Why would anyone be foolish enough to argue today that the world economy might be intelligently viewed from the deck of a ship?

Allan Sekula

A frequent image: that of the ship Argo (luminous and white), each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replaced, so that they ended with an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form. This ship Argo is highly useful: it affords the allegory of an eminently structural object... Argo is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form.

Roland Barthes

Let me begin on dry land, before proceeding to get my feet wet. Here is a somewhat puzzling image [Abb. 68]. What does this photograph represent? A boat has been dislocated from its proper element. Marooned on arid ground, the ship's deck is festooned with the colorful flags of many nations merrily flapping in the wind. Of course, no one is truly fooled by the image: what we actually see is a feeble replica of a ship with spray-painted waves licking its bow. Mounted on the chassis of a motorized vehicle, the mock ship makes no real attempt to pass itself off as a seaworthy vessel. Indeed there is another, more jarring element in the image that truly secures its incongruous nature: four soldiers clad in full riot gear gather to the windward side of the boat and appear ready to board it with their shields raised. A naval skirmish on sun-drenched terra firma; clearly the fake vessel is no match for these land forces. But what kind of battle – part mock, part real – is this? Why has this theatrical prop, this allegorical device, provoked the soldier’s anger?
The event in the photograph took place on June 4, 2010, during a demonstration at Bil‘in, a village in the Palestinian West Bank. The protest was one in a recurrent series of demonstrations against the separation wall that the Israeli government was constructing on the outskirts of the village. In fact, the village has become known for its weekly protests, which it has organized every Friday since January 2005, in the form of marches from the village to the site of the barrier and usually ending in a violent clash between Israeli forces and demonstrators, whereby several protesters and soldiers have been seriously wounded.\(^1\)

The weekly marches have succeeded to attract much media attention. They also have drawn scores of Israeli and international activists who hoped that their presence would protect the Palestinian demonstrators; yet their participation has also given rise to the objection by some critics that Bil‘in was generating a kind of “occupation tourism.”\(^2\)

In short, the Bil‘in demonstrations have been successful to the extent that they operate as a media event which is capable of luring the cameras of the international press to cover the story of the Palestinian village in its struggle against the West Bank barrier. Yet a media event is necessarily repetitious in nature, causing at least one journalist to comment that the weekly clashes occurred with “predictably bloody consequences”, causing him to “watch the drama unfold with depressing familiarity.”\(^3\)

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2 Seth Freedman, “Palestine’s occupation tourism,” in: *The Guardian*, January 20, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jan/20/palestine-israel-protest-tourism (August 8, 2015). At the time of writing, it was unclear whether the Bil‘in protests were still occurring in the same weekly manner. Updates of the protest movement can be found on the website of the Palestinian International Solidarity Movement, which is committed to “using non-violent, direct-action methods and principles” (http://palsolidarity.org/about/). However, the last messages about Bil‘in are of August 31, 2014.

3 Freedman, “Palestine’s occupation tourism.” While finding the cause of the Bil‘in protesters “worthy,” Freedman questions their tactics: “Despite billing the march as ‘nonviolent resistance’, the organisers do nothing to ensure the event
To avoid this kind of weariness from setting in, the Bil’in demonstrators came up with a clever strategy of détournement: they appropriate certain iconic images which already circulated within global media channels, transforming them into local symbols of protest. These transfigured images are then fed back to the international news companies. The model boat carried in the June 4 march, for instance, represented the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara* which was part of the so-called “Freedom Flotilla” that had been involved in an ill-fated attempt to break a navy blockade of the Gaza strip during the preceding week. Among the demonstrators in the march were a few individuals dressed as pirates, carrying blood-soaked swords and waving a black-and-white, Israeli flag imprinted with a skulls-and-bones emblem. Thus, whereas the Israeli government would accuse the flotilla of harboring terrorists, the allegorical props of the Bil’in demonstration implied that the impounding of the *Mavi Marmara* by the Israeli government was an act of piracy in and of itself.

At this point we could simply observe that the Bil’in demonstration shows a clever use of the allegorical method, namely, to make an image “speak otherwise,” and leave it at that. However, there is much more at stake in this example. As I will argue, the particular constellation of concepts which the image of the Bil’in image protest introduced – allegory, 

lives up to such criteria, and by taking no action hand to the army on a plate the perfect excuse to fight fire with fire.”

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4 The flotilla was subject to a raid by the Israeli navy in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea on May 31, 2010. Israeli commandos boarded the ships in order to force them into the Israeli port of Ahsdod. On the Mavi Marmara, a few dozen of the almost 600 activists on board attacked the commandos, armed with iron bars and knives, resulting in the deaths of nine activists, some of which had apparently expressed the wish to become martyrs before embarking on the sea voyage. Of the Israeli commandos, ten were wounded, one seriously. The activists were later released and, due to international pressure, the Israeli government eased the blockade. A United Nations report declared the Israeli blockade legal, despite condemning what it called an excessive use of force by the Israeli commandos who fired their guns while still in international waters. From the Israeli side, the event was dismissed as a media stunt.


piracy and appropriation – has a unique purchase on the present and this despite the fact that each individual concept inhabits a discursive field that suffers from a degree of “outmodedness.” Until recently, that is. I shall, for instance, have more to say about the “piratical” theme in relation to the exceptional, juridical situation in the occupied territories of Palestine. But, more importantly, I shall propose a more general argument about the manner in which allegory provides an appropriate mode of representation to capture the current crisis in sovereign power within the global system of capitalism.⁷ Indeed, one symptom of this crisis is the widely discussed ‘comeback’ of the figure of the pirate, not only on the actual oceans of international trade, but also on the open seas of the Internet. A neo-liberal model of the new economy may celebrate the ‘creative freedom’ (and company profit) that may be gained through the distributed knowledge of information technology, but it also struggles with controlling the counterpart of such freedom, namely, what the culture industry refers to as the theft of intellectual property. It is remarkable, furthermore, that the fully obsolete genre of the pirate narrative has undergone something of a renaissance within the entertainment business, starting with Disney’s widely popular Pirates of the Caribbean series – a profitable niche of movie merchandise that the Bil‘in demonstrators were clearly happy to seize as their bounty, flaunting their piratical act on the air waves.⁸

Perhaps this is the proper moment to reveal how I first became interested in the Bil‘in protests as a contemporary form of media event. As a matter of fact, I first encountered these images through their re-appropriation within yet another framework, namely a film called Pro Testing which was shot by Eran Schaerf and Eva Meyer shortly after the two events took place in August 2010. The film is based on a public performance that they organized in the commercial center of a provincial

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⁷ Depending, of course, on one’s definition of allegory, but I cannot lay all my cards on the table in one go.

Dutch town. This film not only incorporates a series of images of the Bil‘in demonstration which derive from various sources, both professional news agencies and civic journalists, but also appropriates another set of photographs figuring the image of a ship, namely, Marcel Broodthaers’ projection piece *Bateau Tableau* (1973). The latter work consists of eighty slides which reproduce an amateur painting of a sailing ship nearing the coast, *Un tableau représentant le retour d’un bateau de pêche*, executed in a vaguely Impressionist style, which the Belgian artist bought at a curiosity shop [*boutique de curiosités*] in Paris. A few of the images in *Bateau Tableau* show a complete view of the amateur painting, including its ornate, gilded frame, but Broodthaers’ camera mostly scrutinizes the surface of the work from close-up as if embodying the curious eye of a connoisseur. Among the details we get to see are the rigging of the sailing ship, a row boat in the foreground, shadowy figures on deck, a French flag waving from the top mast, billowing white sails, the choppy surface of the sea, and a few wisps of cloud in an otherwise clear sky. As a result the projection tends to dissolve the illusionary scene of the seascape and to reduce the painting to (a representation of) its material base: a few daubs of paint on the rough, woven surface of the canvas. Importantly, however, no narrative sequence is suggested by the order of the slides; the projection moves back and forth between different scales of reproduction and magnification without following any apparent logical order. With each click of the slide carousel yet another close-up is shown and the whole painting disintegrates into a random accumulation of fragmentary details.

What is remarkable about *Pro Testing*, therefore, is that it causes two incongruous series of images – the Bil’in protest and Broodthaers’ *Bateau Tableau* – to converge. But how are these two image series connected, and what exactly takes place at their site of convergence?

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10 *Bateau Tableau* is related to a set of other works by Broodthaers which re-mediate the same amateur painting, such as the films *Analyse d’un Peinture*, 1973; and *A Voyage on the North Sea*, 1973–74. Broodthaers also made a book version of *A Voyage on the North Sea*.

To make *Pro Testing*, Meyer and Schaerf hired a number of performers to re-enact the Bi’lin protest by carrying around images of the event in a public square. In the opening shot a man is shown in the middle distance leaning on a demonstration placard [Abb. 69]. Standing in a public square almost empty of people, he seems to be patiently waiting for something to occur, oblivious to the observing gaze of the camera. Attached to his placard is a photograph of the Bi’lin demonstration showing a close-up of two Palestinians masquerading as buccaneers. However, the film provides no indication, as yet, of the source of this image (only later will a voice-over indicate the photograph’s origin). But even in the absence of any contextual information, it will be obvious to the spectator that the enigmatic image on the placard – this *allegorical tableau* – has no direct relationship to the current public space or *agora* in which it has been implanted.

In the next shot, the camera is placed within a circle of people who all carry white placards bearing no text or image [Abb. 70]. As the camera slowly rotates, panning across their faces (and those of onlookers), which are partially obscured by the placards, the words *Bateau, Tableau, Drapeau* are repeatedly pronounced by means of a megaphone. After a near full circle of the camera, a stationary camera shot of a rippling surface of water fills the frame, while a female voice-over intones: “The French words *Bateau, Tableau, Drapeau* sound similar. When repeating them fifteen times in a row you will eventually confuse them.” Subsequently the blank image of waves segues into a close-up of a man’s torso. The man, whose role in the credits is identified as “the activist,” hands out photographic copies of the *Bateau Tableau* images to random passersby as if he is distributing advertising brochures or political manifestos [Abb. 71–73]. Once his task is completed, the title of the film appears on screen for the first time.

At this moment, the rotational movement of the camera commences once again, slowly panning across the circular row of assembled “pro-

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12 Here is the relevant section of the voice-over: “The date is August 7, 2010. Or is it June 4th? Mayday Mayday. Flag higher. Soldier runs towards camera. Observer take notes. Weapons directed onto spray-painted waves. Wind machine on. Salute. Peace activists dressed up as militants dressed up as peace activists dressed up as… Freeze frame the action. Pan on news agency image. Palestinians dressed up as Israeli pirates near model of ship depicting… Israeli forces approach model of ship depicting Gaza bound aid flotilla raided by…” All the gaps in the commentary are a deliberate part of the work.
testers.” In contrast to the earlier sequence, however, the demonstrators have turned the white placards around to reveal images of the Bil'in demonstration printed on the backside [Abb. 74–76]. As the camera circles from one placard to the next, the spectator seems to watch so many stills of a documentary movie recording the event, yet is never certain about the proper order of events. The various social actors in the photographs are also difficult to make out – even more so than the performers in the film – as they are dressed in costumes, hidden behind shields and helmets, covered by other bodies or the many waving flags. The views of the Bil'in demonstration also begin to turn away from the theatrical prop of the boat to look back at those doing the work of observation: amidst dense clouds of tear gas we see reporters (or are they masked activists?) fleeing the scene with their laptops and cameras clasped under their arms. But there is no end in sight. The camera keeps rotating and the Bil'in event keeps happening. As in Broodthaers’s endless projection, Bateau Tableau, the scene is forever dispersing and reappearing. This rotational movement continues for some time more, but let me pause the video at this point. We have already seen enough to advance our argument another step.

The procedure of Meyer and Schaerf caused some discomfort among the performers, who were uncertain how to interpret their own (fictitious) role as demonstrators. What had become of the difference between an aesthetic gesture and an act of commitment? How would their re-enactment of the Bil’in demonstration be received by others? Had they become complicit in the Palestinian conflict by brandishing these images in public? Expressing this anxiety to the filmmakers, a discussion ensued about the political dimension of the staged performance. The reply of Meyer and Schaerf to the performers was that “we have chosen a matter or material, in which it is hard or impossible to take a position and that this difficulty is part of the film, even by intention ‘forwarded’ by us to the viewer.”¹³ I shall have more to say on this exceptional status of the political space in which it becomes difficult, as the filmmakers say, “to take a position” and which is indicated in their performance-film not by any direct means of depiction, but in the only manner possible, namely in an allegorical fashion. Or, to be more precise, Pro Testing does not present an allegorical tableau for our decipherment, but rather it exhibits the process of allegorical construction (and deconstruction) as

¹³ Eran Schaerf, email to the author, March 30, 2014.
such. A process, furthermore, that does not affirm or consolidate a consensual order of politics in which, according to Jacques Rancière’s well-known formula, each is relegated to his or her own ‘proper’ place within a well-established social distribution. Rather, *Pro Testing* presents, as it were, an allegoresis of the performative speech act of *dissensus* in which the possible position of a political subject within the democratic forum or *agora* is not given in advance. Truly egalitarian speech can only irrupt as a litigious mode of speech, which challenges the position of those who reserve for themselves the entitlement to speak out and be heard in the assembly, a political act that the ancient Greeks referred to as *agoreuein*.

We may conclude from the response of Meyer and Schaerf that they did not dismiss the thorny issue of responsibility as such, but, to the contrary, acknowledged the pitfalls of either a didactic model of art, which seeks to make the spectator’s viewpoint align itself with some form of authorial motivation, or an ethical model of art, which seeks to break down the very barrier between art and life by adopting, for instance, an activist mode of engagement with a particular cause. But what particular message could the activist in *Pro Testing* be communicating while he dispenses pirated reproductions of Broodthaers’ *Bateau Tableau* to a random, shopping public? Why does the voice-over of *Pro Testing* insist on the linguistic slippage between those almost homonymic words: *tableau, bateau, drapeau*? And why the return to those blank images – an undulating surface of water, the white rectangles of the empty placards – again and again? Who is the addressee of these de-differentiated signs and words?

Rancière cautions us that the ‘people’ who comprise the real subject of democracy are not formed by any collection of the members of the community – those who claim the autochthonic principle of birth right – or by the laboring classes of the population – those who are connected by an economic principle of wealth. There is, namely, no subject position that can precede a truly democratic mode of political intercourse. Egalitarian politics only takes place in an in-between space that cannot already be occupied by a set of identitarian subjects before it comes into appearance. As Rancière argues, “the ‘all’ of the community named by democracy is an empty, supplementary part that separates the community out from the sum of the parts of the social body” [my em-
The space of *dissensus* can only emerge in the temporary intervals of the social. It assumes existence only for a short-lived moment, because if such a reconfigured space of disputation were to persist, it would mean that it has been incorporated within a statist distribution of “natural subjects” and “proper sites” of speech. Which prompts Rancière to theorize a kind of meta-level of demonstration as pure event: “A political demonstration is therefore always of the moment and its subjects are always precarious. A political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance: the people are always close to sinking into the sea of the population or of the race… the space of a people’s public demonstration is always prone to being confused with the merchant’s *agora* and so on.”

Following Rancière, then, I will be concerned with this peculiar topology (rather than institutional disposition) of political space – this empty surplus or constitutive void at the heart of the democratic people to which *Pro Testing* points and which Schaerf, as we will see, shall refer to as “the absolute right to demonstrate.”

In short, *Pro Testing* addresses the problematic of “taking a position” in public from different angles. Unlike the institutionalized spaces of governmentality, the political space of in-betweenness, which *Pro Testing* quite literally circles around, is a fugitive one, consisting of random encounters between subjects at a certain place and during a certain time. With the arrest of the activity of the political subjects, their space of appearance collapses. Or, to quote Rancière again: “The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one.” A political speech act is in and of itself the demonstration of another possible world in which an argument against injustice is acknowledged as valid

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16 *Pro Testing* was made in collaboration with the artist Suchan Kinoshita, who developed a special mechanism or “instrument” called the “Inbetweener.” It consists of a round, revolving stage of about 300 cm in diameter and 40 cm in height. A camera is placed at one edge, directed at the center of the stage. The Inbetweener, therefore, reverses the film studio practice of back projection whereby, for instance, a mobile landscape is shown behind an immobile car. What interested Schaerf and Meyer in the Inbetweener is that “different effects and chance moments occur, depending on the velocity and on what happens in the background.” (Email of Schaerf to author on March 30, 2014)
by another subject – “it is the construction of a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds.” Not unlike, that is, the allegorical image of a pirate ship stranded in the desert.

The Bil’in images are emblematic of a complex, political situation from which no actor can easily extract him or herself in order to become a mere neutral observer or impartial judge. As the demonstration ends in a skirmish between protesters and military, and tear gas incites a panic, the distinction between demonstrator and journalist becomes ever more difficult to discern. Hence, the voice-over of *Pro Testing* which keeps asking the same question in relation to these images: “Who is doing the observing?” [Abb. 77] The film is explicitly concerned with the process whereby various “sides” or “parties” in a dispute are forged, undone and redistributed within a fluctuating field of social power. The film ‘demonstrates’ a structural model of political speech; it enacts a kind of meta-demonstration or what Eran Schaerf calls an “endless demonstration.” As a result, *Pro Testing* functions as a kind of “testing ground” of those allegorical operations whereby social agents appropriate arbitrary symbols of political identity – so many banners of insurrection run up the main mast.

What I shall be concerned with here, in sum, is what might be called the aesthetic politics of allegorical representation in the present. Not only am I interested in the potential of allegorical modes of expression to refract, if in a necessarily fragmentary manner, the ‘intractable totality’ of a globalized arena of economic, social and cultural activity, but also their capacity to intervene within this informatized space of advanced capitalism by conducting symbolic acts of piracy. Of course, there are others who have raised the same topic before. Fredric Jameson, for instance, has often insisted upon the fact that the global system of late capitalism, with its complex flows of capital, goods and people, exceeds the grasp of our collective forms of cultural imagination. In the absence of any concrete means to conceive the totality of capitalist

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17 One interest of the work which, unfortunately, I cannot address here is the role of the press in mediating political events. The voice-over of *Pro Testing* makes it very clear that the film presents the parody of a fictional business that organizes ‘events’ on a commercial basis. Here, for instance, is another excerpt of the voice-over: “Editors please note now sending scripts and shows. Soundtrack to documentary images. Silence. Journalists, reporters, please put your gas masks on. These days almost anyone can play editor. Why did you edit the knife out of the picture? More smoke please...”
processes of reproduction and accumulation in the present, we are de-
livered to the “fragmentary and schizoid constellations” of allegorical
form; so many parts—“random, minute or isolated landscapes”—that
can impossibly stand in for a whole, in contrast to “those older national
allegories” which were still able to maintain a (symbolic) dialectic be-
tween part and whole.18 Similar to the kind of allegorical critique that
Jameson proposes, Pro Testing is not invested (or not uniquely invest-
ed) in the immediate cause of the Bil’in protest, but in the kind of so-
cio-political aporias of which it may be emblematic. What I am getting
at, specifically, is the pervasive crisis of sovereignty that, as many polit-
ical theorists have argued, marks the current stage of global capitalism.
If the ostensibly universal values of “symbolic” discourse (i.e. Jameson’s
“older national allegories”) might be said to adhere to the governmental
system of the nation-state, allegorical speech is perhaps best associated
with a deconstruction of such symbolic totalities.

To give an indication of where my argument is heading, it is suffi-
cient to observe that the Occupied Palestinian Territory constitutes a
highly fluid space of conflict in which multiple social agents participate,
including Palestinian protesters, human rights activists, Israeli military,
orthodox settlers, armed resistance groups, reporters, government min-
istries or even those concerned “onlookers” who reside overseas. As Eyal
Weizman has proposed, the plasticity of this situation in which political,
legal and geographical boundaries are continuously redrawn provides
certain tactical advantages to all concerned parties, which is not to dis-
count the immense human suffering that is taking place on the West
Bank. Due to the absence of a sovereign government, a juridical state of
exception exists on the West Bank that prevents its inhabitants from ex-
periencing their environment as an integrated world. There is no shared
horizon—no consensual space—that provides a common background
to its political subjects. Rather, space becomes a medium that “each of
their actions seeks to challenge, transform or appropriate.”19 In short,
such a highly-charged and mutable geo-political landscape will resist
easy symbolical representation; a conclusion which begins to answer
why the ship-out-of-water metaphor might be strangely appropriate to
the ongoing political struggles that divide the West Bank.

18 Fredric Jameson, The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World Sys-
tem, Bloomington 1992, p. 5.
19 Eyal Weizman, Hollow Land. Israel’s Architecture of Occupation, London 2007,
p. 7
Tableau

But how to define allegory as such? And why do Meyer and Schaerf see fit to appropriate Broodthaers in the course of referring to the Bil’in protests? If *Pro Testing* can be said to problematize the current status of political allegory, what we need at this point is to construct a genealogy of the allegorical method within modernity. Of course, we don’t need to look hard to establish the outline of such a genealogical schema since it has been drawn in many different quarters already. For our purposes, I shall limit myself to the most common genealogy of allegory in the modern period, which consists of three successive stages: a romantic, a modernist and a post-modernist (or, more specifically, post-structuralist) model of allegory. Considering the relative familiarity of this terrain, I shall limit my comments to a minimum in order that I may quickly raise a more pressing issue, namely, the question as to what extent *Pro Testing* moves beyond the post-modernist model of allegory? In order to address this crucial question, I shall first need to establish how the concept of allegory can be situated within the discursive field of art criticism.

It was in 1980 that Craig Owens published his seminal two-part essay “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Post-Modernism.”20 This text has had a sizeable impact upon the discipline of art history, informing most discussions of the allegorical in contemporary art during the following decade. Bringing a wide range of theoretical references into alignment with a deconstructivist method of critique, Owens deftly synthesizes a complex debate about the nature of the allegorical sign.21 This debate that has raged ever since Romanticism introduced a hierarchical distinction between the symbol and allegory, privileging the former over the latter. Among the several voices that can be heard in Owens’ essay, Walter Benjamin’s is one of the strongest. In hindsight, it is possible to note how Benjamin’s theory of allegory is slightly transformed in order to resonate more directly with Owens’ own post-modernist model of allegory, yet nothing is to be gained from criticizing Owens on this


21 Owens’ essay is symptomatic of a broader allegorical turn in post-structuralist theory. His text cites liberally from the work of, among others, Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Joel Fineman.
level of conceptual thought. My problem is a different one: I shall only focus on the specific impasse that Owens’ post-structuralist reading of allegory produces when we approach it from the present. Which does not mean that the post-structuralist model of allegory should be discarded (or, even less, that we need to establish a more “faithful” or “correct” reading of Benjamin’s concept of allegory). Instead, what we need to do is to work through the limitations of this model; limitations that were determined by its own historical conditions of conception. And this means, in turn, that we must differentiate Owens’ post-structuralist model of allegory from its original, critical function; namely, to ‘subvert’ the dominant myths of modernist art – a revisionist project that Broodthaers’ own Bateau Tableau, to no small degree, participated in.

In his text, Owens identifies three main procedures as constitutive of the allegorical mode, which can easily be regarded as operative in Pro Testing as well: namely, appropriation, fragmentation, and accumulation. These operations constitute the fundamental matrix of post-modernist allegory, which, as Owens contends, strives to deconstruct the “the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art.” Thus, first of all, the allegorical always assumes the form of a quotation. The allegorist never invents the images he employs, but appropriates them in order to put them to new use in an alternate context. The allegorical mode of post-modernism, therefore, contains no “original material”; it is composed only of confiscated signs and images. In other words, the allegorical procedure as described by Owens resembles a semiotic act of piracy. The purpose of such a confiscation of signs is not to retrieve some lost meaning and restore its presence to a contemporary audience. “Allegory is not hermeneutics,” Owens writes, rather, the artistic strategy of appropriation functions similar to what the Situationists identified as the act of détournement, namely, to alter the destiny of an image, to break apart the conventional relation between sign and meaning and to make it “speak otherwise,” according to the literal meaning of the Greek ἀλληγορία. If the allegorist adds another meaning to the image, “he does so only to replace: the allegorical image supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement.”

The principle of appropriation allows Owens to establish the first link between allegory and contemporary art by referring to the work of, among others, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Cindy Sherman. That is to say, “artists who generate images through the reproduction of other images,” submitting the appropriated image to manipulations in order “to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning.”24 Another link is formed by the strategy of accumulation – the paratactic structure of an image series – that becomes the “epitome of counternarrative, for it arrests narrative in place,” similar to the slide sequence of Broodthaers’ Bateau Tableau. The third constitutive principle of post-modernist allegory, its affinity with the fragmentary and incomplete, concerns the kind of historical attitude the allegorical image of post-modernism conveys. How, in other words, does the allegorist look upon the cultural landscape that has been left in the wake of modernist art? Here Owens makes copious use of Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the “cult of the ruin” in The Origin of German Tragic Drama. As this topos has become a commonplace in the literature, I shall be very brief in dealing with this subject matter. Suffice it to say that the contemplative function of the ruin in Baroque allegory is to convey an impression of earthly existence that is deprived of inner significance and where all human endeavor is submitted to the destructive force of time. Before the melancholic gaze of the Baroque subject, the world turns into a “petrified, primordial landscape”; life seems to flows out of things and all that is left behind is an aggregate of fragmentary, enigmatic signs that contain “everything about history that, for the very beginning, had been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful.”25

All of this is familiar terrain, but what makes this discussion relevant to Owens (and, ultimately, to us) is that Benjamin would later accommodate this Baroque model of allegory to the socio-historical conditions of early modernity. The modernist allegory comments on the obsolescence of its own images and it does so by assuming a pictorial form that Romantic theory had itself already declared outmoded. Hence, Benjamin would argue that Baudelaire’s poem Le Cygne was emblematic of the reified consciousness of the poet – the exiled subject of modernity – who in reaction to the demolition of the old urban environment of Paris could only exclaim “tout pour moi devient allégorie!” In turn, Owens saw

25 Benjamin as quoted by Owens, p. 55.
it as his task to transpose Benjamin’s allegorical view of early modernity to the later twentieth century. There is, nevertheless, one major distinction in approach between Owens and Benjamin. The latter was engaged in a form of immanent critique of the work of art, which considered it to be symptomatic of the very antinomies of modern existence. *Le Cygne*, in other words, formed an elegy to the past within the framework of the modern: its mournful imaginary of castaway sailors living on desert islands was more a product of the age of mercantile capitalism than Baudelaire would perhaps care to realize. However, the redemptive project of Benjamin is to discover exactly such utopian impulses within the obsolete, discarded dreams of modernity, even if they come in the distorted form of seafarers stranded upon exotic shores.

The critical project of Owens, on the other hand, is limited to a debunking of the idealist aesthetics of late modernist art. Indeed his methodological position is not “redemptive” in any Benjaminian sense of the word, but follows a strictly post-structuralist method of deconstruction. The basic proposition of Owens is that the proper function of allegory is to undermine the specious “symbolic” unity of the modernist work of art. Indeed this is key: Owens’ model of allegory targets a formalist theory of modernist art as its primary and sole opponent.

To this purpose, Owens introduces the familiar dichotomy in Romantic theory between the symbolic and the allegorical sign. Romanticism would promote the symbolic over the allegorical for reasons that Benjamin would later reject as categorically unsound. Romantic authors, such as Coleridge, Carlyle or Goethe, would associate the symbol with a dialectical fusion of the particular and the universal; they maintained that the symbol established a synthesis of the contingent and the eternal, whereby the “beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole.”26 On the other hand, allegory was dismissed as conveying a merely conventional, arbitrary relationship between sign and idea. The main grievance of Benjamin was that Romantic theory introduced a distorted, theological conception of the symbol into aesthetics. And he would go on to blame the Romantic indulgence of such a “destructive extravagance” for the following “desolation of modern art criticism.”27 Some fifty years later, Owens would echo the same com-

27 “For this abuse occurs, wherever in the work of art the ‘manifestation’ of an ‘idea’ is declared a symbol. The unity of the material and the transcendental
plaint. But now the desolation of art criticism is blamed on the prior dominance of the formalist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. The mistake of Greenberg was to associate the formalist ideal of “wholeness” and “presentness” on a Romantic notion of symbolic essence. Greenberg, in other words, was to derealize the figurative tableau, reconceiving the picture as a transcendental object of pure optical presence. Allegory, in Owens’ estimation, provided the proper antidote to the Greenbergian strand of modernist idealism. Yet Owens could only conceive this critical project in terms of an endless delay of the formalist promise of presentness:

When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence… It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred.28

To enter upon this route, however, is to become caught in a cul-de-sac: one can only repeat the same tactics of subversion until it becomes an empty gesture. Unless, that is, appropriation is not only conceived as a conceptual strategy that is aimed against the abstract, “totalizing impulses” of modernism, but as a flexible, yet concrete tactic that can be adapted to the changing, material circumstances of cultural production.29

This is the proper moment to have a closer look at Marcel Broodthaers’ Bateau Tableau as it seems exemplary of the deconstructive strategy of allegory outlined above. Rosalind Krauss, for instance, has advanced such a reading, although her case study was not formed by Bateau Tableau, but the related film A Voyage on the North Sea (1973–74). Encapsulated within a broader thesis about the post-medium condition

objet, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence.” Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 160.

28 Owens, “Allegorical Impulse”, p. 85

29 In a recent review, Sven Lütticken has argued for “an expanded notion of appropriation, and a renewed problematization and critical development of the historical appropriation art discourse of the late 1970s and early 1980s – which frequently casts the artist as a critical Barthesian thief of media myths.” What is required is a renewed focus on “the concrete operations performed by the Barthesian appropriation of myths” (or in my case by the allegorical artist). Operations, that is, which are situated in relation to a wider system of cultural and economic processes of transformation that surpasses the immediate horizon of a Barthesian (or deconstructive) theory of appropriation. Lütticken, “Event Horizon,” in: Texte zur Kunst, 96/2014, p. 174.
of contemporary art, Krauss describes the film as “the enactment of a kind of layering that can itself stand for, or allegorize, the self-differential condition of mediums themselves” [my emphasis].\(^{30}\) She comes to this conclusion on the basis of the fact that Broodthaers’ film actually mimics the form of a book: it alternates static shots of the same amateur painting used in *Bateau Tableau* (as well as photographs of contemporary sailboats) with intertitles that are numbered “Page 1” through “Page 15.” “What we are offered,” Krauss observes, “is the experience of a passage between several surfaces, in a layering that draws an analogy between the stacked pages of a book and the additive condition of even the most monochrome of canvases, which, however objectified it might be, must nonetheless apply paint over its underlying support.”\(^{31}\) She then proceeds to argue that this “layering” creates an oscillation between two symbolic orders of plenitude: the self-referential wholeness of the modernist painting and the referential wholeness of realist representations. In this manner, she consolidates a reading of *A Voyage on the North Sea* that follows closely in the tracks of Owens’ allegorical impulse.

Nevertheless, this slippage between the antinomies of realism and modernism, which is enacted by *Bateau Tableau* and *A Voyage on the North Sea*, is not the only way to understand the allegorical operation of these works. There is a more concrete, socio-economic dimension to be considered even though this will take some effort to excavate.\(^{32}\) We may note, for instance, how Broodthaers deftly situates the appropriated tableau within multiple systems of stylistic, monetary and aesthetic value. As the artist confessed, the amateur painting was clearly an overpriced item of dubious artistic market value. Yet he could not resist the desire to buy it: “I dared not bargain for it and paid a high price – that


\(\quad\)\(^{31}\) Krauss, ‘*A Voyage on the North Sea*,’ p. 52.

\(\quad\)\(^{32}\) For sure, Krauss locates the post-medium condition within a wider field of cultural politics. Following Fredric Jameson, she contrasts the redemptive quality of the obsolete to the colonization of everyday life by the commodified “image.” The notion of obsolescence, however, does not carry the analysis as far as I would like.
of love at first sight – even though it was unsigned.” If Broodthaers was willing to pay the inflated cost of the painting, it was because the purchase entered another system of value where it assumed an inscrutable worth – the private collection. Once again Benjamin leads our discussion as he has best described the process of transvaluation that objects undergo in the hands of the private collector. He compared the collector to a child who is capable of endowing discarded objects and materials with an imaginary existence – “in waste products [children] recognize the face that the world turned directly and solely to them.” Likewise, the collector assembles curiosities, which may or may not hold true value as “antiques,” and places them within an enchanted circle of reanimation. Once enclosed within the magical realm of the collection, the collector becomes the interpreter of the “fate” of things. Through his unique proximity to a set of reified objects which he alone may handle, the collector renews the power of things to communicate; in short, he brings them back to life. 

Krauss also comments on this “countertype” of the collector which has become obsolete in the present. What she does not address, however, is the historical specificity of the maritime themes that Broodthaers frequently used in his work. No doubt one may explain the presence of this motif in Broodthaers’ practice as one more example of the outmoded, extending the Benjaminian argument already in place. Certainly one would not be wrong to do so. By the early twentieth century, the once flourishing tradition of maritime literature was rapidly losing its cultural prestige. Its common tropes of mutiny, tempests, pirates, shipwreck, 

37 In an email to the author, Maria Gilissen, the artist’s widow, estimates that Broodthaers made approximately 200 drawings of boats on the sea.
and desert islands would be relegated to the site of children’s literature and theme parks. However, perhaps this does not tell the whole story.

The maritime adventure novel has its origins in the early eighteenth century, starting with the novels of Daniel Defoe and the travelogues of Captain Cook, although one can also point to such precursors as Luís de Camões’ *Luisads* or early Renaissance chronicles of sea voyages. Adopting the form of the “exotic picaresque,” the sea adventure novel would flourish during the nineteenth century, whereby “a sense of awe and wonder – both a fascination and a repulsion – for faraway, exotic, colonized, or colonizable lands and peoples is grafted on an episodic narrative structure.” After the demise of the sailing ship, which coincided with the rise of industrial capitalism, the genre of the sea adventure novel would survive only in the debased form of Hollywood movies or pulp literature. Joseph Conrad was one of the last authors to attempt a significant treatment of the maritime theme of adventure. Yet most critics see in his writing the tell-tale symptoms of a genre in decline. Fredric Jameson, for instance, noted how the latter’s novels are “unclassifiable, spilling out of high literature into light reading and romance, reclaiming great areas of diversion and distraction by the most demanding practice of style and écriture alike, floating uncertainly somewhere in between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson.” The latter, in fact, would boast that *Treasure Island* was a blatant act of plagiarism, a pirated story of pirates.

This is not the place to go into the history of the sea narrative (or its equivalent in painting, the seascape) in any depth. However, a few words are required to explain how the sea narrative became displaced.

38 Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea. Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis*, Minneapolis [et al] 2002, p. 8. Casarino also defines two other types of sea novel: the *Bildungsroman* of the sea and the modernist sea narrative, such as Melville’s *Moby Dick*, “which is structured precisely around what remains marginal and underdeveloped” in the other two forms, namely, the world of the ship which is “detailed as multifaceted and tension-ridden universes.” Casarino’s notion of the modernist sea novel holds many features in common with Benjamin’s modernist concept of allegory. Indeed Casarino notes that the modernist sea narrative has its precedent in “more overtly” allegorical works such as Sebastian Brandt’s *Ship of Fools*, pointing at how the ship as an “autarchic and self-enclosed” narrative unit is informed by “the whole multiform dialectic of capital and labor, and the forever impending possibility of mutiny.”

from its central place within the cultural imaginary of Western society.\textsuperscript{40} To this purpose, I shall briefly turn to the work of another artist, Allan Sekula, who, like Broodthaers, was fascinated by the topos of the sea within modernity. But unlike Broodthaers’ exclusive emphasis on the anachronistic aspect of the sea narrative, Sekula developed a vigorous and extended investigation of the contemporary political economy of maritime space.\textsuperscript{41} Well-known examples are the photo-essay *Fish Story* or the essay film *Forgotten Space* (co-authored with Noël Burch) which reveal at close range the uncertainties and hardships of maritime labor upon which the expanding reach of a global system of capitalism depends.\textsuperscript{42} Nonetheless, despite the crucial role of shipping in maintaining the global exchange of commodities, Sekula notes how maritime labor has become almost invisible within a “post-industrial society” obsessed by the “liquidity” of technological media [Abb. 79–80]. What is pertinent here is how Sekula contrasts the routinized, yet precarious work of the mariner to the pervasive, yet degraded symbolism of the “open seas” which has been adopted by the so-called new economy. “We are all invited to lose ourselves at sea,” Sekula writes, as we board a cruise ship or surf the boundless surface of the Internet. “For most of us,” however, “this amounts to chump change in the supermarket of imaginary danger. But my guess is that members of financial elites, especially those investing in the intangibles of the ‘new economy,’ imagine themselves in a special way to be venturing forth on stormy seas, lifted high by the irrational exuberance of the swells, only to risk being dashed down, disastrously, beneath the waves.”\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} On this topic, see Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*; and Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea*, Princeton 2010.

\textsuperscript{41} Although Sekula correctly points out that the current “informatized” system of global commerce continues to rely on shipping as its material backbone, he also notes the obsolescence of another maritime figure in the present: not the cosmopolitan “brotherhood” of pirates, which threatened the system of mercantilist capitalism, but the rebellious labour force of dockworkers and merchant sailors which challenged industrial capitalism. For brevity’s sake, I have omitted this crucial chapter in the cultural imaginary of maritime space, but for more on this topic see also Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*.

\textsuperscript{42} I have discussed Sekula’s work at more length in my “Uneven Seas: Notes on a Political Mythology of Maritime Space, Part 1,” in: *31: Das Magazin des Instituts für Theorie*, 16/17/2011, p. 84–100.

Sekula’s comments were prompted, in part, by Bill Gates’ purchase of a Winslow Homer painting, *Lost on the Grand Banks*, for the grossly bloated price of 30 million dollars in 1998, setting a new record for the sale of an American painting. Homer’s painting of two dory fishermen cast adrift on a wild and angry sea with no coastal horizon in sight was part of a narrative sequence of three paintings of 1885, including *The Herring Net* and *The Fog Warning*, which, as Sekula observes, displayed in ardent detail “the hidden brutality of work on and against the sea.” Yet the actual state of despair and “lostness” shown in this realist tableau, which is bound to the specific, historical conditions of maritime labor at the end of the nineteenth century, becomes purely metaphysical once the painting enters into the collection of the Microsoft founder: “the depiction of lostness stands now as the antithesis of [Gates’] instrumental program of total global connectedness.”44 In purchasing the painting, Gates “allegorized” the danger faced by the two fishermen in their shallow boat as a representation of the risks to which the capitalist entrepreneur is exposed on the high seas of a globalized marketplace. Or, to apply Benjamin’s felicitous expression, we might conclude that Gates reads his own “fate” in the brushwork of a painting that, originally, was addressed to a different, historical subject.

What we encounter here is not so much the obsolescence of a maritime theme, but its actual survival – or transvaluation – within a neo-liberal world of limitless competition. To put this differently, the neo-liberal ideology of ‘free trade’ is linked in a genealogical sense to the legal concept of the free seas or *mare liberum*. This idea was first codified in a juridical sense by Hugo Grotius in 1609 (although it was not completely new) and came to stand for a realm of free (maritime) trade without any governmental restrictions. The open seas formed a lawless realm “beyond the line,” which did not fall under the jurisdiction of any sovereign nation-state. The *mare liberum* provided an emergent capitalist system with its first, global terrain of primitive accumulation. It was to become a kind of testing ground of entrepreneurial skill. In fact, it was in relation to the unruly domain of the open seas that the concept of economic risk was first articulated (as well as the financial practice of insurance). Thus in *The Wealth of Nations* Adam Smith would coin the

resonant phrase “lottery of the sea” to refer to the wagers of the capitalist within an unpredictable marketplace.45

Schmitt was to associate this hazardous zone of the open seas with yet another, juridical, concept, namely, the liminal state of exception, which “bases itself in an obviously analogous fashion on the idea of delimited, free and empty space.”46 The state of exception consists of a temporary spatial sphere in which every law is suspended; it is a space that is “juridically empty.” What we need to understand is that such a (maritime) state of exception is not external to the Schmittian nomos of the land; rather, it is included in the nomos at the very moment of its foundation. The state of exception, therefore, does not simply refer to a geographical territory; it belongs to a strangely twisted, topological species of space. The state of exception is both exterior and anterior to the territorial space of sovereign power, and there is one historical figure that personifies this paradoxical space in full, namely, the pirate.

As said, the mare liberum suspended the terrestrial law of private property. The open seas were a domain of radical liberty, that is, a region where goods became “free for the taking.” In various places, for instance, Schmitt draws our attention to the intrinsic connection between the legal notion of the mare liberum and the extra-legal act of piracy. Once, Schmitt writes, the open seas knew “no limits, no boundaries, no consecrated sites, no sacred orientations, no law, and no property.”47 With the rise of mercantile capitalism, a very thin line was drawn between the activities of the private merchant, state-authorized privateer and stateless buccaneer – a line that was easily subject to confusion or transgression.48 As long as the sea formed, in Schmitt’s words, “a zone

45 Sekula has also made a film by this title.
48 As David J. Starkey notes, attacks upon seaborne trade “were often perpetrated by the crews of naval and privateering vessels sanctioned by their respective states to commit acts of violence upon specified targets – usually enemy traders in wartime. At the same time, this colonial and commercial world attracted and spawned a range of predators whose operations were deemed illegal by contemporaries. Such commerce raiders were viewed as pirates. Of course, this was a highly subjective viewpoint, for the law of the sea was more a reflection of
free for booty” where “the pirate could ply his wicked trade with a clear conscience,” little distinction existed between merchant and pirate. Both set sail in order to test their luck at accumulating wealth by means of appropriation. And to drive this point home, Schmitt reminds us that the root of the word “pirate” comes from the Greek verb peiran which means to test, to try, or to risk.49

Yet, if the early capitalist and the pirate shared similar goals, they would become mortal enemies in due course. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Caribbean pirates, or buccaneers, established a cosmopolitan community of outcasts, outlaws and runaway slaves that directly challenged the sovereign power of European states and their proxies, the colonial trading companies. Whereas these buccaneers owed their freedom to the mare liberum, by the same stroke they were excluded from the capitalist practice of free trade. As a result the Caribbean pirates developed a consciousness of themselves as a stateless brotherhood, an egalitarian society, which ruthlessly resisted the monopolistic structure of mercantile capitalism. In this sense, the pirate helped fashion the prototype of a social rebel, an exceptional, illegitimate subject who became branded as the absolute enemy of humanity in legal discourse. But, once again, he did not represent a simple antagonist to the sovereign ruler; rather, in Rancière’s terms, he represented a kind of “surplus” – an exception that confirms the rule as well as exceeds it.

Such a maritime state of exception would not last. Britannia’s rule of the waves, or sea-appropriation [Seenahme], would bring an end to the radical freedom of the oceans as well as the “Golden Age” of pirates. Nevertheless, the ghosts of pirates continue to dwell within the present. Contrary, perhaps, to Broodthaers’ days, the pirate is not at all an obsolete figure anymore. This archaic foe has returned, roaming not only the international waters off the coasts of so-called failed nations, but the high seas of the Internet conducting so-called acts of piracy against the laws of intellectual copyright. At least for one scholar, piracy is “both a reality and a metaphor for the neoliberal, postnational age,” whereby

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49 Schmitt, The Nomos of the Earth, p. 43.
it is not certain whether pirates “represent a dominant, neoliberal Gemeinschaft that is exaggerated to monstrous proportions – an ethos of take what you can – or whether they represent a free-culture revolution that may spell the end of millennial capitalism.”50

Drapeau

“Like dreams we can’t remember. They are swimming elsewhere in a world where Shark, Knife, Cook are synonyms.”51 Onto this world stage, where the former romance of the sea has degenerated into a set of indifferent clichés, steps Marcel Broodthaers. We can now fully grasp how the amateur painting of Bateau Tableau operated as a theatrical prop which Broodthaers used to conjure the allegorical attitude of early modernity. The painting came to stand, at a very far remove, for the deeply melancholic desire of the bourgeois subject to be transported to a remote, exotic paradise. In this sense, the amateur painting functions as a kind of memory screen of the nineteenth century and the material surface of the tableau is derealized a second time, not only by a modernist desire for abstraction, but by the Romantic desire to imagine oneself stranded on a desert island, far from the rising tides of industrial capitalism: “Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans un île/aux captifs, aux vaincus… à bien d’autres encor!”52

Leaving nothing to chance, Broodthaers in subtle fashion connects his imaginary Sunday painter to a Romantic yearning to embark on a sea voyage that promises to deliver a bountiful reward of sensuous delight.53 He does so in an understated manner, claiming that the amateur artist did not paint what he was familiar with as he “would rather paint a landscape that is not his own.” Elsewhere, Broodthaers expands upon this comment, animating the painting in further detail. At first, he seems absorbed by the enumeration of iconographic details, but then he

52 These are the final two lines of Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne.”
53 Note also this comment by Benjamin in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 149: “Out-of-the-way details, such as the melancholic’s inclination for long journeys, crop up: hence the horizon of the sea in the background of Dürer’s Melencolia.”
strikes a more allegorical note, calling to mind the Baroque emblem of
good fortune represented by the billowing sails of a ship:

In the foreground of the composition: a buoy, some driftwood, a row-
ing-boat manned by Bretons, identifiable from the red smock and black
jacket worn at that time. Everything seems to indicate that the fleet is ap-
proaching a port in Finistère with sails swelled by the breeze, but because
the sea is not very rough we can deduce that this light breeze is not all that
fills the sails, that the principal force stretching them is the abundance of a
victorious wind.54

Here, Broodthaers seems to observe the boat from afar while standing
ashore. But in the following passage he switches his vantage point, imag-
ing himself to be standing on the deck of the ship in close proximity
to the fishermen. At the same time, he drops the flowery language as he
listens to the men converse about more mundane matters of yield and
profit:

Looking shorewards, to where wives, families, and by-standers excitedly
pass on the good news of their return, are two fishermen, sketched in out-
line leaning against the ship’s rail and reckoning up, if we could overhear
them, their share in the profits. The hold is full of cod, not to mention the
turbot and the sole….55

As we read this text, we switch in swift succession between different
gears of symbolic discourse. One system of value tips into another, sim-
ilar to the way, as Broodthaers states, the separate words tableau and ba-
etau will begin to blur when we repeat them often enough in succession:
“just where the tongue twists” [là où la langue fourche] one word will be
said in place of the other. Thus, we could just as well be holding forth
on the latest boat as on the last painting.”56 Clearly, then, it was this text
of Broodthaers that is quoted in Pro Testing under the addition of one
extra word: drapeau. But what does this nearly homonymic sequence,
this folding of language, contribute to our reflections on allegorical ex-
pression?

Broodthaers’ statement enters the seascape of the amateur painter
into three different systems of value production, which we can identify
by means of the three terms tableau, bateau and drapeau. Each symbolic
system is organized around a particular master signifier. In the case of

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tableau – or the aesthetic system of pictorial value – this signifier is the artist’s signature which functions as a pure marker of style and originality. (It is worthwhile to note that the painting that is appropriated by Broodthaers actually lacks a signature, drawing its aesthetic value into doubt.) In the case of bateau – or the capitalist system of exchange value – it is money which represents the most absolute form of value. Money makes it possible to submit all concrete forms of physical labour, whether the “useful” work of the fisherman or the “leisurely” work of the amateur painter, and the objects they produce, to a similar process of commodification: first by means of an expropriation of the worker’s labour power and secondly by means of an accumulation of surplus value. Hence, the exorbitant price that Broodthaers must pay to possess his “worthless” painting (which he then enters into a further cycle of capitalist reproduction). And, finally, in the case of drapeau – or the political system of national identity – it is the flag that stands in for the sovereign power of the state and its notion of citizenship, which is based on the notion of a native birth-right.\(^57\) Indeed this forms a bio-political system of equivalence – a birth becomes a nation – which is the target of a sublime parody in another work of Broodthaers, his Fémur de la femme française (1965) which consists of a thigh bone painted in the colors of the French flag.

Signature, money, flag: each sign stands for the totality of a symbolic order as such. In other words, the systematicity of a signifying system depends on such “figures” which make all figuration within a system possible and, therefore, they also point to the very limits of such a system. Bateau Tableau performs an endless back-and-forth movement between the registers of bateau, tableau, drapeau; it enacts a twisting of one tongue, one langue, one symbolic system into another. It is rather this performance which connects the work to a “state of exception” – in both its juridical and linguistic sense – than any recollection of the forgotten dreams of maritime freedom or rebellion.

The function of the allegorical procedure is to seize upon such signs which operate at the very limit of a symbolic order and to hold them hostage, as it were. Such is the deconstructive potential of the allegor-

\(^{57}\) Thus Giorgio Agamben’s statement that “the principle of nativity and the principle of sovereignty, which were separated in the ancien régime (where birth marked only the emergence of a sujet, a subject), are now irrevocably united in the body of the ‘sovereign subject’ so that the foundation of the new nation-state may be constituted.” Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 128.
ical: it shows what cannot be signified within a symbolic system – the very limits of the system – by means of “the interruption or breakdown of the process of signification.” Therefore, the condition that makes signification possible, becomes also the condition of the very impossibility of meaning. It impedes a further expansion of the symbolic system; it sets a boundary to the sovereignty of a symbolic order. Giorgio Agamben has linked this paradoxical limit of language [langue] to Schmitt’s concept of the state of exception. In turn, we may associate this turbulent or “lawless” zone with a piratical practice of allegory that causes the self-sufficiency of an ideological system to buckle. Once the signifiers – bateau, tableau, drapeau – are stripped of their symbolic value and jettisoned upon the waves, they may reconnect with other ensembles of floating signs.

Or, if I may abuse this maritime metaphor a bit further, one might state that the allegorical method construes a temporary life raft, an act of bricolage for the castaways of the ship of state. Recall in this regard how Quintilian, the Roman rhetorician, used this very example to define allegory as a “continuous metaphor.” Along similar lines, one might imagine the ship of state – as some nineteenth-century lyricists were prone to do – as being assembled from all the natural resources that a single nation can muster. Conceived in this fashion, the ship of state becomes an intrinsic symbol of the territorial integrity of the nation – an equation of sovereignty with a “native land.” But no such ship corresponds to our allegorical vessel. Its figure of figures, as Roland Barthes noted, is not the imperial ship of state but the Argo, the ship of the Argonauts. The Argo may always sail under the same flag, but it is constantly reconstituted from different elements. In a phenomenal sense, therefore, this “eminently structural object” is never what it seems: it will appear, at one and the same time, as both pregnant with meaning and devoid of all sense. The Argo, Barthes writes, is “luminous and white.” It forms both a surplus and a void, or what goes by the name of an empty signifier (although Barthes’ preferred term was the “neutral.”) What the empty signifier represents is the contradictory notion of a signifier without a signified, like the white monochrome that is both the first and the final tableau within the pictorial system

59 Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 25.
60 Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes, Berkeley 1994, p. 46.
of modernism. Open signifiers exist on the very threshold of the linguistic and the non-linguistic – the empty signifier is both excluded from the order of signification and included as an integral part of the system. Without empty signifiers, like the empty square on a chess board, no language game would be possible. Which is why empty signifiers matter to politics, to quote the title of an essay by Ernesto Laclau which has greatly informed the present argument.

This is the crux: the empty signifier is the pivot upon which the allegorical procedure turns. When the signifier assumes a state of pure equivalence within a specific linguistic system, it gains the ability to acquire another value within another system of differences. The empty signifier represents two sides of the same coin: it represents both the value of pure difference and pure equivalence. Or, in the case of Pro Testing, the empty signifier is represented by the ‘absent fullness’ of the white placard that, on its reverse side, bears the imprint of a specific political cause. What we need to bear in mind is that in the case of a radical disorganization of the social fabric (i.e. a state of exception), order is only present as something absent, that is, as an empty signifier. “In this sense,” Laclau observes, “various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack.”

This “filling” function, whereby the site of the empty signifier becomes occupied, will always be unstable and temporary. To return to Rancière’s distinction between the people and the population, the struggle of one group within society might stand as an (allegorical) model for the struggle of others – but then this one cause is both expanded and reduced to become the surface of inscription for all other causes. Its banner must represent all others and the “people” threaten to disappear into the sea of the “population.” In other words, the emancipatory project of this dissident group is emptied of its specific content: “the chain of equivalences which are unified around this signifier tend to empty it, and to blur its connection with the actual content with which it was originally associated.”

Where does this leave us? Have we not simply come full circle? What I wish to demonstrate by means of the notion of the empty signifier is that post-modernist strategy of allegory represents but one such historical cycle, like Broodthaers’ slide carousel, which drops one image

61 Laclau, “Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” p. 44.
after another into the same slot, causing at each turn of the mechanism the “constituent lack” of the symbolic investments of modernism to be revealed. Yet Pro Testing puts another such image carousel in motion. Here is how Eran Schaerf explains the film’s rotational structure:

The circular form of the instrument and the position of the camera called for staging an endless demonstration. If you think of the way demonstrations are reported of (filmed/photographed), usually from the side, where the onlookers are; or from the front, whereby the placards in the foreground cover the ones behind. So, the instrument offered a way for a report of a demonstration that does not prefer any placard to another; a demonstration that is theoretically endless.63

The “endless demonstration” is the degree zero of demonstration. It is a manifestation without any specific cause, but also a manifestation of the most general cause, namely, the absolute right to demonstrate at any time and in any place. To realize this absolute right to demonstrate would be to fulfill the project of emancipatory politics, to establish a fully egalitarian society. But a political theory of the empty signifier shows why such a communitarian state can never be reached. There is no positive signified for such an unavowable community, only a blank placard that is carried on an arbitrary occasion.64

Before concluding my argument, let me slot one more art historical slide into place. Another reference of Pro Testing, which I have not mentioned thus far, is Anna Halprin’s Blank Placard Dance of 1967 [Abb. 78]. During this event, a group of performers all dressed in white, marched through downtown San Francisco carrying white signs. Each performer stayed ten feet apart from the others so that the march could not be construed as a demonstration according to local law. “My idea,” Halprin has stated, “was that there were so many protests going on and this way each person watching us could just imagine whatever protest slogan they wanted on the placards.”65 Even so the Blank Placard Dance was itself conceived as a response to an earlier street performance by Halprin, which became known as The Bust and enacted a more explicit

63 Schaerf, email to author.
64 As Maurice Blanchot notes, the “right to equality in fraternity” can only be conceived in the paradoxical form of an ‘unavowable’ community that exists, at best, only in the fleeting moment of a “demonstration without project” that refuses to build new institutions of political power. Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, Barrytown 1988, p. 30.
form of political allegory. During *The Bust* a group of white women were instructed to strenuously resist the attempt of three black men to wrap them in lengths of brown butcher paper. This performance came to an unexpected halt when the police arrived on the scene and proceeded to arrest three of the performers (one woman and two of the men).

What Halprin’s two performances suggest is that the gestation of the properly political act is as much the product of chance as motivated by a prior cause. The allegorical principles of the contingent and arbitrary are therefore intimately linked to the political event. Or, in the words of Schaerf:

> A cause is what locates a demonstration in place and time and a demonstration without a cause demonstrates the act of demonstrating; and it offers (especially outdoors) the interaction with chance, or the unknown, which I think is in the core of political action. The Bil‘in demonstration depicted in the placards is somehow between a “specific cause” and endless demonstration. It is a re-enactment of the Marmara Affair, embedded in a weekly demonstration against the Wall. So, it is commemorating a specific event while demonstrating “generally” and “endlessly” for justice. The specific and the general blur into one another the more the demonstration turned into a routine weekly activity.66

Chance is what makes an organized event, such as a public demonstration, unpredictable. The common identification with a particular cause is, of course, what motivates a crowd in the first instance to come together and converse in a public space. Thus, the Greek noun *agora* give us the verb *agoreuein*, which means “to speak openly” or “to speak in an assembly.” Yet this *agoreuein* becomes allegorical once a specific cause is able to link up with other causes, that is to say, when it presents an empty signifier to another local struggle which it may latch onto. Which is what happened in the case of the re-enactment of the *Mavi Marmara* affair in Bil‘in.

The model boat of Bil‘in sails under two symbolic flags, one representing the sovereign nation-state of Turkey, the other the “state of Palestine” which exists in a rather ambiguous state of legality. One might say that Palestine is a nation still at sea which is to use a less figurative manner of speech than it may seem. As noted at the outset of this essay, the Occupied Palestinian Territories know no geography of stable, static boundaries. In this frontier zone, which Weizman describes as “structured chaos,” there is no single center of power, only multiple and diffuse

66 Schaerf, email to author.
relationships of force making it nearly impossible to clearly distinguish interior from exterior. Even the separation wall, one of multiple barriers, is constantly rerouted, only to be tunneled under. And so Weizman impresses upon us yet another maritime metaphor: the dynamic morphology of the frontier is cast in the cartographic shape of an open sea that is dotted “with multiplying archipelagos of externally alienated and internally homogenous ethno-national enclaves.” And in this unique territorial ecosystem, he writes, various other zones, those of political piracy, “humanitarian” crisis, barbaric violence, full citizenship, “weak citizenship,” or no citizenship at all, can exist adjacent to, within or over each other.

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_Bateau, Tableau, Drapeau_. As we have seen, this ensemble of signs can be coached into saying many things. It may, for instance, give rise to an emblem of good fortune which was common during the Baroque period: a ship lifted by white-crested waves, its flag hoisted high and sails swelling with the force of a providential wind. The spinning wheel is another such emblem of fortune or, more appropriately, _risk_. It was in reaction to the “lottery of the sea” that capitalism developed various strategies of risk management; one of the first such stratagems being the invention of the insurance policy. The shipmasters of capitalism would develop many such financial instruments to help them navigate the high seas and ward off disaster: stocks, swaps, options, futurities, derivatives. To such instruments of risk control, we might also add the logistic processes of containerization and automatization which Sekula has recorded in such illuminating detail. Beyond the line, everything now appears under control. So we are now invited to become “lost at sea” for the inflated cost of a ticket to a movie or an amusement park. But the wave-tossed ship of allegory does not succumb to such symbolic stasis. _Pro Testing_ does not invoke the Baroque emblem of a wheel of fortune, but creates the allegorical mechanism of a carousel, which keeps revolving around an empty slot of “absent fullness.” What takes place in this slotted place is a (de)composition of the binary axes of signs from which a symbolic field is constructed. It is here, in the exceptional space of the empty signifier, that the cartographic rules of capitalism are suspended and longitude and latitude become confused. It is here that
the ghost-like ship of the Argo – luminous and white – is able draw its errant course across the blank surface of a sea that has not yet submitted to some territorial authority. It is here at the edges of the symbolic world of language that the triad *bateau, tableau, drapeau* have not yet combined into a stable geometry of meaning: “A cube, sphere, a pyramid or a cylinder obedient to the laws of the sea...”

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