material presence beyond (and typically prior to) the meaning derivable from its signification.

This *presence* is where affect resides, and also the key to affect’s latent rhetoricity. In their landmark *New Rhetoric*, Chaim Perelman and Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca emphasize that presence, understood rhetorically, is a matter of filling “the whole field of consciousness” so to prevent an audience from thinking about what is not being said or claimed. Presence, in this sense, is an extreme close-up, the nose-to-nose encounter that, by occupying all the senses, forces everything else out of mind. At least as discussed in the *New Rhetoric*, presence isn’t about being present to any vital immediacy at all; it’s about diverting attention *away* from what would otherwise be conspicuously absent. On this view, rhetorical presence continues to be a strategy for revealing or concealing meaning, for directing attention in a particular way so to have a particular affect.

By contrast, the nature of aesthetic presence is to engage this same perceptual absorption—front row at the Imax, “inside” the Ocular Rift—but not for any other end

---

231 Ibid., 94.
232 “Concern” is not an arbitrary word-choice here. Recalling Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of “concern” being the essence of experience, I’m trying to emphasize that Nancy is talking about aesthetic experience as itself political, irrespective of the content that the aesthetic might also imbue that experience with. See Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 175-176.
233 Nancy, “Art Today,” 94.
than to experience the affects it actuates. It is not, then, the case that presence per se gains us experiential access to affect, or to rhetoric; better to say that presence can be a rhetorical experience or an affective one, but that the two cannot happen simultaneously. In this two-sides-of-the-same-coin model, affect’s “pre-originary” status gives way to a toggling back and forth, from the affective to the rhetorical, so that the genesis of either one, as with either’s telos or function, are less important than the process of toggling itself.

More than through Nancy, more still than the pragmatists, the fullest expression of this idea is in Hans Gumbrecht’s work. For Gumbrecht, art melds meaning and presence, though some arts create experiences that list more to one side than another.\textsuperscript{235} We would want to say that music, for instance, actuates more presence effects than meaning effects. A book, by contrast, traffics foremost in meaning effects because we tend to pay more attention to the content of the words than to their typeset and font. This “listing” is similar to how McLuhan theorizes all media as having different sense ratios, each activating a particular sensory organ more than others.\textsuperscript{236} though Gumbrecht’s position, like Friedrich Kittler’s (which I discuss further in Chapter Five), is keyed more toward the materiality of cultural objects than toward their effects. The materiality of art, like communication itself, is what one is present to when engaged in aesthetic experience. Art’s meaning is something else.

Gumbrecht explains the difference by describing an “oscillation” that occurs in the encounter with cultural objects. “Presence and meaning always appear together,” he

\textsuperscript{235} Gumbrecht, \textit{Production of Presence}, 109.
\textsuperscript{236} McLuhan, \textit{Gutenberg Galaxy}. 
writes, “and are always in tension.” As he sees it, there is no way to absolve that tension by joining the two in some sort of unitary phenomenal structure. Because the presence and meaning of cultural objects cannot be united in the lived experience of our encounter with them, aesthetic experience is “characterized by an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects.” It is, however, a productive oscillation, both sides having something to offer. Yet presence is particularly important for Gumbrecht because he believes we live in what is “predominantly a meaning culture,” which makes the experience of presence tend to be fleeting, ephemeral, something we catch only in glimpses, affective shimmers. To experience presence therefore requires a “composed disposition” of “focused intensity.”

Gumbrecht describes his project as an effort “to reach and to think a layer in cultural objects and in our relation to them that is not the layer of meaning.” This is, of course, the project that I am trying to undertake with the cultural public sphere at large—“to reach and to think” an aspect of public associations that is not just rhetoric’s meaningful symbolicity. What makes Gumbrecht’s notion of oscillation between presence and meaning so helpful for such a project is that, although he doesn’t describe it as such, the generative process of oscillating between presence and meaning is one way to describe rhetoric itself.

It is, in any case, the way Richard Lanham has described the rhetorical tradition dating back to antiquity. Lanham suggests that rhetoric has always been an art of

---

directing attention, training an audience to look AT or THROUGH its objects. More recently, he’s described these alternatives as attending to “stuff or fluff,” or as the difference between “concentration and reflection.” As Gumbrecht says of presence and meaning, Lanham similarly believes one cannot look AT and THROUGH something simultaneously. An oscillatio is necessary (Lanham, as rhetorician, trades on the capital that comes from using the Latin). Indeed, despite their different traditions, the two thinkers are not so far unaligned to draw rough equivalencies between, on one hand, Lanham’s AT attention and Gumbrecht’s presence effects, and, on the other, Lanham’s THROUGH attention and Gumbrecht’s meaning effects.

Yet each illustrates the oscillation differently. One of Lanham’s examples is typeface style: we can look at the design of a letter, noticing it to be with or sans serif, capitalized or not, emboldened or italicized; or we can look through the typeface to register what it signifies: the letter I, a pronoun referring to oneself. Gumbrecht’s primary example is the Argentinian maxim that you can’t dance to a tango with lyrics. The lyrics take the dancer away from the lived experience of the dance, emphasizing lyrical meaning, while the instrumentation actuates the presence that gives a proper tango its intensity. Both examples require an oscillation between the two effects, only one being perceivable at a time. And both Lanham and Gumbrecht turn to art as a quintessential embodiment of the principle.

It might, then, and finally, be reasonable to speculate that the “jump” from the affective to the rhetorical does not traverse as insurmountable a chasm as it seems, but is in part a matter of preparing the composed disposition to accept the oscillation as inherent

---

241 Lanham, The Electronic Word, 81-85.
242 Lanham, Economics of Attention, xiii.
to all lived experience. That is, we do not have to choose one or the other, presence or meaning, affect or rhetoric, the *vita activa* or *vita contempliva*, because the movement between them is inevitable and of inherent value in itself. Ultimately, Gumbrecht argues, “our desire for presence will be best served if we try to pause for a moment before we begin to make sense—and if we then let ourselves be caught by an oscillation where presence effects permeate the meaning effects.”

This permeating is what relational or dialogic art manages to achieve. It is what I’ve been arguing happens between affective and communicative ecologies: not just a toggling from the self-sufficiency of affects in their state of becoming to the significance of discrete symbolic actions, but a convergence of the two in everyday life. As the art world began to actuate such a convergence in the 1990s and 2000s, a correlated attitude toward public sociality emerged that has come to take citizens as artists, their art the self-sufficient sharing of their experience and tastes for the public measure. This attitude is what I’m calling the democratization of creativity.

**New Media and Communicative Capitalism**

The widespread democratization of creativity is most evident from a technological standpoint. New media scholarship over the last twenty years has seen two robust interests converge. In the first case, a profuse literature has emerged around questions of the Internet’s potential to facilitate and revive the public sphere. Indeed, by now, so much

---

243 Though I won’t explore it here, I’m inclined to suggest that the yogic tradition is one way to cultivate such a disposition, inasmuch as yogic meditation trains the mind to concentrate on a particular position or thought while also being attuned to the whole field of perception as it comes and goes.

244 Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 126.
has been written on this topic that many scholars have made much ado about just how much ado has been made.\textsuperscript{245} Greg Goldberg describes the attention most bluntly when he writes, “More than an interest of scholars of new media, the public sphere is a preoccupation.”\textsuperscript{246} Certainly one reason for the preoccupation is that the Internet, at least on its surface, seems so neatly to fulfill the promise of Habermas’s normative theory of a democratic public sphere.

As Hubert Buchstein observed back in 1997, the Internet seems so promising because it follows an anti-hierarchical structure; it removes many traditional barriers to access; it accommodates the free expression of anyone; and many of its discursive sites hold autonomy from conventional political institutions.\textsuperscript{247} Yet, opinions vary widely about whether and to what extent the Web actually facilitates the democratic promise of a normative public sphere. So diverse are the fine-points of these opinions that many have tried distilling them into essential camps: web optimists and web pessimists,\textsuperscript{248} web optimists and web neutralists,\textsuperscript{249} cyber-utopians and internet-centrists,\textsuperscript{250} and so forth. The verdict is not yet in.

Meanwhile, though, over the last decade or so, scholars have begun giving similarly widespread attention to the democratic potentiality of Web 2.0 and the paradigm shift toward an online participatory culture that now enables ordinary people to

\textsuperscript{245} For examples of some who have mentioned just how much this topic has been mentioned, see Lunt & Livingston, “Media Studies’ Fascination;” Dahlberg, “Rethinking the Fragmentation;” Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres;” Goldberg, “Rethinking the Public/Virtual Sphere.”
\textsuperscript{246} Goldberg, “Rethinking the Public/Virtual Sphere,” 739.
\textsuperscript{247} Buchstein, “Bytes that Bite,” 250.
\textsuperscript{248} Roberge, “The Aesthetic Public Sphere.”
\textsuperscript{249} Buchstein, “Bytes that Bite.”
\textsuperscript{250} Morozon, The Net Delusion.
generate and mediate the cultural content that circulates online. This strain of literature is not just about the Web-as-public sphere, that is, about how the Web makes it possible for more people to have access to cultural capital and to deliberate among strangers about common affairs. Rather, it is invested in the consequences and implications of new media and software platforms that enable more people to participate in cultural production by contributing, curating, and critiquing cultural content for the public measure.

Examples of this paradigm, by now, are readily at hand to anyone paying attention: whenever someone makes a YouTube video, shares a photograph on Instagram, posts a Vine loop, pins a recipe on Pinterest, or writes an online book review, they are active producers of cultural content and not just its passive consumers. The age of the “prosumer” (a portmanteau of “producer” and “consumer” coined by futurist Alvin Toffler as far back as 1980\(^\text{251}\)) is now fully upon us. In turn, common parlance has found cultural “audiences” (a passive formulation) become “users” (an active one),\(^\text{252}\) and the increasingly entrenched foothold of a “wikinomics” model of digital life envisions an ideograph of “the people” having taken over the web with their collective wisdom.\(^\text{253}\)

While some have observed that this begins to complicate theories of agency in cyberspace,\(^\text{254}\) more generally it has inspired what David Beer maligns as “a rhetoric of democratization,”\(^\text{255}\) tacitly affirming the old questions about the Internet’s potential to revive the public sphere, despite how the Web’s immanent power dynamics strongly delimit the means and ends of our online activities.

\(^{251}\) Toffler, *The Third Wave.*
\(^{252}\) See, e.g., Livingstone, “The Challenge of Changing Audiences.”
\(^{253}\) See, e.g., Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics.*
\(^{254}\) See, e.g., Van Dijck, “Users Like You.”
\(^{255}\) Beer, “Power Through the Algorithm,” 986.
The political scientist Jodi Dean is among those who see little hope for the Internet as a new public sphere that might accommodate the kinds of public communication amenable to democratic practice today.\textsuperscript{256} Across several articles and three books—*Publicity’s Secret* (2002), *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (2009), and *Blog Theory* (2011)—Jodi Dean has rather attempted to reveal the extreme limitations of publicly formed political critique under conditions she calls “communicative capitalism.” The term is Dean’s way of describing the kind of capitalism that characterizes global culture since around the turn of the millennium, and it has near equivalents in Manuel Castells’s “capitalism in the information mode,” Dan Schiller’s “digital capitalism,” and Luis Suarez-Villa’s “technocapitalism.”\textsuperscript{257} All these terms critically engage the free market logic that has come to pervade contemporary life as a consequence of corporate interests exploiting network and communication technologies for their own self-sustaining ends.

Dean’s communicative capitalism describes “the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism.”\textsuperscript{258} As this definition suggests, her work shows that the very principles once thought to vouchsafe a healthy democratic practice have, by being incorporated into a neoliberal agenda, become the very things that render public discourse ineffectual as a means of critique and contestation. The virtues of “free” inclusiveness and participation dissemble democracy

\textsuperscript{256} Dean, “Why the Net is Not a Public Sphere.”
\textsuperscript{258} Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 2.
but in fact fortify a system designed by nature to squash resistance and retain corporate
dominion.²⁵⁹

It has not been Dean’s project to note that this milieu is the one to which
relational artists were responding with their new aesthetic form. Dean would, however,
likely share the critiques of Claire Bishop and others who have found the proselytizing
hopefulness that often accompanies Bourriaud and Kester’s claims for relational and
dialogical art to be almost utopian for supporting dialogue and sociality as somehow
“good enough” for change, without also encouraging the antagonism necessary to bring
political change about.²⁶⁰ Recalling Dean’s shrewd observation (and plangent concern)
that public discourse has moved from a practice of messages to contributions underscores
this point. One thing I’m suggesting by observing a widespread democratization of
creativity is that Dean is right, but that our “contributions” have become ever more
aestheticized, which gives them more affective potentiality to reorient public attitudes
toward our social interdependence. Thinking this way has some important implications
for creativity and democracy alike.

Democratizing Creativity

At a fundamental level, to democratize creativity is to tap into everyone’s innate
creative potential by eliminating the barriers to its expression. Naturally, some people are

²⁵⁹ It’s worth mentioning that there are clear parallels between Dean’s position and one
articulated by James Aune in Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic
Correctness, which argues that libertarian rhetoric on the political right uses the supposed
virtues of a “free market” as a way to justify oppressive inequalities that have “extreme
consequences” for the working-class.
²⁶⁰ For more on Bishop’s critique of relational aesthetics, see Bishop, “Antagonism and
Relational Aesthetics.” OCTOBER 110, Fall 2004: 51-79.
more “artsy” than others, some more gifted with the “creative instinct” and drawn toward aesthetic expression. To eliminate barriers to creative expression is not just to give people crayons and paper, but to change the parameters of addressivity for creative acts, and to legitimate these acts in themselves as opposed to doing so on the basis of some aesthetic or alternative measure of merit. Framed rhetorically, to democratize creativity is (at least ostensibly) to empower citizens through a greater facility with the canon of *inventio*.

Doing so in turn promulgates a set of values that extol the individual and open the realm of the cultural to varieties and agents of expression not typically afforded a seat at the table. Vera Zolberg describes the term “democratization” this way:

> Conventionally, it has signified making available what has come to be viewed as traditional elite culture to broader publics, and inducing these publics to use or appreciate it. More recently, however, it has also come to encompass the enlargement of the content of aesthetic culture itself, by including cultural forms and genres hitherto unrecognized or previously excluded from this hierarchically defined construct.\(^{261}\)

It’s curious that the word *democratization*, in Zolberg’s accounting, should have an inherent association with aesthetic culture and creativity, when that association is not definitive with its cognate, *democracy*. Certainly, inclusivity, accessibility, and equality are cornerstones of democracy as an idea, though of course democracy has several iterations: direct, representative, liberal, radical, pluralist, participatory, and so on.

But what about creativity? Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, in their book *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, similarly note “a movement away from what have been labeled elitist conceptions of creative exclusivity towards a more

\(^{261}\) Zolberg, “The Happy Few,” 100.
inclusive consideration of creativity in its more pervasive forms.”262 This movement, for Negus and Pickering, points toward a cultural view of creativity—echoing Dewey—as the communication of experience: a view mindful of creativity’s spiritual and affective manifestations outside the regime of interpretation. It is striking that, in wholly separate and not cross-cited accounts, Zolberg’s look at “democratization” and Negus and Pickering’s look at “creativity” independently offer a basis to see in the “democratization of creativity” heuristic two terms that Raymond Williams might consider keywords for our time.

Inasmuch as a study of the cultural public sphere can trace its origins to Habermas, it calls to be understood relative specifically to theories of deliberative democracy. Habermas, after all, is “regarded by many as the philosophical father of this theory.”263 Though deliberative democrats differ in particulars, they tend to converge around at least the normative conception of a democracy’s need for, and vouchsafed right for all to take equal part in, public discussion, argument, and reasoning about issues of common concern.264 The ingenuity of Habermas’s vision of a public sphere was to begin offering a useful way to understand the real and ideal locus and nature of these public discussions. When Hauser forwards his reticulate model of the public sphere, he improves upon this understanding by showing the complexity of public discourse’s porous movement.265 But essential to Hauser’s theory of the public sphere is its fundamentally rhetorical nature. That is, he shows that the deliberative model emergent

---

262 Negus and Pickering, Creativity, Communication, and Cultural Value, viii.
263 Cunningham, Theories of Democracy, 163.
264 See Benhabib, “Toward a Deliberative Model.”
265 Hauser, Vernacular Voices, 64-67.
from Habermas is itself an inherently rhetorical one: it presumes that democratic public life is constituted through conversational exchanges whose rhetorical nature is what helps a public reach its collective opinions, actions, and sense of meaning.

But if, as I argue following Dean, contributions are replacing messages in participatory public life today, then the cultural public sphere needs to be reconceptualized outside the presumptions of a deliberative democracy whose inherent rhetoricality derives primarily from the discursive nature of democratic public engagement. In other words, to retain a strictly rhetorical theory of the cultural public sphere in a time when public engagement with the arts is losing its discursive dialogism in favor of other, less deliberative interventions, such a theory would need to expand its sense of the rhetorical to include these other non-deliberative forms of intervention. This is what I have been trying to do by introducing an affective ecology into the picture. One challenge of doing so is the need it presumably invites to adapt an affective-rhetorical theory of the public sphere to a model of democracy other than a strictly deliberative one.

The democratization of creativity suggests a model of democracy in which the enactment of one’s citizenship is performed through public work of building the commonwealth. Harry Boyte explains what this means for a sense of citizenship as public work, exceeding the ideals of deliberative democracy that Habermas has championed, and imagining a historically American idea of citizens building the commonwealth through their industry and creativity. The talk exchanged between citizens in the public sphere may well offer a way to reach consensus or to form public opinion about matters of common interest, but then what? There is a difference between talk and work. Boyte

266 Boyte, “Building the Commonwealth.”
suggests we shouldn’t envision ideal citizens as those who participate discursively in public affairs in order to reach a public judgment that state power may or may not then heed; we should rather envision ideal citizens themselves as the powerful and active creators of public services and structures of governance. Citizens build the commonwealth. They create our “common wealth.”

Boyte doesn’t specify how this happens or what exactly such “building” entails. Although he describes the work of citizens as shaping the “public scaffolding of society” and the “public architecture of our world,” we get the most clarity when he says, “public work consists of visible effort by a mix of people that produces things of lasting and general importance to our communities and society; public work adds to and helps to sustain the commonwealth.”

The democratization of creativity can, on this view, be seen as a return to the ideal of citizenship as public work. But this work is affective. It draws us toward the political through the cultural by way of experiencing the affectability inherent in our sociality. To build the commonwealth is, in short, to build our affective ecology. I have tried to show how the art world, as well as technology and its attendant political-economic values, both facilitate and encourage more people to do such creative work and to offer it for the public eye. The problem is whether or not the veritable

---

267 Ibid., 268-70. The coding wiki, GitHub, makes a vivid example of what building the commonwealth might involve. The site allows programmers to post their projects and crowd source their coding problems to others. Recently, even the U.S. government has taken to GitHub, and now has hundreds of governmental projects posted on the site—from internal documents to NASA software—in order to benefit from the kind of “public opinion” an open source wiki is able to provide as a ballast against what amounts to the government’s concession of its limited authority. In 2012, for instance, in a historically unprecedented move toward more direct democracy, the government allowed ordinary citizens on GitHub to edit typos in one of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s internal documents. For more, see McMillan, “How GitHub Helps You Hack the Government.”
explosion in such creative work of citizens creates common goods of “lasting and
general importance,” or merely reifies the extant power structure that appears to be
liberating but in fact constrains us.

Seen in this light, the idea of democratizing creativity carries a latent tension: on
one hand, between the effort to encourage and facilitate the individual expression of all
people’s unique creative instincts; and on the other, to delimit the parameters of such
expression in a way that accommodates a lowest common denominator majority. What’s
more, this tension makes two important assumptions. First, it suggests that creative
expression and participation in public life can be collapsed: to express oneself creatively
is, by that act alone, to enact one’s democratic freedom to contribute discursively to the
collective interest. Second, it legitimates such contributions not just for their participatory
value, but for fortifying the systematic mechanisms of a political-economy (and its
attendant commercial apparatus) that purports to operate in service of maintaining the
universal liberty to participate as an arch-value of democracy. Nevertheless, the
democratization of creativity is only half of the story. The other half, to which I now turn,
involves some similarly parallel changes in the art world and media technologies.
Whereas democratizing creativity has given rise to a new class of *citizen artists*, however,
the co-emergence of widespread cultural curation has resulted in a new breed of *citizen
critic*. 
CHAPTER FIVE
Curating Culture

Vernacular Curation

In 2009, the New York Times ran a short piece about curating. If it had appeared in the Arts & Leisure section it would have been unexceptional: just another article about the curating that goes on in art museums or archives. But this story ran in the Fashion & Style pages; it treated curation as an emergent social phenomenon. Citing cases of flea markets with “personally curated” food stands, nightclubs promising to “curate a night of Curious Burlesque,” and a sneaker store that “curates” its inventory, the article observed the oddity that the verb “curate” had become what its author deemed “a fashionable code word among the aesthetically minded, who seem to paste it onto any activity that involves culling and selecting.” And so it is: everyday examples of what might be called vernacular curation are now so abundant that, even by citing the Times’ own examples I have effectively “curated” illustrative instances to make the point (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: “Muriel’s Over-Curated Life” by Roz Chast, in The New Yorker, August 25, 2014

268 Williams, “On the Tip of Creative Tongues.”
This chapter is about the spread of curation as a vernacular art and the role that it plays in the associative relations of public life today. Vernacular curation is the counterpart of creativity’s democratization. Given the growing abundance of aesthetic texts, increasing access to them, and the diminishing traction of old distinctions between such categories as professional/amateur or author/audience, the need arises to sort and classify the array of cultural output in different, interested ways. Vernacular curation involves “curating culture” in order publicly to exhibit aesthetic tastes, to produce a presence to aesthetic experience, or to make a case for aesthetic value or meaning. Coinciding in part with the spread of new media technologies that make such curatorial acts easy and commonplace, the precipitous growth in acts of curatorship by non-expert citizen critics now gives them powerful rhetorical influence in organizing the public salience of nearly all forms of aesthetic mediation.

To curate is to cull and select, to arrange and order, to distinguish and rank, to preserve and safeguard, all with the tacit assumption that what one selects for display or safekeeping, and how one displays or keeps it, might have some rhetorical affect. But there is an important difference between the culling and selecting that goes into any list-making process, and the culling and selecting that we think of as curatorial. The difference exceeds what is curated and pertains rather to for whom curatorial acts are performed. When I go to the store for beans and rice, I’m not curating my pantry; and the To-Do list I jot on a notecard each morning isn’t curated either, even as there’s always more to be done. My premise is that what makes curatorship distinct is its social orientation toward others.
As I will argue, vernacular curation is an important form of engagement in the cultural public sphere today because it circulates ineffable intensities that orient strangers toward their encounters with the inevitable alterity of public life. To survey the cultural field and re-present a selection of it as an expression of preferential tastes and styles is also to forward a particular case for what matters, or ought to matter, for others. In that sense, all curating is inherently rhetorical: a way of generating meaning and inspiring social action, however “distant” it may seem as a mode of civic engagement. But the cultural milieu and technologies that encourage citizens to curate culture also defer the symbolic message of these acts in favor of more affective contributions that operate with a different order of rhetoricity. To make this case—exploring the genesis of vernacular curation and its repercussions for the affective ecology that saturates the cultural public sphere—I proceed in three parts.

First, I offer a condensed history of curation as a social practice, beginning in ancient Rome and leading to our present day, when what I call *curatorial media* have capacitated ordinary citizens to perform curatorial acts as a stand-in for more deliberative modes of public engagement. Second, I show how these mediated acts of curation, though ostensibly devoid of a public sphere’s more substantive discursive qualities, do operate rhetorically in ways that have great social consequence. I suggest, however, that their greatest consequence derives less from the construction of social meaning through symbolic action, than from a more primary pre-symbolic contribution to the affective ecology that preconfigures any public’s disposition to be rhetorically affected in the first place. To illustrate this point, I conclude, third, with a short case study of the “mixtape”
and the evolving curatorial media whose material constraints act as cultural techniques to shift their rhetorical potentialities away from symbolicity and toward affectability.

**Part 1: A Condensed History of Curation**

**The Public Commons**

Our verb “curate” comes from the Latin *curare*, meaning “to take care.” The first curators were appointed Roman public officials known as *curatores rei publicae*: roughly, “those who take care of the common good.” The position was also sometimes called a *curator civitatis*, indicating that this official was responsible for seeing to a city’s orderly functioning and maintenance. The Roman emperor Domitian appointed the first known *curatores* in the last third of the first century AD. These positions held high social status and found their holders sent to foreign provinces throughout the empire, including in Africa and Asia. One of the foremost duties of *curatores rei publicae* was to supervise the finances of these provincial cities or civic communities, investigating instances of corruption and embezzlement, and ensuring resources were spent prudently for the maintenance of shared public works and the common good.\(^{269}\) It was the *curator rei publicae*, for instance, that restored and cared for the public baths where citizens of all sorts bathed and conversed.\(^{270}\)

By the fourth century AD, likely as a result of Diocletian reforms or the ubiquity of foreign *curatores* throughout the Empire, *curatores rei publicae* were no longer appointed directly by emperors and sent far afield to care for the Roman provinces.

\(^{269}\) Burton, “The Curator Rei Publicae.”

Instead, local councils began electing *curatores* to serve locally as senior magistrates within the community in which they were already established.\(^{271}\) This meant that high social standing or foreign origin no longer held the same weight, and the *curator* became a public figure less associated with the maintenance of Roman power abroad, than with civic-mindedness toward a more familiar community at home. It remains unclear just how much autonomous discretion the *curatores* at this time had, but evidence supports at least some instances of their acting *cum amore populi*—that is, with the enthusiasm of the people, or out of love for the people—when it came to restoring public baths.\(^{272}\)

The takeaway here is twofold. First, the very first curators (at least, the first to go by that name) served a distinctly public purpose. They saw to the responsible delegation of finances directed to the maintenance and smooth operation of shared public spaces. Inevitably, these duties required a process of selection. Funds are never unlimited, and choosing to attend to certain civic needs would have meant choosing not to address others. But the curator’s unique responsibility was to execute these choices (whether autonomously, in response to the people’s will, or at the behest of more central authority seems to have varied), and to do so with the recognition that they were choices of consequence for the civic life and wellbeing of a public that shared some needs—the need to bathe, for instance—which they could not fulfill without the Republic’s help.

Second, the evolving administrative procedures that saw curators initially appointed directly by the emperor and later elected more democratically reveals the first of several historical contingencies that divested curators some of their elite status and brought them closer to the people themselves. Though it has taken thousands of years, I

---

\(^{271}\) “*Curator rei publicae*” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

believe an ongoing trend in this general direction has culminated today with the production of ordinary citizens as vernacular curators whose quotidian acts of sorting and classifying serve to care for the civic good the way only those vouchsafed that authority had been privileged to do in the past. But curatorship that involved caring for the public commons, as in ancient Rome, is only part of the story that gets us to where things are today.

**Care of the Soul**

By the Middle Ages, the role of the curator had shifted from a public office to an ecclesiastic one. In Medieval Latin, the word *curatus* meant “one responsible for the care of souls,” and the *curator rei publicae* had been reincarnated as a *curate*: a parish priest or clergy member who assisted the priests and vicars in assuring the well being of a congregation. As Paul Kolbet has shown in his study of Augustine’s sermons, taking responsibility for the care of souls (sometimes translated as the “cure of souls”) was closely aligned with the rhetorical arts dating back to Plato.\(^{273}\) In the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes rhetoric as a *psychogogia*, or the guiding of the soul through words.\(^{274}\) The role of the curate followed a more Christian form of this psychogogy, what Kolbet describes as a philosophical form of therapy “pertaining to how a mature person leads the less mature to perceive and internalize wisdom for themselves.”\(^{275}\) The curing of souls, which would become the central duty of pastoral curates, thus involved enchanting the

---

\(^{273}\) Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*.

\(^{274}\) Plato, *Phaedrus*, 261a, 271c.

\(^{275}\) Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 8.
congregation through words designed to lead them away from temptation and toward the path of salvation.

No longer a public office intended to safeguard the literal “common wealth” of public funds, nor to care for the public commons to which these funds might be put to use, the *curate* now was a shepherd of the people, guiding them toward piety. Taming the all-too-human beast, though, called for different rhetorical actions than guarding public resources and selecting to what civic ends they would be directed. The work became more classically rhetorical as it was performed principally in sermons, which, though a genre in itself post-Augustine, an Aristotelian frame would regard as epideictic public speeches. The assimilation of curatorial “curing” or “caring” by the religious establishment—no doubt with different responsibilities accorded to curates of different faiths or denominations—meant that the original concern with civic space and public wealth shifted to a concern with the public itself: with its people, who themselves, under God, could care for society and assure its collective virtue by saving their own souls from damnation.

In this way, like the shift to an elected *curator rei publicae*, the spread of religious curates in an increasingly pastoral and feudal context brought curation a step closer to the people. In the same way that the imperial state offered no buffer between one’s identity as a citizen and the rhetoric of the state, the church offered no buffer between one’s identity as a Christian and its own salvific rhetoric. Post-reformation, that is, church rhetoric fell outside the civic realm; its concern was salvation, a different end than citizenship. The people, the congregations, were still directed to act according to God’s will, a will expressed by a clergy whom, before the spread of literacy, claimed special
authority to relay God’s voice, but the curatorial onus to “take care” shifted with the Protestant Reformation and the printing press: through their behaviors and habituations, the people were now entreated to ensure the care of their own soul, and could by doing so contribute to the greater good, though guiding people in that direction was an official curate’s responsibility. Over time, as print technology and the spread of literacy enabled more people to read and interpret scripture on their own—and, crucially, as these changes gradually increased the spread of more secular forms of cultural production—the social function of the curator changed again.

Curiosities

By the seventeenth century, the role of a curator began to assume the form we are more familiar with today: someone who selects and organizes artifacts, performances, or events for public display and safekeeping. In 1662, for instance, the Royal Society of London named the polymath Robert Hooke its “Curator of Experiments.” But the appointment was merely a job: not a public office, not a conferral of spiritual authority, not even an entrée into the elite fellowship of the Society itself. Hooke’s duties were simply to demonstrate scientific experiments for the Royal Society’s regular meetings. Although more publicly staged demonstrations of scientific experiments would become commonplace during the height of eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Hooke’s curatorship served the Royal Society’s more specialized audience. Even so, his explicit position as “Curator of Experiments” marked what, from our vantage, we could identify as a distinct shift in the social role of curators.

Hooke’s appointment fits well in our history: his father, John Hooke, was the curate at All Saints’ Church in Isle of Wight. See Chapman, “England’s Leonardo.”
Here was a curator whose curatorial authority now derived from his own curiosity—a word evolved from the same Latin root *cura* to mean, by Hooke’s day, both an object of interest and the inquisitive interestedness itself. The curator accordingly now played the part of an exhibitor: showing off the natural curiosities of the world and the reasoning human’s capacity to attain mastery over their mysteries. Even so, that Hooke’s particular curiosity and scientific aptitude were rewarded with a job that expected him to showcase them attests that curatorship had not yet become a vernacular art of non-expert laypersons.

Which is not to say there weren’t people who performed acts of curatorship on their own. Already by this time gentleman collectors had been keeping “cabinets of curiosities” gathered from all over the world. One of the first such collectors, predating Hooke, was the Danish antiquary Olaus Wormius (“Ole Worm”), whose collection of oddities became Denmark’s first museum, the Wormium. Its inventory included both natural and cultural artifacts tending toward the bizarre, wondrous, and mythical: musical instruments, taxidermied sea creatures, unicorn horns, and so on (Fig. 7). Often collected in the name of natural science, but also to showcase artworks and other cultural artifacts of foreign origin, the curiosity cabinet, from our vantage, has an unpleasant air of colonial spoils and exoticization. But it was the display of these curiosities for an

---

277 Thanks to John Jackson for drawing my closer attention to this phenomenon, particularly as it played out in arguments about the function of natural history museums as they become more professionalized in the nineteenth century. See Jackson and Depew (forthcoming, Chapter II). For more on the “cabinet of curiosities” and the advent of modern museums, see Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*; and Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*.

278 The vaunted British Museum, for instance, began in 1753 from the naturalist Sir Hans Sloane’s large collection of curiosities. The museum’s collection grew therefrom in direct correlation with the spread of British colonial power. In consequence, countries
audience—and, eventually, a public audience—that brought curators into the realm of museums with which they are still mostly associated today. To understand this transition requires recognizing the convergence of curiosity collectors and those who saw to their caretaking and display.

Figure 7: Ole Worm, Museum Wormianum (Leiden, 1655). This etching was the frontispiece of a catalog whose Latin title translates roughly as, “Worm’s Museum, or the History of Very Rare Things, Natural and Artificial, Domestic and Exotic, Which are Stored in the Author’s House in Copenhagen.”

Museums

One example of this convergence can be seen in the German tradition of Galeriewerk. Galeriewerk were high quality albums and prints displaying impressive collections of art, the first known example being Archduke Leopold Wilhelm’s Theatrum

worldwide are now calling for the British Museum to repatriate works of cultural heritage plundered by British conquest, including the Elgin Marbles of Greece’s Parthenon, Egypt’s Rosetta Stone, and human remains from Tasmania, among others.
Pictorium from 1660.279 A precursor of the modern exhibition catalog, the portability of these albums exposed people far afield (still mostly elites) to works of art well outside their local provenance or physical location, the purpose being largely to demonstrate the exquisite taste and largesse of those who owned the collections that each Galeriewerk reproduced.280 Collectors would hire artists to draw their collections: either by directly representing the private gallery walls where they were displayed, or by drawing fictive “walls” that portrayed the most exceptional and representative work from the larger holdings. Although this process entailed a curatorial practice in itself, the emergence of the museum curator as such was still inchoate. Not until the Galeriewerk tradition of representing collections gave way to public galleries that displayed the collections did the museum curator become more commonplace.

An illustration of this can be seen in the case of what would become the Düsseldorf gallery. Between 1709 and 1714, the German prince Johann Wilhelm II von der Pfalz built a structure adjacent to his palace to house his considerable collection of art.281 Initially, the space was accessible only privately, at royal social functions and for friends and elites given special entrée as guests. Its method of display reflected this purpose: with paintings hung from floor to ceiling, one flush against the other, the close proximity of each artwork had the effect of highlighting the impressive wealth and size of the collection as a whole, making each work’s beauty or significance only subsidiary (Fig. 8). This crammed style of display may have been commonplace in the baroque period also in part because it accommodated the more efficient creation of print albums.

279 See Klinge, *David Teniers and the Theatre of Painting*.
280 See Gaehhtgens and Marchesano, *Display and Art History*, 3.
281 Ibid., 3.
In 1756, Prince Wilhelm opened the gallery to a public audience and hired Lambert Krahe to oversee its organization and display. Krahe made substantial changes. Reducing the number of paintings displayed on each wall, he gave each one more room to stand out (Fig. 9). De-emphasizing the grandeur of the collection as a whole, Krahe’s new arrangement had a more pedagogical and art-historical aim. It both drew more attention to individual artworks, inviting each to be appreciated on its own, and more deliberately juxtaposed each painting relative to works from different schools, educating viewers about the comparative principles of Flemish, Dutch, and Italian styles.²⁸² Though Krahe was technically the gallery’s director, the success of his model helped make the curator a role associated largely with art museums for the next two centuries.

²⁸² See “Krahe’s Enlightened Display.”
Curatorial Media

The modern legacy of the curator as director of our aesthetic commonwealth lingers still. But curatorship has recently, in response to changes in the new media environment, entered the sector of business marketing. Often under the aegis of “content curation,” this newer sense of curating concerns how to select, organize, and distribute digital content pertaining to particular themes or topics, usually for the purpose of targeting a capitalizable market. America in particular, Steven Rosenbaum says, has become a curation nation. “Not long down the road,” he predicts, “curation is going to change the way we buy and sell things, the way we recommend and review things, and the way we’re able to mobilize groups of like-minded individuals to share, gather, and
purchase as groups.” But digital media companies, both start-ups and behemoths alike, do not alone perform acts of curatorship; their tack has rather been to enable and enlist their “users” to become curators themselves. Thanks to the growing ubiquity of curatorial media, curatorship has become a widely practiced vernacular art.

Curatorial media are more than just “social” as their more common appellation suggests. These technologies don’t only connect people; they connect people with the *things* with which they identify—usually aesthetically mediated things at that. Pinterest, for instance, allows its 70 million members to collect images and “pin” them onto virtual boards that publicly display one’s tastes, preferences, and styles for anyone to see. So the fashion maven can have his board of stylish socks and short hemmed pants, just as the lover of typefaces can have her page of favorite fonts. From microblogging services like Tumblr or Twitter to photo-sharing communities like Instagram or Flickr, social media have inherently curatorial properties insofar as they give people a chance to express their tastes and predilections by identifying with some cultural artifacts and not others.

These terministic acts of identification, which sometimes merely take the form of clicking a *Like* or *Share* icon, do not always have much rhetorical salience—at least, not the kind able to sustain a public sphere around the reasonable discussion of important issues. But that does not make them irrelevant to public participation we would still want to recognize as capable of contributing to social change. The point concerns how technology now mediates public sociality, not just in the hands of a media elite, but through mobile devices in our own. When we *Share, Post, Comment, Rate, Review, Like, Pin, or Recommend* something for an audience of strangers, we articulate a set of

---

283 Rosenbaum, *Curation Nation*, 4.
relations between the intimate realm of our own lifeworld and what we take to be of
interest to others. As such relations circulate and recur, an affective ecology develops as a
kind of Pitri dish that “cultures” our orientation to strangers and their common concerns.
To understand how art intersects with such concerns today we need to understand the
rhetorical impact of vernacular curation on public affairs.

Part 2: The Rhetorical Curatorial

Two Rhetorical Orders

To appreciate the rhetorical aspects of the curatorial, it helps, following a line of
thinking introduced at the end of Chapter One, to think of rhetoric operating in two
orders. But the traditional position that takes rhetoric’s purview to lie within the realm of
symbolic action is not the more primary of the two. Rather, in its first order, vernacular
curation helps to “materialize” the affective ecology that exposes us to the bare
possibility of being affected by rhetoric’s more traditional second order of symbolic
action. This is particularly apparent in the case of curatorial media. There are, that is,
rhetorical aspects of the material technologies that capacitate acts of vernacular curation
in the first place, and hence rhetorics that precede the rhetorical salience potentially
generated by the curatorial acts themselves. These first-order rhetorics are a-symbolic,
outside or at least apart from the semantic space where meaning matters. Although
curatorship’s social register has intrinsically rhetorical properties, then, that rhetoricity is
constrained by a more first-order rhetoric that makes its rhetorical sociality possible.

First-order rhetorics are hard to identify because they traffic in registers outside
the hermeneut’s lens of interpreting symbol use and misuse. Yet it is these preoriginal
rhetorics that contribute to the affective ecology that provides some basis for any public’s bare ability to be persuaded, affected, or otherwise moved toward a collective purpose. If curation is becoming so commonplace in civil society that it is replacing more deliberative modes of public engagement, then attending to both orders of its rhetoricity is important for understanding how public spheres operate relative to the cultural field. While taking this focus may imply abandoning a discursive model of the public sphere (a model that relies on the symbolic order alone), acknowledging the pre-symbolic aspects of our sociality should rather be read to add another layer of complexity to such a model’s ongoing traction. We do not need to abandon a discursive model. We need to deepen it.

**Curating Van Gogh**

Because a second-order rhetoricity is, in practice, what scholars of rhetoric have been treating as rhetoric’s primary mode for millennia, it can be illustrated more easily than its first-order antecedent. To that end, the familiar example of museum curatorship should suffice. By selecting some art works for special exhibition, presenting them in a particular context, and displaying them in a certain light (literally and figuratively), museum curators make arguments, narratives, and embodied spaces that influence how such artists or artworks are understood. For instance, consider two art exhibitions: (1) *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*, staged at the Art Institute of Chicago from September 21, 2001 to January 13, 2002; and (2) *Japanese Inspirations: Monet,*

---

284 It is worth noting here that light, for McLuhan, is the quintessential medium because it gives presence to things. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8-9; 74-75.
Gauguin, Van Gogh, staged at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany from September 27, 2014 to January 18, 2015.

The former exhibit included work by Van Gogh and Gauguin created during their southern sojourns, alongside biographical information from this time, as well as photos of the areas when they lived there. In this way, the exhibit told a story about the importance for both Van Gogh and Gauguin of renouncing their city commitments in Paris and moving south (to Arles for Van Gogh, Tahiti for Gauguin), where in relative isolation they could find their unique style and vision. The latter exhibit, meanwhile, also juxtaposed Van Gogh and Gauguin, but it told a decidedly different story about their work. Here, in an exhibition that included Japanese prints and paintings predating the works of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Monet, visitors saw work from across these artists’ careers, the suggestion being that the primary aesthetic influence on their art did not come from the introspective solicitude of any southern retreat, but from their studied imitation of Japanese art.

The point is not that one exhibit presents the truth and the other doesn’t, nor even that both stories might be true. The point is that each one frames Van Gogh and Gauguin—and offers a way of understanding their work—in a particular way. (And, of course, articulating Van Gogh and Gauguin at all is another curatorial frame that is not predetermined but makes a rhetorical case for how to make sense of them both.) This is a pretty straightforward illustration of the second-order rhetoricity of two rather conservative examples of museum curatorship. Each makes selective choices that are not inevitable or predetermined (barring such inartistic constraints as which works the museums were able to acquire on loan, how the museum architecture would limit their...
display, recalcitrant scheduling issues, and so on) and in doing so endeavors to have some measure of persuasive influence or to “induce cooperation” among a human audience that will “by nature respond to symbols,” as Burke says.\textsuperscript{285}

If, as I’ve argued, the role of the curator in the twenty-first century is passing from the smartly dressed authority in charge of public museums to ordinary citizens who, illuminated by their phones on the subway, have uncountable aesthetic texts at their fingertips, an uncountable audience of strangers to curate them for, and all the technological means for their mediation, then the social practice of curatorial acts will entail different rhetorical methods than the straightforward example that two Van Gogh exhibits can portray. Because the vernacular curating of culture has become a reality of our transnational social fabric, it calls for new ways of thinking about how such curatorship functions rhetorically to build a collective orientation to the arts and to create their potential for social uptake. Treating cultural curation as a vernacular form of public engagement, I’m suggesting, offers a rich way to understand the problem that arises when the sheer abundance of cultural output makes it necessary to classify and arrange it all in expedient ways.

**Vernacular Curation and Rhetoric’s Five Canons**

Richard Lanham has argued that in times when information is abundant, attention is the scarce commodity.\textsuperscript{286} Certainly that’s true today. There’s far more out there to which we might attend than we ever actually will. As a result, Lanham suggests, the paramount concern of cultural production in our time is a rhetorical problem of gaining

\textsuperscript{285} Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 43.
\textsuperscript{286} Lanham, *The Economics of Attention*. 
an audience-consumer’s attention. For Lanham, though, the consequence of this predicament is that the rhetorical canon of *style* becomes the paramount way of gaining attention. People pay attention to what is stylized, whether a Corvette or a can-opener. Style, he suggests, is the “fluff” that gains our notice and draws us in to the substantive “stuff” beyond it. An economics of attention is thus one that finds us oscillating between the stuff and fluff of the world, trying to sort the wheat from the chaff. Although Lanham wisely frames our contemporary condition’s information surfeit as a rhetorical problem, articulating it with our information economy, he neglects to see that Cicero’s other four rhetorical canons—arrangement, memory, delivery, and invention—are also well at work once curating culture becomes a social practice of everyday life.

A brief word on each. Maybe above all, curation is a process deeply connected to memory, a canon the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* extolled as “the treasure-house of ideas … the guardian of all the parts of rhetoric.” Curatorship is not curatorship without the collecting of and caring for “treasure houses” of various kinds. And because curatorial media operate through the archival capacities of digital technologies—technologies with infallible memories—they are both a means of remembering and a means of singling out those things that ought to be remembered. The digital curator, we might say, to echo the *Ad Herennium*, both builds a “treasure house” and acts as the “guardian” of those rhetorical ends to which it might be put. But that is not quite accurate. Technically, we would rather have to say that the curatorial media capacitating vernacular acts of curation are what do the archiving and memory work of digital curatorship. The individual curator merely wields these technologies according to the material parameters they afford.

---

287 *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, 205.
An infallible memory may be one such affordance, but the inherently social function of curating also makes arrangement an essential part of curating culture. In its Greek form, the canon of arrangement (taxis) originally alluded to the ordering of troops on the battlefield. In that context, the placement of stronger soldiers relative to the weaker served as a tacit ranking mechanism with important strategic consequences, some symbolic, others all too real. One feature of curatorial media is similarly to enable people to arrange or rank preferences in a particular hierarchy or sequence. Because this ordered systemization unavoidably forwards certain value judgments and orientations toward the texts at hand, it carries the rhetorical weight of an arrangement that, if ordered differently, might have different consequences. And yet, here again, that doesn’t quite get it right, for although those who use curatorial media perform their own acts of arrangement—here understood to include ranking and sorting procedures, not just how to order different parts of a speech—they can only do so in line with the methods and systems of arrangement that particular technologies permit. Amazon’s customer book review system, for instance, allows people to rank books on a five-star scale but to sort reviews only along a binary of helpful or not helpful.

Similarly, curatorial media can be seen to afford different manners of delivery. The rhetorical importance of delivery in the context of digital culture is no longer a booming voice or clear enunciation. The orator’s evocative hand gestures have given way to the tapping on screens and the swiping of fingers. The importance of delivery can be illustrated in the observation (only partly a provocation) that the Internet is already obsolete. Mobile platforms have won the day over desktop applications. Mobile media—the tablets, cell phones, and wearable tech that can go with us as extensions of our
body—are cheaper, quicker, more pervasive, and more versatile than their PC bound alternatives. To share or post a photograph over a mobile device is decidedly different than to do the same on a desktop application. The former enacts that photograph’s more immediate, seamless embedment in the rhythm of our lived experience; its inseparability from our daily life enhances the affective articulation of the photograph with the context of its delivery and reception. Desktop delivery, however, is more calculated because it happens apart from our involvement in anything but its delivery; desktop delivery implies the photograph is something to be “checked” at a designated time; its articulation with any emplaced immediacy is only accidental. Again, though, while those privileged with their choice of platforms may choose which mode of delivery suits them best, they are limited by the affordances each makes possible.\footnote{288}

It may yet be curatorial media’s role in the process of \textit{invention} that illustrates curation’s rhetoricity most plainly. Media and invention are so enmeshed, in fact, that Peter Simonson has proposed the concept of “inventional media” as a way “to refer to the habitats, artistic materials, and communicative modes through which rhetorical generation occurs.”\footnote{289} Simonson wants to wrest invention both from the limitations of logophilia, which treats invention merely as a process of coming up with things to say, and from the romantic ideal of a self-regulating actor/author, which treats invention as the creative act of an autonomous individual. By treating invention instead as “the generation

\footnote{288}{A simple illustration of the point is the observation that an SLR camera strapped around one’s neck doesn’t enable curation in the same way as the camera on a mobile phone in one’s pocket. The former cannot so quickly share what it depicts, while the latter can almost immediately enter a network of public display.}

\footnote{289}{Simonson, “Reinventing Invention, Again,” 300.}
of rhetorical materials from three different conceptions of media—embodied habitats, artistic mediums, and modes of communicative expression—he effectively makes invention a curatorial process. It involves selecting and culling rhetorical materials from these media, whether body languages, artworks, text messages, or anything else that contributes to the “dynamic flow of rhetorical production,” and in that case tacitly correlates invention with a form of curatorship, a way of shoring together and revealing those extant materials that will best perform a rhetorical function.

Cultural Techniques and Curation’s First-Order Rhetoricity

All the above aspects of curation’s rhetoricity align with traditional models of rhetoric, what I’m calling rhetoric’s second order. If, in its first order, rhetoric operates outside symbolism and meaning, then it can also be regarded as that process which makes symbols actionable and meaning possible. When it comes to curating culture, such a process might be described as a cultural technique. “Cultural techniques,” as Bernard Geoghegan explains, “concern the rules of selection, storage, and transmission that characterize a given system of mediation, including the formal structures that compose and constrict this process.” In other words, before particular instances of curation can be communicated publicly and thereby given to attain some social meaning or significance, curatorial processes are constrained by the cultural techniques endemic to the media that make them possible. Nobody has done more to foreground the importance

---

290 Ibid., 313.
291 Ibid., 313.
of this “technological a priori” for framing and defining the range and logic of cultural formations than German media theorist Friedrich Kittler.

Kittler is a pioneer of what is sometimes called media materialism or medial materiality. For Kittler, “Media determine our situation.”293 They do so through discourse networks: “the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data.”294 Of course, different discourse networks make their allowances in different ways, ways which, of necessity, allow for certain kinds of communication and exclude others. The material structures of a discourse network are therefore always of more interest to Kittler than their meaning, or the content of whatever communication they circulate, because it is the discourse networks that determine what counts as eligible for potential meaning in a given cultural formation in the first place.295

In Discourse Networks 1800/1900, he forwards this thesis by distinguishing between textual media in the discourse network of 1800 (which structured romanticism) and technological media in the discourse network of 1900 (which structured modernism). Textual media can transcribe only the literary-symbolic registers of written language or speech into a technically processed code or notation. Ruled by the alphabet, textual media traffic only within this symbolic chain of signification. Signifiers get transcribed into

293 Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, xxxix.
294 Kittler, Discourse Networks, 369.
295 Kittler’s interest in discourse analysis is heavily influenced by Foucault’s efforts to trace “discourse” from a place outside discourse, through the various apparatuses of power that condition actual communication. As Foucault describes his own method in The Archeology of Knowledge, he “wishes to determine the principle according to which only the ‘signifying’ groups that were enunciated could appear . . . based on the principle that everything is never said” (118). Similarly, Kittler’s emphasis is not on explication or understanding but on the rules that organize discourse—what counts as “signification” and what doesn’t—in a given system. See Kramer, “The Cultural Techniques,” 97-98 and Wellbury, “Foreword,” xii.
letters and spaces and words and sentences. Technological media, conversely, record, store, and produce data from the material world itself, and hence refer to things that cannot be transcribed in the symbolic order. The gramophone, for instance, can record sound in “real time,” from amidst the chaos and contingency of its live occurrence in a material context. With technological media—from the gramophone to the computer—the ephemerality of the real could now be repeatable, which meant that the irreversibility of time’s incessant flow could now be manipulated as a cultural technique.

Although Kittler shares with the Frankfurt School an interest in the relationship between technical rationality and the arts, he is not disparaging of our technical condition’s effects on art in the way his German counterparts have been. To the contrary: as John Durham Peters has noted, Kittler rallies against any proposition that the arts—especially those involving time, such as music, dance, or poetry—could be anything but measured and counted through the quantification of technology.296 The technological a priori that guides Kittler’s thinking, directing his focus on medial and infrastructural materiality at the expense of the human, however, does sideline more conventional hermeneutic or ideological criticism of the arts. While the Frankfurt School wants, through dialectical criticism, to spare the arts their commodification by commerce’s technical rationality, and to resist the loss of art’s “aura” (via Benjamin)297 or its “promise of happiness” (via Adorno),298 Kittler deals hardly at all with what the arts do or mean through their social exposure, and instead shows that technology capacitates all

297 See Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”
298 See Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 196.
forms of aesthetic mediation’s semantic potentiality, and hence that technology’s material technicity, not what it creates, is what merits critical scrutiny.

This evasion of the symbolic in favor of the material conditions of its emergence at first makes a rhetorical reading of Kittler’s project seem impossible. What David Wellbury calls Kittler’s “post-hermeneutic” thought, that is, seems to distance itself from the rhetorical by being less interested in meaning than in the difference between meaning and non-meaning (signal and noise) that media’s technicity determines. For Kittler, Wellbury explains, “the object of study is not what is said or written but the fact—the brute and often brutal fact—that it is said, that this and not rather something else is inscribed.”

The stakes, then, are “the constraints that select an array of marks from the noisy reservoir of all possible written constellations, paths and media of transmission, or mechanisms of memory.” These constraints, I think, should be understood as rhetorical because they potentiate and influence matters of consequence relative to acts of curation in particular. The first-order rhetors here thus become the designers, engineers, and programmers who develop the media technologies that enable certain kinds or means of expression and not others.

Part 3: Mixtapes

To illustrate how first-order rhetorics operate as cultural techniques surrounding acts of vernacular curation, I turn now to the example of the mixtape as a relatively recent form of vernacular curation. The cultural salience of mixtapes in the liberal West is plain to see. It’s there in British novelist Nick Hornby’s bestselling novel, High Fidelity (later

299 Wellbury, “Foreword,” xii.
300 Ibid., xii.
produced as a successful film), and it’s there on the street corner when aspiring hip-hop stars hand out their “mixtape” hoping to be discovered. *Rolling Stone* magazine routinely publishes favorite songs of famous musicians; iTunes offers Celebrity Playlists; the news reports on what songs Obama has on his iPod; Starbucks sells “Artist’s Choice” CD compilations. Cameron Crowe, the American movie director, revealed in 2000 that he had made a mixtape for every month of his life since 1978. “It’s as good as a diary,” he explained.\(^{301}\)

What’s so special about the mixtape is not just its diaristic potential, but how it affords the chance to let personal expressions of taste communicate to others what cannot as adequately be conveyed by other discursive means. Mixtapes operate affectively. And they are *curated* texts: in this case, the selection and arrangement of sounds, usually in the form of discrete songs, in order to communicate what is otherwise ineffable through a personal identification with the intensities of an aesthetic medium. Some people, like Cameron Crowe, make mixtapes for themselves; others make mixes for occasions: parties, soundtracks, seductions, road trips, exercise. We make them as gifts for friends or lovers, family or strangers. Whatever the situation or audience, making a mix involves choosing particular songs, placing them in a particular sequence, and doing so knowing that these choices directly affect the story, mood, sentiment, influence or affects that the mix is able to produce. As anyone who has heard or made a mixtape knows, curation can be a powerful form of communication.

\(^{301}\) Crowe, “The Making of Almost Famous.”
The mixtape’s curatorial power is so great that a number of scholars have even noted that mixes offer critical counterparts to voices of authority and oppression, making them integral modes of participation in public affairs. Here’s how Jared Ball puts it:

As an expression of the colonized, the mixtape remains a kind of unsanctioned or dissident communication exercised by oppressed populations seeking to disrupt imposed media environments, which of necessity narrowly limit the roles and function of communication. The mixtape, evolving out of colonial antagonisms, asks for no permission, is bound by no laws of the state, and disseminates a national mythology essential to all national groupings.  

This notion of the mixtape asking for no permission, being bound by no laws of the state, and disseminating a national mythology, begins to sound strikingly similar to the idea of a public sphere itself. Others have made similar arguments. Adam Banks also locates the mixtape relative to cultures of the oppressed, African Americans in particular, and suggests that the curatorial/rhetorical aspects of music selection has a community function. Focusing on party and radio disc jockeys in particular, he argues that the African American DJ “tells the stories, carries the history, interprets the news, mediates the disputes, and helps shape the community’s collective identity” through rhetorical practices that Banks sees as multimedia forms of composition. Thomas Bey William Bailey, similarly, has argued that self-released audio, largely associated with the mixtapes of “Cassette Culture,” can offer creative resistance to the media conglomerates whose technologies of music dissemination entrench existing power structures and are not always in the interest of the people.  

---

304 Bailey, *Unofficial Release*. 
What Ball, Banks, and Bailey share is a belief that mixtapes—and the curatorial rhetorics enacted in their creation—serve a social purpose that is more than just the expression of aesthetic taste or the sharing of aesthetic experience through music. In the case of music, acts of vernacular curation circulate a kind of sensibility, or, if you will, an *affective ecology*, that acts as its own reward. Yet, the media technologies that make it possible for ordinary people to create mixes have, in their relatively short history, already undergone major transformations with consequences for how such acts of curation intervene rhetorically in social life. These transformations, I want to conclude by suggesting, indicate evolving cultural techniques—first-order rhetorics—that contribute to shaping the affective ecology that orients our engagement in the cultural public sphere. That this engagement traffics at times outside symbolic action, indifferent to meaning in favor of a more immediate experience, suggests that a discursive constitution of the cultural public sphere is not alone sufficient to account for its moods and manners of participation.

**Cassette Tapes**

In the time of its flourishing (after the 8-track, before the CD, overlapping with both) the compact cassette tape made it possible as never before for ordinary people to record an assortment of their favorite music and share it with others. With just a blank tape and a cassette tape recorder, anyone so equipped could record audio of all varieties: ambient, live, or recorded. Reel-to-reel and 8-track recorders had made this possible for the amateur as early as the 1960s, but these technologies were cumbersome, of poorer quality, and more cost-prohibitive than their successor. With the introduction of the
compact cassette tape and its recorders into the household, the “mixtape” became a widely practiced vernacular art—and a seminal precursor to our curatorial age.

The material limitations of a cassette tape accommodate and invite only a certain kind of curatorial form, excluding others altogether. A 60-minute tape, for instance, can only record 30 minutes of audio on each side. For the boy in his bedroom with his dual cassette recorder, this required some planning. He needed to time the songs he recorded so neither precipitously to cut the last one off when the tape unspooled to the end, nor clumsily to leave too much time remaining without room for another song altogether. The desire to leave a few seconds of silence between songs only complicated the procedure. Cassette tape technology also required a real time commitment: the magnetic tape only recorded the music as it played. Press the Stop button too late, and the recording captured whatever sounds came next. Hit Stop too soon, and you chopped the song’s end.

Cassette tapes and the technologies available to record on them necessarily constrained the affordances one had in curating a mix. Rhetorically speaking, for instance, at least in rhetoric’s more traditional second order, if one envisioned the first and last songs on a side being crucial to a mixtape’s overall impact (the way songs from a movie’s credits tend to have more salience than those played over scenes of less consequence in the middle), then the two sides to a cassette meant a mixtape had two openers and two closers: four opportunities for salience “built-in” to the media’s very materiality. And because, to make the mix at all required being present to the music in the process of its recording, the creation of the mix entailed an experience of the music that the mix itself was designed to create for its eventual audience. In a way, then, curating a mix on cassette entailed nostalgia not just after its creation, but at the very
moment of its inscription: a kind of Nabokovian “future recollection”\(^{305}\) as one experienced presently the imagination of how a mix will have been received.

Moreover, the cassette tape has what Gilbert Simondon, in an unsent but posthumously published letter to Derrida, describes as techno-aesthetics: a kind of “intercategorical fusion” between a material thing’s technical and aesthetic aspects, which makes it “perfectly functional, successful, and beautiful.”\(^{306}\) That a workman’s tools, for Simondon, are great exemplars of techno-aesthetics owes to the way their functionality and the beauty of their design converge in a tactile pleasure experienced at the level of aesthetic sensation for both the tool’s creator and user. The painter feels her paints, as does the perceiver of her painting. So it is that Simondon celebrates “the bite of a saw with clean teeth”\(^{307}\) the way Auden extols poems that “click like a closing box”\(^{308}\) or Nabokov, ever the synaesthete, performs a techno-aesthetics of his own by describing the “square echo” of a car door slamming.\(^{309}\) The technicity of a thing cannot be separated from its sensorial and aesthetic affects, and techno-aesthetics are achieved when the intercategorical fusion of these elements is something we experience as the medium’s entelechy. Though we hadn’t known it before, the car door can only slam as a square echo.

---

\(^{307}\) Ibid., 3.
\(^{308}\) See Wellesley, Letters on Poetry, 22.
\(^{309}\) Nabokov, Bend Sinister, 59.
Compact Discs

The cassette tape’s successor, the compact disc, offers different material affordances that grossly change the possibilities and means of the curatorial act. The difference makes its way into our language. One used to make a mixtape; the act was creative. On CD, however, one burns a mix; the act is destructive. With the spread of blank CDs, the technology no longer required the meticulous care of planning ahead and timing the songs or their sequence so to maximize available space or affect. And one need not be ever at the ready to catch a song as it stops. The software did all that for you: it told you if you had exceeded the disc’s available time (though, by collapsing music into bytes, time was really the disc’s available space); it showed you by how much you had exceeded that capacity; it automatically adjusted the intervals between songs to meet your preference; and, because a song was mere data, neutral bytes occupying storage capacity, it let you know each song’s length without you even needing to hear it.

As the laboriousness of recording from real time audio became obsolete, so did the experience of the music. Curating mixes on a typical compact disc gave you 750 MB of space, which amounted to 80 consecutive minutes of playtime: only one side, and therefore only one opener and closer, with more prolonged attention required to carry the musical narrative from beginning to end. In short, the material constraints of the medium changed the rhetorical possibilities for the curatorial act, making curation’s capacities to generate meaning fundamentally different from what they are on cassette. No presence to the music or experience of its curation accompanies making mixes on compact disc, no inherent nostalgia, not the same haptic pleasures or techno-aesthetic. All of that gets flattened on a shiny surface and burned away.
At the same time, however, the advent of the writeable CD gave the vernacular curator a modicum of authority. Mixes on compact disc didn’t feel quite so homemade. The audio quality didn’t suffer generation loss. The technology lent to more exactitude and precision. Time itself became compressed on CD: fast-forwarding and rewinding was now an immediate act, not a process; you could find, down to the second, the exact moment on a track that you wanted to hear. If the cassette made amateurs into curators of a vernacular sort, the compact disc began making these vernacular curators less distinguishable from those presumed experts in the music industry who were doing more or less the same thing.

**Streaming**

The CD, though, has gone the way of the cassette: it’s been supplanted by new technologies whose cultural techniques change the nature of curation in significant ways. The same digitization of music that made CDs successful also made them obsolete. Why burn a mix onto a portable disc, fixing that one mix to that one disc, an object that still requires a CD player to use, when portable devices can accommodate as many playlists as one wants and play them for you too? Mixes now survive through music streaming services, which store music remotely but make songs available on demand. These services enable new curatorial processes in part because their users can create playlists from a more enormous inventory of available music. Such playlists are the successor of mixes, a difference most fundamentally marked by the playlist’s potentially endless length.
This difference has an important pragmatic basis. It used to be, if I came to your place and looked through your music collection, I could tell from what music you owned whether and to what extent we shared compatible tastes. And if you made me a mix, whether on cassette or CD, it would already have been subjected to a curatorial process because its songs would come from only those already in your inventory (or, if you were particularly committed, perhaps those you had acquired for the purpose of making the mix). In other words, mixes themselves were a secondary curatorial act following from the primary curatorial act of building your particular music collection: a sort of expression of your taste’s taste. This extra-distillation, the refinement of selecting from an already selective selection, gave mixes inherently more rhetorical salience. As a social act, that is, mixes came from a curatorial horizon that already existed at a personal level, and the sharing of that mix with someone else condensed an already existing personal expression of taste for social dissemination.

Music streaming services have changed this phenomenon by eliminating the primary curatorial act of building a music collection. The capital you might personally have demonstrated by owning a copy, say, of Dylan’s “Great White Hope” bootleg, diminishes when his entire “Bootleg Series” is part of anyone’s available “collection” online. Indeed, the very idea of a music collection disappears. This development matters because it illustrates a fundamental change in the nature of cultural curation in an age when varieties of aesthetic mediation have become digitized and so abundant. Specifically, this change has meant that the dissemination of art—in this example, music—takes for granted that art can actuate certain experiences, and indeed that these experiences, not the expression of personal taste, is central to how the personal
jurisdiction of aesthetic experience intervenes in public life. Curatorial media reify aesthetic texts into their potential for aesthetic experience made social. Such media exist, in short, to disseminate all manner of aesthetic experience and to make ordinary people complicit in their dissemination.

The best example may be Beats Music, an on-demand music streaming service owned by Apple, which distinguishes itself from competitors through its emphasis on curation. Beats employs a “music curation team” of songwriters, radio disc jockeys, industry specialists, and music experts to arrange the service’s library and sharpen the algorithms that ensure listeners have “the right music for right now.” The highlight of their service is a gimmicky feature called “The Sentence,” which involves completing a fill-in-the-blank sentence to help the service’s algorithms determine which music best suits your mood. I’m ________ & feel like ________ with ________ to _________. So, perhaps: I’m on a rooftop & feel like making out with this cute guy to Brazilian Samba. And voilà: Astrud Gilberto.

Despite its veneer of gimmickry, “The Sentence” does something interesting in that the rhetorical guide for its curatorial choices foregrounds personal feeling as a relational experience. Not only does “The Sentence” begin with a statement of identity (I am…), and follow it by an expression of feeling or desire (and feel like…); it asks that this personal feeling be shared “with” others “to” some style of music. Here, to do something “to” a certain kind of music is not to act upon the music, but to let that music affectively saturate what one does. The music does something to the listener. The Sentence, in this sense, attempts to capture one’s desire to have an affective experience:

---

310 Beats Music, “Features.”
to be emplaced somewhere, doing something, with someone, and to have music mark the
time of your presence to that experience. The tacit promise is that the right music fulfills
the experiences that one desires.

But the music already comes too late. The algorithm works instantaneously
enough, but by delivering its sentence in the form of song, “The Sentence” already
circumscribes the experience: the proffered song itself is its condensed iteration, not a
supplement to, but an expression of. Being lost within, being fully “present to” the
experience one desires, is already impossible, glossed with a sonic layer of remove. The
music arrives already saturated with the feeling we have not yet had a chance to
experience. This music, we could say, is what the experience will have been. The
algorithm tacitly tells us that, just by executing its procedure, it has already fulfilled our
desires. Like the most photographed barn in the world in Don DeLillo’s White Noise, in
which “nobody sees the barn”311 because they can only see it as a thing being seen, “The
Sentence” delivers an event we don’t actually experience; we can only experience it as
what Brian Massumi would call the “semblance” of that event, a sort of virtual reality.312

It is important to know that, clever packaging aside, “The Sentence’s” delivery of
virtual experience is not a feature unique to the Beats Music service. As a curatorial
technology, music streaming is intrinsically disposed toward promising listeners the
semblance of experience because its algorithmic infrastructure can not only analyze
components of songs automatically to know as much about the music as possible; it can
also learn over time the context-specific dispositions and preferences of the listeners.
Spotify, for instance, is working to use the data trail of its members to learn other aspects

311 DeLillo, White Noise, 12.
312 Massumi, Semblance and Event.
of their digital profiles in real time, in order then to customize music that anticipates the experiences its algorithms indicate listeners will want specific songs to have helped them have.

So, if a Spotify member posts photos or comments on Facebook indicating she’s going out dancing with friends tonight (or has just split with her boyfriend, or just got a new job), Spotify might with kairotic timeliness recommend music in line with that listener’s other known musical preferences to deliver anticipatory experiences befitting the mood Spotify knows its members are likely to want at that moment—club music for the dance party, maudlin weepers for the break-up. More longitudinally, by tracking the listening habits and social media activity of its members over time, Spotify can deduce what kinds of activities its members are doing at certain times of day—exercising, studying, commuting, meditating—and deliver music that suits these experiences as well. As Daniel Ek, the company’s CEO has said, “We’re not in the music space—we’re in the moment space.” Affective computing of this sort, that is, endeavors to curate experience itself.

Algorithmic Culture

This situation exceeds the microcosm of mixtapes and their technologies. Indeed, it is endemic to our broader algorithmic culture. Curatorship today remains a form of classification; in the cultural realm, it is typically ordered around taste and style. As Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Star have shown, systems of classification are an

---

313 This example illustrates one way that algorithms can behave rhetorically. See Ingraham, “Toward an Algorithmic Rhetoric” for more on the rhetoric of algorithms.
314 Seabrook, “Revenue Streams.”
inextricable part of social relations, a kind of work with pragmatic consequences for how we perceive the world and interact within it.\textsuperscript{315} The tricky part is that, today, they are also almost always invisible. A lot of curating now occurs algorithmically. It’s automated. Perhaps the biggest rhetorical coup of digital media has been the technological systematization of curatorship through procedural algorithms that categorize, rank, recommend, filter, and spit out search results in automated procedures that conceal their highly contingent nature by tacitly purporting to be inevitable and logically infallible. These automated procedures also discreetly underwrite the forms of digital communication that we undertake with the belief that we are “free” and unconstrained by the media that circulate public exchange.

Anymore, it is widely acknowledged that algorithms play an increasing role in human affairs, embedding us within what some have called an “algorithmic culture.”\textsuperscript{316} As Scott Kushner describes it, “the category of algorithmic culture enables an understanding of both how computational logic pervades contemporary culture and how it shapes the possibilities of life itself.”\textsuperscript{317} For Ted Strifhas, algorithmic culture entails “the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of people, places, objects, and ideas using computational processes.”\textsuperscript{318} The automated and binary logic of algorithms, Strifhas suggests, have come to replace more traditional forms of cultural criticism and classification.

\textsuperscript{315} Bowker and Star, \textit{Sorting Things Out}.
\textsuperscript{318} Strifhas, “How to Have Culture.”
In the realm of the arts, for instance, it has long been believed that cultural products (indeed, whole genres of aesthetic expression) come to attain what symbolic value they have in the public eye as a result of the classificatory work of trusted experts whose training and critical authority confers them a modicum of public influence.\(^{319}\) Ted Striphas worries that this old, “elite culture” paradigm is being supplanted by an algorithmic culture directed toward producing “a statistical determination of what’s culturally relevant.”\(^{320}\) The new model “renders culture” through an aggregate of the data produced by people online, regardless of the context of that data’s creation:

In the old cultural paradigm, you could question authorities about their reasons for selecting particular cultural artifacts as worthy, while dismissing or neglecting others. Not so with algorithmic culture, which wraps abstraction inside of secrecy and sells it back to you as, ‘the people have spoken.’\(^{321}\) The apparent reason for Striphas’s concern, then, is not just that the subjectivity of the individual human voice and its context are being subsumed into a context-less “crowd” of big data, but that the algorithmic procedures whereby classificatory decisions are now made remain hidden from public scrutiny behind the shield of proprietary intellectual property laws.

In that case, it is not unreasonable to say that algorithms do plenty of asserting, but very little arguing. Ostensibly, that is, at least when it comes to the arts, algorithmic culture removes the obligation to offer warrants for the critical claims being made about cultural products. In such a paradigm, the conferral of symbolic value on cultural goods need not be informed by familiarity with the long tradition of similar goods into which

---


\(^{320}\) Striphas, “How to Have Culture.”

\(^{321}\) Ibid.
new artifacts emerge (as in Bourdieu’s system of cultural capital); nor need it be supported by argumentation, rational or otherwise (as in a Habermasian public sphere); nor, for that matter, must claims for symbolic value be refined by discussion, debate, dialogue, or deliberation directed toward achieving consensus (as in Gadamer’s hermeneutics). In short, algorithmic culture makes the very discursive components of a public sphere thesis inessential to conferring the value of cultural goods that have gained some public attention. Rather than the formation of something like public opinion, in other words, the cultural public sphere’s sorting algorithms privilege the crowd-sourced formation of that which is worthy of public attention.

**Curation’s Affects**

But does that mean that people are no longer involved in curatorial processes? No. It means that we are susceptible to, and complicit in entrenching, the cultural techniques that make the arts capable of inspiring public attention. When aesthetic texts enter the cultural field already commodified by the creative industries in which they emerge, our best recourse is to approach them publicly in registers beyond meaning and therefore impervious to appropriation. Yet, the creative industries and the new media that drive them try to enlist people—we get called “users”—to articulate the affective registers of artworks by empowering us with more curatorial capabilities.

For instance, Robert Gehl gives the name “affective processing” to the idea, promulgated by the web’s underlying business model, that users are “expected to process digital objects by sharing content, making connections, ranking cultural artifacts, and
producing digital content.” Affective processing is a form of immaterial labor, in which humans are given to act more and more like computers. It was once only computers that did the processing; now we also are the processors. What makes Gehl’s insights unique among many who have theorized immaterial labor is that he distinguishes this labor by its affective register. Like affect, computers operate in what Kittler has called a “semantics-free space” where all signs are reduced to binary. Technicity is indifferent to signification. If humans labor like machines, though, our intrinsic affectability brings to the machines that which they cannot produce on their own: the impossibility of indifference.

By reviewing postings sharing liking friending ranking pinning, we participate in a culture of curation that sometimes exhibits merely phatic properties. The content of these digital gestures is ancillary to the gesture itself. Just by taking part, by contributing our share of affective labor through acts of curation intended for a public audience, we build what Jodi Dean calls “affective networks” that organize a semblance of community. “Affective networks,” Dean writes, “produce feelings of community, or what we might call ‘community without community.’ They enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other in ways we can never fully account for or predict.” For Dean, the process is aggregative, as each Tweet, each post, each review, “accrues a tiny affective nugget, a

---

323 Michael Hardt coined the term “affective labor” in 1999. See Hardt, “Affective Labor” and Hardt and Negri, Empire, 292-293. But Hardt does not address affective labor’s algorithmic aspects through affective processing, which is what makes Gehl unique.
325 Dean, Blog Theory, 96.
little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in.326 Because the water always heals over again after the minor splash of these actions, acts of vernacular curation can seem inconsequential to the cultural public sphere understood as an arena in which aesthetic texts give rise to, or themselves participate in, developing a shared purpose or public opinion relative to our common interests. I have been trying to suggest that this impression is a mistake.

While the vernacular curation of culture certainly does take traditionally rhetorical forms, it is also enabled by rhetorics that have less interest in symbolicity or meaning than in building the affective predispositions that guide our social interdependence in the first place. This is not just a matter of media behaving rhetorically at the level of their material technicity, and thereby forwarding particular ideological values. Eric Shouse, for instance, has observed that media are powerful in part for reasons that go beyond meaning altogether. “Given the ubiquity of affect,” he writes, “it is important to take note that the power of many forms of media lies not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning.”327 In a culture of cultural curation, our engagement in public life is often a matter of creating these affective resonances and leveraging media to that end. In that case, in the cultural public sphere, as Dean puts it, “what appears as an exchange of reasons is a vehicle for the circulation of affects. The lack of action is the abundance of discussion viewed from a different angle.”328

326 Ibid., 95.
328 Dean, Blog Theory, 110.
If the democratization of creativity makes ordinary people into citizen artists, the curation of culture makes people into *citizen critics*. Rosa Eberly, who coined the term, defines the citizen critic as “a person who produces discourses about issues of common concern from an *ethos* of citizen first and foremost—not as expert or spokesperson for a workplace or as member of a club or organization.” Her term emphasizes that these readers are *citizens*, participants in a democracy, whose critical opinions and conversations about literature constitute the enactment of their very citizenship. For Eberly, citizen critics are distinct from literati and other public intellectuals, but less as antitheses than counterparts “from which to understand and judge the other.” The image of counterparts does a good job showing that, in the cultural public sphere, expert and nonexpert critics can contribute to the conversation broadly side-by-side, if not quite in dialogue. But it also retains a categorical discreteness that’s increasingly problematic in the era of Web 2.0 when vernacular and institutional voices intermingle closely to create collaborative and hybrid kinds of authority. In acts of vernacular curation, people perform their public role as citizen critics.

---

329 Eberly, *Citizen Critics*, 1.
330 Ibid., 1.
PART THREE

Reflexive Publics
CHAPTER SIX

Rhetorical Technicity and the Networked Public Sphere

This chapter begins with the supposition that, if there is anywhere it makes sense to look for the cultural public sphere today, that place is online. And if there is anywhere online that stands out accordingly, curatorial media like Goodreads and Amazon are a good place to start. In Chapters Four and Five I argued that two related principles of new media have changed the way cultural public spheres operate today. On one hand, the democratization of creativity finds nearly everyone capacitated and encouraged to produce aesthetically mediated texts; on the other, ordinary people have been given the means and motive to become cultural curators of the resultant surplus of cultural production. This predicament—the broad legitimation of citizen artists and citizen critics—signals for public engagement around the arts a change in kind, not just degree. New media’s digital technologies are materially redrawing the lines between text/talk, artist/critic, public/private that have long been mainstays in theorizing the public sphere. Thinking affectively ecologically, I’ve been suggesting, is accordingly more appropriate to the dynamics of a cultural public sphere that finds citizen artists and citizen critics working in tandem, but also in tension.

Curatorial media like Goodreads and Amazon reveal the tension inherent in the deeper cultural ethos that would supplant more traditionally deliberative forms of public engagement with the forms of participation undertaken by citizen artists and citizen critics. The trouble is, the likes of Goodreads and Amazon are not just in the business of enabling citizen artists to promote and sell their books, and citizen critics to curate and
review them. Despite appearing to provide a free and open discursive space, these platforms also forward strong visions of what public engagement with the arts (and books especially) ought to entail. They do so by technologically constraining that engagement and channeling it toward a particular kind of communication. On Amazon and Goodreads, such constraints take numerous forms: some are hidden in proprietary algorithms; others are overtly stated in site policies; still others are inspired by ranking hierarchies that tend to privilege, say, reviews of a certain length; and some are encoded in the visual arrangement of the website interface. Exploring how these constraints create an affective ecology for those participating on these platforms will tell us more about how the cultural public sphere operates in a digital context.

    Given the aim of illuminating such a cultural public sphere in situ, though, attending to these technical constraints may seem to be misplaced, particularly given all the discussion that’s right there on Amazon and Goodreads to be scrutinized. The sheer abundance of reviews on either site, for instance, offers valuable data from which to identify a host of rhetorical features of critical discourse surrounding a particular book. It would certainly be possible to cross-reference different reviews of a single book and develop a sense for the rhetorical topoi most commonly mobilized on its behalf. Isolating the recurrent topics mentioned across multiple reviews of the same text (for instance, repeated references to its length, to the difficulty of its vocabulary, or to the richness of its characters) would reveal the issues that hold the most rhetorical salience relative to that particular text, and in doing so begin to sketch the contours of that text’s common public significance.
This sort of rhetorical criticism would be valuable and worth pursuing if the goal were to identify the nature of a particular book’s traction in public opinion, or to gain a sense for how, as a whole, the critical arguments surrounding a book most commonly warrant the claims made for its symbolic value. There is also, undoubtedly, important work that could be done on a still larger scale to find the most commonplace rhetorical maneuvers and modes of argumentation that recur across reviews of different books. Doing so might lead to a better understanding of the rhetorics driving the reviews of citizen critics as a discursive genre. These projects and others, in short, would root us in a communicative ecology and invite hermeneutic approaches intent to ascertain what all this discourse means and tells us about a public’s engagement with literature.

As throughout this dissertation, however, my interest is in an affective ecology, which requires a different method and different objects of critical attention. Instead of examining the rhetorics of particular reviews, or analyzing as a case study the public discussion of an especially inspiriting book, this chapter will examine what I call the rhetorical technicity of Goodreads in the context of a particular controversy that occurred on the site in 2013. By “technicity” I hope to register an understanding of digital tools and technologies as more than mere things that produce affordances for the people who wield them. Understanding technologies neither as things nor affordances means, as Gilbert Simondon suggested in 1958, that technicities are “powers in the fullest sense of the word, that is, capacities for producing or for undergoing an effect in a specific manner.” 

In other words, the technologies driving literary social media like Amazon

---

and Goodreads must be understood to do more than mediate or enable what in their case is public discourse about books.

Instead, I suggest, these digital technologies behave rhetorically as ensembles whose elements, together, produce effects that precede the affordances they capacitate. It is along these lines, for instance, that Aud Sissel Hoel and Iris van der Tuin have described technicity as an ontological force: “As technicity,” they write, “technology is seen as a mediator, not in the representational sense but in terms of its functioning: technology takes on ontological import in and through the forces that it exercises on other beings as well as in and through the new virtualities, hence realities, it brings into being.”

By referencing a rhetorical technicity, this chapter will attempt to uncover the powerful influences encoded into the very architecture and design of two prominent sites, and to scrutinize the affective ecology of the cultural public sphere that they potentiate.

**Learning to Love**

In August 2013, a public controversy arose over some bookshelves. The fuss wasn’t about the bookshelves’ design or cost or location; the shelves weren’t even tangible. In fact, they were “virtual bookshelves,” created by registered members on the literary social media site, Goodreads.com. What caused such uproar was the way the shelves’ books had been *curated*. Goodreads, which at the time had over 20 million members (its numbers are now larger), allows people to curate virtual bookshelves of the books they have read, want to read, or are currently reading, to give those shelves descriptive names, and to share their thoughts about these books in the form of rankings,

---

332 Hoel and van der Tuin, “The Ontological Force of Technicity,” 190.
reviews, and comments. The controversy arose because some members had created bookshelves filled with books they described by giving the shelves such names as, “Author Should be Sodomized” and “Should Be Raped in Prison.”

Online bullying—if that’s not too mild a phrase for what happened on Goodreads—has been around as long as the web itself. Where people interact among strangers, especially under guise of anonymity, there will be conflict. It will get personal, sometimes nasty. Goodreads, like many other web fora, already had no shortage of bullies. Their browbeating appeared most often in excoriating book reviews and comments sections. Such reviews, no doubt, were a big part of the larger kerfuffle that crossed a line to something more heinous with the threatening bookshelves. Like book reviews, the shelves are acts of cultural curatorship: attempts to make a case for what’s in and what’s out, what’s good and what’s not, by telling a story about how a particular text or collocation of texts should be understood or appreciated.

Goodreads is structured to allow authors and readers alike to interact in the same virtual space. But the site also distinguishes the two. Members who self-designate as authors, whether self-published or bestselling, get a “Goodreads Author” badge at the top of their online profile. In turn, these authors can leverage the cultural capital of their known status to promote their own books, contest their bad reviews, or promote the books of others. The vast majority of members, though, are not designated authors; they are ordinary readers, there (presumably) to share their opinions publicly and to experience the community of others doing the same. But readers on the site carry an ethos of their own: it’s harder to dismiss a reader’s shelves or reviews as promotionally.

See Williams, “Did A Writer Get Bullied on Goodreads?”
motivated. Whether or not one agrees with their opinions, one at least tends to presume that their efforts are earnest.

Nevertheless, the way this author/reader structure of Goodreads plays out in practice has sometimes pitted readers against authors in an agonistic struggle for control over the site’s discursive norms. Such a struggle, in any case, helps to explain the controversy that rose to its fever pitch around the debut of a self-published, twenty-two-year-old author named Lauren Howard. Howard, who was new to Goodreads, had promoted her book, *Learning to Love*, on the site in advance of its release. Here’s some of the copy: “Innocence personified, Aimee Dalton dreamed of the day she’d meet her Prince Charming… but love at first sight isn’t always as simple as a fairy tale…”

Howard was surprised to see the novel already being rated and reviewed before anyone had even read it. She joined a message board to ask how this could happen. Goodreads, she learned, gives readers the chance to rate and review books both based on their interest in reading them and, elsewhere, to rate and review based on having already done the reading. After posting her presumably innocent inquiry to the message board, though, veteran readers got annoyed. Still before its release, *Learning to Love* began receiving even more 1- and 2-star reviews. Worse, insults to Howard herself flooded these reviews. Then came the rape threats in the bookshelves.

The engagement of ordinary citizens as critics of cultural goods is nothing new, though new media have made it more easy and common. Traditionally, at least through the twentieth century, Americans have tended to classify literary criticism and literary theory (including the innumerable methods and philosophies thereof) as the kind of

---

334 Quoted in Victoria, “Learning to Love by Lauren Howard.”
literary assessment made by experts, usually scholars whose professional work consists in developing and sharpening a broad but penetrating critical understanding of literature. Literary critics and theorists thus are reader-rhetors whose voice is vouchsafed cultural authority because it conforms to the academic, intellectual, and aesthetic expectations of scholarly journals and their audience. Their literary assessments, however, neither reach the general public nor often admit general literary consensus into their own sphere of influence, thus reifying their own status through the insularity of the public that circumscribes it.

Distinct from literary critics or theorists, meanwhile, professional book reviewers are another class of reader-rhetor in the public sphere. Here again we see evidence of a reticulate public sphere, as reviewers publish in the American popular press (Time, Esquire, etc.), industry review magazines (Publishers Weekly, Kirkus Reviews, etc.), and periodicals with elite status that are nevertheless not academic (The New York Review of Books, The New Inquiry, N+1, etc.). Reviewers are accorded status and cultural authority by virtue of their role as journalists for popular media outlets—with some outlets according more status than others—and their assessment of a literary text is more likely than the critic or theorist’s to reach the general public. Still, though, a book review carries a connotation of inferiority, certainly of difference, compared to the work of the critic, perhaps largely because book reviews are a late capitalist phenomenon tied to the commercial publicity of recently published books.335 In both discursive modes, a

335 In an essay on reviewing, Virginia Woolf traces a similar change in English usage to the eighteenth century’s end, when what had once been called criticism became two distinct types of book evaluating. As she explains it, “The critic dealt with the past and with principles; the reviewer took the measure of new books as they fell from the press.” (“Reviewing,” 205).
specialized language with particular vocabularies and discursive norms contributes to the exclusionary status of those able to perform it.

Finally, the vast majority of reader-rhetors are neither critics nor professional reviewers, but everyday people of various professional backgrounds, whose subjectivity acquires a public-orientation whenever they engage conversation or debate about a book’s merits or common social significance. Because such reader-rhetors have no institutionally conferred public status when it comes to discussing books, their judgments and critiques of literary texts rely on rhetorical inventions in a vernacular and distinctly personal mode. It’s these nonexpert readers—citizen critics—that stimulated the controversy on Goodreads. While it goes without saying that for academics and professional critics rape threats wouldn’t fly as part of their critical practice, a vociferous set of readers on Goodreads believed the norms for citizen critics should be different.

The Ethos Conundrum

As curatorial media, platforms like Goodreads and Amazon promulgate a paradox. To legitimate and include everyone as citizen critics is to dismiss the idea that a critic’s *ethos* has a role in the validity of aesthetic judgment. Some critical practices may well be more compelling or persuasive than others, but all are equally valid, these media imply, and their validity is vouchsafed prior to the critical act regardless of one’s supposed expertise or critical deftness. Meanwhile, though, Goodreads and Amazon also hold fast to *ethos* as an essential measure of a critic’s legitimacy, going so far as extrinsically to confer status upon some members in the form of name badges and reviewer rankings. The controversy that arose on Goodreads in response to Lauren
Howard’s promotional efforts for her self-published debut, *Learning to Love*, need to be understood within this greater affective ecology of curatorial media’s paradoxical denial and delivery of rhetorical *ethos*. Before returning to how the controversy played out, then, I want to spend some time discussing the ethos conundrum on Goodreads. Doing so will involve thinking about how its rhetorical technicity constrains the affective ecology from which its more easily traced discursive practices emerge.

As I’ve discussed them so far, affective ecologies remain open to the question of scale. Where do they begin and end? How many are there? In suggesting, as I did in Chapter One, that the public sphere and affective ecologies always work in tandem, I implied that Hauser’s reticulate model of the public sphere makes an equally applicable model to understand the movement and scale of affective ecologies. This is true, but now I can elaborate. Sites of sociality accumulate affective intensity, which dissipates and shifts as the orientations transmitted in such sites fall more outside of equilibrium. If you have ever been to a beach on high tide and again been back when the tide was low, you can see how the affective intensity of the site can accumulate and disperse. The beach exhibits a different orientation to the water when the tide is out, revealing tide pools and sea life previously unseen and all the more powerful for being revealed. But the full tide accumulates an intense affective disposition of its own, reorienting the water in relation to the beach, which it has curtailed by covering and which exerts a similarly powerful affect.

---

336 One trait of ecologies is the ability to self-regulate, that is, to move always toward the restoration of equilibrium. For more on the privileging of efficiency as ecologies strive toward equilibrium, see Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 249. For more on the self-correction or autopoesis of ecologies as they strive toward equilibrium, see Maturana and Varela, *Tree of Knowledge*, 43-52. In the context of the cultural public sphere, readers might also find it helpful to consult Maturana, “Biology of the Aesthetic Experience.”
In that example, the affective ecology of the beach is relatively finite. As we know, though, the tide’s movements derive from the water’s orientation to the moon, which itself changes its orientation toward the Earth and the Sun, waxing and waning as time goes on. The rising climate and depletion of Earth’s ozone layer, arising from the well known story of unsustainable human exploitation of planetary resources and our excessive generation of harmful carbon gases, are of course other factors that might contribute to the beach’s water level and its orientation toward the land. Panning outward, in other words, affective ecologies also move in larger scales, beyond our perceptual capacities and the glisks of intensity we might experience in being present to any specific local stimuli, human and nonhuman bodies included.

All of which goes to say that, in order to think about the affective ecology of Goodreads, and how its rhetorical technicity contributes to the dispositions transmitted in its virtual environment, it is also necessary to bear in mind that Goodreads exists within a broader affective ecology, part of which includes other curatorial media. The most obvious example is Amazon, which bought Goodreads in March 2013 for somewhere between $160 and $200 million. The important difference between Amazon and Goodreads is not just that Amazon sells products and Goodreads doesn’t. It is hardly the case that one site’s communicative sphere is free from the sway of commercial interests and the other not. After all, even though Goodreads does not inventory or sell products, its discursive space decidedly earns capital through advertising sales and affiliate revenue made possible by the sheer quantity of its members.

---

337 Bensinger and Trachtenberg, “Amazon’s Goodreads Acquisition Triggers Backlash.”
Both sites, that is, exploit their users for the capitalizable data they can produce through participation that amounts to unremunerated digital labor. Several people have suggested that providing such data for others to capitalize upon makes Internet users unremunerated laborers.\textsuperscript{338} Jaron Lanier, an outspoken early trailblazer of artificial intelligence, has criticized this labor as “digital Maoism,” suggesting it contributes to a hive mind mentality that devalues human personality while purporting to do the opposite by enabling individual opportunity.\textsuperscript{339} Andrew Keen, another outspoken critic of the web’s false promises, similarly argues that the logic of Web 2.0 makes Internet users into “exuberant monkeys” whose online participation, though creative insofar as it is individualized, nevertheless amounts to “an endless digital forest of mediocrity.”\textsuperscript{340} For Keen, creative industries in particular need “to stop stealing the sweat of other people’s creative labor” if our cultural institutions are to thrive with any quality in the future.\textsuperscript{341}

At stake is the possibility of individuals to collectively participate in public life as an enactment of their democratic citizenship. As Mark Andrejevic has put it, the labor of digital participation tends to “highlight different ways in which the potential of individual and social life is diminished—in which the productive capacities developed by society fall short of their promise of an unalienated existence.”\textsuperscript{342} To feel unalienated is at once to feel unexploited. In the logic of deliberative democracy, it is to feel that one’s participation in public life makes a difference: that certain of our online activities can gain a political momentum that might collectively achieve measurable (or at least

\textsuperscript{338} See, e.g., Scholz, \textit{Digital Labor.}
\textsuperscript{339} See Lanier, “Digital Maoism” and Lanier, \textit{You are Not a Gadget.}
\textsuperscript{340} Keen, \textit{The Cult of the Amateur}, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{341} Ibid., 195.
\textsuperscript{342} Andrejevic, “Estranged Free Labor.”
noticeable) change in matters important to the common interests of civil society—not just the interests of an economic elite.

Where the cultural public sphere is concerned, the important distinction between Amazon and Goodreads consists in the different ways each venue has built-in to its site structurally encoded constraints upon the kinds of critical engagement and taste-expressions that they want their membership communities to practice and privilege. The ethos conundrum I described at the start of this section, in other words, is not just limited to Goodreads, but something that more widely orients citizen artists and citizen critics toward their ways of rhetorically engaging with aesthetic texts. When these constraints are necessary but non-arbitrary, they begin to constitute what I’ve called *rhetorical technicity*.

Though I will not explore them at length here, in the case of Amazon, the orienting constraints take the form of a vertical status hierarchy to rank the ethos of its reviewers. Most of the hierarchy’s key rules are closely guarded because they are proprietary and encoded into algorithms; others Amazon publicizes in its various “Help,” “FAQ,” or “About Us” pages by way of explicating its terms and policies. In the case of Goodreads, these constraints take the form of explicit rules forbidding certain ways of engaging with the books that a given member might wish to review or discuss. While these rules are justified in the site’s policies pages on the basis that they are intended to maintain civility, they also foreshorten the available means of persuasion for those who treat the site as a cultural public sphere. In both cases, the constraints are executed automatically through procedures encoded into the site’s functionality. You might not even know they’re there.
These constraints, again, are determined by a site’s rhetorical technicity: the power of technology influentially to mediate a set of social relations as if from outside those relations, imposing a reality upon them which transmits the unique relationality of their affective ecology. The difficulty of seeing rhetorical technicity at work beneath the many communicative freedoms and possibilities that the sites do legitimately enable is one reason it calls for such critical scrutiny. Neither Amazon nor Goodreads, for instance, delimit who can speak on their pages (though both sites do reward and discourage some discursive practices). The welcome inclusion of anyone with a web connection—the more the merrier!—allows these and other platforms to hang above their masthead the flag of “democratic” inclusivity, impartiality, and equality: an ostensible fulfillment of the web’s beautiful promise of democratization. Nor do these sites censor tastes. Positive and negative reviews are equally welcome, of any text, and no one is held accountable to provide a warrant or justification for their opinion beyond its mere assertion. Ostensibly, anyone is welcome to share any opinion about any text; that act alone is accorded intrinsic value. Yet, the rhetorical technicity encoded into the public communicative spaces on Amazon and Goodreads decidedly does delimit what their members are encouraged or allowed to say, and how they ought to say it. In that sense, understanding the rhetorical technicity of Goodreads is a necessary prerequisite to situating the controversy over the site’s discursive norms within its wider affective ecology.

**The Rhetorical Technicity of Goodreads**

The original impetus for Goodreads, founded by Otis and Elizabeth Chandler in 2007, was the couple’s realization that their favorite way to find a new book was to
browse the bookshelf of a friend. The premise underwriting this realization is one that pervades digital culture and its algorithmic architecture: if people share some known and established aesthetic preferences—for the same book, the same musician, the same TV shows—then they will also share other preferences, at least within a given aesthetic medium, that have yet to be established. Sharing one’s tastes publically therefore builds associative relations that help people deduce their probable preference for texts with which they are unfamiliar or about which they would otherwise be less certain. The more information we have about the preferences of more people, the easier it is to identify statistically viable correlations and predict tastes.

Framed in social media’s ubiquitous idiom of preferential allegiance—the site abounds with “friends,” “likes,” “followers,” and “fans”—to be a Goodreads member is to be interpellated as part of a bibliophilic community expected to value the sanctity of individual taste equally alongside the sharing of such taste. Of course, the site enables the expression of one’s tastes in different ways, not all of which endeavor the rhetorical nuance of critically argued judgments or reviews. Merely adding a book to one’s virtual shelf is, in the language of Kenneth Burke, an act of identification that both serves tacitly to demonstrate an affinity with those who have added the same book to theirs, and implicitly demonstrates one’s distinction from those who have not. This rhetorical act of dis/identification is encoded in the technicity of the site’s architecture, as adding a book to one’s shelf automatically groups one within a linked network of others who have added the book as well.

Here, one’s shelf acts as *mere inscription*; although virtual, these shelves maintain a kind of proxy materiality insofar as they stand apart from and precede the symbolic
registers of discourse that the site’s members might activate through rankings, reviews, comments, and the like. Rate the book (on a scale of five stars) or review it, or comment on someone else’s review, and these encoded acts of dis/identification embed one further within the site’s network of others with similarly aligned preferences. Literature itself is less vital as “equipment for living” than is the bookshelf that enframes its importance.

Yet, members on Goodreads do more than curate bookshelves. They also review books in ways that exceed the rhetorical sufficiency of curation’s mere inscription.

Reviewers on Goodreads are permitted to give their reviews whichever form best suits what they want to express. For instance, the site’s top two “all-time most popular reviews” include several video clips—each a few seconds of looped footage culled from the web—followed by short captions and longer paragraphs of exegesis. The third most popular review is written in satirical dialogue. The site’s openness to reviews of different forms (at least the video content of which is “original” only insofar as it’s been remixed or repurposed) pushes the conventional “book review” genre into unconventional modes. There is, in other words, a strong sense in which Goodreads expands the available means of persuasion for this entire genre of cultural criticism, legitimating the visual, for instance, as equally viable as language. The popularity of reviews, measured in “likes” and page views, is accordingly conferred from an ethos generated from rhetorical choices internal to the review itself, rather than credibility conferred extrinsically.

Yet, Goodreads also partakes in a ranking hierarchy of its members, regularly publishing periodic and all-time rankings of its Top Users, Top Readers, Top Reviewers, and Most Popular Reviewers broken down both by country and the world at large. All categories are assessed on a strictly quantitative basis. So, the Top Users are those who
have added the most books to their shelves; the Top Readers are those whose profiles claim to have read the most books; the Top Reviewers have posted the most book reviews; and the Most Popular Reviewers wrote reviews that received the most votes or “likes.” These calculations are unambiguous. The quantitative basis of Goodreads’s ranking system acts rhetorically as an institutional disinterest supported by an apparent “just the facts” neutrality. In other words, cultivating ethos as an achievement of discursive quality (through eloquence, for instance, or the inventional creativity of posting videos instead of text) is not the only way Goodreads allows its members to attain status.

It would seem that the rhetorical technicity of Goodreads promotes a participatory ethos, whereby merely contributing to the site, and thereby establishing a more publically visible profile, suffices to confer its members with a modicum of status. Yet, despite its quantified basis, the measure of extrinsically conferred status is not a material requisite of the technology—hence the rhetorical nature of the technicity that cultivates the affective ecology in which the site situates its visitors. One of the key principles of rhetorical technicity is precisely its non-arbitrary nature. The point is not just that Goodreads is not disinterested when encoding its choices about member ethos, but that it can’t not make certain choices that give rise to the site’s unique affective ecology. With this in mind, we might supplement earlier remarks by adding that “rhetorical technicity” references the ways that technologies deal with those factors in a mediated environment that materially must be controlled, though they can be controlled in any number of ways. For example, not all reviews of a book can possibly appear on a
single page simultaneously, which means some appear more prominently than others. If some books have hundreds of reviews, how to decide which ones get buried?

In a word, algorithms. But that hardly tells the whole story because algorithms can be made to follow nearly any set of rules to the end of achieving nearly any range of effects. Goodreads is not unique in protecting the sorting procedure it uses, the site explains, “to determine the most interesting reviews”:

The recipe for our special sauce is a closely guarded trade secret, but the ingredients are: length of the review, number of people who liked it, recency of the review, popularity of the review (i.e., number of people who have liked reviews by that person across all books). Algorithms—the closely guarded recipe—require disambiguated data in order to operate. Though the data—the ingredients—are all quantifiable, which data to cook with is a rhetorical decision that could well have gone otherwise. Despite apparent attempts to promote a participatory ethos in which every reviewer is equally validated just for participating, even at the level of the site’s interface, a pre-originary measure of status orients visitors to the site in a particular way.

**Legitimating the Ad Hominem**

How to characterize this orientation? If the exacerbated personal attacks and extreme truculence that pervaded a segment of the Goodreads community over Lauren Howard’s self-promotion of *Learning to Love* in 2013 is any indication, we can certainly say that the site’s affective ecology had diverged from equilibrium. In this case, the juxtaposition of authors (citizen artists) and readers (citizen critics) fomented a struggle between two sides that, I’m trying to suggest, occurred in part because of the rhetorical

---

343 rivka, “How do Like Affect Which Reviews Non-Friends See?”
technicity that Goodreads encoded as its way of resolving the immanent ethos conundrum that its very technicity helped to reify. When Lauren Howard queried a message board about promoting her book, she spoke with a conflicting ethos of her own: on one hand, with the cache of being a “Goodreads Author,” on the other, with the inexperience of being a newcomer. Veteran readers on the site, having the exact inverse ethos conflict, expressed their annoyance toward Howard as an aggressive manifestation of the “authority” they could claim based on their experience in the Goodreads community, but also in a territorial agonism that announced an orientation to the site as a place to discuss books, not to promote them.

On the surface of its communicative ecology a boilerplate case, among many, of web trolls going too far, the controversy tells us something more interesting about the cultural public sphere and the role that acts of curation play in its discursive associations. What made the bullying on Goodreads gain wider attention, that is, was more than outrage at such vindictive behavior. The unique expression of such vitriol by curating and naming personal bookshelves also gained attention because it worked against the ethos parameters Goodreads encodes into the site’s affordances through its rhetorical technicity. Based upon the presumed utility of bibliophilic acts of identification, Goodreads allows its members only to distinguish those books they have read, are currently reading, or those books they would like to read. There is no corresponding option encoded into the site that allows readers to indicate books they do not want to read. By curating shelves on that basis, however, and on the more particular basis that their authors were reprehensible, the offending Goodreads members—and again, we are talking about an extremely small but influential minority of the whole—undermined the
affective orientations that the site’s rhetorical technicity endeavored to promote through its presumption of bibliophilic identificatory benefits.

The suggestion that bibliophobia and disidentificatory orientations were legitimate ways to engage publicly with literature was not something the site was designed or prepared to accommodate. In turn, the controversy that ensued also came to concern what kinds of critical discourse were legitimate in the discussion of books, given that the site did endeavor to legitimate the free expression of opinions whose validity the site’s disavowals of critical ethos vouchsafed. More particularly, the controversy came to concern the extent to which highly emotional, often irrational personal attacks—what we’d more formally call arguments ad hominem—are a legitimate basis for expressing one’s aesthetic judgments. Does not liking an author justify disapproving of her work?

The question exceeded the one long raised by philosophers of art, who have asked if we should discredit works of aesthetic ingenuity if their creators undertook unethical means in their creation (Should we ignore Heidegger’s philosophy because of his anti-Semitism? Should Gauguin’s paintings be dismissed because he brutally abandoned his family to create them?). The bullying controversy on Goodreads was about the rhetorical norms of discourse surrounding how citizen critics support the aesthetic judgments they make in a public context. Are ad hominem arguments justifiable? That these arguments get malicious, that they often have no empirical basis (most readers on Goodreads don’t personally know the authors whose books they review), and that they might be relevant for some readers but not others, no one questioned. The right to free

See, for instance, Eaton, “Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral” and Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art.”
speech in this context carried only minor relevance as well: yes, yes, free speech. But rape threats?

In his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth recognizes the tendency of readers to conflate the author implied by a text’s narrator with the living author who wrote that text, as if both were the same. To distinguish the two, he introduces the idea of an “implied author” and a “flesh-and-blood author,” his assumption being that readers typically only “know” the implied author; the living one is inaccessible, off the page. Because Goodreads allows the flesh-and-blood author to participate in the site’s discussions, however, this distinction is more easily forgotten. In fact, the logic flips: in this context, living authors become metonyms for their books, instead of the other way around.

It is, in short, the rhetorical technicity of Goodreads, encoded into the platform’s parameters for participation, that explains why *ad hominem* attacks might to some members seem pertinent to their aesthetic judgments. The stakes of the site’s discursive norms were therefore not just territorial, the authors vs. readers narrative promulgated in most blog discourse about the controversy. More than that, the stakes concerned a tension between the freedom of a public, consisting in this case of both authors and readers, each of whom, after all, are global citizens entitled to enact their citizenship through the expression of their opinions to strangers, and the rhetorical technicity of the medium—Goodreads—which on one hand facilitates this discussion in the first place, but on the other, delimits the game board on which such discussion can transpire.

---

Social Reading and Algorithmic Culture

It might help here to step back and situate Goodreads relative to the ways it affords its members a chance to take part in what has more widely come to be known as “social reading.” Social reading, as John Jones describes it, is “reading that is defined by the act of sharing the reading experience within a community and that is subsequently shaped and informed by that community.”346 A book club or classroom is a prototype of social reading, particularly when the discussions they afford take place while reading is still in-progress. The formula is (1) read, (2) discuss, (3) go back and read more, informed by the discussion, (4) repeat. In other words, it’s not just the discussion of a text within a community that makes reading social; the distinguishing trait of “social reading” is its enabling the discussion of a text within a community still undergoing the reading experience, so that the experience is informed by that community both ex ante and ex post facto.

The presumed value of social reading to public life is made evident in initiatives sponsored by local governments in different ways around the world, most commonly in the United States in the form of “One City, One Book” programs.347 Such programs involve the selection of a single book, usually a novel, with the goal of getting an entire city’s populace to read it at once. These programs have been critiqued for what amounts to their curatorial discretion: how in the world to choose one book of value to an entire city, and on what basis, from what perspective, with what exclusionary biases are such choices made? Nevertheless, the motivations for the program and others like it (e.g., “On

346 Jones, “Social Reading.”
347 Some more international iterations have included programs in Mexico City and Tokyo to distribute thousands of free books to subway riders in an effort to reduce crime.
the Same Page” or the NEA-sponsored “Big Read”) are some clear but unstated assumptions about the value of reading to civic life and public culture: first, that experience of the arts might do meliorative work for the common good; second, that sharing aesthetic experience can offer a commonplace (in the sense of a starting point) for public discussion that might build civic community by connecting strangers.

Algorithmic culture has enabled the digitization of social reading, giving new efficiency and speed to the connection of one’s reading experience within a network of others who are also reading the same text. In the case of e-books and curatorial media, the virtual connection made shares the same assumptions as the One City, One Book program—roughly, that reading builds community—but its encoded nature entails a rhetorical technicity that adds presumptions about reading that end up algorithmically circumscribing how it operates as a cultural practice. One of the best ways to illustrate this phenomenon is through Amazon’s Kindle, which I’ll consider briefly before returning to the way Goodreads facilitates social reading and how that might influence the affective ecology in which the platform’s citizen critics are drawn toward ad hominem arguments as an assertion of their critical legitimacy.

The Kindle, Amazon’s tablet for e-books, was first introduced in late 2007 and marketed strictly as a reading device for digitized books. Though it has since expanded its affordances to compete with the iPad and other tablets popular circa 2015, the Kindle remains principally a reading-focused device. And to distinguish its assortment of reading-related features, Amazon offers what it calls “Public Notes” and “Popular Highlights” to complement the primary texts of the electronic books it sells. Both features are virtual versions of what, in print culture, would be considered marginalia: the
annotations, dog-eared pages, notes, underlined passages, and so forth that readers sometimes make when reading a text. In the Kindle case, these instances of digital marginalia are made possible by algorithms that connect Kindle users in an invisible network and, at the level of a screen’s interface, make reading itself a social process.

Two things distinguish these digital marginalia from their print counterparts. First, they are easily sharable; indeed, their utility derives precisely from their sharability. Unlike written notes that serve and reach their end with an individual reader’s private or personal agenda, Kindle’s “Public Notes” program enables readers to make publicly visible the private notes that they have added to the books they read. The digital interface that results has made the private experience of reading—which was initially considered profane during the historical passage of oral to print culture\(^{348}\)—at last communal again. But this new “social reading” is now material at the level of inscription; it is not just oral as in antiquity, and not just figurative as in the Nabokovian sense that to read is always to re-read, or in the Boudrillardian sense that all texts are palimpsests of others. Through Public Notes, Kindle readers can privately read how others read, displacing an autonomous, personal source of critical authority with a socialized one. This displacement of personal critical authority with socially or crowdsourced critical authority is another example of the ethos conundrum that curatorial media initiate.

Second, digital marginalia are distinguished by being quantifiable. Kindle’s “Popular Highlights” are just what they claim. Algorithms dependent upon access to the

\(^{348}\) In his *Confessions*, for instance, Augustine remarks about the oddity that Saint Ambrose read silently in the fourth century A.D., reminding us of the difficult transition from oral to print culture—the private silence made possible by the move to print initially seeming to oppose the immanent *publicness* that was thought to be communication’s whole point. See Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 6, Chapter 3.
annotations made by millions of Kindle readers aggregate the highlights made by all of them to “identify the passages with the most highlights…and help readers focus on the passages that are meaningful to the greatest number of people.” The problem here is not with noting the measurable presence of commonly highlighted passages, which could be useful in the limited way that political polling might be: as a superficial litmus test of public interest. The problem is rather with not noting an individual reader’s motives for doing the highlighting to begin with.

Though two readers, independent of one another, may each have marked the same section of a text, their reasons for doing so can differ vastly. In the same way that a poll of the political public sphere might identify shared allegiances to particular candidates or policies, yet do little to capture the manifold reasons individuals have for forming those allegiances in the first place, Kindle’s “Popular Highlights” deny the importance of those differences altogether. In turn, the feature makes the polysemy of a text unimportant, though such multiple meanings are precisely where a cultural artifact’s public significance exists to be negotiated. To deliver for Kindle readers a statistically quantified classification of a text according to its “highlights” is to ignore the nuances of what inevitably are always highly contextual and motivated rhetorical engagements with cultural artifacts. By distilling a text into its supposed moments of most salience to “the public” that has read it, Amazon’s Kindle algorithm promotes a mode of reading that appears to be sensitive to the public interest, but in practice denies the essential differences that make our engagement with cultural artifacts important and, potentially, capable of precipitating social change.

---

349 Amazon Kindle, “Frequently Asked Questions.”
Learning to Love it All

On Goodreads, social reading transpires through the automated networks formed by identifying with particular books: by reviewing them, writing commentaries about them, or just by adding them to one of your virtual shelves. To visit your profile page is to be furnished a real-time list of feeds associated with the books you’ve indicated an interest in, so to enable discussion with those who are writing and thinking about those books themselves, or those who have merely identified with it in one way or another. This access to social input and output about books operates on the tacit belief that reading common texts can democratically bring people together in the formation of a community. Although the site, with millions of books in its database, accommodates a plurality of interests and opinions, it gets entangled in status judgments that are a joint consequence of the intermangling of citizen critics and citizen authors on the site, as well as the ethos conundrum manifest in the legitimation of all individual critical judgments, provided they are not explicitly disidentificatory judgments.

To form identifications based on disidentification—that is, following a sort of Machiavellian “the enemy of your enemy is your friend” model—makes for an asocial kind of reading (or at least, a sociality via asociality, via agonism), which threatens the community of members who have fallen in line with the site’s attempts to model a networked cultural public sphere. What this points to is an affective ecology enacting a double paradox: in the first, both privileging the intrinsic ethos of those who express their individual aesthetic judgment autonomously from others, and privileging the extrinsic ethos of aesthetic judgment’s socially formed basis; in the second, the corollary
assumptions that no critical judgments can be wrong and that only those reached
collectively can be fully legitimated. These two paradoxes manifest in the site’s new
enactment of affective reorientations to the intersection of art and commerce, as well as
traditional conceptions of aesthetic hierarchies.

The observation that art and commerce are deeply entangled is nothing new.
Neither are many corollary claims about the degradation of art: for instance, that the
absorption of art by capitalist logic tolled art’s death knoll by turning it into pure
commodity form. The most classic critiques of art’s commodification, coming from the
Frankfurt School, have articulated art within an assemblage factors, including media,
technology, culture, and social practice. Adorno & Horkheier’s *The Dialectic of
Enlightenment* offers one of the more scathing critiques, but it recurs with somewhat less
disparaging bents in the likes of Walter Benjamin’s essay on “The Work of Art in the
Age of Mechanical Production,” and in Leo Lowenthal’s *Literature, Popular Culture,
and Society*. Lowenthal may have distilled the problem most succinctly, describing it as a
tension between “two powerful cultural complexes: art on the one hand, and a market-
oriented commodity on the other.”\footnote{Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture,
and Society*, xii.} Those looking will find no shortage of critiques,
explanations, theories, and histories of this fundamental tension, and not just from
Frankfurt.\footnote{For some of the more prominent critiques, see Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*;

One of the more commonly attributed legacies of such critical theory has been its
association with an “elite culture” model of the arts. Along the lines of Matthew Arnold’s
view of culture as “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” critical theory that challenged the commodification of art sought to emancipate humans from the degradation that accompanied the loss of art’s high standing to a lowest-common-denominator massification. There was, in other words, a qualitative aesthetic judgment implicit in dialectical critiques, which sought, by separating art from the temptations that the market’s demands might place upon its integrity, to preserve art as an autonomous and superior realm of cultural practice, which might in turn be the saving uplift of a society trending toward intellectual degradation.

The market won that one. Literary culture, Jim Collins writes, has become popular culture. The story of this well-known shift follows the rise of mass communication and post-industrial changes in cultural production, the globalized dispersion of cultural goods, and the democratization of creativity actuated by digital technologies, not to mention the politico-economic paradigms that underwrite the whole lot. It’s a story too large to tell here. And yet, the model of cultural stratification premised upon an elite/mass or high/low distinction has remained dominant for most of the twentieth century. One reason is Pierre Bourdieu’s discovery of actual evidence for it in social practice.

Bourdieu’s 1979 masterpiece, La Distinction: Critique Social du Judgment (and its English translation in 1984), showed links between taste, status, and social class based on rigorous field research and survey questionnaires he administered in Paris between 1963 and 1968. His findings confirmed that an elite/mass model of cultural stratification

352 Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, xi.
353 See Collins, Bring on the Books for Everybody. For another version of the story, see Striphas, The Late Age of Print.
was in fact widely practiced, though without the links to wealth and class one might have expected. For instance, he found that some in the upper classes had no money but decidedly highbrow tastes, while others had lots of money, but their tastes skewed toward the lowbrow. The observation gave rise to Bourdieu’s distinctions between economic and cultural capital, complicating easy linkages associating the poor or uneducated masses with lowbrow taste and the rich or privileged elite with highbrow. Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s influential work also seemed empirically to confirm—it certainly helped to entrench the idea of—an elite/mass model of status hierarchy, in which people gravitate toward either high or low forms of cultural production, and exhibit more or less cultural capital accordingly.

But times have changed. In what remains under-recognized but terribly important work, Richard Peterson has argued that it no longer makes sense to understand cultural stratification in a binary of elite and mass taste: the elites favoring only the high arts that manage to remain relatively autonomous from market imperatives, and the masses taken by the more efficiently produced and widely distributed popular content.\(^{354}\) Certainly such a model has been part of the social imaginary for some time, both before and after Bourdieu, with plenty of other literature attesting to it.\(^ {355}\) But Peterson suggested that the high and lowbrow model no longer held up. Writing in 1992, he argued that social practice actually exhibits a different model of stratification: that of the omnivore and univore.

\(^{354}\) Peterson, “Understanding Audience Segmentation.”
\(^{355}\) See, e.g., MacDonald, Masscult and Midcult; Gans, Popular Culture and High Culture; Lynes, The Tastemakers; Rubin, The Making of Middlebrow Culture; Levine, Highbrow Lowbrow; Latham, Am I a Snob?
The omnivore and univore model suggests that taste is better expressed through quantity than quality. Cultural capital now comes not from the perceived status of what art we appreciate, but in the breadth of arts that we do:

In effect, elite taste is no longer defined simply as the expressed appreciation of the high art forms and a corresponding moral disdain of, or patronizing tolerance for, all other aesthetic expressions. In so far as this view is correct, the aesthetics of elite status are being redefined as the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities and creative forms along with the appreciation of the classic fine arts.\(^{356}\)

Peterson’s new model didn’t try to do away with the elitism and superiority that inevitably pervade social relations. He just suggested that cultural capital is now gained differently than before: namely, by knowing about and consuming a range of cultural products, both high and low (to use the old distinctions), making omnivores the top of the status hierarchy, and univores, by contrast, the ones with lower status because they don’t have the breadth of taste to appreciate a wide range of cultural products.\(^{357}\)

An omnivore would have trouble answering a question like, “What kind of music do you listen to?” because their tastes are so wide. A marimba band? Sure. Country? You betcha. K-Pop? That too. The omnivore can like them all. The same question posed to the univore would cause less trouble. Beethoven or Beyonce, it doesn’t matter; what characterizes univores is not that they prefer lowbrow art, but that whatever kind they prefer is the only kind they know, or at least all they bother with. For Peterson, switching to an omnivore/univore model of the cultural status hierarchy is not just an etic theory. Like Bourdieu, Peterson draws his insights from emic interpretation of data collected in survey work: in his case, the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, a nationwide

\(^{356}\) Peterson, “Understanding Audience Segmentation,” 252.

\(^{357}\) For more on how Peterson’s idea of omnivoroussness relates to Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital, see Peterson, “Problems in Comparative Research.”
American study undertaken jointly by the Census Bureau and the National Endowment for the Arts in 1992. What Peterson doesn’t do, though, is speculate about any underlying reasons for the change in practice that his research identified. One possibility is that the affective ecology has changed, which not only reorients the individual’s experience of the arts, but also the social experience.

**Outcomes**

Here’s what happened on Goodreads. In her personal blog, Lauren Howard, the author at the center of the controversy, announced that she had decided not to release her book at all, the “main reason” being “the recent occurrences on the website Goodreads.” On Goodreads itself, she posted a “review” of the book that just said, “NO LONGER BEING RELEASED.” Howard contacted Goodreads to complain and, eventually, the site removed the reviews, commentary, and bookshelves that its staff deemed too hostile. Some online petitions emerged and received a couple thousand signatures from Goodreads members worldwide (from America to England to New Zealand), asking Goodreads to curtail bullying on the site. The Huffington Post published an editorial about the petitions, which generated such an impassioned response that it was subsequently given a disclaimer and followed by an exculpatory article from Andrew Losowsky, the site’s Senior Books Editor. Meanwhile, citizen

---

358 Quoted in Williams, “Did A Writer Get Bullied on Goodreads?” Howard’s blog has since been taken down.
359 Pippa, “Learning to Love.”
360 See, for instance, Dreyer, “Stop Letting Abuse Continue” and Enchanted Endpaper, “Goodreads Policy On Abuse to Authors.”
361 Stop the Goodreads Bullies. “Why It’s Time to Stop the Goodreads Bullies.”
362 Losowsky, “Stop the Goodreads Bullies.”
critics began posting more reviews and comments to Goodreads, now directing their ire to the site itself on the grounds that their contribution to the discussion was no longer publicly visible, for instance, “BECAUSE GOODREADS FUCKING DELETED IT WITHOUT GIVING THE AUTHOR OF SAID REVIEW ANY WARNING.”

Indeed, on 20 September 2013, Goodreads announced a new policy for its reviews and virtual bookshelves. “There is,” a site moderator explained in the announcement, “a line between relevant criticism and unhelpful ad hominem attacks or off-topic reviews that single out individual readers or authors. Reviews—or shelves—that cross this line are not allowed.” Some predictable disapprobation followed immediately in various blogs and fora, but the policy had now been fixed. The site reserved the right to determine—without being accountable to share its warrants—where that “line” would be drawn, and to delete infractions without notice. The free exchanges of at least this particular incarnation of the literary public sphere were no longer quite as free. Learning to Love is now available under the nom de plum Lauren Pippa. Its reviews are polarized, though neither side tends to mention much about the book itself.

The case of Goodreads instructs us that discursive norms, those rhetorics one is given to abide and accept as necessary, are inevitably a product of the affective ecology in which they might emerge. Without attending to this affective ecology, rhetorical technicity claims the power to decide in advance, as if from some hypothetical “outside” position, that social engagement should abide certain norms. Doing so, however, curtails possibilities for social action that are seldom potentialized until the actual moment of an

363 Goodreads has since removed this comment, first posted August 23, 2013 from a user going by “Litchick (is stuck in the 19th Century).”
364 Kara, “Important Note Regarding Reviews.”
365 See, for instance, Hoffelder, “Goodreads Announces New Content Policy.”
exigence. Although the observation, as I’ve discussed it here, accords to the cultural public sphere in particular, the same could be said of the more overtly political. Setting political norms in advance, as Judith Butler puts it, “is to prefigure the kinds of practices which will qualify as the political and it is to seek to negotiate politics outside of a history which is always to a certain extent opaque to us in the moment of action.”

In its insistence on communicative action, its prizing of openness and inclusivity, its privileging of the rational over (say) the affective, the public sphere thesis from Habermas onward curtails the range of alternative actions, behaviors, and modes of sociality that might conceivably count as political for any given crisis.

This, anyway, is a point that Jodi Dean has made in her attempts to think about communicative capitalism in the networked context of transnational technoculture. And it’s a smart one. Her move to privilege civil society over the public sphere thus derives in part from a desire to identify the political as a process, not just as a fixed site, set of communicative norms, or various standards to ensure the opportunity for equal participation of all. But in supplanting the public sphere thesis with a civil society model predicated on difference, she fails to account for how a rhetorical model of publics is a processual model, rhetoric being quintessentially pliable and adaptable to the emergent contingency of all situated action.

In this sense, theorizing norms for public communication, as if to develop “best practices” for resolving the inevitable, indeed the necessary conflict arising from our social interdependence, misses the point of what a rhetorical understanding of our

---

366 Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” 129.
367 Dean, “Cybersalons and Civil Society.”
368 Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 64.
publicness gives us. Such an understanding is processual insofar as no fixed best practices exist: the rhetorical is precisely a process of determining which practices best fit a particular event. Indeed, if the rhetorical tradition teaches us anything, it is the wisdom of only ever abiding “rules of thumb”—rules there may well be cause to abandon outright depending on the constraints of the exigence at hand.

Nevertheless, Dean is right to harbor a suspicion of norms for political action. I share this suspicion. And still norms are just what we get in so much of public sphere scholarship, that with a rhetorical bent included. While normative theory is not itself suspicious, any one-size-fits-all model of discursive norms will inevitably fail to account for situations whose appropriate forms of discursivity only emerge in the context of unfurling experience, not in advance. Certainly, at the level of experience, there are times when being uncooperative, irrational, partial, uncharitable, and unreasonable are what a situation calls for—or better yet, calls forth. This “calling forth from experience,” I believe, is what is missing from most thinking about the public sphere as a construct used to describe political action that falls outside private settings but free from state or corporate control.

The problem with the Goodreads quarrels, as with so many online spheres of discourse, is that their autonomy from institutional influence is not at all clear. In this case, though, it was not lost on anyone involved that Goodreads (only since owned by Amazon) was participatory in an algorithmic culture whose curatorial media are designed

---

369 I have already mentioned Habermas’s norm of critical rationality and Hauser’s norm on reasonableness. Other norms include, for John Dewey, social cooperation; for Seyla Benhabib, impartiality; for Donald Davidson, charity. There are undoubtedly others. See Bernstein, The Pragmatic Turn, 83-87; Benhabib, “Deliberative Rationality,” 30-35; and Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation.
to make money for their hosts. The controversy and public discussion that arose around
the ad hominem criticism on the site, in other words, attempted to raise through the
problem of discursive norms the question of to what extent its critical discourses were or
ought to be overseen by Goodreads as an institutional influence hosting such discourse.
Was this a cultural public sphere or not? That was the unspoken question. If the
commercial motivations and influences of authors were permitted alongside the critical
and socially generative motivations of citizen critics, what would become of the
possibility for a disinterested critical practice around the arts to contribute some wider
social purpose? Was the ethos conundrum really a conflict between algorithmic culture’s
tacit embrace of an omnivore model of aesthetic taste, as opposed to the elite/mass model
which, while given to sustain entrenched hierarchies of privilege and status, nevertheless
allows a space for genuine critique?

These questions make the Goodreads controversy and its various discourses an
example of what, at the end of Chapter Three, I called a reflexive public: a public
committed to assuring its very publicness by negotiating the terms on which that position
of subjectivity might be established and sustained. Despite its volatility, the discursive
activity on Goodreads in this case took place in what I’ve suggested we think of as a flat
mode of subjectivity. Chapter Seven will consider what a forward mode looks like in the
case of another reflexive public.
CHAPTER SEVEN

The Affective Register of Vernacular Rhetoric

In busy Old Market Square in Nottingham, England, hundreds of people were milling about as usual. By all accounts, it was another normal Saturday. 12 July 2014. But when the clock struck noon, with no other warning, dozens of people sat down en masse, took out a book, and began to read. They sat there for some time, a sea of readers across the busy square, absorbed in their books as bemused passerby looked on.

What was happening? The event was a “flashmob read-in” organized to draw attention to the plight of public libraries across England. But unlike a choreographed dance, the more traditional model of flashmob “spontaneity,” reading is not that fun to watch. It’s less something to see than something to do. This flashmob, however, by making reading publicly visible through an embodied performance, subverted the tendency to ignore the readers we only half-notice in public spaces. In doing so, it drew explicit attention to the invisible importance of reading in everyday life.

Protests like these have become more common during the second decade of the twenty-first century, a time when libraries worldwide are increasingly imperiled. While the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) has bemoaned the crisis facing public libraries for decades, it is only recently that the public has become so vigorously involved in the issue. Reasons for our public library crisis are as manifold as the claims from some camps contesting that a “crisis” even exists. I don’t intend to explore these

---

370 Scott, “Dawn of the Read Flashmob.”
arguments here. Suffice to say, the predicament arises in part from the entrenchment of neoliberal policy’s free market logic; and, in part, from the advent of digital technologies that are complicating the nature of books, reading, and what it means to have access to cultural capital. As I have shown elsewhere, a long and evolving relationship between libraries and their publics has existed through history, and it has been marked by changing rhetorical arguments about what libraries ought to provide for the people they serve. What I hope to show in this chapter is rather how the public’s recent engagement in defense of its libraries offers some insights about vernacular rhetoric’s role in the cultural public sphere.

Critical/cultural scholarship has repeatedly shown a commitment to identify and challenge those obstacles preventing the empowerment or liberation of certain groups or interests. Out of concern for the excluded, the disenfranchised, and the powerless, much of this work supposes that functioning democracies depend upon public modalities of communication that are capable of including those whose voices are not often heard or heeded, and that the governmentalization of communication techniques and technologies deserves critical scrutiny to the extent that it delimits the available means and media of public communication. Given these commitments, attention to vernacular rhetoric—rhetorical measures undertaken within the local context of otherwise disempowered citizens’ everyday experiences and means—has offered scholars a valuable heuristic to imagine an inclusive democratic practice more worthy of our heterogeneous sociality.

Yet, theories of the vernacular take widely divergent approaches: sometimes the vernacular is understood as a demotic or enchorial mode of expression, other times as a

---

373 See Greene, “Rhetoric (Dis)Appearing,” 262-263.
medium; here it’s a demographic category or marker of status, there a form of resistance. I argue that understanding vernacular rhetoric’s most salient role in public affairs requires recognizing the vernacular’s affective register. Three characteristics of vernacularity’s affective register are particularly worthy of attention. These can be expressed as maxims about the “affective vernacular.” First, the affective vernacular is a precondition of the rhetorical; whither affectability, whither rhetoric. Second, the affective vernacular is not directed toward the telos of civic judgment; expressivity and circulation alone are its necessary and sufficient conditions. Third, the affective vernacular cannot be refuted; it can only be denied the chance for emergence or counterbalanced with other affects.

To make this argument, I explore the particular case of a public sphere first emergent in late 2010 around some proposed library closures in the London Borough of Brent. The diversity and disenfranchisement of Brent’s populace makes its public involvement in defending its libraries an especially trenchant illustration of vernacular rhetoric. In particular, Brent’s library controversy, and the cultural policy paradigm in which it took place, found ordinary people frustrated by officially sanctioned channels of public deliberation and left to pursue their own vernacular rhetorics in a less discursive way—a way I suggest be understood as affective. These extra-discursive rhetorics illustrate the affective vernacular’s powerful potential to serve a democracy’s common good even when the end of social change remains far off.

**Vernacular Rhetoric**

Before proceeding to the case of Brent, it will be helpful to establish some theoretical footing in vernacular rhetoric and its role in the public sphere. Gerard
Hauser’s *Vernacular Voices* remains the key reference in this regard. Hauser offers a vision of public spheres consisting in the vernacular rhetoric of ordinary citizens. Such a model “assumes that publics emerge insofar as interested citizens, often out of concern for the common good, engage in dialogue on the issues that touch their lives.” These conversations emerge in communities with shared values and orientations, hence their vernacular nature. “We belong to a community insofar as we are able to participate in its conversations,” Hauser writes. “We must acquire its vernacular language in order to share rhetorically salient meanings.” The vernacular, then, is a kind of commonness shared within a community and expressed publically in language that constitutes our very publicness around the discussion of issues with wide consequence.

Expanding on this notion, Hauser has more recently elaborated that vernacular rhetoric involves interaction within a discourse community that shares “local knowledge, concerns, meanings, modes of arguments, value schemes, logics, traditions, and the like.” These everyday similitudes, he suggests, must also be “shared among ordinary people who neither act in any official civic capacity nor have an elite status that is an entrée to established power.” In fulfilling these criteria, the vernacular of ordinary people aligns them within a shared community of identification: a community certainly capable of accommodating internal dissent, deliberation, and difference (indeed, bound to such diversity lest it become ideological and claim its own established power), but united most strongly by the rhetorical means and stakes of daily, local, ordinary interaction.

---

374 Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*, 189.
375 Ibid., 67.
377 Ibid., 41.
Another variation on the vernacular can be found in the work of Kent Ono and John Sloop. In the introduction to their book, *Shifting Borders*, Ono and Sloop theorize a scaled vernacular, represented by a graph whose X axis has vernacular discourse on the left extreme and civic discourse on the right, and a Y axis with outlaw and dominant discourse at its respective upper and lower extremes. The advantage of such a model is to account for vernaculars that don’t meet a superlative ideal, but are nevertheless vernacular in their local situatedness in relation to power. Ono and Sloop’s thinking about the subject allows that vernacular discourse emerges from those historically subaltern groups alternate to a larger “civic community” in order to resist dominant cultural ideologies or to abide them, each to various degrees. In this sense, the vernacular might be counter-hegemonic or not.

Ono and Sloop’s earlier work shows that vernacular discourse, in itself, doesn’t “enable constituents of vernacular cultures to articulate liberatory political identities and subject positions.” In fact, they say, vernacular cultures often appropriate and thus support the discourses of abiding power structures through pastiche and cultural syncretism, suggesting that the vernacular cannot so easily be distinguished from the official by virtue of its language or by some tenuous criteria of resistance. Ono and Sloop go on to argue that only through their project of “*purposeful poststructural critical rhetoric*” can research highlight that communities can be more or less local, with smaller or broader audiences, and likewise show greater or lesser conformity to the abiding logics and rhetorical inventions of the dominant powerbrokers. Such a critical

---

rhetoric can help us see, in other words, some of the ways that official discourses utilize the vernacular to further their aims, and some ways that vernacular rhetorics respond to operating under the shadow of the official.

If Hauser’s understanding of the vernacular treats it as a common, everyday rhetorical practice, embedded in localized lifeworlds, and if Ono and Sloop’s understanding treats the vernacular as a subaltern form of resistance, from below, to the powers-that-be up top, then Robert Glenn Howard’s understanding represents a combination of these views. Howard grounds his understanding of the vernacular in its very hybridity, dating back to the term’s first use in ancient Rome. Noting that the Classical Latin noun “verna” refers to slaves born and reared in a Roman home, the verna were hybrid insofar as their training in Classical Latin distinguished them from other slaves and gained them “partial access to institutional expression,” while fluency in their native language(s) also distinguished them from their masters and “gave them access to a hybrid agencies [sic].”

But Howard’s sense of hybridity is “less about being new than it is about containing its own alternate.” He maneuvers from the verna as “home born slave” to “vernacular” in its rhetorical sense through Cicero, for whom “vernacular” was a source of persuasive power insofar as it was set against institutionally codified forms of oratory. As Howard explains, “The strength of the noninstitutional aspect of the hybrid verna was seen as powerful by institutional Rome precisely because it was both able to act in institutional modes of communication, Latin, and because it had access to something beyond the control of those institutional powers. The vernacular is powerful because it

381 Howard, “The Vernacular Web,” 496. See also Howard, “Electronic Hybridity.”
382 Howard, “Electronic Hybridity,” 204.
can introduce something other than the institutional into an institutional realm."³⁸³ By establishing that the vernacular has always existed in a hybrid status, indeed that its hybridity is its sine qua non and that such hybridity is what gives it rhetorical traction, Howard introduces a theory of dialectical vernacular.

The notion of a dialectical vernacular merely extends the concept of vernacular’s historical hybridity to problematize contemporary conceptions of vernacular that would separate it in strict opposition to the civic or institutional. In Howard’s mind, understanding the vernacular as common, as Hauser does, is to mark its communal “public” emergence in everyday exchanges of local communities whose shared doxa³⁸⁴ or “common sense” sets it fundamentally apart from institutional sites of discourse. Meanwhile, understanding the vernacular as subaltern, as Ono and Sloop do, is to mark its alterity to the civic and to characterize individual vernacular counteragents as attempting to express resistance to the forces that mark their subaltern status. The dialectical vernacular is Howard’s way to deny the “romanticizing or essentializing identification” of either alternative.³⁸⁵ Positing a dialectical vernacular accordingly allows that the vernacular both appears in institutionally empowered sites of discourse, and that institutionally empowered discourse appears in vernacular discursive sites. At root, his model “imagines a web of intentions moving along vectors of structural power that emerge as vernacular whenever they assert their alterity from the institutional.”³⁸⁶ In this sense, the dialectical vernacular accommodates both Ono and Sloop’s, and Hauser’s ideas of the term, while also extending their limitations.

---
³⁸³ Ibid., 204-205.
³⁸⁴ For more on doxa, see Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Praxis, 159-171.
³⁸⁶ Ibid., 497.
Brent and its Libraries

The London borough of Brent didn’t become a borough until 1965, consolidating the municipal boroughs of Wembley and Willesden, which were divided by the River Brent. Libraries existed in the area well before that time, and Brent absorbed them when it became a borough of its own. These libraries, among the most beloved of which have been those of Willesden Green and Kensal Rise, have a long history in the area that became threatened, in 2010, when they faced permanent and total closure. Tracing some of this history will help to underscore why the people of Brent became so actively and emotionally involved in 2010 when the closure of their local libraries became a looming reality.

In 1891, residents of Willesden Parish voted at a margin of two to one in favor of a measure to establish a library commission and build three public libraries in the area. This measure would not have been possible if British parliament had not, some 40 years earlier, passed the Public Libraries Act of 1850, giving local boroughs throughout England the authority to establish public libraries in their communities using local taxes. The Public Libraries Act institutionally codified the importance of free public libraries for the first time in British history, taking a clear stand on the value that libraries have to ensure a free and civil society for all. The Act initiated a “public library movement” that swept England for the rest of that century and, after the 1891 vote in Willesden, resulted

---

387 Doubleday, “A Year’s Development.”
in the libraries at Kilburn, Harlesden, and Willesden Green, which remain among Brent’s major libraries to this day.  

Willesden Green was the last of the three to open, as it did in 1894 to a great ceremony with orchestral music. The building was beautiful: a late Victorian made of red bricks, accentuated with wood and molded stucco. Its winged-shape let it run along both streets from the corner where it sat, and a turret gave charm to its stately entrance. It was an immediate success. By 1907, the original building was expanded with a second level to accommodate its growing inventory and patronage. By the time Brent became a borough in the 1960s, Willesden Green Library included a sizable lending stock, a separate reference collection, children’s department, and reading room, and its inventory and use were continuing to grow. Soon enough, the old Victorian building, even with its 1907 renovations, could no longer accommodate the library and community’s needs. In 1989, the wings of the original building were razed to make way for a huge “Library Centre” replete with cinema, arts complex, café, and bookstore.

Kensal Rise Library is another area favorite. Opened in 1900 in a ceremony performed by Mark Twain, the site was donated by Oxford’s All Souls College, which stipulated in an explicit covenant that the gift was contingent upon the site being used continuously as a free public reading room and library, lest the property be reverted to the College. Like Willesden Green, Kensal Rise Library was an immediate success, and soon had a hard time keeping up with the growing needs of the community. According to some figures, “80 people per day used the Reading Room in its first week, and this figure rose

---

388 Minto and Hutt, *A History of the Public Library Movement*.
389 Brady, “Much-Loved Landmark.”
390 Ibid.
to 150 after six months.” By 1904 the building had already been extended, in part with funds from Andrew Carnegie. Indeed, Kensal Rise has continuously changed with the times so better to serve its community. In 1922, it was the first library in the area to move to a circulation system in which visitors could take books from the shelf directly, rather than have staff librarians mediate. With the Princess Frederica Primary School only a block away (Fig. 10), the library became a haven for children and their parents; and the library responded by enlarging the Reading Room again in 1928, and in 1934 building a separate Children’s Library and Children’s Reading Room upstairs.

Figure 10: Map illustration of the proximity between a local elementary school and the Kensal Rise Library. The library’s nearness to the school would become an important topos in the public’s resistance to the library’s threatened closure in 2010.

By 1965, when Brent became a borough, England at large was undergoing some major changes in its library policies. Just the year before, parliament had passed the Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964, a monumental piece of legislation requiring all local councils to make public library services a statutory duty. Pushing the Act of

391 Barker, “Kensal Rise Library.”
1850 even further, in effect, public libraries were no longer just options for taxpayers who voted them in; they were now among the fundamental services that all local governments were mandated to provide for their citizens, and failure to do so would be subjected to oversight by the Secretary of State. The Act of 1964 calls for local councils and library authorities to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service for all people “whose residence or place of work is within the library area or who are undergoing full-time education within that area.”

The Act moreover requires that these services be free of charge and promoted publicly. In Brent, this meant the new borough’s council would be responsible for sustaining the Kensal Rise and Willesden Green libraries, among the others that it had inherited.

Within these responsibilities, however, the Brent Council (as with local councils all over England) has had considerable wiggle room to interpret what “comprehensive and efficient” library services mean. As the stories of Kensal Rise and Willesden Green libraries attest, since their inception at the end of the nineteenth century, the immediate communities they serve have been influencing the expansion and evolution of these libraries so to meet the needs of their local exigencies. In other words, before local councils were on the hook to provide and sustain library services, libraries in what became Brent were already treated as valued and robust centers of neighborhood communities. They’ve played an integral role in the everyday lives of local citizens, and the citizens have responded by participating civically so to ensure that their libraries continue to be relevant centers of local value. These discursive responses reached special

---

393 Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964, Chapter 75, Section 7(1).
urgency in the public sphere that emerged around some startling threats to Brent’s libraries in 2010.

Social Exclusion and Libraries

In November 2010, a council overseeing cultural affairs for the London borough of Brent invited public proposals for the consultation of its “Libraries Transformation Project” (henceforth LTP). The transformation would be radical: to the great dismay of local library-goers, the project planned to permanently close half of Brent’s twelve libraries and devote its resources to enhancing the six that remained. Despite the shock of the news, the plan’s foundation had been planted in 2008, when the Council began discussing a long-term agenda for Brent’s libraries after similar stock-taking had taken place on the national scale in the first years of the new millennium. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which oversees all British libraries, held a full-scale investigation of public libraries in 2000; it released a similarly comprehensive Framework for the Future report in 2003, detailing its outlook for “libraries, learning and information in the next decade;” and the Culture, Media and Sport committee has researched and published intermittent reports on libraries since then as well. In 2008, UNISON, a public service union, published an independent report called Taking Stock: The Future of Our Library Service. Given all this attention on a national level, by the time of Brent Council’s November 2010 LTP proposal, what to do about England’s public libraries was already a major issue of contention nationwide.

---

394 Brent Council, “Proposals for Consultation.”
395 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Sixth Report.
396 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Framework for the Future.
397 Davies, Taking Stock.
Almost immediately, in any case, ordinary citizens of Brent joined the public sphere by the thousands to protest the importance of libraries to their daily lives. Although these conversations and protests were overshadowed in the international media by the contemporaneous Arab Spring and Occupy movements, the public activity over Brent’s library closures nevertheless came to form the burning center of a veritable national crisis. By 2011, 600 libraries across England—20% of the total—were threatened with closure.\textsuperscript{398} The Brent case was hardly the start of this trend, but it became the emblem.

To understand the significance of the LTP in the context of Brent, however, it helps to know more about Brent’s demographics. The Greater London area contains 32 boroughs, 12 inner and 20 outer, plus the city of London at the hub, though the city is not considered a borough at all. Brent is an outer borough in northwest London, geographically the fifteenth largest of London’s boroughs, with Wembley as its major town. With a population estimated at 282,672, Brent has one of the highest population densities in outer London. It’s also the most diverse. Brent’s population is 59% black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups—a figure that doubles the outer London average. With 71% of its residents from an ethnic group other than white British, 48% of its population born outside the UK, and 130 different languages spoken in Brent schools, a strong claim can be made that Brent is among the most diverse areas in all the British Isles. Despite this, or perhaps as a corollary of it, Brent is also among the most deprived. The Index of Multiple Deprivation, which measures Income, Employment, Health, Education, Crime and Living Environment, and Barriers to Housing and Services, found in 2007 (its most

\textsuperscript{398} Cooper and Cooper, “Public Library Closures.”
recent report) that Brent has steadily been growing more deprived, and is now among the 15% most deprived of the 354 boroughs in all of England.399

Recently, in what would seem to be a boon for areas like Brent, cultural policy in democratic Europe has codified an interest in treating “social exclusion” as a key index for the health of democratic life. For years, at least in England, the policy paradigm regulating cultural affairs had linked poverty and deprivation to disadvantage, suggesting that some people just lacked the resources necessary for civic and social engagement, though they would presumably be happier and more participatory if only they had the means.400 Such a model neglected that many people were trying to participate in public life—through organizations, clubs, social movements, and so forth—but just weren’t afforded the influence or audience necessary to bring about visible change because the status quo relegated them to a fate of being ignored or easily dismissed.

In contrast, the turn to social exclusion policy operates in a more multi-dimensional register because, as Dave Muddiman suggests, it

relates not simply to a lack of material resources, but also to matters like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power. In other words, the idea of social exclusion attempts to capture the complexity of powerlessness in modern society rather than simply focusing on one of its outcomes.401

399 I have taken all figures in this paragraph from “Brent’s Borough Profile,” a report compiled by the Brent Council in January 2011.
400 Townsend, Poverty in the United Kingdom.
401 Muddiman, “Theories of Social Exclusion,” 2. Though he doesn’t say so outright, Muddiman implies that the policy model of social exclusion recognizes the preparation necessary for the disenfranchised to be more meaningfully included in society. Libraries, I’m suggesting, are a key site of such preparation.
While such an outlook may seem standard to critical/cultural scholars, it did not become prominent in European policy until relatively recently, and it remains absent in any explicit sense from American policy still.

The origins of “social exclusion” as a policy term can be traced at least to a 1980s policy of the French government, which used the new phrase “to refer to a disparate group of people living on the margins of society and, in particular, without access to the system of social insurance.” As an idea, it gestated for a while before overtly catching on in the U.K., in 1997, when the British government formed the “Social Exclusion Unit” in the Cabinet Office and related initiatives soon began in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. England’s Social Exclusion Unit and its likenesses around the Isles took a more multidimensional approach to poverty and social exclusion, attempting to analyze why progress bringing impoverished communities closer to the mainstream was so slow in coming. By 2003, social exclusion was a common enough policy term around Europe that the World Health Organization published a document detailing “solid facts” about social exclusion and its relation to health. And by the end of the last decade, so entrenched was the new term that the EU European Commission made 2010 the “European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.”

Today, the concept of social exclusion constitutes the major paradigm within policy conversations about the social and economic disparities among different communities in (at least European) democratic societies. Understandably, then, the literature on social exclusion is vast, with sometimes quite different ideas about what it

---

403 Wilkinson and Marmot, Social Determinants of Health.
404 For more, see Bassett and Welsh, “2010 European Year for Combatting.”
means or implies for the policies that use it as a guide. Although the concept has a variety of definitions and uses, in a general sense, policies guided by social exclusion attend to the ways inclusion can be achieved so to ensure all citizens the opportunity to participate civically in their communities. As the European Commission reports, “social exclusion refers to the multiple and changing factors resulting in people being excluded from the normal exchanges, practices and rights of modern society.” Accordingly, policies made under the social exclusion model respond to those circumstances necessary to ensure all corners of a society have the rights, resources, and opportunities to be vouchsafed the full measure of their communicative citizenship.

Given that such a model toward public policy is now structurally entrenched in England, the ongoing controversy over Brent’s libraries calls to be understood along the axis of inclusion and exclusion. On this view, the extent to which libraries foster the social inclusion of the citizens they serve corresponds precisely with the extent to which a state intent on eradicating social exclusion must provide libraries for its citizens. But a critical/cultural approach to the library closures thus faces a problem: if recognizing “the complexity of powerlessness” is both an aim of the critical/cultural project and of the policies such a project might endeavor to critique, then what is the justifiable basis for a critical response? In other words, how can a project fundamentally grounded in critiques of inequality challenge a state policy that is itself committed to critiquing the conditions of social life that create inequality? The people have an answer.

---

405 Commission of the European Communities, Background Report, 1.
Vernacular Rhetorics in the People’s Protest

It is hard to emphasize enough the vigor of the Brent protests. After announcing the impending closures in its LTP report, the Brent Council agreed to a three-month period of “extensive public consultation” for the report to be deliberated.\textsuperscript{406} It was during this time that the first public outcries began: in part for the obvious reason that the LTP’s plan to overhaul library services had just been made public, but also because the Council had agreed to entertain public opinion about the proposal only during this three-month time of consultation. Such consultation periods are not unique to the library controversy, but are part of Brent Council’s “have your say” custom, whereby the Council opens its policies to public deliberation for various lengths of time. In this case, the three-month consultation phase included several officially sanctioned opportunities for the participation of ordinary citizens in the public sphere.

These included five “Area Consultative Forums” hosted regionally throughout Brent for a neighborhood’s residents to voice spoken testimony about the LTP’s local impact; six “Service User Consultative Forums” for such testimony to be made by interest groups such as pensioners, minorities, youth, the disabled, and others; two “Public Meetings” for Q&A with Council members; an “Open Day” for general public discussion at Willesden Green Library; a paper, postal, and online questionnaire freely available online and at libraries throughout the borough; and open opportunities for written correspondence with, and requests for information from, the Brent Council.\textsuperscript{407} In addition, and perhaps most substantially, the consultation window also marked the deadline for community interest groups to submit full-scale proposals of their own as

\textsuperscript{406} Brent Council, “Proposals for Consultation.”
\textsuperscript{407} Brent Council. \textit{Library Transformation Plan}
alternatives to the LTP. For three urgent months, it seemed, the public still had a chance—within the system—to save its libraries.

And the people responded. By March, nine groups had submitted as many alternative proposals. Attendance at the Consultative Forums and Public Meetings spiked compared to meetings before the LTP release. By the end of the consultation period, according to the Council’s records, the Council had responded to at least 101 e-mails challenging or questioning the LTP;\textsuperscript{408} they had answered numerous queries about the Council’s statistical information and methodology;\textsuperscript{409} and they had received eight official petitions calling to save the libraries, with signatures that ranged on a given petition from 1 to 6,071 residents.\textsuperscript{410} Of course, merely quantifying the public’s involvement isn’t the point. Close inspection of the forum minutes, meeting transcripts, e-mail correspondence, and other Q&A evidence reveals a discursive public keen to express their concerns about the status of their libraries and what libraries mean to them.

What emerges in reading these records is not only the public’s clear and earnest investment in its libraries—an investment made evident in a wide range of opinions about what libraries should offer to their communities and how. These are striking, certainly. More striking still is a recurrent theme in the public meetings, forums, and inquiries: namely, claims that the consultation process has itself been unfairly limited, stained with flawed evidence, and generally inadequate to the rights of citizens to participate civically in debating the decisions affecting their communities. In other words, despite the numerous sanctioned public forums for addressing the library problem, the engaged

\textsuperscript{408} Brent Council, “Consultation Plan.”
\textsuperscript{409} Brent Council, “Detailed Information Requests.”
\textsuperscript{410} Brent Council. “Brent Libraries Petitions.”
public responded in ways that critiqued the LTP’s efforts as a Potemkin Village that destroyed an already existing public sphere with the farce that its consensus might have some bearing on public policy.

The public meetings designed for the public to question members of the Council were particularly rife with such critiques. Many challenged the Council’s figures about library usage, and accused the Council of a rigged game. One attendee said the Council is “disguising from people what is going on” and another asked outright, “what is the point of a consultation” if the outcome is already predetermined.\textsuperscript{411} Indeed, the indignant feelings recurred at the Willesden Green “Open Day,” where one attendee complained that the public meetings had been a sham: “Councilor Powney ignored us in the public meeting; therefore it wasn’t a public consultation.”\textsuperscript{412} Others likewise bemoaned the inadequate publicizing of the meetings, and what one person called the Council’s “deliberately misleading” published information about the consultation period at large. Some also derided the Council’s questionnaire as “appalling” and full of “leading question[s].”\textsuperscript{413} In written evidence later submitted to the House of Commons, a feeling of inequity and unfairness becomes clear in an assortment of comments (Fig. 11).

\textsuperscript{411} Meeting Notes, “Public Meeting.”
\textsuperscript{412} Meeting Notes. “Willesden Green Open Day.”
\textsuperscript{413} Ibid.
While the problem of social exclusion was thus central to the public’s concern, it remained curiously sidelined by the Council whose policies presumably operated under such a paradigm. Meeting minutes from the public Q&A sessions, e-mails to interested citizens, and the original LTP proposal all point to a Council motivated as much by an economic exigency as by the model of social exclusion. At one public meeting, Councilor Powney told the audience, “This is not a referendum. We have to make changes…The key thing I want everyone to understand is that we’re in a position where saying let’s carry on spending money is not an option.”414 In e-mail correspondence, the Council repeatedly responded to public inquiries by emphasizing that the Council was in an

414 Meeting Notes, “Public Meeting.”
“extremely difficult” or “very difficult financial situation” so “a rationalization strategy is necessary.” The original report had also listed seven reasons for the LTP’s existence in the first place. Several issues more or less related to social exclusion appeared on the list, but on top was “the current economic situation and impending public sector spending reductions.” The Council had pointed toward statistics comparing the annual cost of maintaining libraries with annual library usage in order to arrive at a cost-per-visit for each of Brent’s libraries. According to these figures, those libraries threatened with closure accounted for six of the eight highest cost-per-visit numbers because they see the least traffic in relation to their operation expense.

Cleverly, such evidence allowed the Council to take a consubstantial position wherein economic needs and social exclusion were inextricable considerations. Effectively, the Council could make its case on either basis: Not enough people use these libraries, so we can’t justify their cost; or, If these libraries cost so much to run, then they need to include more people. The voices emergent from the public during the consultation phase, however, were notably concerned with social exclusion alone, albeit in a twofold sense: first, to ensure their libraries be saved because libraries are important community hubs where social inclusion is made possible in an everyday, local context; and second, to ensure the public’s fair discursive inclusion in the conversations that would determine the fate of such libraries.

Brent Council, “Correspondence Log”
Brent Council, “Proposals for Consultation.”
Ibid.
After the consultation period, the Council moved quickly. Only a month later, by 11 April 2011, they had published their final LTP executive report. While ostensibly having considered the results of the public consultation, the final report nevertheless remained recalcitrant on the issue of branch closures that had been its major point of contestation. It also rejected every alternative proposal submitted by public interest groups. In response, that July three Brent residents filed a High Court suit against the Brent Council, claiming the Council “adopted a fundamentally flawed approach to the objective of making savings in its budget” and instead “started from the false premise that library closures were an inevitability, thereby closing its mind to alternative means.”

Most of all, the claimants said, the Council “acted unfairly by failing properly to consult the public on the proposals generally, by withholding relevant information from consultees and by failing to undertake adequate inquiry and consultation in relation to the needs of those groups protected by equality legislation.”

The British press billed the lawsuit as a “landmark” case that would establish a precedent for how library closures would be treated across the country. What rights did Brent’s public have to participate in determining how to fulfill, in a local context, the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act’s mandate that municipalities provide “comprehensive and efficient” library services to their residents? With rampant library closures imminent throughout England, this topic was very much national news. And at this point, the peoples’ cause gained even more momentum.

---

418 Brent Council, “Library Transformation Plan.”
419 Bailey v Brent, paragraphs 4-5.
420 Ibid., paragraph 5
Several high profile British celebrities put their weight behind the struggle in Brent, giving it all the more attention. Prominent authors Zadie Smith, Philip Pullman, Alan Bennet, and others, along with musical celebrities Nick Cave, Depeche Mode, and the Pet Shop Boys, each publicly expressed their allegiance to the goal of saving Brent’s libraries, some with speeches and others with fundraising efforts. A group called Brent SOS (i.e., “Save Our Six”) Libraries formed to organize a more cohesive public opposition. Websites and blogs cropped up like clovers overnight. All these voices in the cause expressed vernacular rhetorics positioned deliberately in opposition to the Council and State’s official, institutional rhetorics. So websites like Voices for the Library showcased first-person testimonies submitted by hundreds of regular people expressing through personal stories the value of local libraries in their daily lives.\footnote{See Voices for the Library, “Stories.”} And groups like Friends of Kensal Rise Libraries, the Cricklewood Homeless Concern, Keep Willesden Green, among others, formed or redoubled their existing efforts to fight the closures in Brent. While these groups are autonomous and discrete in their particular interests, together the conversations they engage attest to the robustness of the public sphere emergent around Brent’s libraries.

Ultimately, though, these efforts were unsuccessful. On 13 October 2011, the high court ruled in favor of Brent Council. That morning, all 12 of Brent’s libraries were closed in anticipation of the ruling. After the verdict, six were immediately reopened—and the ill-fated six immediately boarded up.
The Affective Vernacular

Brent’s library controversy illustrates the difficulty that ordinary people can have in making their voice heard against the obdurate will of authority when the authorities both hold ownership of the problem and the sanctioned means by which it might be articulated otherwise. While the public that participated in these sanctioned channels can clearly be regarded as “vernacular” along any of the concept’s established matrices, the essential vernacularity of this public did not attain its greatest salience until it responded to the consultative period’s shortcomings with rhetorical means of its own. What I hope to conclude the chapter by suggesting is that the affective register of these means gives occasion to rethink how we conceptualize vernacular rhetoric.

Throughout this dissertation I have treated affect as a way to think about those subtle energetics of communication and sociality that maneuver at registers outside the regime of “meaning” or “signification.” The affective is accordingly hard to identify, let alone trace, because it can neither be fixed to an individual on the basis of being personal, the way feelings can, nor semanticized socially, the way emotion can. As Brian Massumi writes, “The problem is that there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect,” and, “in the absence of an asignifying philosophy of affect,” we default to supposing that affect, which (at least for Massumi) is best treated as an intensity, is rather the same as emotion. But affect’s intensity rather derives from being decentered from any individual and instead mobilized through the dynamic relations that pass between people, and between people and things (and, depending whom you ask, between things and things) in the form of language, bodies, images, sounds, and so forth. Affect, in this

\[422\] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27.
sense, is located not in the symbolic exchanges that make our relationality manifest, but in the relationality itself: the invisible, often physically absent vectors potentially connecting all the subjects, memories, material influences, and sensations of our social field without which symbolic exchange would be impossible.

Sara Ahmed has explained affective relationality in ways that are helpful for thinking about the Brent case in particular. In the *Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed draws on Teresa Brennan’s work, which I discussed in Chapter One, to complicate how affects circulate. Brennan illustrated her thesis that affects are transmitted socially by using the example of someone whom, upon entering a room, picks-up on the tension inside immediately. Ahmed extends this theory by observing that affects aren’t just transmitted “outside-in” (existing affects-in-the-room transmitting *into* those who perceive them) but are also transmitted “inside-out” (because our moods influence how we are able to receive those affects coming from elsewhere): “If bodies do not arrive in neutral,” Ahmed writes, “if we are always in some way or another moody, then what we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation.”⁴²³ For Ahmed, then, affects are akin to moods, ways of being oriented *vis-à-vis* others, both objects and people. The mutual influence of these moods or orientations, inside-out and outside-in—“toward” or “away,” as Ahmed has also described them⁴²⁴—is what I have characterized as an affective ecology’s intermangling.

As intermangled orientations, however, affects are not *intrinsic* to subjects or objects. Rather, Ahmed insists, affects follow “a set of processes that might bypass conscious recognition (and are all the more affective *given* this bypassing)” and through

⁴²⁴ See Amhed, *Queer Phenomenology*; and Ahmed, “Happy Objects.”
this process they become something that “almost comes to reside as a quality of this or that object.” Ahmed’s insight is that once we adapt an orientation toward objects and people that presumes affective qualities reside in them, we lose sight of the history by which that orientation came to the fore. We lose the perspective, for instance, to remember that a stranger on the street, or an abandoned handbag at the bus station, is not intrinsically suspicious. They have come to seem suspicious because of the orientations that have circulated in our wider affective ecology and become “sticky.” Not only is the study of affect an ethically laden enterprise, then, in that it calls us toward mindfulness of the ways we have come to be “stuck” in certain dispositions toward others, but thinking about affect as processual rather than situated means there is always hope, even in the face of apparent finality or obduracy, for a reorientation of affective dispositions that could make the world otherwise.

In the case of Brent, after a public consultation and subsequent lawsuit that by all empirical measures made official channels of public dissent appear to have failed, this possibility of more affective public participation can help to account for more vernacular efforts to kept the struggle alive. To be sure, if by “affect” we were to understand something synonymous with emotion or feeling, then the discourse circulating in the public sphere around Brent’s library crisis was affective from the start. Decidedly, threats to local libraries inspired great passion, vitriol, even desperation among those citizens who expressed such feelings because they counted on these libraries as part of the routine and habits of their everyday lives.

---

The everyday, for Henri Lefebvre, one of its most concerted theorists among many others, is a “residual” space outside of politics and economics, and defined by “what is left over after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis.”[426] In this telling, the everyday and affect share important similarities that implicate one in the production of the other. Nearly all theories of affect, as Ruth Leys rightly (if cautiously) assesses, “suggest that the affects must be viewed as independent of, and in an important sense prior to, ideology—that is, prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs—because they are nonsignifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning.”[427] In Lefebvre’s designation of the everyday as a residual space distinct from the political, in his identification of the everyday as what falls outside what institutional structures and systems can commodify and determine, he gestures toward a space similarly independent of ideology, that is, of attempts to pass off a social order as a natural order of benefit to all. The social order of the everyday is rather formed outside the cone of top-down order as such. In brief, although affect exists in all places that there are people or things to exist in relation to one another, which is to say everywhere, the quotidian aspects of the everyday are where social practice accumulates its greatest affectability.

The everyday’s deep affectability, coupled with vernacular rhetoric’s rootedness within the everyday, makes the vernacular an intrinsically affective register. This carries at least three important implications. First, the affective register of the vernacular is a precondition of its rhetorical potentiality and not just a manifestation of its emotional symbolicity. The everyday contexts and background assumptions that give rise to the

[426] Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life, 97.
vernacular are produced through the affective orientations that precede them, not just “always already” but also “always not yet.” As a precondition that continues evolving, affect is not merely functional—that which serves to capacitate the rhetorical. It is rather self-sufficient in that its processual becoming is always ongoing, perpetual. Second, then, we might say that the salience of the vernacular’s affective register to the public sphere is to embody a public testament of belief without exclusively being directed toward a civic judgment that its disempowered status often cannot sway anyway. The affective vernacular fulfills its needs by being there. Apart from ideological intent or signifying content, the affective vernacular, finally, is not susceptible to critique. To phrase it as a principle: third, the vernacular’s affective registers cannot be refuted. The ongoing struggle in Brent makes these points clear.

A Wall of Shame and a Pop-Up Library

After the libraries closed, Brent SOS Libraries appealed for a judicial review. People took to the streets. A round-the-clock vigil began outside the libraries at Preston Road and Kensal Rise, hoping to stop the boarded libraries from being emptied of their books and computers. Residents erected a “Brent Council Wall of Shame” outside Preston Road Library, where children, artists, and others wrote comments, drew pictures, posted signs, and generally railed against the Council or expressed their allegiance to the cause of saving Brent’s libraries (Fig. 12). While the Wall of Shame falls decidedly in the camp of vernacular rhetoric, its affective register can all too easily be conflated with its emotional one. For that reason, it makes a particularly good way to illustrate the key distinction between affect and emotion.
The Wall of Shame was a rickety affair, made of plywood and nails, and serving none of a wall’s typical purposes: the division of space by walling in or walling out. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” Robert Frost reminds us. The Brent Council was such a something. The wall’s sole apparent purpose was not physically to separate the people from the council that had closed its libraries, but symbolically to separate them. The wall existed to accommodate the writing on it. This writing, along with the photos or drawings it accumulated, expressed deep emotion from the people whom the library closures affected. “I can’t read,” someone wrote. Another: “Education is the key of life, and your [sic] taking it away! Pless [sic] save our library!” The pathos of these appeals is self-evident, the bald confessions and solecisms all the more heart-wrenching for not being performances.
But for all its emotionality, for all the pathos it elicits, the writing on the wall is not affective in the way I’ve been suggesting we understand affect. The text and photos belong squarely within the communicative ecology of a public sphere fighting to save one of its most prized access points for culture and the capital it might confer. This communication is vernacular through and through. But to say it is affective, even though an encounter with the wall undoubtedly intermangles the complex ecology of orientations toward the issue, is not a claim that can be warranted by the comments and images posted on the wall having an emotional impact. Perhaps writing on the wall served a sort of cathartic “venting” function for a clearly frustrated populace; but that is the only sense in which we could say it was self-sufficient. The wall rather served as a vernacular rhetoric, outside officially sanctioned means, to continue the struggle by striving for the goal of saving libraries that, with each new day, seemed more incontrovertibly doomed.

As the protest continued, however, it took on a new and curious set of vernacular practices, which I think illustrate the vernacular’s distinctly affective register. Immediately after Kensal Rise library was closed, protestors erected a fully functional “Pop-Up Library” on Kensal Rise grounds, using wood, metal poles, and tarpaulin. Local residents donated the books and staffed its regular hours (Fig. 13). The Pop-Up Library displayed—that is, it did not merely symbolize—the people’s need for a library. Since opening a century before, the original library at Kensal Rise had always been a haven for the neighborhood’s children. In an area of such deprivation as Brent, at the time of its closure in 2011, the Kensal Rise Library had long been a stand-in daycare facility for Princess Frederica schoolchildren after school; it was a place they could go until their

---

428 For more on rhetorics of “display” and demonstration, see Prelli, *Rhetorics of Display*, and Hauser, *Prisoners of Conscience*, Chapter 7.
parents came home from their work shifts. Expressing this locally habituated need at public meetings and consultations had not made any apparent impact. But by building a library all their own, if not quite the haven local children really needed, the people could demonstrate that the library truly was essential to their community and its habitus—so important, it turns out, that they would even build and staff the library themselves.

More than even that, though, the Pop-Up Library at Kensal Rise fulfilled a legal technicality. Because of the covenant demanding that the site of Kensal Rise Library remain a library at all times lest it revert back to All Soul’s College, residents knew that maintaining even a makeshift library on the grounds was necessary in order to retain their claim to that space for a library of one kind or another. Although the Pop-Up accordingly served as an extension of the people’s protest, in other ways it was not a protest directed toward the telos of change, because by satisfying the need for a means to borrow books and gather communally, it might well have succeeded by never ending. The protest, channeling Bowie, fulfilled its needs just by being there.

Figure 13: The Kensal Rise "Pop-Up Library"
Unlike the bodily self-sufficiency of a hunger strike, for instance, which acts primarily as a symbolic but all too material performance of one’s commitment literally to “embody” a cause, the Pop-Up library can be understood outside a symbolic frame altogether. Certainly, by erecting a makeshift library on the grounds of the contested site, the people mobilized a material symbol of their need for libraries. To take away the Pop-Up library would at once take away the symbolic expression of the public will. But the Pop-Up’s primary function was not symbolic at all: it didn’t represent the public’s need for a library; it fulfilled their need. It served as the library that local residents would miss if it weren’t sustained by their own efforts. Accordingly, there was no essential difference between keeping the Pop-Up operational and whatever objective (telos) they might have hoped to reach by doing so. Yes, to take down the Pop-Up would be to cede defeat in the political cause against the Brent Council’s ruling. But to leave it up was not—at least not in its first order—a means to fight for a victory that would or would not one day be achieved. Precisely because the Pop-Up fulfilled their need for a library, it attained as a second order the demonstrative capacity of a symbolic action able to represent that need.

To think of the Pop-Up as rhetorically directed toward the goal of a decisive judgment in their cause’s favor, then, can only make sense after recognizing that its being there alone was also self-sufficient. This a-symbolic, utilitarian sufficiency is the affective register that makes vernacular rhetorics so potent. By endeavoring not to breach the All Souls covenant, the hybrid vernacularity of the Pop-Up operated within a legal apparatus that gave its cause legitimacy; but, it also operated wholly outside any institutional logic’s ability to counter the vernacular’s affective claim for a legitimacy so self-evident that it need no symbolic expression. Taken to its limits, a hunger strike either
ends in giving up the strike, death by starvation, forced feeding, or in the bent will of
one’s oppressors. Such strikes are not designed to be sustainable but signify a condition
of unacceptability that will not last. In their affective registers, all that vernacular
rhetorics have to do is—in very British fashion—keep calm, and carry on.

And so it did. The Pop-Up library remained operational over two more years. The
children may not have had their after school hub, the elderly may not have had their
access to the Web, but the Pop-Up does seem to have established its own everyday place
within the community as their brick and mortar library remained shutdown. There were
still other libraries not too far away. All of Brent is only 16.7 square miles. Undoubtedly,
the remaining other branches in the Borough had larger inventories, more services, actual
facilities. But the Pop-Up demonstrated the reflexivity of the public sphere committed not
just to its ostensible cause—saving the library—but to its reflexive desire to assert its
publicness, which after all had been the people’s desire from the start. The “official
consultation” had been a sham, the lawsuit to that effect failed to convince, and now,
through vernacular means, the sodality formed by cohering around a cause assured the
public the legitimacy of its participatory publicness and a version of the library they had
wanted to save all along.

Until it didn’t. On 31 January 2014, after over two years of relatively unimpeded
operation, someone going by the handle @DJHarryLove posted this Tweet at 3:16 a.m.:
“KENSAI RISE POP UP LIBRARY HAS BEEN TORN DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF
THE NIGHT BY HIRED HEAVIES – KENSAI RESIDENTS WE HAVE TO
RESPOND!!” (Fig. 14) Sure enough, come daybreak, residents woke to find the library
taken apart, the books left in the rain to molder. Shortly thereafter, the Bursar of All
Soul’s College, Thomas Seaman, announced that the old Kensal Rise Library had been sold to a developer named Andrew Gillick, with full awareness that he intended to convert the space into gentrified residential units.

![Tweet](image)

Figure 14: Tweet announcing the Pop-Up's destruction, 31 January 2014.

**What Next?**

The Brent case adds complexity to the thesis that affect is a pre-originary rhetoric and that rhetoric is possible because of affective relations of towardness or awayness, which give rise to symbolic actions that mobilize affects once they’ve been semanticized into feelings and expressed publicly as emotions. Here, an affective orientation to libraries, laminated by the highly local context of the attachments libraries bring forth among Brent’s youth and senescent populations especially, can be said to have given rise to the highly emotional rhetorics of protest and frustration. But the rhetorics performed through official channels and subsequently denied in a Kafkaesque attempt to navigate official channels of modern life were rhetorics that themselves gave rise to new affective orientations to the problem. The becoming of these new affective orientations in turn changed the affective ecology, oriented the people around a new exigence, one premised
on the delayed duration—the return to the previously unfulfilled promise of the All Soul’s Covenant, as Benjamin says all revolution begins with a return to an unfulfilled promise—and the new situation, now “understood” affectively, again became subsumed into rhetorical acts, this time of a vernacular register, though a vernacular shot through with affectivity.

In this light, vernacular rhetorics are more than just the voices of “everyday” people, and more too than such voices expressed in opposition to more official positions of authority. Vernacularity attains its greatest salience as a rhetoric when, by registering its incommensurability with those channels of activism sanctioned by institutional powerbrokers, it turns instead to an affective mode that does not take critical judgment as its only telos. By abandoning the instrumentality implicit in actions directed toward a telos, the affective vernacular evades the refutations of those who would be disposed to disagree with a particular cause or judgment if one were endeavored. Affects cannot be refuted; the reason is precisely because they precede judgment or interpretation. They operate beyond anything with which one could viably disagree. To disagree with affects would be absurd, like “refuting” the wagging tail of a puppy.

By building and staffing a DIY library, citizens of Brent literally built their community’s commonwealth. In service of a struggle to protect their access to a library’s cultural capital, its literature, its technology, they created their own accessibility. Framed aesthetically, in their effort to gain access to art, they created the art they wanted access to. As citizen critics, the people of Brent engaged a long and, by objective measures, ultimately unsuccessful struggle to bring public opinion before the state to challenge its authority. But the vernacular means with which they did so also made them citizen artists,
building and sustaining the very thing they were fighting to protect: not just a library, though the Pop-Up did do that, for awhile. Their vernacular rhetorics also performed their inclusion in the public sphere where their participation might be legitimated just for being participatory. In the end, the case in Brent, and the larger crisis of libraries worldwide, tells us something important about affective ecologies, the cultural public sphere, and how reflexive publics can assert their publicness through what I’ve called a forward subjectivity, all while doing more than trying to create shared “meaning” as a goal. The last word can go to the poet and former Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, who seems to have sensed it all long ago:

The true library asserts that there is indeed a ‘mystery of things.’ Or, more precisely, it asserts that the reason why the ‘things’ compose a mystery is that they seem to mean: that they fall, when gathered together, into a kind of relationship, a kind of wholeness, as though all these different and dissimilar reports, these bits and pieces of experience, manuscripts in bottles, messages from long before, from deep within, from miles beyond, belong together and might, if understood together, spell out the meaning which the mystery implies.429

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sighting, Siting, and Citing Publics

Immobility’s Infinitude

The fantasy of traveling the world from the comfort of one’s home has been an inspiration for literature, and a recurrent theme therein, for centuries. What many regard as the first novel, Don Quixote, Cervantes wrote from a prison cell in part as an exercise in such escapist fantasy. Xavier de Maistre, taking the exercise a step further, wrote his Voyage autour de ma chamber (“Journey Around my Room”) while under house arrest in 1790, about a lazy man who imagines his room’s walls and furniture as if they were exotic foreign lands. The fantasy shows up as well in the short fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, who, in “The Aleph,” envisions a kind of magical orb, hidden in a cellar, through which the whole world could be glimpsed all at once. None of this work would be described as science fiction, which has had its own prognostications of such a fantasy’s digital future. Today that fantasy is close to a technological reality.

In 2007, Google introduced its Street View service as a way, as Brian McClendon, VP of Engineering for Google Earth and Maps later put it, “to share a virtual reflection of the real world to enable armchair exploration.” By sending vehicles into the streets, each mounted with up to nine automated cameras positioned around a sphere propped a few feet above each vehicle’s roof, Google sought to photograph every street scene on earth across a 360° field of vision. From the privacy of one’s home, anyone can now access a seamless map of digitally stitched photographs taken from street-level on

---

430 McClendon, “Explore the World with Street View.”
all seven continents. We can finally “travel” the world—or at least see pictures of it—without leaving our bed.

This chapter is about the kinds of visual publicness that such technology makes possible. More specifically, it is about how artistic attempts to hack, curate, or disrupt Google Street View (GSV) images and operations are reconfiguring our affective ecology. In line with the argument I have been making throughout these pages, I suggest here that the assortment of artistic practices around GSV reveals the activity of reflexive publics oriented toward controlling the means of publicness itself. These publics are reflexive in that they are held together by attention to the conditions whereby strangers are brought into a kind of relation in the first place—in this case, a visual relation.

With the tacit approval of the state, but through a transnational topography, Google makes visible the everyday coexistence of people, animals, and things otherwise unseen in their ordinary emplacement in the world. When citizen-artists call attention to this making visible (what by another name might be called surveillance), they question how seeing can be the operative way whereby citizens otherwise unknown to one another come to share an organized togetherness around common concerns. This orientation is decidedly a vernacular one, allegiant to moments of affective intensity emergent from the mundane, unseen, and quotidian aspects of daily life on the fringes. The best way to understand how various artistic practices around GSV do so, I propose, is through a homophonic heuristic: they sight, cite, and site the public. More than just clever, the rhetorical tropes of sighting, citing, and siting are key elements of the affective ecology that makes publicness what it is in actual practice today.
Ocular Publics

As we have seen, a predominant strain of public sphere theory has posited the public sphere as a discursive construct, held together by talk or text. Alongside the discursive model, however, some scholars have also tried to imagine public spheres more visually and less linguistically. Cara Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang, for instance, have endeavored “to ‘sight’ public sphere theory by situating it with regard to vision and images.”\textsuperscript{431} Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, similarly, have proposed that public spheres are better imagined as public \textit{screens} to accommodate for the spectatorship endemic to contemporary technoculture.\textsuperscript{432} Implicit in both notions is a desire to acknowledge the possibility that images are as salient as words when it comes to orienting a public around issues of shared importance.\textsuperscript{433}

Such a possibility shows up in recent attempts to re-theorize democracy itself. The political scientist Jeffrey Green, for example, has argued that a vocal model of the People’s empowerment doesn’t fit the ways citizens actually perform their citizenship in a spectacle society.\textsuperscript{434} Most often, he suggests, people watch; they look more than they speak, which makes \textit{seeing} a more accurate action than \textit{talking} when it comes to how people hold the state accountable for their policies and laws. Positing an ocular model of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{431} Finnegan and Kang, “‘Sighting the Public,’” 379.
\textsuperscript{432} DeLuca and Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen.”
\textsuperscript{433} I follow W.J.T. Mitchell’s definition of an image as “any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other” (\textit{What Do Pictures Want?}, xiii-xiv). This might be filmic, photographic, or performative, an embodiment or a representation. Images are seen things. “Image” and “photograph,” for instance, are not synonymous. Though all photographs are images, as the larger category of visual object, images need not be photographic.
\textsuperscript{434} Green, Jeffrey, \textit{The Eyes of the People}.
\end{footnotesize}
popular empowerment in place of a vocal model, Green forwards a plebiscitary
democracy based on this key difference between vision and voice.

His ocular model “understands the object of popular power to be the leader rather
than the law, the organ of popular power to be the gaze rather than the decision, and the
critical ideal of popular power to be candor rather than autonomy.” The gaze of the
multitude does not drive toward rhetorical krites, a critical judgment that takes the form
of a decision guided by an achieved consensus or public opinion, as in discursive theories
of publicness. Instead the People’s gaze holds political and corporate leaders accountable
to be candid and honest instead of rehearsed and tactical. In a world of ubiquitous mobile
recording technologies, with old media and new both broad- and narrowcasting images
everywhere, very little goes unseen. Such seeing is the People’s power.

It is important to recognize, though, that in more visual models of the public
sphere, or of democracy itself, publics are not just held together by discussion of the
images that pervade our visual culture. That would merely be a topical variation of a
discursive model. Instead, a visual public or ocular democracy is held together by the
dissemination of images, images that themselves function rhetorically as symbolic
inducements of a similar order as language’s regime of representation. To recognize the
public sphere’s visual currency, then, is in part a way of supplementing—and, to a
degree, even of supplanting—the idea of the public sphere as a realm of linguistic
argument through dialogue with the realm of visual argument through images.

From a discursive standpoint, the capacity of images to argue without recourse to
words is a crucial measure of their corresponding capacity to organize a public sphere

435 Ibid., 15.
around visuality alone. Though academic disputations about the possibility of strictly visual argument were vigorous as late as the mid-1990s, as Alan Gross observes with some regret, “the preponderance of those writing since have taken the position that visual arguments exist.” Through visual argument, then, the thinking goes, images constitute a public sphere with the attention that a spectating populace gives to these images. This is the tacit position, for instance, of Robert Hariman and John Lucaites, whose *No Caption Needed* and related projects have become touchstones for visual rhetoric’s articulation with theories of public culture, including the public sphere.

Hariman and Lucaites focus on photojournalism’s iconic images, which they regard as a legitimate genre of public address, one capable of constituting viewers as citizens, and hence of contributing to public culture a more socially shared drive toward democratic uplift. They recognize, however, that photographic images, when perceived as “a clear window on reality,” might also be “the ideal medium for naturalizing a repressive structure of signs.” To keep this tension taut—the dual capacity of photographs to constitute viewers as citizens pulled by the capacity of photographs to naturalize ideology—they recognize that in any given situation a photograph might reinscribe ideological control or activate a public culture, depending on the rhetorical context of its dissemination and reception. Ultimately, by challenging “the presumption that visual media categorically degrade public rationality,” they have argued that “the widely disseminated visual image provides the public audience with a sense of shared experience that anchors the necessarily impersonal character of public discourse in the

---

438 Ibid., 42.
motivational ground of social life.”

For Hariman and Lucaites, in other words, the stranger relationality endemic to the public sphere is constituted through shared attention to widely circulating images.

Green, as a political scientist, does more thorough work than Hariman and Lucaites in explaining exactly how popular power—the power often thought to derive from democratic public spheres—can be attained merely from the shared gaze of a multitude. But Hariman and Lucaites do compellingly show that iconic images from photojournalism have rhetorical purchase in public life. Twenty-first-century citizens of the world encounter these images in all manner of contexts, through advertisements, t-shirts, broadcast news, the Web, entertainment, social media, private exchange. Long before mobile technologies equipped nearly everyone with a camera-phone everywhere they go, Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators noted in 1965 that photography was omnipresent in society, a middle-brow art practiced by one and all. Prescient at the time, today the observation is self-evident. Chances are, you have near immediate access to a camera during most parts of your day, probably even right now.

If people are not just seeing images, but creating and sharing them too, it is easier to understand how such images might themselves hold together a public sphere without recourse to discourse. It’s along these lines that Ariella Azoulay, in accord with others who theorize visual models of the public sphere or democracy, has envisioned photography as the practice that best enacts the civic bonds of contemporary citizenship. “Photography,” she writes, “is one of the only practices by means of which a political community has been formed that is based on a mutual obligation among its members,

---

439 Ibid., 43.
440 Bourdieu et al., Photography: A Middle-brow Art.
who hold the power to act in connection with this obligation.”

Inasmuch as citizens are governed, Azoulay suggests, they share an obligation to one another, not toward the governing power, and because photographs are “constructed like statements (énoncés)” and citizenship is “gained through recognition,” photography and citizenship share important “conceptual valences.” Our visual interactions, in sum, ensure that the people, those on the margins especially, do not go unseen or unrecognized, and in doing so these interactions build civic bonds that check the ruling power.

What all these approaches share is an interest in recognizing that images, largely in their rhetorical capacity to argue—to evince—are as essential to public solidarity as words. But merely substituting visual argument for discursive argument does not tell the whole story. Transposing a discursive model of signification into a visual register keys us toward a photo’s social meaning, and thereby misses what meaning cannot convey. If, as I have been arguing throughout these pages, rhetorical meanings are capacitated by the unique set of conditions specific to a given affective ecology, then it is not enough just to expand the discursive model of public spheres to include images. Such an expansion is a crucial insight, to be sure. From an affective standpoint, however, the capacity of images to argue reflects only their secondary rhetorical order. It is therefore necessary to examine the affective ecologies through which images move, accumulating their affectability as they do. Google Street View offers an illustrative case through which to do so.

441 Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography, 104.
442 Ibid., 17.
443 Ibid., 23.
Street Photography and the Photographic Vernacular

The genre of “street photography” has existed at least since Eugène Atget, in the late nineteenth century, began taking pictures of Parisian street scenes. Using surreal long exposures and wide angles, Atget captured everyday Paris, not its landmarks, but the more quotidian or unnoticed of its buildings and working class, at the onset of its industrial modernization. In doing so, he legitimated the ordinary details of public street scenes as a photographic subject, expanding the range of photography beyond portraiture and forensic science, and establishing a precedent for professional and amateur photographers ever since. Without Atget, there may have been no Cartier-Bresson to issue candid photographic reports from the everyday life of the streets; no Diane Arbus to show the humanity of freaks and carnies; no Garry Winogrand, no Walker Evans, no Robert Frank, no Alfred Stieglitz, no Joel Meyerowitz, no Lee Friedlander—to draw mostly from the American tradition alone.

There are, of course, many versions of street photography’s history to be told, and telling them is not my aim here. It is important, however, to recognize that Google Street View belongs within this long history of street photography and its vernacular idioms. Though circulation might make certain exemplars of the genre into icons, in the main, street photography is distinguished by producing distinctly non-iconic images of public spaces. This is especially true in the case of GSV. Google’s fleet of camera-equipped cars, tricycles, people, and camels indiscriminately photograph everything they pass. GSV images, then, resist iconicity in part by virtue of being arbitrary: the cameras look in all directions and catholically capture what they see. The indiscriminating nature of these
photos divests them of their iconicity. The goal is to photograph the entire public world. But, just as curation cannot be comprehensive, the all-inclusive cannot be iconic.

The non-iconic quality of GSV images would not appear, then, to give rise to any public sphere, at least not the “stranger relationality” proposed in Hariman and Lucaites’ approach to visual icons. GSV images don’t really even circulate for the public’s attention. Just the opposite: one needs to go looking for them. In this sense, GSV images count as what are sometimes called pull media: “media,” Henry Jenkins explains, “in which consumers must seek out information” (as opposed to push media, “in which the content comes to the consumer.”) Accessing the Street View archive is simple enough, and Google’s suite of mapping apps makes the photographs searchable and navigable in a variety of ways. But the images, ostensibly at least, neither deliver any ideological message, nor purport to have any substantive civic or artistic purpose.

GSV images, in a way, are invisible, at least in the sense of seeming inconsequential; they’re so ordinary as to go unnoticed. Better yet, they are nested, hidden, embedded: embedded virtually in the GSV interface and materially in the streets the images represent. The embedment of these images in the GSV interface is especially important in that no automated buttons allow you to Share or Like GSV images. In a digital realm so otherwise given to enable sharability, the omission is unusual. The interface facilitates no easy extrapolation. As a result, GSV photos do not tend to spark widespread conversation. And how could they, when the photos are not even discrete texts? GSV images, that is, don’t have an edge; they have no frame, at least not in the conventional sense; onscreen, they are digitally stitched together to form a 360°

---

444 Jenkins, Convergence Culture, 291.
panorama on a seamless map. One moves across the photos, over them, up them, down them, astride them. They exist to be passed by.

What’s more, GSV images have a programmed obsolescence, as Google replaces earlier photographs with more up-to-date versions whenever their vehicles are able to revisit and re-photograph street scenes they’d already covered. Like Atget, who set about deliberately to document the remnants of nineteenth-century Paris before they were lost to the quickly spreading modernization of the Twentieth, Google Street View sets about to document public places, but inevitably does so at fixed moments in time. The replacement of older images, when possible, with newer ones, suggests an effort to keep up with the times, but less as fashion than to record a more recognizable empirical referent: look, this is what the world now looks like here.

What it looks like, to anyone who has “traveled” through Street View, is almost always mundane. Roads, buildings, medians. Shoulders, sidewalks. Trees. Pedestrians and peopleless expanses. Corners and construction. Wilds. Wastelands. These photos operate, that is, in a vernacular idiom. They depict everyday scenes that are even more vernacular than the latent vernacularity of other street photography. Because GSV pictures are taken indiscriminately, they capture public space in its organic process; the pictures aren’t “about” that process. And, because GSV pictures are stitched together to form a panorama, no rhetorical framing or curatorial calculus of inclusion/exclusion lends GSV images any intrinsic salience; these images may “argue,” but their more primary impact is to affect.

In what sense, then, should we think of them as vernacular? Kara Finnegan has theorized an “image vernacular” to indicate the enthymematic quality of images: the
ability of certain images to make arguments based on premises that are already commonly shared by their perceiving audience, and therefore able to remain un-depicted in the image itself on account of that common sensibility. But because the GSV images are so arbitrary, attributing an argument, enthymematic or not, to any particular “view” seems misguided. We might, then, suppose their vernacularity is an extension of what Hauser meant by “vernacular voices”: the spoken or written exchanges of ordinary life in their situated and non-empowered contexts, exchanged among strangers to reach consensus on issues of shared concern. Given attempts to theorize ocular models of publicness, an expansion of this discursive vernacular into the visual would seem justified. But, because the GSV images are so embedded, not easily shared or circulated, it also doesn’t ring true to see them as forms of quotidian public exchange, directed toward achieving a common vision of the world.

Perhaps the answer lies in visual studies scholar Geoffrey Batchen’s call for a “vernacular theory of photography.” Batchen is not attending to the genre of street photography in particular—his subjects are more domestic, private—and his work predates the advent of Google Street View, but he wants us to recognize that the so-called official version of art history or photojournalism misses much that nevertheless comes within the photographic lens. For Batchen, the important thing is to avoid canonizing widespread images over others whose salience, though less circulated than iconic images, is no less robust in the more immediate context of their reception.

Batchen is less interested in iconoclasm, though, than in a sort of photographic pluralism: regarding photos as they are used in the practices of everyday life to be an

\[\text{445} \text{ Finnegar, “Recognizing Lincoln.”}\]
\[\text{446} \text{ Batchen, Each Wild Idea, 59.}\]
essential aspect of their cultural and social function. The issue is how photographs make
some things visible and not others, including the representationality of the photographic
medium itself.

Where much photography seeks to repress its own existence in favor of
the image it conveys, vernaculars have presence, both physical and
conceptual. Apart from the stress on the dimensionality of the photograph,
they also frequently collapse any distinction between the body of the
viewer and that of the object, each being made to function as an extension
of the other.\footnote{Ibid., 76-77.}

The GSV archive has just this sort of physical and conceptual presence in that its images,
beyond facilitating the novelty of “armchair exploration,” are also geotagged to actual
sites and spaces, and therefore serve an identificatory utility as an existential wayfinding
mechanism: You are here. Or, You could be here. Or here. Or here.

The vernacular nature of GSV images, then, is not just their ordinariness, but how
they make ordinariness visible as ordinary. Put differently, GSV images don’t only make
the everyday visible, they make visible that they are making the everyday visible.

“Vernacular photographs,” Batchen writes, “tantalize precisely by proffering the rhetoric
of a transparency to truth and then problematizing it, in effect inscribing the writerly and
the readerly in the same perceptual experience.”\footnote{Ibid., 77. For more on writerly/readerly, key terms of Roland Barthes, see his \textit{S/Z} and
\textit{The Pleasure of the Text}. In brief, readerly texts enlist their audience not as producers of
their meaning, but as passive receivers of what has already been inscribed. Writerly texts,
by contrast, are recurrently inscribed with the assumption that their meaning derives from
cultural context and the active engagement of an interpretive agent.} The conflicted perceptual experience
that vernacular images offer is one reason they are liable to produce such an affective
intensity. In other words, it is not just despite, but in part \textit{because} of their mundaneness,
that these images have such extraordinary affectability.
Street View’s Affective Ecology

To summarize where we are thus far: there are reasons to imagine public spheres being organized by images even without warranting that claim by citing the capacity of images to argue. The involvement of images—photographs in particular—in our affective ecology is one of the more compelling such reasons. The Google Street View archive exists in an affective ecology of the everyday; it consists in vernacular photographs that present actual, mundane, and material sites in the world, but it also makes these sites extraordinary in their very exposure to us from a mediated (and literal) distance. Before turning to ways various citizen artists have problematized GSV, organizing a visual form of publicness that is more than just a reinscription of its discursive symbolicity, we now need to think about how visual publicness might exist through an image’s affective ecology.

Scholars of visual culture and photography have long noted the affective quality of images. Walter Benjamin, for instance, noticed in 1931 (and citing Atget in particular) that photographs elicit responses not because of their formal or aesthetic properties, but because the ordinariness of their referents enchant.449 Susan Sontag has likewise emphasized the emotional power of photographs in her influential writing about photography.450 And Roland Barthes, in Camera Lucida, one of the most seminal texts in the field of visual studies, premised his whole phenomenological approach to photographs upon the inability to escape a photograph’s affective power.

449 Benjamin, “A Little History of Photography.”
450 See Sontag, On Photography; and Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others.
Barthes is particularly insightful about how photographs affect—and hence, his work offers a basis from which to extrapolate a sense of the affective ecology through which photographs traffic. “Affect,” Barthes reflects, “was what I didn’t want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph to.”\(^{451}\) Central to Barthes’s whole theory of photography, in other words, is what he calls the Photograph’s “affective intentionality,”\(^{452}\) the eclipse of meaning by a photo’s affective intensity. Except Barthes did not write of an eclipse. Famously, he wrote of a photo’s *studium* and *punctum*.

A photo’s *studium* is its nameable meaning, the ways its cultural context draws a spectator to notice and take a modicum of pleasure from it. A photo’s *studium* enlists a spectator’s passive but conscious cooperation in receiving its cultural meaning, as if being educated by faces, figures, gestures, and settings that are already known in advance. By contrast, a photo’s *punctum* punctuates the *studium*; it “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”\(^{453}\) The *punctum* provides a photo’s personal poignancy, as if by accident. “It is,” Barthes writes, “an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there.”\(^{454}\) Although the concepts of a photo’s *studium* and *punctum* have been the largest critical legacy of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes’s desire to retain the “affective intentionality” of photographs is the more essential point. It is, in a way, what makes the very idea of a *studium* and *punctum* viable. “Indeed,” write Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu, “the concept of the punctum is best understood not only as a way of contrasting the subjective

\(^{452}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{453}\) Ibid., 26.
\(^{454}\) Ibid., 55.
dimensions of an image with the objective dimensions associated with the *studium*, a now familiar opposition. Rather, the punctum is a powerful concept because it, in fact, introduces a theory of feeling photography.”455 Theories of “feeling photography,” to use Brown and Phu’s phrase, have become still more prevalent as scholars across disciplines have, as we’ve seen, turned to affect in their work.

Not all such work, it must be noted, distinguishes affect, feeling, and emotion in the way I argued is important in Chapter One. The information theorist Tiziana Terranova, however, tracks especially well with the tradition of affect theory I have been following. Terranova suggests that the power of images for the public masses has very little to do with what images represent or mean: “What is important of an image, in fact, is not simply what it indexes – that is, to what social and cultural processes and significations it refers. What seems to matter is the kind of affect that it packs, the movements that it receives, inhibits and/or transmits.”456 The position jibes well with Jodi Dean’s observation that public communication today consists in contributions rather than messages. And it is undoubtedly for that reason that Dean’s theory of “affective networks”—a close equivalent to my affective ecologies—shows explicit traces of Terranova’s thinking.457 The public sharing of images can act as the visual equivalent of phatic expression: a form of social interaction guided less by the transmission of information or any dialogic process of inquiry than by the performance of autotelic ritual

---

affinities. Images may well argue, that is, but their more primary quality is to \textit{infect}. They are, Terranova says, \textit{bioweapons}, and they infect, or fail to, with vital immediacy.  

Of course, the infectious quality of images is what gives them such great power—and potential danger. This is particularly true when thinking about the public as a democratic counterbalance against state authority. The traditional promise of the public sphere, after all, has been the communicative achievement of consensus, through enlightenment rationality, so viably to hold the state accountable to a legitimated public opinion. The totalitarian catastrophes of the twentieth century, however, reveal that the capacity of what we now call “old media” to manipulate the mass through spin and propaganda, often in the form of images, proves communication to be susceptible to corruption by private interests or the ideological agendas of the empowered. This corruption has not been limited to totalitarian states, but increasingly can be identified in liberal capitalism’s legal personification of corporate entities, which manifests in similarly despotic, if competing, corporate agendas to control market interests over the social interests of the people.

It was the great millennial hope of “new media” to countervail this corruption by distributing the producers of media content beyond the control of powerful conglomerates and putting it into the hands of the people. If this was not a false hope, it has, at least, yet to be fulfilled. Google’s mapping and Street View projects remind us, as Foucault and others have insisted, that the power to see is also a mechanism of disciplinary control. Such power is often wielded by the state and, increasingly, by

\footnote{458 The analogy of \textit{infection} recalls Teresa Brennan’s insight, discussed in Chapter One, that affects are \textit{contagious} in their social transmission. Neither Terranova nor Brennan, whose books were published in the same year (2004), cite one another on this similarity.}
corporations like Google. If GSV has organized a public capable of countervailing the powers that be, it has done so through the creative and curatorial acts of citizen artists whose “GSV Hacks” (as I will, with some misgivings, characterize the assortment of artistic practices surrounding GSV) attempt publically to make visible the very making visible of public space through surveillance.

A robust assortment of creative and curatorial activity surrounds Google Street View and, more generally, Google’s mapping technology. These activities operate in several realms, here under the name of art, there as vernacular performances, sometimes as hybrid operations dissembling a clever admixture of citizen journalism, protest, or civic disruption. Collectively, though, these hacks disclose what it might look like to understand a public sphere being constituted through the affective ecology of its images as opposed to its discourse. The reflexive, if only tenuously associated “public sphere” emergent around Google Street View and its associated hacks, however, is not merely a public that it is possible, using Finnegan and Kang’s language, “to sight.” What I hope to show are three iterations of reflexive publics, each intent upon troubling the convergence of publicness and privateness as a consequence of geographical media that make sighting, sitting, and citing publics interchangeable counterparts, thus calling attention to their own ocular constitution.

**Sighting the Public**

In 2011, to widespread disapproval, a German photographer named Michael Wolf received honorable mention for the prestigious World Press Photo Award. It wasn’t that Wolf’s collection, “A Series of Unfortunate Events,” was aesthetically underserving, at least not exactly (Fig. 15). The controversy arose from its consisting entirely of photos
that Wolf had taken of someone else’s photos. And not just someone’s. The images came from Google Street View: compelling scenes that Wolf had found in the GSV archive, carefully curated, and then photographed, as the World Press Photo Award site puts it, “by placing a tripod on a camera in front of a computer screen in Paris.”

Figure 2: A Photo from Michael Wolf's collection, "A Series of Unfortunate Events."

Mishka Henner, a Belgian photographer based in Manchester, England has received recognition for similar work, with similar controversy. His 2012 exhibition, “No Man’s Land,” was a finalist for the 2013 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize and its £30,000 purse. Though he, like Wolf, didn’t win the award, being recognized as a finalist for a top international honor brought public attention to questions about the nature of photography and authorship. Henner’s photos in “No Man’s Land” had also been curated from the GSV archive, but his were taken using screenshots, which only reinforced

459 World Press Photo, “2011 Photo Contest.”
arguments that he had not authored the photos at all (Fig. 16). In interviews, Henner responded to such claims by emphasizing that photos are always *taken*: “I think the verb ‘taking pictures’ is an interesting one,” he said. “If I am walking around with a camera, I am taking pictures. If I am looking at images, I am taking pictures.” In this case, the pictures he “took” were pictures that Google had already taken. But from whom, or from what, had Google taken them to begin with?

Figure 3: A photo from Mishka Henner’s exhibit, ”No Man's Land,” depicting prostitutes photographed by GSV while waiting for work.

---

460 Quoted in Cooper and Robson, “Do You Really Call This Art?”
The cases of Wolf and Henner, as with others doing similar work, call attention to the (in)visibility of people in public spaces. Wolf’s work sights people in the context of urban centers, where the crowd makes them invisible; Henner sights people in the context of urban outskirts, where the remoteness makes them visible. Both draw attention to ordinary people as people being seen in moments when they appear unaware they are being watched. Whether and to what extent the people depicted in Wolf and Henner’s work were aware of the GSV car passing by is impossible to say. What we can say is that the photographs curated from the GSV archive depict people in acts that typically evade the camera’s eye: a woman urinating behind a car, a man being dragged across the street, prostitutes waiting along a roadside at midday. By selecting these photographs from among what is almost literally a world of others, Wolf and Henner’s work captures the evading of evasion, it sees seeing.

One tenet of public sphere theory is that its discursive associations entail relations among strangers, the recognition of the unknown other through conversation and an intersubjective expression of identity and interest. Without strangers, a public sphere would be something different, a community perhaps, or an interest group, but it wouldn’t be a public sphere because it would not exceed one’s known associations. Google Street View takes photographs and publishes images of people who are almost always strangers to those who see their image. In fact, GSV algorithms automatically blur the visible faces of those it depicts, making everyone a stranger. Although the photos do not allow for any discursive interaction with the people they capture, by assuring the subjects remain

461 See, for instance, Doug Rickard and Jon Rafman, both of whom curate photos from the GSV archive. Rafman’s work, to my eye, is the most exciting of them all. See http://9-eyes.com/.
blurred (in what amounts to a feeble conciliation of the right to privacy), GSV photos do nevertheless orient viewers to the potential for a stranger relationality that might, in a different medium, be enacted through associations built around a more common purpose.

Google Street View photos all follow a uniform aesthetic; they are all shot at roughly the same height, focused at roughly the same middle distance, taken in the same slightly washed out color palette. This uniformity, coupled with the camera’s apparent indifference to its subjects, lends an illusion of naturalism to the images—an illusion that has been associated with photography since its outset. Cara Finnegan has argued, for instance, that the illusion of photographic naturalism is so prevalent that it acts as a visual enthymeme in all photography, helping photographs to argue without needing to demonstrate their transparency, their lack of artifice. Because the Street View program endeavors such a ubiquitous range of coverage, and because of the automated nature of its photography (every shot is taken without a human deciding in each instance what to shoot and what not), GSV images elicit a particularly strong faith in their naturalism, which can make it hard to see them as arguments for anything. Instead, we tend see these photos as surveillance, as documentation, but not as statements or arguments, and still less as art.

The brilliance of Wolf and Henner is to take these photos outside their context of surveillance and show them as things being surveilled themselves. Sometimes beautiful things. Or just bizarre. Or lonely. Or any number of highly poignant, even haunting scenes. But their work does not turn the camera on the cameras. Their projects are not best read as critiques of surveillance. What they’re doing is not something easily read at

---

all; they are sighting public moods, passing moments, helping to see the unseeable being seen going unseen. Although it may appear that Wolf and Henner are up to the same agenda, or at least doing things the same way, that is, by curating GSV photos and presenting the results as a series for public attention, each rather achieves their ends quite differently, and that difference is important for the kinds of public attunement they cultivate.

The most challenging thing about Wolf’s photos is that they’re photos. He actually took pictures, with his camera, of the images pulled up on his computer screen from the GSV archive. In a photojournalistic sense, then, the photographs are documents of a particular time and place, in Paris, when and where Wolf had been using his computer. They are evidence that an image on a computer screen, depicting whatever it is it depicted (in Paris or not), had been seen in that time and place. Wolf’s photos, in other words, are not indistinguishable from the GSV photos; they are not merely curated appropriations of the GSV photographs, re-presented in a context of his making. In a literal and important way, Wolf’s pictures are documentary photographs of an everyday, private world (his own), and what they document is his “sighting” of the GSV interface as an access point to see public space and its people going about their quotidian business within it (Fig. 17).
Henner’s photos may also be culled from GSV, but the method is different. Unlike Wolf, who browsed the GSV archive casually until finding images of particular resonance for him—images with a punctum—Henner went looking for images of a particular subject matter. His “No Man’s Land” collection deliberately seeks to show people in interstitial spaces, on the outskirts, literally marginalized (Fig. 18). And not just any people: his photos specifically show prostitutes that GSV captured while they were waiting at their street-side posts soliciting work. To find the images, Henner visited prurient web forums to learn where sex workers could be found in places other than urban centers. Then Google’s maps led him right to them: photographs from GSV depicting the women, usually alone, vulnerable, bored, and suggestive.

Also unlike Wolf, though, in curating the photos for his series, Henner didn’t photograph the screen of his computer. He took a screenshot of the GSV interface itself,
making it more appropriate to call the photos in his collection *reproductions* of the GSV images, rather than *representations* of them. As a result, the images are not vernacular in quite the same way as Wolf’s. They certainly depict scenes from everyday life, scenes otherwise not typically captured; but, as Henner invites us to see them, the images are institutional. They come from Google’s documentary lens, and this is what gives them their power: the Google camera’s utter indifference to their plight, and its almost eerie capture of these women’s bored industriousness, their conspicuous invisibility.

![Figure 5: An image from Henner's "No Man's Land"](image)

**Siting The Public**

In addition to “sighting” the public through curatorial acts like Wolf’s and Henner’s, others are “siting” the public in creative ways. For his “Map” project, which
ran from 2006 through 2013, Aram Barthall created public installations in cities throughout Europe and Asia. Each consisted in the erection of a towering red “map pin” in the precise geographical location that, by Google’s measure, marks a city’s center (Fig. 19). Virtual versions of these pins, 20 pixels in size, are familiar to anyone who has used the Google Map interface. We see them on screens as the teardrop-shaped index used to pinpoint specific places on a virtual map. Barthall constructed his map pins from wood boards, beams, and paint, with the dimensions calculated carefully, so that, as he explains, “the size of the life size red marker in physical space corresponds to the size of a marker in the web interface in maximal zoom factor of the map.”463 The upshot is what amounts to both a visual allusion and illusion. On the ground, to pedestrians encountering the life size red marker, it acts as a sculpture, alluding to the pins on Google Maps. On Google maps, the photographic capture of the pin creates the illusion of its being a digital signpost, not an artifact in the material world.

Figure 19: Aram Barthall's Map Project, ground level view

---

463 Barthall, “Map. Public Installation.”
The project illustrates one of the more compelling attempts to “culture jam” Google and its mapping enterprise. Culture jamming, as Christine Harold describes the practice, is a strategy of rhetorical protest that “usually implies an interruption, a sabotage, hoax, prank, banditry, or blockage of what are seen as the monolithic power structures governing cultural life.” Examples of culture jamming range from changing the text on a corporate logo to modifying street signs and storefronts. Culture jamming is a challenge to what Hariman and Lucaities noticed as the ability of images to naturalize ideology. In that sense, culture jams complicate the uncomplicated, add friction to the frictionless, bring noise into the signal. Barthall’s “Map” project works as a culture jam because it uses Google’s own language of the red pin to play upon the ways the images on Google’s maps are used as a cultural practice in everyday life.

In person, Barthall’s pin sculptures are massive “You Are Here” reminders, a kind of existential wayfinder that, by gesturing toward an absent virtual space with the allusive pin, take us away from the public screen and drop us back into what Auden called “the real world of theology and horses.” The pin sculptures, however, are not erected in any place of obvious significance. To pedestrians passing by, they therefore mark the location with a salience it wouldn’t otherwise have. Yet, Barthall chooses the locations based upon the precise GPS coordinates that Google identifies as the geographical center of a city. In a virtual interface, where mapping technologies make it possible to pan in and out, it is easier to gain an overhead perspective that may make such a “center” seem more central than it would in person. By locating and marking the supposed city center in

---

actual space, though, Barthall sites a public place that seems worthy of no special notice. At the same time, however, the pins also bear the letter A in large black print, making them, in Google’s mapping language, starting positions on a route toward some distant Pin B, unseeable from ground level. In turn, the sites Barthall chooses for his pins both gain salience from being pinned and lose that salience, as the pins mark the place not of a location to reach but a place to leave from.

One feature of the public sphere that I’ve suggested is particularly important today is their virtuality, not just in the sense that they’ve gone online, but in the phenomenological sense that they cannot be perceived en toto except as virtual forms we presume to be constituted elsewhere. Google mapping and Street View technologies visualize the elsewhere of the world: not public spheres as such, but public space and, in the case of Street View, public citizens. The ability in digital interfaces to pan in and out gives us a perspective on space that we cannot have when im mediately embodied on the ground. Barthall’s pins “site” the public inasmuch as they remind us of its virtuality, its being also elsewhere, though we cannot see it from within the way we could when panning out to see the bigger picture from overhead online (Fig. 20).

Figure 20: Aram Barthall's Map Project, aerial view
But the “Map” project also changes the online encounter, “jamming” the presumed naturalism of Google’s maps with a pin endemic not to virtual space, where we’re accustomed to supposing it belongs, but one actually existing in the physical world. In doing so, unknowing users of Google’s mapping suite are likely to suppose the program has a glitch; it has planted a pin somewhere you’ve not commanded one to be. Ironically, this has the potential consequence of raising some skepticism about the naturalism of Google maps, though it does so only because Google’s mapping satellites and Street View cars are able to achieve a kind of naturalism, that is, able to photograph Barthall’s physical pin in its “natural” setting.

To site the public in this way is not to locate “a public,” still less publicness as such. But it does pinpoint a new relationship between public and private that our mediated and mobile environments make possible through locative media technologies. Recalling Google’s description of Street View as enabling armchair tourism, Barthall’s project also accomplishes the real thing, marking places as sites to be seen by the passing flaneur and motorist alike. Considering that the context of our movement through public spaces is now so often mediated through mobile technologies that we carry or wear, some have suggested the flaneur is an obsolete public character, replaced instead by the phoneur, whose passage through public space is traced and mediated by locative technologies that give access to, among other things, Google’s mapping services. It is in a world where the phoneur exists that Barthall is trying to site publicness as more than a digital overlay of informational and corporate cartography. The idea of toggling between public and private space no longer holds when our private and personal

---

engagement with digital environments (on the screen of a phone, for instance) occurs in public space and acts as an overlay upon that space. Adding the “texture” Eve Sedgwick described as the affective essence of sociality, Barthall’s project resituates the fraught experience of public/private intermangling.

Citing the Public

In addition to public sighting and siting, others have “cited” the public by performing *tableaux vivant* for passing GSV vehicles. Two men in Edinburgh, for instance, staged a faux murder scene on a street corner, which Google photographed and uploaded to Street View, leading to a tail-chasing police investigation in June 2014 (Fig. 21).467 And in Pittsburgh, in 2008, the artists Ben Kinsley and Robin Hewlett organized a whole neighborhood of Northside residents to perform a series of tableaux for a GSV vehicle photographing Sampsonia Way. The resultant “Street With a View” performance included a parade (replete with balcony-tossed confetti and a marching band in full regalia), a pack of marathon runners, a garage band practicing, a cupid figure firing a string “laser” that apparently made anyone it touched fall in love, and a mock-up seventeenth-century sword fight.468 Even the Google staff has created similar tableaux, lining the sidewalks outside their Dublin headquarters, some in costumes, others holding signs, for the passing GSV cameras.469

---

467 For more, see Carter, “Police Called.”
468 For more, see Kinsley, “Street With a View (2008).”
469 For more, see Scott, “Google Ireland’s Dublin Staff.”
The significance of cultural jams like the *tableaux vivant* is to cite public citizens as active producers of their world, not just as passive subjects for the photographic lens. “Citing” is apropos not just as a clever third term in a homonymic trio. To cite here means to give credit, to direct attention toward a responsible agent whose actions are of consequence for others and need recognition accordingly. More than just send-ups or hoaxes, in other words, the projects that “cite” the public, I think, are undertaking the serious business of refusing to let the pictorial representation of everyday life’s quotidian public moments give the impression of public inactivity. Though the faked murder scene in Edinburgh and the festival of activities in the Pittsburgh tableaux decidedly were not—and should not be taken to be—instances of public activism or overt political purpose, they do create an affective experience of the fears and joys, kicks and frustrations of being a citizen of the world today.
Among the more interesting aspects of this third group of GSV hacks is the trope of their fakeness. These are performances all. For the *tableaux vivant* in Edinburgh and Pittsburgh, this is self-consciously the case. The actors are playing at being public actors before the audience of a passing vehicle they know in advance will publicize their performance in a context that will pass it off as ordinary, that is, as not a performance at all. There is no need to try forcing some political motive onto performances that are, above all, just for fun. To the contrary, the just-for-fun ethos of these performances is what gives them such affective resonance. These performances are not *only* hoaxes, in other words. They are also aesthetic actuations of affects that can’t be represented because they only emerge in the experience of the performance that brings them about, an experience that may be a prank, but at once gives rise to a recessive orientation toward public engagement. Even if they are “pointless” or trivial, they constitute a form of public subjectivity nonetheless, and despite its recessive mode, they contribute to the affective ecology without which more obviously discursive and deliberative forms of public participation would be impossible.

The fakeness of the tableaux in the two burghs emerges from very different dispositions, each nevertheless expressive of a mood or sensibility vis-à-vis what sort of public image would, to follow Barthes, most rise from the scene and shoot out of it like an arrow. The murder scene in its hard, midday light, the victim laid out flat on the street, the culprit holding a hammer and staring toward the car in guilt, performs a different set of moods than the confettied parade and marching band, the marathon runners and people leaning out of balconies. The former expresses all the attendant despair and desperation of the crime, the latter all the delight and absolution of the revel (Fig. 22).
When photographed and displayed as an image on Google Street View, each can be read as an example of the permeable border between Gumbrecht’s presence and meaning effects. The fakeness of the performance, once reified as an image, gives way to the reality of Street View’s ostensible naturalism. These performances did happen in this time and this place; displayed on Street View, their status as “fake” performances becomes ambiguous. The performers who staged the tableaux become something other than performers: they get cited as creators of a public life that is not their own except for what is gained in their performance of it. As Auden wrote of poetry, this life survives in the valley of its making, where executives would never want to tamper: a way of happening, a mouth.
Sighting, Siting, Citing

None of these examples quite reveal a robust public sphere brought together through discussion. Certainly discursive attention has circulated around these assorted creative acts, mostly online, in various “but is it art?” debates about Wolf and Henner, in blogs and art world literature about Barthall, and in the popular press, where the *tableaux vivant* have raised attention for taxing the police force and for their clever novelty. In terms of a communicative ecology, though, the discussion around these GSV hacks cannot account for how citizen artists and critics have through these projects contributed to an affective ecology that saturates more legible versions of a cultural public sphere.

These cases illustrate, yet again, a reflexive public whose affectability holds it together as much as its discourse. The recessive public subjectivity of those involved here make it harder to identify a public sphere in its traditional form. If the claims of Finnegan and Klang, Deluca and Peeples, Jeffrey Green and others are right, though, then images do accrue the sorts of attention that constitute a mode of publicness, and the curatorial and artistic activity around Google’s Street View images constitutes another form of such attention. In each of the three examples—sighting, siting, and citing—the attention being exerted, however, concerns an issue about public life and what its everydayness actually entails. In this sense, I think the case belongs within yet another of reflexive publics oriented around questions about how it feels to be a public as much as questions about how it feels to be in public.
Looking in Perfect Silence at the Stars

Nothing enchants like the sky at night. Given the right mood, anyone can be so affected. For most of us, residing in areas populated with others, when we look at the night sky in our everyday lives we see it through our city’s ambient light. It’s only when we take the state highway out, when we bump down the country road and walk the unlit trail, in short, when we escape the light pollution’s dome, that we see the night sky more unconcealed. And then, like the refrigerator that stops its hum, announcing its presence by ceasing to announce its presence, by absence we become aware of what we’ve been influenced by without having realized it had been an influence at all. As you prepare to leave these pages, it is time to ask, What is it this study has unconcealed that we were unable to realize before?

By investigating some contemporary intersections of art and public discourse, I have cast my gaze upon the cultural public sphere, trying to educe some insights about the ways, in a world where the digital has attained such consequence, that people are now orienting themselves toward the aesthetic in public efforts to build the lives they desire. In doing so, I have tried deliberately to avoid both discussions of the aesthetic and of the discourse surrounding it. If this curious endeavor has been successful, then it is because its many provocations and speculations have introduced a new framework for thinking and feeling about concepts that, though not entirely new to human experience, are today more urgent than ever.
This framework yields three important functions. First, it refines our vocabulary for understanding how our sociality holds together rhetorically in a time of radical contingency and pervading uncertainty. Second, it expands the rhetorical by unearthing what’s beneath it: an affective counterpart that, by capacitating rhetoric’s potential for salience, exerts a rhetorical influence itself. Third, and finally, this framework opens an unlit trail toward a critical practice of unconcealing those ambient and affective influences to which we are always susceptible yet seldom disposed to perceive. As a way of ending, then, let me say more about these three takeaways and what they now enable us to do—whether as scholars or as laypersons, striving like so many others to create the kind of world we want to feel like we live in.

Rhetoric’s Affects, Affect’s Rhetorics

Rhetorical sociality is the name for that interminable complex of influences that are an inevitable consequence of being emplaced in a cultured world. In some ways the phrase is redundant: rhetoric tends always toward the social, and the social is always rhetorical. Pairing the rhetorical with sociality is intended to articulate their irreducible relationship. Constantly, we are producing and responding to ambient influences around us, only the most obvious of which are exerted deliberately by human agents in the form of symbolic action—words, signs, representations, and so forth. Unmistakably, such influences are pervasive: in the clatter of headlines, tickers, podcasts, Tweets, emails, ads, monuments, TV shows, artworks, texts and talk galore.

Self-persuasion or internal rhetorics might seem to be the exception here. We reason with ourselves as much as we reason with others. Yet, as Isocrates observed, our internal self-persuasion trains us for our persuasion with others. Rhetoric cultivates “reflective practitioners” ultimately always in service of social engagement with others.
These influences need not be strategically waged or motivated by sinister ends, though they certainly can be and often are. Rhetoricity is an intrinsic property of all symbolic action. And most often, of course, it is precisely these symbolic influences that we would identify, if we bothered to think about it, as the predominant guides to how we make sense of our world. Whatever we know or feel about the latest act of terrorism abroad, for instance, is likely to derive largely from hearing, reading, or talking about it, whether through the news or entertainment media, intimate or stranger relations, online or otherwise. While we may ultimately follow the guide of our own compass in forming our beliefs and acting, that compass’s needle is pulled by the magnetism of these more traditionally rhetorical influences around us. We can’t help it.

And yet, alongside the ways that communication symbolically draws us to understand and adapt to aspects of our world in particular ways, we are also susceptible to unrepresentable, pre-symbolic factors that—no less rhetorically but far less consciously—have influence in ways that dispose us toward those more traditionally rhetorical forms of communicative persuasion, making its meanings possible by delimiting the legible. These pre-symbolic factors are the affects that hold people and things together in vectors of relationality, orientations of towardness and awayness in Ahmed’s language, which are impervious to representation, though we can experience them in fleeting tinges, momentary glisks, intensities that encounters with art are particularly successful at making present. When affects attain some duration, when the ambient but material conditions of their becoming present—and not just the salience or meaning they capacitate—serve as a sustained impetus for a collective orientation toward
matters of consequence for many, then public spheres emerge wielding a unique self-sufficiency.

The self-sufficiency of these public spheres contributes to making them reflexive publics: relations among strangers held together by a shared desire to recognize in the present moment a possible “space of transformative investment.”\textsuperscript{471} This hope for transformation, however, is more than an agenda, presented in the form of public opinion, for those with the power to reify; and it is more, too, than an investment deferred to a future by striving to be in an environment in which our striving could one day be overcome. The space of transformative investments that reflexive publics strive to make possible may well be directed toward actuating social change through advocacy for a cause or purpose, but they also build a space for that investment in the present by creating in practice the very world in which it is possible to invest without loss. The former manifests in communication that is meant to persuade and is directed toward an end; the latter involves an ongoing affectability that is always still in process and serves as its own reward.

Inasmuch as both are part of the rhetorical sociality that is immanent to all encultured experience, I have been arguing that our rhetorical sociality consists in two rhetorical orders: communicative ecologies and affective ecologies. Affective ecologies encompass rhetorics of the first order because they are what make it possible for communicative ecologies, and their second order rhetorics, to countenance any meaning. This formulation is a major reversal of a line of thought that goes as far back as the pre-

\textsuperscript{471} I am indebted to Lauren Berlant for this phrase, as we and others discussed it on July 22, 2014, at Northwestern University’s Summer Institute in Rhetoric and Public Culture, the subject of which was “Rhetoric, Politics, and Affect.”
Socratic sophists: namely, that perceived meaning and truth are produced through rhetorical dexterity, and not, as I’m suggesting, that there are also “preoriginary” factors responsible for producing the very capacity for the rhetorical production of meaning in the first place. In other words, what has seemed like rhetoric’s first order is better regarded as its second. While both orders are rhetorical, it is the affective that makes the communicative’s salience possible. This notion, smacking of paradox, has been at the center of this study: if affect precedes rhetoric, how can it also be rhetorical? We are now in a position better to see, like the stars unconcealed, how this might be so.

There are of course many ways to define and understand rhetoric, each of which might lead to a different answer. Given the practical wisdom undergirding the very foundation of the rhetorical tradition’s origins in ancient Greek politics and culture, the best such ways are more interested in what rhetoric does than what it is. And rhetoric does a lot of things. Most fundamentally, though, certainly as I have been thinking about it here, rhetoric makes things matter in influential ways. A long and fruitful tradition of study has attended, and continues valuably to attend, to how it does so through discourse in just about any context imaginable. Meanwhile, efforts to attend to how rhetoric makes things matter beyond discourse and meaning, specifically through affects, have been less conspicuous, to put it mildly. And understandably so—to a degree. Such efforts are all too easily stymied before they even begin by the obdurate problem of affects being unrepresentable. I have tried to surmount that problem by following an inquiry cast as speculative from the start, but this has left me tempted at times to peel the stickers off the Rubik’s Cube and replace them where it would be more convenient for them to belong.
Is affect a condition for rhetoric or is it a rhetoric? I am led to the conclusion that it is both one and the other provided we are willing to tinker with traditional conceptions of the rhetorical. What I have called second order rhetorics are not necessarily designed by intent, but they are marked by agency and performance: the good man speaking well, to follow Quintilian (who follows Cato). First-order rhetorics exhibit different properties, but what they do remains the same. Affect, that is, exercises influence; it makes things matter, maybe not in an artful way, maybe not in a way that’s purposive, but it has an influence in a real and consequential way. What it doesn’t have is a unitary agent, and what it doesn’t offer is a performance, except by metaphor. Affects are moods that don’t belong to us enough to quite be called moods; they’re not our own, but rather the ineffable form of relationality between bodies, orienting one to another so that this relation strives toward becoming something sustainable, something of which sense can be made.

Astronomers tell us that a planet can only be weighed if another planet moves near it. Affects operate rhetorically in a similar way. As planets are measured by their effect on other objects, what can be known of affective ecologies is known through the coming together of different relations, each of which transmit orientations toward being in the world that “stick” or don’t. I have argued that in the affective ecology of late liberalism’s\textsuperscript{472} technoculture, one of the stickiest relations is identifiable in the paired trends of creativity’s democratization and culture’s curation. We have never been more accountable for building our own commonwealth, and never labored so much to partition it in service of uncommonwealth. As Jodi Dean has put it so perfectly, “We are

\textsuperscript{472} For an explanation of why “late liberalism” is an appropriate term to describe our historical present, see Povinelli, \textit{Economies of Abandonment}, 25-29.
configuring the worlds we inhabit, yet they are ever less what we desire but haven’t reached and ever more what we cannot escape yet still enjoy.473

Thinking affectively ecologically attunes us to the interstitiality of being suspended in such an impasse.474 Doing so opens up a critical practice that, as I’ve tried to show, offers a new vantage on our rhetorical sociality, particularly on our investments in the cultural public sphere. A subtext running throughout this dissertation has been its tacit endeavors of a study in method, in how, if affects are unrepresentable, their analysis can possibly give way to a productive mode of critical engagement. The post-hermeneutic rhetorical criticism I have tried to practice, inspired by Gumbrecht and Kittler, is not one that would initially appear to offer much benefit for the study of publicness, particularly given that publics hold together most empirically from the discursive associations around and through which their shared sense of salience develops. Positing a framework that takes rhetorical sociality to be comprised of two rhetorical orders, however, enables us also to understand publicness in a different, affective register, and to think about the ways, beyond what meaning conveys, that people endeavor together to reconfigure sustainable public worlds.

The three cases discussed in Part Three illustrate both the framework and method I have been trying to develop. Each is an example of a reflexive public in process, people trying publicly and in common, though in different ways and with different goals, to create a space of transformative investment so that it might be possible to thrive within a

---

474 Lauren Berlant has called this impasse a relation of cruel optimism, a state in which what we desire is what impedes our flourishing. “It might involve food, or a kind of love;” she explains, “it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project” (*Cruel Optimism*, 1).
historical present that asks us to enact our citizenship through creative and curatorial acts that, while ostensibly participative and constructive of the commonwealth, in actuality only further entrench a cultural logic that impedes real transformation. Each case consists in people exhibiting a different mode of public subjectivity in a cultural public sphere. Each makes evident the superposition of the two orders of our rhetorical sociality. Each demonstrates in some way the consequences of creativity’s democratization and the curation of culture. And each takes place in different realms of social experience: one in cyberspace, one not, and one that troubles the difference.

Maybe most of all, the three cases indicate that the cultural public sphere is not just a site for the apolitical engagement of strangers occasioned by art. Conditions are now such that cultural public spheres may rather be the most fecund sites for political action addressed to power, including corporations and the state alike. The incendiary controversy on Goodreads concerned the ethos conundrum that is encoded materially in the rhetorical technicity of the site and throughout the affective ecology of curatorial media at large. In a flat mode of publicness, those involved struggled to assert a sustainable relationship between the promotional activity of citizen artists and the curatorial activity of citizen critics. The protests over library closures in England concerned the importance of being legitimately included as citizens able, with predetermined loss, to assert their desires as a public. In a forward mode of publicness, the people of Brent leveraged the affective register of vernacular rhetorics to suspend the loss of a prized and locally indispensable institution with a transformative investment in its sustainability. And, as Google sends its surveilling cameras everywhere, artists, makers, and culture jammers have tried to disrupt the roving eye of corporate technology.
Through recessive modes of publicness, these people sighted, sited, and cited different possibilities for public life in its public spaces. All three cases exemplify some ways that affective ecologies operate in tandem with communicative ones.

**Shortcomings and Future Directions**

Readers would gravely misunderstand me if they come away thinking I have suggested that communication is not essential to the public sphere. Talk, conversation, symbolic action, the whole range of discursive practices where meaning traffics and signification registers its salience, in short, rhetoric’s traditional purview has been, still is, and will remain the constitutive essence of all public spheres, even as our forms of public subjectivity become more recessive and participation means addressing global, networked audiences, sometimes as if into a digital vacuum. Nevertheless, throughout these pages I have, quite deliberately, *avoided* public discourse in my effort to think about rhetorical sociality, in the cultural public sphere particularly, as having an affective register in addition to its more legible communicative one. By positing an affective ecology in superposition with such a sphere’s communicative ecology, I have tried to show that there is more to the public sphere than just its signifying discursive practices. More than argumentation. More than discursive norms. More than critical judgment, consensus, or public opinion. There is more, in short, than what the mainstream of rhetorical thinking about publicness has heretofore given us to recognize.

Even in a study of book-length, however, it is necessary to make tough decisions about which subjects can be broached and which can’t. I have not said all that I would like, and in some cases probably said more than I should. Among the most regrettable
shortcomings that result from my choice in omissions are an under-theorization of discourse and symbolicity, of materiality, and a thin treatment of how aesthetics and politics intersect. Better articulating the arguments I’ve made with a discussion of neoliberalism would also have been worthwhile, and was something I endeavored in earlier drafts of the manuscript, although these and other topics, I decided, ultimately would have taken the focus too far afield. There’s more work to be done.

The arguments that have found their place in these pages also give rise to some implications that have not. The distributed agency in affective ecologies, for instance, calls for a rethinking of rhetorical agency that has not been endeavored here. Although my inquiries have been amenable to new materialist thought and more object-oriented ontologies, I have neither tried to develop my own understanding of how humans and non-humans alike might be imagined as agents or actants, nor tried overtly to enter conversations with the thinking of those who have done so. Doing more with the key concepts of lifeworld and sensus communis, rather than merely relegating them to a footnote in Chapter Two, would also be generative. And, finally, but almost certainly not exhaustively, dealing more deeply with the idea of building the commonwealth would also be worthwhile. Although in Chapter Four I discussed Harry Boyte’s idea that building the commonwealth is a way of enacting democratic citizenship, better troubling what that means, and what it means today in particular, might better clarify the importance of the concept to my argument.

There are also, inevitably, various holes in the literature I’ve drawn upon to forward my claims. Two glaring absences stand out. Given the nature of my topic, I could not escape having to pass through the work of Heidegger and of Deleuze and Guattari.
While I have gestured toward these philosophers here, a desire to do justice to the complexity of their work has urged me away. Both thinkers (and here I am pairing Deleuze with Guattari as a unitary team, despite the complex work each has produced on his own), have developed such broad and encompassing theories, each part articulated with another, that to remove some key ideas without contextualizing their place within the larger scheme would both do a disservice to these ideas and be unfair to my readers. It is of little help to quote Heidegger on Befindlichkeit and, satisfied at that, leave an author/date parenthetical citation.

When I began this project, moreover, I was not acquainted enough with the work of Heidegger or of Deleuze and Guattari to incorporate their thought into my own. They have not, in other words, been major (conscious) influences for me to date, though I have come to recognize in their work some ideas that resemble and predate those that I arrived at (far less developed) independently. Perhaps their influence has been more affectively impactful than I could know, the way the literary critic Sven Birkerts has written of Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow that, “the book exerts its influence even on those who have never read it.”475 So while I have, inevitably it now seems, as my writing progressed had to become familiar with some touchstones from Heidegger and Deleuze and Guattari that bear directly on my project, lacking the breadth to articulate how these more isolated points of relevance fit within their entire oeuvre—to say nothing about cultivating the depth of a specialist on these difficult thinkers—I have chosen to leave Heidegger and Deleuze and Guattari mostly offstage. They deserve to be leading figures or play little role at all.

Conversely, some readers may note with dismay the diversity of those literatures that do appear here. Having drawn upon insights from rhetorical theory, sociology, art history, cultural studies, political science, media studies, and more, this project may be vulnerable to accusations of dilettantism. As I have said from the start, though, why would we not bring all our available knowledge to bear on our most challenging inquiries, and this one especially? The cultural public sphere, after all, is a subject of inherently interdisciplinary range. And affect’s permeability has an even more transdisciplinary character. To confine the study of either strictly to a single academic framework would miss the point of their encompassing importance to the felt reality of being alive today. And in the end, that may be the subtle undercurrent that has run throughout this dissertation: not just affects, but feelings, a strange sense, call it a tingle, that something feels different about living today. Let me send you off by saying a little more.

The Drunkenness of Things Being Various

*What does it feel like to be alive today?* Granting that any potential answer will depend upon what one supposes it means to feel, or to be alive, or how one conceptualizes today, the possibilities are as plural as they are personal. It would be preposterous to attempt a definitive answer, and least of all in the few pages that remain. Not everyone lives in the same present. The cultural public sphere, by intermangling different people and tastes and aesthetic expressions and modes of publicness, puts our affective orientations to the historical present in constant states of ongoing juxtaposition. So, while the historical present may not be the same for everyone, the cultural public
sphere at least actuates experiences of the affective remainder that results from these differences being brought together.

In 1962, the same year Habermas published *Strukturwandel*, his seminal book on the bourgeois public sphere, the British-American poet W.H. Auden published an article in the *Massachusetts Review* called “The Poet and the City.” There’s no indication that Auden was then aware of Habermas, who had just finished graduate school and been appointed to his first professorship in Heidelberg. But Auden’s essay shares some affinities with Habermas’s thesis about the attenuation of the public sphere under conditions of mid-twentieth-century consumerism and mass media. For Auden, a shift in the modern “*Weltanschauung*” is his equivalent of the “structural transformations” that Habermas charts more comprehensively. (“*Weltanschauung*” never once appears in Habermas’s original German.) Whereas Habermas, however, was concerned with those circumstances that inhibited public discourse as a form of political agency, Auden identified those circumstances that inhibited artists from pursuing their vocations. He identifies four aspects of this shift that made it particularly difficult, by 1962, for artists to carry on producing salient work.

First, “The loss of belief in the eternity of the physical universe.”476 Auden argued, if developments in science show the universe as a constantly changing process, as something that is not everlasting, then artists who once believed they could make an enduring artistic creation no longer have a natural model of endurance to follow. The search for artistic perfection and permanence hence starts to seem like a waste of time. As a consequence, poetry, say, could either take a whimsical, inconsequential attitude toward

476 Auden, “The Poet and the City,” 78.
its own significance, embracing the ludic frivolity of the postmodern, or else lose all sense of its own import and permanence.

Second, “The loss of belief in the significance and reality of sensory phenomena.” 477 Auden next observed that people no longer trust the relation between the subjective faith of their senses and the objective reality of the world. We have come to believe, he suggests (in true Sophist fashion), that there is no such thing as one real truth about the phenomenal world, only infinite spins on it. The traditional notion of art as mimesis thus disappears, Auden said, because the only truth an artist can imitate accurately or inaccurately is his own sensory perspective. While this view extols the individual subject, it obliterates any sense that an artist might bring widely shared and valuable truths to a public that, after all, is composed of atomized individual subjects whose personal beliefs and impressions are no better or worse than any artist’s.

Third, “The loss of belief in a norm of human nature which will always require the same kind of man-fabricated world to be at home in.” 478 Since the Industrial Revolution, Auden suggested, technology has changed the world so quickly that it is now impossible to imagine life just a few years into the future. Artists no longer have any assurance that what they create today will be pleasing, or even comprehensible, to people tomorrow. Prefiguring what Guy Debord, five years later, would call the “Society of the Spectacle” 479 Auden recognized the accelerated pace of modern life, with its incessant news cycles, its relentless technological “advance,” and lamented what that meant for

477 Ibid., 78.
478 Ibid., 79.
479 Debord, Society of the Spectacle.
artists who might hope to relate in a lasting way to the relevant concerns and views of a public audience.

Fourth, “The disappearance of the Public Realm as the sphere of revelatory personal deeds.” Like a good student of rhetoric, Auden contrasted ancient Greek culture with his own. In antiquity, he said, the public realm was a place for personal deeds and interpersonal interaction. In the modern world, however, public life is the place for impersonality. Consequently, the arts have lost the human subject as a person of public action. This, the most dire loss of all, means that artists have less incentive to produce their work for an indifferent public, and the public audience for art meanwhile has less tendency to be moved when the stakes of art’s appreciation are social instead of private. In other words, artists had lost any social capital in service of a larger social good. Performing good deeds in private affairs was now a morally sufficient way to live, which meant that art’s place in the greater social imaginary had become superfluous.

To some, Auden’s observations will seem as prescient today as they were when he first made them. To others, they will seem to have smacked of unsupportable nonsense from the start. I offer them as a kind of closing gesture to place in relief with your own sense of the world today. My aim is neither to take sides either way, nor to offer an updated and numbered list befitting our current day, though updates could viably be made. What Auden’s dictums presume, albeit through a different language, is the existence of an entangled relationship between art, public life, and our affective orientations to the historical present, each influencing the other. That relationship is

---

480 Ibid., 80.
certainly not a new one today. But thinking about how it plays out now, in the 
contemporary cultural public sphere, has been this dissertation’s aim.

I have argued that two entangled but opposing trends are at the center of public 
life, particularly vis-à-vis the arts, at this moment of late liberalism. The democratization 
of creativity and the curation of culture invite us to perform our citizenship through 
creative expression while at once to be critics and tastemakers through acts of vernacular 
curation. As both citizen artists and citizen critics proliferate, the fallacy of the pedestaled 
artist-genius and polymath gatekeeper may at last be undergoing its final, final collapse. 
Whether or not we choose to participate as such citizens, we live in a time when we have 
never been more responsible for making the world we desire. Yet, this predicament has 
not endowed us a genuine meritocracy or some clear opening of possibility through 
greater inclusivity. We also live in a time when we are ever more without the guidance of 
meaningful common referents and trustworthy authorities on which to rely and seek uplift 
from the tumult of our lives.

We are left, that is, in between. Pulled in multiple directions. Suspended in 
omnivorous hybridity. Even as our lives can feel stultified, we strive to keep them in 
process. Time will tell if convergence culture, in which old media and new become one, 
and once-authoritative gatekeepers bump elbows with vernacular voices, will remain in a 
state of perpetual hybridity, or if this convergence is only a transition, a process whose 
end is yet to be seen. But for now we are intermangled, colliding with the suddenness of 
the world and trying to press from it the excess that is not a source of our commonness.

World is suddener than we fancy it. 
World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural.\textsuperscript{481}

The state of constant becoming within an incorrigibly plural world is, like stagnant water for mosquitos, the ideal habitat of affect. It implicates everything as an “us” striving for sustainable interdependence.

Art does not get us all the way there. It was Wittgenstein’s insight that if something can’t be said, it can’t be whistled either. As I type these words, trying, like Samuel Beckett, to “fail better” at saying the unsayable, I am sitting on a high stool with no backrest. The seat encourages a more upright posture, which in turn facilitates a greater flow of my blood. There’s a pot of tea still steaming by my side, and the sun is just starting to creep in through the window. These things act upon me to create more alertness through the ambient combination of circulation/caffeine/daylight. Literally, they affect me.

But it also matters that the walls are a burnt ochre, that the floors are grimy, that others are talking. It matters that I’m tired, facing deadlines, short on money, worried about the future. A snow storm’s coming, the roads are under construction, I’m in charge of dinner tonight, and have thank you notes in need of writing. All this matters. It matters too that a microwave is whirring, that my son’s favorite word is “moon,” that North Korean families are surviving on grass, that crude oil prices have hit a certain mark and Netflix keeps recommending movies I don’t want to see. Somewhere volcanoes are overdue, and that matters. Pine beetles and wildfires matter, as does my wife’s recent haircut. It matters that autism has been linked to a gut’s microbiome, that there’s laundry to do, that our oceans are being overfished, that my bike’s tire is flat, that infant girls are

\textsuperscript{481} MacNeice, “Snow,” 116.
being dumpstered in India while de-extinction projects are trying to bring back the woolly mammoth, the passenger pigeon, frogs that give birth through their mouths.

What matters is not just *that* these and so many other things matter, or can, but that they have consequence for how we respond to the world in ways that strive to configure a desirable life within it. These consequences are not always causal or direct, still less perceivable. Our horizon always recedes as we draw toward it. Pollution makes sunsets more beautiful. You know the cliché: when we look at the stars, we are seeing the past. To see the present in a way that makes possible the creation of a sustainable future, put these pages away and realize that having been with them matters more than what they have tried to say.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bailey and Others v Brent London Borough Council, 27 May 2011,


Biesecker, Barbara A. “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of *Différance*.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22, no. 2 (1989): 110-130.


Cooper, Rob, and Steve Robson. “Do You Really Call This Art? Images of Google Streetview Prostitutes (That You Might Have Seen All Over the Web) Now Displayed in


Deleuze, Gilles. Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze. *Sur Spinoza*, 1978. Available at: https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/deleuze_spinoza_affect.pdf


Hand, Brian. “A Struggle at the Roots of the Mind: Service and Solidarity in Dialogical, Relational and Collaborative Perspectives Within Contemporary Art.” In What is


Janssen, Susanne, Giselinde Kuipers, and Marc Verboord. “Cultural Globalization and Arts Journalism: The International Orientation of Arts and Culture Coverage in Dutch,


Lunt, Peter, and Sonia Livingstone. “Media Studies’ Fascination with the Concept of the Public Sphere: Reflections and Emerging Debates.” *Media, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1, 2013: 87-96.


