

HELEN MOLESWORTH

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## Work Ethic

HELEN MOLESWORTH

*Some people like to go out dancing; other people like us have to work.*

—The Velvet Underground

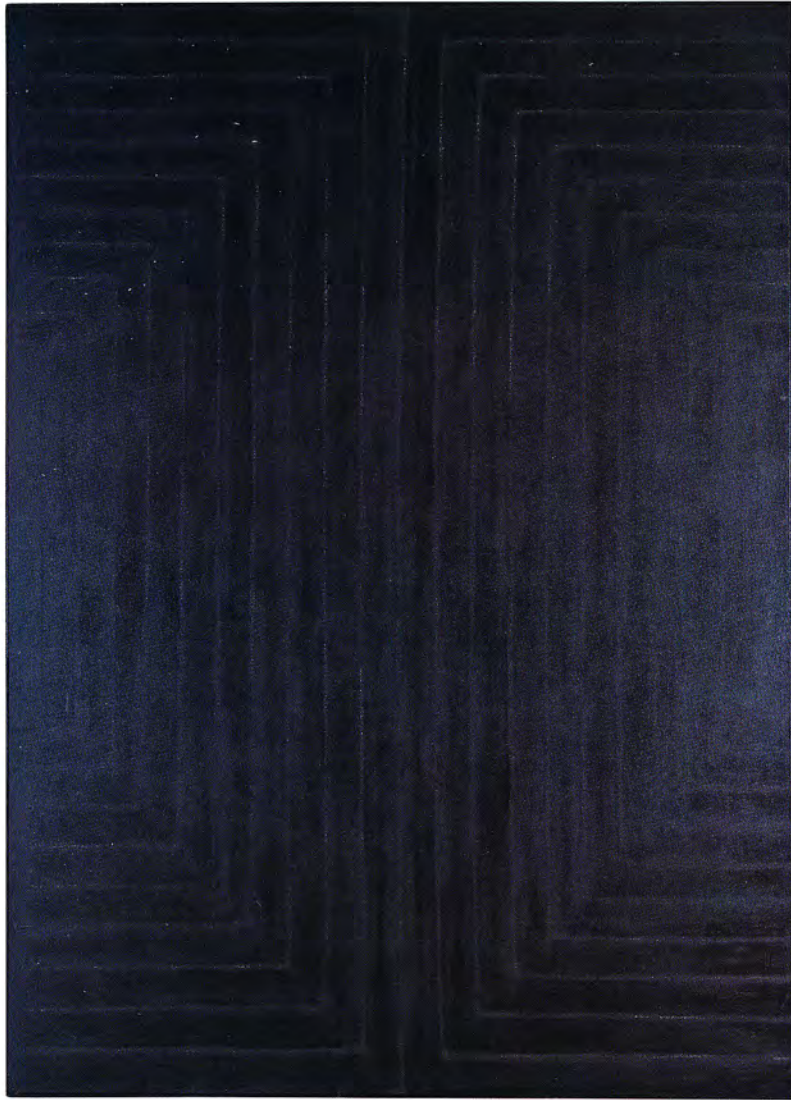
ONE OF THE more curious attributes of avant-garde art after World War II was the increasing disregard for traditional artistic skills such as drawing, painting, and sculpting. Robert Rauschenberg's legendary *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) consisted of just that—the artist erasing a drawing by Willem de Kooning. Frank Stella's *Club Onyx* (1959) is a painting of black stripes of house paint; their width is determined by the store-bought brush. And when Robert Morris made *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), critic Leo Steinberg described it as

A plain wooden box and a tape recording of the sawing and hammering that put it together. The work strips the adverb from the definition of art. A thing done—period.<sup>1</sup>

Steinberg had distilled the problem. Here was a work of art content to be described in the language of *work* as opposed to that of art. Sawing and hammering had replaced drawing and composition. And in replacing the skills of art with the activities of work, artists began to make art that eschewed artifice and illusion and instead presented itself to the world as it was: a box with the sound of its own making, an object insistent upon the labor of its maker.

This essay argues that one unifying principle of the extraordinarily heterogeneous field of post-World War II avant-garde art was a concern with the problematic of artistic labor. A historical convergence had occurred. Just as artists relinquished traditional artistic skills and the production of discrete art objects, the status of labor and the production of goods in the culture at large were also changing profoundly as the American industrial economy, based in manufacturing, shifted to a postindustrial economy rooted in managerial and service labor. The concern with artistic labor manifested itself in implicit and explicit ways as much of the advanced art of the period managed, staged, mimicked, ridiculed, and challenged the cultural and societal anxieties around the shifting terrain and definitions of work.





Frank Stella, *Club Onyx*, 1959.

One of Modernism's many promises was that art offered possible resistance to an increasingly regimented and segmented life under the auspices of industrialization. From the Arts and Crafts movement to the Bauhaus, the history of modern art is shot through with the dream of an integration of the realms of art and life, work and leisure, such that the alienation produced by the fragmented nature of modern labor would be ameliorated. This essay argues that in the

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period following World War II, artists came to see themselves not as artists producing (in) a dreamworld but as workers in capitalist America.<sup>2</sup> They navigated the avant-garde desire to merge art and life under dramatically different social structures than their Modernist predecessors. Artists during the 1960s made art in the midst of the corporatization of American culture, the professionalization of the category of "artist," and a burgeoning New York market for contemporary art. These sociohistorical forces placed extraordinary pressures on artists to redefine themselves and their work, and often they did so by thinking through and acting out the profound transformations of late-twentieth-century labor in their work.

It is a well-worn tale that the end of World War II ushered in an era of remarkable economic growth for the American economy. Just as the manufacturing base quickly reconfigured itself to meet the needs of a wartime economy, with similar ease it transformed into a manufacturing economy of commodities for an increasingly affluent and mobile middle class. This, in turn, was accompanied by the rise of the managerial class, whose labor was no longer defined by the production of objects. Rather, the work of management was to oversee the labor of others, and it often involved making representations of work, such as diagrams, graphs, and flowcharts.<sup>3</sup> Paul Osterman and the other authors of *Working in America* describe how "at least since the New Deal, a clear view of how work is organized has been embedded both in law and policy. On that view, there is a sharp and identifiable divide between the activities of managers and those of workers, the former being responsible for conception and planning and the latter for execution."<sup>4</sup> Joseph Pine and James Gilmore note in *The Experience Economy*, however, that "it was in the 1950s when services first employed more than 50 percent of the U.S. population, that the Service Economy overtook the Industrial (although this was not recognized until long after the fact)."<sup>5</sup> While the recognition of the change in labor demographics from a manufacturing to a service economy may have been slow in coming, management's cultural ascendancy aided this shift. Hence, Pine and Gilmore argue that with the codification and rise of management, the work executed by workers has also been transformed from goods ("tangible products that companies standardize and then inventory") into services ("intangible activities performed for a particular client").<sup>6</sup> While the



manufacturing base of the United States was diminishing, the production of goods increasingly happened elsewhere—usually in “unseen” faraway places such as China, Korea, Japan, Malaysia, and India, and, as the decades wore on, in places such as Mexico—closer to home but still just as much out of sight. Ironically, the manufactured commodity’s vanishing in America was accompanied by the disappearance of the traditional art object as well; the changing economy had a significant impact on how postwar art was made. This economic transformation was accompanied by an artistic one that further shaped artists’ exploration of the problem of artistic labor: the increasing influence and importance of the work of Marcel Duchamp.

Conceivably, no twentieth-century artist was more ambivalent about artistic labor than Marcel Duchamp. In the teens, he purchased mass-produced commodities (most famously a urinal he titled *Fountain* [1917]) and dubbed them “readymades.” The readymades defied two historical definitions of art: namely, that art should be unique and that it should be produced by a highly trained artist with a requisite set of learned skills. By challenging the necessity of traditional artistic labor and the value of unique objects and by establishing a potential continuum between the space and activities of everyday life and the rarified realm of art, Duchamp’s readymades constituted the most serious attack on the category of Art since the Renaissance.

Far from destroying art, Duchamp’s profound challenge ultimately served to create an enormous field of aesthetic possibility. It helped liberate artists from conventional modes of working, contributing to a climate that permitted and rewarded an increasingly porous idea of art’s possibilities. Artists no longer needed to content themselves with the production of visually aesthetic objects. Art became a realm of ideas. This freedom did not come immediately; the most important reception of Duchamp in the United States occurred in the late 1950s through John Cage, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, all of whom rejected the supposed purity and emotionalism of Abstract Expressionism and enabled a fuller exploration of Duchamp’s questioning of skill and labor.<sup>7</sup> Notoriously heterogeneous, the art of the 1960s and 1970s produced a wide range of movements, including Minimalism, Conceptual art, Fluxus, Performance, Process, Feminist art, and Happenings. The new art was



described in various ways. It was dematerialized; it pursued the aesthetics of silence; it was anti-illusionistic; it was conceptual; it was anticommodity; it was democratized. The new art remained, however, extremely difficult for lay viewers to understand or interpret. Its difficulty lay, in large measure, in its double rejection: as artists stopped employing traditional artistic skills, they also stopped making works of art that imagined the museum or the collector's home as their final destination. Instead, artists attempted to make works of art that would actively resist easy assimilation into the realm of the art market, where art was seen to be one luxury commodity among many.<sup>8</sup>

The liberation of art from traditional artistic skills, the production of a unique object, and the primacy of the visual necessitated new aesthetic criteria less focused on appearance and more concerned with ideas. Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* and Rauschenberg's oeuvre provided Leo Steinberg with a new hermeneutic, one he went so far as to call postmodern. In his deeply influential essay "Other Criteria" (1968), he stated plainly that new art presents itself not as "art" but as "work," and as such needs to be analyzed in sociocultural terms in addition to those taken from the discourse of art.

Much as the category of Art was in question, the role of the artist was being rearticulated. Two texts also important to the formation of postmodern ideas declared the newly problematized author/artist. One was a short speech delivered by Duchamp, "The Creative Act" (1957), and the other was an essay by French theorist Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967). Both appeared in the eclectic avant-garde journal *Aspen* in 1967—Duchamp's spoken by the artist and distributed on a floppy record, and Barthes's in its first English translation. Both texts would become legendary. Duchamp's argument became a received idea in art schools across the United States, and Barthes's text would become standard college reading in the humanities.

Duchamp's lecture put forward the then radical idea that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone." Denying both the autonomy of the artwork and the privileging of the artist's intention, Duchamp instead turned the focus of attention upon the viewer, stating that "the spectator brings the work in contact with the exter-



nal world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”<sup>9</sup> Barthes similarly challenged the idea that “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end . . . the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us.” Citing the public and ideological character of language, he suggested that the author could no longer be seen as an omnipotent, singular, and codified dispenser of meaning. Instead, the reader is the privileged subject, for the “reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed . . . a text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination.” Emphatically, Barthes’s essay ends with the oft-quoted line, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”<sup>10</sup> By positioning the reader as the final destination of a text, Barthes’s essay rhymes in spirit with Duchamp’s. Both shift the value and emphasis away from the producer of the work of art or literature in favor of the viewer or reader.<sup>11</sup>

“The Death of the Author” crystallized a point of view by succinctly describing an increasingly prevalent form of anti-authorial artistic practice. Many artists and writers in the 1960s found the idea of the author’s metaphoric death liberating, and they deployed a variety of means to undermine or downplay their own authorship. Some (e.g., John Cage) used chance operations, feeling that when the conscious choice of the artist was eliminated, so too was artistic intention. Others (e.g., Sol LeWitt) adopted serial systems, reasoning that a predetermined mathematical logic diminished the display of artistic subjectivity. Many artists (e.g., Donald Judd) felt increasingly comfortable turning over the production of their work to paid assistants and fabricators. Still others (e.g., John Baldessari) turned to the camera, hoping that a mechanical tool would lessen any trace of their hand. And then there were those (e.g., Yoko Ono) who turned the completion of the artwork over to the viewer in a literal way, creating participatory proposals that were only considered “art” once engaged by a viewer.

When artists challenged the role of the author, they also, wittingly or not, questioned the status and even value of their labor. In effect, to problematize the role of the author/artist is to place the producer of the text/art object in question. By diminishing traces of their



intentionality and subjectivity, attributes of the work of art usually associated with its fabrication were removed: traces of the artist's hand, reliance upon a learned set of skills, a prolonged duration for the creation of a work, a studio complete with tools and equipment. Even though artists embraced these new anti-authorial modes of artistic production, they did so at some peril. Were artists still required, in any subjective or authorial specificity? (Anyone can follow through a serial system, click the shutter on a camera, throw a pair of dice.) If not, what exactly was their role? What was to constitute their labor? This was felt particularly keenly in the visual arts, where one effect of the ebbing of the authorial role was that the resultant art was often only tenuously an object.

Sol LeWitt, whose work was also included in *Aspen*, discussed the new artistic process in the following way:

The aim of the artist would not be to instruct the viewer but to give him information. Whether the viewer understands this information is incidental to the artist; he cannot foresee the understanding of all his viewers. He would follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion avoiding subjectivity. . . . The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise.<sup>12</sup>

That LeWitt imagines himself a clerk is not surprising. The newly problematized relationship to artistic authorship and its attendant modes of artistic labor hardly happened in a vacuum. America's shift from an industrial to a postindustrial society was to have as profound an effect upon art as it had upon the daily lives of all workers. Far from being a timeless and unchanging entity, art of the 1960s reflected the rise of a highly professionalized managerial class and the simultaneous development of a service economy.

Some art historians have viewed the strategies of anti-authorship, such as LeWitt's imagining of himself as a clerk, as part of the "de-skilling" of the artist. Yet it is more accurate to treat this transformation as a re-skilling, for as artists weathered the change from a manufacturing to a service economy, it stands to reason that the declining value for one set of skills would be accompanied by a ris-



ing value for another. So what, then, were the new sets of skills needed to be an artist? What kinds of artistic labor would come to be seen as legitimate within this new socioeconomic context?

In the early 1940s, there were 60 candidates for graduate degrees in studio art enrolled in eleven American institutions. By 1950–51, there were 322 candidates at thirty-two institutions. The trend continued through the end of the century. Thirty-one new Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs opened in the 1960s, and forty-four in the 1970s. From 1990 to 1995, ten thousand MFA degrees were awarded in the United States. These numbers are astounding. What do they mean for artists and the art they produce?

In *Art Subjects*, historian Howard Singerman persuasively argues that after World War II, artists were increasingly professionalized in academic art programs in the United States. With the G.I. Bill fueling the professionalization of degree-granting art departments, the way art was taught changed markedly. This shift is most evident in the diminishing importance accorded to the traditional skill of drawing—long the core of artistic training. The predominance of Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on unconscious processes and a highly rigorous version of abstraction, often meant that the technical skill of drawing was no longer encouraged. In this context, Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* takes on a new (and renewed) significance. Of all of the Abstract Expressionists, de Kooning was renowned for his draftsmanship, something that Rauschenberg was doubtlessly aware of when he asked the artist for a drawing he would subsequently erase. That Rauschenberg should request to erase one of de Kooning's drawings can be seen less as an anti-oedipal urge and more as an acknowledgment that one form of artistic skill was being supplanted by another—draftsmanship erased in the face of conceptual art's nascent ascendancy. Despite the lack of technical skill required to erase the drawing, Rauschenberg claimed to have worked very hard to erase the drawing well. And the results of his hard labor are evident: not even the slightest trace of the drawing remains.

As art departments continued their professionalization and artists continued to undermine the significance of technical skill, contradictory ideas emerged about the teaching of art. On the one hand, the idea arose that art could not be systematically taught. On



the other, there was a consensus that art could be learned and that it was acquired in large measure by being around artists and listening to them talk. This “talk” took place in the form of the “crit,” the guest artist lecture, and the phenomenon of the studio visit, all of which signaled a significant break with traditional academic art training. In such training, the “assignment and product are given in the same language”—life drawing, for instance. In the postwar period, however, a split occurred, and the language of the “assignment” was quite different from the language of the finished product. For example, the assignment might be to “make a void,” a kind of problem solving that can take any form.<sup>13</sup> If the separation of mental labor from manual labor is one of the hallmarks of managerial professionalization, then, Singerman argues, postwar artistic training was designed to train artists in a theoretical discourse separate and distinct from manual labor. The result was a generation of college-educated artists whose skills were no longer manual and visual but largely theoretical and verbal. The rise of the MFA artist—an artist trained in large measure to become a teacher in MFA programs and whose proficiencies are mental rather than manual—reflects the shift in labor experienced by the vast majority of American workers. And just as many Americans now earn their livings without ever making a sellable commodity, many artists have stopped making commodities such as painting and sculpture designed to be bought and sold on the market.

Yet there was (and remains) a curious resistance to the idea of the professional artist—a person for whom being an artist was a job, a way to make a livelihood (often through teaching) as much as an existential “calling.” When Harold Rosenberg, an influential critic of the 1950s and a champion of Abstract Expressionism, wrote “Everyman a Professional” in 1959, he opined:

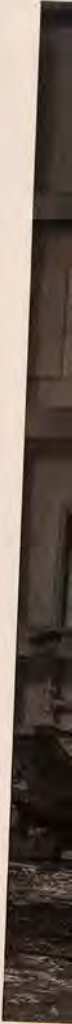
Thus the essential mark of a profession is its evolution of a unique language. . . . The more incomprehensible the lingo is to outsiders, the more thoroughly it identifies the profession as such and elevates it out of the reach of mere amateurs and craftsmen.<sup>14</sup>

Even though Rosenberg criticized artists for this development, his commentary supports Singerman’s contention that part of what it meant to become an artist in the late 1950s and 1960s was to learn



how to talk about art with other art professionals. But the romantic myths of the artist as outcast, the artist as lone genius, the artist as inspired (not trained) or, conversely, the artist as one possessing a highly distinctive set of laboriously learned skills still held sway in the popular imagination. In these scenarios, the rise of the professional artist was viewed as a cynical degradation of art's magical or auratic status. The nostalgia for certain sets of skills was countered, however, by a generation of artists who acknowledged that art and artists are both in and of the world, helping produce it and being produced by it. In this light, the use of a non-object-based art made by an academically trained artist and described in an increasingly professionalized language echoes similar transformations in other forms of production (of both knowledge and objects) from the university to the corporate boardroom, as postwar culture at large came to be dominated by the logic of the management and service sectors of the economy.

The professionalization of the artist did not happen immediately or easily. As artists grappled with the emergent terms of a postindustrial world in which the conditions of labor were changing dramatically, one of their responses was to portray themselves as workers. The Abstract Expressionists maintained and helped to promulgate the largely European myth of the isolated artist in his studio, but, as art historian Caroline Jones argues, they also presented themselves as workers by participating in the creation of a documentary image-world of the artist at work in his studio. These images varied greatly: artists presented themselves as members of the working class, as typified by photographs of Jackson Pollock in his work shirts and blue jeans, and as members of the business class, as seen in Barnett Newman's professional images, complete with suit and bow tie.<sup>15</sup> Yet it was the emergence of Frank Stella and Andy Warhol that set into motion a new set of practices as well as images for the artist as worker-professional. Both Stella and Warhol made art where the interior life of the artist, as expressed through an individualized mark, was utterly absent from the final artistic process. To do so, both adopted a mechanistic production apparatus: Stella developed a highly regimented stripe of paint, equal to the width of the store-bought paintbrush, and Warhol borrowed mass-produced images that he subsequently silk-screened in an assembly-line fashion. And



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Hollis Frampton, Frank Stella in his studio working on *Getty Tomb (Second Version)*, 1959.

while Stella shocked the art world with his idea of an “executive artist” who has others do his work for him, Warhol actualized this model when he established The Factory and famously quipped that if people wanted to know about his work they should ask his assistants. Despite their embrace of the executive model, both artists also flirted with other forms of identification, projecting an affinity with members of the working class. Stella’s adoption of house painting’s tools and techniques was accompanied by the following recollection: “it sounds a little dramatic, being an ‘art worker.’ I just wanted to do





Andy Warhol and assistant Gerard Malanga screening Campbell's soup can canvases in The Factory, 1964.  
Photograph: Ugo Mulas.

it and get it over with so I could go home and watch TV.”<sup>16</sup> Here, Stella mimed the stance of the hourly worker, not the corporate executive, and it is telling that Hollis Frampton's photographs of Stella painting in the studio are a strictly blue-jeans-and-white-tee-shirt affair. According to Jones, Warhol was also ambivalent about his role as either art worker or business executive, which may account for his vacillation between a blue-jeans aesthetic and his position as the head of The Factory.

For some, the idea of the artist as worker-professional was less ambivalently structured. Artist Allan Kaprow's description of the contemporary artist in “Should the Artist Become a Man of the World?” (1964) matter-of-factly states that artists “resemble the personnel in other specialized disciplines and industries in America,” so much so that “on the street they are indistinguishable from the





ry, 1964.

middle-class from which they come and towards whose mores—practicality, security, and self-advancement—they tend to gravitate.” The problem for Kaprow was not professional status but that the artist must work within a “subtle social complex whose terms he is only beginning to understand.”<sup>17</sup>

An important aspect of this new social complex was the post-World War II emergence of New York as the capital of the art world. In addition to the influx of European artists during the war and the rise of an increasingly lucrative art market, part of New York’s becoming the mecca of the art world was the phenomenon of loft conversion. Wildly different in scale and effect than the garret apartments of prewar artists, loft spaces were typically abandoned light manufacturing buildings. In the illuminating study *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Sharon Zukin tracks the rise of SoHo and loft living, demonstrating how artists displaced light manufacturing only to be displaced themselves by members of the elite service industry.<sup>18</sup>

One unique quality of SoHo was that artists from disparate artistic movements lived and worked there simultaneously. Stella occupied a loft space on West Broadway in 1958, and Alison Knowles and George Maciunas, both Fluxus artists, were some of the first artists to buy buildings in SoHo. Allan Kaprow’s Happenings took place in SoHo lofts; artists involved in the new sculpture (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Richard Serra) lived and worked there, as did Conceptual artists (Sol LeWitt, Mel Bochner). This highly abbreviated list suggests that no matter how divergent the aesthetic concerns and practices, the infrastructure of SoHo was a common denominator in putting pressure on artists to perform or stage their work in new ways. For instance, the Artists’ Tenants’ Association was formed in 1960–61 in order to protect artists’ right to live in lofts zoned for manufacturing. In their attempts to gain the attention of Robert Wagner, then mayor of New York, they threatened to boycott all art exhibitions in the city unless officials stopped their eviction policies. That artists could bond together as professionals and envision themselves as participants in a boycott already conveys a level of professional identity through affiliation. It also suggests that they understood their identities as not only the producers of culture but



also its potentially primary consumers. Artists thus straddled the nascent economic transformation from production to consumption within their own professional identities.

The loft laws were resolved to ensure artists' ability to inhabit them. But residency came with a requirement that the spaces be studio-residences: the lofts could not be used only for living (as opposed to living and working).<sup>19</sup> Hence the edict *to work* was in place as a mandatory component of the legal solidity of SoHo as the artists' neighborhood. If one of the most enduring legacies of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde was the desire to blur the boundaries between art and life, then loft living may have furthered this initiative. The combination of the scale and historicity of such spaces, along with the new legalistic imperative to produce at a time when production was very much in question, was bound to have an enormous influence on contemporary art practices.

Artists stood at a crossroads in the 1960s. The influences exerted upon them and their conditions of possibility were extraordinary: the postwar reception of Duchamp, a profound alteration in the conception of the artist's role, the shift in the economic structure of the Western world, the rise of a new type of academic art training, and a dramatic change in the site of artistic production all came to bear on the production and reception of avant-garde culture. This essay has argued that shifts in artistic practice were bound up with a changing economic structure. The transformation from an industrial to a postindustrial society is perhaps best described by Ernest Mandel, who historicized this period as late capitalism. For Mandel, one of late capitalism's most distinctive characteristics is the spread of the logic of work into all areas of life, resulting in an increasingly bureaucratic and disciplinary society. He writes, "Mechanization, standardization, over-specialization and parcellization of labor, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life." Mandel continues with a particularly germane example: "The 'profitability' of universities, music academies and museums starts to be calculated in the same way as that of brick works or screw factories."<sup>20</sup> The visual and plastic arts were particularly well poised to negotiate this historic shift, as the value found in art has traditionally been positioned within a dialectical set of social practices.



Produced by both mental and manual labor, it is also a mixed site of leisure and work. Furthermore, throughout the twentieth century the avant-garde has set out to blur the distinctions between art and life. All these factors contribute to contemporary art's increasing porousness to the economic and social conditions of its production as well as its ability to represent and critique these transformations.

At this crossroads, much of the most important and challenging art of the period staged the problem of labor's transformation, its new divisions, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and leisure. Generally speaking, artists responded in one of four ways. Some played the part of both manager and worker, restaging the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century division of labor. Others, emboldened by the professionalization of the category of artist and liberated by an economic shift away from manufacturing, simplified things by adopting a purely managerial position. Still others had a prescient understanding that the burgeoning service economy would ultimately give way to a leisure economy based on experience.<sup>21</sup> These artists turned to participatory strategies, directly involving the audience in the art. And finally (although this mapping is by no means chronological), there were those artists who experimented with not working at all, or at least trying to figure out how to work as little as possible.

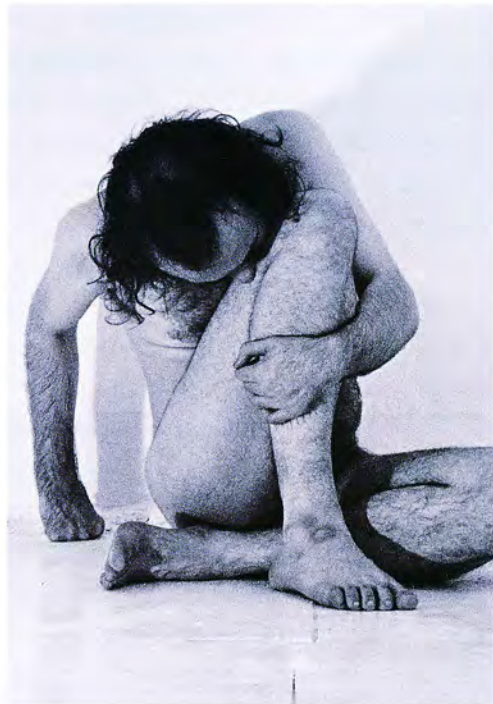
Many artists staged the tension of the changing definitions of labor by mimicking the logic of labor's division into mental and manual realms. By establishing a task and then performing it, these artists acted out the roles of both manager and worker. It follows that in the absence of traditional artistic skills and concrete objects, the artist's studio, the space of artistic production, became a highly charged arena. What exactly was an artist supposed to do there? Bruce Nauman laconically presented the problem as follows: "If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio . . . you sit in a chair or pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around the studio."<sup>22</sup> Yet Nauman never simply sat. He dictated for himself a set of task-like activities—playing a note on the violin, bouncing balls arrhythmically, walking around the studio in an exaggerated manner—all of which were filmed, transforming the studio into a performative arena.



**TRADEMARKS**  
**September 1970**

Biting as much of my body as  
my mouth can reach.

Applying printer's ink to each  
bite & stamping bite-prints  
like finger-prints.



If Nauman's activities betray a literal, futile, and restless quality, then Vito Acconci's *Trademarks* (1970) can be seen as a humorous send-up of some of the anxiety provoked by the studio. In *Trademarks*, Acconci bit himself repeatedly on the arm and leg, trying to make a perfect dental impression on his skin. The impression was inked and "prints" were made, which were subsequently given away as gifts. In a parodic gesture of artistic mark making, Acconci deploys his body as the exclusive agent of artistic production, yet he does so in a way that empties out any particular subjective dimension. Not quite as efficient (or as iconographic) as a thumbprint, *Trademarks* offers an unskilled but physically arduous art activity, suggesting that even though the artwork was just barely an object, it still required a lot of effort to make.

Artists who assigned themselves tasks and then performed them rejected traditional artistic media and their attendant skills and turned instead to a presentation of the work of art in the language of "a thing done," a task performed. In doing so, many developed an obsessive reliance upon documentation.<sup>23</sup> Often the films





Vito Acconci, *Trademarks*, 1970/2001.

and photographs produced in this manner are fairly banal, produced with a deadpan lack of affect that is usually quite humorous. Yet the humor masks a certain level of anxiety surrounding the making of the art. When is the work finished? Is it “enough” work? It repeatedly appears that mimicking the strategies of efficient and productive labor in a parodic and deliberately unproductive way both enacts the artist’s desire to embody a stereotypical American work ethic while simultaneously critiquing it. Consider Chris Burden’s *Honest Labor* (1979), in which the artist himself dug a ditch over a period of three days while acting as a visiting artist at an art school. Typical of much task-based work and Process art, the end “product” or result of *Honest Labor* is “useless”: a ditch without a purpose. What is valued is the *process* and/or the performance of the artist. Elevating the process was seen as a way to deemphasize the traditional values—both aesthetic and financial—attributed to the final product or artwork. Here, the artist does an “honest day’s work” yet refuses to produce a luxury commodity object.



Artists emphatically suggested in the 1960s that the importance of a work of art lay more in how it was made rather than in the final product. Often referred to as Process art, this shift in emphasis was offered as a critique of the commodity status of art and was bound up with artists' desire to retain a degree of autonomy for the artistic act—a last-stand protection of sorts against an increasingly commodified world. Another way to conceptualize “process” is to read it as “artistic labor,” for the process through which a thing is made is where its labor resides. So although we have seen that during the 1960s the art object underwent an internal split between mental and manual labor, with the privilege continually afforded to the realm of thinking, the emphasis on process provided a way for artists to maintain and even give value to the manual labor still inherent in the production of an object. Hence Burden's highly physical activity of ditch digging is ultimately presented as a photograph and a typed description of the activity—manual labor presented in the aesthetic of conceptual art.

Process art and task-based works were not the only places in which the language and logic of work were mimed by artists. Conceptual artists (perhaps more than any other group) disavowed the final object or product status of art, opting instead to emphasize cognitive processes. In doing so they often relegated the production of their work to others, replicating the logic of managerial labor. LeWitt seemed to have no trouble in taking a classic white-collar stand in regard to work's production. In his widely read “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” he states, “When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”<sup>24</sup>

But machines do not make LeWitt's wall drawings; assistants do, further completing the professionalized separation of mental and manual forms of artistic labor. As many Conceptual artists relied heavily upon the language and logic of the instruction, they functioned like managers, producing graphs, charts, and diagrams with directions for others on how to perform the labor required to make the object. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh described this aspect of Conceptual art as the “aesthetic of administration,” arguing, “this aesthetic identity is structured much the way this class's social iden-



tity is, namely, as one of merely administering labor and production (rather than producing) and of the distribution of commodities.”<sup>25</sup> In this context, John Baldessari’s presentation of himself as a “nine-to-five artist,” reflecting his daily routine of going to the studio, takes on a new resonance—even if, when he arrived at the studio one day in 1972, he taped himself singing Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art” to the tune of *Camptown Races*.<sup>26</sup> Baldessari’s *Commissioned Paintings* (1969–70) consist of a series of works painted by Sunday painters chosen and approached by Baldessari, who asked each of them to represent faithfully banal snapshots of a friend pointing at objects in a domestic and/or studio space. Each painting was subsequently taken to a sign painter, who “captioned” the paintings with the phrase “This is a painting by Pat Nelson” (or whoever the Sunday painter was). Finally, Baldessari placed his signature on the back of the canvas. *The Commissioned Paintings* are a witty jab at the problem of the artist as genius. They also restage the division of labor inherent in the production of all commodities. Baldessari’s critical gesture thus becomes that of drawing attention to the problem of the differentiation in value between the named producer of the painting on the front (in this instance, the “manual laborer”) and Baldessari’s (managerial/authorial) signature on the back.

The question of the differentiation of value mandated by a division of labor was most problematic, perhaps, for artists influenced by feminism. As shifting definitions of labor came to structure both art and everyday life, the traditionally unpaid labor of housework and child rearing became material for artists interested in problems of work. That many artists who were women tried to combine their housework and their artwork indicates that the traditional division of labor between manager and worker does not apply to domestic tasks. So, too, it is difficult for the necessary tasks of housework to be rendered parodically as useless or noncommodifiable labor. While Minimalist artists farmed out instructions for sculptures to factories, Martha Rosler turned her video camera on her household tasks. In *Backyard Economy* (1974) we watch the artist mow the lawn and hang out the laundry. Daily, necessary, unpaid chores do double duty: they “get done” while art is being made.<sup>27</sup> To this end, Feminist art issued a multilayered critique: one was clearly sociological, drawing attention to the status of women’s unpaid labor in the marketplace;



another was directed at contemporary “critical” art, inasmuch as the miming of industrial and managerial forms of labor in much Minimal and Conceptual art did not enact the same forms of humor and critique when applied to the women’s work that is never done.

All of the above artworks engage the problem of labor through the figure of the artist, either as a combined worker/manager or simply as a manager. But our discussion opened with “the death of the author” and the newly central place of the viewer. The viewer is hardly universal, however, and the type of viewer imagined and interpolated by works of art varies greatly. Some artworks are not complete, though, without viewer participation, and as the viewer is pressed into service, it remains unclear whether the activity is work or play. In each instance, the role of the artist as someone who fabricates something designed to promote contemplation is radically altered: the artist now is someone who provides an experience for an audience.

For instance, Allan Kaprow staged an event in 1967 called *Fluids*. Urged on by simple posters that consisted of a schematic drawing and typed instructions, the work consisted of voluntary participants building a wall of large ice bricks in Southern California and—upon its completion—watching the fruits of their labor melt. Kaprow’s work, later called “Happenings,” always involved an intense interpenetration of art and life, and his events often were guided by a string of refusals. He provided no discrete or permanent object, no comfortable or passive spectatorship. Instead, *Fluids* offers a highly staged version of “useless” labor. This strategy of refusal continues today: Kaprow disallows the documentation of the Happenings in museums, insisting that they are deeply experiential and cannot be understood adequately through documentation.<sup>28</sup> So while we can surmise that the work of fashioning the ice wall was both physically arduous and pleasurable, distinctly blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, the artist rejects spectatorship that is nonparticipatory.

*Fluids* negated the logic of art as a commodity object by virtue of the artwork’s disappearance and it questioned the labor of the artist and the leisure of the spectator by virtue of its method of fabrication. Fluxus, a loose grouping of international artists, also explored ideas of uselessness, play, and the blurring of art and life, work and leisure. George Maciunas, the “ringleader” of the group, gathered the ideas of

Fluxus artists (which often took the form of instructions for nonsensical and nonproductive behavior) and fashioned them into game boards, little puzzles, and an entire array of Cracker Jack–like trinkets designed to be sold cheaply and actively handled. Creating a veritable cottage industry of game production, Maciunas and his Fluxus counterparts did not reject the commodity form but humorously embraced it, subverting its logic. They also skewered the logic of managerial instruction. Fluxus instructions, or “scores” (a term they borrowed from musical composition), were often of a bodily nature and silly, such as Mieko Shiomi’s “Smile” piece, in which the participant was asked to smile as slowly as possible. Even though they were created by a disparate group of artists, Maciunas’s games and products had a visual and tactile similarity, relying strongly on the modest means of envelopes, letter printing, small plastic boxes, and colored cardboard. The graphics evoke nineteenth-century American carnivals and circuses, drawing a strong corollary between the role of art and the traditional spaces of play and leisure. Ernest Mandel argues that late capitalism is determined to infiltrate every aspect of our lives with the logic of the commodity. In response to this interpenetration, Fluxus insisted on recreation without a profit motive. This is the spirit that drives one of Maciunas’s most endearing works: a series of modified Ping-Pong paddles, one with a gaping hole, one with a tin can, one with a soft doughy substance, and so on. Made to be played with, Maciunas’s altered rackets imply that above all, the strategy of Fluxus was to be utterly nonserious (or seriously playful), for the world was serious enough.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike artists who imagined the audience as joyful participants, Yoko Ono and Valie Export presented the completion of the work of art on the part of the audience as a kind of dilemma. In Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), audience members were invited to cut off pieces of her clothing, and in Export’s *Tapp und Tastkino* (*Touch Cinema* [1968]), viewers were allowed to grope her breasts in public. In both instances, spectators were confronted with desire—their own and that of others—in a negotiation of the (problematic) social boundaries of the human body, especially the female body. In each instance, viewership was presented as an activity bound up with the enacting and solving of ethical situations: Should audience members dissuade other audience members from taking too much of Ono’s



clothing? Should audience members censure the activities meted out on Export's available body? In other words, the audience is placed in a fraught situation in which its potential passivity is made manifest.<sup>30</sup> By emphasizing the role of the viewer/participant and the struggle it entails, these performances pressure the category of leisure, questioning whether audience-participatory works are a space of deregulatory release or whether they, too, come with responsibilities. As popular as the ideas of sexual and creative liberation—largely put forth by the German intellectual Herbert Marcuse—were in the 1960s, both performances imply that the refuge from work in leisure activities structured around voyeurism have always had as part of their sexual liberation a hidden “price”: the potential subjugation of women.<sup>31</sup>

The artists involved with participatory works imagined or interpolated varied audiences, but they shared a common goal of reinvigorating and enlivening the bureaucratic subject of postindustrial labor. Could the repressive structures of an administered society be loosened without risking an (unwitting?) repression elsewhere? As we have seen, the solution for some artists has been to establish a realm of participatory ludic play. The Duchampian legacy, replete with its ambivalence toward work and art, presented many artists with a humorous conundrum: If what artists make is art, then is *anything* an artist does art? Numerous artists attempted to blur the distinctions between art and life, work and play, by bestowing the name and value of art upon their everyday “non-art” activities. Often this has looked like nice work if you could get it. For instance, *Smashed* (1972) is a deadpan parody of task-based work, as Gilbert and George offer black-and-white photographs of their drunken antics. Similarly, Tom Marioni held a weekly “performance,” *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art* (1970), in which friends and artists came together to drink beer, stacking up their empty bottles as an indexical sculpture, clear evidence of process being more important than product. In these works, the artists suggested that rather than blurring art and life for its own sake (a kind of avant-garde formalism) or parodying the structure of a highly administered workplace (a repetition of business as usual), the encroachment of work into the space of leisure could be effectively countered by creating a situation where leisure overtakes work.

Many, if not all, of the works included in *Work Ethic* possess a utopian dimension. This utopianism was made possible, in part, through the widespread social upheavals of the 1960s—rebellions that, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*, created a “massive transvaluation of the values of social production and production of new subjectivities [that] opened the way for a powerful transformation of labor power.”<sup>32</sup> Yet the 1960s may have been the end of one historical phase and the slow beginning of another. *Empire* contends that late capitalism is on the wane, as nation-based economies are being supplanted by a globalized economy and the postindustrial service economy is becoming an information economy. Hardt and Negri propose that in the midst of this massive transformation—one that threatens to leave many behind in its churning wake—a sophisticated and articulate account of labor’s changing roles and face is imperative for any kind of social change. They offer a map of labor’s metamorphosis from what they term “productive labor” (the production of goods and services during late capitalism) to “immaterial labor” (the production and management of information under our current conditions). Further, they contend that immaterial labor is divisible into three basic types. The first is industrial production rendered as information, where “manufacturing itself is considered a service.” The second is the “creative and intelligent manipulations [of information] on the one hand and routine symbolic acts on the other.” And the third is labor in the bodily mode, meaning the production and manipulation of affect.<sup>33</sup>

There is an almost uncanny homology between Hardt and Negri’s assessment of our current economic transformations and the strategies deployed by artists negotiating the ramifications of labor’s prior transformation. Artists who play out the roles of both manager and worker in task-based and Process works render the logic of industrial production into aesthetic information. Artists who mime the structure of management both creatively and routinely manipulate information. (What better way to describe a serial logic?) And artists who turn to the viewer to complete the work consistently do so in a bodily and affective mode. Given these sympathies, it is perhaps no mistake that Hardt and Negri argue that we need “to recognize *the profound economic power of cultural movements*, or really the increasing indistinguishability of economic and cultural phenom-



ena.”<sup>34</sup> All of the artists in this exhibition in some way stage, manage, and/or resolve the cultural and societal anxieties that surround changing definitions and divisions of labor. Some seem to have understood these transformations in an almost prescient manner. This is crucial, as work and professional life constitute an increasingly powerful site of our identity (as much, if not more so, than family, religion, and ethnicity). As we try to cope with the increasing regimentation and administration of our daily lives—both at work and at leisure—artists offer tentative, temporary solutions, stopgap measures, or blockades in the road.

Perhaps we can learn a lesson from the current tendency of contemporary artists to repeat various 1960s practices. While some critics might see Gabriel Orozco’s *Mesa de ping-pong con estanque* (*Ping Pond Table* [1998]) as a mere repetition of Maciunas’s altered Ping-Pong paddles, I would like to suggest that artists borrowing 1960s strategies do so precisely because they were so instrumental in thinking through the changing dynamics of labor.<sup>35</sup> *Mesa de ping-pong con estanque* (*Ping Pond Table*) is a particularly powerful contemporary instance of this. Two Ping-Pong tables are spliced together to form the shape of a crucifix. In the center is a square “pond” containing water lilies. The table comes equipped with four paddles and several balls. Viewers are invited to play. Because there are no preestablished rules, the terms of engagement depend upon the participants. The museum’s imagining of viewers as solitary is disallowed; instead, a contested (and competitive) public space is offered where participants come together as equals to negotiate a situation. In many regards, Orozco’s work offers a utopian microcosm of the traditional public sphere in which disinterested citizens are encouraged to come together to debate the function of their society. Citizens thus bear responsibility for the work of public life. Today, however, such a public sphere has largely ceased to exist, as corporate interests almost entirely shape public debate, and here, debate (or its potential) is substituted with play. Deploying the Fluxus strategies of the nonserious, the game, and the radically altered commodity, Orozco is able to revisit the site of the museum as the primary arbiter of art’s role and meaning in society.

Recently, the museum has been discussed in both the popular press and the art media as an institution in crisis. Structured by



Gabriel Orozco, *Mesa de ping-pong con estanque (Ping Pond Table)*, 1998.

contradictions, it is a place of work (scholarship and conservation) and leisure (a tourist destination), as well as a site of public service (education) and a place dependent upon private funds (growing corporate support of the arts). Increasingly, the pressures exerted on museums mean that they have become sites of experience as opposed to spaces of interpretation.<sup>36</sup> *Ping Pond Table*, as an object, is both a sculpture and a game, and its dual identity intimates that the space of the museum is a fraught one. As a sculpture it needs to be interpreted and conserved; as a game, it offers an experience (tellingly, though, the experience it offers is impossible without the active and critical participation of the viewer). In *Ping Pond Table* viewers complete the work, but they are asked to do so in a fashion that is more communal than solitary. *Ping Pond Table* thus suggests that in the face of diminishing spaces for critique and debate within a hypercommercialized experiential art world, perhaps the space of play can be reclaimed as having a potentially critical dimension. Far from a mere repetition,



such a reinvention (provisionally) resists the contemporary forces of global capital—forces that have transformed art into a mere commodity and museums into mandatory tourist destinations—and articulates the potential politics and pleasure in both resisting and shaping new forms of labor and leisure. Contemporary art may hold a key, then, to new identities and to how the conditions of social possibility can be reshaped in the new millennium.

1. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 60.
2. This essay argues that art practices and labor practices are inextricably linked. Although the transformation of the American economy has had global ramifications, this essay deals primarily with the ways in which American artists negotiated the changing definitions of labor. The intricate relations of labor practices, ideologies, and their impact on art making in other parts of the world are beyond the scope of this essay.
3. See Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Writing about the phenomenon of Taylorization and the rise of scientific management, Seltzer observes: "The real innovation of Taylorization becomes visible in the incorporation of the *representation* of the work process into the work process itself—or, better, the incorporation of the representation of the work process as the work process itself" (159).
4. Paul Osterman et al., *Working in America: A Blueprint for the New Labor Market* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 33.
5. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 8.
6. For the shift from a goods-based to a service-based economy and the definitions of each, see *ibid.*, 8–9. This work also claims that we are currently in the midst of a shift from a service-based economy to an experience-based economy, with experiences described as "events that engage individuals in a personal way" (12).
7. On the importance of Duchamp's reception in America, particularly its deferred nature, see Hal Foster's "What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 5–32.
8. The rejection of the museum means that while much advanced art from the 1960s and 1970s now forms the canon of art history within the academy, its entrance into the narrative of art history offered by the museum has been infinitely slower. This has changed in recent years with the advent of important exhibitions. See, for instance, Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995); Luis Camnitzer et al., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999); Paul Schimmel, *Out of Actions*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2000).
9. *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 140.
10. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 143, 148.
11. For more on the relations between these two texts, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Readymade, Objet Trouvé, Idée Reçue," in *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston: I.C.A., 1985), 106–22.
12. Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966," *Aspen* 5/6 (Fall/Winter 1967): unpaginated.
13. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 144. When Rauschenberg was a student at the Art Students' League in New York, he rebelliously turned his back on the live nude model and made a white painting with numbers instead.
14. Harold Rosenberg, "Everyman a Professional," in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 63.
15. Caroline Jones's *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) argues that a

veritable industry of documenting artists at work in their studios accompanies the rise of Abstract Expressionism. I would like to suggest that a certain anxiety may have been at work regarding whether abstraction was legitimate artistic labor; the inordinate amount of documentation might seem to make it so. For a discussion of Pollock's and Newman's self-presentation, see chapter 3 in particular.

16. As quoted in *ibid.*, 121.

17. Allan Kaprow, "Should the Artist Become a Man of the World?" (1964); reprinted in his *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 35.

18. Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 5. Zukin argues that in a concerted effort to create high-end office space and equally luxurious residential spaces, city and bank investments consistently foreclosed manufacturing options in Manhattan. She contends that "the residential conversion of a manufacturing space provides a substantial part of the infrastructure for a supposedly post-industrial economy," adding that "this infrastructure fulfills the physical needs of the service-sector and white collar employees" (19).

19. *Ibid.*, 50.

20. Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London: Verso, 1978), 387.

21. According to Harvard School of Business professors Pine and Gilmore, authors of *The Experience Economy*, the service industry is in the process of being eclipsed by the "experience economy." Here, services are tailored to clients in ways that increase their experiential quotient. A cup of coffee is no longer served to you by a counterperson but by a "barista," and the event takes place in an environment dedicated to the experience of coffee as opposed to a "mixed-use" environment (like a lunch counter or deli). This shift is what enables a \$3.00 cup of coffee. Such micro-managed and highly orchestrated services become "experiences" whose driving motive is the creation of profit.

22. As quoted in Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 127.

23. See Darsie Alexander's "Reluctant Witness: Photography and the Documentation of 1960s and 1970s Art" in this volume.

24. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967); reprinted in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 12.

25. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art,

1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 128.

26. As quoted in *John Baldessari*, exh. cat., texts by Marcia Tucker and Robert Pincus-Witten (New York: The New Museum, 1981), 15.

27. See Helen Molesworth, "Housework and Art-work," *October* 92 (Winter 2000): 71–97.

28. Allan Kaprow, telephone conversation with the author, November 2002. Kaprow's work was never designed to be exhibited in museums, and he continues to resist the kind of historicization that such exhibiting entails.

29. Fellow traveler Henry Flynt would organize, along with Maciunas, a 1963 demonstration against "serious culture" (directed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lincoln Center, and The Museum of Modern Art), suggesting that high art had already fallen prey to the logic of late capitalism, a logic that could potentially be fought with the weapon of nonseriousness.

30. For the ethical problematic of much 1960s and 1970s performance, see Frazer David Ward, "False Intimacies, Open Secrets: Public and Private in the Performance Art of Vito Acconci and Chris Burden" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2000). See also Miwon Kwon's "Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art of the 1960s and After" in this volume.

31. Herbert Marcuse was the most influential thinker of the postwar period regarding issues of work, leisure, and creativity. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), he argued that "the play impulse is the vehicle of liberation." Linking libidinal urges and play urges, he advocated a desublimation of work's repressive tendencies. See *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 171. Also see, in this volume, Chris Gilbert's essay on Marcuse's theories of leisure, "Herbie Goes Bananas: Fantasies of Leisure and Labor from the New Left to the New Economy."

32. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 275.

33. *Ibid.*, 293.

34. *Ibid.*, 275; emphasis in the original.

35. On the repetition of Dada strategies throughout the postwar period, see Helen Molesworth, "From Dada to Neo-Dada and Back Again," *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 177–81.

36. For an expansion on this dichotomy in museological practice, see Sir Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).