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Kuras and Duncan
MacKenzie as part
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project for Performa
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The Artist as Double Agent¹

– Zachary Cahill and Philip von Zweck

double agent n. A spy who works on behalf of mutually hostile countries, usually with actual allegiance only to one.

– Oxford English Dictionary

One has heard of double and triple agents who themselves in the end no longer exactly know for whom they were really working and what they were seeking for themselves in this double and triple role playing... On which side do our loyalties lie? Are we agents of the state and of institutions? Or agents of enlightenment? Or agents of monopoly capital? Or agents of our own vital interests that secretly cooperate in constant changing double binds with the state institutions, enlightenment, counter-enlightenment, monopoly capital, socialism, etc., and, in so doing, we forget more and more what we our 'selves' sought in the whole business?

– Peter Sloterdijk²

Zachary Cahill: It is well worth pondering the idea that the ever-greater erosion of the romantic conception of the artist that we have seen over the last few decades has appeared in tandem with the rise of a hybridised notion of artistic agency that moves within and between the various institutions that comprise the art world. In some instances this erosion may be lamentable. No doubt weighed down with the impossibly heavy baggage of claims to genius and crimes of nationalism(s), the romantic figure of the artist may still prove useful in an art world that is increasingly shaped by impersonal institutions. But if we are to have no truck with nostalgic lamentations for the fall of the romantic trope, then we should take stock of what contributes to the rise of hybridity and some of the ways it has become manifest in the art world today.

The institutional imperatives that have given rise to this hybridity are (at least) twofold. On the one hand, we have institutions playing the role of artists. Theorist and critic Boris Groys locates the production of art in the realm of 'multiple authorship', where art is

Zachary Cahill and Philip von Zweck discuss how artists reroute the institutional impulse of today's art system by taking up day jobs that feed into their practices – acting, in effect, as double agents.

the product not only of the artist but also of choices made by curators, museum directors, museum board members, etc., in a kind of Duchampian play of artistic selection writ large.³ On the other hand, we have the artist as employee of institutions, occupying numerous roles (from marginal to gainful employment) within art schools, museums, galleries and art

periodicals, for example. These two poles could be thought of as opposed ends of the spectrum that constitutes a new hybrid notion of the artist, which might even be entering a phase of maturity. This mature figure, I would offer, is that of the artist as double agent.

1 A version of this paper was first delivered on 16 February 2012 at INVISIBLE-EXPORTS in New York, on the occasion of the group exhibition 'How I Wrote "Elastic Man"' (1 February–10 March 2013), which included work by Anne Doran, Franklin Evans, Daniel Newman, Deb Sokolow, Philip von Zweck and Ishmael Randall Weeks. 'The Artist as Double Agent' was originally conceived as a performative text and edited live at INVISIBLE-EXPORTS, where von Zweck responded in real time to Zachary Cahill's previously written commentary. The text has been altered here for the sake of clarity.

2 Peter Sloterdijk, quoted in Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and International Order*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, p.1. For Guilhot's notion of the double agent, see also pp.10–14.

3 See Boris Groys, 'Multiple Authorship', *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008, pp.96–97.

Philip von Zweck: What is significant here is that, while not new, this hybridisation – what we will describe as ‘double agency’ – is becoming a required tactic for artists, especially those trying to participate from positions outside of centres (geographic or otherwise) of influence.

The Romance of Double Agency

ZC: Double agents, as we understand from popular culture, move between different states and have a complex relation to their identities. Often we find spy movies rather empty because, in the end, after all the shuttling back and forth between allegiances, the truth of the spy’s identity is that there is really no one there. We don’t have access to the agent’s personal life because it is subordinate to the task at hand; spies are in some sense non-characters. They do not have the courage of their convictions, or the convictions behind their power appear so intense that it is hard to fathom what really drives them – a belief in their country as a rationale for their dangerous work can seem hardly more than ideological brainwashing. Chameleon-like spies adapt to their environments to survive. Loyalties get confused. Notions of right and wrong, the just and the unjust, are less governed by actual laws than a personal code of conduct.

Conventionally understood, the romantic figure of the artist is an individual who retreats into his or her own subjectivity. Against this extended misconception, however, it might be instructive to recall the dictum of that Romantic artist par excellence, Caspar David Friedrich: ‘I have to morph into a union with the clouds and rocks in order to be what I am.’⁴ I would like to propose that the operation the Romantic painter describes as morphing with the landscape is roughly analogous to the ways in which artists merge with institutions to perform their double agency.

PvZ: I think that you are not describing double agents but a perception of the double agent predominantly informed by fiction. While I am not a spy, I think the decision to become an agent (double or otherwise) is indeed made through conviction; the problem of double agents (for both spies and artists) is that their need to keep those convictions and motivations guarded may lead to distrust. In contrast with the Romantic painter’s desire to become one with the landscape, the double agent doesn’t morph into the institution, he or she only appears to do so: there is always a distance, an awareness on the part of the double agent that his or her long-term plan is not necessarily aligned with that of the institution.

Institutional Romance(s)

ZC: Perhaps it is important to try to set down some provisional modes by which artists operate as double agents. The first, and perhaps most common, is the day job, through which the artist pursues his or her artistic work, making no distinction between one and the other. He or she slips between the gears of the institution, advancing at once the company’s dime and his or her own. This might be the artist who works in arts administration, or within the academy – an institution that often has as its mission the idea of supporting artistic research. Artist-teachers bring their clout to a teaching gig, and, in exchange, schools allow them to build their clout. It is a symbiotic relationship. Next might be the artist-critic: the artist who takes up writing to advance ideas and arguments that enter into circulation at much higher velocity and volume than perhaps the exhibition format can muster.⁵ This moment may have had its heyday in the pitched debates in art magazines during the 1960s, when artists such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd wrote impassioned and polemical texts in the pages of *Artforum* and elsewhere as a counterpoint to the critical hegemony of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Another

4 Caspar David Friedrich, quoted by Werner Herzog in Elizabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders (ed.), *Whitney Biennial 2012* (exh. cat.), New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012, p.139.

5 David Robbins, for example, has argued that owing to the long preparation time required to make an exhibition, writing can circulate much faster and in many instances reach a much wider audience than a traditional show in a gallery can. See D. Robbins, ‘Alternatives to Art’, lecture given at the Open Practice Committee, Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, 26 March 2012, available at <http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/opc/video/2012/03/david-robbins-2> (last accessed on 21 January 2014). Dan Graham also realised the importance of the relationship between art and publishing: ‘I learned that if a work of art wasn’t written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of “art”. It seemed that in order to be defined as having value – that is, as “art” – a work only had to be exhibited in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine.’ D. Graham, quoted in Gwen Allen, *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011, p.24.

double agent is the artist as curator, creating exhibitions with an artistic sensibility that is at once different from and the same as the curator in his or her craft. As Elena Filipovic notes,

*If it is easy to see that artist-curated exhibitions can trouble our very understanding of such notions as 'artistic autonomy', 'authorship', 'artwork' and 'artistic oeuvre', what might be less evident is that they also complicate what might count as an 'exhibition'. Many artist-curated exhibitions — perhaps the most striking and influential of the genre — are the result of artists treating the exhibition as an artistic medium in its own right, an articulation of form.*⁶

Relatively recent examples include Maurizio Cattelan's Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art in 2006, which he co-curated with Ali Subotnik and Massimiliano Gioni, and Artur Zmijewski's edition in 2012. Lastly, we have the artist as businessperson-impresario: an individual who wields all of these methods in some version of Warhol's Factory, sourcing labour and content to and from a variety of participants. An example of this today might be artists Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle in their role as founders of the network e-flux, which uses advertising sales through its announcement service to support projects such as *e-flux* journal and Time/Bank, a micro-economic model that facilitates the exchange of time and skills amongst individuals or groups of people involved in the cultural field via a time-based currency.⁷

No doubt these are all gross oversimplifications, but perhaps they will be at least provisionally useful for trying to understand this sketch of the artist as double agent.

PvZ: For me the idea of double agency in art has to do with getting two (or more) seemingly unaligned results out of one set of operations — that is, doing something that is your day job while at the same time it is your art. While I can see how this can happen in arts

Double agency may amount to a type of romantic project whereby artists assert their subjectivity through various masks and by morphing identities within larger institutional structures.

administration, I think you haven't gone far enough in your description. Making a living doing the work you want to do, be it in your studio or in an administrative office, however, strikes me as agency, not double agency. To qualify as double agents, artists would need to be able to claim credit for their day job as their art practice, or at least significantly blur the lines between art and work. To my mind, Pablo Helguera is a

great example, since his individually authored projects often share the same form as his day job as Director of Adult and Academic Programs in the education department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. When he presents a lecture-performance, it is his art. But when he does it at MoMA, is it his job? Also interesting is the relationship between your own administrative position at the University of Chicago, Zachary, and your work as a writer and artist.

I am unable to situate the artist as professor in a category of double agency because the goals of the artist and the institution are too in line with each other — unless we are referring to artists of such stature that they draw a pay cheque while not actually teaching (as Slavoj Žižek is so proud of doing in Astra Taylor's 2005 film *Žižek!*). In those instances both the professor and the academy are working against the students, who are drawn to said institution by the lure of educational opportunities they may never have — a very problematic higher-education version of bait-and-switch.

I see the artist-critic and artist-curator as being the most successful modes of double agency, as they both perform a function with power and influence, which, depending on scale, has the potential to disseminate the artist's name and critical agenda.

6 Elena Filipovic, 'When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artist as Curator', *The Artist as Curator*, issue no.0, periodical publication distributed with *Mousse*, issue 41, December 2013—January 2014, p.5. An earlier version of this text was delivered as the keynote presentation at the symposium 'Artist as Curator', organised by Afterall at Central Saint Martins, London, 10 November 2012, available at <http://afterall.org/online/artist-as-curator-symposium-keynote-by-elena-filipovic> (last accessed on 21 January 2014).

7 For specific *e-flux* journal issues, see <http://www.e-flux.com/journals/>; for the Time/Bank project, see <http://e-flux.com/timebank/> (both last accessed on 26 March 2014).



What I think you are failing to discuss is the urgency for artists to be double agents. In his recent book *Your Everyday Art World* (2013), Lane Relyea argues that artists' moves to combine a plethora of flexible freelance jobs (studio work, curation, criticism, etc.) grew out of the forms of contingent labour that gained prominence in the 1990s, and have certainly not left.⁸ What we're calling double agents may be the kissing cousins of the artists Relyea speaks about insofar as they adapt the artistic strategies we might associate with Conceptualism and Institutional Critique to the dire economic landscape of contingent employment and decreased arts funding: double agents embrace the DIY strategies Relyea lays out, but also desire to work within institutions in more or less any capacity, even in day jobs, with a view to twisting an institution to work for them once inside. Such methods are used tactically (although not necessarily consciously) in the attempt to move from the periphery to the centre of an insular art world; they are small ways to manufacture proximity.

Daniel Newman,
*John Candy Firing
Range*, 2012, mixed
media, 53 × 47cm
(framed). Courtesy
the artist and
INVISIBLE-
EXPORTS, New York

8 See Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013.



Promotional image for Philip von Zweck's project for Performa 11 at INVISIBLE-EXPORTS, New York, 12–13 November 2011. Courtesy the artist and INVISIBLE-EXPORTS

Artistic Platforms

ZC: Let's delve into a few concrete examples as a way of fleshing (or flushing) out our double agents. One place to start is your work, Philip. The group exhibition 'How I Wrote "Elastic Man"', held in the winter of 2013 at the New York gallery INVISIBLE-EXPORTS, thematised ideas of secrecy and gnosticism, confusion, deception and self-erasure. Considering the rest of the work on display — such as Deb Sokolow's humorous drawings, which create choose-your-own-adventure-esque narratives around outlandish conspiracy theories, and Daniel Newman's chilling collage *John Candy Firing Range* (2012), with its depiction of the fine line between interrogation and torture that could have been taken out of a James Bond film — one could rightly ask, how exactly are your abstract striped paintings indicative of double agency? To answer this question one needs to acquaint oneself with your broader artistic output or simply consult your bio on the INVISIBLE-EXPORTS website, which states that you are 'a painter and an artist'.⁹ But isn't a painter de facto an artist? This clever demarcation, I believe, gets at the way in which you can be thought of as a double agent. A large part of your artistic practice is given to 'platforming', or presenting other artists' works through your own projects. For your contribution to Performa 11, for example, you asked some 28 artists to contribute original works from which you would create a photocopied edition over the two-day length of the event (12–13 November 2011). Visitors were invited to request specific works to be reproduced, so that the print run of each would depend on the popularity of that work. Acting as an agent primarily for yourself, you also cagily put other artists into the rotation through this photocopy-based distribution project, adopting in this way a curatorial role: you provide your collaborators with a happy line on the CV, and they, in turn, fill the project with content, or at least imagery. The other trajectory of your practice is grounded in painting. Mostly abstract and well-wrought, the paintings in some sense serve as a palatable stalking horse in the art world for your platforming work, and vice versa. It is this *in-between-ness*, the movement back and forth in both practices, that I think of as double agency.

⁹ See INVISIBLE-EXPORTS, 'How I Wrote "Elastic Man"' [press release], 2013, available at http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/48_howiwrote/howiwrote.html (last accessed on 21 January 2014).



Installation view, 'Dave Hardy: A House with Gates', Regina Rex, New York, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Regina Rex

But if you are an artist-painter-double agent, what then of the other types of agents I mentioned earlier? Might we take the Brooklyn-based outfit Regina Rex as a kind of MI6 model? Regina Rex, founded in 2010, is a consortium of some thirteen artists that employs a crisp and clean white cube as the primary locus of their artist-curator-gallerist activities. An artist-run space is not the newest thing under the sun. Notably, however, the group deploys a rather nebulous curatorial identity to foster a complex curatorial regime that is imbued by each artist's own sensibility. Perhaps Regina Rex is founded on the age-old principle that there is strength in numbers. There is disagreement in numbers, too, which may account for how the space has remained fresh and vital. The application of the curatorial signature 'Regina Rex' to each exhibition, rather than the name of the specific organising member, also ensures that no one outside of the collective knows whose show succeeded or failed. Theoretically, at least, the group's fortunes rise and fall together. Regina Rex remains dynamic through its members' license to un-authorise exhibitions – by which I mean, responsibility is shared by the group, credit is given to everyone and no one. It may very well be that the organisation works through a kind of disorganised principle that allows the tumult of voices to drive the production of the gallery, continually riffing off each other. In any case, through using an indistinct group identity, artists from the group can slide between the two different sides of a gallery situation; this enables them to move through the art world as double agents in a way that might not be possible for lone artists. Obviously, there are a number of similar precedents. One quickly thinks of the Bernadette Corporation, Reena Paulings, Claire Fontaine and any number of other artist collectives that have a certain clandestine veneer to their activities.

PvZ: I fear you are over-romanticising Regina Rex. While you call them artists as curators, I think they might be more accurately described as artists as businesspeople-impresarios. Regina Rex is a collectively run gallery, but that doesn't necessarily make it a curatorial collaboration, since shows are often curated by fully credited individuals, usually keyholders. I would claim that Regina Rex is a model of double agency as a response to being on the periphery: not only is the gallery located in the out-of-the-way area of Bushwick, in Brooklyn, but, more to the point, at the time of its founding a significant portion of its membership were recent transplants from Chicago, where several had been involved in artist-run exhibition spaces. Chicago is a city where there is a long-standing tradition of the hybridity we are calling double agency, of artists writing and curating and exhibiting and leveraging... This is maybe best exemplified by the artists-journalists-event organisers-podcasters Bad at Sports; or better yet,



the artist-professor-critic-gallery director and co-curator of the 2014 Whitney Biennial Michelle Grabner.¹⁰ While I can't argue that this was Regina Rex's explicit intention — strangers in a strange land — opening a gallery is a very effective way for a group of unknown artists fresh from grad school and mostly new to New York to support their friends while making valuable contacts. In your own words: 'If indeed, as Robert Storr put it recently in *The New York Times*, "the middle of the art world is now Brooklyn", one might then venture the rejoinder: and the centre of Brooklyn is now Chicago.'¹¹

Art History Writes Itself

ZC: While Regina Rex is an artist-centred endeavour, Our Literal Speed (OLS) is a network of US-based artists and scholars that operates 'in the vicinity of art and art history'.¹² Founded in 2006, the group publishes texts in leading art journals such as *October* and the *Oxford Art Journal*,¹³ organises symposia at museums and universities, maintains a deep archive on their website and conducts other rather clandestine interventions into the circuitry of contemporary art. So adroitly does OLS practice double agency that their work has even garnered pages in the standard arbiter of the past century of art history, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (2004).¹⁴ This represents an instance of art historians taking the academisation of the art world to an almost operative level (OLS does have a penchant for talking about itself in terms of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*). OLS operates in a liminal zone of authorship, not exactly nameless nor faceless. Indeed, two participants, Abbey Dubin and John Spelman, are the group's most visible faces, appearing on posters, advertisements and the group's website. Other participants, such as art historians Christopher Heuer, Matthew Jesse Jackson and Andrew Perchuk, are less visible, though not invisible. The agents play double roles both within and beyond the project. This is key to understanding the methodology of OLS. As with Regina Rex,

10 Michelle Grabner co-curated the 2014 Whitney Biennial alongside artist and curator Anthony Elms and curator Stuart Comer.

11 Zachary Cahill, 'Hand's Tide', *Artforum.com* [online magazine], 26 September 2010, available at <http://artforum.com/archive/id=26475> (last accessed on 21 January 2014).

12 The group is sometimes referred to as 'Our Literal Speed: Events in the Vicinity of Art and Art History' in the promotional materials accompanying the group's activities. This was the case, for example, in 'A Live Pedagogical Concept Album', which took place at The University of Chicago, Art Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, the Renaissance Society and Smart Museum of Art, all in Chicago, on 30 April—2 May 2009.

13 See Our Literal Speed, 'Our Literal Speed', *October*, no.129, Summer 2009, pp.143—47; and Our Literal Speed, 'Words, Gestures, Complicities, or The Fusion of Entertainment and Enlightenment', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.33, no.3, November 2010, pp.385—409.

14 See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and David Joselit (ed.), *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, vol.2, London: Thames & Hudson, 2011, pp.738—39.



Philip von Zweck,
Untitled, 2010,
acrylic and enamel
on canvas,
30.48 × 22.86cm.
Photograph:
Nancy Behall.
Collection Branson
and Michelle
Edwards. Courtesy
the artist and
65GRAND, Chicago

if you look hard enough, you can figure out who all the players are; it is not an instance of secrecy in the conventional sense, but rather, as Žižek so often describes regarding the functioning of ideology, it is about hiding best while wearing a mask of oneself.¹⁵ This might hint, importantly, at the fact that OLS's aim is self-reflexivity rather than secrecy. Hence, these key OLS phrases: 'Stuff Near Art That Is Not Art, Which Is Treated as if It Were Art, Is Now the Substance of Most Serious Art'; 'If the twentieth century was defined by the Readymade, then perhaps the twenty-first century belongs to the Nevermade'.¹⁶ These taglines, spoken at OLS lecture-performances, have gone on to serve as slogans on the website and in other manifestations of the group's activities. They hint at a working methodology, or a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy/art-historical forecasting. OLS could be thought, through their various activities, to be manifesting a new form of art-historical writing, in which the artists are writing their own history, or histories.

15 Slavoj Žižek has made reference to this idea on a number of occasions, including in the seminar 'Jacques Lacan: A Lateral Introduction', University of Chicago, Spring 2006, as well as in an interview with Rosanna Greenstreet for *The Guardian*, 9 August 2008, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/09/slavoj.zizek> (last accessed on 21 January 2014).

16 These expressions were used, for example, in the description of Our Literal Speed's programme at the Banff Centre, Alberta, 7 January – 22 February 2013, available at <http://www.banffcentre.ca/programs/program.aspx?id=1277> (last accessed on 21 January 2014).

In this sense, OLS may be said to be romantic, according to art historian Joseph Leo Koerner's definition of the term: 'Romanticising means simultaneously reading the world as if it were a book, and imagining, or writing, a book that would be consubstantial to the world.'¹⁷

PvZ: If Regina Rex and myself are double agents, it might be out of a desire (conscious or otherwise) to find ways to be included despite starting from relatively nowhere. A borrowed Xerox machine and the help of brilliant friends, or part of a shared studio space in a remote neighbourhood and, again, the help of some friends: these are simple attempts to get through a door. If we are field agents turned double, OLS may be like the spymaster as double agent, privileged in operating not tactically but *strategically*. OLS are entrenched in academia, in places like the University of Chicago and the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, with access to institutions like *October* and ZKM/Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. Judging by the way you describe their practice, OLS may be *the* model for effective double agency. As primarily art historians, its members are for the most part tethered to the academy, but most artists live in the naïvety that double agency is a stepping stone to agency. A good question for the spies: can that happen?

A Romantic Mission?

ZC: These are models of double agency. They are not exhaustive by any means. Still, models are important. We need new ones that are relevant and vital for artists (and cultural producers more broadly) to try to understand their world and how to work within it. Double agency is an artistic mode of working that takes advantage of institutional structures and the technological demand to put 'the soul at work', as theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has put it.¹⁸ If we are always at work through the insidious encroachment of technology and cognitive labour, as Berardi claims, with no zone of the human psyche that can be off line (think of the 'on call' status you inhabit daily courtesy of your smartphone), then it seems a critical imperative to reroute the neoliberal injunction to exploit creative labour and the monetisation of nearly every facet of life. Double agency may amount to a type of romantic project whereby artists assert their subjectivity through various masks and by morphing identities within larger institutional structures. While deeply locked in the logic of capitalism, double agency strives to wrest time away from its clutches, to divert the flow of human capital by haunting institutions with artistic spirit. No doubt this is a tightrope walk. For in the end, who is to say where the individual stops and the institution begins? Institutions are made up of people, after all. Yet somehow, in the throws of what could be thought of as a type of institutional jouissance, it is easy to forget this fact. If nothing else, the romantic mission of the artist as double agent may be to remind us not that institutions are impersonal but that they are instead filled with personnel – with all the good and ill that may imply.

PvZ: I don't think institutions are made of people. I think they are made of structures and staffed by people, and it is in the gap between the two where double agents work.

17 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, p.31.

18 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's book of the same title is an argument against what Jonathan Crary has called the '24/7' temporality of neoliberal capitalism. Both authors make convincing cases for neoliberalism's repercussions on the nervous system (Berardi) and sleep (Crary). See F. Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia), Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009; and J. Crary, *24/7: Terminal Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London: Verso, 2013.