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Paintings as Chorus

New Boundaries of the City in the Paintings of Franz Ackermann

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Figure 1. Franz Ackermann, *Vulcano,* 2010. Oil on canvas 283 x 485 x 5 cm. (source: Artnews.org)

The large-scale abstract paintings of German painter Franz Ackermann are colorful urban-surreal landscapes generated out of experiences of global travel. Impressions from the artist's extended and never-ending trek to distant parts of the globe and back home again appear on the canvases as an expressionistic hybrid of cartographic tracings and cartoon-quality floating cutouts. Ever-present transit lines connect disparate parts that sometimes even extend onto actual walls, ceilings, and floors of exhibition spaces. Because Ackermann's travel and creative production have been so seamlessly folded into one for over twenty years, we can consider his practice as one extended performance. Ackermann's overall project shows us the dissolution of boundaries of the 'tourist city' – that amorphous, ever-changing, indefinable, individualized, but commonly shared experience of a city. This 'tourist city' – different from the social, economic, or political life of a city – is experienced in the aesthetic realm. Ackermann's paintings are the aesthetic space – or 'boundaries of the city' – where such a 'tourist city' can be mapped. I argue that Ackermann's paintings function like the ancient Greek tragic chorus that open up a symbolic but active space that expands possibilities for establishing the aesthetic domain as the rightful place to negotiate the 'boundaries of the city.' Friedrich Nietzsche's 1872 essay *The Birth of Tragedy* and Euripides' *The Bacchae* provide the groundwork to analyze the ways in which the tragic chorus can be linked to Ackermann's worldwide exhibitions. Finally, Ackermann's project presents a new theory of the city as the 'artist's city,' where the shattering of the *principium individuationis* (principle of individuation) inside aesthetic space activates the transformation of the city.

Figure 2. Franz Ackermann, *Home, Home Again*, 2002. Mixed media
(source: www.broadartfoundation.org)

Since 1990, Franz Ackermann's studio practice has consisted of a non-stop itinerary of traveling as a tourist, sketching his impressions of his experiences on the road in small hotels, and returning back to his studio to produce large-scale works for international exhibitions. He sees no separation between traveling and painting. His travels always are a process of returning home. This can be seen in the titles of his major exhibitions: "Home, Home Again," "Coming Home," "Transit: Again/Always/Forever," and "Travelantitravel." The imagery is always of an anonymous city absent of any figures. As mental landscapes, his works have some affinity with the surreal landscapes of the 19th century Greek-born, Italian painter Giorgio De Chirico, but are strikingly different in their total lack of either identifiable landmarks or cultural artifacts (De Chirico often used Classical Greek architecture and statuary). Ackermann's cities are in a perpetual present, which points to a rejection of any historical memory. Disconnected from the world of responsibility, the 'tourist city' is a privileged space. It is independent of the city where residents/visitors/businesses/industries/policies carry on their daily business. A tourist enjoys certain freedoms, and being a tourist makes way for a tourist experience. The tourist reciprocates by bringing life and energy into the space where she or he travels.

The artwork *Home, Home, Again* (2002) showcases Ackermann's extraordinary accomplishment to create a present-day equivalent to the Greek tragic chorus that collapses the ordinary boundaries of illusion and reality. This particular work has been exhibited around the world – in Salamanca, Spain, the White Cube in London, the Kunstmuseum in St. Gallen, Switzerland – and is now in the permanent collection of the Broad Art Foundation at the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art. It is a mixed-media installation of five large-scale paintings, a floor installation of items such as plastic water jugs, maps, tourist brochures, and metal crates sitting on top of a painting placed on the floor. The paintings are in dialogue with other interventions into the architectural space by way of such elements as a strip of connected photographs, small works on paper, objects on the floor, and compositionally-related painted elements that extend directly on the walls of the gallery. Many of Ackermann's major formal strategies are present, from bold and colorful pictorial elements showing chunks of the urban and vacation landscape, sinewy mapping lines of network connections, and splashes of neo-psychedelic color. Ackermann creates paintings out of his experiences, transforming a complex set of interactions, feelings, memories, contemplations, chance encounters, surprises, and phenomenological experiences into the artwork. As we can glean through the paintings' titles, we are shown the *Staying* Room, the *Landing* Room, and fragments of city blocks, parks, highways, cruise ships, sports stadiums, or even tiki bars on tropical islands (Ackermann 2007 32-58). These in-between places that dominate Ackermann's imagery are what French anthropologist Marc Augé calls "non-places" (Augé xviii). Augé describes a non-place as an "ambiguous site in which a person experiences a mix of pleasure and uneasiness of self-suspension" (xviii). In these non-places, ideas are stretched out temporally and spatially and therefore appear to be impossible to take in from one perspective.

Can Ackermann's artwork take us into the aesthetic domain of the city? Philosopher Jacques Derrida's essay "The Parergon," published in his 1978 book *The Truth in Painting*, shows painting's ability to open up the aesthetic domain in general, which can be applied to the 'boundaries of the city' in Ackermann's work. Derrida builds on what Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in the *Critique of Judgment* calls the Middle Term, or *Mittleglied* that forms the articulation of the theoretical and practical (Kant 7-8). This Middle Term is the "originary part" (a phrase that Derrida culled from Hegel's writings on aesthetics); the "place without a place;" and the place where the "beautiful is inscribed" (Derrida 38). Ackermann's art re-conceptualizes this 'middle articulation' as a global space.

In their formation of aesthetic space as global space, Ackermann's paintings have the same capacity as the ancient Greek tragic chorus to "collapse the ordinary boundaries of illusion and reality" (Euripides 12). What does Ackermann's staging of a pictorial drama of the contemporary city have to do with Greek tragedy? A place to start answering this question is Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, in that it presents a point of reference to connect German Romanticism to Greek tragedy and forwards to the German situation today. *The Birth of Tragedy* was written in 1872, early in the philosopher's career. As Anke Finger and Danielle Follet in *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork* point out, Nietzsche dedicated his book to the composer Richard Wagner who at that time was searching for a *Gesamtkunstwerk* ('total-artwork') that would "overcome the isolation of the individual" through its revelation of "metaphysical totality" (Finger and Follet 8). Wagner wrote in his 1850 manifesto *Art and Revolution*: "Any serious investigation of the essence of our art of to-day, we cannot make one step forward without being brought face to face with its intimate connection with the Art of ancient Greece. For, in point of fact, our modern art is but one link in the artistic development of the whole of Europe; and this development found its starting-point with the Greeks" (Wagner 1). The possibility of reinstating a 'total-artwork' to the central position that the tragic chorus had taken in Classical Greece inspired the young Nietzsche to expand these ideas even further. In an 1886 post-script to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche underlines his assertion of the metaphysical justification of art: "The preface to Richard Wagner already proposed that art—and *not* morality—was the essential *metaphysical* human activity; in the book itself there appears many times over the suggestive statement that the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (Nietzsche, "An Attempt at Self-Criticism," translated by Ian C. Johnson, 2000). It is the pursuit of this line of questioning that makes looking at the function of the tragic chorus relevant to Ackermann's paintings of the 'tourist city' today.

While Greek Classical references in Berlin's architecture and urban fabric will be revisited later in relation to Ackermann's paintings, Nietzsche's connection to Greek philology was foundational in his investigation into pre-Socratic Greek aesthetics. As Andrew Bowie traces in *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*, Nietzsche supposed that in his time only music had the capacity "to give birth to myth" (the most significant example), and particularly the tragic myth: the myth which expresses Dionysian knowledge in symbols (Bowie 10). Bowie makes a case that music as it emerged in the Romantic period was the only art form able to express this new understanding: "Music has complex relationship to language - non-representational, non-conceptual form of articulation [...] which makes it so important as a way of understanding other aspects of subjectivity that are not reducible to the cognitive, the ethical, or the emotive" (Bowie 10). Nietzsche's writing supports Bowie's claim that he believed music was the only art form of his time with true ethical capacity. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he quotes Schopenhauer's 1818 text, *The World as Will and Representation*, that argues that there is a possibility to access the 'thing-in-itself' in the aesthetic phenomenon of music, since "music represents the *metaphysical of everything physical in the world,* the thing-in-itself of every phenomenon" (Nietzsche 56). Nietzsche wrote that "wave after wave of philosophies" since the time of Socrates was dominated by "optimistic science" and an Apollonian style of beauty (56). As science and philosophy valued reason above all else, there was a parallel tendency in art to value beauty-in-form over irrational formlessness. Nietzsche saw this leading to an imbalance, resulting in the arts becoming top-heavy on the Apollonian side wherein the production, and appreciation, of art pursued ideas of beauty in form above all else (50). Nietzsche feared that this "optimistic" mastery also carried within it a "germ of destruction" that was leading to cultural "paralysis" (65).

The impulse of German Romanticism to seek knowledge in the formless sublime reflected a more general suspicion of rational science's dominant authority to claims on truth. To large extent, Romantic art had suffered a dramatic loss of social purpose and was produced

mainly to serve (bourgeois) pursuits of pleasure (Bowie 9). Much of post-Kantian German aesthetics called art's purpose into question as it explored ideas about subjectivity. For example, according to historian Kai Hammermeister, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) both extended the work of Kant to say that the purpose of art is "communicability of community;" Johann Schiller (1759–1805) and Johann Goethe (1749–1832) both believed that art turns into a means of aesthetic education (Hammermeister 37); and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) went so far in his *Introductory Lectures to Aesthetics* to say that art should be a science, because "it no longer is able to give us full satisfaction as art only" (Hegel 13). In contrast, Nietzsche (drawing from the writing of Schopenhauer and Wagner) sought to wrest art in general from this marginal position to reset it to be the focal point and voice of philosophy itself (Nietzsche 56).

Nietzsche asserts that the reinstatement of art to a place of social relevance can only come to be with a re-pairing of the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit that had been fatally separated at the Socratic turn of Western thought. According to Nietzsche, plastic art epitomizes Apollonian dream art, which allows for an "immediate apprehension of form [...] where nothing seems indifferent or redundant" (Nietzsche 2). Music, on the other hand, is Dionysian ecstatic art, which desires "to express the very essence of nature symbolically" (9). As a challenge to the Kantian claim in the *Critique of Judgment* that "beauty is the symbol of morality" (Kant 92), Nietzsche searches for a truth that goes beyond beauty alone: "Apollonian art tries to console us with the idea of eternity of the beautiful image, Dionysus provides us with far more redemptive truth" (Nietzsche 5). In Greek tragedy, the artist was both a "dream and ecstatic artist in one" (5).

While the 'total artwork' of Greek tragedy was an integral part of life in the early democratic state of Athens, the heterglossia of culture today precludes any such singular medium for cultural catharsis. Ackermann's work, then, is much more identifiable with the German Romantic tradition of the 'total artwork' with its "aesthetic aspirations towards the borderlessness" (Finger 4). As *The Birth of Tragedy* demonstrates, the motivation to re-introduce pre-Socratic cultural values was motivated by a desire to create an authentically German "new mythology" in the face of the encroachment of liberal universalizing values that had become increasingly more pervasive in post-Enlightenment thinking (Nietzsche 14). By the time Nietzsche surveyed this field, he dismissed the theory of subjectivity in aesthetics as "a mere figment" because, for him, "the 'I' thus sounds out of the depth of being" (14). His instinct told him that "the depth of being" was a Dionysian spirit (14). The salient point of Nietzsche's essay is that it presents an alternative to prevailing ideas in German aesthetics of the time to say that art drives not only poetry, but also the formation of society itself.

Ackermann's paintings utilize this combination of form-representing-formlessness in order to operate within the symbolic realm of the boundary. Like the tragic chorus, perspective takes on symbolic form, where the stage is all around. As a representative of the middle articulation (a place devoid of perspective), there is an absence of fixed positions – only perpetual motion and fluidity that articulates the borderless connectivity between tourist cities. However, Ackermann's paintings still protect a boundary – the boundary of aesthetic space. When defining the science of aesthetics, 17th century German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartner explains: "[a]rt shelters the immediacy of experiences in all its individuality, richness & complexity" (Hammermeister 12). Renewing Baumgartner's definition of aesthetics as something that shelters, we can reimagine that living aesthetically – or living in the 'artist's city' – provides a real, tangible, and valuable form of protection.

In order to dig deeper into the significance of the Romantic search to reconnect beauty and the sublime (which is essentially what Nietzsche sought to articulate in his formulation of "the symbolization of Dionysian wisdom through Apollonian artifices"), it is necessary to understand the role of the chorus (Nietzsche 25, 82). Nietzsche's argument in *The Birth of Tragedy* hinges on the thesis that it was Euripides who finally succeeded in killing off the tragic chorus by "transporting the spectator onto the stage" (37). By dissolving the distinction between chorus and actors, Euripides blurs the lines between the "intrinsic truth of nature," "the eternal heart of things," "the thing in itself," and "the collective world of phenomena" (embodied in the chorus) and the "falsehood of culture, which poses as the only reality" depicted in the "dream" image of the action on stage (24).

What is ironic is that Euripides' final tragedy, *The Bacchae* (it is thus considered the very last of the Greek tragedies), places the Dionysian myth at the center of its plot. Classical theatre historian A.E. Haigh's *The Tragic Drama of the Greeks* verifies Nietzsche's assessment of the decline of tragedy, but also shows that *The Bacchae*actually revived the role of the chorus:

> Speaking generally, then, the history of the chorus in Euripides is a history of gradual decline. [...] At times, even in his later works, he recurs with sudden affection to the ancient grandeur and significance. [...] But most conspicuous example of all is the *Bacchae*. In this play, one of the very latest of extant Greed tragedies, the chorus appears to make its dying effort, and flashes forth with renewed passionate enthusiasm of the Bacchantes, their breathless suspense during the progress of an action on which their very life depends, and their jubilant exultation over the victory, not only give to the play its distinctive tone, but also excite a dramatic interest hardly inferior to the interest of the Eumenides. (27)

Opening in Athens in 405 B.C.E (three years after Euripides' death), one can imagine the impact the drama made as it earned the coveted first prize awarded to the best tragedy, a recognition that had eluded Euripides during his lifetime. While only the text remains, the chorus made up of bacchantes (female worshipers of the cult of Dionysos who celebrated the rites of spring and winter) carrying masks, wielding ivy and snake-covered thyrsi, wearing fawn and lion skins must have been spectacular on stage. Bathed in color and garlands, the chorus of bacchants danced the traditional dance of the Bacchae within strict conventions of form. The dynamic energy of the Dyonisian chorus was matched by the spectacle of an earthquake and the *deus ex machina* pine tree that miraculously transports the doomed king from the wilds back into the city. [1] As in all tragedies, the chorus chants phrases, sings verse, and dances in symbols to match the progression of the drama. The rhythmic and slowly moving circle is a beautiful form to celebrate the mystery of fertility. Through its aesthetic form, the individual ceases to exist as an individual and is briefly subsumed into the eternal universality that goes beyond understanding. In this tragedy, the chorus is not merely a device – in every way it takes on the real form of Dionysian worship.

In Euripides' play, the destruction of the city of Thebes and the tragic dismemberment of its leader Pentheus by his own mother Agave was caused by the decline of authentic worship of the Dionysian cult, which was in fact in decline in the Athenian city-state. At the opening of the play, Dionysos stands in front of a smoldering temple that foreshadows the catastrophe that is to come: "Like it or not, this city must learn its lesson: what it means to disbelieve my mysteries" (Euripides 19). The chorus mirrors the changing tempo of the unfolding story as the songs move from rejoicing in the hunt and subsequent feast carried out in the open wilderness: "we sing of sacred everlasting things, the blessings, the song of Bacchus!"; to warning of the dangers of living by laws that do not follow natural law: "a tongue without reins and mind that knows no law can only come to a bad end/but a mind at peace with life mindfully lived cannot be shaken and does not bring the house down in ruin"; to bearing witness and creating a buffer to the horror of violence of the savage truth as the mother, fresh from the festival hunt, is finally made to see that what she holds in her hands is not the soft mane of a glorious lion freshly killed, but the blood-matted hair of her very own son (21, 36). It is as if Euripides sensed the loss of the Dionysian spirit in a society that increasingly turns its mindset to see reason as the source of morality – forsaking the song of the chorus to listen only to the "counterfeit, masked" passions and words of its heroes (Nietzsche 36). Is there a similar lesson presented by Ackermann's paintings?

The ancient song that the chorus sings in refrain is the epicenter of the entire play:

> What is wisdom?
> or should we ask
> What is right?
>
> What gift from the gods
> is more righteous
> than the sight
>
> O your hand held high
> above the head
> of an enemy?
>
> What is right
> is always
> something of beauty (Euripides 67)

This song, for which Euripides drew from ancient lyrics, links wisdom with art. The ancient songs are about the mystery of change: the divine into human (Dionysus was 'twice born' in the thigh of Zeus), the dry soil into 'milk and honey,' the passing of winter into spring, the individual into community. All of these changes occur in the aesthetic space of the song.

To say "what is right is always something of beauty" (Euripides 67) is to say that the course of time itself is determined in aesthetic space because the *right* line is determined not through conquest of war or formation of laws, but in culture through the expression of what the collective wisdom understands as beautiful. For example, in Classical Greece, the evolution of rites of spring, to chorus, to satyr play, to staged tragedy *is* the formation of democratic structure, not a result of law. Reason alone is not the true mediator of laws and boundaries because interactions in the world are necessary for any metaphysical transformation of phenomenon. Just as Dionysos is the god of theatre, the chorus of *The Bacchae* is the symbol of aesthetic space that tragedy opens up for the citizens of Athens to actively participate in the formation of the city. The lesson of the origin myth of *The Bacchae* is that Greek tragedy and social ethics are always rooted in aesthetics. [2] As Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy*, "it is only aesthetic phenomenon that justifies the world to all eternity" (16). As an inheritor of this legacy, Ackermann's pictures convey that it is beauty alone that is, to echo Euripides, 'right.'

The form of the chorus can be analyzed to reveal its ancient wisdom. The underlying message is that the balance between freedom and society must be negotiated in the aesthetic space represented by the chorus. A recent study by Classical theatre historian Graham Ley describes how the circular stage for the chorus is the defining space of the theatre (see Figure 3).

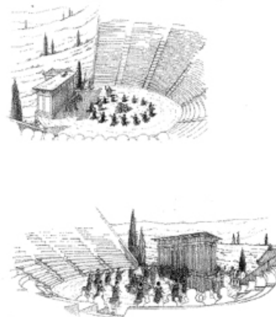

Figure 3. Schematic diagram of fifth-century theatre (top.); Scenes from Euripides' *Supplicants* (bottom.)
(source: Graham Ley. *The Theatricality of Greek Tragedy: Playing Space and Chorus.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 50-51)

In the middle of the approximately twenty-four meters in diameter space is an altar around which the chorus moves. Seeing the diagram, it is clear that the movement of the chorus around the altar is the most central visual element for the audience. Ancient Greek tragedy was always held outdoors, and the circular orchestra was always placed at the base of a hill so the audience can look beyond the playing space out onto a distant landscape. Nietzsche describes the outdoor experience of the theatre: "In their theaters the terraced structure of the theatre on rising in concentric arcs enabled everyone to *overlook*, in an actual sense, the entire world of culture around him, and in an over-abundance of contemplation to imagine himself one of the chorus" (25). Thus, the "Dionysian symbolism" (25) is conveyed through the combined totality of the movement of dance, rhythm and tone of verse, and visual effects – *as it operates in the theatre of the world*. When Ackermann places his paintings in installations that interact with real objects like travel brochures, sleeping bags, pinball machines, cages, and palm trees, he is insisting that his viewers are participants along with all things in the world. The connection to the polis through art is the essential piece that allows these two aesthetic phenomena to link the self with the all-encompassing exteriority beyond the self. In the aesthetic realm, the self ceases to be an individual, but is subsumed into the collective energy of the larger community. This is what it means to experience 'the tourist city.'

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of the dithyrambic chorus to Greek tragedy. Choral competitions between the ten tribes of Athens, each putting forth a chorus of fifty men and another of fifty boys (500 dancers in total), at the 'City of Dionysus' festivals in Athens, according to Classicist Richard P. Martin, "ranked in civic importance as high if not higher than tragedy, comedy, and satyr-play" (Martin 37). Another historian, David Whiles, reinforces this assessment. He writes: "Athenian theatre was designed for a complete community. Men would walk in from the countryside to see twenty dithyrambic dances and seventeen plays in the space of some five days. They feasted in their democratic groupings, and would bivouac if they had no lodgings" (Whiles 40).

Basically, the Dionysian rites of spring started as localized festivals of the harvest, and evolved into a community display and a sharing of aesthetic wisdom across territorial divides. *The Bacchae* originated from ancient traditions that had passed through generations over many centuries. Dionysian festivals strengthened a community, but were not territorial in the way of some other public festival processional traditions such as the Koah-hiu(n) Processional System of the Tainan Region in Taiwan described by anthropologist Fiorella Allio, in which ritual parades demarcate neighborhood boundaries as shamanic dancers perform in order to ward off bad spirits, but also to set clear boundaries between tribes (Allio 131-178). Greek choral competitions crossed real boundaries of topography that separate tribes and also retained and strengthened social conventions across regions. These rituals gave meaning to life and strengthened the democratic life in cities and among cities. In Plato's Book II of *Laws*, which deals largely with the role of the Dionysian chorus in the ethical life of the city, the philosopher explains the function of the chorus is for education of society. He writes: "and the uneducated is he who has not been trained in the chorus, and the educated is he who has been well trained (Plato *Laws: Book II*). The wisdom is in the physical dance and song, and the competition, and even today there are still remnants of ancient dithyramb circular dances preserved in small religious festivals on the Greek Islands.[3]

The recognition of the power of aesthetic space to transform the ethical life of a city is the ultimate message of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Ackermann's paintings in many ways show the shift in complexity in how an individual relates not only to the aesthetic space of the city, but also to civic responsibility. In Ackermann's work, an individual travels through a tourist city disconnected from either the local social order or ethical order while operating under greater globally shared orders of behavior. For tourists, alienation is freedom, but tourism and entertainment culture in general transform cities in real ways. The paintings, and Ackermann's greater studio enterprise, communicate the concrete reality of art strengthening the global community. In Ackermann's paintings, we see stadiums, skyscrapers, seaside resorts, bridges, parks, and green spaces. These are the places where the polis interacts. The rituals enacted in these shared places of play keep the more sinister aspects of modern life at bay. Ackermann's sprawling installation, *Gateway-Getaway* (2009), at the 2009 Tate Modern *Altermoderns* show mixes steel cages with tourist paraphernalia. It comments on a real-life 2008 news story of the arrest of twenty-three African refuges who washed up from sea at a vacation destination. By showing the side-by-side realities of leisure time and an immigrant's life-and-death fight for survival, Ackermann reveals in a dramatic way different boundaries of the city.

If ancient Dionysian cult worshippers wearing fawnskins and carrying ivy-covered thyrsi seem far removed from the spectacle of Euripides' bacchant chorus whirling on the outdoor orchestra platform in 5th century Athens, then there is a supersonic jump to the aesthetic form of an installation of Ackermann's paintings in a major museum show in the early 21st century. But I still maintain that a line can be drawn. The connection is twofold: all three of these art forms (cult ritual, civic dramatic arts, contemporary visual art) operate in the aesthetic domain of a community; and each negotiates the boundaries of the self and the city. In the original Dionysian cults, bloody masks were hung from trees to mark the place of the festival feast and also to signify the losing of one's head in intoxication (Euripides 11, 14). Although recently scholars M.S. Silk and Xavier Rui have shown that "academic constructions of Dionysos" exaggerate the savagery and violence of the cult in its historical form, the comic and tragic masks of Greek theatre directly reference the brutal fragmentation of the body, and *The Bacchae* explicitly dramatizes the myth in gory detail (Silk 259; Rui 51). As theatre historian Hubert Golder notes: "Dionysos is the god of theatre because, like the theater and its symbol, the mask, he mediates orders of reality – the familiar and the mysterious, the ephemeral and the eternal, the terrible and the beautiful, the immanent and the transcendent" (Euripides 11). The chorus of *The Bacchae*, then, is the ultimate symbol of the Dionysian mask of Greek tragedy – it is a dynamic *middle articulation* of action both on and off the stage and a unifying force that brings the Athenian audience together to open a space for possible cathartic (i.e., phenomenological) transformation of the democratic state through participation in the shared experience of tragedy.

Life today is vastly more complex and globally interconnected than at the time of the Greek city-state, and art reflects that paradigm shift. The territorial and artistic boundaries encompassing the idea of the Dionysian mask have to be reconfigured in order to fit today's reality, and Franz Ackermann's "mental maps" do this exceptionally well. As representations of "Incredible Terrible Beautiful" (another

exhibition title by Ackermann), each painting maps the artist's evolving understanding of the world within a created world of an artwork. When these works are put together in an installation, and considered across exhibitions, they are self-reflective like a Bacchanalian chorus. Therefore when the paintings interact with each other within an installation and in relation to the artist's entire temporal/geo-spatial exhibition practice, Ackermann's paintings can be read as *paintings-as-chorus.*

If considered in this way, Ackermann's work demonstrates a new development in painting in which the combination of painting in installation and extended, cohesive art practice opens a door of access to the transcendent sublime that 19th century thinkers thought was only accessible through music. What can be called Ackermann's 'new Romantic' paintings take viewers beyond the experience of mere appearance of the sublime to the experiential sublime accessed through embodied perception of walking through a total installation of painting that is not limited to a singular experience. [4] What makes Ackermann's work different, beyond the fact of the self-reflectivity of the 'Map' already discussed, is that it dissolves aesthetic boundaries through formal strategies of shifting perspective that move across time and space. This is done, I believe, through Ackermann's new understanding of subjectivity through his exploration of the 'tourist city.'

Figure 4. Franz Ackermann, *New Ads for Sao Paulo 1* (2011) Digital color photo on Dibond. 48 x 60, edition of 25

How can we consider Ackermann's project as a painting of the 'tourist city'? This can be asked through the example of Ackermann's home city of Berlin. The palimpsest of the city mirrors the city's ideas, and Berlin's historical hope to be an "Athens on the Spree" is most conspicuous at the very heart of the city at the Brandenburg Gate. Its goddess-driven chariot atop the muscular columns with their bas-reliefs of myths is a time machine that lets all passersby see German aspirations to Greek ideals, even Ackermann. The important point is that Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate is the confluence of its history. The brick line ringing the front of the gate marks the place where the Wall was dismantled that once divided East and West Germany. The Gate now reigns over a busy public park with vendors, street performers, public concerts and general tourist attractions. It is close to the visitor-friendly Reichstag (the parliament building), it is the central axis for the main boulevard leading to the embassies and Museum Island behind, and to a massive part ahead, and it is close to the memorials to the atrocities of WWII. From this vantage point, it is clear to see that Berlin has emerged out of the rubble as a new city. Contemporary theorist Stephen Barber, in *Fragments of the European City*, calls it "an exact visual seismography of its own violent identity" (Barber 106). He writes: "It is the city which initiates an exploration of the process of seeing, the damage to seeing, the multiplicity of seeing, since Berlin simultaneously manifests its precipitation of scarred space *and* the cancellation of that space" (107). Whether it is due to a process of 'self-seeing,' as Barber suggests, there is no doubt that Berlin has emerged as a global city.

The boldest thing about Ackermann's paintings however, is not their depiction of the global city, but their powerful reassertion of the artist's subjectivity. Ackermann is a modern day Odysseus searching for a way home – and his home is, in a simplified way, *his* Berlin. His art is very distinct, however, from a new brand of global artists identified by French curator and theorist Nicholas Bourriaud as *Altermoderns* who are inventing new forms out of the experience of world travel (Bourriaud 1). Ackermann's paintings convey anonymity, but through a very personal subjectivity. He does this through formal artistic strategies employed to turn the chorus of ideas provoked by his travels into aesthetic form of what philosopher Jacques Lacan calls the "total intentionality" of experience (Lacan 71). Lacan describes total intentionality as: "a recapitulation of the regulatory function of form, 'which is governed, not only in the subject's eye, but by his expectations, his movement, his grip, his muscular and visceral emotion – in short, his constitutive presence, directed in what is called his total intentionality" (Lacan 71). Ackermann's real life lived, and painted, in "total intentionality" creates an experience of walking inside a map that vibrates between conceptualism, representation, place, non-place, memory, reality, representation, etc. This "total intentionality" also can be seen in Bakhtinian terms of the dialogical – or the activity of authoring, defined by Bakhtinian scholars Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist as: "a ceaseless activity, an enormous energy, which is constantly in the process of being produced by the very forces that it drives" (Clark and Holquist 7). The sum total of Ackermann's project becomes a total experience that phenomenologically changes the city, most importantly Ackermann's home city. This is how the 'tourist city' in the paintings mirrors the transformation of Berlin to an 'artist's city.'

Ackermann proves that what we see in the city is what we see in ourselves. Barber alludes to this when he says: "All that the face exudes is the collision of itself with the city" (69). Ackermann's creative subjectivity – what makes him special – is that he captures the experience of traveling, of seeing cities, in order to see his own city (cityscapes as self-portraits). He shows his brain being mapped; the mind-mappings that he is doing are not travelogues, but are portraits of his own interactions with the world. His map is a new mask – a wild, beautiful map that offers itself as the face of urban travels. While maps are traditionally used as a rational way to negotiate the unknown, Ackermann's paintings revert that order to signify a state of chaos. Ackermann's virtual maps, therefore, replace the aesthetic form of the tragic mask. As a navigation system, they no longer remain a dismembered head that imagines the catastrophe of individuation as ''the origin and primal cause of all suffering" that tragedy and art must heal (Pothen 10). Instead, they serve as entry zones (i.e., the middle articulation) that provide footing to access simultaneously alternate states of void and empirical reality. This is different from Euripides' Dionysian drama that moralizes "the end of individuation" (Pothen 10). In Ackermann's paintings, we see individual subjectivity constituted in the common space of the 'tourist city.' The overall moral is that borders can be experienced aesthetically because they are shared. Our interconnected world is a far, far cry from older, generally self-contained societies, mostly due to the change in modes of travel. Today's world is figuratively, literally, geographically, and virtually more and more a world of borderlessness. That post-war Germany and Berlin in particular has actively worked to dismantle borders, it is not surprising that it has produced an artist such as Ackermann.

Ackermann's practice, paintings, and installations of the 'tourist city' show that the aesthetic is all around us. The catharsis they offer is that it is possible to go through life aesthetically – to find individual identity in the 'tourist city,' and then return, as a tourist-hero, home. Home, in Ackermann's case, is the 'artist's city.' Ackermann's work is thus a demonstration of a rebirth of the German romantic spirit as universal-spirit where the tragic city, through the fertility of the tourist city, becomes the 'artist's city.' Berlin is an artist's city: it holds a new kind of subjectivity – the *subjectivity of a commons* – that draws its breath from the aesthetic domain. It recognizes the possibility for a new aesthetic leadership – and that leadership is located in the chorus.

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[1] The *deus ex machina*, or "god from the machine" is a plot device in Classical Greek tragedy whereby characters, usually gods, are lowered into the scene with a crane.

[2] This challenges Freud's interpretation of the Greek chorus in his 1913 essay "Totem and Taboo." In his explanation of the Oedipus story as the origin myth of social ethics, Freud makes an assumption that the chorus was formed around the myth of hero when he interprets the Greek Chorus as founded on the "company of brothers" responsible for killing the father and causing the suffering of the hero. The 'error' of combining of hero and chorus is precisely what Nietzsche sought to elucidate in *The Birth of Tragedy* (see Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo" in *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay, p. 510.)

[3] Circular dances based on ancient rites are still practiced at seasonal outdoor festivals in Greek communities. To view a video of a contemporary performance, visit: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afOIhl1toZQ&list=FLvtXFwylL8YgktHFCP95_EA&index=3&feature=plpp_video).

[4] The Romantic sublime is usually discussed in relation to 19th century Romantic-era paintings, such as those of Caspar David Friedrich, or even those of Goya or Turner. In terms of contemporary painting and installation art, many artists have created environments that are concerned with the inexpressible sublime - or even dystopic sublime - notably Ilya Kabakov and Thomas Hirschhorn. Others have successfully combined painting and installation where immersion, or movement, of the viewer is an integral part of the work. Examples are Claude Dubuffet, Iza Genzken, Jessica Stockholder.