The *translatio* of the German art-scene eastward to Berlin is incomplete. Writers and curators were drawn to the city while dealers and works stayed behind in the denser, wealthier Rhineland. Now the network of human beings and objects is stretched tight across time-space. It might seem that this asynchronous, staggered translation has brought about a desirable disentanglement of art and world, for now the dualism of art-as-idea and art-as-object has been exploded and mapped onto a political-geographical surface. The writer sits in Berlin hundreds of miles from Düsseldorf, where the art is sold, and is therefore free to write. The writer in New York does not quite have this freedom. And yet the writer in Berlin is not happy. Freedom—freedom to repoliticize art—has brought new anxieties. The extrication of art from world is never quite achieved, for the physical proximity of the State to the art-sphere has revived an archaic Prussian pragmatism and skepticism. Berlin was in fact never more idealistic than during the Cold War. Now authenticity is slipping out of reach again.

It takes a certain nerve to face up to and to live every day with art’s entanglement in worldly loops, as curators do whenever they seek sponsorship for exhibitions and projects that hypothesize utopia; or when institution-critique is instantly absorbed by the very institutions under critique. It is easy to become discouraged and conclude that the entanglement means that utopia and critique have become mere iconographies, evacuated symbol-systems that persist only because they permit equitable comparisons of artworks on other criteria.

But the anthropologist James Clifford, writing about the performance of emergent subaltern identity in the midst of capitalist culture, warns critics against an excessive purism. “Tribal” cultural production, Clifford argues, is not necessarily compromised by its embrace of commodity culture or tourism. The tribes “articulate” tradition through
“linkages of old and new, ours and theirs, secret and public.”¹ Perhaps Clifford’s story is
the allegorical key to the art-scene. The concept of an articulated avant-gardist tradition
rescues the art-world. But Clifford’s levelling of the gradient between the authentic and
the inauthentic may be just too Californian for Europeans to absorb. Europeans might
wonder whether Clifford in facing up to contamination is brave or simply naïve. Europe
has become the museum of authenticity. A European with a strict conscience
distinguishes between “good” authenticity (an authentic radical politics, such as cannot
be found in the U.S.) and ”bad” authenticity (many varieties of artisanal products); but to
tell the truth very few Europeans draw this distinction. They are pleased to possess
authenticity of any sort because it differentiates them from Americans. Europe finds an
identity and a common language at just the right moment, the moment of no return after
the introduction of the euro: and that adhesive and self-affirming identity is mistrust of
the American. Most Americans, meanwhile, are pretty impressed by the second kind of
European authenticity (savory food), but not the first (intelligent politicians). The wise,
Clifford-type of American is not impressed by either authenticity and may even consider
Europeans to be naïve.

Translatio artium names the myth of a wandering creative flame that in every epoch
seeks its true homeland, in rhythm with the translation of empire that shapes history.
Berlin, of course, resists any coordination between those two trajectories. An intense
earnestness about cultural politics—especially in Berlin, where time and energy for
roundtable discussions and forums are abundant—compensates for the near-total absence
of any positive or visionary European world-politics. The stage of the world is still, for
Europeans, Europe, precisely because the imperium is now elsewhere. The ancient
wisdom of the bourgeoisie is inscribed within the new art-system—literally inscribed, for
in the courtyard of the Kunst-Werke in Berlin on Auguststrasse one reads high on the
wall the dictum of a certain W.B., known of course to all comers by his initials alone:
Man kann erklären: ein Werk, das die richtige Tendenz aufweist, braucht keine weitere
Qualität aufzuweisen. Man kann auch dekretieren: ein Werk, das die richtige Tendenz
aufweist, muss notwendig jede sonstige Qualität aufweisen. (You can declare: a work

¹ James Clifford, On the Edges of Anthropology (Interviews) (Chicago, 2003), 36-38.
that shows the correct political tendency need show no other quality: You can also declare: a work that exhibits the correct tendency must of necessity have every other quality.) (Der Autor als Produzent, 1934). In my mind this depressing, authoritarian formula was magically transformed into a subtler, more truly Benjaminian thought: *Man kann erklären: ein Werk, das die richtige Tendenz aufweist, braucht keine weitere Qualität aufzuweisen. Man kann auch dekretieren: ein Werk, das solche weitere Qualitäten besitzt, muss notwendig die richtige Tendenz aufweisen.* (You can declare: a work that shows the correct political tendency need show no other quality: You can also declare: a work that possesses these further qualities must of necessity exhibit the correct tendency.) I convinced myself somehow that this was how the quote actually read, and even cited it for friends approvingly. How disappointed I was on my next visit to Auguststrasse. It is as if Kunst-Werke imagines that the spectacularization of the spectacle will all come to an end in their courtyard. Later I learned that the inscription was part of a 1994 work by Joseph Kosuth that was retained by the Kunst-Werke as a long-term installation. Another transatlantic re-entry; and again I had trouble knowing where in the cycle I stood.

Last fall in Berlin the New York artist Sarah Morris showed her film *Los Angeles.* Her camera, fascinated, folded the grim glamorous surface of the screen-world over onto itself. She deceived actors by capturing them with an apparatus, her camera, whose social positioning and addressee they didn’t quite understand. It wasn’t one of the cameras they knew. For once they didn’t know who they were performing for. Several audience members, in public conversation with the artist after the film, asked her how she maintained her objectivity in the midst of Hollywood’s seductions. The artist responded in an unconcerned, downtown sort of way that she didn’t really recognize a distinction between inside and outside. Morris was simply re-channeling Los Angeles’s reflexivity; more generally she was contributing a complex subroutine to the experiment that America is always performing on itself. Berliners and New Yorkers all live in the same conceptual world, supposedly, and yet this exchange seemed to me an allegory for a hidden rift of misunderstanding. Substance is just a crumpled surface: a concept easy for
Americans to grasp, hard for Germans, even if they “know” it is true. Americans are wise, or blithe.

Berlin is the European city that most instinctively understands a certain myth of New York. Berlin’s fascination with New York’s modernity actually helped create New York (as in general America created itself partly to meet the horrified, disapproving, fascinated gaze of the European). Now, in a feedback loop, New York—the /New York/ internalized by Germans through cinema and travel—helps create Berlin. Kreuzberg and Neukölln in their ugliness feel like New York neighborhoods. The re-opening of the Soviet sector has given Berlin its Brooklyn. It is almost too easy for an American to love Friedrichshain and Treptow. Americans project on Berlin, Berliners project on America, and so on, projections infinitely nested. One is caught in an endless relay. I had the sense that for (young) Berliners the romance of the neighborhoods and the camp of the Soviet relics tastes exactly the same as they do for me. It has to do with the fantasy—another orientalism—that the avant-garde retreated to the east in the face of capitalist modernity and that it is camping out somewhere on the steppes. One day it might creep back toward us.

Berlin is the European city that carried out more seamlessly and successfully the self-representation of modernity than any other. Unless it was Moscow. As if modernity and Europe needed to clear out a little space from one another. Berlin wants badly to sustain this reflexive project, but it is not so easy. The price of reflexivity is ugliness, and Berlin seems unwilling to make itself any uglier than it is. Moscow is still ugly and so is Los Angeles. As Berlin’s absolute modernity fades, it becomes an exquisitely pleasant place to live. Gendarmenmarkt emerges from the grey with spurious authenticity, and with a Christkindlmarkt selling “arts and crafts” and charging admission on top; and Berlin is pulled slowly back into the familiar, sleek, self-admiring European mode. The city’s ancien régime character emerges. With sweet stubbornness the university professors, even the youngest, observe the ancient hierarchies, gender biases, protocols of address.
Neo-classicism everywhere, repetitions of Phidias and Raphael. In the nineteenth century German art extended the series of neo-neo-classicisms just one generation too far, and then it was too late. The authority of the classical ideal was irresistible. The series unfolded in meaningless cycles until National Socialism once and for all filled classicizing repetition with its true dread content, absolute obedience to authority. The most beautiful, dreadful artworks I saw last year were the cartoons in pencil by Peter Cornelius for his frescoes (destroyed in WW II) at the Glyptothek. Cornelius drew them in the 1820s. Later he became director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin. The cartoons belong now to the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin but last fall they were translated back to Munich and put on display in the Haus der Kunst, room after room of the highest kitsch: the lives of the Greek gods, a montage of Raphael citations, three hundred years too late already at the moment of its creation. The bewitching spectacle of Europe representing itself, reframing and restaging itself, for itself. German art was most German when it tried hardest to be international, that is, classical. It is hard to think back to a time when Germany had anything real to offer other than an idea about representation. Except of course for the two world wars.

On the Bewag Heizkraftwerk on Michaelstrasse, near the river-bank at the edge of Mitte, there is a massive mosaic inscription on 12000 tiles: “And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the wicked with the wicked. [And the Lord answered:] Perhaps there are fifty righteous within the city.” (Genesis 18:23-24). It is a work by Thomas Bayrle commissioned by the power company, and therefore immediately undermined. And yet…I was shaken by the bitter judgment. The baleful voice of the Judaic god, writerly even as it was spoken, echoed through an infinite series of mediations, and even through that final mediation, the pious self-castigation of the industrial boardroom, a gesture of the nineteenth century. Exactly as the relaxed pneumatic nudes of Raphael resisted multiple disenchantments and drifted like poison through my pores. Authentic and inauthentic mingled in irreversible entropy. The dialectic of avant garde and kitsch is over, if it ever began.
Intellectual and academic Berlin is increasingly remote from New York; they are divergent planets. Internalization of theoretical paradigms—systems theory, cybernetics, mediology—proceeds on different cycles, at different rates, on the two continents. The German/English language differential is copied and multiplied until thought-patterns themselves no longer match. Translation moves in the narrowest of channels. The “artworlds” of Berlin and New York, by contrast, are locked in a tight mimetic pattern, a feedback loop. Art-Berlin felt rather familiar.

On 18 September 2004, in Bert Neumann’s “Neustadt” at the Volksbühne, the American artist Catherine Sullivan restaged the chaotic Fluxus performance of 20 July 1964 at the Technical Academy in Aachen. This was the event where the bloodied Joseph Beuys confronted the audience holding a Crucifix. The 1964 event was itself a restaging of absurdist performances and events of the so-called “first” avant-garde. But behind that first avant-garde stood still another, and another, back to Caravaggio or Masaccio or who knows what. Sullivan was intervening in the rhythm of European avant-gardes. Her “Audimax-Project” was a re-performance of a neo-avant-garde performance in the symbolic heart of the orientalizing neo-neo-avant-garde, Frank Castorf’s Volksbühne. Her work broke down theatricality into its elemental components and recombined them into unrecognizable, indecipherable patterns. She rewrote the 1964 event as an anagram of itself, the events and actions dispersed and redistributed as nonsense. Sullivan’s hypnotic piece at the 2004 Whitney Biennial, “The Ice-Floes of Franz Josef Land,” was similar in structure and tone. It involved five simultaneous black-and-white video projections in a small room. Here she directed actors in an cryptographic re-performance of a 1920s Soviet film. Her piece in Berlin cycled back to the stage, and in the context of the Biennial installation, felt like theater as a representation of a video representation of a theatricalization of a film. At the Volksbühne the antic segments of gesture appeared and disappeared like spoken phrases, citations from an unreconstructible polylogue. The gestures derived from art and from life, reducing the two quantities to a common performative denominator.
Sullivan, who works in Los Angeles, asks: are the avant-gardes translatable? what is the meaning of their sequence? That mythic sequence is the infrastructure of the criticism and history of modern art. In the now-dominant model, the sequence of avant-gardes complies with a negative or Platonic model of mimetic declension: the Idea declines successively toward the concrete, the spectacular, and the purchasable. The successive avant-gardes mimic and parody one another. Berlin 1924 / Aachen 1964 / Berlin 2004. Berlin hesitates to confirm this sequence. The city fears that the shift from the Rhenish artworld of the Bundesrepublik back to the reunified Berlin might entail yet another debilitating loss of authenticity, as if it wondered whether the BRD /DDR binarism was not the authentic Germany after all.

Sullivan drains the pathos out of the sequence of avant-gardes by showing that all events in the sequence are equally real and concrete. The first event is not the original but rather the figure for the second. The second event completes the figure, and in doing so creates the first event as a figure. Both events are equally historical and equally arbitrarily isolated from an infinity of other events. Although both events are real, their connection is not real, but only comes into being in the exegesis; Sullivan’s exegesis. The mimicry at the Volksbühne altered its object forever; the Aachen Happening cannot persist in its own self-understanding. And that is the power of mimicry: the mimic takes possession of her object. Sullivan practices a reverse mythologizing, a kind of euhemerism. She shows that the “gods” were only “men,” for already in 1964 their gestures were meaningless and like all gestures had to await their interpretation. Aachen 1964 was dependent on the future. The fourth avant-garde creates the third, the third avant-garde created the second, and so on.

By recasting the sequence of events as a combinatorics and a text-game, rather than as a fall from grace, Sullivan sends a message to a Berlin that might still in some ways be operating under the old paradigm. She tells Berlin not to fear its self-repetition. In fact, she brings home a message that was first formulated by a Berliner, or at least by a thinker whose passage took him through Berlin. The philologist Erich Auerbach (“Figura,” 1938) showed that the theologians’ coupling of type and antitype, the Old Testament
episode and its New Testament fulfillment (Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah / Last Judgment), was not an allegorical or abstract conceit, but rather a link between two real, historical events. That link was not itself real or causal. It was created arbitrarily by an interpretation. Auerbach argued that figural thinking shaped all post-antique literary production. In modernity, the figural relationship is no longer theologically guaranteed but rather is thoroughly manmade. It became the basic textual mechanism of literary realism, the clockwork that drives the bourgeois novel. But the bourgeois novel was already latent in the gospels. Auerbach completed but in the process overcame the tradition of Christian exegesis. In the modern German context this amounted to an overcoming of Romantic idealism. And for this he was sent on a journey:


Perhaps Berlin has forgotten the last subtlety of Auerbach’s teaching, the anthropic and realist principle that empties out emancipatory theologies. After the performance at the Volksbühne, on the wings of the stage, I fell by mistake into a “European” subject-position and asked Sullivan, my countrywoman, precisely the wrong question: how was it possible that she had so thoroughly internalized the tones and conventions of a certain tradition of central European avant-gardist theater? had she lived for long periods of time in central Europe? She answered: no, I studied theater at school. In effect, she was saying: internalization is the wrong model, for it reintroduces the pathos of authenticity. Lessons are texts, and to repeat them—to rehearse them—is also to read them.

New York, February 2005