

JACQUELINE ROSE: ZIONISM ON THE COUCH

BOOKFORUM

FEB/MAR 2005

STICKS AND STONES

GOTTFRIED
SEMPER'S *STYLE*

HE DIDN'T FORGET POLAND

ADAM
ZAGAJEWSKI
ON WITOLD
GOMBROWICZ



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Against Gravity

BETTINA FUNCKE TALKS WITH PETER SLOTERDIJK

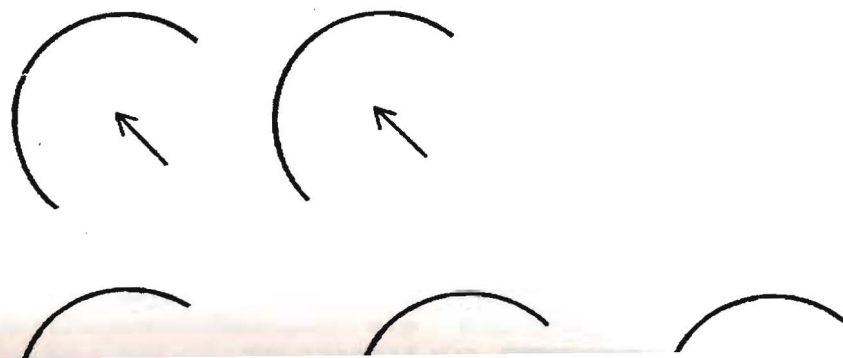
The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk achieved much acclaim (and a wide readership) in the United States during the heyday of critical theory with the translation of his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), in which he introduced a multifaceted style of writing, freely engaging with philosophy, history, anthropology, fiction, poetry, literary theory, and colloquial language. This unique discursive repertoire was widely perceived as constituting an altogether new take on the role of philosophy, one that continues to mark his work. If Sloterdijk's subsequently translated *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989) also captured his performative philosophy (itself a continuation of the Nietzschean project that provides the book with its subject), the title was perhaps not the follow-up to *Critique of Cynical Reason* that American readers had expected. Due to the vicissitudes of critical-theory reception in the United States, Sloterdijk's work came to be viewed as an '80s period piece.

In Germany, however, Sloterdijk is one of the most prominent public intellectuals and has distinguished himself by pushing the boundaries of the traditional forum of the philosopher—and thus its very definition—by turning not only to the traditional academic stage but also to that of the mass media. This was a risky move, for in doing so he courted marginality from both sectors. But his was an attempt, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, to recover a greater relevance for critical think-

that temporal problems were seen as progressive and cool, the questions of space were thought to be old-fashioned and conservative, a matter for old men and shabby imperialists. Even the fascinating, novel chapters on space in Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus* couldn't change the situation, since they arrived too early for the chronophilic, or time-worshipping, zeitgeist of those days. The same goes for programmatic propositions in late Foucault—according to whom we again enter an age of space—which in their time were still unable to usher in a transition.

My *Spheres* trilogy obviously belongs to a widespread reversal among philosophical and cultural-theoretical discourses that

visual means to illustrate logical facts; he otherwise rejected such antiphilosophical aids. In the drawing, one can see five arrows, each of which is rushing toward a single semicircular horizon—a magnificently abstract symbolization of the term *Dasein* as the state of being cast in the direction of an always-receding world horizon (unfortunately, it's not known how the psychiatrists reacted to it). But I still recall how my antenna began to buzz back then, and during the following years a veritable archaeology of spatial thought emerged from this impulse. The main focus may have been Eurocentric, but there was a constant consideration of non-European cultures, in particular India and China. Incidentally,



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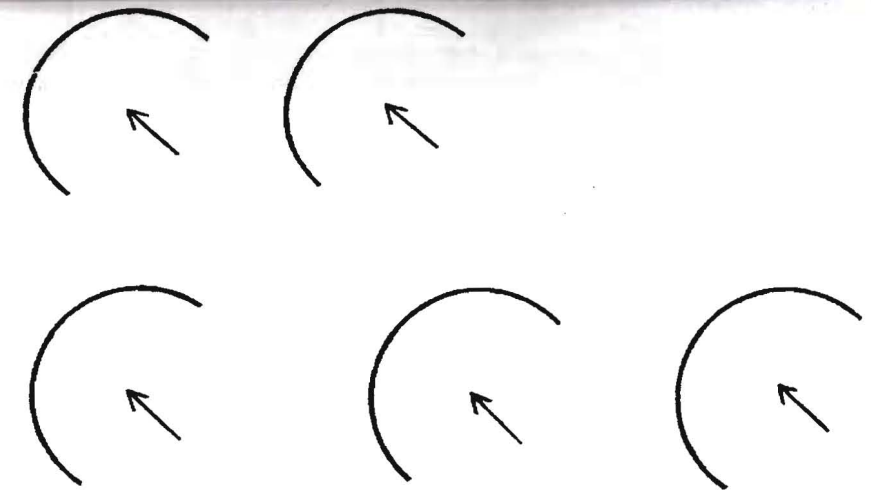
In order to restore the relevance of leftist critical thought, Sloterdijk has specifically attacked contemporary issues—issues different from those facing earlier thinkers such as those of the Frankfurt School. Last year, the *Spheres* trilogy, Sloterdijk's most ambitious project to date (and about 2,500 pages long), was completed after seven years of writing. Still, despite the singular impact of the book in Europe, Sloterdijk remains under-recognized in the States: *Spheres* has yet to be translated into English.

—BETTINA FUNCKE

BETTINA FUNCKE: Until the publication of your trilogy, the image of the sphere was hardly present in contemporary theoretical discourse. I'm wondering how you came across this metaphor, which has gained such importance for your thinking in recent years. Which authors or texts do you refer to?

PETER SLOTERDIJK: A given culture never possesses a complete vocabulary for itself. The current language games only ever emphasize select topics and leave other phenomena unaddressed. This applies as well to the vocabulary of theory in the late

twentieth century. In past decades, one could speak elaborately and with great nuance about everything that had to do with the temporal structure of the modern world. Tons of books on the historicization, futurization, and processing of everything were published—most of which are completely unreadable today. By contrast, it was still comparatively difficult ten years ago to comment sensibly on the spatialization of existence in the modern world; a thick haze still covered the theory landscape. Until recently, there was a voluntary spatial blindness—because to the extent



A drawing by Martin Heidegger, ca. 1960.

has taken place in the strongholds of contemporary reflection over the course of the past decade. As I began in 1990, while a fellow at Bard College, in New York, I had only a vague premonition of this topological turn within cultural theory. Only now, after the completion of the trilogy, do I see more clearly how my work is connected with that of numerous colleagues around the world, such as Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, and Edward S. Casey. Even Ilya Kabakov's installation art and the work of architects like Frei Otto, Grimshaw and Partners, or Rem Koolhaas, belong to the circle of theoretical relations. At the time, I wanted to work with the figures of the circle and arrow in order to offer my students in Vienna and New York, who were mainly young artists, an introduction to philosophical thinking. I thought that graphic figures would be useful in that context.

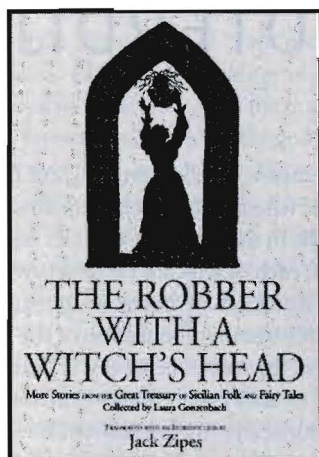
I was also fascinated by a chalkboard drawing Martin Heidegger made around 1960, in a seminar in Switzerland, in order to help psychiatrists better understand his ontological theses. As far as I know, this is the only time that Heidegger made use of

I also owe something to Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, although later I quite stubbornly departed from his promptings.

BF: But in your work the term *sphere* plays such a crucial role, whereas in the other new discourses of space one encounters terms like *place*, *dwelling*, *territory*, *local*, *global*, and other words ending with the suffix *-scape*.

PS: There are different reasons for this, partly linguistic and partly factual. Particularly crucial here is that below the thin layer of modern language games, in which the word *sphere* plays only a marginal role, lies a very powerful old layer—one could call it the two-thousand-year domain of old-European "sphere thinking." As modern intellectuals, we have simply forgotten that in the era between Plato and Leibniz almost everything to be said about God and the world was expressed in terms of a spherology. Think about the magical basic principle of medieval theosophy, which says, God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. One could almost claim that the individualism of the modern era signifies an unconscious realization of this dogma.

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THE ROBBER WITH A WITCH'S HEAD

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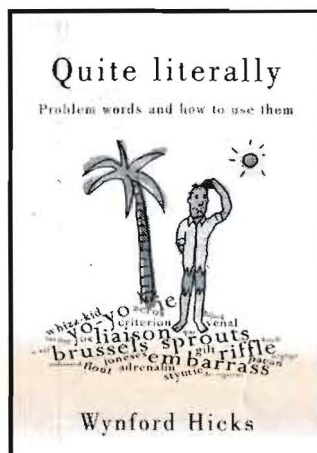
The Robber with the Witch's Head presents almost fifty new stories about demons and clever maidens and princes. Bursting with life, this is a storyteller's dream, full of adventure and magic, translated by Jack Zipes.

QUITE LITERALLY

Problem words and how to use them

Wynford Hicks

What's your bete noir? Or is that bite? Should you split infinitives, end sentences with prepositions, start them with conjunctions? Wynford Hicks answers questions like these in this fun, practical guide to English usage.



SIX NAMES OF

Even German semantics plays a role in my choice of terms, since between Goethe and Heidegger the word *sphere* is employed as an approximate synonym for the circle of life or world of meaning—and of course this already goes a ways toward accommodating my search for a language appropriate to animated, interpersonal, or surreal space.

BF: The subtitles of the three volumes of *Spheres*—*Bubbles*, *Globes*, and *Foam*—are similarly unusual, as if they were created in a linguistic realm that seems closer to everyday speech.

PS: The term *metaphor* that you used earlier makes me hesitate a bit because, in my opinion, words like *sphere* or *globe* are not metaphors but rather thought-images or, even better, thought-figures. After all, they first came out of geometry and had, beginning with Greek antiquity, a clear morphological sense, which turned into a cosmological sense after Plato. It is different with the titles of the first and third volumes, *Bubbles* and *Foam*. Here we are truly concerned with metaphors, at least on an initial reading. With *Bubbles* I tried to describe the dyadic space of resonance between people as we find it in symbiotic relations—mother and child, Philemon and Baucis, psychoanalyst and analysand, mystics and God, etc. By contrast, in addition to its metaphorical meaning, *foam*—I use it instead of the completely exhausted term *society*—has of course also a literal sense.

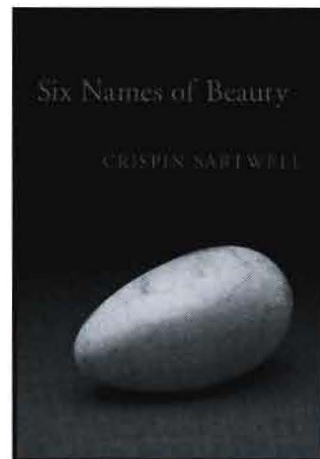
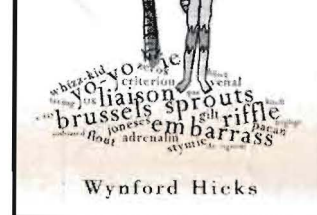
From a physical perspective, it describes multichamber systems consisting of spaces formed by gas pressure and surface tensions, which restrict and deform one another according to fairly strict geometric laws. It seemed to me that modern urban systems could be easily understood with analogy to these exact, technical foam analyses. *Spheres III* emerged out

resent the transition of modern literary criticism into the clinic, by which the disappearance of the author returns as the disintegration of the everyday personality?

As you know, I've always allowed myself as much freedom as possible in leaving the question open as to whether I'm a philosopher or a writer, but now you're forcing me into a corner. Since I ultimately speak as a philosopher and cannot envelop myself in artistic silence, I'll thus have to admit it: You're right. The beginning of the trilogy has an esoteric aspect, assuming that we understand the expression correctly. With its nearly seven hundred pages, *Bubbles* provides an excessive theory of pairs, a theory based on a fundamental irony. While everyday thought is firmly convinced it knows everything about pairs—namely, that they are the result of adding one plus one (biographically speaking, this means the effect of an “encounter”)—I undertake the experiment to demonstrate to what extent the “being-a-pair” [*Paar-Sein*] precedes all encounters. In my pair analysis, the number two, or the dyad, appears as the absolute figure, the pure bipolar form. Accordingly, it always takes precedence over the two single units of which it seems to be “put together.” This can be most easily demonstrated in the relationship between mother and child—or, even better, between fetus and placenta. With this we enter the terrain of a radical



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SIX NAMES OF BEAUTY

Crispin Sartwell

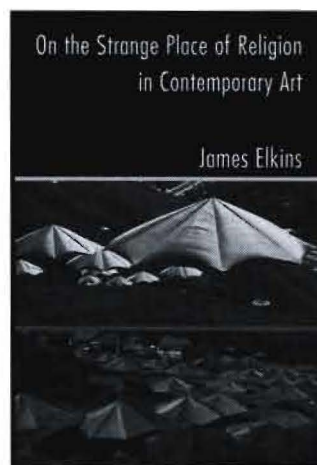
"Crispin Sartwell has written a classic book on experiencing the world aesthetically. It is rich with real examples and personal knowledge of the way each of the six names of beauty discloses a different mode of beauty's meaning in human life."

—Arthur C. Danto

ON THE STRANGE PLACE OF RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY ART

James Elkins

For millennia, art has been religious. Religion and serious art have grown apart, yet there is a tremendous amount of religious art outside the art world. In this new book from James Elkins, the author discusses the curious disconnect between spirituality and current art.

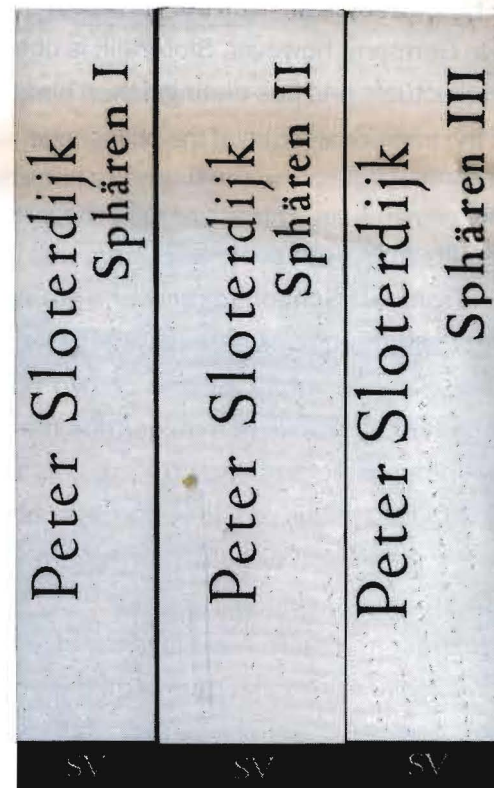


From a physical perspective, it describes multichamber systems consisting of spaces formed by gas pressure and surface tensions, which restrict and deform one another according to fairly strict geometric laws. It seemed to me that modern urban systems could be easily understood with analogy to these exact, technical foam analyses. *Spheres III* emerged out of this intuition. One finds in this hybrid book a great deal of commentary on the transformation of sociology into a general theory of "air conditioning." Foam: That is, modern people live in "connected isolations," as the US architectural group Morphosis put it thirty years ago. In social foam there is no "communication"—this is also one of the words facing an apocalypse—but instead only inter-autistic and mimetic relations.

BF: While reading the books, it occurred to me that there are three different, successive points of ori-

entation or even methods in each respective volume. Could one describe the first volume as esoteric, the second as exoteric, and the third as a *Zeitdiagnostik*, a diagnosis of the present moment?

PS: This question affects me in a very personal way because it's connected with a disturbingly deep diagnosis. It is true that the three volumes of *Spheres* don't follow one other in a singular trajectory; each has its own direction and its own climate. One could even wonder whether they really derive from the same author. The question is of course sophistical, since I know definitively that I wrote all three myself. However, this doesn't prove that I was always the same person in the seven years it took to write them. What guarantees that multiple personality disorder, an invention of postmodern doctors, doesn't simply rep-



ized philosophical psychology that departs from the general faith in the priority of individuality. The truly esoteric is not found in the books on sale at the airport bookstore; it is depth psychology, which reminds us of pre-individual, pre-subjective, pre-egoistical conditions. This brings me very close to Lacan, who spoke occasionally of the "democratic esotericism" of psychoanalysis. And you can see what zones we enter in my book's relatively scandalous chapters on "negative gynecology" and prenatal existence in the womb—I completely understand why some readers have perceived this as macabre.

The second volume develops the public and political consequences of these basic assumptions; in this sense, it could be described as the exoteric component of the project. It examines the notion that

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older cultures have imagined the world primarily as a spirit-infused circle. I tried to show in *Globes* how the geometricization of the cosmos was first carried out by the Greeks; after that I reconstructed the geometricization of God under the neo-Platonic philosophers, which gave me the feeling of reopening one of the most exciting chapters in the history of ideas. Out of all this resulted, as if by itself, a philosophical history of globalization: First the universe was globalized with the help of geometry, then the earth was globalized with the help of capital.

Finally, in the third volume of *Spheres*, I have thematized the modern world in terms of a theory of spatial multiplicities. I begin with the idea that the world is not structured monospherically and all-communicatively, as the classical holists thought, but rather polyspherically and interidiotically. At the center of this volume is an immunological theory of architecture, because I maintain that houses are built immune systems. I thus provide on the one hand an interpretation of modern habitat, and on the other a new view of the mass container. But when I highlight the apartment and the sports stadium as the most important architectural innovations of the modern, it isn't out of art- or cultural-historical interest. Instead my aim is to give a new account of the history of atmospheres, and in my view, the apartment and the sports stadium are important primarily as atmospheric installations. They play a central role in the development of abundance, which defines the open secret of the modern. The praise of luxury with which the book ends is, in my opinion, the decisive act in terms of diagnosing the present.

BF: Especially in the third volume, you develop nothing less than a new, up-to-date terminology of critical theory by which you historically contextualize and delimit terms from the Frankfurt School. A far-reaching

of the real. In reality, I think that it is through the occurrence of abundance in the modern that the heavy has turned into appearance—and the “essential” now dwells in lightness, in the air, in the atmosphere. As soon as this is understood, the conditions of “criticism” change dramatically. Marx argued that all criticism begins with the critique of religion; I would say instead that all criticism begins with the critique of gravity. In addition, we can recognize that European “critical theory” did not survive the trip across the Atlantic unscathed. The authentic critical theory “at home” was,

and this is exactly what authors who work with visual parallel-narratives are doing.

The reference to Walter Benjamin is absolutely necessary in this context, and I'm pleased that you've brought up his name. However, I must admit that my relationship to Benjamin is not simple. On the one hand, his *Arcades Project* is utterly exemplary for today's cultural theory because it already anticipates almost everything that was to become important later—the passion for the archive; the “micrological” examination of the detail; media theory; discourse analysis; and the search for a

approach, which rests on the term *multitude*. To what extent, in your opinion, is their investigation a failed effort?

PS: Let's first talk about Negri and Hardt's success: They have managed to give the current desire for radicality a *novum organum*, an accomplishment that deserves admiration. At the same time, I suspect that the secret behind the book's great success can be ascribed to its thinly veiled religious tones. At first one doesn't easily recognize the good old-left radicalism when Saint Francis takes the stage next to Marx and Deleuze. But this new alliance with the



T. OHLBAUM/OPALE

Peter Sloterdijk, 2004.

above all, a kind of secret theology: It treated the failures of creation (aka society) and criticized reality in the (unnamed) name of the infinite. This approach was so cleverly encoded that American sociolo-

gists could not grasp the capitalistic totality. On the other hand, I'm convinced that Benjamin's work reaches a dead end and that he failed as a theorist. In my forthcoming book,

the *multitude* is instructive for the position of left radicalism in the post-Marxist situation. Whoever wants to practice fundamental opposition today needs allies who are not entirely of this world. In order to grasp the

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BF: Especially in the third volume, you develop nothing less than a new, up-to-date terminology of critical theory by which you historically contextualize and delimit terms from the Frankfurt School. A far-reaching critique of the contemporary reception of critical theory's inheritance runs through the book. In particular, you criticize what you view as the misleading interpretation of this tradition by the American academy, leading you to rehearse the conceptual history and historical situating of terms such as *revolution* and *society*. Can you summarize what this critique consists of and why you think that an entirely new vocabulary needs to be invented?

PS: The reason a new vocabulary is necessary in the cultural sciences can be explained in seven simple words: because the old one is basically useless. And why? Because all previous natural languages, including theoretical discourse, were developed for a world of weight and solid substances. They are thus incapable of expressing the experiences of a world of lightness and relations. Consequently they are not suited to articulate the basic experiences of the modern and the postmodern, which construct a world based on mobilization and the easing of burdens. This already allows me to explain why, in my view, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School is outdated and must be replaced by a completely different discourse: Because of their Marxist heritage, critical theorists succumb to the realistic temptation of interpreting the light as appearance and the heavy as essence. Therefore they practice criticism in the old style in that they "expose" the lightness of appearance in the name of the heaviness

Peter Sloterdijk, 2004.

above all, a kind of secret theology: It treated the failures of creation (aka society) and criticized reality in the (unnamed) name of the infinite. This approach was so cleverly encoded that American sociologists and literary critics could argue unchallenged that they were reading a plea for a multicultural society.

BF: Your use of images, idiosyncratic for books of philosophy, recalls contemporaries in the German-speaking realm such as Alexander Kluge, Klaus Theweleit, and to a certain extent W.G. Sebald. The images are used not as illustrations but as parallel narratives. Could one also consider Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as a historical model that likewise includes an extensive image section? The question of your reference to *The Arcades Project* suggests itself because this book also presents a widely diverse examination of spaces and atmospheres that have marked the contemporary moment. Is it fair to say that, in a way, your examinations of the stadium and the apartment house of the twentieth century are continuing Benjamin's studies of the emerging modern era's spatial conception and the arcades?

PS: The inclusion of images in the flow of the text is my answer to the transformation of spatial consciousness in modern theory. Considered in terms of media history, I no longer write my philosophical prose on the page of a book but on a monitor page—that is, virtually, in hypertext space. The monitor space is a close relation of the modern exhibition space, a kind of electronic white cube. When you work there, it is logical that you imagine a second and third text "next to" the verbal text,

sovereign viewpoint from which one can grasp the capitalistic totality. On the other hand, I'm convinced that Benjamin's work reaches a dead end and that he failed as a theorist. In my forthcoming book, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals: Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung* (Inside the Internal Space of World Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization, 2005), you'll find a critique of Benjaminism that leads to a pretty devastating result. I accuse Benjamin of not really understanding, and thus only halfheartedly following, his own superb ideas around the creation of new interiors through capitalism. Even worse for me is the fact that he placed the historically outdated architectural type of the arcade at the center of this analysis, although already by his time it couldn't be ignored that the capitalistic interior had long since moved beyond the arcade stage. Sports stadiums, convention centers, large hotels, and resorts would have been far more worthy of Benjamin's attention. The whole idea of wanting to write an "ur-history of the nineteenth century" rests on a misconception. Thus I suggest examining the capitalistic interiors on their own relevant terms, which leads, consequently, to a theory of foam. What we need today is an "air-conditioning project" for large social entities or a generalized "greenhouse project." I think that in *Spheres III* one can already partly recognize what the beginnings of such a post-Benjaminian treatment of the pluralized spatial creations of the modern and postmodern might look like.

BF: Another post-Benjaminian book is Negri and Hardt's *Empire*. In the third volume of *Spheres*, you criticize these authors'

saints is instructive for the position of left radicalism in the post-Marxist situation. Whoever wants to practice fundamental opposition today needs allies who are not entirely of this world. In order to grasp the awkward situation of left radicalism, one should recall Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger, ideologies that no longer match circumstances are reinterpreted by their believers until they appear to match them again—with the unavoidable result that theories become increasingly bizarre. Gershom Scholem clarified something similar in relation to the fate of Jewish prophetism. The gist of what he says is this: When prophetism fails, apocalypticism emerges; when apocalypticism fails, gnosis emerges. An analogous escalation can be observed in the political opposition movements since 1789: When the bourgeois revolution fails or is insufficient, left radicalism emerges; when left radicalism fails or is insufficient, the mystique of protest emerges. It seems to me that Negri has arrived at exactly this point. His "multitude" calls forth a community of angry saints in which the fire of pure opposition burns—yet it no longer offers a revolutionary project, instead testifying by its mere existence to a world counter to universal capitalism. Thus one cannot simply say that Negri's framework failed—it has already incorporated his failure. Perhaps it would be more accurate to claim that the political revolutionary has become transformed into a spiritual teacher. This is the price to be paid by anyone who seriously tries to develop a language of the left beyond resentment. □

Bettina Funcke is a New York-based art historian.