

“A government of the Public, for the Public, by the Public”
—Anonymous peasant,
in Gustave Courbet’s *The Gleaners*, 1857

The Alchemy of the Human, Whereby the Curator of Social and Political Forms Studies an Undefined Subject In Ever-mutation.

The Museum of Social Forms would no doubt host well designated specimens varying in size and in features: a group, a crowd, a public, a class, a multitude, a mass, a People, a community, the excluded, the minority, the subalterns. But there could be no effective walls to isolate each from every other, as if the gathering of Man in society would constantly produce too blurry of a contour, too porous of a substance to be fixed. For the curator of this museum, his objects of study are ever fluid, as if his vantage point as a scholar was in nature contaminated and diluted in advance of such substances. The same could be said of the vantage point of the visitor of such a museum, who would look at its walls only to find continuity with his own constitutive manhood. Even considering the hypothesis of exteriority, while looking at the museum walls and displays one would be unable to circumscribe these particular species—a group, a crowd, a public, a class, a multitude, a mass, a People, a community, the excluded,

the minority, the subalterns—for their capacity to mutate is too frequent and their multiple states overwhelmingly intermittent. Moreover, each species is afflicted by an inclination to be various species simultaneously, and thus capable of easily evading the form whence its name originates from.

Of the Discursive Substance of the People and the Public

Such forms of the social gathering of humankind, unstable substances as they are, would determine not a science but alchemy, where the study of each would reveal indirectly their properties and effects with spectacular currency in our daily life. Such currency does not exclusively effect social studies but is a token for the description of many transactions infiltrating into domains such as culture, and its well-known trade of art. This infiltration has laid the intricate brickwork of the museum itself. It flows impregnating its atria and wings, accumulating as dust or sunlight in corners and attics.

Of these substances the word People has been found to be particularly prone to subtractive effects. The word is characterized by its viscosity, a semifluid quality denying one to grasp the whole of the word's biome at any one time. Its semifluid consistency is caused by a constitutive internal friction of the P/people; a blindspot right at the place it fractures into a double ontology. This negative surplus generated by the term P/

people is present in its capitalization People as a sign of an ideal or universality of the state, but also an assumed totality of the nation-state's subject, but equally present in the lower-casing of people as a sign of cause and purpose of such a state, of the poor, the non-equal. As such, despite the well-intended People, the democratic state does not avoid producing more of the minority-stricken people or manage to eradicate inequality as a whole, to eliminate that continuous threat of exclusion of people (again lower-case) caused by the People's sovereignty.

It is this fracture that determines a subtractive effect at the core of the genealogy of the P/people; a subtraction, which eludes itself in constant retreat. Thus in all the variations of the latin origin of the word P/people¹ —people, pueblo, povo— resides the inherently fractured essence, from which stems the ambiguity generated in its every occurrence. It is precisely this ambiguity that determines its interdependence in its ontological other: People need people, while people need People. It is as if democracy, being ontologically flawed, could never aim at absolute totality, which would be the constitution of a People, while nonetheless needing to signal it as an ideal. The people, on the other hand, would be the surplus of democracy, its unintended excess, its failure but simultaneously its motor, its impulse. Therefore, the People are continuously addressing the people (its voiceless counterpart) however constitutive of the People the later may be. And this voiceless counterpart is voiceless precisely due

to this autophagic blindspot of the ideal of the P/people.

Ever expanding and malleable, the Public is the molar link into the political nature of the People, and it identifies the subject of the nation or of the territory by way of constituting a given cultural property. Characteristic of the Public is its capacity to conjures those absent; it implies the under-represented without representing, and thus alleviates the disturbing fracture of the P/people through its symbolic characteristics. Such is the correlation of the nation-state and culture. Within that relation, the People may take the form of a Public of the nation-state, and all Public may redirect to all People, even to those that are not the audience of the national institution's walls—enacting itself thus beyond the physical presence of its people.

The Public, then, is a dear case study of the museum, for it implies not only a collective term but also in its polysemantic porousness,² is used as an adjective for all walks of democratic and communal life, expanding in place, time, and habitat. The word has configured so wide an entity, its capacity of capturing ideals is so vast, that it is understandable why it has been the most consistent container for the reception of art in the last two centuries. As a vessel for culture it has permeated all social structures and species. Yet, its survival and widespread use is not the mark of superiority to other social forms (a group, a crowd, a public, a class, a multitude, a mass, a People, a community, the

excluded, the minority, the subalterns) but rather a consequence of its entanglement in such a dilated fit. It is this additive quality, in contrast to the P/people's subtractive fracture, which makes it qualify as an addictive form in the region of political representation.

The Recipe for the Public under Mass Culture, or The Spectator

Despite the enlightened conception that it is the public who visits the museum of art, and that the Public is the one looking at art, in considering the alchemy of the forms described above it becomes difficult not to claim the contrary.³ In fact, art has had quite an active role in forming, shaping and molding these multiple entities that appear before it. It can be claimed that these social entities, which we call Public, are art's object. They are the medium and form by which it constitutes itself in the nation-state. In its turn, art's sculpting of the term and conceptions of Public has located art in the walls of democratic institutions; it has legitimized its placement in plinths and podiums—a reciprocal reproductive movement founded in the creation of the first public museum. Art has contributed to the creation of the P/people in the performative act of being placed and displaced within public museums. It has defined the terms of access to culture as an aspect of equality and the importance of education in defining the pedagogical component in culture. It has met crowds at universal fairs and salons and attracted them with polemics to its

strange forms. Fearing the cult of the ‘masses’ throughout the 20th century, art pushed split its characterization within culture and defined the terms entertainment and spectacle. Molding ‘the spectator’ to become a pathologized viewer afflicted with a consumer culture capitalism, the word would coincidentally refer back to the quintessential title of a famous 19th century newspaper widely circulated in England and staple of the nobleman’s library.⁵

The mode of address of these multiple social forms has been a constant of modern and contemporary art, of artists, curators and other artworld types, all of which enamored by these social shapes and their nomenclature, or at least as much as the social scientist. In fact, art has been the Curator of Social Forms of this Museum, and the museum cited above is not one specialized in social sciences but rather the Museum of Culture and Its Place Within the nation-state.

1 Giorgio Agamben, “What is a People?” in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000).

2 “We speak of the public at a theater, the public at some assembly, and here public means crowd. But this is neither the sole nor even the primary meaning, and while the importance of this type of public has declined or remained static, the inventing of printing has caused a very different type of public to appear, one which never ceases to grow and

whose indefinite extension is one of the most clearly marked traits of our period. There is a psychology of crowds; there remains to be developed a psychology of the public, understood in this other sense as a purely spiritual collectivity, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental (...) We should note that these hydraulic comparisons naturally come to mind every time we speak of crowds as well as publics. For in this respect they resemble each other; a crowd in action on the evening of a public celebration circulates with a slowness and numerous eddies reminiscent of a river having no specific bed. A public is even less comparable to an organism than a crowd. They are both rather like streams with a poorly defined channel.” Gabriel Tarde, *On Communication and Social Influence*, “The Public and the Crowd,” ed. Terry N. Clark, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 278.

3 “They [social scientists] too “see double.” In the first denunciation, objects count for nothing; they are just there to be used as the white screen on to which society projects its cinema. But in the second, they are so powerful that they shape the human society, while the social construction of the sciences that have produced them remains invisible. (...) Works of art are either too weak or too strong.”

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvester Wheatsheaf and Harvard College, 1993) p. 53-54.

4 The better-known *The Spectator* was a daily English publication founded by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele published from 1711 to 1712. Of the same name is a weekly British conservative magazine first published on 6 July 1828, still in print today.