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THE RETURN OF THE REAL

THE AVANT-GARDE AT THE  
END OF THE CENTURY

HAL FOSTER

AN OCTOBER BOOK

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Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1977.

## INTRODUCTION

Not long ago I stood with a friend next to an art work made of four wood beams laid in a long rectangle, with a mirror set behind each corner so as to reflect the others. My friend, a conceptual artist, and I talked about the minimalist basis of such work: its reception by critics then, its elaboration by artists later, its significance for practitioners today, all of which are concerns of this book as well. Taken by our talk, we hardly noticed his little girl as she played on the beams. But then, signaled by her mother, we looked up to see her pass through the looking glass. Into the hall of mirrors, the *mise-en-abîme* of beams, she moved farther and farther from us, and as she passed into the distance, she passed into the past as well.

Yet suddenly there she was right behind us: all she had done was skip along the beams around the room. And there we were, a critic and an artist informed in contemporary art, taken to school by a six-year-old, our theory no match for her practice. For her playing of the piece conveyed not only specific concerns of minimalist work—the tensions among the spaces we feel, the images we see, and the forms we know—but also general shifts in art over the last three decades—new interventions into space, different constructions of viewing, and expanded definitions of art. Her performance became allegorical as well, for she described a paradoxical figure *in space*, a recession that is also a



return, that evoked for me the paradoxical figure *in time* described by the avant-garde. For even as the avant-garde recedes into the past, it also returns from the future, repositioned by innovative art in the present. This strange temporality, lost in stories of twentieth-century art, is a principal subject of this book.

Partial in interests (I am silent about many events) and parochial in examples (I remain a critic based in New York), this book is not a history: it focuses on several models of art and theory over the last three decades alone. Yet neither does it celebrate the false pluralism of the posthistorical museum, market, and academy in which anything goes (as long as accepted forms predominate). On the contrary, it insists that specific genealogies of innovative art and theory exist over this time, and it traces these genealogies through signal transformations. Crucial here is the relation between *turns* in critical models and *returns* of historical practices (broached in chapter 1): how does a *reconnection* with a past practice support a *disconnection* from a present practice and/or a development of a new one? No question is more important for the neo-avant-garde addressed in this book—that is, art since 1960 that refashions avant-garde devices (e.g., the constructivist analysis of the object, the photomontage refunctioning of the image, the readymade critique of the exhibition) to contemporary ends.

The question of historical returns is old in art history; indeed, in the form of the renaissance of classical antiquity, it is foundational. Concerned to comprehend diverse cultures in a single narrative, the Hegelian founders of the academic discipline represented these returns as dialectical moves that advanced the story of Western art, and they offered appropriate figures for this historical narrative (thus Alois Riegl proposed that art advances as a screw turns, while Heinrich Wölfflin offered the related image of a spiral).<sup>1</sup> Despite appearances, this notion of a dialectic was not rejected in modernism; at least in the Anglo-American formalist account, it was continued, in part, by other means. “Modernism has never meant anything like a break with the past,” Clement Greenberg proclaimed in 1961, at the opening of the period that concerns me here; and in 1965 Michael Fried was explicit: “a dialectic of modernism has been at work in the visual arts for more than a century now.”<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, these critics stressed the categorical being of visual art à la Kant, but they did so to preserve its historical life à la Hegel: art was urged to stick to its space, “its area of competence,” so that it might survive, even thrive, in time, and so “maintain past standards of excellence.”<sup>3</sup> Thus was formal modernism plotted along a temporal, diachronic, or vertical axis; in this respect it opposed an avant-gardist modernism that did intend “a break with the past”—that, concerned to extend the area of artistic competence, favored a spatial, synchronic, or horizontal axis. A chief merit of the neo-avant-garde addressed in this book is that it sought to keep these two axes in critical coordination. Like the late-modernist painting and sculpture advocated by formalist critics, it worked through its ambitious antecedents, and so sustained the vertical axis or historical dimension of art. At the same time it turned to past paradigms to open up present possibilities, and so developed the horizontal axis or social dimension of art as well.

Today the address of many ambitious practices is different. Sometimes the vertical axis is neglected in favor of the horizontal axis, and often the coordination of the two seems broken. In a way this problem may stem from the neo-avant-garde as well, in its implicit shift from a disciplinary criterion of *quality*, judged in relation to artistic standards of the past, to an avant-gardist value of *interest*, provoked through a testing of cultural limits in the present; for with this implicit shift (discussed in chapter 2) came a partial move from intrinsic forms of art to discursive problems around art. Yet the early neo-avant-garde alone did not effect this putative change from “a historical succession of techniques and styles” to “a simultaneity of the radically disparate.”<sup>4</sup> Only with the ethnographic turn in contemporary art and theory, I argue in chapter 6, is the turn from medium-specific elaborations to debate-specific projects so pronounced.<sup>5</sup>

For the most part this horizontal expansion is welcome, for it has involved art and theory in sites and audiences long removed from them, and it has opened up other vertical axes, other historical dimensions, for creative work. Yet this move also prompts questions. First, there is the question of *value* invested in the canons of twentieth-century art. This value is not set: there is



always formal invention to be redeployed, social meaning to be resignified, cultural capital to be reinvested. Simply to surrender this value is a great mistake, aesthetically and strategically. Second, there is the question of expertise, which also should not be dismissed as elitist. In this regard the horizontal expansion of art has placed an enormous burden on artists and viewers alike: as one moves from project to project, one must learn the discursive breadth as well as the historical depth of many different representations—like an anthropologist who enters a new culture with each new exhibition. This is very difficult (even for critics who do little else), and this difficulty may hinder consensus about the necessity of art, let alone conversation about the criteria of significant art. As different interpretive communities shout past each other or fall into silence, reactionary know-nothings can seize the public forum on contemporary art—which they have done to condemn it.

A primary concern of this book, then, is the coordination of diachronic (or historical) and synchronic (or social) axes in art and theory. Out of this concern come the two notions that govern the stories that I tell (in chapters 1 and 7 in particular). The first is the notion of parallax, which involves the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer. This figure underscores both that our framings of the past depend on our positions in the present and that these positions are defined through such framings. It also shifts the terms of these definitions away from a logic of avant-gardist transgression toward a model of deconstructive (dis)placement, which is far more appropriate to contemporary practices (where the turn from interstitial “text” to institutional “frame” is pronounced). The reflexivity of the viewer inscribed in the notion of parallax is also advanced in the other notion fundamental to this book: (deferred action). In Freud an event is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it retroactively, in deferred action. Here I propose that the significance of avant-garde events is produced in an analogous way, through a complex relay of anticipation and reconstruction.

Taken together, then, the notions of parallax and deferred action refashion the cliché not only of the neo-avant-garde as merely redundant of the historical avant-garde, but also of the postmodern as only belated in relation to the mod-

ern. In so doing I hope that they nuance our accounts of aesthetic shifts and historical breaks as well. Finally, if this model of *retroaction* can contribute any symbolic resistance to the work of *retroversion* so pervasive in culture and politics today—that is, the reactionary undoing of the progressive transformations of the century—so much the better.<sup>6</sup>

This book traces a few genealogies of art and theory since 1960, but it does so to approach *actuality*: what produces a present as different, and how does a present focus a past in turn? This question also involves the relation of critical to historical work, and here no one escapes the present, not even art historians. Historical insight does not depend on contemporary advocacy, but an engagement in the present, whether artistic, theoretical, and/or political, seems requisite. Certainly innovative historians of modern art have long tended to be incisive critics of contemporary practices as well, and this parallax view has often led to other criteria for both objects of study.<sup>7</sup>

I advance this point not to insinuate my name but to remark my difference. Prominent art historians like Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and T. J. Clark differ in method and motive, but they share a deep conviction in modernist art, and this conviction is somehow generational. Critics formed in my milieu are more ambivalent about this art, not only because we received it as an official culture, but because we were initiated by practices that wished to break with its dominant models. So, too, the anxiety of influence that flowed from Pablo Picasso through the milieu of Jackson Pollock to ambitious artists in the 1960s had eased for us; one sign of our difference (for our predecessors, no doubt, of our decadence) is that the angel with whom we wrestled was Marcel Duchamp by way of Andy Warhol, more than Picasso by way of Pollock. Moreover, both these Oedipal narratives had passed through the crucible of feminism, which changed them profoundly.<sup>8</sup> Thus a critic like me invested in the minimalist genealogy of art must differ from one invoked by abstract expressionism: not indifferent to modernist art, he or she will not be entirely convinced by it either. Indeed, I argue in chapter 2, this point of initiation may position the critic on a crux of modernist art, and so lead him or her to attend to its contradictions more than to its triumphs.<sup>9</sup>



Like others in my milieu, then, I have some distance on modernist art, but I have little on critical theory. In particular I have little distance on the semiotic turn that refashioned much art and criticism on the model of the text in the middle to late 1970s (discussed in chapter 3), for I developed as a critic during this time, when theoretical production became as important as artistic production. (To many of us it was more provocative, innovative, urgent—but then there was no real contest between, say, the texts of Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida and new-image painting or pop-historicist architecture.) Nevertheless, when it comes to critical theory, I have the interest of a second-generation initiate, not the zeal of a first-generation convert. With this slight distance I attempt to treat critical theory not only as a conceptual tool but as a symbolic, even symptomatic form.

Two retrospective intuitions might be ventured here. Since the middle 1970s critical theory has served as a secret continuation of modernism by other means: after the decline of late-modernist painting and sculpture, it occupied the position of high art, at least to the extent that it retained such values as difficulty and distinction after they had receded from artistic form. So, too, critical theory has served as a secret continuation of the avant-garde by other means: after the climax of the 1968 revolts, it also occupied the position of cultural politics, at least to the extent that radical rhetoric compensated a little for lost activism (in this respect critical theory is a neo-avant-garde in its own right). This double secret service—as a high-art surrogate and an avant-garde substitute—has attracted many different followers.

One way in which I treat critical theory as a historical object is to attend to its synchronic connections with advanced art. Since the 1960s the two have shared at least three areas of investigation: the structure of the sign, the constitution of the subject, and the siting of the institution (e.g., not only the roles of the museum and the academy but also the locations of art and theory). This book is concerned with these general areas, but it focuses on specific relations, such as the rapport between the minimalist genealogy of art and the phenomenological concern with the body on the one hand and the structuralist analysis

of the sign on the other (discussed in chapter 2), or the affinity between the pop genealogy of art and the psychoanalytic account of visuality developed by Jacques Lacan around the same time (discussed in chapter 5). It also concentrates on particular moments when art and theory are repositioned by other forces: for example, when site-specific installations or photo-text collages replicate the very effects that they otherwise resist, the fragmentation of the commodity-sign (chapter 3); or when a critical method like deconstruction is turned into a cynical gambit of art-world positioning (chapter 4).

Whether one regards such moments as total failures or as partial exposés, they do raise the question of the *criticality* of contemporary art and theory (the historical development of this value is discussed in chapters 1 and 7). I have already pointed to a few aspects of the *current crisis*, such as a relative inattention to the historicity of art and a near eclipse of contestatory spaces. But these laments about a loss of historical purchase and critical distance are old refrains, and sometimes they express little more than the anxiety of the critic about a loss of function and power. Yet this does not make them misbegotten or narcissistic. What is the place of criticism in a visual culture that is evermore *administered*—from an art world dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever? And what is the place of criticism in a political culture that is evermore *affirmative*—especially in the midst of culture wars that prompt the right to threaten *love it or leave it* and the left to wonder *where am I in this picture?* Of course this very situation makes the old services of criticism evermore urgent as well—to question a political-economic status quo committed to its own reproduction and profit above all else, and to mediate between cultural groups that, deprived of a public sphere for open debate, can only appear sectarian. But to note the needs is not to improve the conditions.

Several factors hinder art criticism in particular. Neither advocated by the museum nor tolerated by the market, some critics have withdrawn to the academy, while others have joined the administration of the culture industry—the media, fashion, and so on. This is not a moral judgment: even within the time



spanned by this book the few spaces once allowed for art criticism have narrowed dramatically, and critics have followed artists forced to exchange critical practice for economic survival. A double switch in these positions has not helped: as some artists abandoned critical practices, others adopted theoretical positions as if they were readymade critiques, and some theorists embraced artistic postures just as naively.<sup>10</sup> If the artists hoped to be elevated by theory, the theorists looked to be grounded in art; but often these two projections advanced two misconceptions: that art is not theoretical, not productive of critical concepts, in its own right; and that theory is only supplemental, to be applied or not as one sees fit. As a result there may be little formal difference between the illustration of commodity aesthetics in art of the late 1980s, say, and the illustration of gender politics in art of the early 1990s. Often in the cynicism of the first and in the voluntarism of the second, work on form is neglected—in the first as futile, in the second as secondary. And sometimes these misconceptions—that art is not theoretical and/or political in its own terms, that theory is ornamental and politics external—disable theoretical and political art, and do so in the name of each.

This is not to save theory from artists or art from politics; nor is it to aid the theory-bashing of the media or the witch-hunting of the right. (Sometimes theory is burdened linguistically and irresponsible politically, but that hardly means, as the *New York Times* has it, that art criticism is so much jabberwocky and that deconstruction is an apology for the Holocaust.) On the contrary, it is to insist that critical theory is immanent to innovative art, and that the relative autonomy of the aesthetic can be a critical resource. For these reasons I argue against a premature dismissal of the avant-garde. As I note in chapter 1, the avant-garde is obviously problematic (it can be hermetic, elitist, and so on); yet, recoded in terms of resistant and/or alternative articulations of the artistic and the political, it remains a construct that the left surrenders at its own loss. The avant-garde has no patent on criticality, of course, but a commitment to such practices does not exclude a commitment to others as well.

To demand this multiple focus does add to the burden on progressive art and criticism, and the situation in art and academy is hardly supportive. In both

worlds a political backlash has manipulated an economic downturn to produce a reactive climate in which the dominant call is a conservative cutback to authoritative (often authoritarian) traditions.<sup>11</sup> The great threat to art and academy, we are told, comes from miscreant artists and tenured radicals; but subsidized reactionaries tell us so, and these ideologues of conservative foundations have done the real damage, as public faith in art and academy is eroded through such fantasms of the artist and the academic. This is hardly a state secret: thus far the right has dictated the culture wars and dominated the public imaging of art and academy, as the layman is led to associate the first with pornography, the second with indoctrination, and both with a waste of taxpayer money. Such are the deserts of the rightist campaign: while the left talked about the political importance of culture, the right practiced it.<sup>12</sup> Its philosophers have succeeded where readers of Marx have not—they have transformed the world, and it will take a great struggle to transform it otherwise.

It may be petty to worry about art and academic worlds when cooperative state and social contract alike are trashed. Yet important battles are waged here too: the attacks on affirmative action and multicultural initiatives, on public funding and political correctness (a classic instance of a leftist critique turned into a rightist weapon). The revolution of the rich also shows its true colors in these worlds, for our current rulers have revealed a new disregard not only for social compensation but for cultural support (at least the old rich had the good grace to be arriviste). Finally, however, there is this fundamental stake in art and academy: the preservation, in an administered, affirmative culture, of spaces for critical debate and alternative vision.

Again, to (re)claim such spaces is not easy. On the one hand, it is a labor of disarticulation: to redefine cultural terms and recapture political positions. (Here one must dispel the reactionary fantasms of art and academy as well as disentangle leftist critiques of such institutions from rightist attacks.)<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it is a labor of articulation: to mediate content and form, specific signifiers and institutional frames. This is a difficult task but not an impossible one; I address some practices that succeeded, however provisionally, in such (dis)articulations. One beginning is to recover critical practices interrupted by



the neoconservative coup of the 1980s—which is precisely what some young artists, critics, and historians do today. This book is my contribution to this work.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter 1 prepares my discussion of critical models in art and theory since 1960 through a new articulation of historical and neo-avant-gardes. Chapter 2 presents minimalist art as a crux in this relation in the 1960s. Chapter 3 discusses the subsequent reformulation of the work of art as text in the 1970s. And chapter 4 recounts the eventual meltdown of this textual model in a pervasive conventionalism of the image in the 1980s. In chapters 5 and 6 two contemporary reactions to this double inflation of text and image are examined: a turn to the real as evoked through the violated body and/or the traumatic subject, and a turn to the referent as grounded in a given identity and/or a sited community. Finally, chapter 7 (which is more epilogue than conclusion) extends my discussion to three discourses crucial to art and theory over this time: the critique of the subject, the negotiation of the cultural other, and the role of technology. The chapters tell connected stories (to me it is very important to regain the efficacy of such narratives), but they need not be read consecutively.

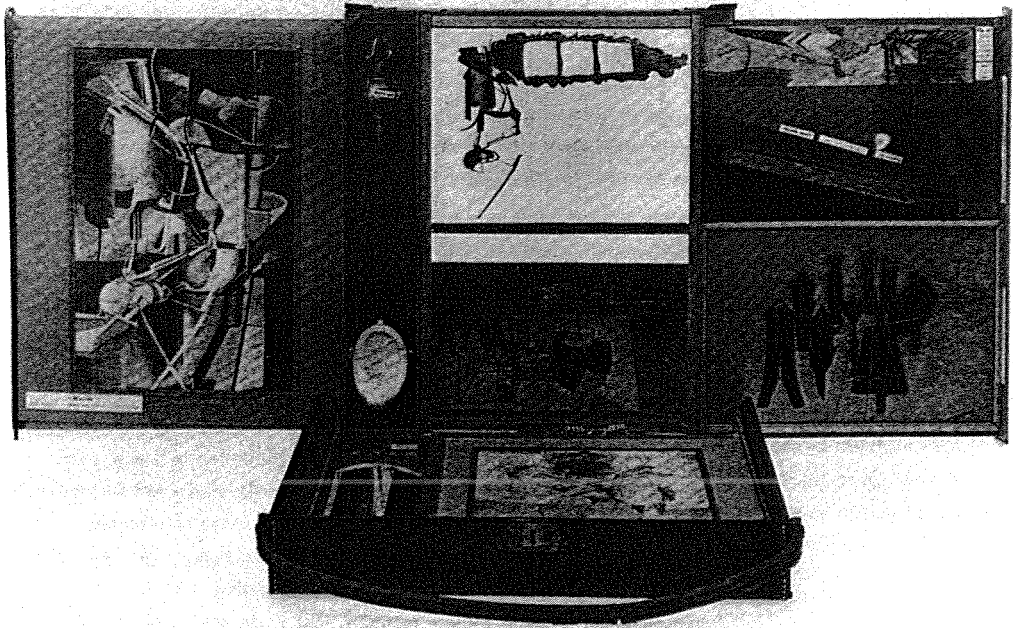
I dedicate this book to three people who have kept critical spaces open for me: Thatcher Bailey, founder of Bay Press; Charles Wright, director of the Dia Art Center from 1986 to 1994; and Ron Clark, head of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. I grew up with Thatcher and Charlie in Seattle, and they supported me as a critic in New York—Thatcher as a publisher, Charlie as a sponsor, and both as friends for years. In the same spirit I want to thank other old friends (Andrew Price, John Teal, Rolfe Watson, and Bob Strong) and family (Jody, Andy, and Becca). Over a decade ago Ron Clark invited me to the Whitney Program, where I was director of critical and curatorial studies when this book was conceived. Our seminars with Mary Kelly remain important to me, and I extend my thanks to all participants in the program over the years. For intellectual community I am indebted to my friends at *October*: Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Denis Hollier, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Mignon Nixon; as well as at Cornell: David

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New York, Winter 1995







Marcel Duchamp, *Box-in-a-Valise*, deluxe edition, 1941, with miniatures (clockwise) of *The Bride* (1912), *Paris Air* (1919), *The Large Glass* (1915–23), *Tu m'* (1918), *Comb* (1916), *Nine Malic Molds* (1914–15), *Glider Containing a Water Mill* (1913–15), *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14), *Fountain* (1917), *Traveller's Folding Item* (1916).

## WHO'S AFRAID OF THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE?

Postwar culture in North America and Western Europe is swamped by *neos* and *posts*. There are many repetitions and ruptures in this period: how do we distinguish them in kind? How do we tell the difference between a return to an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made to displace customary ways of working? Or, in the register of history, how do we tell the difference between an account written in support of the cultural status quo and an account that seeks to challenge it? In reality these returns are more complicated, even more compulsive, than I make them out to be—especially now, at the turn of the century, as revolutions at its beginning appear to be undone and as formations thought to be long dead stir again with uncanny life.

In postwar art to pose the question of repetition is to pose the question of the *neo-avant-garde*, a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture.<sup>1</sup> No rule governs the return of these devices: no one instance is strictly revisionist, radical, or compulsive. Here, however, I will focus on returns that aspire to a critical consciousness of both artistic conventions and historical conditions.

In "What is an Author?," a text written in early 1969 in the heyday of such returns, Michel Foucault writes in passing of Marx and Freud as "initiators of discursive practices," and he asks why a return is made at particular moments to the originary texts of Marxism and psychoanalysis, a return in the form of a rigorous reading.<sup>2</sup> The implication is that, if radical (in the sense of *radix*: to the root), the reading will not be another accretion of the discourse. On the contrary, it will cut through layers of paraphrase and pastiche that obscure its theoretical core and blunt its political edge. Foucault names no names, but clearly he has in mind the readings of Marx and Freud made by Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, respectively. (Again, he writes in early 1969, or four years after Althusser published *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* and three years after the *Ecrits* of Lacan appeared—and just months after May 1968, a revolutionary moment in constellation with other such moments in the past.) In both returns the stake is the *structure* of the discourse stripped of additions: not so much what Marxism or psychoanalysis means as *how* it means—and how it has transformed our conceptions of meaning. Thus in the early 1960s, after years of existentialist readings based on the early Marx, Althusser performs a structuralist reading based on the mature Marx of *Capital*. For Althusser this is the scientific Marx of an epistemological rupture that changed politics and philosophy forever, not the ideological Marx hung up on humanist problems such as alienation. For his part, in the early 1950s, after years of therapeutic adaptations of psychoanalysis, Lacan performs a linguistic reading of Freud. For Lacan this is the radical Freud who reveals our decentered relation to the language of our unconscious, not the humanist Freud of the ego psychologies dominant at the time.

The moves within these two returns are different: Althusser defines a *lost break* within Marx, whereas Lacan articulates a *latent connection* between Freud and Ferdinand de Saussure, the contemporaneous founder of structural linguistics, a connection implicit in Freud (for example, in his analysis of the dream as a process of condensation and displacement, a rebus of metaphor and metonymy) but impossible for him to think as such (given the epistemological limits of his own historical position).<sup>3</sup> But the method of these returns is similar: to focus on "the constructive omission" crucial to each discourse.<sup>4</sup> The motives



are similar too: not only to restore the radical integrity of the discourse but to challenge its status in the present, the received ideas that deform its structure and restrict its efficacy. This is not to claim the final truth of such readings. On the contrary, it is to clarify their contingent strategy, which is to *reconnect* with a lost practice in order to *disconnect* from a present way of working felt to be outmoded, misguided, or otherwise oppressive. The first move (*re*) is temporal, made in order, in a second, spatial move (*dis*), to open a new site for work.<sup>5</sup>

Now, amid all the repetitions in postwar art, are there any returns in this radical sense? None appear as historically focused and theoretically rigorous as the returns in Althusser and Lacan. Some recoveries are fast and furious, and they tend to reduce the past practice to a style or a theme that can be assimilated; such is often the fate of the found object in the 1950s and the readymade in the 1960s. Other recoveries are slow and partial, as in the case of Russian constructivism in the early 1960s, after decades of repression and misinformation in East and West alike.<sup>6</sup> Some old models of art appear to return independently, as with the various reinventions of monochrome painting in the 1950s and 1960s (Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Ryman, and so on). Other old models are combined in apparent contradiction, as when in the early 1960s artists like Dan Flavin and Carl Andre draw on such diverse precedents as Marcel Duchamp and Constantin Brancusi, Alexander Rodchenko and Kurt Schwitters, or when Donald Judd contrives an almost Borgesian array of precursors in his 1965 manifesto "Specific Objects." Paradoxically, at this crux of the postwar period, ambitious art is marked by an expansion of historical allusion as well as by a reduction of actual content. Indeed, such art often invokes different, even incommensurate models, but less to act them out in a hysterical pastiche (as in much art in the 1980s) than to work them through to a reflexive practice—to turn the very limitations of these models into a critical consciousness of history, artistic and otherwise. Thus there is method to the Judd list of precursors, especially where it appears most mad, as in its juxtaposition of the opposed positions of Duchamp and New York School painting. For Judd seeks not only to extract a new practice from these positions but to trump them as he goes—in this case

to move beyond “objectivity” (whether in the nominalist version of Duchamp or in the formalist version of the New York School) to “specific objects.”<sup>7</sup>

These moves involve the two returns in the late 1950s and early 1960s that might qualify as radical in the sense sketched above: the readymades of Duchampian dada and the contingent structures of Russian constructivism—that is, structures, like the counterreliefs of Tatlin or the hanging constructions of Rodchenko, that reflect both inwardly on material, form, and structure and outwardly on space, light, and context. Immediately two questions arise. Why do these returns occur then? And what relationship between moments of appearance and reappearance do they pose? Are the postwar moments passive repetitions of the prewar moments, or does the neo-avant-garde *act* on the historical avant-garde in ways that we can only now appreciate?

Let me respond to the historical question briefly; then I will focus on the theoretical question, which concerns avant-garde temporality and narrativity. My account of the return of the dadaist readymade and the constructivist structure will not come as a surprise. However different aesthetically and politically, both practices contest the bourgeois principles of autonomous art and expressive artist, the first through an embrace of everyday objects and a pose of aesthetic indifference, the second through the use of industrial materials and the transformation of the function of the artist (especially in the productivist phase of agitprop campaigns and factory projects).<sup>8</sup> Thus, for North American and Western European artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s, dada and constructivism offered two historical alternatives to the modernist model dominant at the time, the medium-specific formalism developed by Roger Fry and Clive Bell for postimpressionism and its aftermath, and refined by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried for the New York School and its aftermath. Since this model was staked on the intrinsic autonomy of modernist painting in particular, pledged to the ideals of “significant form” (Bell) and “pure opticality” (Greenberg), discontented artists were drawn to the two movements that sought to exceed this apparent autonomy: to define the institution of art in an epistemological inquiry into its aesthetic categories and/or to destroy it in an anarchistic attack on its formal conventions, as did dada, or to transform it according

to the materialist practices of a revolutionary society, as did Russian constructivism—in any case to reposition art in relation not only to mundane space-time but to social practice. (Of course the neglect of these practices within the dominant account of modernism only added to the attraction, according to the old avant-gardist association of the critical with the marginal, of the subversive with the repressed.)

For the most part these recoveries were self-aware. Often trained in novel academic programs (the master of fine arts degree was developed at this time), many artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s studied prewar avant-gardes with a new theoretical rigor; and some began to practice as critics in ways distinct from belletristic or modernist-oracular precedents (think of the early texts of Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, and Dan Graham alone). In the United States this historical awareness was complicated by the reception of the avant-garde through the very institution that it often attacked—not only the museum of art but the museum of *modern* art. If artists in the 1950s had mostly recycled avant-garde devices, artists in the 1960s had to elaborate them critically; the pressure of historical awareness permitted nothing less. This complicated relation between prewar and postwar avant-gardes—the theoretical question of avant-garde causality, temporality, and narrativity—is crucial to comprehend today. Far from a quaint question, more and more depends on it: our very accounts of innovative Western art of the twentieth century as we come to its end.

Before I go further I should clarify two major presuppositions of my argument: the value of the construct of the avant-garde and the need for new narratives of its history. By now the problems of the avant-garde are familiar: the ideology of progress, the presumption of originality, the elitist hermeticism, the historical exclusivity, the appropriation by the culture industry, and so on. Yet it remains a crucial coarticulation of artistic and political forms. *And it is this coarticulation of the artistic and the political that a posthistorical account of the neo-avant-garde, as well as an eclectic notion of the postmodern, serve to undo. Thus the need for new genealogies of the avant-garde that complicate its past and support its future. My*

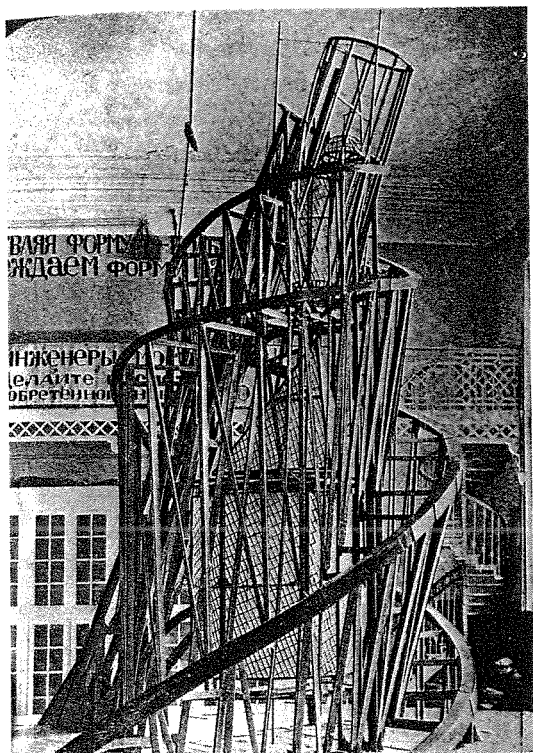




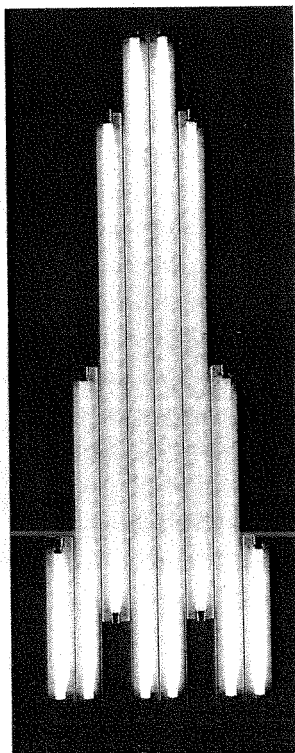
Alexander Rodchenko, with constructions,  
c. 1922.



Carl Andre, with sawed sculptures, c. 1959–60.



Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument for the Third International*, 1920, model.



Dan Flavin, "Monument" for V. Tatlin, 1969.

model of the avant-garde is too partial and canonical, but I offer it as a theoretical case study only, to be tested on other practices.<sup>9</sup> I also offer it in the belief that a revaluation of a canon is as significant as its expansion or its disruption.

#### THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE I

The central text on these questions remains *Theory of the Avant-Garde* by the German critic Peter Bürger. Over twenty years old, it still frames intelligent discussions of historical and neo-avant-gardes (Bürger first made these terms current), so even today it is important to work through his thesis. Some of his blind spots are now well marked.<sup>10</sup> His description is often inexact, and his definition overly selective (Bürger focuses on the early readymades of Duchamp, the early chance experiments of André Breton and Louis Aragon, the early photomontages of John Heartfield). Moreover, his very premise—that one theory can comprehend the avant-garde, that all its activities can be subsumed under the project to destroy the false autonomy of bourgeois art—is problematic. Yet these problems pale next to his dismissal of the postwar avant-garde as merely *neo*, as so much repetition in bad faith that cancels the prewar critique of the institution of art.

Here Bürger projects the historical avant-garde as an *absolute origin* whose aesthetic transformations are fully significant and historically effective in the first instance. This is tenuous from several points of view. For a poststructuralist critic such a claim of self-presence is suspect; for a theorist of reception it is impossible. Did Duchamp *appear* as “Duchamp”? Of course not, yet he is often presented as born full-blown from his own forehead. Did *Les Femmes d'Alger* of Picasso *emerge* as the crux of modernist painting that it is now taken to be? Obviously not, yet it is often treated as immaculate in conception and reception alike. The status of Duchamp as well as *Les Femmes d'Alger* is a retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings, and so it goes across the dialogical space-time of avant-garde practice and institutional reception. This blind spot in Bürger concerning the deferred temporality of artistic signification is ironic, for he is often praised for his attention to the historicity of aesthetic

categories, and to a certain degree this praise is earned.<sup>11</sup> So where does he go astray? Do conventional notions of historicity not allow for such delays?

Bürger begins with the premise, which permits one to historicize in a Marxist way, of "a connection between the development of [an] object and the possibility of [its] cognition" (li).<sup>12</sup> According to this premise, our understanding of an art can be only as advanced as the art, and this leads Bürger to his principal argument: the avant-garde critique of bourgeois art depended on the development of this art, in particular on three stages within its history. The first stage occurs by the end of the eighteenth century when the autonomy of art is proclaimed as an ideal, in Enlightenment aesthetics. The second stage occurs by the end of the nineteenth century when this autonomy is made over into the very subject of art, that is, in art that aspires not only to abstract form but to an aestheticist withdrawal from the world. And the third stage occurs at the beginning of this century when this aestheticist withdrawal comes under attack by the historical avant-garde, for example, in the explicit productivist demand that art regain a use value, or the implicit dadaist demand that it acknowledge its uselessness value—that its withdrawal from the cultural order may be an affirmation of this order as well.<sup>13</sup> Although Bürger insists that this development is uneven and contradictory (he alludes to the notion of the "nonsynchronous" developed by Ernst Bloch), he still narrates it as an *evolution*. Perhaps Bürger could not conceive it otherwise, given his strict reading of the Marxist connection between object and understanding. But this residual evolutionism has troublesome effects.

Marx advances this premise of connection in a text that Bürger cites but does not discuss, the introduction to *Grundrisse* (1858), the draft notes preparatory to *Capital* (volume 1, 1867). At one point in these sketches Marx muses that his fundamental insights—not only the labor theory of value but the historical dynamic of class conflict—could not be articulated until his own time, the era of an advanced bourgeoisie.

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its

relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc.<sup>14</sup>

This analogy between socioeconomic evolution and anatomical evolution is telling. Evoked as an illustration of development as recapitulation, it is neither accidental nor arbitrary. It is part of the ideology of his time, and it arises almost naturally in his text. And that is the problem, for to model historical development after biological development is to naturalize it, despite the fact that Marx was the first to define this move as ideological par excellence. This is not to dispute that our understanding can be only as developed as its object, but it is to question how we think this connection, how we think causality, temporality, and narrativity, how immediate we deem them to be. Clearly they cannot be thought in terms of historicism, defined most simply as the conflation of *before* and *after* with *cause* and *effect*, as the presumption that the prior event produces the later one. Despite many critiques in different disciplines, historicism still pervades art history, especially modernist studies, as it has from its great Hegelian founders to influential curators and critics like Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg and beyond.<sup>15</sup> Above all else it is this persistent historicism that condemns contemporary art as belated, redundant, repetitious.

Along with a tendency to take the avant-garde rhetoric of rupture at its own word, this residual evolutionism leads Bürger to present history as both *punctual and final*. Thus for him a work of art, a shift in aesthetics, happens all at once, entirely significant in its first moment of appearance, and it happens once and for all, so that any elaboration can only be a rehearsal. This conception of history as punctual and final underlies his narrative of the historical avant-garde



as pure origin and the neo-avant-garde as riven repetition. This is bad enough, but things get worse, for to repeat the historical avant-garde, according to Bürger, is to cancel its critique of the institution of autonomous art; more, it is to invert this critique into an affirmation of autonomous art. Thus, if readymades and collages challenged the bourgeois principles of expressive artist and organic art work, neo-readymades and neo-collages reinstate these principles, reintegrate them through repetition. So, too, if dada attacks audience and market alike, neo-dada gestures are adapted to them, as viewers are not only prepared for such shock but hungry for its titillation. And so on down the line: for Bürger the repetition of the historical avant-garde by the neo-avant-garde can only turn the anti-aesthetic into the artistic, the transgressive into the institutional.

Of course there is truth here. For example, the proto-pop and *nouveau-réaliste* reception of the readymade did tend to render it aesthetic, to recoup it as an art-commodity. When Johns bronzed and painted his two Ballantine ales (upon a remark of Willem de Kooning, legend has it, that Leo Castelli could sell anything as art, even beer cans), he did reduce the Duchampian ambiguity of the urinal or the bottle rack as a (non)work of art; his materials alone signified the artistic. So, too, when Arman collected and composed his assisted readymades, he did invert the Duchampian principle of aesthetic indifference; his assemblages flaunted either transgression or taste. More egregiously, with figures like Yves Klein dadaist provocation was turned into bourgeois spectacle, "an avant-garde of dissipated scandals," as Smithson remarked in 1966.<sup>16</sup> But this is not the entire story of the neo-avant-garde, nor does it end there; indeed, one project in the 1960s, I will argue, is to *critique* the old charlatany of the bohemian artist as well as the new institutionality of the avant-garde.<sup>17</sup> Yet the story does end there for Bürger, mostly because he fails to recognize the ambitious art of his time, a fatal flaw of many philosophers of art. As a result he can only see the neo-avant-garde in toto as futile and degenerate in romantic relation to the historical avant-garde, onto which he thus projects not only a magical effectivity but a pristine authenticity. Here, despite his grounding in Benjamin, Bürger affirms the very values of authenticity, originality, and singu-

cynical and opportunistic. Here Bürger echoes the famous remark of Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), mischievously attributed to Hegel, that all great events of world history occur twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. (Marx was concerned with the return of Napoleon, master of the first French Empire, in the guise of his nephew Louis Bonaparte, servant of the second French Empire.) This trope of tragedy followed by farce is seductive—its cynicism is a protective response to many historical ironies—but it hardly suffices as a theoretical model, let alone as a historical analysis. Yet it pervades attitudes toward contemporary art and culture, where it first *constructs* the contemporary as *posthistorical*, a simulacral world of failed repetitions and pathetic pastiches, and then *condemns* it as such from a mythical point of critical escape beyond it all. Ultimately *this* point is posthistorical, and its perspective is most mythical where it purports to be most critical.<sup>19</sup>

For Bürger the failure of both historical and neo-avant-gardes spills us all into pluralistic irrelevance, “the positing of any meaning whatever.” And he concludes that “no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced *as art* than any other” (63). This despair is also seductive—it has the pathos of all Frankfurt School melancholia—but its fixation on the past is the other face of the cynicism about the present that Bürger both scorns and supports.<sup>20</sup> And the conclusion is *mistaken* historically, politically, and ethically. First, it neglects the very lesson of the avant-garde that Bürger teaches elsewhere: the historicity of *all* art, including the contemporary. It also neglects that an understanding of this historicity may be *one* criterion by which art can claim to be advanced as art today. (In other words, recognition of conventions need not issue in the “simultaneity of the radically disparate”; on the contrary, it can prompt a sense of the radically necessary.) Second, it ignores that, rather than invert the prewar critique of the institution of art, the neo-avant-garde has worked to extend it. It also ignores that in doing so the neo-avant-garde has produced new aesthetic experiences, cognitive connections, and political interventions, and that these openings may make up *another* criterion by which art can claim to be advanced today. Bürger does not see these openings, again in

part because he is blind to the ambitious art of his time. Here, then, I want to explore such possibilities, and to do so initially in the form of an hypothesis: *rather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde, might the neo-avant-garde comprehend it for the first time?* I say "comprehend," not "complete": the project of the avant-garde is no more concluded in its neo moment than it is enacted in its historical moment. In art as in psychoanalysis, creative critique is *interminable*, and that is a good thing (at least in art).<sup>21</sup>

## THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE II

Immodestly enough, I want to do to Bürger what Marx did to Hegel: to right his concept of the dialectic. Again, the aim of the avant-garde for Bürger is to destroy the institution of autonomous art in order to reconnect art and life. Like the structure of heroic past and failed present, however, this formulation only seems simple. For what is art and what is life here? Already the opposition tends to cede to art the autonomy that is in question, and to position life at a point beyond reach. In this very formulation, then, the avant-garde project is predisposed to failure, with the sole exception of movements set in the midst of revolutions (this is another reason why Russian constructivism is so often privileged by artists and critics on the left). To make matters more difficult, life is conceived here paradoxically—not only as remote but also as immediate, as if it were simply *there* to rush in like so much air once the hermetic seal of convention is broken. This dadaist ideology of immediate experience, to which Benjamin is also inclined, leads Bürger to read the avant-garde as transgression pure and simple.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, it prompts him to see its primary device, the ready-made, as a sheer thing-of-the-world, an account that occludes its use not only as an epistemological provocation in the historical avant-garde but also as an institutional probe in the neo-avant-garde.

In short, Bürger takes the romantic rhetoric of the avant-garde, of rupture and revolution, at its own word. In so doing he misses crucial dimensions of its practice. For example, he misses its *mimetic* dimension, whereby the avant-garde mimes the degraded world of capitalist modernity in order not to embrace it

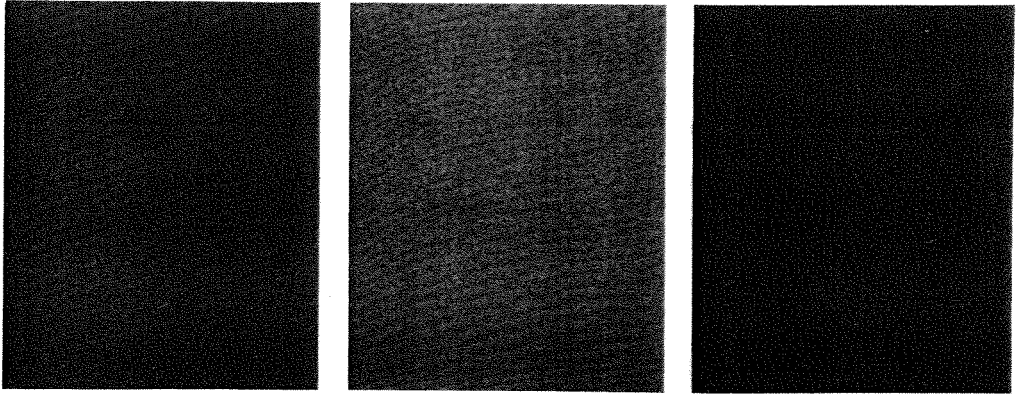
but to mock it (as in Cologne dada). He also misses its *utopian* dimension, whereby the avant-garde proposes not what can be so much as what *cannot* be—again as a critique of what is (as in de Stijl). To speak of the avant-garde in these terms of rhetoric is not to dismiss it as merely rhetorical. Rather it is to situate its attacks as both contextual and performative. *Contextual* in that the cabaret nihilism of the Zurich branch of dada critically elaborated the nihilism of World War I, or that the aesthetic anarchism of the Berlin branch of dada critically elaborated the anarchism of a country defeated militarily and torn up politically. And *performative* in the sense that both these attacks on art were waged, necessarily, in relation to its languages, institutions, and structures of meaning, expectation, and reception. It is in this *rhetorical* relation that avant-garde rupture and revolution are located.

This formulation blunts the sharp critique of the avant-garde project associated with Jürgen Habermas, which goes beyond Bürger. Not only did the avant-garde fail, Habermas argues, it was always already false, “a nonsense experiment.” “Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow.”<sup>23</sup> Some respondents to Bürger push this critique further. In its attempt to negate art, they argue, the avant-garde *preserves* the category of art-as-such. Thus, rather than a break with the ideology of aesthetic autonomy, it is but “a reversal phenomenon on the identical ideological level.”<sup>24</sup> This critique is pointed, to be sure, but it is pointed at the wrong target—that is, if we understand the avant-garde attack as rhetorical in the immanent sense sketched above. For the most acute avant-garde artists such as Duchamp, the aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus, rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice at its best is contradictory, mobile, and otherwise diabolical. The same is true of neo-avant-garde practice at its best, even the early versions of Rauschenberg or Allan Kaprow. “Painting relates to both art and life” runs a famous Rauschenberg motto. “Neither is made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)”<sup>25</sup> Note that he says “gap”: the work is to sustain a tension between art and life, not somehow to reconnect the two. And even Kaprow, the neo-avant-gardist most

loyal to the line of reconnection, seeks not to undo the "traditional identities" of art forms—this is a given for him—but to test the "frames or formats" of aesthetic experience as defined at a particular time and place. This testing of frames or formats drives the neo-avant-garde in its contemporary phases, and it does so in directions that cannot be foreseen.<sup>26</sup>

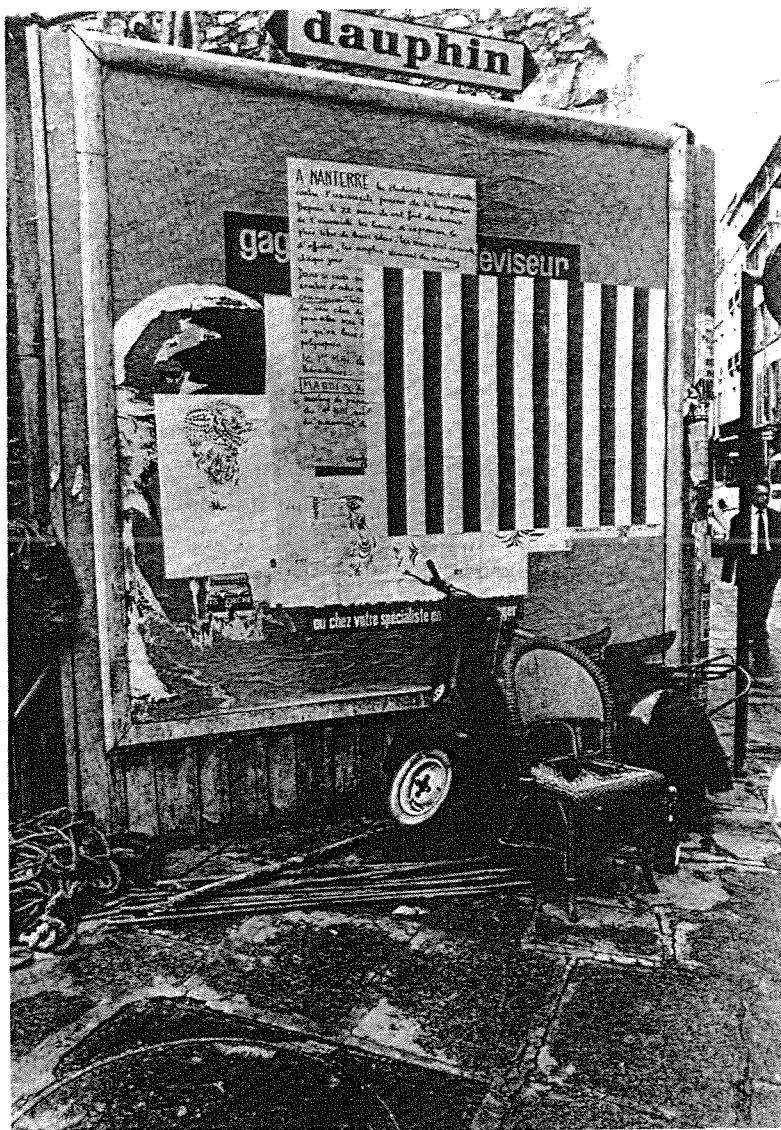
At this point I need to take my thesis about the avant-garde a step further, one that may lead to another way—with Bürger, beyond Bürger—to narrate its project. What was effected by the signal acts of the historical avant-garde, as when Alexander Rodchenko presented painting as three panels of primary colors in 1921? "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion," the great constructivist remarked in 1939, "and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow. I affirmed: this is the end of painting. These are the primary colors. Every plane is a discrete plane and there will be no more representation."<sup>27</sup> Here Rodchenko declares the *end* of painting, but what he demonstrates is the *conventionality* of painting: that it could be delimited to primary colors on discrete canvases in his artistic-political context with its specific permissions and pressures—this is the crucial qualification. *And nothing explicit is demonstrated about the institution of art.* Obviously convention and institution cannot be separated, but neither are they identical. On the one hand, the institution of art does not totally govern aesthetic conventions (this is too determinist); on the other hand, these conventions do not totally comprise the institution of art (this is too formalist). In other words, the institution of art may *enframe* aesthetic conventions, but it does not *constitute* them. This heuristic difference may help us to distinguish the emphases of historical and neo-avant-gardes: if the historical avant-garde focuses on the conventional, the neo-avant-garde concentrates on the institutional.

A related argument can be advanced about Duchamp, as when he signed a rotated urinal with a pseudonym in 1917. Rather than define the fundamental properties of a given medium from within as do the Rodchenko monochromes, the Duchamp readymade articulates the enunciative conditions of the art work from without, with an alien object. But the effect is still to reveal the conventional limits of art in a particular time and place—this again is the crucial qualification (obviously the contexts of New York dada in 1917 and Soviet



Alexander Rodchenko, *Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue*, 1921.





Daniel Buren, photo/souvenir of one of 200 green-and-white papers posted in Paris and environs, 1968.

constructivism in 1921 are radically different). Here, too, apart from the local outrage provoked by the vulgar object, the institution of art is not much defined. Indeed, the famous rejection of *Fountain* by the Society of Independent Artists exposed the discursive parameters of this institution more than the work per se.<sup>28</sup> In any case, like the Rodchenko, the Duchamp is a declaration, a performative: Rodchenko “affirms”; Duchamp “chooses.” Neither work purports to be an analysis, let alone a deconstruction. The modern status of painting as made-for-exhibition is preserved by the monochrome (it may even be perfected there), and the museum-gallery nexus is left intact by the readymade.

Such are the limitations underscored fifty years later by artists like Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, and Hans Haacke, who were concerned to elaborate these same paradigms in order to investigate this exhibition status and that institutional nexus systematically.<sup>29</sup> To my mind this is the essential relation between these particular historical and neo-avant-garde practices. First, artists like Flavin, Andre, Judd, and Morris in the early 1960s, and then artists like Broodthaers, Buren, Asher, and Haacke in the late 1960s, develop the critique of the conventions of the traditional mediums, as performed by dada, constructivism, and other historical avant-gardes, into an investigation of the institution of art, its perceptual and cognitive, structural and discursive parameters. *This is to advance three claims: (1) the institution of art is grasped as such not with the historical avant-garde but with the neo-avant-garde; (2) the neo-avant-garde at its best addresses this institution with a creative analysis at once specific and deconstructive (not a nihilistic attack at once abstract and anarchistic, as often with the historical avant-garde); and (3) rather than cancel the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde enacts its project for the first time—a first time that, again, is theoretically endless.* This is one way to right the Bürger dialectic of the avant-garde.

#### RESISTANCE AND RECOLLECTION

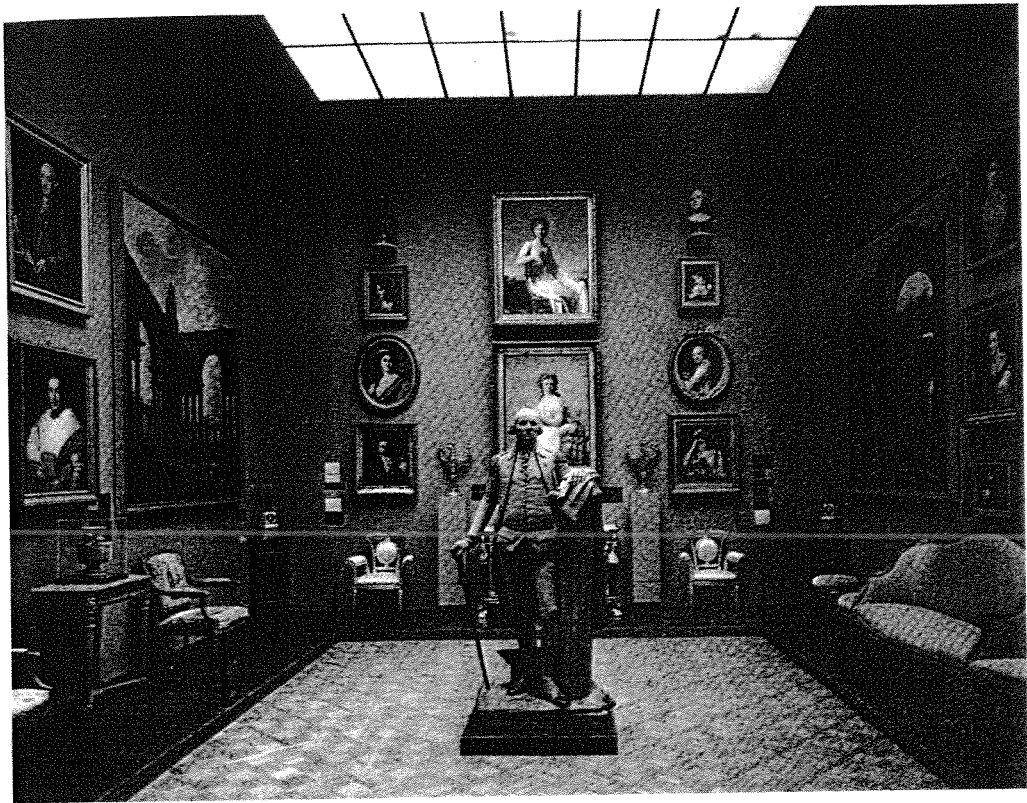
Yet my thesis has its own problems. First, there is the historical irony that the institution of art, the museum above all else, has changed beyond recognition, a development that demands the continual transformation of its avant-garde

critique as well. A reconnection of art and life *has* occurred, but under the terms of the culture industry, not the avant-garde, some devices of which were long ago assimilated into the operations of spectacular culture (in part through the very repetitions of the neo-avant-garde). This much is due the devil, but only this much.<sup>30</sup> Rather than render the avant-garde null and void, these developments have produced new spaces of critical play and prompted new modes of institutional analysis. And this reworking of the avant-garde in terms of aesthetic forms, cultural-political strategies, and social positionings has proved the most vital project in art and criticism over the last three decades at least.

However, this is but one historical problem; there are theoretical difficulties with my thesis as well. Again, terms like historical and neo-avant-garde may be at once too general and too exclusive to use effectively today. I noted some drawbacks of the first term; if the second is to be retained at all, at least two moments in the initial neo-avant-garde alone must be distinguished: the first represented here by Rauschenberg and Kaprow in the 1950s, the second by Broodthaers and Buren in the 1960s.<sup>31</sup> As the *first* neo-avant-garde recovers the historical avant-garde, dada in particular, it does so often literally, through a reprise of its basic devices, the effect of which is *less to transform the institution of art than to transform the avant-garde into an institution*. This is one ruse of history to grant Bürger, but rather than dismiss it as farce we might attempt to understand it—here in analogy with the Freudian model of repression and repetition.<sup>32</sup> On this model, if the historical avant-garde was *repressed* institutionally, it was *repeated* in the first neo-avant-garde rather than, in the Freudian distinction, *recollected*, its contradictions worked through. If this analogy between repression and reception holds, then in its first repetition the avant-garde was made to appear historical before it was allowed to become effective, that is, before its aesthetic-political ramifications could be sorted out, let alone elaborated. On the Freudian analogy this is repetition, indeed reception, as *resistance*. And it need not be reactionary; one purpose of the Freudian analogy is to suggest that resistance is unknowing, indeed that it is a process of unknowing. Thus, for example, as early as Rauschenberg and Johns there is a Duchamp genre in the making, a reification not only at odds with his practice but paradoxically in



Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*, 1972, detail.



Michael Asher, *Untitled*, 1979, installation, the Art Institute of Chicago.



advance of its recognition. This reification may also occur in resistance to his practice—to its final work (*Etants donnés*, 1946–66), to some of its principles, to many of its ramifications.

In any case the becoming-institutional of the avant-garde does not doom all art thereafter to so much affectation and/or entertainment. It prompts in a *second* neo-avant-garde a critique of this process of acculturation and/or accommodation. Such is the principal subject of an artist like Broodthaers, whose extraordinary tableaux evoke cultural reification only to transform it into a critical poetic. Broodthaers often used shelled things like eggs and mussels to render this hardening at once literal and allegorical, in a word, reflexive—as if the best defense against reification were a preemptive embrace that was also a dire exposé. In this strategy, whose precedent dates to Baudelaire at least, a personal reification is *assumed*—sometimes homeopathically, sometimes apotropically—against a social reification that is *enforced*.<sup>33</sup>

More generally, this becoming-institutional prompts in the second neo-avant-garde a creative analysis of the limitations of both historical and first neo-avant-gardes. Thus, to pursue one aspect of the reception of Duchamp, in several texts since the late 1960s Buren has questioned the dadaist ideology of immediate experience, or the “petit-bourgeois anarchist radicality” of Duchampian acts. And in many works over the same period he has combined the monochrome and the readymade into a device of standard stripes in order to explore further what these old paradigms sought to expose, only in part to occlude: “the parameters of artistic production and reception.”<sup>34</sup> This elaboration is a collective labor that cuts across entire generations of neo-avant-garde artists: to develop paradigms like the readymade from an object that purports to be transgressive in its very facticity (as in its first neo repetition), to a proposition that explores the enunciative dimension of the work of art (as in conceptual art), to a device that addresses the seriality of objects and images in advanced capitalism (as in minimalist and pop art), to a marker of physical presence (as in site-specific art of the 1970s), to a form of critical mimicry of various discourses (as in allegorical art of the 1980s involved with mythical images from both high

art and mass media), and, finally, to a probe of sexual, ethnic, and social differences today (as in the work of such diverse artists as Sherrie Levine, David Hammons, and Robert Gober). In this way the so-called *failure* of both historical and first neo-avant-gardes to destroy the institution of art has *enabled* the deconstructive testing of this institution by the second neo-avant-garde—a testing that, again, is now extended to other institutions and discourses in the ambitious art of the present.<sup>35</sup>

But lest I render this second neo-avant-garde heroic, it is important to note that its critique can also be turned on it. If the historical and the first neo-avant-gardes often suffered from anarchistic tendencies, the second neo-avant-garde sometimes succumbs to apocalyptic impulses. “Perhaps the only thing one can do after having seen a canvas like ours,” Buren remarks in one such moment in February 1968, “is total revolution.”<sup>36</sup> This is indeed the language of 1968, and artists like Buren often use it: his work proceeds from “the extinction” of the studio, he writes in “The Function of the Studio” (1971); it is pledged not merely to “contradict” the game of art but to “abolish” its rules altogether.<sup>37</sup> This rhetoric, which is more situationist than situated, echoes the oracular, often macho pronouncements of the high modernists. Our present is bereft of this sense of imminent revolution; it is also chastened by feminist critiques of revolutionary language and cautioned by postcolonial concerns about the exclusivity not only of art institutions but of critical discourses as well. As a result contemporary artists concerned to develop the institutional analysis of the second neo-avant-garde have moved away from grand *oppositions* to subtle *displacements* (I think of artists from Louise Lawler and Silvia Kolbowski to Christopher Williams and Andrea Fraser) and/or strategic *collaborations* with different groups (Fred Wilson and Mark Dion are representative here). This is one way in which the critique of the avant-garde continues, indeed one way in which the avant-garde continues. And this is not a recipe for hermeticism or formalism, as is sometimes alleged; it is a formula of practice. It is also a precondition of any contemporary understanding of the different phases of the avant-garde.



Hans Haacke, *MetroMobilitan*, 1985.



Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992, detail of slave manacles repositioned in metalwork display, Maryland Historical Society.

## DEFERRED ACTION

Perhaps now we can return to the initial question: how to narrate this revised relation between historical and neo-avant-gardes? The premise that an understanding of an art can only be as developed as the art must be retained, but again not along historicist lines, whether in analogy to anatomical development (as momentarily in Marx) or in analogy to rhetorical development, of origin followed by repetition, of tragedy followed by farce (as persistently in Bürger). Different models of causality, temporality, and narrativity are required; far too much is at stake in practice, pedagogy, and politics not to challenge the blind-ered ones that are in place.

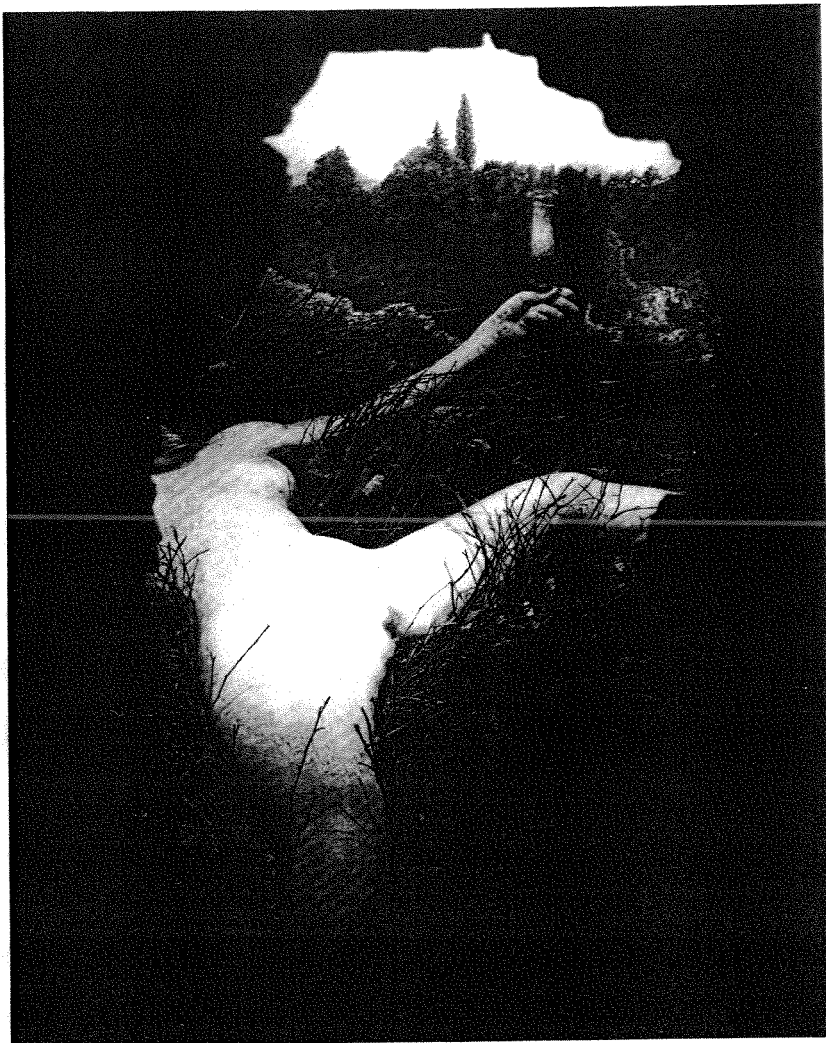
In order to advance a model of my own I need to foreground an assumption already at work in this text: that history, in particular modernist history, is often conceived, secretly or otherwise, on the model of the individual subject, indeed *as a subject*. This is plain enough when a given history is narrated in terms of evolution or progression, as often in the late nineteenth century, or conversely in terms of devolution or regression, as often in the early twentieth century (the last trope is pervasive in modernist studies from Georg Lukács to the present). But this modeling of history continues in contemporary criticism even when it assumes the death of the subject, for often the subject only returns at the level of ideology (for example, the Nazi subject), the nation (now imagined as a psychic entity more than as a body politic), and so on. As is clear from my treatment of the art institution as a subject capable of repression and resistance, I am as guilty of this vice as the next critic, but rather than give it up I want to make it a virtue. For if this analogy to the individual subject is all but structural to historical studies, why not apply the most sophisticated model of the subject, the psychoanalytic one, and do so in a manifest way?<sup>38</sup>

In his best moments Freud captures the psychic temporality of the subject, which is so different from the biological temporality of the body, the epistemological analogy that informs Bürger via Marx. (I say in his best moments for, just as Marx often escapes the modeling of the historical on the biological, Freud often succumbs to it in his reliance on developmental stages and



Lamarckian associations.) For Freud, especially as read through Lacan, subjectivity is not set once and for all; it is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events. "It always takes two traumas to make a trauma," comments Jean Laplanche, who has done much to clarify the different temporal models in Freudian thought.<sup>39</sup> One event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*). It is this analogy that I want to enlist for modernist studies at the end of the century: *historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts—in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition.*<sup>40</sup>

On this analogy the avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments. It cannot be because it is traumatic—a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it, at least not immediately, at least not without structural change. (This is the other scene of art that critics and historians need to register: not only symbolic disconnections but *failures to signify*.)<sup>41</sup> This trauma points to another function in the repetition of avant-garde events like the readymade and the monochrome—not only to deepen such holes but to bind them as well. And this function points to another problem mentioned at the outset: how are we to distinguish the two operations, the first disruptive, the second restorative? Can they be separated?<sup>42</sup> There are related repetitions in the Freudian model that I have also smuggled into my text: some in which the trauma is acted out hysterically, as the first neo-avant-garde acts out the anarchistic attacks of the historical avant-garde; others in which the trauma is worked through laboriously, as later neo-avant-gardes develop these attacks, at once abstract and literal, into performances that are immanent and allegorical. In all these ways the neo-avant-garde acts on the historical avant-garde as it is acted on by it; it is less *neo* than *nachträglich*; and the avant-garde project in general develops in deferred action. Once repressed in part, the avant-garde did return, and it continues to return, but *it returns from the future*: such is its paradoxical temporality.<sup>43</sup> So what's neo about the neo-avant-garde? And who's afraid of it anyway?



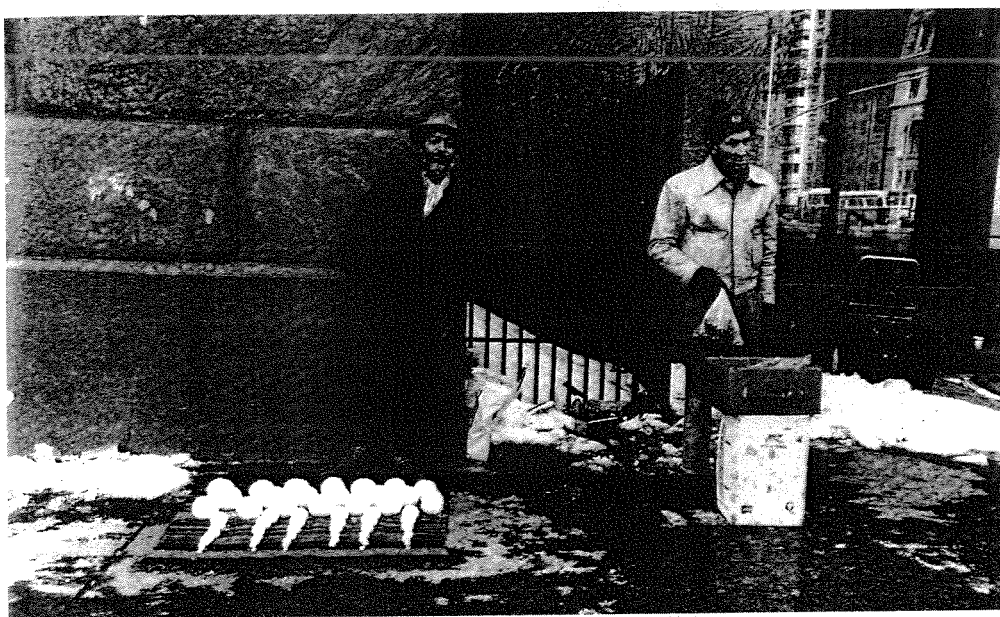
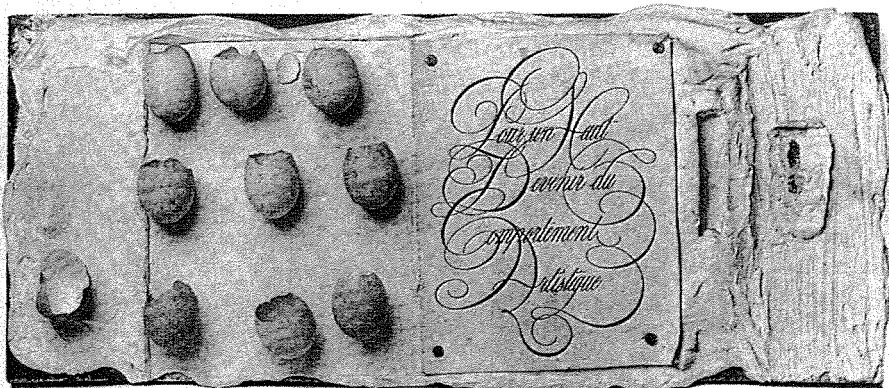
Marcel Duchamp, *Given: 1. the Waterfall, 2. the Illuminating Gas*, 1946–66, detail.



Silvia Kolbowski, *Already*, 1992, detail.

I want to return briefly to the strategy of the return with which I began. Whether the artistic recoveries of the 1960s are as radical as the theoretical readings of Marx, Freud, or Nietzsche during the same period cannot be decided. What is certain is that these returns are as fundamental to postmodernist art as they are to poststructuralist theory: both make their breaks through such recoveries. But then these breaks are not total, and we have to revise our notion of epistemological rupture. Here, too, the notion of deferred action is useful, for *rather than break with the fundamental practices and discourses of modernity, the signal practices and discourses of postmodernity have advanced in a nachträglich relation to them.*<sup>44</sup>

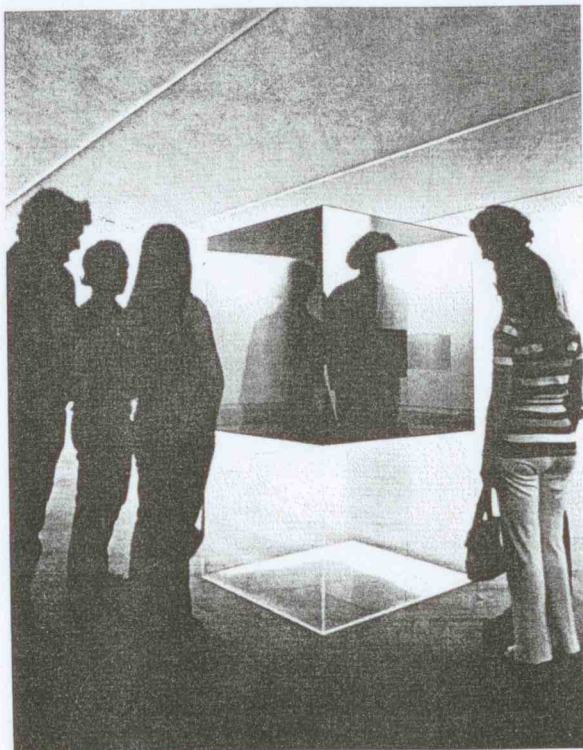
Beyond this general *nachträglich* relation, both postmodernist art and poststructuralist theory have developed the specific questions that deferred action poses: questions of repetition, difference, and deferral; of causality, temporality, and narrativity. Apart from repetition and return stressed here, temporality and textuality are the twin obsessions of the neo-avant-gardes—not only the introduction of time and text into spatial and visual art (the famous debate between minimalist artists and formalist critics, discussed in chapter 2, is but one battle in this long war), but also the theoretical elaboration of museological temporality and cultural intertextuality (announced by artists like Smithson and developed by artists like Lothar Baumgarten in the present). Here I want only to register that similar questions, posed in different ways, have also impelled crucial philosophies of the period: the elaboration of *Nachträglichkeit* in Lacan, the critique of causality in Althusser, the genealogies of discourses in Foucault, the reading of repetition in Gilles Deleuze, the complication of feminist temporality in Julia Kristeva, the articulation of *différance* in Jacques Derrida.<sup>45</sup> “It is the very idea of a *first time* which becomes enigmatic,” Derrida writes in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (1966), a fundamental text of this entire antifoundational era. “It is thus the delay which is in the beginning.”<sup>46</sup> So it is for the avant-garde as well.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Pour un Haut Devenir du Comportement Artistique*, 1964.

David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983.





Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1965.

ABC art, primary structures, literalist art, minimalism: most of the terms for the relevant work of Carl Andre, Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and others suggest that this art is not only inexpressive but almost infantile. Often dismissed in the 1960s as reductive, minimalism was often regarded in the 1980s as irrelevant, and both trashings are too vehement to be only a matter of art-world polemics. Beyond the vested interests of artists and critics pledged to humanist ideals and/or iconographic images in art, these trashings of minimalism were conditioned by two related events: in the 1960s by a specific sense that minimalism consummated one formalist model of modernism, completed and broke with it at once; and in the 1980s by a general reaction that used a trashing of the 1960s to justify a return to tradition in art and elsewhere. For just as rightists in the 1950s sought to bury the radicalism of the 1930s, so rightists in the 1980s sought to cancel the cultural claims and to reverse the political gains of the 1960s, so traumatic were they to these neoconservatives. Nothing much changed for the Gingrich radicals of the early 1990s, and political passion against the 1960s runs as high as ever today.<sup>1</sup>

So what is at stake in this trashing is history, in which minimalism is hardly a dead issue, least of all to those who would make it so. It is, however, a perjured one, for in the 1980s minimalism was represented as reductive and *retardataire*

in order to make neo-expressionism appear expansive and vanguard, and in this way the different cultural politics of the minimalist 1960s and the neo-expressionist 1980s were misconstrued. For all its apparent freedoms, neo-expressionism participated in the cultural regressions of the Reagan-Bush era, while for all its apparent restrictions, minimalism opened up a new field of art, one that advanced work of the present continues to explore—or so it will be the burden of this chapter to prove. To do so, the reception of minimalism must first be set in place, then a counter-memory posed via a reading of its fundamental texts. Next this counter-memory will be used to define the dialectical involvements of minimalism with both late-modernist and neo-avant-garde art, which in turn will suggest a genealogy of art from the 1960s to the present. In this genealogy minimalism will figure not as a distant dead end but as a contemporary crux, a paradigm shift toward postmodernist practices that continue to be elaborated today. Finally this genealogy will lead back to the 1960s, that is, to the place of minimalism in this critical conjuncture of postwar culture, politics, and economics.<sup>2</sup>

#### RECEPTION: "I OBJECT TO THE WHOLE REDUCTION IDEA"

On first glance it all looks so simple, yet in each body of work a perceptual ambiguity complicates things. At odds with the specific objects of Judd is his nonspecific composition ("one thing after another").<sup>3</sup> And just as the given gestalts of Morris are more contingent than ideal, so the blunt slabs of Serra are redefined by our perception of them in time. Meanwhile, the latticed logic of LeWitt can be obsessive, almost mad;<sup>4</sup> and even as the perfect cubes of Bell appear hermetically closed, they mirror the outside world. So what you see is what you see, as Frank Stella famously said,<sup>5</sup> but things are never as simple as they seem: the positivism of minimalism notwithstanding, perception is made reflexive in these works and so rendered complex.

Although the experiential surprise of minimalism is difficult to recapture, its conceptual provocation remains, for minimalism breaks with the transcendental space of most modernist art (if not with the immanent space of the dada-



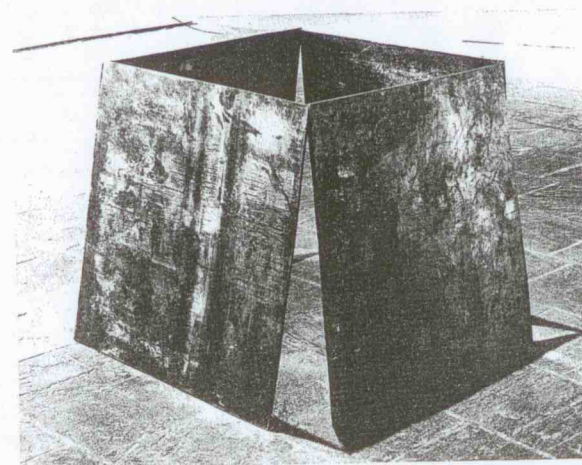
Sol LeWitt, *A 9* (from "Serial Project #1"), 1966.



ist readymade or the constructivist relief). Not only does minimalism reject the anthropomorphic basis of most traditional sculpture (still residual in the gestures of abstract-expressionist work), but it also refuses the siteless realm of most abstract sculpture. In short, with minimalism sculpture no longer stands apart, on a pedestal or as pure art, but is repositioned among objects and redefined in terms of place. In this transformation the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign space of formal art, is cast back on the here and now; and rather than scan the surface of a work for a topographical mapping of the properties of its medium, he or she is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention in a given site. This is the fundamental reorientation that minimalism inaugurates.

Made explicit by later artists, this reorientation was sensed by early critics, most of whom lamented it as a loss for art. Yet in the moralistic charge that minimalism was reductive lay the critical perception that it pushed art toward the quotidian, the utilitarian, the nonartistic. For Clement Greenberg the minimalists confused the innovative with the outlandish and so pursued extraneous effects rather than essential qualities of art. This was why they worked in three dimensions (note that he does not call this work "sculpture"), a zone in which what is specific for Judd is arbitrary for Greenberg: "Minimalist works are readable as art, as almost anything is today—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper."<sup>6</sup> Greenberg intended this remark as a scourge, but to the likes of John Cage it was an avant-gardist challenge: "We must bring about a music which is like furniture."<sup>7</sup> And this challenge was indeed taken up, via Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cage, and Merce Cunningham, in minimalist art (e.g., Judd and Morris), music (e.g., Philip Glass), dance (e.g., Yvonne Rainer), and theater (e.g., Robert Wilson), if rarely in the interests of a restored use value for culture.<sup>8</sup> In this reorientation Greenberg smelled a rat: the arbitrary, the avant-gardist, in a word, Marcel Duchamp. As we saw in chapter 1, this intuition of the return of the readymade paradigm in particular and the avant-gardist attack on the institution of art in general was common among both advocates and detractors of minimalism, and it is one I want to develop here.

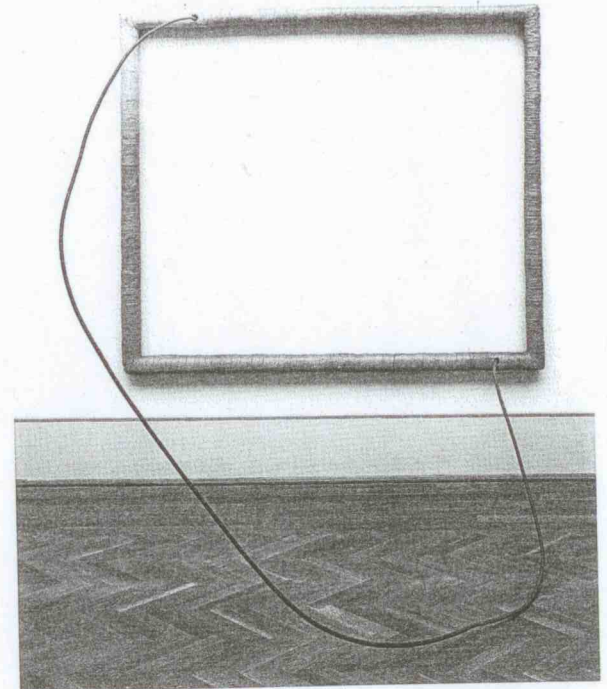
For Richard Wollheim, too, the art content of minimalism was minimal; indeed, it was he who introduced the term, by which he meant that the work



Richard Serra, *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969.

of art was to be considered in terms less of execution or construction than "of decision or dismantling."<sup>9</sup> This aesthetic possibility is still taken as a threat in the guild of high art; here Greenberg defends against it: "Minimal art remains too much a feat of ideation." If the first great misreading is that minimalism is reductive, the second is that it is idealist. This was no less a misreading, made by some conceptual artists too, when it was meant positively: that minimalism captures pure forms, maps logical structures, or depicts abstract thought. For it is precisely such metaphysical dualisms of subject and object that minimalism seeks to overcome in phenomenological experience. Thus, far from idealist, minimalist work complicates the purity of conception with the contingency of perception, of the body in a particular space and time. (Consider how Serra pressures the Platonic idea of the cube in *House of Cards* [1969], a massively fragile propping of lead slabs.) And far from conceptual, minimalism is not "based on systems built beforehand, a priori systems," or so Judd argued in 1966.<sup>10</sup> However, more important to minimalism than this perceptual positivism is its avant-gardist comprehension of art in terms of its conventionality.<sup>11</sup> In short, minimalism is as self-critical as any late-modernist art, but its analysis tends toward the epistemological more than the ontological, for it focuses on the perceptual conditions and conventional limits of art more than on its formal essence and categorical being. It is this orientation that is so often mistaken as "conceptual."

In this way the stake of minimalism is the nature of meaning and the status of the subject, both of which are held to be public, not private, produced in a physical interface with the actual world, not in a mental space of idealist conception.<sup>12</sup> Minimalism thus contradicts the two dominant models of the abstract expressionist, the artist as existential creator (advanced by Harold Rosenberg) and the artist as formal critic (advanced by Greenberg). In so doing it also challenges the two central positions in modern aesthetics that these two models of the artist represent, the first expressionist, the second formalist. More importantly, with its stress on the temporality of perception, minimalism threatens the disciplinary order of modern aesthetics in which visual art is held to be strictly spatial. It is for this category mistake that Michael Fried condemned



Eva Hesse, *Hang-Up*, 1965-66.



minimalism—and rightly so from his position, for minimalism did prompt a concern with time as well as an interest in reception in process art, body art, performance, site-specific work, and so on. Indeed, it is difficult to see the work that follows minimalism as entirely present, to be grasped in a single glance, a transcendental moment of grace, as Fried demands of modernist art at the end of his famous attack on minimalism, "Art and Objecthood" (1967).<sup>13</sup>

As minimalism challenges this order of modern aesthetics, it also contradicts its idealist model of consciousness. For Rosalind Krauss this is the central import of the minimalist attack on anthropomorphism and illusionism, for in her account these categories constitute not only an outmoded paradigm of art but an ideological model of meaning. In "Specific Objects" (1965) Judd had already associated relational composition with a "discredited" rationalism. In "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture" (1973) Krauss poses a further analogy between illusionism and intentionality. For an intention to become an idea, she argues, an illusionist space of consciousness must be posited, and this space is idealist. Thus, to avoid the relational and the illusionist, as minimalism sought to do through its insistence on nonhierarchical orderings and literal readings, is in principle to avoid the aesthetic correlates of this ideological idealism as well.

This reading of minimalism warrants a digression. In her phenomenological account of minimalism, of minimalism as a phenomenology, Krauss insists on the inseparability of the temporal and the spatial in our reading of this art. Indeed, in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977) she rethinks the modernist history of the medium through this inseparability (which her very title advances). In effect Krauss gives us a minimalist history of modernist sculpture in which minimalism emerges as the penultimate move in its long passage "from a static, idealized medium to a temporal and material one."<sup>14</sup> Here, rather than posit minimalism as a break with modernist practice (the conclusion to which her subsequent criticism tends),<sup>15</sup> she projects a minimalist recognition back onto modernism so that she can then read minimalism as a modernist epitome. Yet this is only one half of the story: minimalism is an apogee of modernism, but it is no less a break with it.

Of special interest here is the anachronism of this minimalist reading of

modernist sculpture, which Krauss justifies in this way: "The history of modern sculpture coincides with the development of two bodies of thought, phenomenology and structural linguistics, in which meaning is understood to depend on the way that any form of being contains the latent experience of its opposite: simultaneity always containing an implicit experience of sequence."<sup>16</sup> It is true that, as represented by Edmund Husserl and Ferdinand de Saussure, phenomenology and structural linguistics did emerge with high modernism. Yet neither discourse was current among artists until the 1960s, that is, until the time of minimalism, and when they did reemerge they were in tension.<sup>17</sup> For example, structuralism was more critical of idealist consciousness and humanist history than was phenomenology; phenomenology was questioned because such notions were held to be residual in it. Now if this is so, and if minimalism is phenomenological at base, one might question how radical its critique of these notions is. For instance, just as phenomenology undercuts the idealism of the Cartesian "I think," so minimalism undercuts the existentialism of the abstract-expressionist "I express," but both substitute an "I perceive" that leaves meaning lodged in the subject. One way to ease this bind is to stress the structuralist dimension of the minimalist conjuncture, and to argue that minimalism is also involved in a structural analysis of pictorial and sculptural signifiers. Thus, while some artists (like Robert Irwin) develop the phenomenological dimension of minimalism, others (like Michael Asher) develop its structural analysis of these signifiers.

Minimalism does announce a new interest in the body—again, not in the form of an anthropomorphic image or in the suggestion of an illusionist space of consciousness, but rather in the *presence* of its objects, unitary and symmetrical as they often are (as Fried saw), just like people. And this implication of presence does lead to a new concern with perception, that is, to a new concern with the subject. Yet a problem emerges here too, for minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power. In other words, it does not regard the subject as a sexed body positioned in a symbolic order any more than it regards the gallery or the museum as an ideological apparatus. To ask minimalism for a full critique of the subject may be anachronistic as well; it may be to read it too

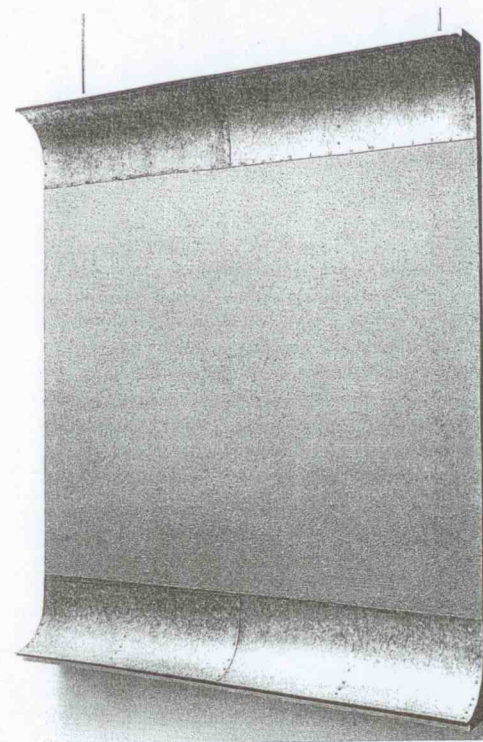


much in terms of subsequent art and theory. Yet this question also points to the historical and ideological limits of minimalism—limits tested by its critical followers. For if minimalism does initiate a critique of the subject, it does so in abstract terms, and as subsequent art and theory develop this critique, they also come to question minimalism (this is especially true of some feminist art). Such is the difficulty of a genealogical tracing of its legacy, which here must await an analysis of the discourse of minimalism in its own time.

DISCOURSE: "THERE IS NO WAY YOU CAN FRAME IT"

In its own time the discourse of minimalism was dominated by three texts: "Specific Objects" by Donald Judd (1965), "Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2" by Robert Morris (1966), and "Art and Objecthood" by Michael Fried (1967).<sup>18</sup> Although well known, they manifest both the claims and the contradictions of minimalism in ways that are not well understood.

The year of "Specific Objects," 1965, was also the year that Greenberg revised his position paper, "Modernist Painting," which followed by four years his landmark collection of essays *Art and Culture*. In this context the first two claims made by Judd—that minimalism is neither "painting nor sculpture" and that "linear history has unraveled somewhat"—defy both categorical imperatives and historicist tendencies in Greenbergian modernism. Yet this extreme defiance developed as excessive devotion. For example, the reservation voiced by Greenberg about *some* painting after cubism—that its content is too governed by its edge—is elaborated by Judd into a brief against *all* modernist painting—that its flat, rectangular format "determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on and inside it."<sup>19</sup> Here, as Judd extends Greenberg, he breaks with him, for what Greenberg regards as a definitional essence of painting Judd takes as a conventional limit, literally a frame to exceed. This break is attempted through a turn to specific objects, which he positions in relation to late-modernist *painting* (again, as represented by David Smith and di Suvero, late-modernist sculpture remains too mired in anthropomorphic composition and/or gesture). In short, *Judd reads the putatively Greenbergian call for an objective painting so literally as to exceed painting altogether in the creation of objects*. For what can be



Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1962.

more objective, more specific, than an object in actual space? Moved to fulfill the late-modernist project, Judd breaks with it, as is clear from his list of prototypes: Duchamp readymades, Johns cast objects, Rauschenberg combines, John Chamberlain scrap-metal sculptures, Stella shaped canvases, and so on—all rejects from the Greenberg canon.

This list suggests another consequence of the minimalist supersession of late-modernist art. According to Judd, some of these precursors assumed that "painting and sculpture have become set forms," that is, forms whose conventionality could not be elaborated further. "The use of three dimensions," he claims (note that Judd too does not term minimalism "sculpture"), "isn't the use of a given form" in this reified sense. In this other realm of objects, he suggests, *any* form, material, or process can be used. This expansion opens up criticism too, as Judd is led by his own logic to this infamous avant-gardist position: "A work of art needs only to be interesting." Here, consciously or not, *interest* is posed against the great Greenbergian shibboleth *quality*. Whereas quality is judged by reference to the standards not only of the old masters but of the great moderns, interest is provoked through the testing of aesthetic categories and the transgressing of set forms. In short, quality is a criterion of normative criticism, an encomium bestowed upon aesthetic refinement; interest is an avant-gardist term, often measured in terms of epistemological disruption. It too can become normative, but it can also license critical inquiry and aesthetic play.<sup>20</sup>

In "Specific Objects," then, the mandate that late-modernist art pursue objectivity is completed only to be exceeded, as Judd and company come out the other side of the objecthood of painting into the realm of objects. In "Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2" Robert Morris presents a different scenario in which minimalism is again set in a complicated relation to late-modernist discourse.

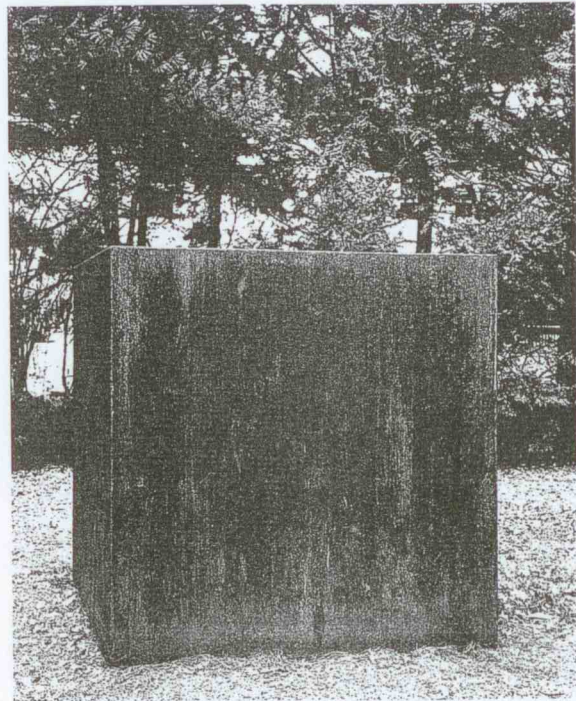
As Morris retains the category of sculpture, he implicitly disagrees with Judd on the genesis of minimalism. Sculpture was never "involved with illusionism," pictorial as this category is, and neither is minimalism. Far from a break with sculpture, minimalism realizes "the autonomous and literal nature

of sculpture . . . that it have its own, equally literal space." At first glance this statement seems contradictory, for its two adjectives conflate the positions held by Greenberg and Judd respectively: the demand for autonomy and the demand for literalism. Yet this is precisely how Morris sees minimalism, as a provisional resolution of this contradiction, for he defines its unitary forms as *both* autonomous and literal. With minimalist gestalts, Morris writes, "one sees and immediately 'believes' that the pattern of one's mind corresponds to the existential fact of the object." His is the most nuanced discussion of the quintessentially minimalist tension between "the known constant and the experienced variable." Although Morris sometimes privileges the unitary form as prior to the specific object (in a way that the anti-idealism of minimalism otherwise does not), he usually presents the two as bound qua gestalt "cohesively and indivisibly together." This unity is necessary for Morris to retain the category of sculpture and to posit shape as its essential characteristic.

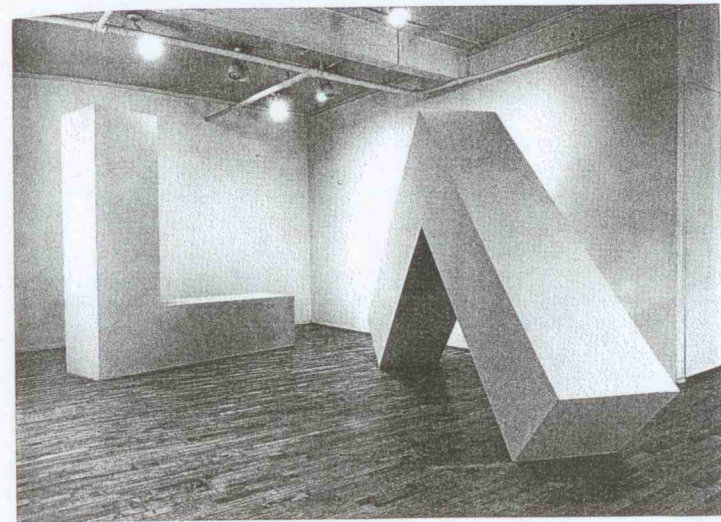
Yet this argument also appears circular. Morris first defines modernist sculpture in terms of minimalism (that it be literal) and then defines minimalism in terms of modernist sculpture (that it be autonomous). He then arrives at the very property, shape, that a year later Fried will pose as the essential value of *painting*. Part 1 of "Notes on Sculpture" ends in this way: "The magnification of this single most important sculptural value . . . establishes both a new limit and a new freedom for sculpture." The paradoxical nature of this statement suggests the tensions in minimalist discourse as well as the instabilities of aesthetic categories at this time. *For minimalism is both a contraction of sculpture to the modernist pure object and an expansion of sculpture beyond recognition.*

In Part 2 of "Notes on Sculpture" Morris addresses this paradoxical situation. First he defines the "new limit" for sculpture by reference to a remark by Tony Smith that situates minimalist work somewhere between the object and the monument, around the scale of the human body.<sup>21</sup> Then in an incisive move Morris redefines this scale in terms of address (from private object to public monument), that is, in terms of *reception*—a shift in orientation from the object to the viewer that turns the "new limit" for sculpture into its "new freedom." However, one intermediate step is needed, and so Morris returns to the mini-





Tony Smith, *Die*, 1962.



Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1965.

malist gestalts. These unitary forms are used not only to "set the work beyond retardataire Cubist esthetics," he argues now, but, more importantly, to "take relationships out of the work and make them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision."

In this way, as Judd exceeds Greenberg, so Morris exceeds both, for here, in 1966, a new space of "object/subject terms" is acknowledged. The minimalist suppression of anthropomorphic images and gestures is more than a reaction against the abstract-expressionist model of art; it is a "death of the author" (as Roland Barthes would call it in 1968) that is at the same time a birth of the viewer: "The object is but one of the terms of the newer esthetic. . . . One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from the various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context." Here we are at the edge of "sculpture in the expanded field" (as Krauss would call it in 1978). Yet even as Morris announces this new freedom, he seems ambivalent about it: in a flurry of contradictory statements he both pulls back ("that the space of the room becomes of such importance does not mean that an environmental situation is being established") and pushes forward ("Why not put the work outside and further change the terms?").

Finally, "Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2" is caught in the contradictions of its moment. On the one hand Morris insists that sculpture remain autonomous; on the other hand he suggests that "some of the new work has expanded the terms of sculpture" to the point where the object is "but one of" them. It is this expanded field, foreseen by Morris, that Michael Fried in "Art and Objecthood" is pledged to forestall.

More fully than Judd and Morris, Fried comprehends minimalism in its threat to formalist modernism, which is why he prosecutes it with such passion. First Fried details the minimalist crime: an attempt to displace late-modernist art by means of a literal reading that confuses the transcendental "presentness" of art with the mundane "presence" of things. According to Fried, the essential difference is that minimalist art seeks "to discover and project objecthood as such," whereas late-modernist art aspires "to defeat or suspend" this objecthood. Here, he contends, "the critical factor is *shape*," which, far from an

essential sculptural value (as Morris would have it), is an essential pictorial value. Indeed, only if it "compels conviction as shape" can the late-modernist painting of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Stella suspend objecthood, transcend the literalism of minimalism, and so achieve presentness.<sup>22</sup>

Given this difference, Fried must next show why minimalist literalism is "antithetical to art." To this end he argues that the presence of the minimalist object is that of a personage in disguise, a presence that produces a *situation* that, however provocative, is extrinsic to visual art. Here Fried also cites Smith on the scale of minimalism, but in order to recast it as an art of abstract statues, hardly as radically anti-anthropomorphic as its advocates claim. And yet his primary point is not to show up minimalism as secretly anthropomorphic but to present it as "incurably theatrical," for, according to the crucial hypothesis of "Art and Objecthood," "theatre is now the negation of art."

In order to support this hypothesis, Fried makes a strange detour: a gloss on an anecdote, again told by Tony Smith, about a nighttime ride on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s. For this proto-minimalist artist and architect the experience was somehow aesthetic but not quite art:

The experience of the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.<sup>23</sup>

What was revealed to Smith, Fried argues, was the "conventional nature of art." "And this Smith seems to have understood not as laying bare the essence of art, but as announcing its end."

Here is marked the crux of the Friedian case against minimalism but of the minimalist break with late modernism. For in this epiphany about the conventionality of art is foretold the heretical stake of minimalism and its neo-avant-garde successors: not to discover the essence of art à la Greenberg but to transgress its institutional limits ("there is no way you can frame it"), to negate its formal autonomy ("you just have to experience it"), precisely to



announce its end.<sup>24</sup> For Fried as for Greenberg such avant-gardism is infantile: hardly a dialectical sublation of art into life, minimalist transgression obtains only the literalism of a frameless event or object "as it happens, as it merely is." Fried terms this minimalist literalism "theatrical" because it involves mundane time, a property that he deems improper to visual art. Thus, even if the institutional autonomy of art is not threatened by minimalism, the old Enlightenment order of the arts (the temporal versus the spatial arts) is endangered. This is why "theatre is now the negation of art," and why minimalism must be condemned.

At this point the prosecution of minimalism becomes a testament to formalist modernism, replete with the celebrated principles that "the concept of art" is "meaningful only *within* the individual arts" and "what lies *between* the arts is theatre."<sup>25</sup> Here, then, even as the order of Enlightenment aesthetics is disrupted on all sides in practice, it is reaffirmed in theory. And, finally, against this practice, against the hellish "endlessness" of minimalist theatre, Fried opposes the sublime "instantaneousness" of the modernist work, "which at every moment . . . is wholly manifest." More than a historical paradigm, even more than an aesthetic essence, this becomes, at the end of "Art and Objecthood," a spiritual imperative: "Presentness is grace."<sup>26</sup>

With its condemnation of theatrical art and its insistence on individual grace, this brief against minimalism is distinctly puritanical (its epigraph concerning the presentness of God refers to the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards). And its aesthetic does depend on an act of faith. Against avant-gardist atheism we are asked to believe in consensual quality, "specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt." As Judd implicitly countered quality with interest, so Fried explicitly counters interest with *conviction*, which, like Greenberg, he attempts to save from subjectivism by an appeal to quasi-objective standards of taste, that is, to a particular judgment of an exclusive history of art. In short, beyond respect for the old decorum of the arts, Fried requests devotion to art, and in the words "compel conviction" are exposed the disciplinary underpinnings of this aesthetic. Apparently, the real threat of the minimalist paradigm is not only that it

may disrupt the autonomy of art but that it may corrupt belief in art, that it may sap its conviction value. Here the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy returns in a late guise, and it suggests that rather than separate from religion (as Enlightenment aesthetics sometimes proposed to be), autonomous art is, in part, a secret substitute for religion—that is, a secret substitute for the moral disciplining of the subject that religion once provided.<sup>27</sup>

In the end the complication of minimalism for Fried comes clear in a long footnote in which he glosses a remark by Greenberg that "a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one."<sup>28</sup> Fried must qualify this avant-gardist intimation that modernist art voids the conventional, for otherwise it might allow recognition of minimalism as advanced art. So first he distinguishes between the "irreducible essence of art" and the "minimal conditions" for its recognition as such. Then he argues that this essence is *conditional*, but not to the point where it becomes *conventional*, that is, to the point where aesthetic autonomy is threatened: "This is not to say that painting *has no essence*; it is to claim that that essence—i.e., that which compels conviction—is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past." This formula is an affirmation of categorical limits ("painting") and institutional norms ("the vital work") in the face of the minimalist threat to both. As such it attempts to resolve the contradictions of late-modernist discourse inherited from Greenberg—but in a way that remains *within* this discourse and stands *against* its supersession in minimalism.

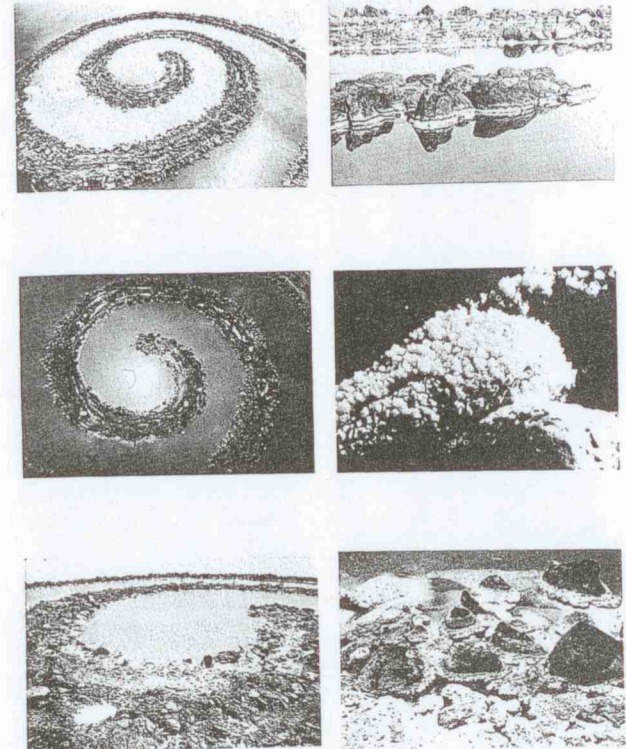
#### GENEALOGIES: "ROOT, HOG OR DIE"

Fried is an excellent critic of minimalism not because he is right to condemn it but because in order to do so persuasively he has to understand it, and this is to understand its threat to late modernism. Again, Fried sees minimalism as a corruption of late modernism "by a sensibility *already* theatrical, already (to say the worst) corrupted or perverted by theatre." In this reading minimalism develops out of late modernism, only to break it apart (the Latin *corruptere*, the root

of *corrupt*, means "to break"), contaminated as minimalism already is by theatre. But theatre here represents more than a concern with time alien to visual art; it is also, as "the negation of art," a code word for avant-gardism. We arrive, then, at this equation: *minimalism breaks with late modernism through a partial reprise of the historical avant-garde, specifically its disruption of the formal categories of institutional art*. To understand minimalism—that is, to understand its significance for advanced art since its time—both parts of this equation must be grasped at once.

First the minimalist break: rhetorically at least, minimalism is inaugurated when Judd reads late modernism so literally that he answers its call for self-critical objectivity perversely with specific *objects*. Morris seeks to reconcile this new minimalist literalism with the old modernist autonomy by means of the gestalt, only thereby to shift the focus from the object to its perception, to its *situation*. Fried then rises to condemn this theatrical move as a threat to artistic decorum and a corruption of artistic conviction; in so doing he exposes the disciplinary basis of his formalist aesthetics. In this general scenario, then, minimalism emerges as a dialectical moment of a "new limit and a new freedom" for art, in which sculpture is reduced one moment to the status of a thing "between an object and a monument" and expanded the next moment to an experience of sites "mapped out" but "not socially recognized" (in his anecdote Smith mentions "turnpikes, air strips, drill grounds," the very expanded field condemned by Fried but explored by Smithson and many others). In short, *minimalism appears as a historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broken up*, in which the ideal of pure art becomes the reality of one more specific object among others.

This last point leads to the other side of the minimalist rupture, for if minimalism breaks with late-modernist art, by the same token it prepares the postmodernist art to come.<sup>29</sup> Yet before this genealogy is sketched, the avant-gardist part of the minimalist equation must be grasped. In chapter 1 I discussed the return of the transgressive avant-garde (especially Duchampian dada and Russian constructivism) in art of the 1960s, which poses the problem of its delay in the previous decades. To a great extent this avant-garde was suppressed



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1969–70, details.



by Nazism and Stalinism, but it was also detained in North America by a combination of old anti-modernist forces and new Cold War politics, which tended to reduce the avant-garde to bolshevism *tout court*.<sup>30</sup> This North American delay allowed the dominance of Greenbergian formalism, which not only overbore the transgressive avant-garde institutionally but almost defined it out of existence. Thus, for Greenberg in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939/1961), the aim of the avant-garde is not at all to sublimate art *into* life but rather to purify art *of* life—to save it from debasement by mass-cultural kitsch and abandonment by bourgeois patronage. In effect, this formalist avant-garde sought to *preserve* what the transgressive avant-garde sought to *transform*: the institutional autonomy of art. Faced with this account, the minimalists looked to the transgressive avant-garde for alternative models of practice. Thus Andre turned to Alexander Rodchenko and Constantin Brancusi, Flavin to Vladimir Tatlin, many others to Duchamp, and so on. In this way minimalism became one site of a general return of this avant-garde—a return that, with the force of the repressed, opened up the disciplinary order of late modernism.

This avant-gardist connection may explain why, in the very first sentence of "Art and Objecthood," Fried brands minimalism as "largely ideological" when most critics saw it as largely *nonideological*, altogether minimal in content, a zero degree of art. One implication here is that minimalism is an aesthetic fraud that corrupts conviction in art, but there is another: that minimalism presents a self-conscious position *on* art, which might allow it not only to comprehend modernist art as an institutional discourse, an array of other "largely ideological" positions, but also to intervene in this discourse *as* such a position. Again, this is an avant-gardist recognition (Fried smelled the same rat as Greenberg: Duchamp and disciples), but minimalism does more than repeat it, for, as I argued in chapter 1, only with minimalism does this understanding become self-conscious. That is, only in the early 1960s is the institutionality not only of art but also of the avant-garde first appreciated and then exploited.<sup>31</sup>

For many critics the failure of the historical avant-garde to integrate art into life renders this avant-gardist project futile. "Since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as an institution is accepted as *art*," Peter Bürger

writes in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), "the gesture of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic."<sup>32</sup> But this failure of the transgressive avant-garde in the 1910s and 1920s as well as of the first neo-avant-garde in the 1950s is not total; at a bare minimum it prompts a practical critique of the institution of art, the tradition of the avant-garde, and other discourses in a *second* neo-avant-garde that emerges in the 1960s. In this second neo-avant-garde, in which minimalism as well as pop art figure prominently, the aim is twofold at least: on the one hand, to reflect on the contextual conditions of art, as in minimalism, in order to expand its parameters; and on the other hand, to exploit the conventionality of the avant-garde, as in pop, in order to comment on modernist and mass-cultural formations alike. Both steps are important to the institutional critique that follows in art of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Finally, however, my claim that the mission of the avant-garde is comprehended, if not completed, only with the neo-avant-garde furthered by minimalism and pop rests on this belief: the break that Bürger considers the ultimate significance of the avant-garde is only achieved by this neo-avant-garde in its contestation of formalist modernism.

The meaning of the break in the history of art that the historical avant-garde movements provoked [Bürger writes] does not consist in the destruction of art as an institution, but in the destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones. This has consequences for scholarly dealings with works of art; the normative examination is replaced by a functional analysis, the object of whose investigation would be social effect (function) of a work and a sociologically definable public within an already existing institutional frame.<sup>33</sup>

Only with minimalism is such "normative examination"—in my account the categorical approach of Greenbergian formalism—revealed to be prejudicial. And with this revelation come the two shifts that I have stressed: the *normative* criterion of *quality* is displaced by the *experimental* value of *interest*, and art is

seen to develop less by the *refinement* of the given forms of art (in which the pure is pursued, the extraneous expunged) than by the *redefinition* of such aesthetic categories. In this way the object of critical investigation becomes less the essence of a medium than "the social effect (function) of a work" and, more importantly, the intent of artistic intervention becomes less to secure a transcendental conviction in art than to undertake an immanent testing of its discursive rules and institutional regulations. Indeed, this last point may provide a provisional distinction between formalist, modernist art and avant-gardist, postmodernist art: to compel conviction versus to cast doubt; to seek the essential versus to reveal the conditional.

None of this develops as smoothly or as completely as I imply here. Nevertheless, if minimalism and pop do mark a historical crux, then, again, they will suggest not only a perspective on modernist art but also a genealogy of postmodernist art. This genealogy cannot be a stylistic history of influence or evolution (in which minimalism "reduces" the art object, say, so that conceptualism may then "dematerialize" it altogether), nor can it be a psychological account of generational conflicts or periodic reactions (as with the trashing of the 1960s with which I began). Again, only an analysis that allows for both parts of the minimalist equation—the break with late modernism and the return of the avant-garde—can begin to account for the advanced art of the last thirty-five years or so.

A few readings of recent art approach minimalism and pop as such a crux, either as a break with the aesthetic order of late modernism or as a reprise of the critical strategies of the readymade (but not both); they are significant for what they exclude as well as include. In two essays from 1979 Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens depart from the aesthetic order mapped out by Fried in "Art and Objecthood."<sup>34</sup> For Crimp it is theatrical presence, condemned by Fried and repressed in late-modernist art, that returns in the performance and video art of the early 1970s, to be recontained in the pictures of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and others in the late 1970s. For Owens it is linguistic temporality that returns to disrupt the visual spatiality of late-modernist art: the textual decenterings of the art object in the site/nonsite works of Smithson, for

example, or the allegorical collisions of aesthetic categories in the performances of Laurie Anderson. Yet, however much they comprehend, both scenarios overlook crucial developments: the first neglects the institutional critique that emerges from minimalism, and the second does not question the historical forces at work in the textual fragmentation of art after minimalism. Moreover, both critics accept the terms offered by Fried, which are not deconstructed so much as reversed. In this way his negative terms, the theatrical and the temporal, are only revalued as positive, and his late-modernist schema remains in place, indeed in force.<sup>35</sup>

As an analysis of perception, minimalism prepared a further analysis of the conditions of perception. This led to a critique of the spaces of art (as in the work of Michael Asher), of its exhibition conventions (as in Daniel Buren), of its commodity status (as in Hans Haacke)—in short, to a critique of the institution of art. For critics like Benjamin Buchloh this history is mostly a genealogy of the presentational strategies of the readymade. Yet, as we have seen, this narrative also leaves out a crucial concern: the sexual-linguistic constitution of the subject. For the most part this concern is left out of the art as well, for, again, even as minimalism turned from the objective orientation of formalism to the subjective orientation of phenomenology, it tended to position artist and viewer alike not only as historically innocent but as sexually indifferent, and the same holds for much conceptual and institution-critical work that followed minimalism. This omission is addressed in feminist art from the middle 1970s through the middle 1980s, and in this investigation such disparate artists as Mary Kelly and Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler and Martha Rosler turned to images and discourses adjacent to the art world, especially to representations of women in mass culture and to constructions of femininity in psychoanalytic theory. This is the most productive critique of minimalism to date, and it is elaborated in practice.

Recently the status of minimalism has changed once more. On the one hand, it recedes from us as an archival object as the 1960s become an historical period.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, it rushes toward us as artists seek an alternative to practices of the 1970s and 1980s. This return is a mixed event: often rather than

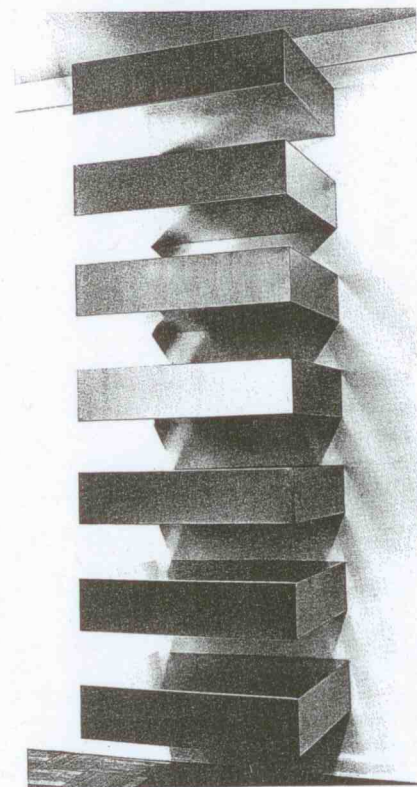


a working through of the problems left by minimalism, it appears strategic and/or reactive. Thus there are strategic revisions of minimalism that refashion it in iconographic, expressive, and/or spectacular themes—as if to attack it with the very terms that it opposed. So, too, there are reactive versions of minimalism that pit it against subsequent work—that pose its phenomenological intimation of the body, say, against the psychoanalytic definition of the subject in feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s (which here becomes the object of resentment). In this way, even as minimalism became a set style long ago, its value is still not set, and this is further evidence of its crucial status in postwar art.<sup>37</sup>

A POP-MINI-SERIES: "A SCHIZOPHRENIC CLATTERING"

Finally, in order to understand the crux of minimalism we must reposition it in its own time. One way to do so is to juxtapose minimalism with pop art, as related responses to the same moment in the dialectic of modernism and mass culture. In this account both minimalism and pop confront, on the one hand, the rarefied high art of late modernism and, on the other hand, the spectacular culture of advanced capitalism, and both are soon overwhelmed by these forces. Thus pop may seek to use mass culture in order to test high art, but its dominant effect is to recoup the low for the high, the categories of which remain mostly intact. And minimalism may resist both high art and low culture in order to regain a transformative autonomy of aesthetic practice, but its dominant effect is to allow this autonomy to be dispersed across an expanded field of cultural activity.<sup>38</sup> In the case of pop, then, the fabled integration of high art and low culture is attained, but mostly in the interests of the culture industry, to which, with Warhol and others, the avant-garde becomes as much a subcontractor as an antagonist. In the case of minimalism the fabled autonomy of art is achieved, but mostly to be corrupted, broken up, dispersed.

What forces effect this integration and that corruption? The best clues are the pop embrace and the minimalist refusal of low culture, both of which point to a new order of serial production and consumption. In this light the minimalist stress on perceptual presence resists mass-mediated representations.



Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1966.

Moreover, the minimalist insistence on specific objects counters simulacral images—even as minimalism, like pop, also employs serial forms and techniques. In short, the minimalist emphasis on the physical here-and-now is not only an enthusiasm for phenomenology, nor is the minimalist suspicion about artistic subjectivity only an embrace of structuralism. In part the first critiques, even as the second reflects, a reification of history and a fragmentation of the subject associated since Georg Lukács with the dynamic of capitalism. As I argue in chapter 3, these historical processes reach a new intensive level in the 1960s—to the point, Fredric Jameson has claimed, where they effect an “eclipse, finally, of all depth, especially *historicity* itself, with the subsequent appearance of pastiche and nostalgia art.”<sup>39</sup> Such an eclipse is projected by minimalism and pop alike, with each so insistent on the externality, indeed the superficiality, of contemporary representations, meanings, experiences. Certainly pastiche and nostalgia, the twin reactions to this putative eclipse of historical depth, dominate the cultural wares of the 1970s and 1980s.

Minimalism may resist the spectacular image and the disembodied subject of advanced capitalism, while pop may embrace them. But in the end minimalism may resist these effects only to advance them too.<sup>40</sup> This notion will remain conjectural, however, at the homological level of reflections or the mechanistic level of responses, unless a local link between artistic forms and socio-economic forces in the 1960s is found. One such link is provided by the readymade: both minimalism and pop use the readymade not only thematically but formally, even structurally—as a way à la Judd to put one thing after the other, to avoid the idealist rationalism of traditional composition.<sup>41</sup> But to what order do these minimalist industrial objects and pop art simulacra point? To work in a series, to serial production and consumption, to the socio-economic order of one-thing-after-another.

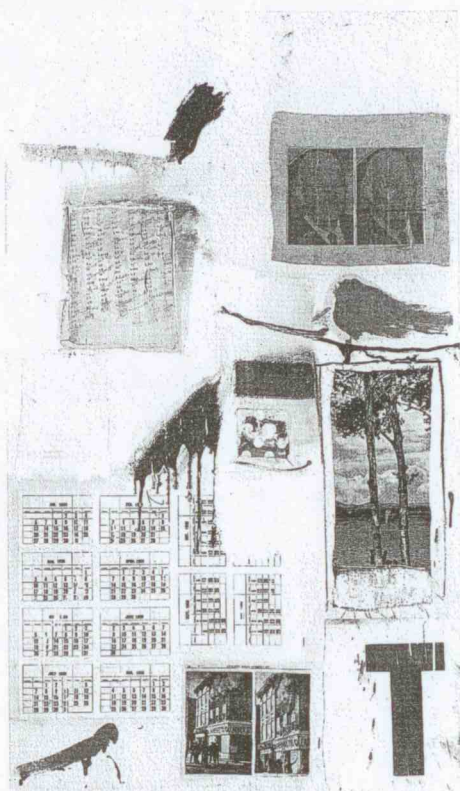
Of course seriality precedes minimalism and pop. Indeed, this procedure penetrated art when its old transcendental orders (God, pristine nature, Platonic forms, artistic genius) began to fall apart. For once these orders were lost as referents or guarantees, “the oeuvre [became] the original” and “each painting [became] a discontinuous term of an indefinite series, and thus legible first not

in its relation to the world but in its relation to other paintings by the same artist.”<sup>42</sup> Such seriality is not evident much before industrial production, which more than any other force eroded the old orders of art, especially pristine nature. Ironically, even as artists from Claude Monet to Jackson Pollock wrested original impressions from this reified nature, they succumbed to seriality through this very struggle. This succumbing to seriality is fundamental to the becoming-abstract of art. Nevertheless, in abstract art seriality still pertains to the pictorial ordering of the motif more than to the technical production of the work.

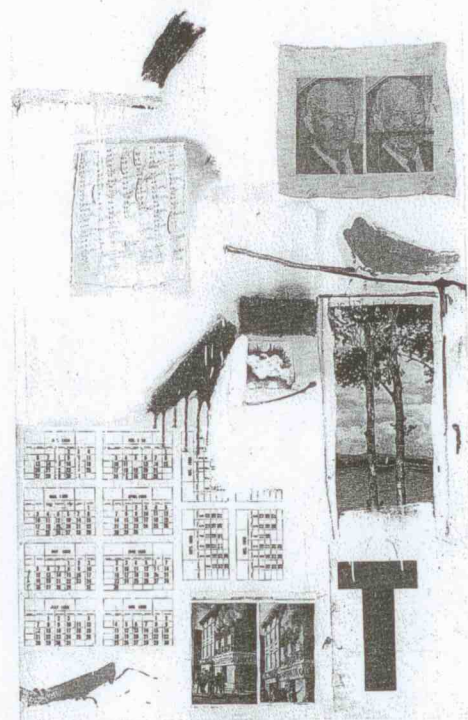
In time, however, seriality could not be avoided, and this recognition led to demonstrations and counter-demonstrations of its logic. Consider, for example, how Rauschenberg tests this logic in *Factum I* and *II* (1957), each canvas filled with found images and aleatory gestures that are repeated, imperfectly, in the other. *Yet not until minimalism and pop is serial production made consistently integral to the technical production of the work of art.* More than any mundane content, this integration makes such art “signify in the same mode as objects in their everydayness, that is, in their latent *systematic*.”<sup>43</sup> And more than any cool sensibility, this integration severs such art not only from artistic subjectivity (perhaps the last transcendental order of art) but also from representational models.<sup>44</sup> In this way minimalism rids art of the anthropomorphic and the representational not through anti-illusionist ideology so much as through serial production. For abstraction tends only to *sublate* representation, to preserve it in cancellation, whereas repetition, the (re)production of simulacra, tends to *subvert* representation, to undercut its referential logic. (In future histories of artistic paradigms, repetition, not abstraction, may be seen to supersede representation—or at least to disrupt it most effectively.)<sup>45</sup>

Since the Industrial Revolution a contradiction has existed between the craft basis of visual art and the industrial order of social life. Much sculpture since Rodin seeks to resolve this contradiction between “individual aesthetic creation” and “collective social production,” especially in the turn to processes like welding and to paradigms like the readymade.<sup>46</sup> With minimalism and pop this contradiction is at once so attenuated (as in the minimalist concern with





Robert Rauschenberg, *Factum I and II*, 1957.



nuances of perception) and so collapsed (as in the Warholian motto "I want to be a machine") that it stands revealed as a principal dynamic of modernist art. In this regard, too, the seriality of minimalism and pop is indicative of advanced-capitalist production and consumption, for both register the penetration of industrial modes into spheres (art, leisure, sport) that were once removed from them. As the economist Ernest Mandel has written: "Far from representing a 'post-industrial society,' late capitalism thus constitutes *generalized universal industrialization* for the first time in history. Mechanization, standardization, over-specialization, and parcellization of labour, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life."<sup>47</sup> Both minimalism and pop resist some aspects of this logic, exploit others (like mechanization and standardization), and foretell still others. For in serial production a degree of difference between commodity-signs becomes necessary; this distinguishes it from mass production. Indeed, in our political economy of commodity-signs it is difference that we consume.<sup>48</sup>

This logic of difference and repetition is second nature to us today, but it was not so patent thirty-five years ago. Yet this logic structured minimalism and pop: in minimalism it is evident in the tension between different specific objects and repetitive serial ordering, and in pop in the production of different images through repetitive procedures (like silkscreening). Again, this serial structure integrates minimalism and pop, like no other art before them, into our systematic world of serial objects, images, people. Finally, more than any industrial technique in minimalism or mass-cultural content in pop, this logic, long since general to both high art and low culture, has redefined the lines between the two.

Although this logic qualifies the transgressive value of minimalism and pop, neither art merely reflects it. Both play with this logic too; that is, both release difference and repetition in sometimes subversive ways. As Gilles Deleuze, the great philosopher of these forces, wrote in 1969:

The more our daily life appears standardised, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the



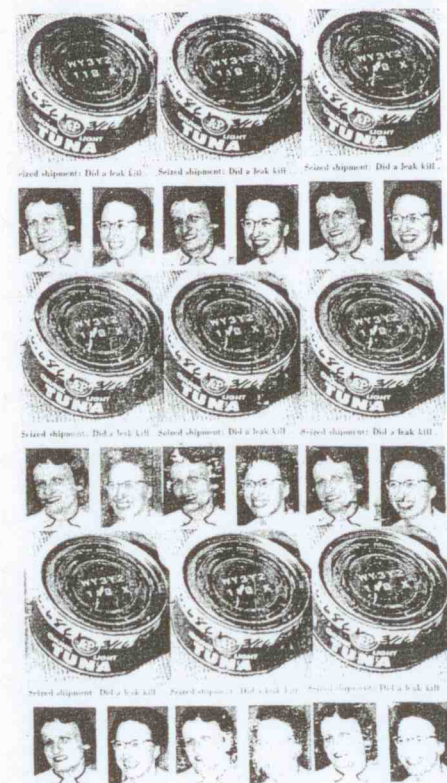
Window display with paintings by Andy Warhol, Bonwit Teller, New York, 1961.



more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition, and even in order to make the two extremes resonate—namely, the habitual series of consumption and the instinctual series of destruction and death. Art thereby connects the tableau of cruelty with that of stupidity, and discovers underneath consumption a schizophrenic clattering of the jaws, and underneath the most ignoble destructions of war, still more processes of consumption. It aesthetically reproduces the illusions and mystifications which make up the essence of this civilisation, in order that Difference may at last be expressed.<sup>49</sup>

As Deleuze suggests, the artistic crux marked by minimalism and pop must be related to other ruptures of the 1960s—social and economic, theoretical and political. Somehow the new immanence of art with minimalism and pop is connected *not only* with the new immanence of critical theory (the poststructuralist shift from transcendental causes to immanent effects), *but also* with the new immanence of North American capital in the 1960s. Somehow, too, the transgressions of institutional art with minimalism and pop are associated *not only* with the transgressions of sexist and racist institutions by women, African-Americans, students, and others, *but also* with the transgressions of North American power in the 1960s.

The diagram of these connections is very difficult to produce; certainly it cannot be drawn with the conventional tools of art criticism, semiotic analysis, or social art history alone.<sup>50</sup> At risk in such mappings is the specific location of the art, but the relations between minimalism and pop and the greater forces of the time are also crucial to record. Could it be, for example, that the historical consciousness of this neo-avant-garde—the recognition of the conventionality of art and avant-garde alike—depends on the privileged perspective that advanced capitalism offers its culture for the first time in the 1960s?



Andy Warhol, *Tunafish Disaster*, 1963.



many critics today make a fetish of historical specificity—as though, once context is tracked down, the contingent truth of a given problem will come out with its hands up.

Parts of chapter 1 have appeared in "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October* 70 (Fall 1994); of chapter 2 in "The Crux of Minimalism," in Howard Singerman, ed., *Individuals* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986); of chapter 3 in "Wild Signs," in Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); and of chapter 7 in "Postmodernism in Parallax," *October* 63 (Winter 1993).

1

WHO'S AFRAID OF THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE?

1

Peter Bürger poses the question of the neo-avant-garde in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), more on which below; but Benjamin Buchloh has specified its paradigm repetitions in several texts over the last fifteen years. This chapter is written in dialogue with his criticism, and I try to clarify my debts as well as my differences as I go along.

2

Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–38.

3

Lacan details this connection in "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious" (1957), and in "The Meaning of the Phallus" (1958) he deems it fundamental to his return to Freud: "It is on the basis of such a wager—laid down by me as the principle of a commentary of Freud's work which I have been pursuing for seven years—that I have been led to certain conclusions: above all, to argue, as necessary to any articulation of analytic phenomena, for the notion of the signifier, in the sense in which it is opposed to that of the signified in modern linguistic analysis. The latter, born since Freud, could not be taken into account by him, but it is my contention that Freud's discovery stands out precisely for having had to anticipate its formulas, even while setting out from a domain in which one could hardly expect to recognise its sway. Conversely, it is Freud's discovery that gives to the opposition of signifier to signified the full weight which it should imply: namely, that the signifier has an active function in determining the effects in which the signifiable appears as submitting to its mark, becoming through that

passion the signified" (*Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose [New York: W. W. Norton, 1985], 78).

A similar strategy of historical connection has transformed modernist studies. In a deferred recognition some critics have linked Saussurean linguistics to high-modernist reformulations of the artistic sign: in primitivist cubism (Yve-Alain Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," *Representations* 18 [Spring 1987]); in cubist collage (Rosalind Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," in Lynn Zelevansky, ed., *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992]); in the Duchampian readymade (Benjamin Buchloh in various texts). On another axis T. J. Clark has juxtaposed the fantasmatic figures of the late Cézanne with the sexual theories of the early Freud in "Freud's Cézanne" (*Representations* [Winter 1996]); and in *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993) I connect surrealism with the contemporaneous theory of the death drive.

4

Foucault, "What is an Author?", 135.

5

Of course these discourses are not lost and found, nor did they disappear. There was continuous work on Marx and Freud, just as there was on the historical avant-garde; indeed, continuity with the neo-avant-garde exists in the person of Duchamp alone.

6

See Benjamin Buchloh, "Constructing (the History of) Sculpture," in Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), and my "Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism," in Richard Andrews, ed., *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914–1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).

7

This trumping, which I discuss further in chapter 2, is not unique to Judd; all minimalists and conceptualists confronted the "painterly peripety" posed by Frank Stella and others (see Benjamin Buchloh, "Formalism and Historicity: Changing Concepts in American and European Art since 1945," in Anne Rorimer, ed., *Europe in the Seventies* [Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1977], 101). Neither is the method of contradictory combination specific to North American art; its master may well be Marcel Broodthaers, who draws on Mallarmé, Duchamp, Magritte, Manzoni, George Segal. . . .

8

Obviously both formulations require qualification. Not all readymades are everyday objects; and though I disagree with aestheticist readings of the readymades, not all are indifferent. As



for constructivism, its industrial ambitions were foiled at many levels—materials, training, factory integration, cultural policy.

9

I do not discuss feminist practices specifically, for they postdate the initial neo-avant-garde at issue here. In this moment the Duchampian urinal returned, but mostly for men. In a later moment, however, feminist artists put the readymade device to critical use—a development traced in chapter 2.

10

*Theory of the Avant-Garde* provoked much debate in Germany, which is resumed in W. M. Lüdke, ed., "Theorie der Avant-garde." *Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976). Bürger responded in a 1979 essay that introduces the English translation of his book (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; all subsequent references appear in the text). There are many responses in English; the most pointed one—Benjamin Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* (November 1984)—informs some points I make below.

11

"What makes Bürger so important," Jochen Schulte-Sasse writes in his Foreword to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, "is that his theory reflects the conditions of its own possibilities" (xxxiv). This is not true of its artistic conditions. As Buchloh notes in his review, Bürger is oblivious to that neo-avant-garde which does what he says it cannot do: develop the critique of the institution of art.

12

On the ramifications of this premise for the formation of art history as a discipline, see M. M. Bakhtin/P. M. Medvedev, "The Formal Method in European Art Scholarship," in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 41–53.

13

A productivist demand may also be implicit in some readymades, even in the anarchistic formula of the reciprocal readymades: "Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board" (Duchamp, "The Green Box" [1934], in *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson [London: Thames & Hudson, 1975], 32). On this point also see chapter 4.

14

Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 105.

15

If Hegel and Kant preside over the discipline of art history, one cannot escape historicism by a turn from the former to the latter. Formalism can be historicist too, as in the Greenbergian argument that artistic innovation proceeds through formal self-criticism.

16

Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 216. "A new generation of Dadaists has emerged today," Richard Hamilton wrote in 1961, "but Son of Dada is accepted" ("For the Finest Art, Try Pop," *Gazette*, no. 1 [1961]). In this pop "affirmation" Hamilton registers the shift from the transgression value of the avant-garde object to the spectacle value of the neo-avant-garde celebrity.

17

On the latter point see Benjamin Buchloh, "Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant-Garde," *Artforum* (May 1980): 56.

18

This is similar to the charge made by Greenberg, a great enemy of avant-gardism, against minimalism in particular. See his "Recentness of Sculpture" (1967), in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (New York: Dutton, 1968). Also see chapter 2.

19

This model of tragedy and farce need not produce posthistorical effects. Moreover, in Marx the first term is ironized, not heroicized, by the second term: the moment of farce tunnels back and digs under the moment of tragedy. In this way the great original—in his case Napoleon, in our case the historical avant-garde—may be undermined. In "'Well Grubbed, Old Mole': Marx, Hamlet, and the (Un)fixing of Representation," Peter Stallybrass, to whom I am indebted for this point, comments: "Marx thus pursues a double strategy in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Through the first strategy, history is represented as a catastrophic decline from Napoleon to Louis Bonaparte. But in the second strategy, the effect of this 'debased' repetition is to unsettle the status of the origin. Napoleon I can now only be read back through his nephew: his ghost is awakened but as a caricature" (lecture at Cornell University, March 1994). In this way if the evolutionist analogy in Marx is beyond critical salvage, this rhetorical model may not be. On repetition in Marx see Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) as well as Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (London: Verso, 1995); on rhetoricity in Marx see Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). On the notion of the posthistorical see



Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1992).

20

Although no less a projection than the present, this past is obscure: what is this lost object of the melancholic critic? For Bürger it is not the historical avant-garde alone, even though he does castigate it like a melancholic betrayed by a love object. Most critics of modernism and/or postmodernism harbor a lost ideal against which the bad object of the present is judged, and often, as in the Freudian formula of melancholia, this ideal is not quite conscious.

21

Some comparison of Bürger and Buchloh is useful at this point. Buchloh also regards avant-garde practice as punctual and final (e.g., in "Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture" he deems traditional sculpture "definitely abolished by 1913" with the Tatlin constructions and the Duchamp readymades [in Chantal Pontbriand, ed., *Performance, Text(s) & Documents* (Montreal: Parachute, 1981), 56]). Yet he draws an opposite conclusion from Bürger: the avant-garde does not advance arbitrariness but counters it; rather than a relativism of means, it imposes a necessity of analysis, the slackening of which (as in the various *rappels à l'ordre* of the 1920s) threatens to undo modernism as such (see "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression" [October 16 (Spring 1981)]). "The meaning of the break in the history of art that the historical avant-garde movements provoked," Bürger writes, "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" (87). "The conclusion," Buchloh responds in his review, "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" (21). For Buchloh this "aesthetic passivism" promotes "a vulgarized notion of postmodernism" even as it condemns it.

Bürger and Buchloh also agree on the failure of the avant-garde, but not on its ramifications. For Buchloh avant-garde practice addresses social contradictions that it cannot resolve; in this structural sense *it can only fail*. Yet if the work of art can register such contradictions, its very failure is recouped. "The failure of that attempt," Buchloh writes of the welded sculpture of Julio Gonzalez, Picasso, and David Smith, which evokes the contradiction between collective industrial production and individual preindustrial art, "inasmuch as it becomes evident in the work itself, is then the work's *historic and aesthetic* authenticity" ("Michael Asher," 59). According to this same dialectic of failure, Buchloh regards repetition as the authentic appearance of the neo-avant-garde. This dialectic is seductive, but it tends to limit

the possibilities of the neo-avant-garde before the fact—a paradox in the work of this important advocate of its practices. Moreover, even if Buchloh (or any of us) gauges these limits precisely, from what purchase does he (do we) do so?

22

Adorno criticizes Benjamin on a related count in his famous response to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "It would border on anarchism to revoke the reification of a great work of art in the spirit of immediate use values" (letter, March 16, 1936, in *Aesthetics and Politics* [London: New Left Books, 1977], 123). For instances of the dadaist ideology of immediacy see almost any relevant text by Tristan Tzara, Richard Hülsenbeck, etc.

23

Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 11. A complementary critique argues that the avant-garde *succeeded*—but only at cost to us all; that it penetrated other aspects of social life—but only to desublimize them, to open them up to violent aggressions. For a contemporary version of this Lukácsian critique (which is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the neoconservative condemnation of avant-gardism *tout court*), see Russell A. Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

24

B. Lindner, "Aufhebung der Kunst in der Lebenspraxis? Über die Aktualität der Auseinandersetzung mit den historischen Avantgardebewegungen," in Lüdke, ed., *Antworten*, 83.

25

Rauschenberg quoted in John Cage, "On Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work" (1961), in *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 105.

26

See Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (New York: Abrams, 1966). The first serious intimation of postmodernism in art draws on this avant-garde project to challenge the modernism advanced by Greenberg. In "Other Criteria" (1968/1972) Leo Steinberg plays on the classic definition of modernist self-criticism: rather than define its medium in order to "entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" (Greenberg in "Modernist Painting" [1961/1965]), Steinberg calls on art to "redefine the area of its competence by testing its limits" (*Other Criteria* [London: Oxford University Press, 1972], 77). The dominant axis of much neo-avant-garde art was vertical, traced in time; it researched past practices in order to return them, transformed, to the present. The dominant axis of much contemporary art is



horizontal, arrayed across space; it moves from debate to debate as so many sites for work—a reorientation that I discuss in chapter 5.

27

Alexander Rodchenko, "Working with Mayakowsky," in *From Painting to Design: Russian Constructivist Art of the Twenties* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzyska, 1981), 191. How are we to read the retrospective aspect of this statement? How retroactive is it? For a different account see Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 43–45.

28

But can one distinguish this work from its rejection? It can also be argued that the policy of the Society exhibition—to include all comers in alphabetical order—was more transgressive than *Fountain* (despite the fact that its rejection belied this policy). In any case *Fountain* poses the question of the *unpresentable*: not shown, then lost, later replicated, only to enter the discourse of modern art retroactively as a foundational act. (*Monument to the Third International* is a different instance of a work turned into a fetish that covers its own absence, a process that I think below in terms of trauma.) The unpresentable is its own avant-garde paradigm, indeed its own tradition, from the Salon des Refusés through the Secession movements onward. It should be distinguished from the *unrepresentable*, the modernist concern with the sublime, as well as from the *unexhibited*. This last distinction might point again to the heuristic difference between convention critique and institution critique.

29

The *Musée d'art moderne* of Marcel Broodthaers is a "masterpiece" of this analysis, but let me offer two later examples. In 1979 Michael Asher conceived a project for a group show at the Art Institute of Chicago in which a statue of George Washington (a copy of the celebrated one by Jean Antoine Houdon) was moved from the central front of the museum, where it performed a commemorative and decorative role, to an eighteenth-century period gallery, where its aesthetic and art-historical functions were foregrounded. These functions of the statue became clear in the simple act of its displacement—as did the fact that in neither position did the statue become historical. Here Asher elaborates the readymade paradigm into a situational aesthetics in which certain limitations of the art museum as a place of historical memory are underscored. ("In this work I was the author of the *situation*, not of the elements," Asher comments in *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* [Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983], 209.)

My other example also elaborates the readymade paradigm but in order to trace extrinsic affiliations. *MetroMobilitan* (1985) by Hans Haacke consists of a miniature facade of the

Metropolitan Museum of Art inset with a statement from the museum to corporations concerning the "many public relations opportunities" of museum sponsorship. It is also decorated with the usual banners, one of which announces a show of ancient treasures from Nigeria. The other banners, however, are not usual: they quote policy statements of Mobil, sponsor of the Nigeria show, about its involvement with the apartheid regime of South Africa. This work makes the co-duplicity of museum and corporation patent, again through the effective use of the assisted readymade.

30

Bürger acknowledges this "false elimination of the distance between art and life" and draws two conclusions: "the contradictoriness of the avant-gardiste undertaking" (50) and the necessity of some autonomy for art (54). Buchloh is more dismissive. "The primary function of the neo-avant-garde," he writes in "Primary Colors," "was not to examine this historical body of aesthetic knowledge [i.e., the paradigm of the monochrome], but to provide models of cultural identity and legitimation for the reconstructed (or newly constituted) liberal bourgeois audience of the postwar period. This audience sought a reconstruction of the avant-garde that would fulfill its own needs, and the demystification of aesthetic practice was certainly not among those needs. Neither was the integration of art into social practice, but rather the opposite: the association of art with spectacle. It is in the spectacle that the neo-avant-garde finds its place as the provider of a mythical semblance of radicality, and it is in the spectacle that it can imbue the repetition of its obsolete modernist strategies with the appearance of credibility" (51). I do not question the truth of this specific statement (made in relation to Yves Klein) so much as its finality as a general pronouncement upon the neo-avant-garde.

31

Obviously this singling out is artificial: Rauschenberg cannot be detached from a Cage milieu any more than Kaprow can be dissociated from a Fluxus ethos, and Broodthaers and Buren emerge in spaces vectored by different artistic and theoretical forces. Other historical examples would also generate other theoretical emphases.

32

Again Buchloh has led the way: "I want to argue, against Bürger, that the positing of a moment of historical originality in the relationship between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde does not allow for an adequate understanding of the complexity of that relationship, for we are confronted here with practices of repetition that cannot be discussed in terms of influences, imitation, and authenticity alone. A model of repetition that might



better describe this relationship is the Freudian concept of repetition that originates in repression and disavowal" ("Primary Colors," 43).

33

I return to this strategy in chapters 4 and 5. In paired poems in *Pense-Bête* (1963-64), "La Moule" and "La Méduse", Broodthaers offers two complementary totems of this tactic. The first, on the mussel, reads: "This clever thing has avoided society's mold./ She's cast herself in her very own./ Other look-alikes share with her the anti-sea./ She's perfect." And the second, on the jellyfish: "It's perfect/ No mold/ Nothing but body" (translated by Paul Schmidt in *October* 42). Also see Buchloh, "Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant-Garde," where he notes that Broodthaers was influenced by Lucien Goldmann, who in turn studied with Georg Lukács, the great theorist of reification. Broodthaers was also influenced along these lines by Manzoni.

34

Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 137-38. As Buchloh remarks, Buren directs his critique less at Duchamp than at his neo-avant-garde disciples (the phrase "petit-bourgeois anarchist radicality" is Buchloh's). But, as we will see, Buren is not immune to this charge either. Moreover, as his stripes are now his signature, it could be argued that they reinforce more than expose these parameters.

35

Again, one might note here the concomitant shift to a horizontal, synchronic, social axis of operation.

36

Daniel Buren, as quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 41.

37

Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio," *October* 10 (Fall 1979): 58; and *Reboundings*, trans. Philippe Hunt (Brussels: Daled & Gevaert, 1977), 73. This language informs influential theory of the time too, as in this trumping of ideology critique by Barthes, also in 1971: "It is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked (the doxa now takes care of that), it is the sign itself which must be shaken" ("Change the Object Itself," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath [New York: Hill and Wang, 1977], 167). How are we to relate institution critique in art and theory to other political forms of intervention and occupation around 1968? For me this question is riddled by a photo-document of an April 1968 project by Buren, which consisted of two hundred striped panels posted around Paris—to test the legibility of painting beyond the limits of the museum. In this one instance the panel is posted over various

advertisements on a bright orange billboard, but it also obscures a handwritten announcement of a student meeting at Vincennes (again, this is April 1968). Was the placement inadvertent? How are we to mediate these image-events?

38

I practice this continuation of the subject by other means in chapter 7; both here and there it is meant only as a model. In part this turn is driven by the need to think the atavistic aspects of contemporary nationalisms and neofascisms in a psychoanalytic frame (the work of Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen on identification and Slavoj Žižek on fantasy is important in this regard). It is also driven by the sense of a traumatic core in historical experience. This application has dangers, such as an invitation to immediate identification with the traumatized victim—a point at which popular culture and academic vanguard converge (sometimes the model of both seems to be *Oprah*, and the motto "Enjoy your symptom!"). Today innovative work in the humanities appears reconfigured less as cultural studies than as *trauma studies*. Repressed by various poststructuralisms, the real has returned, but as the traumatic real—a problem that I take up in chapter 5.

39

Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 88. Also see his *Seduction, Translation, the Drives*, ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (London: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1992).

40

The classic discussion of deferred action occurs in the Wolf-Man case history, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1914/1918). Above I said "comprehended" rather than "constituted," but the two processes are imbricated, especially in my analogy if the avant-garde artist-critic assumes the position of both analyst and analysand. This slippage between comprehended and constituted is not only my vacillation; it operates in the concept of deferred action, where the traumatic scene is ambiguous: is it actual, fantasmatic, and/or analytically constructed?

There are other problems with my model (besides the very problem of analogy). This deferral might not comprehend other delays and differences across other cultural space-times. So, too, even as it complicates the canonical avant-garde, it might obscure other innovative practices. It might also retain a normative logic whereby the good neo-avant-garde, like the good subject, is a self-aware one that recognizes repression and works through trauma.

41

T. J. Clark pointed to this need over twenty years ago in *Image of the People* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973): "As for the public, we could make an analogy with Freudian theory. . . . The



public, like the unconscious, is present only where it ceases; yet it determines the structure of private discourse; it is key to what cannot be said, and no subject is more important" (12).

42

"The crucial point here," Žižek writes in his Lacanian gloss, "is the changed status of an event: when it erupts for the first time it is experienced as a contingent trauma, as an intrusion of a certain nonsymbolized Real; only through repetition is this event recognized in its symbolic necessity—it finds its place in the symbolic network; it is realized in the symbolic order" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* [London: Verso, 1989], 61). In this formulation repetition appears restorative, even redemptive, which is unusual for Žižek, who privileges the intransigence of the traumatic real. Thus formulated in relation to the avant-garde, the discourse of trauma is no great improvement on the old discourse of shock, where repetition is little more than absorption, as here in Bürger: "As a result of repetition, it changes fundamentally: there is such a thing as expected shock. . . . The shock is 'consumed'" (81). The difference between shock and trauma is important to retain; it points to a crucial distinction between modernist and postmodernist discourses.

43

See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 55. We hardly need another magical key to Duchamp, but it is extraordinary how he built recursion and retroactivity into his art—as if he not only allowed for deferred action but took it as his subject. The language of suspended delays, missed encounters, *infra-mince* causalities, repetition, resistance, and reception, is everywhere in his work, which is, like trauma, like the avant-garde, definitively unfinished but always inscribed. Consider the specifications for the readymades in "The Green Box": "By planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), 'to inscribe a readymade'—The readymade can later be looked for.—(with all kinds of delays). *The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It is a kind of rendezvous*" (*Essential Writings*, 32).

44

In a sense the very discovery of *Nachträglichkeit* is deferred. However operative in such texts as the Wolf-Man case history, it was left to readers like Lacan and Laplanche to develop its theoretical implications. Moreover, Freud was not aware that his own thought developed in *nachträglich* fashion: e.g., not only the return of trauma in his work but also the double temporality through which trauma is conceived there—the diphasic onset of sexuality, the fear of castration (that requires both a traumatic sighting and a paternal injunction), and so on.

240

45

In the essay devoted to this notion, perhaps the crucial one in the shift from a structuralist to a poststructuralist problematic, Derrida writes: "*Différance* is neither a word nor a concept. In it, however, we shall see the juncture—rather than the summation—of what has been most decisively inscribed in the thought of what is conveniently called our 'epoch': the difference of forces in Nietzsche, Saussure's principle of semiological difference, difference as the possibility of [neurone] facilitation, impression and delayed effect in Freud, difference as the irreducibility of the trace of the other in Levinas, and the ontic-ontological difference in Heidegger" (*Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 130]).

46

Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 202, 203.

2

## THE CRUX OF MINIMALISM

1

Like 1848 for its subsequent generations, 1968 remains a prime cultural-political stake, and current interest in the art of the 1960s is part of its contestation.

2

The epigraphs of the four sections that follow are drawn from Donald Judd (1 and 3) in Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *ArtNews* (September 1966), reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 159, 157; Tony Smith (2) in Samuel Wagstaff, "Talking with Tony Smith," *Artforum* (December 1966): 19; and Gilles Deleuze (4), *Difference and Repetition* (1968), trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 293.

3

Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Year Book* 8 (1965), reprinted in *Complete Writings* (New York and Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, 1975), 184. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent Judd quotations are from this text (181-89).

4

See Rosalind Krauss, "LeWitt in Progress," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984). Although few critics listened, LeWitt insisted

241

on the illogic of his art in statements like "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (*Art-Language* [May 1969]).

5

Frank Stella in Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," 158.

6

Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," in *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), reprinted in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, 183. All subsequent Greenberg quotations are from this text (180-86).

7

John Cage, *Silence* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 76.

8

For example, Yvonne Rainer compared the factory fabrication, unitary forms, and literal aspect of minimalist art to the found movement, equal parts, and tasklike activity of Judson Church dance; see her "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A," in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*.

9

Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art," *Arts* (January 1965), reprinted in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, 399.

10

Judd in Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," reprinted in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, 156. Judd ascribes this a priori quality to European modern art as such, which is typical of the absolutist judgments of the time. This definition also opposes minimalist art to conceptual art in which the system is often a priori. Whether the precedence of the concept devalues the authorial subjectivity of the artist (as LeWitt claims in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" [*Artforum*, Summer 1967], "the idea becomes the machine that makes the art") or inflates this subjectivity (as occurs in most idealist versions) is a crucial ambiguity in conceptual art. How it is decided will determine its status in relation to minimalism—whether conceptual art elaborates "the crux of minimalism" or recoups it. But then this ambiguity may be undecidable, and this undecidability may be fundamental to conceptual art.

11

Among the antecedents of minimalism both positivist and avant-gardist tendencies appear in Johns (a case can be made for Ad Reinhardt as well).

12

See Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility—Reflections on Post '60s Sculpture," *Artforum* (November 1973).

13

See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967). I discuss this text at length below.

14

Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 292-93. The ultimate move comes with work that follows directly on minimalism, such as Robert Smithson's *Spinal Jetty* (1970), Serra's *Shift* (1970-72), and Bruce Nauman's video *Corridor* (1968-70). In this history Krauss favors sculpture that, like minimalism, is materialist (its meaning opaque, carried on the surface) as opposed to idealist (its meaning transparent to its structure), but this very opposition is idealist.

15

See, for example, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 13 (Spring 1979).

16

Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 3-4.

17

The reception of phenomenology was mediated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, especially his *Phenomenology of Perception*, which was translated in 1962. The reception of structural linguistics was mediated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and others, some of whose work was read by some North American artists in the middle 1960s.

18

"Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2" were published in *Artforum* (February and October 1966); Morris published "Part 3" in *Artforum* (June 1967), the same issue in which "Art and Objecthood" appeared, and "Part 4" appears in his collection *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993). The Morris and Fried texts are reprinted in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, from which the quotations here are drawn.

19

See Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting" (1955/1958), in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

20

Perhaps "interest" does not displace "quality" so much as provide the first term of its normative scheme. In this light Judd ascended to the pantheon of quality, which he defended



passionately. (As Howard Singerman suggested to me, Judd implies as much in "A long discussion not about master-pieces but why there are so few of them," *Art in America* [September and October 1984].) Moreover, it was his consistency that allowed minimalism to become a style. Finally, in his obsession with (anti)illusionism he remained bound to painting.

21

The remark is a response to questions about a six-foot steel cube titled *Die* (1962). Morris quotes Smith as follows:

Q: Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?  
A: I was not making a monument.

Q: Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?  
A: I was not making an object.

22

Even late-modernist sculpture such as Anthony Caro's suspends its objecthood, Fried argues, by its emphasis on opticality and "the efficacy of gesture."

23

Tony Smith in Wagstaff, "Talking with Tony Smith," 19. Smith mentions other "abandoned" sites that artists like Smithson soon entered, but one of his examples might qualify the avant-gardist value of this "expanded field": the Nazi drill ground in Nuremberg designed by Albert Speer. In short, on the other side of traditional forms also lies mass spectacle, and the desublimation of these forms can also abet a regression of the subject.

24

This is also the heretical stake of its avant-garde predecessors, with this difference argued in chapter 1: whereas avant-garde artists like Rodchenko mistook the conventionality of art for its end, neo-avant-garde artists like Smith imagined its end in the very limits of its conventionality.

25

In his subsequent historical work, Fried reads these principles into the origins of modern art.

26

For a critique of the notion of presentness see Rosalind Krauss, "The Blink of an Eye," in David Carroll, ed. *The States of "Theory"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Also

see the exchange between Fried and Krauss in Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987).

27

Ultimately the stake of Anglo-American formalism is the autonomous art object *only to the degree that it supports the autonomous art subject*, defined in aesthetic judgment and refined through aesthetic taste. This ethical imperative is strong in Fried, as manifest in the value of "conviction" and the fear of "corruption." (In this regard "theatre" may represent the threat not only of avant-gardism but of mass culture—its perversion of the moral subject as formed through modernist art. Certainly this is the case for Greenberg in "Modernist Painting.") In *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, Fried is explicit about the morality of autonomy: "While modernist painting has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of the society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure and complexity of moral experience—that is, of life itself, but life as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness" ([Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, 1965], 9). But this autonomy might also be undermined by conviction in this sense: conviction suggests dependence on the art object, indeed devotion to it, which might render the object less a mirror of the subject than a support that the subject requires. In any case the subject presumed by this criticism is quite different from the dominant models of my generation, which insisted not on conviction but on demystification and deconstruction. (On this point see my exchange with Fried in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* as well as my remarks in chapter 4.)

28

Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* (October 25, 1962): 30.

29

For example, minimalism pushes the "empirico-transcendental" analytic of modernist art, its double concern with the material and the spiritual, the immanent and the transcendental, to the point where this analytic is transformed—in the institution critique central to postmodernist art, its creative analysis of the discursive conditions of art. (On the "empirico-transcendental" analytic see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* [New York: Vintage Books, 1970], 318–22.)

30

That is, when it did not present the avant-garde as an expression of capitalist freedom—a use discussed by Serge Guilbaut in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

31

Another factor in the delayed reception of the historical avant-garde was the immaturity of North American institutions of high art, which had to be established before they could be embattled. In this establishment, however, modernist art was enshrined, and this, along with the wartime presence of European modernists in North America, allowed for a rapid recognition of this art as a discourse, then as an institution, and now as a period.

32

Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 53.

33

Ibid., 87. As suggested in chapter 1, Bürger intimates a posthistorical condition—that artists, critics, and historians are now, in a period after art, in the position of mere technocratic custodians of art. I see very different consequences.

34

See Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1978), and Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* 10 (Fall 1979).

35

Fried suggests as much in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, 56. The reversal of the opposition of presence and presentness was only one example of failed deconstruction. Another instance crucial to theories of postmodernism was the reversal of the oppositions of aura and reproduction, originality and repetition, developed by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). Too often this text was taken as a weapon to wither art suspected of aura; hence the attack on the original and the unique and the embrace of the photographic and the textual. Granted, this attack was provoked by a forced resurrection of aura—the various Frankenstein monsters, produced in the laboratory of market and academy, of neo-expressionism, postmodern architecture, art photography, and the like. Nonetheless, the postmodernist reading of Benjamin tended to collapse his dialectic of mechanical reproduction and auratic experience. In so doing it also tended to void the critical potential of each term—as long as they are held in tension.

36

Especially as its signal artists like Judd begin to die. In an excellent new introduction to the Battcock anthology on minimalism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Anne M. Wagner draws on Foucault to define this status of minimalism: the "privileged region of the archive is neither past nor present: at once close to us, and different from our present existence,

it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith [New York: Harper and Row, 1976], 130). This problematizes the objectivity of the minimalist crux: is it liminal as such—or only for us now?

37

There are also thematic femmings and queerings of minimalism. As represented by the exhibition *Sense and Sensibility*, curated by Lynn Zelevansky at the Museum of Modern Art in 1994, this femmed minimalist art is posed against the psychoanalytic feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s, which it regards as oppressive. There is also a critical version of this position, as represented by Anna C. Chave in "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power" (*Arts* [January 1990]), which attacks minimalism for macho iconography. Minimalism worked to avoid the authority of iconographic meaning; it is thus counterproductive to reassert this authority when it is this authority that is in question. Moreover, both reactions—artistic and critical—condemn minimalism in a way that forecloses a historical basis of feminist art. For again, however circumscribed, minimalism did put the question of the subject in play, and in this respect feminist art begins where minimalism ends.

38

The two main positions in independent film in the 1960s—the North American cinema represented by Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, and Paul Sharits, and the French cinema represented by Jean-Luc Godard—are analogous. To Annette Michelson both respond to the "trauma of dissociation" suffered by cinema in the course of its industrial division of labor and Hollywood separation into genres. While Godard and company collide these genres as readymades in a critical montage, the North American independents refuse them and, in a modernist reflection on the medium, seek to reassert its totality as an art. See Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

39

Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," in Sohnya Sayres et al., eds., *The Sixties without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 195.

40

For an analysis of this ambiguous status of minimalism (which draws on the original version of the present chapter), see Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," *October* 54 (Fall 1990).



41

See Krauss, *Passages*, 250.

42

Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 104.

43

*Ibid.*, 109. Baudrillard continues: "It is this serial and differential organization, with its own temporality punctuated by fashion and the recurrence of behavior models, to which art currently testifies." This testimony is ambiguous, but at least seriality is not sublimated in minimalism and pop, as it often is in conceptual art. Here again it is not clear to me whether conceptual art elaborates or recoups the minimalist crux.

44

Paradoxically, this severing is performed in superrealist painting to the degree that its referent is another image, a photograph, more on which in chapter 5.

45

I develop this point further in chapter 4. For a related history of musical paradigms see Jacques Attali, *Noise*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

46

Benjamin Buchloh, "Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture," in Chantal Pontbriand, ed., *Performance, Text(s) & Documents* (Montreal: Parachute), 58.

47

Ernest Mandel, *Late Capital* (London: Verso, 1978), 387.

48

Baudrillard: "The sign object is neither given nor exchanged: it is appropriated, withheld and manipulated by individual subjects as a sign, that is, as coded difference. Here lies the object of consumption" (*For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 65).

49

Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 293. In Chapter 5 I return to the appearance of "destruction and death," especially in pop.

50

See Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," for a very impressive attempt.

3

## THE PASSION OF THE SIGN

1

This third way is associated with the work of Fredric Jameson. See his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). I return to these debates in Chapter 7.

2

See my "(Post)Modern Polemics," in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985).

3

See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 95-96.

4

See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). My reading of this text is indebted to Dana Polan, "Brief Encounters: Mass Culture and the Evacuation of Sense," in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

5

*Ibid.*, 40.

6

Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280.

7

Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 34. Also see chapter 1, note 3.

8

Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 280. "Always already" suggests the complex temporality of deferred action.

9

The shift from index to sign as outlined by Barthes suggests another passage in what Jean-Joseph Goux calls "symbolic economies": a partial shift in the economy of the subject from the classical capitalist regime of *repression* meted out by the phallic power of the father to the advanced-capitalist regime of *investment* in which flows of desires are released in order to be