

To Touch and Be Touched:

Affective, Immersive and Critical Contemporary Art?

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In my article, I will present as a case study the collection exhibition shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in 2016.¹ The starting point for the exhibition was the metaphor of touch. As a concept, touch is ambivalent: it is more intimate than sight, which has been the traditional metaphor for knowledge in Western thinking. Yet touching is also about grasping or understanding, as in it we are taking hold of something. Our curatorial team, Eija Aarnio, Arja Miller, and myself, was interested in touch early on, because with it the distance to the observed is lost: when touching something we, too, are being touched. To be clear, we did not want to create an exhibition where spectators are actually able to touch. Instead, we were looking at the collections of the museum and searching for artworks that would “touch” us—works that were able get under our skin. While forming the conceptual core of the exhibition, our curatorial team recognized a tension in the way in which “touchy issues,” affects and emotions, are perceived in our society. On the one hand, we were interested in emotions and affects raised by the artworks. We wanted to focus on the immersive dimension of the art that seems to escape verbalization, a dimension that makes use of the multisensory experience and addresses the viewer in a direct manner. On the other hand, we also became aware of how society in general has been taken over by an emotional surge. If previously feelings and emotions were not meant to be shown in public, today they have become commonplace. What was emotional and affective seems no longer to be private, but shared and public.² In fact, strong emotions seem to be a prerequisite for success, be it a matter of reality television or politics. This is also connected to the search for extreme emotions and experiences, an aspect we felt needed to be included in the exhibition—not the least because in museums' competition for audiences, the experience-laden works are often seen as an answer.³

In this article, I will discuss the concept of our collection exhibition through selected case studies. I attempt to shed light to the discursive (i.e., theoretical) background of our “immersive” exhibition project. Unfortunately, I am not able to cover the whole exhibition, which was based on the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma's collections, and included over twenty-five participants. By choosing only five artworks for this article, I necessarily create an interpretation. However, my intention is to demonstrate with the selected artworks aspects that, from my curatorial perspective, are important for the thematics: how the spectator can be touched through multiple senses, which is especially reflected in the works that bring forth different senses and the embodied spectatorship, as well as address the traditional mind-body dualism, and lastly, how the theme is connected to the emotional surge that has taken over the public sphere to the point it becomes normal to speak of emotions of such inanimate things as the market. In the following, I will not present an in-depth analysis of the individual works, but instead point towards interpretations that, in my mind, communicate the exhibition's conceptual background.⁴ Prior to presenting the case studies, however, I will clarify some of the theoretical discussion that influenced the planning process.

The affective turn

Society in general is obsessed with feelings, emotions, and affects. Likewise, art research as well as cultural studies and sociology have for some years been interested in the affective. Media theorist Marie-Luise Angerer comments how “emotion and affect are now viewed as crucial to cognition and communication.”⁵ Within art research, this can be seen in the interest towards the emotional and affective reception of the artworks by the public. Indeed, some researchers speak of the affective turn. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg point to the watershed moment that came in 1995, with the publication of Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank's essay, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold,” as well as Brian Massumi's “The Autonomy of the Affect.”⁶ It is impossible to summarize all of the theoretical discussion influencing the so-called turn.⁷ Yet, for the sake of this article, I wish to point towards some parts of it: the important discussion around phenomenology concerning embodiment and perception,⁸ as well as the turn seen as a counterreaction to the previous theoretical emphasis on language and meaning in poststructuralism and deconstruction.⁹ My own perspective on the thematics of the affective is deeply rooted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and its legacy in continental philosophy. His studies in perception and embodiment have influenced my approach to the field of contemporary art, as I look at the artworks from the perspective of philosophy.¹⁰

Through the renewed interest in affect, questions of the body, the sensuous, and the emotional have become central for many researchers. Within the affective turn there are

different ways to define affect. Massumi underlines how affect is distinct from emotions and feelings. According to him, affect predates personal feelings and cultural emotions, as it is something that does not yet, or cannot have a name. He comments that “emotion and affect—if affect is intensity—follow different logics and pertain to different orders.”¹¹ Affect is something that is not within the conscious thought. In emotions, the intensity of affect has been labeled and owned.

Through the theoretical discussion around the affective turn, it is possible to find concepts and tools to discuss the emotional surge in our society. As Angerer has remarked, “Today, the enthusiasm with which affects, emotions and feelings are habitually used to underpin arguments points to a *dispositif* of affect.”¹² Angerer uses the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif* to describe a permeating discursive structure that affects us both in institutional and individual level. As such, the affective turn is not an unproblematic concept—there has been interest into affect and emotions within philosophy for centuries.¹³ I choose to use the term here in its broad sense, to refer to the heightened interest in affect and emotions seen in both researchers and Western societies. The interest has brought to the fore the challenges of affect—those in-betweens that escape conscious thought—but also turned attention to emotions and aspects of human experience that have long been either unarticulated or considered unimportant. While my first case studies draw from the bodily experience, the later examples point more towards the social aspects examined within the affective turn.

Touch and its limits

In the history of Western philosophy, senses have been cast in different roles. For instance, Aristotle remarked how perception works in different ways: taste and touch require contact, whereas the other senses allow distance.¹⁴ Of all the senses, vision has been the most commonly used metaphor for certainty, but then again, it has also been perceived as something dubious. This double bind can be seen, for instance, in the Cartesian tradition: how it both rejects senses, as they are associated with deception, and how vision is used as a metaphor for knowledge. In fact, this association with seeing has permeated Western thinking to the point that, as Hannah Arendt has commented, “Thinking has been thought of in terms of seeing.”¹⁵

Touch differs from vision radically, as with it the distance to that which is sensed is lost. Moreover, another aspect that seems to haunt philosophers is the way in which touch escapes us. Jacques Derrida writes, “We can only touch on a surface, which is to say the skin or thin peel of a limit.”¹⁶ The idea that touching is not taking in possession, such as grasping or taking hold of something, but is merely approaching something that does not let itself be touched. An important aspect in touching has to do with the

asymmetry of the experience. The phenomena of touch has been discussed, among others, by Merleau-Ponty. His philosophy influenced many thinkers and artists, particularly in its ability to bring attention to the embodied experience and how it is not possible to perceive the world without one's body: we cannot step outside the world and observe it from outside, as we are already in it. These insights have affected the way we think about visual art, too.¹⁷ I am particularly interested in the reversibility and asymmetry of touch. Merleau-Ponty wrote about the experience of a handshake and the double touching that takes place in his posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*. In the chapter "The Intertwining — the Chiasm," he wished to address the double nature of the body as the seen and the seer, the touched and the touching, but he argues that these two experiences, the touching and the being touched, are not simultaneous or coinciding. The two hands that touch one another always remain separate, and allot the roles of touching and of being touched between them. Reversibility is "always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence."¹⁸

Here, the rejection of total coincidence equals divergence. We cannot touch without being touched, and yet these two never seem to coincide totally; the moment is always defined by asymmetry. This double nature of touch—exposing oneself to something other and, at the same time, the impossibility to reach total coincidence serve as a metaphor for encountering artworks.

Smells of the world

Christian Skeel and Morten Skriver's *Babylon* (1996) is a work of art that touches the spectator through the sense of smell.¹⁹ The work consists of twenty-nine different smells placed in ceramic pots. The title of the work is a reference to the ancient city of Babylon in Mesopotamia, a city known as a trading hub and a melting pot for different tribes. It is also the origin of the Biblical story about the Tower of Babel that has been used to explain the multiple languages we speak—and the inability of humans to work together.

The smells that Skeel and Skriver chose for their work come from different sources—sandalwood, civet, castoreum—and all have different origins. The geographical and cultural dimension of smells becomes evident in the work: what is perceived as pleasant in one place might seem unpleasant elsewhere. In addition to the different smells, a large pot in the middle of the work mixes all of these smells together. Within the exhibition, the work highlights one of the dimensions that the modernist white cube context wished to ignore, at least according to its critics; namely, the sense of smell.²⁰ However, within contemporary art, there have already been several artists exploring the sense of smell since the 1960s and '70s, such as Joseph Beuys or Wolfgang Leib, as well as more contemporary figures, such

as Ernesto Neto or Hungarian artist Hilda Kozári. In the exhibition, *Babylon* can be seen as a gesture to remind the spectator of this multisensory aspect of contemporary art, and of our own bodily existence.

To connect smell to the thematics of this article, I wish to return attention to touch. As Aristotle remarked, it does not allow distance—similarly to taste—but is based on contact. Smell, on the one hand, seems to give space to distance. A small sniff can already tell us that we do not want to approach the source of a smell. We can also close our nostrils if we want. On the other hand, even a sniff can have a strong effect. Can we make the bad smell go away once it has entered our olfactory sense? Does smell not, like touch, require contact, and once having been exposed to it, is it not difficult to control? Those familiar with the sense of smell can perhaps point towards the privileged connection to emotion and memory.²¹ The olfactory experience seems to then have the ability to address us more directly and strongly than one could anticipate. This is why *Babylon* can be affective: smell's tight connection with memory is guaranteed to create spectatorial experiences that are beyond our control.

Touching color

Finnish artist Kaarina Haka (b. 1974) builds her work to the space using various materials and elements that together form a total installation. It is difficult to define her work, as it seems to be both painting and sculpting at the same time. One could connect her creative process to such contemporary artists as Katharina Grosse, Tarja Pitkänen-Walter, or Marianna Uutinen, all of whom are exploring the limits of painting. Typical materials for Haka are painted balloons emptied of air, fishnet, found stuffed toys, chains, and glue. The final works can be seen both as images—when observed from a distance—or installations, where the spectator can enter and walk around. In the former, the spectator can ignore the material aspect of the color; in the latter, the materiality of the work plays a crucial role.

In my reading, Haka's work poses challenges to the spectator: as already mentioned, it escapes the traditional definitions of painting and sculpture.²² Yet what is more important is the way in which her work ties together materiality and color. This effect makes me think of one of the key comments made by Merleau-Ponty. He argued that color does not exist independently, but it is always the color of some materiality, like the redness of a dress, for instance. Merleau-Ponty writes how “the red dress a fortiori holds with all its fibers onto the fabric of the visible, and thereby onto a fabric of invisible being.”²³ Color is connected to the visible, to materiality, but it also has a connection to the invisible deep within it. Merleau-Ponty writes how “a naked color, and in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision....”²⁴ To him, color is part of the texture of the world. The redness of the dress is connected to fibers of visible, in all its materiality,



Fig. 1 *Kaarina Haka, work in progress, artist's studio in February 2016. Photo by Saara Hacklin.*

but it is also indivisible from the invisible, like, as he suggests, in the case of the red dress it links to the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers, and Revolution. In short, color is both material and meaningful. And this same intertwining of the two worlds, invisible and visible, also takes place in the observer. “Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.”²⁵ We see colors and connect them to their materiality and the web of interrelations, but also “feel” them in our body, although perceiving them just through vision. In order to describe this phenomena of intertwining, Merleau-Ponty developed the concept of flesh (*la chair*).²⁶ Encountering Haka's work addresses the spectator in various levels. Her work draws attention to the qualities of color, their connectedness with manifold of materials and cultural history, and how our perception of that particular material alters as we perceive it from a distance or from close range. The seen has an ability to make us feel the color, be it a sense of touch—for instance, in the memory of touching a stuffed toy—or its reference to color and our personal and cultural memories connected to it. Also, the way in which the work posits the spectator—being inside an installation, disorientated and unable to control²⁷—calls for a visuality where we are unable to take possession from a distance, but are instead immersed inside the painting in Diderotian style.

Pain and the body

Roma Auskalnyte (b. 1988) is a Lithuanian-born artist who works with printmaking, video, and performance. In her three-channel video installation, *Punishment* (2014), the spectator sees the artist kneeling over a metal plate. On the two side monitors, the spectator is faced with close-ups of the artist's knees. The letters of the metal printing plate imprint Auskalnyte's skin: “In text I trust / In written truth / I believe / Read more.” The video installation is accompanied by a printing plate with the same letters.

In her artist's statement, Auskalnyte mentions an old punishment: “There was a punishment in the schools: if a pupil is misbehaving, not listening and not doing what s/he is told to do, s/he was sent into a corner to kneel on dry peas.”²⁸ Auskalnyte's work associates with various performances that have made use of the artist's body and (potential or real) pain.²⁹ For the spectator, thinking about the sharp metal under one's knees can make one shiver. Through the artist's statement, pain is strongly associated with learning. Passionate feelings such as love or hate can be painful. Yet also learning has been linked with pain in different times. It is possible to force information into us? Does pain make the learning process more efficient? Auskalnyte's piece addresses the relation of knowledge—or written word, to be precise—and bodily experience. I propose that her work can be seen as an encounter between the immersive (embodied experience) and the discursive (text, theory). It juxtaposes bodily experience and new “knowledge” (i.e., written word) that is situated outside the body. In the work, the artist turns herself into a piece of



Fig. 2 *Roma Auskalnyte, Punishment (2014). Photo by Roma Auskalnyte.*

paper, and in so doing lets the letters and words inscribe their will into her body in an Kafkaesque manner.³⁰ But does inscribing make the statement true?

I propose that Auskalnyte's work points towards one of the challenges that the affective turn addresses: the mind-body dualism. Or, to put it another way, as Massumi has written about Stelarc and his artistic practice, "in what way is the body an idea, and the idea bodily?"³¹ Auskalnyte's work invites one to think about how the bodily, lived experience is related to knowledge and the role of pain. There is an interesting remark by philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his essay, "Can Thought go on without a Body?," where he ponders the possibilities of thinking and its relation to the body. He writes, "Thinking and suffering overlap."³² In Lyotard's analysis, thinking is painful, because in it we are encountering something that is new, and not something that is already part of our experience and thoughts. "The unthought hurts because we're comfortable in what's already thought."³³

Reading Auskalnyte in Lyotardian lines, one could say that both the body and pain are necessary for thinking. Pain can serve as a catalyst for thinking—in order to truly think, there has to be suffering. On the other hand, the way Auskalnyte's work connects pain and thinking poses questions about the self. The text inscribed into the artist's knees seems to signal absolute trust and submission to the written word. The self is being set aside for the words and wisdom of the written truth. However, in the end, there are the words: "Read more." This statement can be interpreted in many ways. It is a commandment set to the artist, but also a commandment to the spectator: to read more. This catchphrase is familiar to all of us browsing the Internet; a hyperlink that one can click to find out more, a promise of the never-ending, new possibilities of the Web, here paralleled with the artist's body. In the end, the words will fade away from the artist's knees, like hyperlinks become inactive.

The refusal of experience

Thinking about the self and its relation to knowledge from the outside, I wish to now turn towards my fourth example, namely Hanna Saarikoski (b. 1978), a Finnish painter and video artist. In her *See Paris and Die* (2012) video work, the artist is giving the spectator the possibility to follow her first visit to Paris. As such, the aesthetics of Saarikoski's performative video is relatively minimalistic, following the lines of many performance videos. What is curious about the work is that the artist will go about in Paris with eyes tightly shut. To emphasize her refusal to see, she has painted pictures of eyes on her eyelids. Watching the video of an artist trying to experience the sights and typically "Parisian" activities, like enjoying a baguette and some wine in the park, always with her eyes shut, it becomes clear that Paris comes to her in smells, sounds, and tastes—in the multisensory experience of the city. I suggest that removing sight from one's everyday senses invites the spectator to



Fig. 3 *Hanna Saarikoski, See Paris and Die* (2012), still from the video.

imagine how the “touch” of Paris would feel like. The piece directs thinking towards the multiplicity of sense-experience without the hegemony of vision and its possessive look.

However, I want to also underline another aspect of Saarikoski's piece, namely its association with tourism. The proverb, “See Naples and die,” makes a connection between seeing and death. Having visited the city of Naples, one has seen it all and can die in peace. The attitude of this proverb is even more topical at present, and it can be connected with today's experience-oriented society—people are encouraged to search for more extreme experiences in order to be moved. See Naples and many more, forget not to share it on social media! Instead, in Saarikoski's work, the proverb is interpreted literally. Seeing means death. Shutting her eyes is an attempt to keep death at arm's length. Another association has do with Stendhal syndrome, which can be especially linked with the overwhelming richness of Italy. While protecting herself from death, the artist is keeping herself away from the potentially overwhelming beauty and richness of the city. Instead of trying to get hold of the sights through seeing, she wants to limit her experiences. Referring back to the Merleau-Pontian discussion earlier, while he underlined the idea that we are not able to see without being seen, or touch without being touched, Saarikoski refuses the position of an active seer, the role of the tourist or flaneur that “takes” the city, and instead exposes herself to the looks of others. Towards the end of the video work is a scene filmed in the Louvre. The first passage shows tourists trying to get a glimpse of the *Mona Lisa*. The second shows the artist, who has stepped aside from the crowd and becomes photographed like the artworks in the museum. The boldness of some fellow spectators is bewildering, as they push their cellular phones very close to Saarikoski's eyelids. The “blind” artist becomes a spectacle for others.

Spectacle and the spectator

My final example is Tuomas A. Laitinen's (b. 1976) *Wall Street* (2009), an installation made out of neon lights and sound. The work forms a large and twinkling tic-tac-toe in which the figures of X and O blink. Adjacent to the colorful, flickering spectacle is a mechanism that has a 1950s-style microphone standing next to it. The sound of the machine that changes the lights is amplified with the help of the microphone. The mechanism used in the work incorporates slot machine parts. Creating an impressive light and sound installation and naming it *Wall Street*, the artist creates various parallels. Wall Street, the stock exchange and heart of the Western economy, is here represented as a random game. Another parallel that the work creates is that of a circle: by amplification of the sound and image, they together create an impressing totality, a system that seems to make no reference to the outside world.

These associations underline, in my mind, the idea of spectacle. Like in the Debordian spectacle, he or she can only be allured by the inviting colors of the spectacle, but not



Fig. 4 Tuomas A. Laitinen, *Wall Street* (2009). Installation photo by Kimmo Syväri.

interfere with it—the work appears as a tautology.³⁴ The spectator is being left outside the blinking lights that form the mechanisms of the market. The market has a life of its own; it is represented here as a closed system that does not take any input from the spectator. We can gather around the neon lights, watch them in awe, yet never participate or “win.”

I wish to make a final connection between the work and the way in which “the market” is talked about in our society. Psychologizing the market has become common through the metaphors of economy. This is seen, for instance, in the way in which we receive messages through media that the stock market has become “nervous” and needs to “cool down.” The market has become a self-supporting system with a life and emotions to which we are subjected, yet have no control over. The impressive spectacle of the stock market may be a game and a facade, and yet it touches us in many ways.

Conclusion

I began this article with a reference to the concept of touch and ended it with blinking neon lights. Through the selected case studies of the exhibition, I hope to have opened up those theoretical aspects that guided the curatorial work. What became crucial for us during the planning process was that, besides the idea that immersive and affective works address the spectator in multisensory ways, it was important to take into critical consideration the emotional surge that has taken over our societies. This question also became a challenge. How could we find works that would speak of the manner in which spectators are being torn in different directions by the bombardment of media imagery? Thinking about the different ways of interpreting touch had led to looking for not only intimate and personal, “immersive” works, but also pieces that were able to raise questions concerning our experience-driven society that in turn highlight strong emotions and affectivity—the ways in which society in general wishes to “touch” us and guide us towards preset responses.

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1. Open to public from April 22, 2016, until January 29, 2017.
 2. Eeva Jokinen, Juhana Venäläinen, and Jussi Vähämäki, “Johdatus prekaarien affektien tutkimukseen,” in *Prekarisaatio ja affekti*, eds. Eeva Jokinen and Juhana Venäläinen (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2015), 14.
 3. The popularity of immersive exhibitions like Yayoi Kusama, seen at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in autumn 2015, does not exclude, however, the dimension of the discursive and research. Julian Stallabrass has commented that impressive installations are the art world's way to fight against mass culture. See Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
 4. Another kind of article could have been written not only by choosing different artworks from the same exhibition, but also by focusing on different questions in the case of each artwork.
 5. Marie-Luise Angerer, *Desire After Affect* (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2015), 1.

6. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.
7. Gregg and Seigworth list eight approaches to the theorization of affect. See Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 6.
8. See for instance Vivian Sobchack's influential contribution to film studies, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
9. Patricia T. Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 206.
10. Saara Hacklin, *Divergencies of Perception: The Possibilities of Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology in Analyses of Contemporary Art* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2012), <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/29433>.
11. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.
12. Angerer, *Desire After Affect*, xv.
13. For an analysis of the turn, see for instance Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martyn Lloyd, "Editors' introduction: philosophy and the 'affective turn,'" in *Parhnesia*, no. 13 (2011): 1–13.
14. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 5.
15. Cited in David Michael Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.
16. *Ibid.*, 6. Derrida's thinking takes on Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas on touching.
17. For Merleau-Ponty's reception within visual arts, see for instance Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).
18. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 147.
19. All of the artworks discussed in this article belong to the collections of Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, part of Finnish National Gallery. For information on collections, see <http://www.kiasma.fi/en/collections/>
20. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), 14–15. First published 1976 by *Artforum*.
21. Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous theory and multisensory media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 120.
22. The *Untitled* (2016) piece by Haka is still unfinished at the moment of writing. My analysis is based on encountering various previous works by Haka, and also by studio visits during the process of preparing a new site-specific piece for Kiasma.
23. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 132.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 134.
26. I will not go deeper into the new ontology Merleau-Ponty worked on in the last stage of his career. For more, see for instance Hacklin, *Divergencies of Perception*, 5.
27. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 13.
28. Roma Auskalnyte, "Roma Auskalnyte," in *Kuvan kevät 6.–31.5.2015*, exh. cat., eds. Anni Anttonen, et al. (Helsinki: University of the Arts Helsinki, 2015), 31.
29. For instance, performances by Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, Yoko Ono, and Dennis Oppenheim.
30. I am thinking in particular of Kafka's short story, "In the Penal Colony" (1914).
31. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 90.
32. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 18.

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33. Ibid., 20.
 34. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, § 13, accessed February 24, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>.