

Fig. 1—Robert Rauschenberg. *This is the first half of a print designed to exist in passing time* (1949). It "...consists in fourteen different prints made from one woodcut block. The first is black. Those that follow change the field incrementally as they build compositions in black and white. This duality outlines the process of its making. Rauschenberg first blackened the whole wood block and then made progressive incisions in the blackness to generate lines of white, which caused each succeeding print to differ slightly from its predecessor. The title page, and its linguistic definition of the object, appears handwritten on tracing paper placed over the first black print, in all its materiality. All fourteen prints in the set are stacked together and bound with string, like a (filmic) flipbook. Each component of the title indexes another radical dimension of Rauschenberg's conception of this work. The idea that this is (only?) 'the first half' makes us wonder about 'the second half'." (Julia Robinson 2008, p. 46-47). Cf. [sequence/consequence](#) below.

One of the major figures in aesthetic theory with a clear critical agenda—in late modernity—has been Giorgio Agamben. In his query on [homo sacer](#), there are two responses to crisis that recur pervasively in his work: the one is the state of *exception*, the other is Bartleby's (from Herman Melville's novel on the [Scrivener](#)) canonical phrase of *response* "I prefer not to!". If we apply extend the two to the Covid-19 lockdown and Agamben's response to it (his vaccine scepticism), it is completely logical. But logical in the sense that he proceeds from aesthetic to ethical.

We identify a [Sartrian](#) legacy in that human being defines by its effective ability to say *no*. The question raised here is whether it is possible to achieve much more than that from a critique founded in aesthetics. The question is addressed to the humanities in general, and not only to philosophy. The [Spinozist](#) critique attempts to formulate the point of departure in ethics. If an attempt this is done—using the duality of the 'state of exception' and 'refusal' as a point of departure—the question is not so much whether we arrive at aesthetics; but at *artistic choices*.

In order to move from aesthetics to ethics, we need to move from *blindly* proliferating states of exception that came in the wake of the lockdown—on this point we have to grant that Agamben has made his point—and its accompanying trail of human being *engrossed* by refusals, to a more empowered and *actionable* position (which is Spinoza's point). Which means that we should consider the state-of-exception and refusal *conjointly* rather than adopting them as two separate, and opposed regimes: that is, to consider states of exception and refusal as *conjoint/similar*.

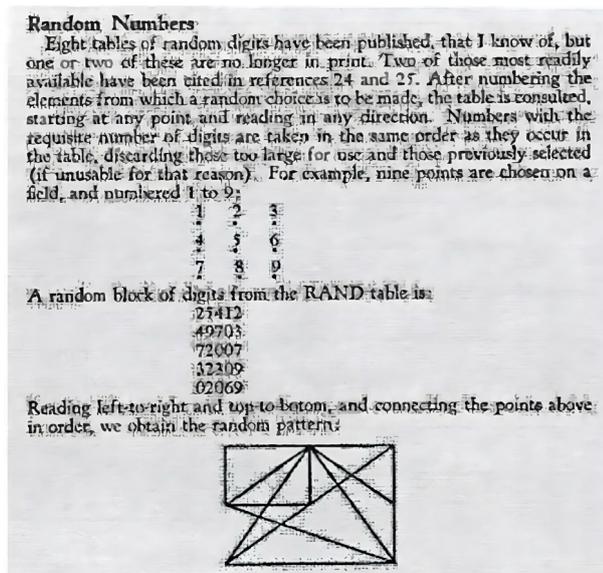


Fig. 2—George Brecht. Excerpt from "chance imagery" 1966. Brecht on Jackson Pollock: "As far as the observer is concerned, [he] has demonstrated that the ability of humans to appreciate complex chance-images is almost unlimited."

That is, that exception and refusal are two kinds of exception (or, two kinds of refusal). So, they are similar in this regard. They are *different* in the aspect explored in the previous handouts—[44.CARDS](#), [45.PRIVATE/PUBLIC](#) (languages) and [46.THESEs](#)—be-tween *being* held and holding, occasions and tasks, arenas and situations, sharing and making, the mundane and quotidian. In the ethical scope, we are interested in the mediations between/within pairs of this kind: and the materials that emerge as the media of such mediations. Like fossil fuels, if we are interested in mediations in which the existence, discovery, exploitation, negotiation and marked convertibility of fossil fuels (as the [read thread](#)) is at stake.

In this (ethical) model, mediation emerges by articulating *difference* and, in this sense, making it operative. While the media is the *other* of mediation. Hence the relation between trailing mediation and tracking media is a relation between **sequence** (*mediations*) and **consequence** (*media*).

Accordingly: if the medium is the *message*, then the mediation is the *shifter* (i.e., the deixis

articulating when there is a message and otherwise not). Here we are clearly beyond McLuhan, since the media do not extend active embodiment *unless* there is a mediation.

The theory of *shifters* is referred to Otto Jespersen, Roman Jakobson, Rosalind Krauss and Julia Robinson. Now the question is whether we can move unto an actionable critique—rather than one articulating in denial of its premise—in the sense of *criticality*: that is, inhabiting projects-in-the-making, bringing them to a critical threshold, triggering avalanche-like dynamics, incorporating these into the hatching of new repertoires (i.e., criticality in the sense of [Irit Rogoff](#)). What will happen if we apply these definitions and insights to *organisations* that *want to* but *will not* change?

At art-school, a not uncommon confusion between *aesthetics* and *artistic choices* will provide a useful test-case: it is clearly possible to construct and maintain a quasi-opposition, of the type accused above, between the *form* and *substance* of professional processes at art school. In fact, it happens to the point of defining a pervasive condition and frustration at such schools. That is, a formal protocol defining professionalism at the administrative level, which aims at being “neutral” in its procedural notion of sanction, by which its decisions/and verdicts are put into effect.

In the absence of *jurisprudence*—i.e., a body of authoritative documentation on the *precedent* of how rules have been applied on real cases—its ability of holding and being held by substantial concerns, or professional substance—is virtually *nil*. The lack of live articulation between *form* and *substance* resulting from this, means that the *material media* which constitute the art school’s *raison d’être*, will be by-passed from *lack* of mediation. Where it should have communicated in the entire system, according to precedent and history, it becomes instead the weak link.

Which means that the task of writing the *history* of the art school—which, in principle, would constitute a priority task and -occasion of *cultural history*—is virtually impossible: I myself have peer-reviewed and had to reject attempts at this. The attempts at remedying this situation have revealed that the institutional *memory* of art-school is ailing. And its ability to learn from the works produced on its current arenas, are minimal: the tasks and occasions are pervasively *disjoint*, and accordingly there *no/few* encounter(s). The still new trail PhD is a candidate strategic case.

If we by *substance* determine the domain of professional concerns, interests and values—the ideological pole of work-life—it will manifest historically, institutionally and artistically. It will manifest in counterpoint to a formal, legally conceived, framework. However, it is arguable that understanding formal and substantial in terms of *opposition* simply is a category-mistake. And that having overlooked this throughout modernity, might have *cost* us and will *continue* to cost us dearly. As the lack of mediation between formal and substantial costs us a *material* insight.

That is, it costs us an actionable history at the institutional level. And it costs us a living institution at the artistic level. The lack of formal-substantial integration will make strategic collaboration with

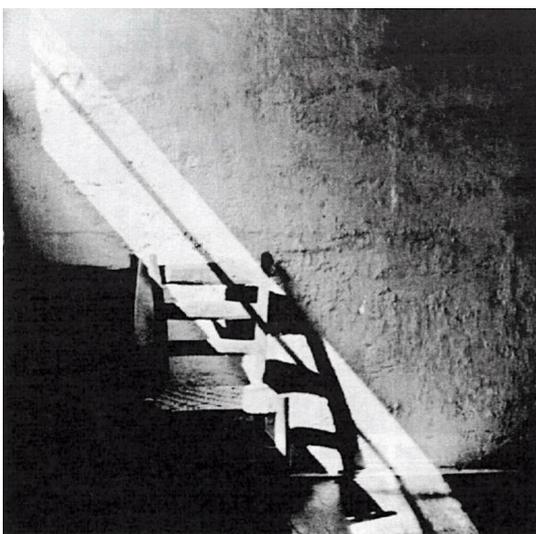


Fig. 3 – Robert Rauschenberg. *The quiet house* 1949.
—Spinoza argues that what is common to all singular things cannot constitute the essence merely of one or an indefinite amount of particular things, but rather must be “equally in the part and the whole” (IIP37) of all singular things (common notions).

other institutions laborious (i.e. chaotic and complicated), and by ex-tension will make sustainability unlikely: at least if sustainability is not locked to waste management, but joined to a *value creation* pledged to a continuous caption of human work produced by the institution: in this case, the art-school. Essentially to live as we preach, and relate to waste and work conjointly: what we can do to not letting *work* go to *waste*.

This pious hope surely applies in the wake of the pandemic: the work that was put down in converting our homes from being the stronghold of private life, to alternative between the day-to-day activities (*the quotidian*) and including the work-arenas of video-conferencing (*the mundane*). It created an awareness of the private and public as *subcategories* of the quotidian and mundane: as something to be held, rather than categories holding us. And categories to be jointly articulated rather than conceived in opposition: with a potential of hatching new ways of living and working. Something that promises to articulate common notions of *value*.