

Miško Šuvaković

Faculty of Media and Communication, Singidunum University, Belgrade

Sven Spieker: *Art as Demonstration. A Revolutionary Recasting of Knowledge*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2024.

Sven Spieker is a professor of Comparative and German Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the founder and editor of the influential journal *ArtMargins*, which is published in both print and online versions. He is the author of the book *The Big Archive/Art from Bureaucracy* (The MIT Press, 2008). He has edited two collections: *Destruction* (The MIT Press, 2017) and *Akusmatik im Labor/Kultur-Kunst-Medien* (Königshausen & Neumann, 2023).

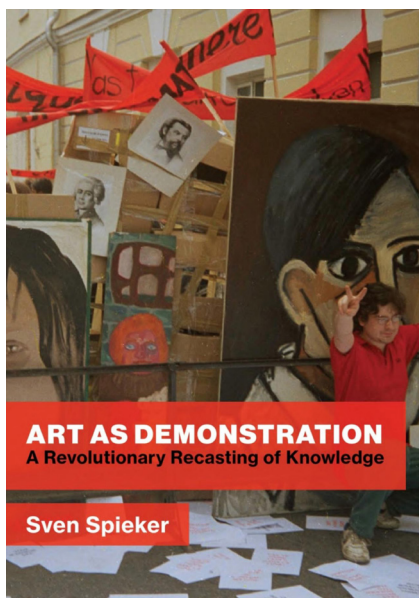
Spieker focuses on comparative theoretical studies of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde phenomena in various cultural and geopolitical environments during the long 20th and early 21st centuries. His approach is methodologically defined by the analysis and discussion of artistic, cultural, and political acting, in relation to theoretical constructions of the networks and maps of modernity and contemporaneity between artistic practice, cultural theory, epistemology, and politics.

In his book *The Big Archive*, the concept of the memory archive is analyzed as a psychoanalytical concept (Freud), as well as an archive as an apparatus for storing and displaying information, knowledge, and even artworks and documents. The archive is also viewed as a medium for artistic research and work with data, memories, artworks, and documents. On a chosen theme – the concept of the archive – Spieker demonstrated the modalities of discussion of individual and collective, human and media capabilities for gathering, preserving, and utilizing important and reflective data. In Spieker's words, the archive exists in the interspace or "[...] the archive's precarious position between order and chaos, between organization and disorder, between the presence of the voice and the muteness of objects." He wrote about the works of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Andre Breton, El Lissitzky, Sergei Eisenstein, Gerhard Richter, Walid Raad, Andrea Fraser, and others.

In his new book, *Art as Demonstration*, Spieker introduces the reader to the uncertain field of revolutionary or proto-revolutionary actions and performances by artists from the time of the neo-avant-garde through conceptual art to contemporary art. He focuses his attention on the concrete power of conceptualization and expression, that is, the articulation of political, cultural, artistic, and aesthetic positions in specific geopolitical spaces of the Cold War between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the transitional world with the illusion of non-existent borders and the illusion

of liberal freedoms. He argued that demonstration is more than a technical device “in the armor of global modernism, functioning as it does as a powerful means for artists to intervene in the reality that surrounds them. [...] Art-as-demonstration then presents us with a conundrum: while on the one hand, it is inextricably connected to an optimistic belief in dialogue, progress, and instruction as an emancipatory force, on the other hand, its optimism is forever threatened by an equally intractable blind spot with regard to its proclivity for being manipulated.”

In his book *Art as Demonstration*, Spieker addresses the ways in which demonstration has helped (re-)shape art and politics from the height of the Cold War to the late 20th century. He analyzes what he calls “art-as-demonstration” in two regions: “Western Europe (especially Germany) and the US – the ‘West’ – and the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union – the so-called ‘East’ – paying close attention to how demonstration manifests in or as art on either side of the Berlin Wall. Indeed, while the emancipatory agenda of the 1960s used to be identified squarely with the West – the 1967 anti-shah protests in the Western half of Berlin, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, May ‘68 in Paris, Germany’s *außerparlamentarische* Opposition (APO), and so forth – a more comprehensively oriented take on the era has now emerged that not only includes the nations of the former Eastern Bloc but is also mindful of the many ways the two sides remained connected, defying the Cold War’s binary logic.” This approach highlights the essential idea of the importance of geopolitical and geo-aesthetic comparability. It shows that it is not enough to develop discourses and narratives within the possible worlds of the West and East, but today it is necessary to show on both sides the analogies, similarities, overlaps, contradictions, and conflicts in the practices of artistic, cultural, and political aspirations towards emancipation and the realization of phantasmatic or real freedom.



Cover image of the book:

Art as Demonstration.

Published courtesy of Sven Spieker.

The book *Art as Demonstration* is composed of ten chapters.

In the first chapter, “Introduction: Art-As-Demonstration in the 1960s and Beyond”, the theoretical context of the discussion on art rooted in acts, gestures, performances, or practices of public and private demonstration is established. The concept of demonstration is associated with acts and practices of public protest developed within art and alternative cultures of the 1960s. It is characteristic that the idea of art as a practice of demonstration is considered along a spectrum – from political public acts to political-ethical transgression and the immanent deontologization of the artwork, extending to didactic practices between utopian and pragmatic, i.e., between live and archival work.

In the second chapter, “Ostentatious Neutrality”, Spieker updates and elaborates on the modalities of didactic and productive art established among Weimar-era figures, such as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, with references to post-Duchampian 1960s art. The tactics of decision-making and performative demonstrative or showy actions are applied to the practices of conceptual artists such as Bernar Venet, Daniel Buren, and Adrian Piper.

The third chapter, “Burlesque Lecture Demonstration”, discusses the lecture performances of American minimal and post-minimal artist Robert Morris (*from March 21, 1964/1994*) and the Belgrade post-conceptual anonymous artist Walter Benjamin (*Mondrian Lecture, 1986*). Spieker offers an interesting and instructive interpretation of the concept of lecturing as a form of demonstration.

In the chapter “Film as Operation”, the demonstrative productions of German filmmaker Harun Farocki and Polish experimental visual artist Paweł Kwiek are analyzed and discussed. In the chapter “Taking It to the Street: Eastern European Art Demonstration,” public manifestations and actions of neo-avant-garde Czech artists Milan Knižák and Jiří Kovanda, Hungarian artist Endre Tót, post-conceptual artist Mladen Miljanović from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and contemporary Romanian artist Ciprian Homorodean are examined. Particular attention is given to demonstrations in public space. Notably illustrative is the chapter “Learning from the Situation,” which analyzes the work of the leftist activist Ulrike Meinhof and video artist Clemens von Wedemeyer. The subsequent section discusses the work of Bazon Brock and Włodzimierz Borowski in relation to gaze strategies – “Instructions for Seeing”.

In the chapter “Teaching What Does Not Exist!”, the work of the Moscow group *Gnezdo* (*The Nest*) and conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov is discussed. The phenomenon of demonstrations in the Soviet and post-Soviet social and cultural space is especially examined through project platforms such as the Extra-Governmental Control Commission, Radek Community, and Chto Delat. The concluding tenth chapter, “Postscript: The Migrant’s Hands: Between Demonstration and Archive in Sylvain George’s *Qu’ils Reposent En Révolte* (*Des Figures de Guerre*)”, guides the reader into contemporary issues and introduces a significant political conflict between the global North and South, exemplified by migrant demonstrations, activities, and actions. It, also, emphasizes the relationship between demonstrations and archives.

In contemporary art history and theory, a critical shift has occurred from a linear historicization of artistic, cultural, and social phenomena toward unexpected resets of history from a perspective of contemporaneity. For example, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois reconstructed the history of modern art based on a selected reference quote from Georges Bataille's *Dictionary*. In other words, they performed deconstruction and reontologization of modernist research and the recreation of aesthetic and artistic forms by invoking the idea of "formlessness". Sven Spieker established, as the fundamental condition for his reontologization of late modern and contemporary art, culture, and politics, a concept rooted in "demonstrative" or "demonstration" artistic practice, contrasting it with concepts of performance, live, activist, or participatory art. Today, it appears that every new study of modernity and contemporaneity hypothetically marks a shift from "historically linear presented aesthetic-artistic facts" toward hypothetical constructs of political, cultural, aesthetic, and artistic models. The universal weaving of the history of modernity and contemporaneity involves the introduction of theoretical differences and symptoms of recontextualization and resemantization of effects, where a revolutionary recasting of knowledge is being interpreted.