

Art in America

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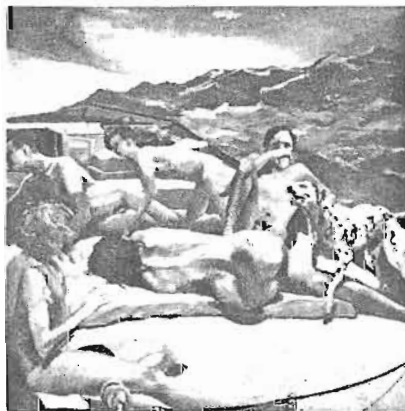
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Review of Books

Theorizing the Avant-Garde

A belated translation of Peter Bürger's "Theory of the Avant-Garde" prompts reflection on the critical foundations of esthetic theory in the late '60s.

BY BENJAMIN BUCHLOH

Theory of the Avant-Garde, by Peter Bürger, translation by Michael Shaw, foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984; 135 pp., \$25 cloth, \$10.95 paper.

The English translation of Peter Bürger's short but concise and important *Theory of the Avant-Garde* reaches the reader ten years after its original publication in Germany. The first study of the subject since Renato Poggioli's hopelessly atheoretical and historically insufficient *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962), Bürger's essay—since that is what the book should be called, rather than a "theory"—might generate excitement for this reason alone. Since this review is written with particular concern for the viability of Bürger's argument in the context of contemporary (meaning 20th-century in general) visual arts production, it must be said at the beginning that frustration is mixed with the excitement, for although Bürger is a literary historian of considerable competence and standing in the fields of French and comparative literature (a major study of French Surrealism preceded this work), his knowledge of the history and theory of the avant-garde in the visual arts at times seems limited, if not naive.

The essay's conciseness and logically argued proposals, as well as the range of its references (even if mostly essayistic), make it a slightly belated, but still valuable contribution to the current debate on modernism. However, as one scrutinizes more closely Bürger's rather ambitious attempt to develop a *The-*

ory of the Avant-Garde in 99 pages, more and more drastic faults appear. These can be attributed less to the fact that the book was written ten years ago, and more to the fact that any theorization of avant-garde practice from 1915 to '25 (plus a few additional snide comments on the "neo-avant-garde" after 1945) must force the vast differences and contradictions of that practice into the unifying framework of theoretical categories, and is therefore doomed to failure.

One wishes that Bürger had expressed some awareness of how patently absurd it is to reduce the history of avant-garde practices in 20th-century art to one overriding concern—the dismantling of the false autonomy of the institution of art—which he sees as the driving force of Dada (Berlin, Zürich and New York), Russian Constructivism and Soviet Productivism, and French Surrealism. Does Bürger seriously believe that it was John Heartfield's primary concern in 1939 to "destroy art as an institution set off from the praxis of life"? Or, to take the opposite case, would Dalí and Picabia—Surrealists who flirted with fascism at the same time—have cared about this proposal? If theorization of this entire period is at all possible—and Bürger himself voices doubts near the end of his essay when he quotes Adorno's statement that the degree of irrationality in late capitalist society no longer allows for theorization—it would require a much closer and more thorough reading of art history and its constructs and texts.

Just how much Bürger really

cares about the *materiality* of that history becomes painfully obvious when he repeatedly refers to "a piece of woven basket" that Picasso included in his painting (presumably a reference to the piece of printed oil-cloth in the most famous of all of Picasso's Cubist collages, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912). Or when he refers to the typical "neo-avant-garde" artist who, imitating Duchamp, places a "stove-pipe" in the museum (he might be referring to either Rauchenberg or Tinguely, neither of whom, however, employ "stove-pipes"). Or when he says that Duchamp's readymades "unmask the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work." (This last statement exemplifies the high-handedness with which Bürger looks at work by artists whose practices he claims to theorize.)

Bürger's central idea that the "historical" avant-gardes of the early 20th century must be differentiated from both their modernist predecessors in the 19th century and their "neo-avant-garde" followers after 1945, is sound and will serve as an obligatory model for anyone working in the history of modernism. However, he has made up his mind from the start about the interest and validity of the neo-avant-garde; in his theory, the art of the post-1945 period is measured against the authority of the historical avant-garde and found insufficient and dismissable: "The Neo-avant-garde which stages for a second time the avant-gardiste break with tradition becomes a manifestation that is devoid of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatsoever."

This kind of hyperopic reading of the art of the present testifies only to the traditional contempt of the academic critic for artists who continue to produce after criticism has declared either the climax or the death of the kind of art it favors. Had Bürger's contempt for contemporary art practice not limited his vision so severely, he might have discovered that artists in the late '60s were engaged in a parallel analysis of the institution of art and the institutionalization of esthetic discourse. In fact, Bürger's major hypothesis had already been fully developed in Daniel Buren's

1969 essay "Limites Critiques," as well as in the works of many artists of the period.

Bürger's wholesale dismissal of contemporary production is particularly ironic in light of the fact that his study is a programmatic attempt to integrate the history of avant-garde practice into academic discourse, and simultaneously to open up that discourse to become a critical hermeneutics. As such, the essay is the product of a struggle within the field of German literary and art history of the mid to late '60s, when as part of the general process of politicization, students in the humanities became increasingly aware of the enormous omissions of historical material from the general academic curriculum (in part a continuation of the German fascists' blackout of avant-garde production). Students of Bürger's generation began to question the inherent humanist authoritarianism of the discipline as well as its definition as *Geistesgeschichte* and its restriction of inquiry to the acknowledged masterpieces of the cultural history of a single nation. Bürger's generation also became aware of the problems—if not the outright failure—of the methodology that both art and literary history had inherited from the 19th century, and that had been passed on from generation to generation of its students with only minor adjustments. They discovered—often in opposition to their teachers—the "other" history of the 20th-century avant-garde (especially Berlin Dada, French Surrealism and Soviet Constructivism and Productivism), as well as theories of artistic production that had been developed outside the academic apparatus (such as Walter Benjamin's epochal *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*)—theories which turned out to be more important for the development of a new literary criticism than most of the discipline's own paper tigers.

Reading Bürger's essay a decade after its initial publication offers a welcome opportunity to reflect upon both the relevance and the limitations of the critical foundations of esthetic theory in the late '60s. As Bürger himself clearly states, his theory is based on Marx's critique of ideo-

logy. He argues that, unlike Marx, who discussed the social function of religion in detail, Marxist aestheticians like Adorno, Benjamin and Lukács never addressed the *function* of art, but accepted the 19th-century bourgeois definition of art as essentially dysfunctional in a society regulated by cause-and-effect explanations, exchange value and profit orientation. Only in Marcuse's writings does Bürger discover an attempt to clarify the social function of art as providing an affirmative "justification of the established form of existence."

However, this '60s notion of art as ideology—as applied by Marcuse, Bürger, and the majority of the social historians of art—is profoundly deficient. When esthetic knowledge is assigned to the realm of ideology, the critical subject (the academic, the historian) produces knowledge that supposedly looks into the esthetic abyss from a position of scientific objectivity. Surely this was never the assumption in either Adorno's or Benjamin's writings; and it is on this basis that Bürger argues that their work is limited to the conditions of modernism itself.

As has been argued in more recent theoretical reflections on the relationship of esthetic practice and ideology, the concept of ideology employed in Bürger's essay suffers from both an underestimation of the power of ideology to constitute subjectivity and an overestimation of the subsumption of art by ideology. Both Althusser's now-standard 1969 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and Julia Kristeva's notion that esthetic practice performs a "semiotic rupture" in the totality of ideology (see, for example, her *La Révolution du langage poétique*, 1974) provide a theory of ideology and subjectivity that allows for a more complex view of the relationship between the totality of ideological discourses and institutions within which the subject—including the historian and critic—is constituted, as well as the actual interference against ideology that esthetic practice can produce.

Bürger's ideas are close to the humanistic centralism of the discipline against which he set out to develop a critical hermeneutics. This objection applies to Bürger's account not only of production, but of reception as well. When discussing Surrealism and the theory of shock, he argues that the artist's "refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient. And this

is the intention of the avant-gardiste artist, who hopes that such withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it. Shock is aimed for as a stimulus to change one's conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in a change in the recipient's life praxis."

This interpretation of shock as esthetic strategy is derived from Walter Benjamin's writings on

that Adorno's theory (like that of Lukács) was essentially part of modernism (i.e., the doctrine of art as an autonomous institution) and must therefore be historicized. Bürger's vignettes on Adorno's notion of the "New" and on the Lukács-Adorno dispute provide a competent and clear primary introduction for readers who are not familiar with this material. They will, however, search in vain for a thoroughly researched, historically substantiated case against Adorno's esthetics (such as that made, for

maintain not only logically, but historically as well. A multitude of conflicting and mutually exclusive esthetic practices have coexisted since the origins of the avant-garde (whether one locates these with David, Courbet or, as Bürger does, after Cubism). At the same time that Heartfield and Lissitzky were engaged in the most radical and consequential assault on the institution of art during the late '20s and '30s, Vlaminck and van Dongen—former members of the Fauve avant-garde—were selling what Paris then thought to be the best contemporary painting, but what was in fact the most menial art ever to leave the studios of the "avant-garde."

The assault on the false isolation of art and on the ideology of its autonomy by the "original" avant-garde cannot be abandoned simply because it was aborted. It seems more viable to define avant-garde practice as a continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning, the discovery and representation of new audiences, and the development of new strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of the ideological apparatuses of the culture industry to occupy and to control all practices and all spaces of representation.

Bürger's view of scholarly, theoretical and critical work on contemporary esthetic practice is a consequence of the esthetic anomie that he advocates. The critic and historian become the apologetic accountants of *post-histoire*, caretakers inside the ideological apparatus of art and its institutions: "This has consequences for the scholarly dealings with works of art: the normative examination is replaced by a functional analysis, the object of whose investigation would be the social effect (function) of a work, which is the result of the coming together of stimuli inside the work and a sociologically definable public within an already existing institutional frame."

This characterization of the critic and the historian as administrators affirms a state of acquiescence to the given that reminds us of the historicism and positivism of the late 19th century, when esthetics' supposedly scientific foundations were reinforced. Roman Jakobson's famous request to absolve art from the prosecutions of the sciences and to develop instead a science of art remains valid, if not urgent, in the face of the theorization of the avant-garde that Bürger submits. □

Had Bürger's contempt for contemporary art practice not limited his vision so severely he might have discovered that artists in the late '60s were engaged in a parallel analysis of the institution of art and the institutionalization of esthetic discourse.

the subject in his Baudelaire study (and his essay on Surrealism). However, like the two crucial chapters in Bürger's study devoted to Benjamin's theory of allegory and his strategies of montage, it has been subjected to oversimplification and a loss of specificity. But even within the limited framework of Bürger's methodology, it should have been obvious how problematic it is to excerpt one—admittedly central—concept from Benjamin's thinking in 1924 and to make it the basis for a theory of avant-garde production, when in fact in 1934 (in the essay "The Author as Producer") Benjamin developed an entirely different theory of the nonorganic work of art, one whose strategy of montage is derived from the author's experience of the work of the Soviet avant-garde and possibly that of John Heartfield. Of course, Bürger does not mention the radical changes in montage esthetics in the 1915–25 period, or the fact that within Dada-montage esthetics itself, oppositional modes wrestled with each other (see the Schwitters-Huelsenbeck polemic).

The second major text upon which Bürger draws heavily is Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (fortunately—and finally—now available in English). While Bürger certainly succeeds in conveying a sense of the eminence of Adorno's esthetic thought, he fails to convince us

example, in Thomas Crow's recent essay "Modernism and Mass Culture".

Bürger's least convincing argument, however, is the one that will probably make his essay popular with a large number of practitioners and recipients of contemporary art. Here is his "postmodernist" conclusion (a variety of "postmodernism" that has already been adequately criticized in the current debate): "The meaning of the break in the history of art that the historical avant-garde movements provoked does not consist in the destruction of art as an institution, but in the destruction of the possibility of positing esthetic norms as valid ones."

The conclusion that, because the one practice that set out to dismantle the institution of art in bourgeois society failed to do so, all practices become equally valid, is not logically compelling at all. One has only to consider the argument in terms of other ideological struggles to reveal its absurdity (e.g., since most struggles for self-determination in Latin American countries are aborted, colonialist and imperialist policies are historically just as valid as the politics of liberation). Still, it is not surprising that the kind of esthetic passivism Bürger advocated as early as 1972 has in the meantime become the core of a vulgarized notion of postmodernism.

Bürger's case is impossible to