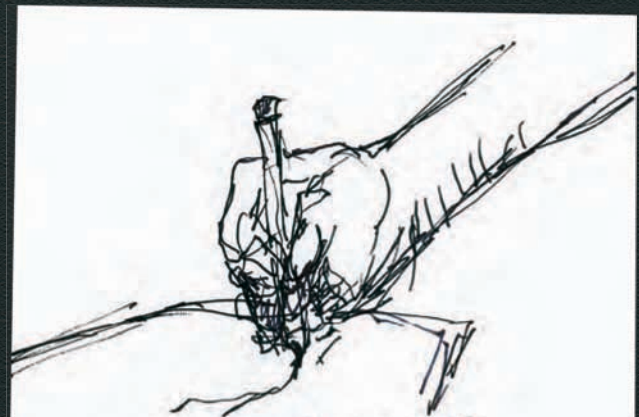
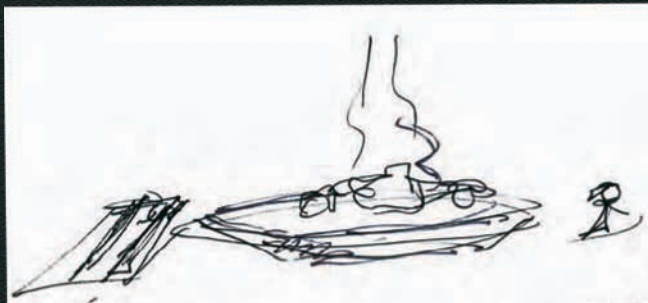




TRAINED to think for
themselves
But not of
themselves



In the AFTERNOONS
ART CLASS provided
Some semblance
of control



THE food was WARM
and left little
to the imagination

ZACHARY CAHILL:

USSA 2012

THE OPHANAGE PROJECT

september 9th–october 15th, 2011
artist talk: october 6th, 7pm
opening: september 9th, 6–9pm
gallery hours: tues–sat, 11am–5pm

The Art of the Orphan

by Joan Copjec

Who can recall—without re-experiencing a kind of Dickensian shudder—that bizarre moment in the mid-1990s when the then-Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, announced his dream of founding orphanages across America in which children of welfare mothers, upon being forcibly removed from their families, would be installed and looked after by the State? What could have motivated a declared enemy of the “Nanny State” to imagine this particular congregate socio-economic solution to our woes: the erection of Kidsvilles, homes as ersatz as any theme park, over which agent-Moms would preside? Conservative champions of “family values” had, of course, long expressed a keen interest in the nation’s children, even going to the extreme of trying to delegatize abortion in order to rescue them in their unborn state. If such a thing were possible, we can be sure that many of these conservatives would also have favored orphanages for the unborn; for what family values advocates value is not families, primarily, and not children and fetuses so much as their as-yet-unbornness, that is, the potential they store.

But despite the bleak images it called up, Gingrich’s proposal was not actually Dickensian. The grim conditions we associate with the orphanages of Dickens’ day testify both to the problems that oozed from the machinic coupling of urbanization and industrialization—overcrowding, poor sanitation, disease, prostitution—that so often orphaned children of the working poor and to the still operative, if begrudging, belief in social amelioration. If Gingrich’s proposal sounded a discordant, untimely note, it was because the conditions which had produced the nineteenth-century orphanages that still figure in our imaginations have become things of the past. In our day urbanization has become disastrously uncoupled from industrialization while commitment to social amelioration has all but vanished. The sorry conditions with which laborers used to have to contend have not disappeared, and in many places have worsened, but laborers themselves have become a dying breed. As manufacturing plants continue to close down and jobs for the poor dry up, the once-dangerous classes

now pose little threat to State power. The volatile and potentially revolutionary discontent of workers no longer exists as a political factor. Government programs designed to appease the disgruntled rumblings of the economically disadvantaged no longer need to be implemented and thus government itself can grow smaller. Why then would it consider getting into the orphanage business, even if for only one lunatic moment?

We know that the State does not really want to disappear, it only wants to appear to. What it wants to shrink is not its size, but its ungainliness, all those cumbersome, costly programs that weigh it down, cause it to veer off course. From out of this longing it became possible to hypothesize that the best way to divest itself of useless programs—welfare, social security, urban development, and the like—was to invest in orphanages. Well, not orphanages exactly. The fundamental difference between the orphanages of the nineteenth century and those that populated the wild dreams of mid-90s conservatives is this: while the former were dedicated, at least minimally, to caring for orphans, the latter were dedicated to creating them. The primary interest of the Right was less orphanages than orphans. Even as they continued to romance the family, conservatives recognized what Freud made plain: families are hotbeds of wayward desires, transmitters of traditions; they bestow on their children a provenance, one that would never accrue any value, in the estimation of the State, which thus preferred to interrupt the lineage. To do this it would be necessary to orphan the offspring of the poor.

The conservative dream of orphanages is hypermodern in its starry-eyed faith in destruction, in absolute beginnings. *Tabulae rasae* are the ideal and there is no more exemplary figure of the blank slate than the orphan, which also fascinated Enlightenment thinkers for this very reason. Think of Rousseau’s *Émile*; of Kasper Hauser and all the other unnamed children abandoned in the wild, totally ignorant of language and culture; of Vaucanson’s mechanical duck, Condillac’s marble statue: orphans all. The Enlightenment was spellbound by such figures precisely because they were so radically innocent, so unrelated to any other human existence. But what that age was most curious to witness was the precise moment when the orphan opened its eyes, began to speak, to use utensils, to walk or smell, to relate for the first time to the world; the moment of de-orphaning was the one Enlightenment thinkers were keen to observe. In the end the orphan was for them the figure of relation, between the inanimate and the animate, nature and culture. Contemporary conservatives are fixated, rather, on the orphan’s orphaning; its uprooting. Capitalism abhors history. Fueled by the ideal of pure self-authoring, it has no use for the past. And the future? It is a long way off; let it take care of itself.

The ambitiously antic “USSA 2012: The Orphanage Project” of Zachary Cahill plays off the anachronism today’s conservatives would deny while spouting their pretend concern for the unborn and recently born they would orphan. While in the past the conservative inclination was to try to solve social problems by translating them into situations correctable by physical structures—prisons, mental hospitals, orphanages—not even these facilities can expect to receive public funding now. It was therefore inevitable—and part of the point of Cahill’s time-based project—that his efforts to found an orphanage in Chicago’s south side would fail to garner financial support.

“Very interesting, but what does this have to do with art?” This question, posed to Cahill by an interviewer, will rightly occur to others. Embedded in the question are two interrelated but separate concerns. The narrower one asks about the relation between orphanages and art. Is the attempt to build an orphanage a suitable project for art? The second, broader one asks about the relation between politics and art. Does this project separate art from politics or does it suture the former to the latter, thus sacrificing art’s specificity?

Let us address the narrower one first. The structure at the core of the “Orphanage Project” is not purely external to it, but bears on its being as art; for art has lived and died with the possibility of its own orphaning for some time. Although museums have been denounced as antiquated, ruined institutions, rendered irrelevant by current art practice, they retain an immense power that no artist can afford to disregard. What chance of life does an artwork have, even today, if it is not exhibited—in a museum? But the power of museums, rely precisely on a “dialectic of orphanage or abandonment.” That is, every artwork has to “become an orphan in order to find [its] way back to the womb of an enduring [ersatz] family.”¹

Art enters the orphanage not only in that frame of Cahill’s “Collected Notes + Sketches” (see cover), where it is explicitly invoked—“In the afternoons art class provided some semblance of control”—but implicitly in all of the isolated, orphaned frames with their sketchy, stranded figures abandoned in a field of emptiness. Even in this one: “The food was warm and left little to the imagination,” we find art. We would—naturally, grammatically—have expected *but*; but we get *and*. Imagination enters this orphanage only to throw our assumptions into question. Perhaps it was not the standard orphanage fare, porridge, that was being served that day, but a cold savory which had turned dishearteningly tepid. The *and* puts pressure on us to think in a way we are unaccustomed to thinking and to think specifically about what is being conjoined in this project: orphanages and museums, insofar as they serve similar functions; artworks torn from the sites where they were nourished and created, the traditions to which they belonged, and placed together with similarly orphaned works of art in a new museal home, more stable and enduring. What sort of home does a museum offer? Would it be truthful to say that it provides shelter from the ravages of time and that it leaves little to the imagination? That is: that it renders the orphaned artwork “poor in world,” as Heidegger would put it, by which he meant: robbed of its

openings onto new life, reduced to a mere object? If we consent to the *and*, we are forced to reflect back on the life and shelter provided and wonder if they are worth it?

While the conjunction, *and*, ordinarily creates balance, here it creates disequilibrium. Things are not settled. For the orphan is not just a pitiful, abandoned creature in need of shelter, but is often figured as a hero (a point made in a conversation Cahill records). Mohammad, the prophet-hero of Islam, is one of the most auspicious examples of these elevated figures whose powers are intimately linked to their orphan status. Freud has shown, however, that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where the figure of the father remains prominent, children have an unconscious desire to orphan themselves. No life, it seems, without some abandonment, without severing attachments to our beginnings. Thus, despite serious criticisms lodged against the institution, Adorno exhorted, “Museums cannot be shut.”² Nor can orphanages, Cahill playfully adds.

We turn next to the second concern, regarding the relation between art and politics. An art project that proposes to build an orphanage and to question the function of museal lodgings can be labeled political. The question is: where does one draw the line between political art and propaganda, art that abandons its proper function to serve a political one? This often-asked question can, with the help of the distinction Alain Badiou draws between destruction and subtraction, be given the blueprint of an answer.³ As long as the political is structured, around the division friend/enemy, destruction remains paramount in that field. The enemy must be “taken out”: the battle concluded with his destruction. Propaganda, like politics, goes directly for the throat; nothing impedes it. The same goes for capitalism, the uber-friend of today’s political field. If the idea of the orphanage recently resurfaced in this field, it could only have been as a monument to the annihilation of the enemy underclass or as a slate wiped clean of the welfare-dependent.

Here lies the difference between politics and art: the latter arises from the sublimation of the destructive impulse; it refuses the absolute erasure of destruction and gives us something other than a *tabula rasa*. Art subtracts a section of the track on which destruction gains its traction. It impedes destruction’s head-long movement, inserts a delay, a wait. Yet, Lacan places these words in the

mouths of capitalist conservatives, who want nothing more than to perpetuate their own eternally forward-moving power: "Let's keep on working, and as far as desire is concerned, come back later."⁴ Capitalism would have us wait, too—forever, for a future so far off that we would be foolish to expect anything from it in our lifetimes. What is the difference, then, between the fruitless promise of a future dangled out by capitalism and the "adulterated wait" with which Cahill associates the "Orphan" of his project?⁵ How does art install a counter-wait in the frictionless path of destruction's unadulterated, empty wait for an end to destruction?

If the desire to destroy the political enemy always continues unabated, this is because it is driven by its own dissatisfaction; the destruction it aims for cannot satisfy it. Art brakes destruction by throwing in its path a morsel of satisfaction that curbs its appetite. Art creates a pleasurable diversion by introducing a new real irreducible to the existing real. Not another fully-described closed reality, but a new form, from which we can begin to hope for and build another reality. Art's function is to adulterate waiting with a dose of satisfaction, to offer a living promise that the future is worth waiting for.

Cahill's orphanage was never intended to be a new reality; it is, rather, the machinery for rolling out the Orphan Form. Not the spoils of the battle to further disenfranchise the poor, to wrest from them their lineage—which is the Orphan Solution of American conservatives—but its charming replacement. While the Orphan Solution clings to the delusion that a complete orphaning is possible, that an individual subject could be fully wrenched from the not completely accessible archive of its past, the Orphan Form insists otherwise: one cannot annihilate what one cannot access. One can only create something new from it.

Notes

1. Alexander García Düttmann, "How Portable Is Your Museum?: Collages," in *The End(s) of the Museum/ Els limits del museu* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 200), p. 153.
2. Theodor Adorno, "Valery Proust Museum," *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 180; also cited in Düttmann, *ibid.*, p. 167.
3. Badiou makes this distinction in several essays, and most recently in the lecture "Negation and Formalization," given at the conference, "Can Art and Politics Be Thought?," The Hammer Museum, L.A., June 4–5, 2011.
4. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Denis Porter (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), p. 318.
5. Cahill borrows this phrase from Thomas Mann.

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This exhibition is dedicated to Judith & Joseph Quigley.

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