

**A Larsen effect:  
Gardar Eide Einarsson and the evacuation of forms  
by Nicolas Bourriaud**

Of the theoretical clichés to be found in discourse on art at the start of the twenty-first century, those related to the idea of antagonism are among the most tenacious. The idea that art must display or represent social conflict in order to be seen as "political", and that furthermore this intention can provide a criterion of aesthetic judgement, harks back to the late nineteenth-century opposition between academic criticism and modernist criticism. The former saw Pissarro and Cézanne as "reactionary" because they did not depict working-class poverty, but rather flower gardens and country scenes; the latter considered their methods and the forms they produced as the content of their art, and, in the last analysis, a validation of its critical potential. Those who championed the allegories of academic art in the second half of the nineteenth century vaunted "the importance it accords to thinking", in other words "its passion for history, [its] assertion of patriotic, political and religious convictions, and in the end, [its] expression of social or civic ideas."<sup>1</sup> Some critics condemned Impressionism as a non-committed form of art that concentrated on portraying the Parisian bourgeoisie taking their ease, just as Stalin's USSR condemned abstract art as "reactionary" and "bourgeois". And it is a similar logic that nowadays brands Rirkrit Tiravanija as an "escapist" who reproduces patterns of leisure and entertainment<sup>2</sup>, or claims that exhibitions by him or Liam Gillick are "founded on the harmonious identification of full subjects, by comparison to the dis-identified, partial and 'antagonistic' subject position produced in certain works by Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn"<sup>3</sup>. Apart from the fact that the judgement passed on the first two is in my view ill-founded, it remains emblematic of the permanence (or the return) of the theoretical postulate that the critical and/or political dimension of a work lies in its subject rather than its formal character, its declared aims rather than its modes of production or its effects. And the idea of being "dis-identified" is hazy, to say the least. As for the suspicion that hangs over those artists who use the codes of entertainment, it obviously recalls the position adopted by Theodor Adorno, who, unlike the petty bourgeoisie of his time, felt that art should be ascetic, and life voluptuous.

If Gardar Eide Einarsson can be seen as an important figure in the artistic landscape of the early twenty-first century, it is not on account of the political positions he shares with millions of others, nor the subjects he deals with, which in themselves would be insufficient to render a piece of artistic work worthy of interest. The kind of phrase with which half of all press releases for exhibitions begin, "X's work deals with the theme of [...]", never fails to raise a smile – it might just as well be noted that Cézanne was interested in mountains and fruit. It is Einarsson's artistic project that captivates us. It could be defined in various different ways, but I would sum up his ambition as that of painting a hermeneutic fresco of "control society". By separating the object from the background, or enlarging it, downloading signs from the Internet or gleaning them in the street, combining graffiti and flags, flyers and videos, Einarsson immerses the modernist visual system in the sinister morass of post-9/11 political repression. Using allusive forms whose confrontation gives rise to a huge visual Larsen effect, he represents a world in which human relations are reduced to injunctions, interdictions or stifled claims.

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<sup>1</sup> Thérèse Burollet, in "L'Art Pompier", in the catalogue of the *William Bouguereau, 1825-1905* exhibition, at the Musée des Beaux Arts, Montréal, the Petit Palais, Paris, and Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> George Baker, "Editorial Introduction", *October 110*, fall 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Claire Bishop: "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", *October 110*, fall 2004. The quotation is taken from the same author's "Nicolas Bourriaud", in "Art. Key Contemporary Thinkers", ed. Diarmud Costello and Jonathan Vickery, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2007.

## I. Minimalism, heraldry, politics

Enlargement and separation from backgrounds are Einarsson's basic principles. It should be said that the mine of signs to which he devotes his attention is full of tiny details, and forms that are clandestine, necessarily discreet. *I'll Never Give My Hand to the Police*, 2007, for example, originated in a prisoner's tattoo, and other works have been based on images taken from obscure Internet sites, administrative questionnaires, bumper stickers, comics or underground publications. His work casts light on a whole invisible life, and visitors to his exhibitions may feel as though they have turned over a damp stone to find a swarm of agitated insects beneath it. Terror, repression, dissensus, diverse types of adhesion to obscure ideals: such are the psychological motifs suggested by these stripped-down, monochrome forms. And though Einarsson clearly belongs to the post-production and scan-art movement that has been the major phenomenon of the 2000s, he stands radically apart from artists such as Seth Price, Kelley Walker, Meredith Sparks or Wade Guyton, whose iconographic preferences are much more heterogeneous (being oriented towards a generalised "dispersion"), and whose aesthetics are more "pop". In formal terms, the predominance of black-and-white and the minimalist rigour that characterise Einarsson's compositions are more reminiscent of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who in the 1990s renewed the iconography of political activity, which he contrasted with the vocabulary of minimalism. Einarsson's allusions, subtle intimations and blowups of details represent a formal continuity with this approach. But where the Cuban-American e-Torres examined the multiple facets of a single source, namely that of "biopower" and the repression of sexuality, Einarsson, with equal consistency, explores figures of conflict between individuals and the societies to which they "belong". This major conflict lies at the heart of a vast, fragmented fresco whose scattered debris seems to be brought together in each of his exhibitions. It is for the viewer to direct these sometimes enigmatic fragments back towards the invisible centre, the essential conflict: the individual against a central power, the individual and the multiple alternatives that oppose the central power. As the dominant stylistic figure of Einarsson's work, ellipsis produces in us a sort of muted anxiety, a specific sign of menace. It is clear that something has been taken from the objects we are looking at, and that the link which should make the sense explicit has been obliterated. Through his systematic use of ellipsis, Einarsson instils in the viewer a political consciousness that uses fear as a general principle. In *Untitled (American Flag)*, 2007, for example, the flag has been "emptied out" in such a way as to make it available for an unspecified use. Forms float in a threatening atmosphere; colour is absent; speech bubbles in comic strips have no speakers, or vice versa. Einarsson's world is that of a mismatch between form and content, in which evacuation reigns. This unique metaphor takes account of an entire political context, from disciplinary confinement in offshore camps to the deportation of illegal workers. More generally, it demonstrates the artist's search for a lexicon that can represent the society in which we live, given that the current proliferation of information is accompanied by a deafening silence with regard to contemporary political issues: the bombardment of information to which we are subject makes it possible, paradoxically, to keep a lot more things secret. There is a sort of informational white noise, a susurrant that covers and "equalises" discordant sounds. The bandpass is reduced to the dimensions of government propaganda and ruling ideology, while anything that is not considered to be "in the public interest" is relegated to the netherworld of the Internet. This situation is examined in Einarsson's work through the elision of content, and a tacit appeal to the personalisation of social forms, as in *Online souvenir #2 (Statue of Liberty)*, 2007, which includes both the head of the statue and the twin towers of the World Trade Center, above the slogan "YOUR TEXT HERE To Personalize". Demonstration banners, hoardings, light boxes, administrative forms – formats are emptied out, and their contrasts accentuated through the use of black-and-white. This reduces political opinions to the dimensions of bumper stickers, or urban graffiti. What artists and outlaws have in common is an urge to produce sense within their respective systems, through customising and marking their territory.

## II. The spectacle of politics, the politics of the spectacle

The emblematic figure of the relationship to the City is no longer the citizen, but the immigrant, who has none of the former's civil rights. This is really an invisible citizen, a denizen of basements, a furtive weapon engaged in a social war – the political equivalent of Philip K. Dick's "replicants", with all the attributes of humans, apart from rights. The acquisition of an identity (and its associated social visibility) is thus the central issue in an urban strategy and a precarious thinking process whose points of attachment are non-material. The South African artist Kendell Geers has shown this in photographs of private security systems, and in works that feature physical danger, such as *Mondo Kane*, 2002, a minimalist cube with shards of glass stuck in it, and others made of razor blades, or carrying a lethal electric charge. Francis Alj's, having moved from his native Belgium to Mexico, also works on the control systems that traverse the City, with images of outsiders, homeless people and stray dogs. But the question of immigration and insecurity implies another: that of translation. Einarsson, who left Norway for New York at the start of the 2000s, draws a part of his problematic from the act of immigration, which he has described in interviews as a sort of primal scene. In Norway, he says, "there is a very different relationship to individualism. It's almost frowned upon to be excessively individualistic. People are encouraged to have a social frame of mind. I moved to New York seven years ago. To me, the extent to which this cowboy individualism seemed to be present was shocking. That probably comes out of my having moved here the day before 9/11. In my first year, it was armed guards on the subways and Humvees downtown. I can see those experiences in my work. I was just cataloguing all of the repressive imagery."<sup>4</sup> How can a relationship to a particular society be translated into the vocabulary of another? The feeling of being alien to the social body has become a precondition to perceiving it. In the art of the early twenty-first century, the gaze of the stranger is much more interesting than that of the "native". And the reason why it prevails over the perception of the individual who belongs fully to a community is that it is equivalent to the way the psychoanalyst looks at a patient. It is a gaze from outside, what Jacques Lacan would have called a "floating listening". Every society secretes a specific subconscious that could be termed "ideology"; and the primary role of artists who take a critical approach to their environment is to interrogate this social subconscious, to grasp its symptoms in the succession of narratives and images produced by society. Ideology, according to Louis Althusser, is "a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, as the case may be) that has an historic existence and role within a given society"<sup>5</sup>. And human society, he added, creates a particular type of formation that is "profoundly unconscious"<sup>6</sup>. Einarsson questions the modes of apparition of ideology in daily life, and in the most popular forms of cultural production. But unlike a number of artists who settle for simply presenting these forms as ideological, he puts them into perspective as part of a political project, bringing out their true ideological character. Above all else, what his works show is a certain state of turmoil. They expose the consternation of ideology through the chaotically multiple phenomena of resistance to centralised power, the proliferation of extreme left-wing groups, the pullulation of criminal networks. In this dissident universe, anti-capitalist militancy joins up with the world of crime by strange pathways. Einarsson evolves an erudite intertextuality in exploring the secret language of a clandestine community as compact as the Japanese yakuza (*Tokyo Underworld*, 2006), or in manipulating the codes of underground subcultures or leftist militias. Seen through the monochrome figures that make up his exhibitions, politics is a distinct branch of heraldry, an ensemble of ensigns under which the watchwords of a protean, ideological dissidence file by, more or less hermetically, sometimes reduced to an unceasing

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Christopher Bollen, *Interview*, November 2008.

<sup>5</sup> In *For Marx*, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

flow of political and ideological signals from which the artist extracts forms that touch us with their flashing power. We see that they continue to generate sense (though we do not clearly perceive its origin). But what world do they come from? Cut out, filigreed, standardised in black-and-white, fitted into the format of modernist painting, they seem to have been camouflaged in order to operate optimally in the specific reality the art world offers them. Signs in combat gear.

If the capitalist productive system is to be preserved, then ideas, and more particularly ideas with a potential for subversion, must be relegated to a domain in which they have only exhibition value. Such is the danger that hangs over the world of art – that of turning into a natural reservoir of protest against the system. Art has become a location for the redeployment of politics in a depoliticised space, under the omnipresent authority of a market indexed upon the luxury goods industry. But this structural contradiction, however violent, may produce truth effects. It is true that the world of art could see itself described as a locus of the utmost hypocrisy, in other words one of inoffensive political maximalism, where the extremism of positions is exacerbated by the fact that no one imagines they could have the slightest effect on an ideologically armour-plated reality. Art is also, however, a place where counter-ideology is produced, at the infinitesimal scale of the signs manipulated by Einarsson. To return to Althusser, let us not forget that "the function of ideology is to ensure a link between people across the forms of their existence, the relationship of individuals to the tasks the social structure has set them."<sup>7</sup> Ideology is an imaginary bond, a mental fixative. By means of samplings and the "detaching" of signs, Einarsson's works put into practice a critique of ideology, and it is in this sense that they bring about political effects at the very heart of their formative process. I have already mentioned the "Larsen effect" that characterises his exhibitions. By making the signs of their source as remote as possible, while bringing them as close as possible to the codes of pictorial modernism, and to the dominant ideology as it is reflected in the art world, Einarsson generates an overwhelming, chaotic dissonance – a "white noise" that drowns out the music of information; an art in which the control of amplification is manifest, and which plays with "breath" as a formal instrument.

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<sup>7</sup> In "Théorie, pratique théorique. Idéologie et lutte idéologique", quoted in Jacques Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser*, 1974.