

The Box, The Net, and The Field

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“I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us a only one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space.”

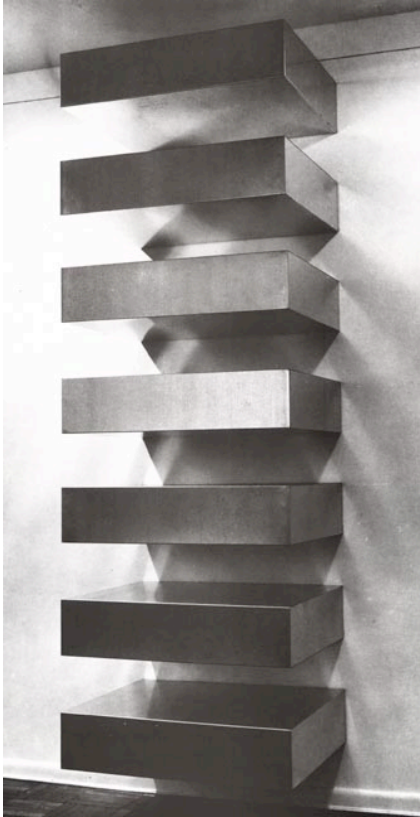
- Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces 1967, Heterotopias” [Foucault, 2]

Introduction

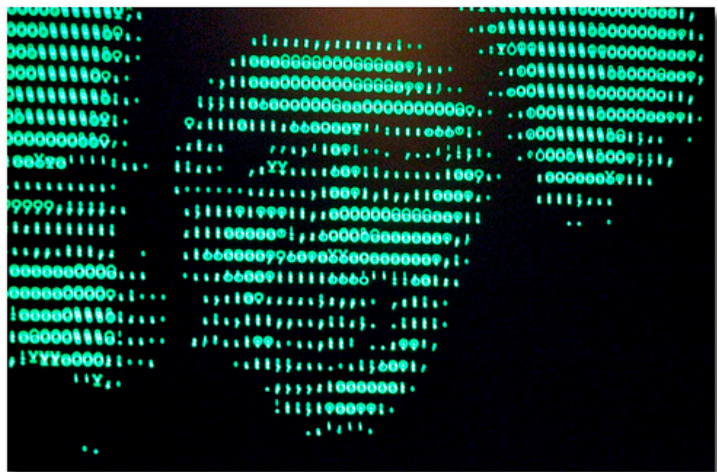
I would like to discuss here two works of art, a Minimalist sculpture by Donald Judd and an Internet artwork by Vuk Cosic, in terms of how they occupy or activate different kinds of spaces, from physical to discursive to political. This approach will allow me to situate each work in its own space, synchronically, and it will also allow me to present them as sometimes occupying the same space, separated only by time, diachronically. The latter draws on a device Hal Foster uses in his book, *The Return of the Real*, in which, to simplify, he describes a Modernist avant-garde (Duchamp, Brancusi, Schwitters et al) as pre-figuring a neo-avant-garde (Rauschenberg, Klein, Judd, et al) and the neo-avant-garde as recalling the radical strategies of their antecedents in ways that are not redundant, but inflected with the intervening history and effectively recast for their own era.

Before I begin though, “spaces” is a pretty loose conceit, and I would like to detail how I’m thinking about them here (my proposal is largely a synthesis of ideas from my predecessors and main influences for this paper, so please forgive the extensive but necessary quoting here). On spatiality, I am informed by Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*,

“A distinction is required other than the one that distributes behaviors according to their place (of work of leisure) and qualifies them thus by the fact that they are located on one or another square of the social checkerboard – in the office, in the



Donald Judd,
Untitled, 1966.
Galvanized iron,
7 units, 9 x 40 x 31 in. each



Vuk Cosic, *ascii history of moving images*
1998, net.art, dimensions variable.

This series consists of seven short film clips appropriated from Lumiere, Eisenstein, Star Trek, King Kong, Blow Up, Psycho, and Deep Throat, rendered digitally in black and white with the light values represented by alpha-numeric ASCII characters. Presented on the Internet at <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/film/>.

workshop, or at the movies. There are differences of another type. They refer to the *modalities* of action, to the *formalities* of practices. They traverse the frontiers dividing time, place, and type of action into one part assigned for work and another for leisure. For example, *la perruque* grafts itself onto the system of the individual assembly line (it's counterpoint, in the same place), as a variant of the activity which, outside the factory (in another place), takes the form of *bricolage*. Although they remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances, these transverse tactics do not obey the laws of the place.....These styles of action intervene in a field that regulates them at a first level..." [de Certeau, 29]

De Certeau posits the strategies of those in power as fixed fields or territories of social operation and control, whereas tactics (interventions by those not in power) are dynamic, temporary movements within or across those spaces. I propose a similar mapping, but one in which the fields of power are not fixed; they are also in motion. As T.J. Clark put it, "Social Practice *is* that complexity which always outruns the constraints of a given discourse.." [Clark, 42] To further visualize them, I think of these fields – physical, discursive, political, and many more - as stacked parallel planes in constant motion relative to each other, like shifting tectonic plates, and there is also a space behind them - the space of the Real. In terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Real is the realm of our repressed traumas and the bliss of oblivion of the self. I propose that de Certeau's fields of social conventions act as *screens* that protect us against the Real, and de Certeau's tactics are not lateral gestures across the surface of these fields, but orthogonal interruptions, breaks and openings that reveal the Real. Since the fields are in motion, so must be the tactics. Again, from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the tactic "...must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers." [de Certeau 37] These gaps in the fields of power are not so much penetrations created by artists, but chance rifts to be exploited by them. Foster urges us to, "...rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order, but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde within the symbolic order." [Foster 157] Sometimes these gaps are large

and persistent. In *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, Julian Stallbrass offers the whole Internet as a tactical open space,

“Online space and time are as effectively moulded by economic power as are their counterparts in the physical world. Nevertheless, users may work against the overall character of online space-time; individually through acts of concentration and engagement, and in simple acts like printing out pages to read at their leisure; and more importantly, collectively in forging their own environments by discourse and with labour...In all these ways, the very malleability of online space-time continues to offer extraordinary opportunities.” [Stallbrass 59]

At other times, the gaps are small and transient enough to fit just one or two artworks through and, with this in mind, I will use the approach outlined here to focus on Judd’s *Untitled* and Cosic’s *ascii history of moving images* as "ways of operating" (tactics) that transverse social fields of operation (strategies) [de Certeau 34].

To summarize, I will relate these two works through the social and psychoanalytic theories of de Certeau and Foster; descriptive trajectories that complement and, at times, even intersect one another. I will deploy de Certeau’s general sense of spatiality; of social fields and intervening trajectories. I am also interested in exploring, through application, whether or not his more specific ideas of the tactic and strategy may be applied to plastic art forms situated within, using the given conditions of, and aimed at the art world (*Untitled* 1966) as well as the more usual time-based art forms such as performance and media art that originate from, use the conditions of, and take aim at targets external to the art world as such media, commerce, and politics (*ascii history of moving images*).

Think of the sections below not as a continuous progressive narrative, but as site visits to these works as we find them situated in relation to different social fields.

Space for a New Subjectivity

In the opening paragraphs of his 1965 essay, “Specific Objects”, artist Donald Judd sets out to establish the “New Work” (Minimalism) as a break with the conventions of the art world, “Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture...The new three-dimensional work doesn’t constituted a movement, school, or style...anyway, movements no longer work; also linear history has unraveled somewhat.” [Judd 1] Another way of saying that linear history has unraveled is that a gap has appeared in the field of the art world, ready to be exploited.

In “Art and Objecthood”, Michael Fried’s critical response to “Specific Objects”, Fried agreed there had been a break, but one which he saw as a falling back from the progress won earlier by Abstract Expressionism. Fried thought great art should exhibit a quality he called "presentness" and be "at all times wholly manifest". He believed that a state of grace came from this type of suspension of time where the past is hidden, the future unknown, and there is only an eternal present. He contrasted “presentness” with an opposite condition that Minimalist sculpture shared with theater that he called “presence”. Presence signaled not only a kind of theatricality, but a sense of time in which the artwork is not manifest in an eternal moment, rather it unfolds, bit by bit, in real, mundane, time [Fried 148]. In other words, Abstract Expressionist art is cast as existing wholly unto itself without contingencies, whose monumental condition viewers might clamber upon to attain ascendancy, while Minimalist art came into the viewer’s space almost gesturally, like a hand reaching out in acknowledgement of the viewer’s subjecthood. I don’t intend to re-visit the well-trod debate between Fried and Judd, except to point to this new subjectivity as a space that is possibly shared by Minimalism and net.art. Judd provides further evidence of the new subjectivity, “...Anything spaced on a rectangle and on a plane suggests

something in and on something else, something, something in its surround, which suggests an object of figure in it's space...that's the main purpose of painting." [Judd 2] Judd wanted to avoid this kind of figure/ground relationship and thus the parallel hierarchical relationship of artwork/audience, aiming instead for a more egalitarian space. Judd continues, "Three-dimensional work usually doesn't involve ordinary anthropomorphic imagery." [Judd 5] emphasizing again that there is no figure inside and thus closer to the art, no imaginary hero in the story, but rather the work exists in our space in recognition of our presence; we get to be the protagonist...but at a price.

For Judd the totality of the work is superior to its particularity, "A painting is nearly an entity, one thing, and not the indefinable sum of a group of entities or references." [Judd 2] Moreover, the emphasis on unity precludes difference, "The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements possible within it." [Judd 2] This also has implications for the audience. While Minimalist work recognizes the subjecthood of the audience, it recognizes a generic subject, and no difference between subjects. The audience is a newly empowered and yet depoliticized, ungendered, undifferentiated mass (rather, into the vacuum left by the work flows the normative forms of the surrounding venue, so the audience is assumed to be the upper-class straight white male that quietly governs the white cube).

Minimalism has been criticized for being apolitical, but the new subjectivity it articulated for art laid the groundwork for much political work to come later including the art of Feminism, Post-colonialism, and Queer discourse. What that later work brought was largely the recognition of difference and to that I would like to now turn.

In Fried's terms, Cosic's *ascii history of moving images* exhibits even more "presence" than Minimalist works. It inherits the unfolding of cinematic works bit by bit in mundane time, it

relies on complex yet largely hidden material infrastructure in the form of computers and the Internet, and it relies on external cultural knowledge on the part of the audience (because it is important that the sampled film clips are well-known memes rather than random artifacts). It is the furthest thing from being at all times wholly manifest. But of course all of this serves to thrust the work even further into the space of the viewer. Whereas Minimalist works rely on the contingent movement of the viewer's body and memory through space and time in order to realize the complete work, net.art operates like an algorithm that relies on dynamic external variables and these variables can introduce difference. Cosic's work relies on specific cultural knowledge, and many net.art works go further in relying on the viewer's interaction or participation to complete the work. *Lost Love* is net art project that allows viewers to type in their stories of lost love, allows others to edit those stories, and keeps all the stories and edits in a semi-permanent database. It incorporates the difference of the audience into itself and reflects it on a 1:1 scale. Works like this not only recognize the viewer, but they retain the imprint of the viewer's gaze in a lasting and public way - not only do you remember the artwork, but *the artwork remembers you*. To what effect that difference is put in net.art varies from political to supercilious, but this capability builds upon and extends the new subjectivity which puts net.art and Minimalism into proximity within a tactical aperture.

Michel de Certeau said that the tactic, "Does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection; it is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision'". [de Certeau 37] Contingency fuels the new subjectivity and characterizes it as tactical.

De Certeau characterized the tactic as temporal, but he also suggested it could be thought of spatially. He offered the example of a theoretical North African living in the tenements of

Paris who layers his own Kabylia atop the space of the slums, “He superimposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place...” [30] *Untitled* 1966 superimposed the contemporary space of psychoanalytic theory (specifically the new psychoanalytic model of the subject) upon the ‘tenement’ of the gallery and uses a phenomenological trick to reveal new modes of being in that space. De Certeau wrote that the strategic, “postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors...) can be managed.” [36] Fried articulated and reinforced the strategic role of the artwork and the gallery, whose correlative external forces, its target and Other, is the audience and the mundane order from which its members must be separated. *Untitled* 1966 traces a crack in that barrier, allowing the mundane and sacred spaces to meld in the gallery, and allowing audiences into the subjective space of the artwork itself.

Relative Space of the Body

Although Minimalism and net.art recognize the subjecthood of the viewer, neither offers the viewer a particularly privileged position. Contingency works two ways. Looking at Judd’s *Untitled*, 1966, you must move your body from side to front to side if only to confirm that the consistent forms your brain has filled in for you actually continue on the backside of the object (this is art, after all, anything could happen). Is the box second down from the top the same as the bottom one? On one level you “know” it is, but you cannot confirm this from any one vantage point; each box presents a different side and perspective. The viewer must reconcile ontology with epistemology. This work is completed by the viewer phenomenologically through

movement and memory and neither artwork nor viewer is positioned at the center of the relationship, but in constant relativity.

Cosic's *ascii history of moving images* is distributed across much further distances, within which there is no center for the viewer to occupy. The viewer's body is reduced to a node in a network of bodies, but the work is no more central than the viewer as there is no one true original instance of the work, no monolithic master copy. Again, the viewer and work are both de-centered and in relative positions.

In neither of these works can the viewer employ the Renaissance model of vision and project his eyesight out onto the entire object, capturing it in a single field of vision thus owning it. This shared tactic creates a "Copernican revolution" of the body; the viewer is a subject, but not a sovereign subject.

Space of Materiality & Valuation

Judd's *Untitled*, 1966, is made of galvanized iron and many Minimalist works were fabricated from similarly industrial materials; copper, plexiglass, steel, plywood. This materiality was intended to free Minimalist works from conventions of the art world including the limitations of genre and the relationship between materiality and valuation, "Oil and canvas are familiar and, like the rectangular plane, have a certain quality and have limits. The quality is especially identified with art...Most of the work involves new materials, either recent inventions or things not used before in art." [Judd 2] Net.art's new materiality and initial distance from the art world served to free it from art conventions as well and below I will detail how the specific operations of net.art, again, revive and extend a shared tactic.

In *Digital Art*, Christiane Paul writes, “Ultimately, every object – even the virtual one – is about its own materiality.” [Paul 70] This is true, but this text, like so many about new media art, goes on to conflate materials, medium, and form. We need to tease these apart if we are to detail the operation of materiality as tactic. I propose to use the triad of medium, materials, and instance (I will address form in the next section). By medium, I mean the cultural field of operation, often defined as art genres; painting, photography, cinema, dance. By materials, I mean the physical strata of the work; watercolor on paper, steel, digital network technologies, etc. And by instance, I mean a specific manifestation of an individual artwork.

By way of examples, it is illustrative to point to materiality beyond Minimalism and net.art. Painting integrates all three layers outlined above; we see a “painting”, the paint on canvas, and the unique instance of Pollock’s *Number 6* all at once. Film upsets the relationship between the layers; we see a “film”, and we see a specific instance of a print of King Kong (the instance is multiple here, but not infinitely so and each print is still unique), but we do not see the material of halide on celluloid strips; rather we see the output of the material, the disembodied image. (To preempt any objection that the painting is also merely an image enabled by light, I would propose that light is the constant in all of my examples and thus can be algebraically X’d out of the equation.) Conceptual and performance art upset the three layers in another way; the lack of a coherent format, from “instructional art” to “body art” to “flash mobs” problematizes the formation of stable “mediums”, the specific instance remains singular and unique but ephemeral, and the work is often manifested with unique materials and props, detritus that, ironically, can act as magnets for valuation.

Net.art creates a new relationship between these three layers and through this revives and extends earlier tactics that intervene in genre-making.

In Cosic's *ascii history of moving images*, we see "net.art", but we do not see much of the material infrastructure that is both microscopic and distributed and thus invisible. Instead, as with film, we see the output of those materials, the image on the screen. We see an instance of the work but one whose quantitatively infinite reproducibility effects a qualitative break in the market-value-chain that is a fundamental part of genre-making. Unique instances, such as paintings, can be valued in part on scarcity. The same principle applies even to analog reproducible media such as film and photography; the limited reproducibility of each work means that value is distributed over more instances than with painting, but not so thinly as to disappear. The unique quality of each such instance further buoys their value (film archives often promote the screening of a particular print as superior to others and photographs are produced in limited, signed, and numbered series). Any instance of the *ascii history of moving images* is exactly the same as ten billion potential other copies; its materiality does not contribute to its value one bit.

The tactic of substituting industrial materials and/or techniques for the familiar materials of the art world exploits a gap in the economic and cultural field of genre-making, creating unexpected consequences in all sides.

First, this tactic has been absorbed into the field and now Judd's plywood boxes sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. But this is simply the field in motion, closing up the gaps initially exploited by the readymade and by Minimalism.

Ephemerality, shifted slightly from past models, remains in the arsenal of tactical materiality. Net.art's materiality, or immateriality, forces the field of genre-making to attempt to heal itself by further shifting from the material commodity discourse to one of "intellectual property". Net.art re-calibrates by incorporating content from anonymous participants, by

facilitating ongoing distributed collaborations without clear roles, by identifying the naming of (web)sites as a cultural territory, and by incorporating other “properties” (like King Kong and Star Trek) into itself, causing the contested sites of genre and valuation to at least appear increasingly unstable.

Space of Form

Judd’s *Untitled*, 1966 is comprised of a series of seven vertically stacked identical and evenly spaced iron boxes attached on one side to a wall. This visual seriality or repetition, characteristic of Judd’s work and of much Minimalist work in general, formally reinforces the new subjectivity by positing a non-hierarchical and egalitarian sameness. This formal seriality also brings these works into the social space of modernity and the public space of mass production. As Foster puts it, “...the seriality of minimalism and pop is indicative of advanced-capitalist production and consumption, for both register the penetration of industrial modes in to spheres (art, leisure, sport) that were once removed from them.” [Foster 66]

Cosic’s *ascii history of moving images* is also comprised of a series of seven boxes, in this case identically sized rectangular digital film clips from diverse sources; Lumiere, Eisenstein, Star Trek, King Kong, Blow Up, Psycho, and Deep Throat. Cosic’s work exhibits an additional kind of seriality that is more characteristic of net.art in general; its aforementioned reproducibility. Judd hinted that if artists adopted industrial techniques as well as industrial materials, Minimalist art might be similarly mass-produced, “Art could be mass-produced and possibilities otherwise unavailable, such as stamping, could be used.” [Judd 5] Of course, net.art has taken full advantage of industrial materials and production and Cosic’s work, in particular, echoes cinema’s earlier position in this space. I’ve already covered the implications of

reproducibility for valuation, so here let me point to another reading of seriality that may apply to Minimalism and net.art and once more position them as united in a tactical space.

In *Return of the Real*, Foster puts seriality in psychoanalytic terms, “Lacan defines the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated.” He then translates this psychoanalytic dynamic into a formal tactic, “...repetition serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also points to the real, and at this point the real ruptures the screen of repetition.” [Foster 132] Through this lens, the seriality of Minimalism and net.art can be seen as a tactic that points to the Real beyond the fields of social control.

Utopia as Good Place / Utopia as No Place

Utopianism in Judd’s work is no obvious fact. As the authors of *Art of the 20th Century* put it, “Unlike Malevich’s Black Square or Mondrian’s right angle, the simplicity of these [Judd’s] cubes and structures is not based on a belief that the sum of the world is contained within the non-figural, or that a universal harmony is condensed within the basic form. The do not herald any utopia.” [Walther 525] I cannot help but feel that Judd’s tactics have a utopian feel to them, even if that does not comprise the main thrust of his work. But Judd, and Minimalism in general, has been characterized as apolitical, so how could it also be utopian? Not all utopic impulses need to be political, in fact, from Thomas More’s *Utopia* onward, politics is the most common thing banned from utopia [More]. Judd himself seems to allow that his objects do not exist in a phenomenologically rich but socially vacant space, “Nothing made is completely objective, purely practical or merely present.” [Judd 6] It would be dangerous to completely separate consciousness from politics in any case.

First, Judd attempted to establish a break with the past as is necessary for any utopian project. He helped articulate a new subjectivity delivered through phenomenology that addresses the subjecthood of all viewers. This tactic was mistaken by Fried as anti-utopian, even plebeian, but it is so only when seen through the lens of Fried's transcendentalism. In fact, both Fried's and Judd's models were utopian but they differed on a tactical level. The formal tactic of repetition of equal masses in *Untitled* 1966 models egalitarian and non-hierarchical relationships that reinforce the inter-subjective relationship established between the work and viewer. These repeated shapes present ontological sameness, but at the same time epistemological difference; each is the same as others, but different because of their relative position, angle, order, view, etc. This difference is still non-specific, but it indicates a situation in which one can have difference without hierarchy, and utopia needs no charismatic leaders. *Untitled* 1966 exhibits a perfection of form that seems to echo the ideal society or consciousness of utopia. I agree with the authors of *Art of the 20th Century* in that I would not argue that this perfection of form is a revival of Greek ideals of the reconciliation of the complexity of the world in geometry. Rather *Untitled* 1966 points to the perfection of the void, and the hollowness of the shapes that so disturbed Freud merely suggest a different kind of utopia. More on that shortly.

The utopian tone of net.art and Cosic's work is more commonly agreed upon. "Net art, then, is seen as an archaeology of the future, drawing on the past (especially of modernism), and producing a complex interaction of unrealized past potential and Utopian futures in a synthesis that is close to the ideal of Walter Benjamin...Cosic's own project to cross-breed out-moded ASCII graphics with video is an attempt to concertina different time frames in this way." [Stallbrass 48] Early net.art in particular staked a flag on the Internet as an everyplace/no place utopia and saw the Internet as a kind of friendly ecosystem that bestowed on its denizens

(netizens) a natural immunity that protected them from incursions into that walled garden. So, for instance, the materiality of net.art naturally was supposed to protect it from commodification as outlined above. There are many examples of net.art works that are explicitly political and/or utopian (this pairing is not required for utopia, but it does occur.) But net.art can also be as utopian in a formal sense as Minimalism.

The ASCII characters that appear in the *ascii history of moving images* create a new dimension that cuts through the flat plane of the cinema/computer screen. This work is on some level about the relationship of digital media to cinema (and to every other media) and the ascii digits slice through the surface of the movie clips just as they are also cutting orthogonally through other media, joining them in the "media convergence" of the universal machine. A zero that appears in one of the ascii movies may appear there as a graphic element but this bit may appear, along the new axis, as a small piece of a digital sound file, in a spreadsheet as a numerical zero, and so on. This creates a 'three dimensional' view of the Internet, one that that cuts across public and private spaces, across commercial and political spaces, and suggest new possibilities, orthogonal horizons, utopias.

The careful placement of these bits to achieve this orthogonal dimension further reveals Cosic's work as tactical, as a "way of operating" that transverses the social fields of normative control. Tactics are generally utopian; they manifest 'the way things should be' against the field of 'the way things should not be'. Of course, certain tactics are more utopian than others but this does not posit an overall organization between utopian tactics, nor even a shared specific goal. Rather utopianism may be understood as an inflection, a mode, or an impulse behind certain tactical maneuvers. Even disorganized play springs from an impulse, and, as with play, the utopian impulse is one that is generative as well as reactive.

Utopia means, of course, both ideal place and no place; the final frontier. And it is into this last, ultimate space that I would now like to position Minimalism and net.art, not in relation to any small particular gap in the social screens, but in relation to what lay in the other side of all those screens - the Real - that, I propose, is the same as utopia. Returning to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the Real is the impossibility of true knowledge of other people, the existential nothingness that comes from the absence of that connection, the unattainable situation – no place [Lacan]. Yet this oblivion is also a universal condition uniting humankind, potentially inspiring the deepest empathy and inter-subjectivity – the ideal place. The Real fixes us in its gaze, offering us the chance to confront our repressed traumas and come to terms with the paradoxes they represent, be they personal (unfulfilled desire for love, sexual ambivalence, etc.) or collective (slavery, sexism, war). We must come to terms with these past traumas if we are to move on to the ideal consciousness/society. If we don't, we're doomed to relive and repeat them in other forms that we use to screen out the Real, to defer utopia. Utopian art is that which acts as the opposite of a symptom; it reveals rather than screens the Real. It can achieve this through tactics that exploit the gaps in our collective screens/fields or it can point directly to the Real through tactics like repetition, both outlined above.

The Real is not something we go to live inside; rather it's the effect of the Real on the here and now and how we deal with that that is key. Perhaps this is a productive way to view utopia; it is always deferred, but the utopian impulse here and now is more important than 'achieving' utopia anyway. *Untitled* 1966 does not beckon us to some far away transcendental plane, but rather comes into our space here and now and its meaning is not inherent and separate but created contingently with the viewer. So utopia may not be some far off place, but an impulse that exists here and now whose realization is created contingently in the space between

utopia and the subject. To put it another way, utopia is not ‘somewhere’ that we arrive at through manifest destiny and proceed to parcel into sub-divisions that each may own his share; utopia is the ‘nowhere’ of the tactic [de Certeau 37] whose only real effect is in shaping our actions now.

In the fictional universe of DC Comics, there exists the ‘source wall’, a cosmic barrier that separates ‘our’ space from the space of absolute knowledge (Kirby). The villain, Darkseid, is driven by his sole ambition to travel beyond the wall so that he can steal the ‘anti-life equation’ and bring it back to our space, to achieve it, to possess it. Of course, there is no anti-life equation. As with Judd’s space and Cosic’s bits, there is nothing of the Real or of utopia to possess; the journey through is all that matters.

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