

Faultlines: Art and the State

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SUMMARY

Opening with a hypothesis on a link between art and politics, this paper focuses on key features of the work of Marina Gržinić and Mairéad McClean. Texts by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben are examined with respect to their relevance to each artist as well as political governance in Ireland. Gržinić's development of Foucault's analyses—a shift in governmentality from Biopolitics to Necropolitics—is posited, and the status of art is considered.

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In their introduction to a collection of seminar papers originally presented at Tate Britain, Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne claim that an 'inherent' connection between art and politics emerged in Europe during the period from the Enlightenment through to post-Revolutionary France. They suggest that in modern philosophy a gap appeared 'between ideality and the actual' in which the problem of aesthetics—the nature of beauty—becomes a displacement, a displacement for 'a "failed" political desire'.¹ The authors perceive traces of this gap in the reconfigurations of the aesthetic in recent philosophical discourse. What Alliez and Osborne suggest is a way of understanding the relation between art and politics that has historical traces but also allows for a view of art as a spectre with sub-conscious resonances. Whether it is possible to claim an inherent connection to politics across the spectrum of contemporary art, it is fair to say that in general there is an ideological dimension to art

which is produced and reproduced and may be directly or indirectly political. While ideology is involved in the language(s) of art, art comprises a complex of attitudes and values within which the political may surface. None of this is straightforward. The language used in and around art is not necessarily consistent, involves choices, and is open to interpretation. Alliez and Osborne's suggestion is probably based on observation of historical tendencies both inside and outside the context of art but, since it is an idea that is not constricted to any one ideological field, and given the reconfigurations of recent politics, it is open to appropriation across the political spectrum.

More tangibly, Alliez and Osborne allude to a range of late twentieth century discursive models which, independently or in conjunction, serve as conductors in how we frame contemporary art. The catch-all title they offer is 'post-aesthetic', indicating what are in part responses to avant-gardism and its aftermath. While 'critical theory' is significant among the models identified, in fact critical theory has evolved as an umbrella term for several theoretical approaches. A common characteristic is that 'critical theory' offers a critique of the artistic and political establishment and often takes an explicitly oppositional stance. The artist and theorist Marina Gržinić draws on the legacies of critical theory in her critique of recent art and the structures that support it.² In her view art is becoming depoliticised; it is now an 'apolitical niche'. Similarly, in the introduction to her book co-authored with Šefik Tatlić, Gržinić claims that there has been an emptying of content from politics 'in favour of aestheticization of pure ideology', a process that 'represses the possibilities of production of political ideologies'.³ Rather than existing as distinct fields, art and politics are sucked into replicas of one another in

a vortex of pure image, less and less grounded in ‘reality’.

Where Alliez and Osborne use ‘politics’ as a concept and as a principle, Gržinić sees ‘politics’ in its ‘reality’ as serving the self-interest of the elite, and ultimately, of the dominant world order. She isn’t primarily interested in art as a domain; she is interested in how oppositional art may yet be an agent for change, change which necessarily involves a different kind of politics. While all agree on the embeddedness of the political in art, they differ fundamentally in focus. Alliez and Osborne are first and foremost concerned with (internal) concepts and subjectivities, while Gržinić sees art as an (external) agency to effect change in the world. This essay will focus on two foundational elements in Gržinić’s argument before relating these to the Irish context. The work of artist Mairéad McClean is a significant reference point in this discussion. Finally, the essay returns to Alliez and Osborne’s reflections on formations in art, and its current status is questioned.

Gržinić’s premise, one widely shared, is that global capitalism is the major driving force in today’s world which designates the principal tasks of government as the maintenance of the economy, its infrastructure, and its citizens. It is this which underpins the capitalist global network. Rather than focus on party politics she concentrates on governance, that is, how ruling cohorts distribute their executive powers.⁴ The idea of governmentality as an exercise in biopolitics is primarily associated with Michel Foucault as elaborated in his lectures, interviews, and texts from the mid-1970s. Foucault noted that modern government invades all aspects of our lives in respect to how populations are organised not only in terms of the law, the economy, and the work environment, but also in terms of the family,

health, education, and so on. He sets out how the exercise of power has evolved from sovereign edict—often directed towards combat, war, or executions—to a modern form. Where power was previously demonstrated by death at the command of the sovereign, a defining feature of power today is its focus on life. The emergence of the modern entails the governmental organisation of life; in short, biopolitics.

In biopolitical governance life is scrutinised and regulated; statistics are compiled and norms are established. Norms are set not only through parliament and the judiciary but through a proliferation of institutions all with their apparatuses and techniques. Power no longer resides in any single source. What this represents doesn’t simply reflect a humane shift from the ever-present threat of death to the probability of a better life; the management of life operates in the knowledge that a regulated populace makes for a stronger, more productive workforce. As Foucault would have it, this raises the question of ‘life’ in a new way. ‘Life’ in the biopolitical regime is a double-edged matter. Populations may no longer subsist under the imminent threat of death, but, when societies are geared to economic productivity, the nature of living becomes an issue. Hence questions about the relation of value and life are pertinent to the kind of politics that now prevail, as are questions of where the arts and humanities sit on this scale.

While Foucault scrutinises aspects of biopolitics through numerous lectures, interviews, and texts, Gržinić chooses just one of his texts to identify a new direction: Foucault’s 1975–76 lectures at the Collège de France, later published as *Society Must Be Defended*. In the last section Foucault asks why killing is justified within biopolitical governance when death is by and large hidden, and forensic focus is placed

on life? Foucault's answer is that racism plays a part; racism that may be pared down to the belief it is necessary to be 'biologically stronger' than others.⁵ He identifies historical wars and colonialism as antecedents for this apparent paradox. The Foucault text provides Gržinić with a link to a 'successive' stage: from biopolitics (bio [*life*] politics) to necropolitics (bio [*death*] politics).⁶ Her critique centres on Europe as a political and economic block, and on the conflicting nationalisms within what is sometimes identified as Southeastern Europe or West Balkans (she supports critical art practices active in the region). She is critical of the administration of the European Union's external border and the enforcement of what is sometimes referred to as 'Fortress Europe'. Gržinić regards European policies in relation to areas such as immigration as at least in part founded in racism. Drawing on decolonial theory she argues that biopolitical governance is tipping towards a new form: necropolitics. Europe, with its history of colonialism, is (at very least) complicit in many of the wars and famines occurring beyond its borders. A most obvious example is that the European Union, in order to protect 'our' interests, acts to contain refugees outside its borders, meaning that in effect we are increasingly implicated in the many casualties which result. The essential feature of necropolitics, from a European perspective, involves a shift from the biopolitics of life to a new form of death in which governmentality doesn't command killing so much as allows it to happen. This new form of proxy death has rapidly become the norm which Gržinić seeks to critique and contest.

In Ireland such discourse perhaps does not receive the attention it deserves. To date we have been largely immured from the immigration 'crisis' happening across large parts of continental Europe where migrants and refugees have

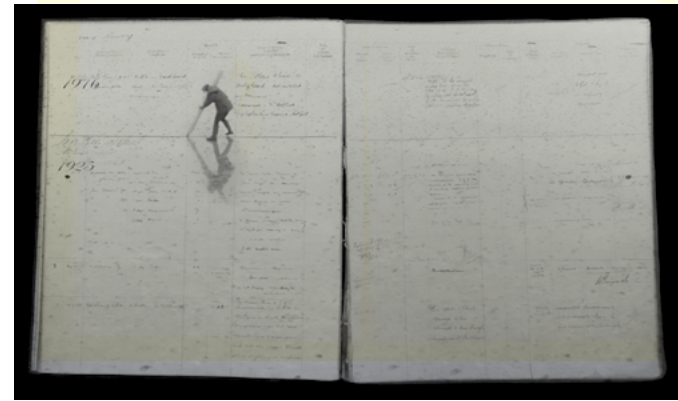
been targeted as the cause of social problems instead of being understood as symptoms of global neoliberal policies. Officially at least, in Ireland racism is regarded as peripheral to the body politic and therefore easily downplayed. However, if we assume a biopolitical perspective there is much within Irish politics that is deserving of scrutiny. One of Gržinić's key sources on the transition from biopolitics to necropolitics is the work of philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. She praises the distinctions Agamben makes between a life of possibility as opposed to 'forms of life' or 'bare life'. Forms of life are the fragmentations and formalisations of life under biopolitics. In Gržinić's terms, the depoliticisation of art and the aestheticisation of politics are symptomatic. Against 'forms of life', Agamben posits 'form-of-life' as life, not reducible merely to fact, but as possibility.

Agamben exposes the logical contradictions and incompatibilities embedded in the use of the state of exception, or emergency powers, by pointing out that in utilising powers to suspend the law (emergency powers invoked usually because of a perceived crisis), there exists a paradox, a contradiction that cannot be reconciled.⁷ Far from being simply a suspension of law that allows the state to operate outside its lawful limits, the *possibility* of invoking a state of exception makes it effectively part of the apparatus of the law even while it has no content in law. In tracing the extensive use of the state of exception through the twentieth century Agamben demonstrates that this outside-inside paradox has become the norm. For Agamben the law assumes enormous power in governmental control; legislation is a significant element in the biopolitical machine and is to the detriment of life. The law is also implicated in the concept of bare life, a term Agamben uses in respect to those without legal status.⁸ As he points out,

the removal of legal status is effected through sovereign powers. But it creates the same paradox as the state of exception because the removal of legal status requires invoking law. In Agamben's words: 'inside and outside do not exclude each other, but rather blur with each other'.⁹

Mairéad McClean's films often feature ordinary people trying to cope with forms of control that they might see as illegitimate, senseless, or both. Whether the camera follows actual events or enactments by a performer, people are seen to challenge or circumvent authority, or to improvise with their own actions. At times humour is employed to expose absurdity in rule-based systems, and at times the natural environment is shown to expose impotence as the system interfaces with nature. *A Line was Drawn* (2019) is a fourteen-minute film which reflects on the British establishment of Northern Ireland in 1922 and its consequence: a border that separates the six counties from the rest of Ireland. The partition line is shown up in McClean's work, not just for its arbitrariness in the natural and pre-existing man-made environment, but also for the abstract way it was conceived in the first place. The focal point of the film is a solitary female figure who lugs a life-sized pencil across beach and countryside and rows a boat across open water. She is filmed in both Super-8 and video; these sections are interspersed with extensive use of British archive film of varied subject matter. Fast edits are used on this material which ranges from simplistic pedagogic footage about ethnic lineage to propaganda footage of British surveillance and army patrols during the 'Troubles'.

Original voiceover on this material is male and pointedly in Received Pronunciation, or 'King's English', a factor underpinned by another archive sequence illustrating



↑ Mairéad McClean, *A Line Was Drawn* (14 mins., 2019)

'proper' English pronunciation. There are a few contrasting images associated with 'Irish' identity, which are equally clichéd. Two other voiceovers are heard. One is a female voice (McClean's), repeating a refrain 'once upon a time ...' as though the border existed in an imaginary place. The second is a male Irish voice, reading from a logbook of the post-partition era which painstakingly recorded the wares and livestock seized by customs officers that people attempted to bring into Northern Ireland via unofficial routes. The original logbook is shown on screen and the woman with the pencil is superimposed as she draws a line across the open pages.¹⁰ The consequence of tariffs imposed on goods crossing the border was that they served to accentuate trade in purely economic terms. And, as shown in McClean's film, this recording of goods impounded due to border-enforcement highlights the lower echelons of bureaucracy as impersonal, thankless book-keeping, reducing the border question to the

quantification of what was at the outset local, low-level practice. Smuggling later became a large-scale business.

The border as everyday reality and as symbol of division represents much more than book-keeping. Mairéad McClean's earlier film, *For the Record* (2008), is an enquiry into what happened to her father between 1958 and 1962,¹¹ when he was interned during the 'Border Campaign', a period of active opposition to the border led by the Irish Republican Army (IRA). While the severity of this campaign was minor compared to that of the Rising to Civil-War period (1916–1923), or during 'The Troubles' (1968–1994), it was nevertheless seen as sufficient threat for the Northern Ireland authorities to intensify their enforcement of the 'Special Powers Act' of 1922 and imprisonment without charge was imposed. P.J. McClean was one of those interned in Crumlin Road Gaol in Belfast. *For the Record* recounts Mr McClean's time there and his attempts, fifty years on, to find what pretext the authorities may have had for his internment. For most of the intervening period, official documentation of his case was classified and, even in 2007/8 when the film was made, much of the content in documents requested from the authorities came in redacted form. What emerges is that police intelligence had concluded IRA activists were planning attacks on defence forces, but their net was widened to pick up those identified as potential political opposition before any IRA attack had materialised. No evidence was ever forthcoming that Mr McClean had any direct or indirect involvement. His research leads him to the conclusion that he was interned because he failed to 'toe the line' and a justification for his internment was concocted retrospectively.

While they share similar subject matter, *A Line was Drawn*



↑ Mairéad McClean, *For the Record* (54 mins., 2008)

and *For the Record* are markedly different in construction. The former draws on artistic conventions in its mix of filmic mediums, edited and collaged with both documents and imaginary elements. *For the Record* is a fifty-four-minute film which is ostensibly closer to documentary in how it records an individual's search to uncover details of a traumatic period in their past. Mr McClean is seen at his table going through his memories and his records, and later, the records as released by the Northern Ireland Office. He is seen checking his view of events with his fellow internees and visiting Crumlin Road Gaol, now a tourist attraction. But *For the Record* is not conventional documentary. The apparatus of filmmaking is exposed; for example, Mr McClean is shown preparing to say his piece to camera. He appears comfortable in his role in the filmmaking. Where *A Line was Drawn* contains many sequences with fast edits of archive material, use of older mediums is much more limited in *For the Record*. There is a short low-resolution sequence of a dog on a chain; there is a shot of a horse and

a photograph of a youthful Mr McClean riding bareback. These images cut into the recording in the present and operate, as it were, in the subconscious. They switch between the fact of incarceration and metaphors for a state of freedom. They are similar to elements present in *A Line was Drawn* and their subjective appeal is their aspiration to 'freedom'. *For the Record* is also a reflection on time past, time present, and the time of the making of the film. The monotonous, repetitive dullness of life in Crumlin Road Gaol is duly documented but the viewer also gets glimpses of a quiet life in the McClean family home as the elderly couple go about their own daily routines. Mr McClean is seen cutting back shrubbery from the conservatory to allow in the light. He makes one decision at a time as to where cuts are to be made. In this way, the action of opening-up a room to the light and the sky stands in contrast to prison existence where decisions are outside the prisoner's control. The movements within the family home, and the research undertaken therein, are seen to evolve at a deliberate pace which is in stark contrast to the prison regime where routine is fixed for all inmates and where release date is unknown. The film ends, not with the credits, but with thoughts on the effects of internment on family, and on women. The McClean family were subjected to another round of internment nine years on, and a later McClean film will turn to her mother's response to that episode.¹²

Events in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1994 were of course much more widespread and destructive than the earlier 'Border Campaign'. After the re-introduction of internment in 1971, direct rule from Britain came into force from 1972. In many respects the next two decades tested the limits of the British authority's observance of their own rules. Breaches varied between the excesses

in the treatment of internees, to 'the acceptable level of violence'¹³ as a British minister pronounced, to the covert operations in the so-called 'dirty war' which extended from subversion tactics to alleged killings and assassinations. South of the border, the Republic too has a long history in its use of internment and, during the 'Troubles', the state enforced a level of media censorship that surpassed the British. In 1976, Section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act was amended which effectively censored specified organisations from broadcasting. For Agamben the use of the state of exception on the pretext of defence from terrorism can lead to hardened positions and ultimately to civil war,¹⁴ but he has also researched the history of the emergence of the economy as the supreme constituent of government strategy.¹⁵ In an Irish context this is most pertinent in the aftermath of the economic crash in 2008. After the establishment of the Fine Gael and Labour Coalition Government in 2011 an unprecedentedly powerful

↓ Mairéad McClean, *For the Record* (54 mins., 2008)



government sub-committee was created to address the crisis. The Economic Emergency Council (EMC) consisted of the four most senior cabinet members and was supplemented by civil servants and political advisers. Little has emerged as to what took place at the weekly meetings of the committee, but it is questionable to what extent decisions made were referred to cabinet much less discussed in the Dáil.¹⁶ While the opposition leader questioned the constitutionality of the EMC¹⁷ a prominent academic defended it by likening it to, of all things, a war cabinet.¹⁸ For now, at least, economics seems to have succeeded armed conflict as the ultimate defence of the state. The EMC was in existence until 2016 when a new government was formed, and the economy deemed to be in recovery.

A consequence of the febrile atmosphere following the economic crash and the harsh measures which were enforced to stabilise the economy has been that government is more likely to ignore the recommendations of advisory bodies.¹⁹ After severe cuts during the crisis a part restoration of funding for agencies was accompanied with the establishment in late 2016 of *Creative Ireland*, a body which is directly under the auspices of the minister with responsibility for the arts. Without the degree of autonomy often enshrined in legislation for older state agencies, *Creative Ireland* is more closely entwined with government oversight of funding decisions. The language employed in *Creative Ireland's* literature indicates a shift in emphasis away from visual art as a distinct field to 'culture' in general. Funding privileges projects which will enhance 'individual and societal wellbeing'.²⁰ When interpreted from the perspective of the biopolitical regime, 'wellbeing' represents an evolution from a mid-twentieth century emphasis on 'health' as physical health, to a twenty-first

century model where 'health' is both physical and mental. In this model, art and creativity are seen to contribute towards the good but also, productive, society much more closely than before. In short, with funding as carrot, art-related work sits firmly within the economic spectrum. The issue is not that general wellbeing is undesirable but that, in this societal settlement, art is a cog in an apparatus that delimits its role and its aspirations.

Alliez and Osborne's account of art theory as post-aesthetic is an appropriate adjunct for the concept of art as open-ended, a late-modern concept and something which has been very positive for creative practice. But that open-endedness may now have turned into a negative. Rapid change means that cognitive mapping of contemporary art is more difficult given the fracturing taking place. In this, various developments may be cited here, from the particular (new mediums that require collaborations with other disciplines) to the general (the bombardment of instantaneous, global communications, the relentless expansion of monetarisation and financialisation, and so on), all tied to the refrain of social progress. These external forces are at work, as never before, in both the conceptual and material aspects of art production. The academic John Byrne, in terms reminiscent of the late twentieth century, remarks that 'contemporary art has long since become indistinguishable from all other forms of popular culture and mass media'. The assumption that art is just different or superior, he continues, is illusory self-deception. Such pre-suppositions, 'denies the critical proximity and interdependence of contemporary art practice to the production of meaning within society'.²⁰ While Byrne's comments are valid, the predicament is surely less straightforward. If Mairéad McClean's film

For the Record may be categorised as documentary, the way it is constructed draws, not on mainstream documentary, but on ideas and methods developed in video art over the decades. For example, it shows itself as a film that is simultaneously document and artifice. These are qualities which may well become even more marginalised but to argue for the maintenance of this or any other art discipline invites criticism of elitist paranoia in the face of mass culture. The more substantive issue is in Byrne's taunt that the production of meaning is not exclusive but operates through the social. The point is taken, but it turns on what is meant by 'critical proximity'. If Byrne intends this as the ability to exercise critical faculties, it should be stressed that criticality involves the use of tools. Tools are for specific purposes and require an established home where they can be nurtured. If art is to acquire these things, new political strategies are needed.

ENDNOTES

1. Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne, 'Introduction' in *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 9.
2. This synopsis of Gržinić's theoretical work is based on Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014). While the Introduction is jointly authored, the remainder of the book is in two sections by each author. The Gržinić chapters were those considered for the purposes of this paper. Gržinić has since developed a more complex schema. See, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEoaq_UE7JQ&t=3257s.
3. Gržinić and Tatlić, xi.
4. Two important foundations in Gržinić's work are Michel Foucault (Gržinić and Tatlić, 23) and Giorgio Agamben (Gržinić and Tatlić, 22). They are central to this paper.
5. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, translated by David Macey (London: Penguin, 2004), 258. Campbell and Sitze describe Foucault's analysis of racism as 'very different from the racism that now has been reified into a "lens" for social scientific research. The racism we experience in the biopolitical field can't be reduced either to the "biological essentialism" that some complacent critics of racism have come to identify with racism as such, or to "neo-racism"—the emphasis on fixed and immutable "cultural differences"—that is the dialectical counterpart of this complacent critical dependency on the authority of the natural sciences.... It's a racism that, instead of referring to "race", now refers, thanks precisely to the universalist tendencies of contemporary biology, only to ambiguous caesurae internal to a single "species"'. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (eds.), *Biopolitics: A Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 19.

6. While in Foucault's work there are few references beyond the West, one instance is, 'It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them. Outside the Western world, famine exists, on a greater scale than ever; and the biological risks confronting the species are perhaps greater, and certainly more serious, than before the birth of microbiology. But what might be called a society's "threshold of modernity" has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies'. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, translated by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1981), 143.
7. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 2004.
8. Anthony Downey writes extensively on the art of the Middle East and has drawn on Agamben's writings. See Downey, 'Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's "Bare Life" and the Politics of Aesthetics', *Third Text*, 23:2 (2009): 109-25.
9. Agamben, 23.
10. Section of an email from Mairéad McClean to the author, 12 September 2019: 'The book I used is called "The Register of Seizures" and I located it in Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. There are several books like this, but I was not allowed to see them as they are closed to the public under the 80-year rule. This "General Register of Seizure" straddles the period from 1867-1934. I use the page in the book that shows the actual pencil line that delineates when the border was set up (the girl draws across this line with the big pencil in the film). The last entry (before the pencil line) was written 1916 (a gun was

smuggled in by boat from outside of the island of Ireland), and the one after the line is written in 1925. This entry contains things like tea, jam, and eggs which were taken over without payment of duty.'

11. P.J. McClean (1933-2019) was a founding member of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). He was twice interned, in Crumlin Road in the 1950s and Long Kesh in 1971 where he was one of those singled out for 'special treatment' in a case that was to become known as 'The Hooded Men'.
12. Broadcast 32172 (2016) uses footage of McClean's mother in interview with an American TV crew in 1972 when Mr McClean was in Long Kesh. *No More* (2014) deals with the 1970s period and is the third McClean video work dealing with internment.
13. Reginald Maudling, then British Home Secretary, quoted in December 1971.
14. Agamben, 87.
15. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2011.
16. The then political editor of the *Irish Times* adopted a neutral, descriptive tone in an account of the EMC. He added one qualification in third person terms: 'However, some Ministers outside the inner circle of the EMC have privately expressed fears the development has concentrated too much power in the hands of a few and eroded the authority of the Cabinet'. Stephen Collins, *Irish Times*, 17 August 2012; <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/success-or-failure-in-meeting-bailout-targets-will-be-crucial-test-of-economic-body-1.538019>.
17. 'Martin queries constitutionality of Economic Management Council', Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ),

- 30 July 2013; <https://www.rte.ie/news/2013/0730/465453-politics-budget>.
18. Brigid Laffan, *Irish Times*, 28 August 2013; <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/economic-management-council-acts-as-a-war-cabinet-in-ireland-s-fight-for-survival-1.1507361>.
19. One example involves the Higher Education Authority (HEA). See Graham Love, *Irish Times*, 6 August 2019; <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/department-reluctant-to-cede-power-over-higher-education-1.3977636>.
20. Creative Ireland, 2019; <https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/en>.
21. John Byrne, 'Use Value and the Contemporary Work of Art: Freeing Art from the Present Technocratic Framework', *Open*, 23 (2012): 18.

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