Iconic Intelligence (Or: In Praise of the Sublamental)

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> The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism.
> —Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction" (1969: 218)

Two Theses

In the closing pages of his book *The Perils of the One*, in a section titled "Idols of Unrepresentability," Stathis Gourgouris explores two counterintuitive theses. The first is announced earlier in the book and pertains to what Gourgouris (2019: 136) refers to as "iconoclasm's own political theology," one that is active (he adds) "not just in the domain of religion but in the secularist framework itself, where the politics of unrepresentability

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continue to hold sway, unchallenged." Gourgouris's position on this issue is clearly stated at the beginning of "Idols of Unrepresentability" and can be presented here as the first thesis: "The prohibition of images is a radical notion only when it operates in a desacralized universe" (191). When it does not, "iconoclasm merely reorients idol worship from the utterable and representable to the unutterable and unrepresentable" (191). The positives may have been turned into negatives, but the logic remains the same. It's idols across the board. Gourgouris, by contrast, is interested in a "desacralized universe of meaning" that "reconfigures the meaning of both iconoclasm and the sacred" (192).

Unsurprisingly, given his interest in the political theology of iconoclasm, Gourgouris shows himself to be particularly drawn to icons—images, and by extension artworks—that *both* foreground the sacred status of the image *and* break it down. He quickly mentions Dadaism and Marcel Duchamp as examples—"Duchamp's ready-mades," he writes, "are iconic renamings" (192)—and then dedicates a few paragraphs to how Maurizio Catellan's art, suspended with steel cables from the ceiling of New York's Guggenheim Museum for Catellan's exhibition *All*, "exposes and thus incapacitates . . . the latent idolatrous desire of the presumed secular spectator" (193). The work Gourgouris focuses on has explicit religious content: *La Nona Ora* (*The Ninth Hour*, from 1999) shows Pope John Paul II crushed by a meteorite. In Gourgouris's reading, however, that religious content becomes a red herring. He insists that the violent response this piece received when it was shown in the pope's native Poland cannot be explained away as a response to blasphemy. Rather, the work's vandalization reveals the sacred logic of the demand that such a thing *not* be shown: "iconoclasm's own political theology."

Moreover, and on this count I am pushing Gourgouris a bit, Catellan's work also invites a reflection on the artwork's own relation to the sacred: Gourgouris (2019: 193) refers to *La Nona Ora* as Catellan's "most iconic" work, a superlative that begs the question of how to distinguish the "most iconic" from the "idol." *La Nona Ora* is not so much about its religious content as it is about the sacrality of the idol, its prohibition, *and* the icon/work of art. In Gourgouris's reading then—which, again, I am expanding slightly here—the meteorite in *La Nona Ora* turns out to be a boomerang: it crushes the pope and those who argue that such a thing ought not to be shown. But while crushing the sacred across the board—in crushing both the idol and its prohibition—it also ends up crushing the sacrality of art itself. The artwork's iconoclasm ends up hitting the artwork in the face.

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It's worth noting how Gourgouris's argument about *La Nona Ora* differs from the one he develops (in close relation to his discussion of *La Nona Ora*—they are at one point treated in the same paragraph; see Gourgouris 2019: 193) about the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, which involved the cartooning of the Prophet Mohammed. The response to the cartoons, he argues, cannot be explained away with blasphemy—in that case, we would be dealing with a response that is entirely within the logic of the sacred. Rather, the issue with the cartoons is the violation of the representation of the prophet by "the racist impulses against specific peoples still caught in the living history of colonial domination" (Gourgouris 2019: 194). That is what explains the reaction they received. The issue is not simply idolatry versus iconoclasm. One can only arrive at that insight, however, by practicing what Gourgouris—via Jan Assman—refers to as an "iconic literacy" or also an "iconic intelligence" (Assman quoted in Gourgouris 2019: 195): a mode of reading or thinking/knowing that would apply outside the visual realm as well. If this is a lesson of secular criticism, one that seeks to go beyond both idols and idols of unrepresentability, it is one that Gourgouris attributes to Edward Said, whose influence is clear in *The Perils of the One*.[1]

Part of the project of deconstructing the opposition of idolatry versus iconoclasm, and of rethinking the meaning of the sacred and iconoclasm, is to lay bare what Gourgouris (2019: 195) refers to as "a certain vulnerability" of the image—something that, he adds, "cannot be abolished or transcended even by means of mechanical reproduction." This is in fact what brings us to the second, much less developed thesis in the book's closing section: even the idol, as a representation of the divine, exceeds the divine and therefore presents a threat to it. Another way of saying this is that the idol is always already desacralizing. Hence the need to forbid the idol, as Gourgouris notes, within the logic of monotheism—because monotheism follows the logic of the one, and the idol always inevitably adds to that: it turns the one into two. It is this simple fact of addition, of the artwork's power of presentation (as Gourgouris also calls it), that renders the artwork vulnerable, turns it into something that invites destruction—a destruction that, as per thesis one, might be even more theological than the idol itself. This would explain, then, Gourgouris's focus on unrepresentability: representation is always inevitably desacralizing; as such, it is rendered vulnerable

1. The book's first chapter especially carries Said's imprint, and Gourgouris (2019: xxiii) mentions in his acknowledgments that Said discussed the first draft of the chapter with him in 2003.

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and invites the antirepresentational response; and it is the latter, rather than the former, that thus most deserves the scrutiny of Gourgouris's lesson in secular criticism. The sacred is at its most intense not in the image but in the image's prohibition. Representation and art always already have a tie to desacralization.

Art's Own Political Theology

Of course, *La Nona Ora* shows us that art is not so easily situated on the side of desacralization. Part of the point of Catellan's work—the work's ultimate point—is in fact to unwork *art's* tie to the sacred.[2] To paraphrase Gourgouris: to unwork *art's own political theology*. Art's challenge to the divine, to the logic of the one, is not so much established as something to be achieved. The project is especially urgent when it comes to big art-world names (like Catellan) who take on quasi-theological status, no matter their own iconoclasm. Consider, for example, Karl Ove Knausgaard's (2020: 59–62) profile of Anselm Kiefer in the *New York Times Magazine*, which has this kind of sacralization of the artist on full—and, I should add, critical—display. As for the artworks themselves: in Gourgouris's description, *La Nona Ora* becomes Catellan's "most iconic" work, as I've already noted. As such, it comes close to being an idol. When Alfred Stieglitz photographed it in his studio, Duchamp's *Fountain* (about which I will have more to say later) was renamed "Madonna of the Bathroom" by Stieglitz and Duchamp due to how the shape of the urinal resembles that of icons featuring the Virgin with Child (Camfield 1991: 141). "Buddha of the Bathroom" was one of the other titles that have been given to the piece: in the eyes of some, the shape of the urinal resembles a sitting Buddha (140).

Finally, those who know a thing or two about art—the curators and critics—are often brought within the realm of the theological as well. The curator Jan Hoet, for instance, was referred to in his native—and Catholic—Flanders as a *kunstpaus*, or "art pope," an authority in the realm of art. The term's composition raises questions, however, about his authority's origin, something that is always unstable but particularly so in the realm of aesthetics. It may indeed be because of that instability that authority in the realm of art is compared to that of the pope. No wonder that art history is full of stories in which the authority of the art connoisseur is undermined. From

2. This is an argument that I have developed further in a review of a book that, coincidentally (or not?), has Catellan's *La Nona Ora* featured on its cover (Boever 2018a).

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the Vermeer forger Han van Meegeren to the Chinese master-painter and occasional forger Zhang Daqian to the Hungarian forger Elmyr de Hory, who is the central character in Orson Welles's video-essay *F for Fake* (Plan-film/Specialty Films 1973), all these figures challenge the foundations on which art expertise is built. As de Hory emphatically puts it in Welles's film, in terms that resonate with *The Perils of the One*, "It should not exist that one single person makes a decision about what's good or what's bad [art]." Art should not follow the logic of the one. But, of course, de Hory feels the need to make this claim because very often, it does.

I would like to stick, then, with Gourgouris's second thesis—even the idol presents a threat to the divine—to consider instead art's own political theology, the ways in which art turns icons into idols. This is a process of sacralization that is worth analyzing, one that I have elsewhere (and with reference to the thought of Carl Schmitt that is under pressure in Gourgouris's book) called "aesthetic exceptionalism" (Boever 2019). By this, I refer to the belief—and the word reveals that I am laying bare a logic of the sacred here—that artists and artworks (and, one might add, curators and art critics) are somehow exceptional. Paul Kahn has commented on the close association between God and the artist in political theology. You will find exceptionalist understandings of artists and art in a host of contemporary thinkers (I've considered, for example, the works of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière on this count). While it would be difficult to argue that artists and artworks aren't somehow different—we can recognize, surely, the *singularity* of artists and artworks—it is also clear that their *exceptionalization* is a theologization, one instance of the sacralization that Gourgouris's book (and the project of secular criticism at large) invites us to resist. To desacralize the icon, then, to think—and make—an icon that is not an idol, would mean to detheologize and de-exceptionalize the icon, and, by extension, art, to bring it back to its worldly—although nevertheless singular—status. In my own work, which has been inspired by both Gourgouris (2013b) and Emily Apter (2018) (with whom Gourgouris has been in conversation—Apter has provided back cover blurbs for both *The Perils of the One* and Gourgouris's *Lessons in Secular Criticism* [2013a]), I have referred to this as an "unexceptionalizing" gesture. It would be a question of thinking and making an icon that is, precisely, not "iconic"—singular, but not an idol. (Our very use of the term "iconic" shows the extent to which the icon, any icon, has been folded into the sacred logic of the idol.) This is the project of what I call, riffing off both Apter's and Gourgouris's discussions of unexceptional politics, unexceptional—worldly, desacralized; one might say: secular—art.

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As Gourgouris suggests, Duchamp is indeed a good example in this context. Usually, Duchamp's readymades are considered to mark an upward move: they seek to transform a found object—say, a urinal bought at J. L. Mott Iron Works—into an original work of art by adding a signature to it ("R. Mutt") and placing it in the gallery or museum. While it seems doubtful that this reading can cover the full extent of Duchamp's project—Stephen Barker has argued that a readymade was always already a replica: impossible to turn it into an original (Barker 2017)—the iconic interpretation of Duchamp's project still seems right. Consider, for example, Duchamp's most famous readymade: *Fountain*, from 1917. As William Camfield (1991: 133) has detailed, the original work, famously photographed by Stieglitz, has gone lost: Broken? Hidden? Stolen? What we have, instead, are later versions, "fabricated replicas" (162) of the celebrated readymade. Of those replicas, however, including those of other works by Duchamp that have been lost, he apparently "made it absolutely clear that the copies were not meant to replace the originals" (162). In other words, the 1917 work was the original—the later versions did not exist at the same level. Duchamp said that "despite everything, 'a copy remains a copy'" (162–63). Clearly, Gourgouris—and others—are not wrong to draw out the idolatry in Duchamp's art. Indeed, and speaking more generally, if Duchamp sometimes does not seem to consider readymades as art, Camfield recalls that the artist also "stressed that readymades were not 'trivial' but, to the contrary, represented 'a much higher degree of intellectuality,'" adding about himself that "I'm nothing else but an artist, I'm sure, and delighted to be" (165). It's Duchamp's acknowledgment that he still finds "magic" in the readymade—something that Camfield captures with the wonderful but contradictory post-Benjaminian phrase "readymade aura" (135)—that puts one on the trace of exceptionalism in Duchamp's work.

Gourgouris mentions Duchamp in the same breath as Dadaism, and Dadaism's vandalistic intervention in art is another good example to consider in this context. In an essay titled "Damage Control: The Modern Art World's Tyranny of Price," Ben Lerner (2013: 42)—whose novel *10:04* (2014) regrets how Duchamp's move to turn a mere object into art has become the guiding principle of the artworld; the artists that Lerner's narrator admires seek to reverse that move, to unexceptionalize art rather than exceptionalize the everyday object—suggests that "much of the story of twentieth-century art can be told as a series of acts of vandalism." Both Duchamp and Dadaism feature prominently in such a tale. But which part of the artwork did Dadaism vandalize, given that Dadaism was folded back into the history of art?

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Perhaps the avant-garde's target was not so much *art* but the realization of art as *work*, as Giorgio Agamben (2019: 3), in an essay titled "Archeology of the Work of Art" (published in a short book titled *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*), has suggested. (Agamben relies for this point on a study by Robert Klein, "The Eclipse of the Work of Art.") It is the commodity, the work, which is the avant-garde's target, not so much art itself. Agamben brings in as an example here the Situationists, who—in Guy Debord's proclamation—"want at the same time to abolish [the work of art] and realize [art]" (Debord quoted in Agamben 2019: 3). Art realizes itself not so much "in a work but in life (the Situationists intended to produce not works but situations)" (3). Note here that Debord and the Situationists are another one of Gourgouris's (2019: 192) examples, one that he does not find fully convincing (and Agamben—who is much criticized in Gourgouris's book—provides us with a reason here for why that may be so).

I trust my overall point is clear: in all the above examples of iconoclasm—from the Situationists to Dadaism and Duchamp—the idol of art remains intact.

When Gourgouris (2019: 195) indicates, in relation to his second thesis, that "mechanical reproduction" can neither "transcend" nor "abolish" the "vulnerability" of the image—when he indicates, in other words, that the image remains vulnerable to destruction even when it is a mechanically reproduced copy (this is something that others, for example, Tobin Siebers, have drawn into question[3])—he suggests that Andy Warhol's *Mao* or *Marilyn* paintings "may be considered meditations on precisely this issue." Warhol's paintings of Mao and Marilyn can be said to meditate, in their representation of an idol, and through their status of artworks that operate within the logic of the copy, on the very status of the artwork-as-idol, something that of course Walter Benjamin (whose thinking in this area Gourgouris's use of the phrase "mechanical reproduction" evokes) already intimated. Do Warhol's paintings break down the logic of the idol? Do they continue it? And what does the question of the copy, and specifically of mechanical (rather than manual) reproduction, add to those conversations?

Both Warhol paintings have triggered responses that would be of interest to Gourgouris. The *Mao* paintings, for example, have been banned from exhibitions in China, a prohibition that fits into Gourgouris's discussion

3. I am thinking in particular of Siebers's (2010: 83–99) chapter "Disability and Art Vandalism." There Siebers suggests that the copy is less susceptible to vandalism's force—vandalism typically takes the original as its target.

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of "iconoclasm's own political theology"—a political theology that applies in China as well, even if the status of theology and of the copy are different there. In "Damage Control," Ben Lerner (2013: 47) recalls how, when visiting Warhol's Factory in 1964, the "self-declared witch and performance artist" Dorothy Podber removed a revolver from her purse and shot a stack of *Marilyn* paintings. I don't know what triggered Podber's iconoclasm; surely it was not a prohibition of the image—she thought of what she did as a work of performance art. What interests me instead (and Lerner, too, focuses on this) is the subsequent idolization of the vandalized paintings: retitled "Shot" paintings—*Shot Orange Marilyn*, for example—they ended up fetching a lot more money at art auctions than the regular *Marilyns*. Lerner concludes from this that art vandalism that pushes up dollar value isn't really vandalism. But one can rephrase this in Gourgouris's terms, which leads to a version of thesis one: *iconoclasm that intensifies the logic of the sacred isn't really iconoclasm*. Instead, we are dealing here with a situation in which a witch's art was resacralized. Warhol, as Lerner notes, did not acknowledge the witch. Her curse realized itself a mere four years later, through Valerie Solanas.

It's worth marking the dialectic at work in some of these examples to see what Gourgouris wants to be done with. Consider the transformation of the street artist (and vandal) Banksy's work *Girl with A Balloon* into a new artwork titled *Love Is in the Bin* at a 2018 Sotheby's auction. Banksy's work, which had arrived in an ornate frame, started sliding down as soon as its sale had been concluded, leaving a partially shredded print hanging from the frame. The verdict on this performance is still out: Did Banksy want the entire print to be shredded, as he has claimed, and did the stunt therefore go wrong? Was the auction house in on it, as suggested by the fact that the Banksy sale was left all the way to the end of the auction, with the work installed on a wall at the back of the auction room rather than shown in front like the other works that were being sold? Was the partial shredding, then, part of the plan? In other words: how much of an act of vandalism was this? How much did its iconoclasm participate in the theological economy and politics of the artworld that it sought to contest (the video Banksy released after the auction was clear about this contestation[4])? The ease with which this work could be recuperated into "art"—the sale went through and the work was later assessed to be worth three times as much; it went on dis-

4. See Banksyfilm, "Shredding the Girl and Balloon—The Director's Half Cut," October 17, 2018, YouTube video, 2:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxkwRNIZgdY.

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play at the Museum Frieder Burda, in Baden-Baden in southwest Germany, which also dismantled the piece's shredder—shows how difficult it is to truly vandalize art or to escape what in critical work about Banksy has been called "the Banksy effect" (Brenner 2019): the ways in which art vandalism gets recuperated as art. This is, of course, the old story of the avant-garde becoming the new norm.

But although that logic is very much operative in all the artworks that Gourgouris discusses, it is not what he is interested in. The *Jyllands-Posten* example reveals as much: the point of his reading of the cartoons is precisely to not limit himself to the sacred and focus instead on the images' racism. But the issue is, of course, that while the cartoon is certainly a form of art, we also immediately recognize it as different from the works of Warhol, Duchamp, or Cattelan—even Banksy. The cartoon does not qualify as "art": it does not rise to art's theological status.[5] So while the theological is obviously operative in the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons because of their content, it is not operative at all at the level of their own status as a work. There is nothing sacred about a cartoon. One cannot speak of the cartoon's own political theology in the same way that one speaks about art's own political theology. It's the cartoon's iconoclasm that brings it within the sphere of the sacred—*not* its iconic status. The cartoon is just an icon.

With art, however, there is always—inevitably—its iconic status to consider. It seems part of the notion of art itself. Far from positing art on the side of desacralization, then, as Gourgouris does, I think we ought to consider the opposite: that the slogan "nothing sacred" must also signify to a certain extent "the end of art." By that I mean, of course, the end of aesthetic exceptionalism. It seems to me that aesthetic exceptionalism is far more dominant than the understanding that can be found in Gourgouris's second thesis—namely, that art poses a threat to the divine. (This has something to do with the disappearance of art's critical function[6]—counterintuitively, it is because art is no longer critical that it has assumed exceptionalist status, revealing that the condition of aesthetic exceptionalism is a postcritical condition; the task we are facing today is, rather, a commitment to unexceptional critique, or secular criticism.) The dominance of aesthetic excep-

5. Speaking of racism, and racists: when an original page drawn by Hergé in 1942 for the Tintin album *The Shooting Star* was auctioned, the value of the drawing in part came from the fact that it had drops of blood in it, as Hergé had apparently injured himself while working. The cartoon needs this little extra to approximate the exceptionality of art.
6. On this, see Vande Veire 2003.

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tionalism is the case for the modern era. Historically, art has moved from its crafts-like status in ancient times (a key reference point, of course, for Gourgouris—see not only *Lessons in Secular Criticism* but also *Does Literature Think?* [2003]) into its modern, exceptional status, from its worldly, poietic understanding into its theological/modern exceptionalization. (Its key ideas are familiar: the understanding of the artist as genius; of the gallery or museum as a secularized church; of the work as a cultic object, not to be touched, and having exceptional economic value; of the curator or critic as art pope—the artworld, just like academia, is full of stars, and full of those who have been burned by them.) As evidence of our contemporary situation, consider the difficulty of finding a work of art—one recognized as a work of art—that is *not* somehow iconic. I mean—doesn't it *have to be* iconic *to be* art? In "Idols of Unrepresentability," Gourgouris does not offer us a noniconic work of art. Dadaism, Duchamp, the Situationists, Catellan, Warhol—these are all iconic references, if not idols. Karlheinz Stockhausen, who is discussed earlier in the book and to whom I will return in a moment: iconic. No; to move away from the sacred—to offer an icon that is not iconic, that is not an idol—Gourgouris shows us a cartoon.

Unexceptional Art, Unexceptional Politics

Be water, my friend.
—Bruce Lee

My criticism, then, is that with the artworks discussed in *The Perils of the One*, we remain within the sacred—within the realm of the idol, rather than the mere icon (I write *mere* to distinguish my understanding of the icon from its near-identification with the "iconic," which borders on the "idolatrous"). To be clear: I don't think that writing about Warhol, Catellan, Duchamp, and company *necessarily* puts us within the realm of the idol, even if these artists and their works are idols. I think there is a way to write about these artists and their works that would be unexceptionalizing—that would remove these artists and their works from the realm of the exceptional and bring them into the realm of the unexceptional (the worldly, the desacralized). But I don't think Gourgouris's writing about these artists in the closing section of *The Perils of the One* fully accomplishes that (perhaps we need to wait for this move until the final volume of his Lessons in Secular Criticism trilogy, the provocatively titled *Nothing Sacred*): it merely lays that out for us as a challenge, a challenge to which I am responding here by fleshing out—still much too quickly—Gourgouris's examples. War-

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hol, Catellan, Duchamp, and company remain intact in “Idols of Unrepresentability” as idols, even if they are idols who are critical of idolatry. Using a term that Gourgouris borrows from W. J. T. Mitchell, one might say that we are in the realm of “critical idolatry” (Mitchell quoted in Gourgouris 2019: 194) in which the idol at the end of the day remains intact. What Gourgouris lays out for us as a challenge, however, goes beyond such critical idolatry. Critical of iconoclasm that operates within the logic of the sacred, Gourgouris calls for a thought and knowledge of the image, a reading of the image, which would understand the image as a mere image—as an icon, not an idol. Just an image. The cartoon points us in this direction—but the cartoon isn’t quite art.

One might very well see the difference between critical idolatry and this other, second project as different understandings of critique, with the first remaining within the limits of the critique and the second turning transgressive. (To capture this in proper names: it’s Immanuel Kant [2007] vs. Michel Foucault [2007] on the Enlightenment.)

So—and to rephrase the question with which I started—can there be art that is just an icon, not an idol? Or does art always inevitably produce idolization? Gourgouris’s take on this is that any idol, through its power of presentation, undermines the sacred and thereby invites its prohibition or destruction. For him, then, there is no such thing as art’s own political theology: art inherently undermines political theology. My own interest is in aesthetic exceptionalism: while Gourgouris may be fundamentally correct about art’s relation to political theology, we are surrounded by aesthetic exceptionalism, by a discourse of artists, artworks, curators, and critics that operates within the logic of the one. The conversation about art and artists in *The Perils of the One* can only take on its full meaning if it plays out Gourgouris’s understanding of art’s presentational power against art’s own political theology.

As I’ve shown, this is certainly something that interests the artists that Gourgouris discusses—I would argue that Catellan’s *La Nona Ora* does precisely this. Ben Lerner, whom I referenced earlier on, turns to Elka Krajewska’s *Salvage Art Institute* on this count. Krajewska’s project, which is discussed both in Lerner’s article “Damage Control” (2013: 49) and in his novel *10:04* (2014: 129ff), exhibits artworks that have been declared to be of zero value because of some accident they suffered: smoke damage because of a fire, excess humidity in a flood, a tear in a canvas, et cetera. While such damage is often visible, Lerner’s narrator in *10:04* is most interested in those zero-value artworks where it is invisible: where the zero-

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value work looks identical to the work that might sell for millions. Whereas Lerner is interested in the question of value in this context, Krajewska's own terminology appears to go further than that: she refers to the works on display in the Salvage Art Institute (SAI) as "No Longer Art."[7] It's the more radical denomination. For Lerner, by contrast, the works in the SAI are still art—but art without value. *He* is pushing the question of art before or after capitalism. *She* is going for the end of art. Of course, by putting these works on display once again—by making them part of the artwork by the artist Elka Krajewska—these works risk becoming appropriated again as part of the dialectical/hegemonic art machine. Call it the Banksy effect. But by labeling these works "No Longer Art," Krajewska makes it difficult to still call her project an art project and her work art. Instead, she is no longer an artist; and her work, too, is no longer art. Lerner, however, can't quite seem to have it this way. In *10:04*, where Elka appears as the character called Alena, the novel's narrator is so "wow[ed]" by her work that he considers whether Alena might be a "genius" (Lerner 2014: 134, 133). It's exceptionalism all over again—the very thing, I would argue, that the SAI sought to work against. Instead, one should consider Krajewska's project as offering us artworks that are mere icons—not idols.

Lerner's narrator in *10:04* is interested in this in part, it seems, because he would like to situate his own novel in Alena's "Totaled Art Institute" (as the SAI is referred to in *10:04*). How to make it No Longer a Novel? How to No Longer be a Novelist? And does it even make sense to ask that question given that the state of the novel these days is, like Ricky Dalton in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood* (Sony Pictures 2019), that of the *has-been*? Does it make sense to ask that question given that the issue of value does not at all pertain to novels as it does to works of art—even if the novel under consideration in *10:04*, which may or may not be the novel *10:04* itself, was contracted with a "strong six-figure" (Lerner 2014: 4) advance? (As the head of a financial services firm told me recently, they do not look at novels to identify signals that will affect markets because there is no major money involved in novels.) On this count, I would suggest considering a particular instance of a manuscript that is meant to contribute to a book's sales—namely, the advance review copy. My shelves are lined with review copies labeled "Not for Resale/Not Returnable," books that are, except for this label, identical to the ones you'll find at the store. These are, then, books outside the realm of value—novels before or after capital. All it

7. See the Salvage Art institute website at https://salvageartinstitute.org.

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takes for *10:04* to be before or after capital is to mark it as a review copy. It cannot be sold. It cannot be returned to the store or to the publisher: they just won't take it. It's precisely the outside that Lerner is looking for in "Damage Control" and *10:04*.

Moving on from this discussion and drawing from a book manuscript that I am in the process of writing,[8] let me suggest three figures that would be useful to rethink art outside the sacred. The first, already intimated in Gourgouris's discussion of iconoclasm, is the vandal. Art vandalism is a primary site to develop the iconic literary or iconic intelligence that Gourgouris writes about, with careful consideration not only of "iconoclasm's own political theology" but also of what I have called here art's own political theology—the ways in which art vandalism is easily reappropriated as the new thing in art (to the extent that Lerner can suggest that the history of twentieth-century art is a history of art vandalism).

The second figure, only hinted at here, is the forger. Indeed, the problematic of the copy—raised in Gourgouris's book when he mentions "mechanical reproduction"—is in my view another central site for the investigation of art's own political theology, the challenges posed both to authenticity as tied to authorship and as tied to the original work of art (both are examples of the logic of the one). Duchamp's *Fountain*, which we know today only through Stieglitz's photograph of the original and then later replicas, raises this issue for us, since Duchamp was adamant that the replicas were copies that could not substitute for the original piece. Warhol, of course, is another key figure for this conversation. Forgers such as the already mentioned van Meegeren, Zhang, or de Hory have all posed important challenges to the political theology of art.

Finally, I want to suggest the figure of the sage as a productive site to think through unexceptionalism. I have in my recent work explored how ancient Chinese thought, and specifically Taoism, can be a useful guide to unwork the exceptionalism that I consider to be characteristic of Western thought (Boever 2019, 2020a, and 2020b). Such exceptionalism cannot be separated from political theology and the monotheistic thinking that Gourgouris identifies; it is tied also to the metaphysical and ontological thinking that are typical of the dominant strands of Western philosophy (Boever 2020a). One finds this countered in the nontheological process thought that characterizes the ancient Chinese traditions. Part of what Gourgouris's

8. The title of this manuscript is "The Vandal, the Forger, and the Sage: Unexceptional Art between the West and China."

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work shows us, however, is that any simple (and, one might add, Orientalist) opposition of Western and Chinese thought on these counts will not do. Working with key sources in the Western tradition, specifically in ancient Greek thought, Gourgouris (2018) has laid bare the unexceptionalist beginnings of Western thinking and played them out against the political theologies that have become dominant.

This leads directly into the question of politics. What is the politics of a thinking and doing that seeks to leave the sacred behind? What is a politics outside of political theology? If the latter is often associated with "sovereignty," what is the name we can reserve for what lies outside of that? In Gourgouris's work, this outside is called "democratic anarchy," which is a more specific articulation of what—in conversation with Apter—he also refers to as "unexceptional politics." Gourgouris is interested in a political regime called "democracy" where the people alternate the role of ruling and being ruled—a regime that is autonomous in the sense that the rule the people follow is one they gave to themselves. Gourgouris can characterize such an understanding of democracy as anarchic and autonomous because its rule is radically shared and not experienced as a heteronomous command. When I follow the law, I am simply following the law I have given to myself. Such a thought is, in Gourgouris's (2018: 8) view, antimonarchical—it is against the rule of the one. "*Anarchy*," he writes, "*is the* arche *of democracy*."

If in an anarchist democracy, as Gourgouris theorizes it, everyone is equally entitled to govern, then anarchist democracy is precisely unexceptional—for everyone, *without exception*. Following Apter (2018), he thus embraces the notion of an unexceptional politics:

> I favor this notion because for me democracy is precisely the regime that does not make exceptions, if we are to take seriously Aristotle's dictum of a politics where the ruler learns by being ruled, making thus the ruled simultaneously the rulers, in a determinant affirmation of an *archè* that has no precedent and no uniqueness but is shared by all. No exceptions. The obvious politics of partiality and discrimination or exclusion in so-called modern democracies testifies to their fraudulent use of the name. Contemporary democratic states are no more than liberal oligarchies. (2013b)

As Gourgouris sees it, unexceptional politics goes against the theologization of politics (which he associates with Schmitt):

> I am interested instead in a politics where nothing is miraculous, where indeed nothing is sacred, where there is no *Homo Sacer* [this

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> is a reference, obviously, to Agamben's project]. This would be an unexceptional politics, an untheologized politics. It would have to be necessarily an anarchic politics, as democratic politics is at the core, insofar as *archè* is unexceptionally shared by all and therefore lapses as a singular principle. Anarchy as a mode of rule—democratic rule par excellence—raises a major challenge to the inherited tradition of sovereignty in modernity. (2013b)

If I have focused on the notion of art's own political theology here, it is because while many in the artworld would be ready to embrace Gourgouris's position when it comes to politics, the situation is vastly different when it comes to art. Unlike "unexceptional politics," "unexceptional art" receives a much less warm reception if it is welcomed at all. People, and artists in particular, tend to find "unexceptional art" offensive—I've experienced this firsthand when I've talked about unexceptional art in art venues. To think of art as unexceptional—now that goes against the very core of what we believe art is! Some might even accuse those defending the unexceptional of being "neoliberal" (I speak from experience!).[9]

Let me return, however, to my reference to the Chinese sage in this context. Consider the work of the Taoism-influenced Beijing-based artist Song Dong. In a short text about Song's work that was published on the occasion of the exhibition *The Allure of Matter* (shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from 2019 until 2020), Nancy P. Lin (2019: 187) starts with Song's "early fascination with the *Dao De Jing*" before quickly turning to the water-based works that Song started to develop around 1992. For Song, Lin notes, "The transparent, formless, and ephemeral qualities of water instantiate these Daoist notions of the ineffable; water's naturally occurring transitions between solid, liquid, vapor thus provide opportunities for artistic reflections on presence, absence, action, trace, and impermanence" (187). It's worth emphasizing, as Lin does, that the waterworks all develop "at the intersection of performance, video, and conceptual art" (187), because some of these elements will enter a tension with the material of water and the Taoist qualities that Song ascribes to it.

Such is the case, for example, with *Stir-Fry Water*, in which Song tries to stir-fry water: "Lasting only one minute and forty seconds, the video documentation is the only evidence of the work's existence" (Lin 2019: 187).

9. I address this in some detail in Boever 2020b as well as in "The Vandal, The Forger, and the Sage."

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Song's attempt "to treat water as a bounded concrete object" (187) obviously appeared futile—the work it produced is barely even there. Yet one should point out, as Lin does, that the video documentation operates as "a counterweight to the fugitive nature of water" (187), and this is something that returns in Song's work. In *Water Diary*, for example, Song records "his most intimate thoughts on a stone slab" (188), practicing calligraphy that uses clear water. "Song's brushstrokes leave only a brief trace," Lin writes, "quickly evaporating like an invisible ink that betrays none of the writer's secrets" (188). Yet here, too, there is documentation that adds a permanence that stands in tension with the work's absence.

Even more interesting is a work titled *A Pot of Boiling Water*. For it, "Song walked along an alleyway pouring a pot of boiling water" (Lin 2019: 188): "The water trail temporarily marked the artist's passage and later dissipated just as the artist himself disappeared from view" (188). This work and its documentation recall a story that can be found in Walter Benjamin, and that Benjamin himself claims to have found in China, about a painter who disappeared in his own work. Evidently, Song's interest in water is undermining the exceptionalism not only of the artwork but also of the artist himself. It's worth noting that Taoism is typically associated with anarchy—although a peculiar kind of anarchy that would preserve some degree of verticalization (Laozi 2003: 102).

Song Dong's unexceptionalist attitude is hardly limited to Chinese art. Some years ago, Raphael Rubinstein (2009) published a noteworthy article titled "Provisional Painting," in which he argued (in terms that for me often evoke Edward Said's [2006] thinking in *On Late Style*) that there is a provisionality that characterizes the work of many contemporary painters—artists who have "made works that look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling"; "In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from 'strong' painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse." (Raoul De Keyser, Albert Oehlen, and Michael Krebber are his initial examples—but he has many more to back up his case.) Tracing such an attitude back to well-known figures in Western modern painting—Cézanne, Giacometti, Sigmar Polke—as well as literary figures, such as Valéry (a poem is "never finished, only abandoned"; Agamben [2015: xiii], by the way, is very fond of this line as well and uses it in reference to his Homo Sacer series) and Artaud ("no more masterpieces"), Rubinstein also connects it to more contemporary phenomena such as punk. Richard Tuttle, Noël Dolla, Robert Rauschenberg, David Salle, and Martin Kippenberger are part of provisional art's genealogy: their work needs to be under-

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stood in part as "a struggle with a medium that can seem too invested in permanence and virtuosity, in carefully planned out compositions and layered meanings, in artistic authority and creative strength, in all the qualities that make the arts 'fine'" (Rubinstein 2009). The *not-so-fine-arts*, then—that is what provisional painters are interested in.

It's worth noting the ethical and political overtones of some of Rubinstein's descriptions. De Keyser's paintings "[forfeit] 'heroic' ambitions even before the first mark is made"; Rubinstein (2009) points out, "He works in a manner so low-key that even sympathetic critics can be unsure how to evaluate his paintings": we are somewhere between "deliberation and indecision" (according to Roberta Smith, whom Rubinstein quotes); with respect to these paintings, "The sense of doubt never quite goes away" (Barry Schwabsky quoted in Rubinstein 2009). These are, then, explicitly nonsovereign paintings, where the very mastery of the painter is in question. The works are not smooth; one critic compares De Keyser's paintings to "stuttering," as Rubinstein notes. It's a reference that recalls the work of Gilles Deleuze, and it sets up Rubinstein's theoretical framing of provisional painting at the very end of his text through the lens of Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work on minor literature. Provisional painting is painting in the minor mode. Unexceptional, as I would have it.

At one point in Rubinstein's 2009 article, "Chinese ink painting" comes up, but the reference is not developed. It's merely used to characterize Michael Krebber's paintings, which demonstrate a hastiness that according to Rubinstein "seems closer to a prostitute's hurried coupling than to the rapid elegance of a Chinese ink painting." Still, the reference is interesting, because its context indicates that we are not in some postcritical universe here: Rubinstein clearly distinguishes between different kinds of hasty work—some bad, some good (he ends his piece, by the way, with a discussion of how "at times, provisional painting overlaps with 'bad painting,' a mode with roots in the 1970s that continues to offer artists means of engaging the medium without having to take on all of its unwanted trappings"; in addition, there is painting that is, quite simply, bad—that is, it does not even rise to the established mode of "bad painting"). Noting that Krebber's 2004 show at dépendance gallery in Brussels was titled *Unfinished Too Soon*, Rubinstein eventually ties Krebber's attitude to a few lines from Marianne Moore: "I too, dislike it . . . / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in / it, after all, a place for the genuine." This, too, projects us back into earlier parts of this text: Moore's "I too, dislike it" happens to be the leitmotif of Ben Lerner's *Hatred of Poetry*; it

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shows up in Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, as well (Boever 2018b). Indeed, we are not all too far removed here from some of the concerns that drive Lerner's work on art vandalism.

Via Miró's "rejection of the idea of a finished, durable work"—Rubinstein includes the painter's confession that "after completing a painting he had his dealer take it away as quickly as possible"—Rubinstein even embarks on a discussion of "greatness," in particular of "what makes 'great' painting impossible?" While this question makes sense within the Western tradition, the issue can be reflected differently from the Chinese side as a question about how to maintain that impossibility in painting. In other words, seen from the Chinese side, great painting is painting that paints this impossibility. Rubinstein (2012) seems to have realized as much in his later work on provisional painting, which culminated in an exhibition titled *Provisional Painting* at the Modern Art gallery in London in 2011. Summarizing his curatorial vision there, Rubinstein ends up quoting the *Dao De Jing*: "The greatest straightness looks like crookedness. The greatest skill appears clumsy. The greatest eloquence sounds like stammering." Provisional painting, then, becomes a way of asserting within the Western tradition, through contemporary painting, a wisdom that was at the heart of Chinese thought and painting in the sixth century BC. This connection is further confirmed in Rubinstein's follow-up essay, published in 2012, where the connection to Chinese thought is again explicitly made (he references and quotes from François Cheng's book *Empty and Full*). "How curious," Rubinstein writes in this second piece, "that the prospect of leaving a work intentionally unfinished remained controversial in Western aesthetics some[10] centuries after its virtues had been recognized in Chinese painting, and some four centuries after Michelangelo's ambiguous embrace of the nonfinite." I could not agree more—how curious indeed.

Exit Music

I am trying to reorient, then, some of Gourgouris's thinking toward unexceptional works of art, or unexceptionalizing ways of writing about iconic works of art—those idols that make up art history's pantheon (Duchamp, Catellan, Warhol, etc.). My suggestion has been that such works, and such ways of writing, strangely seem to lie outside of Gourgouris's book, which maintains a curious, contrapuntal proximity to the sacred without fully laying out art's own political theology.

And yet Gourgouris is hardly unaware of the problematic of art's own

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political theology that I have laid out. He makes that most clear in his discussion of Stockhausen in his book's first chapter. There, the issue is precisely that he ultimately shows Stockhausen's "aesthetic" to be "religious in essence": "anesthetized to historical materiality, if only because it cannot comprehend the enormous and undeconstructible significance of humanity's finitude" (Gourgouris 2019: 7). When Stockhausen was reported to have praised the 9/11 terror attacks as the greatest work of art, he appeared to situate himself on the side of the aesthetic/religious transcendence of the world at the cost of the world's annihilation. "*Fiat ars—pereat mundus*," as Benjamin (1969: 242) puts it in "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction"; for him, the phrase captures fascism's aestheticization of politics. For Gourgouris, however, this accusation—fascism!—cannot tell the whole story. Rather, and taking Stockhausen's reported comments seriously, to think of art in this way as a great power of creation and destruction means to credit it with the all-changing power that it has. (This is the other side, one might say, of Plato's banning the poets from his ideal republic: it reveals how seriously Plato took the power of art.) Gourgouris then leads us toward a reversal: rather than reject Stockhausen's comment as fascist, he treats it as a reminder of art's radical transformative power. Still, Stockhausen cannot be saved from the Benjaminian reading because, as Gourgouris (2019: 5) shows, his aesthetic is "religious in essence"; he points out, for example, that "Stockhausen's work has been characterized since the beginning by relentless commitment to the technology of sound as the medium for the invocation of the transcendental, an attitude bearing the precarious duplicity of conceiving technology itself as an immaterial, transcendental language: as *sound* pure and simple, devoid of any instrumentality"; second, there are the explicitly biblical motifs in Stockhausen's work that further combine the reliance on "the material power of technology" with "metaphysical excess" (6). In that sense, for Gourgouris, Stockhausen's religious "art falls short" (7). That does not mean, in my view, that it is fascist; but it definitely allows me to locate it in the category of "aesthetic exceptionalism."

I will admit that I find it surprising Gourgouris does not return to music in "Idols of Unrepresentability," given how music—the "*sound* pure and simple" that he mentions in his discussion of Stockhausen—has often been construed as precisely that: an idol of unrepresentability. (It is for that reason, perhaps, that it is more easily allowed in sacred spaces than the icon.) Freud (1997: 122), a key reference in Gourgouris's oeuvre, remarked at the beginning of his "The Moses of Michelangelo" that music gave him no pleasure because unlike literature and sculpture, and sometimes also with

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painting (though less so), music didn't allow for analysis, a comment that suggests music's exceptional status.

While music may be absent from "Idols of Unrepresentability," I want to close by considering, very briefly, the music that Gourgouris has released as Count G on the record label Sublamental: from *Pyramid Coil* (2017) to *Pursuing Phantoms* and *Stains* (both 2018), to *Music for Street Rumor* (2019) and *Spell Solved for X* (2020).[10] Given music's strong tie to unrepresentability and the sacred, Gourgouris's intervention in it should not come as a surprise. On the one hand, his music could not be more different from Stockhausen's: it has none of its grandeur but works through improvisation, experiment, field recordings and "found sounds" (in particular on *Music for Street Rumor*), copies (in some cases applying what Frank Zappa called "xenochrony"—rendered as "heterochronicity" in *Stains*'s album insert; *heterochronicity* refers to the practice of using a guitar solo from one song in another, which arguably undermines some of the "one-ness" of the "solo"), and samples. There are echoes here of Duchamp and Dada. The overall impression in Count G's compositions is that of chance and chaos. While this is electronic music, influenced by drum and bass, and with very articulated percussion, the production does not hide the instruments, and one clearly hears, for example, the reeds alongside the percussion, sometimes intensifying it and sometimes breaking with it. Nothing about this electronic music is smooth; the compositions seem designed to make listeners hear the instruments better. There is something halting, amateurish to the drums (even on a track as warm as "Rueful Rusty Barman," from *Spells Solved for X*); the aesthetic is obviously not one of technical perfection. Instead, there is grain aplenty, and many of the compositions are jarring, feel like they are going against it—disrupted, disruptive, broken, yet still somehow together. On the other hand, there are also echoes of Stockhausen: *Spells Solved for X* develops the rather grand concept of a journey into the underworld and back; certainly Gourgouris shares with Stockhausen the understanding of art that he arrives at when taking Stockhausen seriously: the conviction that art can be radically transformative. Art can upset everything—and listening to Count G, one does get the feeling that one's very sense of what

10. Count G's involvement with another Sublamental artist, Masking Tapeworm, is unclear, although it's worth noting that the beats on Masking Tapeworm's EP, especially tracks one and two, show a distinct relation to Count G's own work; furthermore, Count G's most recent album, *Spell Solved for X*, reveals other affinities with Masking Tapeworm—including the warmer sound of tracks three and four on Masking Tapeworm's EP. Note also that a Masking Tapeworm album featuring Count G has been announced.

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music can be is rewired; moreover, that one's brain is rewired by Count G's worldly sounds.

If Stockhausen's music can be characterized as "sacred," I am tempted to call Gourgouris's "secular," in the sense he develops in *The Perils of the One*: not as idol, not as iconic, but as mere icon. It's just music—singular, but not exceptional. We are moving here from Stockhausen's *sublime* to its counterpoint, something that, borrowing the name of Count G's label, we might well call *the sublamental*. From that point of view, the name of Gourgouris's alter ego—"Count G," seemingly referencing a European nobleman—can only be read as a dig at the sovereignty of exceptional artists and their exceptional art. What this count delivers, rather, outside of but not without relation to *The Perils of the One*, is unexceptional music: worldly, desacralized, secular. Barely even music. By all means, you, too, should try it at home.

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