

**On the Museum's Ruins**

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**with photographs by Louise Lawler**

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## Photographs at the End of Modernism

From the parochial perspective of the late-1970s art world, photography appeared as a watershed. Radically reevaluated, photography took up residence in the museum on a par with the visual arts' traditional mediums and according to the very same art-historical tenets. New principles of photographic connoisseurship were devised; the canon of master photographers was vastly expanded; prices on the photography market skyrocketed. Counterposed against this reevaluation were two coincident developments: a materialist history of photography and dissident photographic practices. My own view of these transformations was that, taken together and brought into relation, they could tell us something about postmodernism, a term coming into wide use at just that time.

But my first essay about photography proposed a modernist interpretation. Two years before writing "On the Museum's Ruins," I still wanted to discriminate between a "legitimately" modernist photographic practice and an "illegitimate" presumption that photography is, as a whole, a modernist aesthetic medium. I argued, in "Positive/Negative," that the few existing photographs by Edgar Degas, made around 1895, were about photography itself (the very notion—"photography itself"—would later seem preposterous to me). Degas accomplished this modernist self-reflexivity by making photography's negative-positive process manifest in the photographic print, for example by double printing or by employing the Sebatier-effect—a usually accidental effect of exposing the negative to extraneous light during the developing process, which results in a partial reversal of light and dark.

The final photograph I discussed was, however, a straightforward portrait of Degas's niece Odette. I described the little girl as

photogenic, intending a play on the literal meaning of that word, wherein something—such as the lace Fox Talbot used to demonstrate the technique of a photogram in *The Pencil of Nature*—is itself purely positive-negative and therefore a suitable metaphor for the photographic process. The essay concludes,

Degas's photograph of Odette is replete with this kind of metaphor, with its lace backdrop, its patterned wallpaper, its illustrated newspaper. Odette herself wears a lace dress. This is a photograph of the photogenic, everything already resolved into black and white. Even Odette's cute smile is so resolved. She is at that age when children lose their baby teeth, and her smile reveals the gaps where two of her incisors are absent. The preponderance of lace in this photograph is a pun on that smile, for the French word for lace is *dentelle*, a diminutive form of the word *dent*, meaning tooth. So Odette's smile is indeed photogenic; already reduced to presence and absence, positive and negative, black and white, it is a wry metaphor for photography.<sup>1</sup>

I visited my family in Idaho the summer "Positive/Negative" was published, and my grandmother, then in her eighties, asked if she might read it. I couldn't imagine what she would make of it, because, although she was an educated woman, she certainly had no familiarity with modernist art theory or with the Derridian inflection—photography as a kind of Mallarméan writing—with which I attempted to imbue that theory. After she had read the article, she told me that she found it interesting, but that I had made a mistake: "That isn't a lace dress the little girl is wearing," she informed me, "it's eyelet embroidery" (not "little tooth," then, but "little eye").

Such a grandmotherly observation, I thought, thinking especially of my other grandmother, who was so adept at “women’s work”—needlepoint, quilting, braiding rugs from old socks whose holes she’d previously darned. I don’t remember if she ever made lace or embroidery. But whether lace or embroidery, I reassured myself, what’s the difference? What matters is the *theory*. I realize now, though, that my self-defense in the face of my grandmother’s correction arose not really because the comment was grandmotherly but because it reminded me of the sort of art historian who, when presented with a theoretical argument, repudiates it by citing trivial empirical mistakes. But my grandmother was not an art historian; her seeing was situated differently. Her recognition of the difference between lace and embroidery, a tooth and an eye, resulted from an expertise uncredited within the disciplinary dispute I imagined. It may be true that it matters little in this case whether lace or embroidery, but it matters much that my grandmother could see what I could not: it demonstrates that what any of us sees depends on our individual histories, our differently constructed subjectivities.



Hanging on the wall behind me is a black-and-white photograph by Louise Lawler. Its subject is at first somewhat difficult to discern. The picture divides two-thirds of the way down; the upper part is mostly dark, but interspersed with lighter areas; the lower third is itself split in half, light above, dark below. The light stripe has a darker rectangle in the center on which one can read, close up, “Edgar DEGAS (1834–1917)/Danseuse au bouquet,/saluant sur la scène, vers 1878/Legs Isaac de Camando 1911.” With this information we can more easily “see” the picture. It shows the lower center portion of a pastel by Degas in which we can make out a tutu, a ballerina’s legs, a bouquet of flowers, and some reflections on a shiny stage floor. Below that is part of the picture’s frame, with its engraved label, and below that the wall on which the picture hangs. The photograph presents a work by Degas, but re-presents it—

reframes it, crops it, and slides down to show its frame and the museum wall.

I’ve had this photograph since 1982, when, having paid in advance for 100 sheets of Lawler’s *Documenta 7* stationery,<sup>2</sup> I asked Lawler if I might have a photograph instead. Knowing of my interest in Degas, she gave me this one. I came to think of the picture as neatly describing the trajectory of my writing, a trajectory that moved beyond discrete works of art to encompass their institutional framing conditions: from artwork to museum. But in thinking that, I missed the photograph’s pun on “legs.”

About the time I acquired this picture and began overlooking the “legs,” Craig Owens published his essay “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism.” There he criticized a number of theorists of postmodernism—himself among them—for “skirting” feminist content in readings of work by various women artists; included in his critique were my interpretations of photographs by Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. Here is Owens on Levine:

When Sherrie Levine appropriates—literally takes—Walker Evans’s photographs of the rural poor or, perhaps more pertinently, Edward Weston’s photographs of his son Neil posed as a classical Greek torso, is she simply dramatizing diminished possibilities for creativity in an image-saturated culture, as is often repeated? Or is her refusal of authorship not in fact a refusal of the role of creator as “father” of his work, of the paternal rights assigned to the author by law? (This reading of Levine’s strategies is supported by the fact that the images she appropriates are invariably images of the Other: women, nature, children, the poor, the insane. . . .)<sup>3</sup>

I had reason, at a later time, to consider a possible addition to Owens’s parenthetical list of “others.” For several years I had hanging in my bedroom Levine’s series of Weston’s photographs of his son Neil. On a number of occasions, a certain kind of visitor to my bedroom would ask, “Who’s the kid in the photographs?”—gener-

ally with the implication that I was into child pornography. Wanting to counter that implication but unable easily to explain what those photographs meant to me, or at least what I thought they meant to me, I usually told a little white lie, saying only that they were pictures by a famous photographer of his son. I was thereby able to establish a credible reason for having the photos without having to explain postmodernism to someone I figured—given the nature of these encounters—wouldn't be particularly interested anyway.

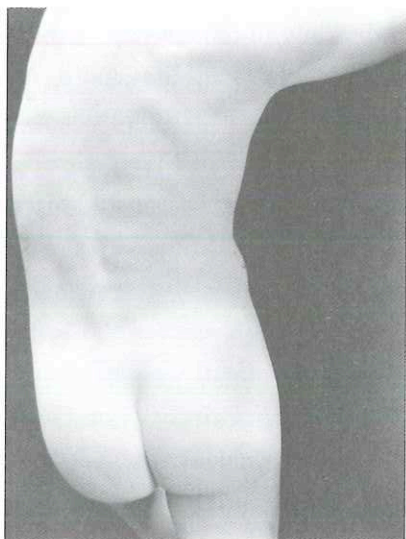
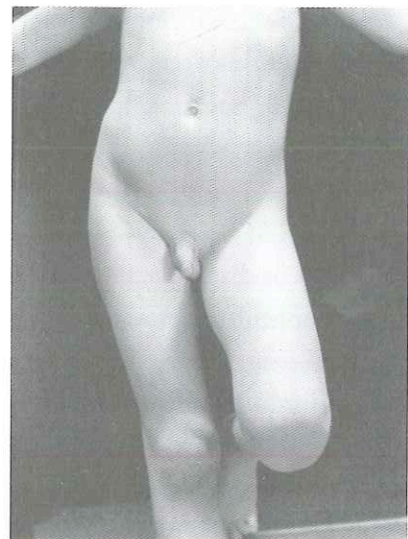
But then I was forced to recognize that this question was not so naive as I'd assumed. The men in my bedroom were perfectly able to read—in Weston's posing, framing, and lighting the young Neil so as to render his body a classical sculpture—the long-established codes of homoeroticism. And in making the leap from those codes to the codes of kiddie-porn, they were stating no more than what was enacted, in the fall of 1989, as the law governing federal funding of art in the United States. That law—proposed by right-wing senator Jesse Helms in response to certain of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs—implicitly equated homoeroticism with obscenity and with the sexual exploitation of children.<sup>4</sup>

In "Appropriating Appropriation," written in 1982 and reprinted in this collection, I compare Robert Mapplethorpe's classically posed photographs of nudes to Sherrie Levine's appropriations of Edward Weston's photographs of Neil. I attempt to distinguish between two forms of appropriation: Mapplethorpe's modernist appropriation of style—the classical style of Weston, for example—and Levine's postmodernist appropriation of material, the appropriation of Weston's actual pictures by simply rephotographing them. Mapplethorpe's appropriations, I argue, align him with a tradition of aesthetic mastery, simultaneously referring to that tradition and appearing to renew it, whereas Levine's work interrupts the discourse of mastery through the refusal to reinvent an image. Mapplethorpe's work, I contend, continues the tradition of museum art, whereas Levine's holds that tradition up to scrutiny.

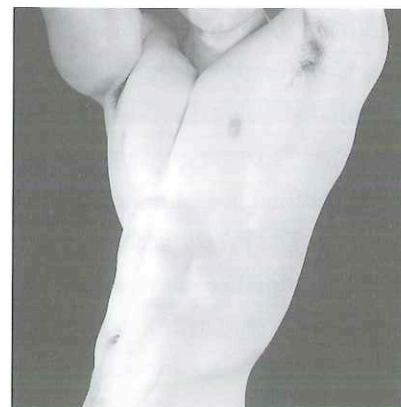
Debates about contemporary art could no longer be the same, however, after the national furor over Mapplethorpe's photographs, initiated by the Corcoran Gallery's cancellation of *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, peaking in the passage of Helms's amendment to an NEA funding bill, and culminating momentarily in the acquittal, on charges of "pandering obscenity" and "the illegal use of a minor in nudity oriented materials," of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center and its director for mounting the same exhibition.<sup>5</sup> What I failed to notice in 1982 was what Jesse Helms could not help but notice in 1989: that Mapplethorpe's work interrupts tradition in a way that Levine's does not. Whereas Weston's male nudes fit comfortably into a Western homosocial tradition, in which homoeroticism is incited only to be contained or disavowed, Mapplethorpe's pictures often depict eroticism as openly homosexual (a distinction that Helms's own amendment language paradoxically but strategically obscured).<sup>6</sup> Thus, whereas I saw Mapplethorpe's nudes only in the context of the other conventional genres of the artist's work—still lifes and portraits—Jesse Helms saw them in the context of the overtly homosexual images of Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*. The line that Mapplethorpe crossed, between the safely homosocial and the dangerously homosexual, was also a line between the aesthetics of traditional museum culture and the prerogatives of a self-defining gay subculture.

Although most of the "offending" pictures brought before the jury in Cincinnati were explicit S/M subjects from the *X Portfolio*, two were portraits of young children. One of these was a photograph of the naked young Jesse McBride, a picture whose innocence is obvious enough—and all the more so if we compare it to Weston's homocrotically charged pictures of Neil, taken when the boy was about the same age as Jesse McBride in Mapplethorpe's portrait. But this apparent innocence should alert us again to Helms's insistence on reading all of Mapplethorpe's pictures within the context of the artist's homosexuality. In the midst of the debates about legislative restrictions on the NEA, the *New York Times* quoted the senator as saying,





Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (After Edward Weston)*, 1981.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Michael Reed*, 1987  
(photo courtesy the Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe).

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Charles*, 1985 (photo  
courtesy the Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe).

"Old Helms will win every time" on cutting Federal money for art projects with homosexual themes. "This Mapplethorpe fellow," said Mr. Helms, who pronounces the artist's name several ways, "was an acknowledged homosexual. He's dead now, but the homosexual theme goes throughout his work."<sup>7</sup>

The "scandal" of *Jesse McBride* is that it was taken by an openly gay man, a man who also took explicit pictures of "perverse" sex acts, a man who subsequently died of AIDS.

The Cincinnati prosecutors attempted to exploit Helms's contextualization by disallowing the contextualization I had urged in "Appropriating Appropriation": placing the offending photographs in relation to the exhibition as a whole, which would have allowed the jury to see classical nudes, still lifes, and a wide range of portraits.<sup>8</sup> Still, despite the prosecution's tactical success in isolating the photographs in question from Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, the defense won its case by reinscribing them within museum discourse. Expert witnesses for the defense—mostly museum officials—described Mapplethorpe's wider aesthetic preoccupations and detailed the photographs' "formal qualities," reducing them thereby to abstractions, lines and forms, light and shadow. Here is a description by Janet Kardon, *The Perfect Moment's* curator, of Mapplethorpe's self-portrait in leather chaps and vest with a bull whip shoved up his rectum, which Kardon referred to as a "figure study":

The human figure is centered. The horizon line is two-thirds of the way up, almost the classical two-thirds to one-third proportions. The way the light is cast, so there's light all around the figure, it's very symmetrical, which is very characteristic of his flowers. . . .<sup>9</sup>

In a move that underscores the trial's many contradictions, the prosecution attempted to show that these very formal qualities could be deployed toward obscene ends. In Mapplethorpe's portrait of Jesse McBride, the child sits on the back of an overstuffed chair placed

next to a refrigerator. Along the wall behind the chair, a molding intersects an electrical cord so as to form an arrow shape pointing, it could be said, in the direction of the boy's genitals. But when the prosecutor attempted to make this claim, the boy's mother simply remarked, "Refrigerators work by electricity."<sup>10</sup>

Evacuating meaning from Mapplethorpe's photographs was not, in any case, limited to confining them to the realm of pure formalism. Another kind of distortion was voiced at the Cincinnati trial by Robert Sobieszak, senior curator at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography:

I would say they [the *X Portfolio* photographs] are works of art, knowing they are by Robert Mapplethorpe, knowing his intentions. They reveal in very strong, forceful ways a major concern of a creative artist . . . a troubled portion of his life that he was trying to come to grips with. It's that search for meaning, not unlike Van Gogh's.<sup>11</sup>

What is disclaimed here is Mapplethorpe's willing and active participation in a sexual subculture that we have no reason to believe he found "troubling" or was "trying to come to grips with."<sup>12</sup> Such a statement denies the subject's representation of his own sexual choices. By likening Mapplethorpe's work to that of Van Gogh—or, more accurately, to the Van Gogh of popular myth—Mapplethorpe's expression is rendered pathological; it thus achieves significance *because of*, rather than in spite of, its "troubling" subject matter.

So the line that Mapplethorpe's work crossed—between the aesthetics of museum culture and the prerogatives of a self-defining gay subculture—was redrawn to reinscribe the work safely within the museum. Although it was a successful tactical maneuver for the purposes of the obscenity trial, the aesthetic-merit defense made no case at all for the rights of sexual minorities to self-representation. At virtually no point in the widespread public debate about the censorship of artistic expression was anyone asked to speak on behalf



of the subculture Mapplethorpe's work depicted and perhaps addressed.<sup>13</sup> And because Mapplethorpe had died of AIDS, he was unable to speak for himself.



But what *is* that pun on "legs" in the Lawler photograph that hangs behind me? "Legs" is, of course, French for "bequest," and thus the label signals no more than what Lawler often captures in her "museum" photographs: those illusive indicators of an artwork's material history, something more than just what the artist portrayed, something less than a full account. But here, for the anglophone reader, Camando's legacy and the ballerina's legs linguistically combine in a sly hint about property and gender. To whom do these legs properly belong? Are they up for grabs? Lawler does not simply photograph the ballerina's legs, the legs Degas painted; she photographs the signs of a signifying system in which those legs are caught up.

And what of Jesse McBride's legs, or, more to the point, his little penis? Jesse Helms and the prosecutor in Cincinnati would have had us believe that the young boy's genitals are made the focus of all our attention. But the insinuation is dependent on something more than this particular photograph; it depends on placing the photograph in a broader representational matrix. In a piece for the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *New York Times*, Hilton Kramer wrote, "What one finds in many Mapplethorpe photographs is . . . so absolute and extreme a concentration on male sexual endowments that every other attribute of the human subject is reduced to insignificance. In these photographs, men are rendered as nothing but sexual—which is to say, homosexual—objects."<sup>14</sup> Without denying the homosexual specificity or even the "sexual objectification" of many of Mapplethorpe's photographs, I think we are nevertheless obliged to ask how it is that when a man is rendered as nothing but a sexual object, he thereby becomes a *homosexual* object. Rendering the subject an object must be exclusively and

unquestionably a male prerogative, for certainly when a woman is rendered nothing but a sexual object, we do not think of her, *mutatis mutandis*, as a lesbian object. Kramer assumes and underwrites a law of representation in which only a woman is properly a sexual object, the proper object of the male subject.<sup>15</sup>

How representation and subjectivity are explicitly and implicitly gendered has, of course, been the topic of feminist cultural work for nearly two decades; antihomophobic analysis has recently extended and complicated this feminist critique to include what is variously designated as sexuality (as distinct from gender), sexual orientation, or sexual object-choice.<sup>16</sup> The discussion of subjectivity in the essays that compose this book does not, however, comprehend these issues of sexual difference and sexuality; it is to that extent partial, in both senses of the word. When I wrote these essays, I understood the subject of representation in the traditional humanist sense as its *author*, standing in for universal *mankind*, and I wanted to displace that subject. I wanted to show that the creating subject was a fiction necessary to modern aesthetic understanding, and that what took its place in postmodern knowledge was the institution, if by institution we mean a discursive system. The museum is, in these essays, a figure for this system; at the same time it is shown to provide its cover: it installs the creating subject in its place.



My title essay outlines the book's project, a theory of postmodernism in the visual arts based on a Foucauldian archeology of the museum. It proposes that the modern epistemology of art is a function of art's seclusion in the museum, where art was made to appear autonomous, alienated, something apart, referring only to its own internal history and dynamics. As an instrument of art's reproduction, photography extended this idealism of art to a broader discursive dimension, an *imaginary* museum, a history of art. Photography itself, though, was excluded from the museum and art history because, virtually of necessity, it points to a world outside itself.



Thus, when photography is allowed entrance to the museum as an art among others, the museum's epistemological coherence collapses. The "world outside" is allowed in, and art's autonomy is revealed as a fiction, a construction of the museum. Although this discursive incoherence is what signals the advent of postmodernism, postmodernism is not only a matter of interpretive theory, it is also a matter of practice. What is at issue in "On the Museum's Ruins" is not merely the museum's long-postponed decision to admit the heterogeneity of photography but the fact that that heterogeneity is already *in* the museum, and represented as being there in Robert Rauschenberg's silkscreen works of the early 1960s. I designated those works postmodernist both because they expose that heterogeneity and because they do so by destroying the integrity of painting, hybridizing it, corrupting it with photographic images.

"On the Museum's Ruins" introduces a series of oppositions: postmodernism versus modernism, "archeology" versus art history, photography versus painting, hybridity versus integrity. In succeeding essays these oppositions are revised as, for example, a postmodernism of resistance versus a postmodernism of accommodation, materialist history versus historicism, practices versus works, contingency versus autonomy. Each essay performs a kind of balancing act, juxtaposing and interpreting—juxtaposing in order to interpret together—artworks, institutions, exhibitions, critical discourses, histories. The title essay's project is not so much realized as it is repeatedly reformulated. Throughout the decade during which these essays were written, cultural activity and the conditions of its production and reception changed rapidly, as did my own interests and positions. Although overlapping in their general concerns, the essays divide, more or less chronologically, according to three forms of critique, which correspond to the book's three sections: (1) the poststructuralist critique of authorship and authenticity, (2) the materialist critique of aesthetic idealism, and (3) the avant-garde critique of art's institutionalization.

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Photography, a watershed—a watershed between modernism and postmodernism. Or so it seemed. The five essays composing the book's first section, "Photography in the Museum," were written between 1980 and 1982. Each seeks to bring into relation, with varying emphases, and with the purpose of theorizing a shift from modernism to postmodernism, the following phenomena: (1) the reclassification of photography as ipso facto an art form and its consequent "museumization," (2) the threat posed by photography's reclassification to the traditional modernist mediums and to the aesthetic theories that underwrite their primacy, and (3) the advent of new photographic practices that refuse the tenets of authorship and authenticity upon which photography is newly comprehended.

If modernist aesthetic theory and practice commence with the creation, during the early nineteenth century, of the museum as we know it, they also coincide with the invention of photography, whose mechanically determined images would haunt them. Painting, the principal museum art, developed throughout the modern period in antagonism to photography's descriptive powers, its wide dissemination, and its mass appeal. Isolated in the museum, painting increasingly shunned objective depiction, asserted its material uniqueness, became hermetic and difficult. It referred, according to formalist criticism, only to itself—"itself" indicating both its material essence and the self-enclosed history of the medium. But behind painting's self-referentiality, guaranteeing its particular meanings, stood the artist's subjectivity, for ultimately painting had to transcend its materiality and become human. The autonomy of art always defers, if only implicitly, to a prior autonomy, that of the sovereign human subject.

Photography could not so easily be granted such autonomy. More or less than an art form, banished from the museum except as an instrument, a tool, it pursued its course elsewhere, where its capacity for illustration and reproducibility could be usefully exploited—in journalism and advertising, in the physical sciences, in archeology and histories of art. Its meanings were secured not by a



human subject but by the discursive structures in which it appeared. It referred not to itself or its own history but to a "world outside." But in spite of this, there were always photographers who lay claim to the artist's mantle. They imitated painting, manipulated prints, limited editions, foreswore utility, embraced artifice: in short, they invested their medium with the trappings of subjectivity, for which they were grudgingly granted a niche in the museum. As formalist theory took greater hold, however, it was not photography's imitation of painting that secured its place in the museum. Rather it was photography's fidelity to "itself." And thus, nearly 150 years after its invention in the 1830s, photography was *discovered*, discovered to have been art all the while. But what could this mean to the museum and to painting, which had hitherto resisted photography's allure?

This transition appeared to signal the reaffirmation, perhaps in bad faith, of the museum's founding premises and painting's self-confidence. The rhetoric of aesthetic autonomy and subjectivity was uneasily transferred to photography, while painting, in the guise of neoexpressionism, reclaimed its descriptive potential. Against this realignment, however, postmodern artists made other claims: that originality and authenticity are discursively produced by the museum; that subjective expression is an effect, not a source or guarantee, of aesthetic practices.



If photography appeared to put the museum in crisis, it also appeared just in time to alleviate a crisis already felt. The economic recession of the mid-1970s shrank museums' operating and acquisition budgets, and photographs could be purchased, displayed, and loaned at far lower costs than could the museum's traditional objects. But the crisis was not merely economic; from the 1960s onward, contemporary art practices had strained the museum's resources not in monetary but in physical and ideological senses.

During the 1960s, minimal sculpture launched an attack on the prestige of both artist and artwork, granting that prestige instead to

the situated spectator, whose self-conscious perception of the minimal object in relation to the site of its installation produced the work's meaning. The artist's own lowered prestige was exemplified by, but not limited to, the fact that minimal artworks were fabricated to specifications from readily available industrial materials. With the usual indicators of the artist's subjectivity in the craftsmanship of a work thus abandoned, the subjectivity experienced was the spectator's own. This condition of reception, in which meaning is made a function of the work's relationship to its site of exhibition, came to be known as site specificity, whose radicalism thus lay not only in the displacement of the artist-subject by the spectator-subject but in securing that displacement through the wedding of the artwork to a particular environment. The idealism of modernist art, in which the art object *in and of itself* was seen to have a fixed and transhistorical meaning, determined the object's placelessness, its belonging in no particular place, a no-place that was in reality the museum—the actual museum and the museum as a representation of the institutional system of circulation that also comprises the artist's studio, the commercial gallery, the collector's home, the sculpture garden, the public plaza, the corporate headquarters lobby, the bank vault. . . . Site specificity opposed that idealism—and unveiled the material system it obscured—by its refusal of circulatory mobility, its belongingness to a *specific* site.

But it is only the sense given to the word *specific* that would fully determine a break with modernism. For minimal sculptors, the interpolated context of the work of art generally resulted only in an extension of the aesthetic domain to the site itself. Even if the work could not be relocated from place to place, as is the case, for example, with earthworks, the materiality of the site was nevertheless taken to be generic—architecture, cityscape, landscape—and therefore neutral. It was only when artists recognized the site of art as *socially* specific that they began to oppose idealism with a materialism that was no longer phenomenologically—and thus still idealistically—grounded in matter or the body. This development, again intended as definitional for postmodernism, is taken up in my essay



about Richard Serra's public sculpture, "Redefining Site Specificity." Of the essays here, it is the most explicitly Marxist in its interpretive framework.<sup>17</sup>



Materialist history, especially as contemplated by Walter Benjamin, increasingly and perhaps paradoxically inflected the Foucauldian archeology of the museum that I initially proposed. The three essays in this book's final section employ these methods of historiography against the eclectic and revisionist historicism of an affirmative postmodernism. By the mid-1980s, postmodernism had come to be seen less as a critique of modernism than as a repudiation of modernism's own critical project, a perception that legitimized an "anything goes" pluralism. The term *postmodernism* described a situation in which both the present and the past could be stripped of any and all historical determinations and conflicts. Art institutions widely embraced this position, using it to reestablish art—even so-called postmodernist art—as autonomous, universal, timeless.

My response was to examine the institutions themselves, their representations of history and the ways their own history is represented. Pursuing my earlier archeological project, I discovered that the museum's history was written much like art's, as a continuous evolution from ancient times. Locating the museum's origins in a universal impulse to collect and preserve mankind's aesthetic heritage, such history was unimpeded by knowledge that aesthetics is itself a modern invention and that collections differed vastly in their objects and classificatory systems at different historical junctures, up to and including the present. The three final essays take as their impetus, respectively, three "originary" institutions, the late Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, the Fridericianum in Kassel, and Berlin's Altes Museum, not to uncover their true histories but to observe how they have been pressed into the service of contemporary museological historicism. What is at issue is the contemporary art of exhibition: the construction of new museums and the expansion and

reorganization of existing ones to create a conflict-free representation of art history, and, concurrently, the effacement or co-optation of current adversary art practices.

The question of adversary practices, the question of their relation to definitions and theories of postmodernism, is central to this book. The "end" of the avant-garde, whether lamented by the Left or gloated over by the Right, was generally seen as the condition of postmodernism's possibility. I was skeptical. The practices I claimed as postmodernist seemed to me to continue the unfinished avant-garde project. Indeed, the prewar avant-garde appeared, through the lens of a postmodernism critical of modernism, virtually as postmodernism *avant-la-lettre*. In this I both agreed with and differed from Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which makes a crucial distinction between modernist art—the autonomous art previously described—and the interventions of the avant-garde. According to Bürger, with the advent of a fully modernist art for art's sake, art's autonomy became institutionalized, whereupon the avant-garde sought both to contest art-as-institution and to grant art a social purpose:

The concept 'art as an institution'. . . refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works. The avant-garde turns against both—the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy. Only after art, in nineteenth-century Aestheticism, has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop "purely." But the other side of autonomy, art's lack of social impact, also becomes recognizable. The avant-gardist protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences.

When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially signif-



icant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content. . . . The avant-gardistes proposed the sublation of art—sublation in the Hegelian sense of the term: art was not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form.<sup>18</sup>

For Bürger, though, this is a *historical* project that failed: art's sublation into the praxis of life did not occur "and presumably cannot occur in bourgeois society unless it be as a false sublation of autonomous art."<sup>19</sup> The avant-garde's failure is recognizable in the recuperation of its interventions as autonomous works of art. This is the function of what Bürger calls the neo-avant-garde, which, in adopting avant-garde techniques in the aftermath of the original project's demise, "institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions."<sup>20</sup>

Bürger's view of the postwar avant-garde (his neo-avant-garde) differs significantly from mine.<sup>21</sup> As I see it, contemporary artists began, at about the same time Bürger published his book in Germany (the early 1970s), to learn and apply the very lessons of the historical avant-garde that Bürger theorizes. The challenge to art-as-institution is, if anything, more explicit in the work of, say, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, or Louise Lawler than it is in the practices of dada and surrealism that Bürger cites. At the same time, the ability of the institution to co-opt and neutralize such challenges is also recognized, in both art and criticism. A number of my essays seek to reveal the falsifications necessary to forge an institutional history of modernism free of the conflicts posed by avant-garde art, whether historical or contemporary.

But there are problems that my own essays share with Bürger's position. Bürger locates the failure of the avant-garde in its inability to return art to social purpose and furthermore sees this failure as determined by the continuation of bourgeois hegemony.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, my own essays limit the efficacy of postmodernist practice to a critique of art-as-institution, only intimating the apparently still-foreclosed possibility of art's integration into social practice. This would suggest—falsely I think—that revealing the institutionalization of art is not already a social practice with real consequences. More seriously, it suggests that art can only play a useful role in society once society itself has been thoroughly transformed, which assumes that art is merely reflective, not productive of social relations. Bürger's and my positions are both constrained by a vanguardism central to modernism's own radical claims. In this sense, my theory of postmodernism is internally contradictory, positing both a rupture with modernism and a continuity of one of modernism's most salient features.

Bürger's commitment to vanguardism is not limited to deferring the realization of art's practical potential to a revolutionary social order. It can be discerned, as well, in his unquestioning repetition of the Frankfurt School condemnation of popular culture. For Bürger, what he still calls the culture industry is the very antithesis of the avant-garde because it brings about "the false elimination of the distance between art and life."<sup>23</sup> Relying on the work of Walter Benjamin, my position is less rigid on this count, but my essays stop short of a necessary analysis of the postmodernist challenge to the uncompromising distinction between "high" and "low" culture or of the museum's role in continuing to shore up that distinction.<sup>24</sup>



It was the specter of death that finally revealed to me the limits of my conception of postmodernism. By the time I completed the most recent essay in this collection ("This Is Not a Museum of Art," written in 1988), I had become actively involved in the grassroots movement to end the AIDS crisis. My engagement in direct-action politics did not, however, represent a break with the positions argued in these essays. Rather it grew out of an attempt to adapt those positions to an analysis of aesthetic responses to AIDS, which



in my view are divided between two distinct trends: what Bürger referred to as changes at the level of the contents of individual works and changes in the way art functions in society. The former trend includes traditional artworks that take AIDS as subject matter—paintings, plays, novels, poems “about” AIDS; the latter consists of cultural participation in activist politics, most often using agitprop graphics and documentary video.<sup>25</sup> Such work eludes the museum, not because it is never shown there but because it is made outside the institution’s compass. Arising out of a collective movement, AIDS activist art practices articulate, actually *produce*, the politics of that movement. Often anonymously and collectively made; appropriating techniques of “high art,” popular culture, and mass advertising; aimed at and constitutive of specific constituencies; relevant only to local and transitory circumstances; useless for preservation and posterity—is this art not an example of the “sublation of art into the praxis of life”?

Or perhaps the question should be, Is this not postmodern art? From the vantage point of these practices, postmodernism looks rather different from its theorization in this book. Indeed, I now think it would be more accurate to say of the essays published here that they are about the end of modernism. Contemporary art’s critique of the museum and the modern aesthetic it produces still “belongs” to the museum, even if reluctantly, just as my analysis of those practices still engages with the problems of modernism. In “Mapping the Postmodern,” Andreas Huyssen makes a similar point about the relation of poststructuralist theory to postmodernism:

I think we must begin to entertain the notion that rather than offering a *theory of postmodernity* and developing an analysis of contemporary culture, French theory provides us primarily with an *archeology of modernity*, a theory of modernism at the stage of its exhaustion. It is as if the creative powers of modernism had migrated into theory and come to full self-consciousness in the poststructuralist text—the owl of Minerva spreading its wings at the fall

of dusk. Poststructuralism offers a theory of modernism characterized by *Nachträglichkeit*, both in the psychoanalytic and the historical sense.<sup>26</sup>

This is certainly true of my essays, as they are initially inspired by Foucault’s early work, whose stated objective is an archeology of modernism. What follows from this realization is a shift in both the objects and methods of inquiry. Confronting aesthetic responses to AIDS, it is impossible to stay within the museum, and not only because the most forceful responses rarely appear there. AIDS activist art does not seek primarily to interrupt our notion of art itself but instead to intervene in a wider arena of representation: the mass media, medical discourse, social policy, community organizing, sexual identity. . . . Thus any attempt to assess and theorize this work will have to place it in relation not merely to aesthetics but to the full range of discourses it engages. Only a hybrid approach such as that of cultural studies—which proceeds locally, but against the grain of disciplinary knowledges; theoretically, but through a tension among competing theories—would seem suited to such a task.

The narrowness of focus in my essays on the practices and institutions of contemporary art entails a skepticism about totalizing postmodern theory, whereby every cultural act becomes some sort of symptom of a larger condition—fragmentation, schizophrenia, nostalgia, amnesia. What worried me most about such formulations was their suppression of difference and conflict, their inability to distinguish the critique from what is criticized. But my narrowness of focus also resulted in the parochialism, partiality, and vanguardism I’ve already mentioned. Remaining within the world of high art, neglecting all forms of difference but those of aesthetic function, I was unable to comprehend the genuine significance of postmodernism as, precisely, the eruption of difference itself within the domains of knowledge. This is not the same thing as the collapse of coherence through heterogeneity and the incursions of the “world outside,” but neither is it a surface condition or a cultural logic built upon an economic foundation.<sup>27</sup>



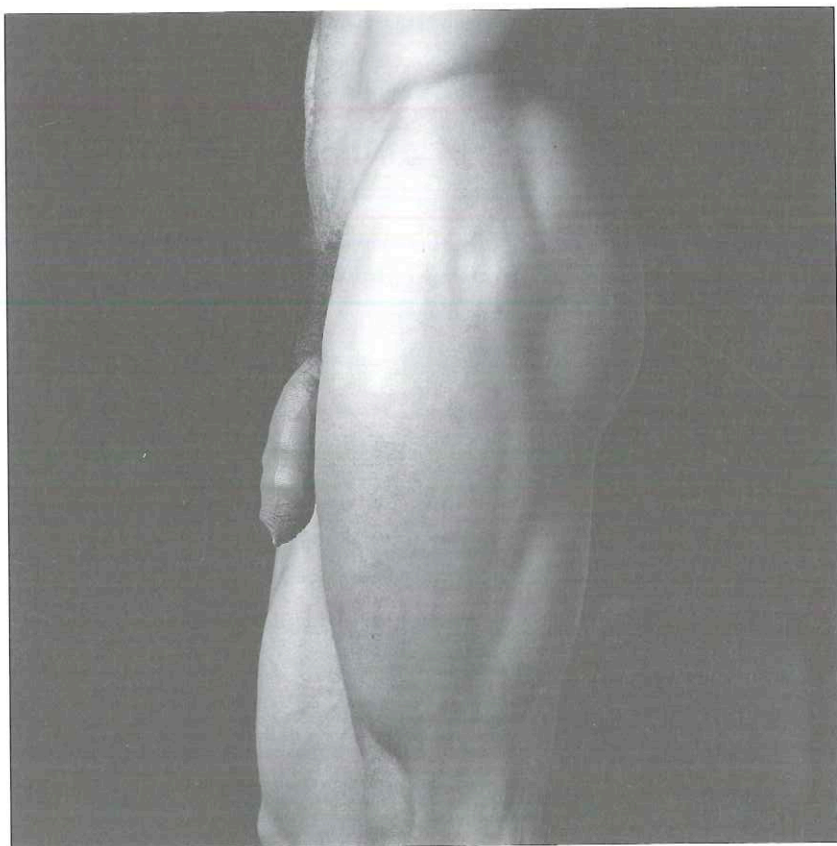
In the fall of 1988, the Museum of Modern Art staged a major exhibition of Nicholas Nixon's photographs, including a new series of portraits of people with AIDS (PWAs). Each portrait comprised a chronological sequence of pictures taken at intervals of a few weeks and was considered complete only when its subject had died. The photographs enraged me. Everything I had objected to about photography in the museum was contained in these pictures and the critical commentary that accompanied them: the fetishization of technique (Nixon's "achievement" was said to lie in his use of an old-fashioned view camera to rework the snapshot aesthetic); the insistence on the artist's subjectivity at the expense of that of his subjects (Nixon's theme was a grand and universal one, the mysteries of life and death);<sup>28</sup> and the obliteration of every type of social relation that produced the images, from the interaction of photographer and subject to the failure of government to respond to an epidemic that disproportionately affected "marginal" populations. What forced me to consider writing about these photographs, though, was not that they posed anew the problem of photography in the museum but that they so faithfully reproduced mass media stereotypes about what are so callously called "AIDS victims": their otherness, their isolation, their desperation, their inevitable decline and death. Seeing what I saw, AIDS activists protested Nixon's show and demanded different pictures: "PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back."<sup>29</sup>

But I had seen yet a different picture, Stashu Kybartas's videotape *Danny*, a loving portrait of a young gay man with AIDS, his skin covered with Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, his face bloated from chemotherapy, already dead when the tape was completed. In the video's apostrophizing voice-over, Kybartas, who pictures himself, too, mourns a man he clearly found sexually appealing. Seeing *Danny* made obvious to me, by utter contrast, what Nixon's ugly photographs had so perfectly—and so unconsciously—condensed

from media stereotypes: "These are not images that are intended to overcome our fear of disease and death, as is sometimes claimed. Nor are they meant only to reinforce the status of the PWA as victim or pariah, as we often charge. Rather, they are, precisely, *phobic* images, images of the terror at imagining the person with AIDS as still sexual."<sup>30</sup> I came to understand much more about Nixon's photographs than their possession by the museum, which transmutes documentary specificity into aesthetic generality. What I came to understand was that this transmutation constitutes a very particular and very significant social effect, that of inciting sexual fear and loathing while pretending to appeal to a common humanity.

The target of my critique of the museum is the formalism that it appeared inevitably to impose on art by removing it from any social context. But the critique itself is not entirely free of formalism, a formalism that substitutes the institution for the work of art, a vanguardist formalism that cannot discern how changes "at the level of the contents of individual works" might in some cases lead to changes "in the way art functions in society," even when that art appears in a museum. A significant lesson of the controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs is that their social effects far exceeded their formal congruence with "art photography" and its insistence on the creative subject. What is occluded by the institution's emphasis on the subject *behind* representation is more than the historical, institutional structures that fabricate the creating subject; what is also, crucially, occluded is the gendered, sexually oriented, and otherwise designated subject effected by, constituted in representation through, those structures. If Hilton Kramer decried Mapplethorpe's "reduction" of the human subject to a sexual object, it was not, as he might think or might wish us to think, because the photographs thereby dehumanize their sitters; it was because Kramer, solicited as viewing subject of the photographs, found himself in the position of a man gazing at another man's genitals. And if Robert Sobieszak felt called upon to defend the *X Portfolio* pictures' search for meaning, it is not because Mapplethorpe was trying to come to

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled*, 1981 (photo  
courtesy the Estate of Robert  
Mapplethorpe.



grips with a troubled portion of *his* life, but because Sobieszak, as viewer, found *himself* troubled. And finally, in a very different register indeed, if Kobena Mercer criticized Mapplethorpe's sexual objectification of *black* men—in Mercer's case, a critique grounded in, rather than disavowing, feminist theory—his complex revision of his initial criticism was impelled by the recognition of himself not only as the stereotyped object but also as the desiring subject of the representation.<sup>31</sup>

A genuinely postmodern critique of modernist formalism does not merely “move beyond discrete works of art to encompass their institutional framing conditions,” as I imagined Louise Lawler's photograph illustrated of my own project. The institution does not exert its power only negatively—to remove the work of art from the praxis of life—but positively—to produce a specific social *relation* between artwork and spectator. Mapplethorpe's photographs do not abrogate that institutionally determined relation—which is why I compared them unfavorably with Sherrie Levine's postmodern appropriations. But they do take advantage of it, with the result not of rendering the depicted sitter a homosexual object but of momentarily rendering the male spectator a homosexual subject. And positions are occupied in the ensuing controversy as a function of our comfort in occupying this one.

§

It is my hope that this book's critique of the museum provides a useful analysis of what might be called a discourse on the objects of knowledge. But there is another step that it does not take: an analysis of a discourse on the *subjects* of knowledge. This step is taken by Michel Foucault's work as it progresses from *The Order of Things* to *The History of Sexuality*, a trajectory that can also be characterized as progressing from an archeology of modernism toward a theory of postmodernism. The essays here are engaged with the former; my present concerns are with the latter. The dividing line is an epidemic that has claimed, among so many others, the life of Michel Foucault.



## Notes

1. Douglas Crimp, "Positive/Negative: A Note on Degas's Photographs," *October*, no. 5 (Summer 1978), p. 100.
2. See "The Art of Exhibition," this volume.
3. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. 73.
4. The compromise language of the notorious Helms amendment to the NEA/NEH appropriation bill stated, "None of the funds authorized to be appropriated for the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce materials which in the judgment of the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value" (*Congressional Record—House*, 101st Congress, public law 101-121, October 23, 1989, p. H6407).
5. Among the best analyses of the issues at stake in these events are Carol Vance, "The War on Culture," *Art in America* 77, no. 9 (September 1989), pp. 39-43; and "Misunderstanding Obscenity," *Art in America* 78, no. 5 (May 1990), pp. 49-55.
6. I have written briefly of my failure of observation before, in "The Boys in My Bedroom," *Art in America* 78, no. 2 (February 1990), pp. 47-49. For an important account of the necessary distinction between homoeroticism and overt homosexuality in Western tradition and in contemporary debates about the canon, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), esp. pp. 48-59.
7. Maureen Dowd, "Jesse Helms Takes No-Lose Position on Art," *New York Times*, July 28, 1989, p. B6.
8. In one of many biased rulings, Judge David J. Albanese refused the defense's motion to have the photographs at issue seen in relation to the whole exhibition. This was particularly damaging, since one can only prove obscenity, according to the Supreme Court's 1973 *Miller v. California* decision, if the work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest. See Vance, "Misunderstanding Obscenity."
9. Quoted in Jayne Merkel, "Art on Trial," *Art in America* 78, no. 12 (December 1990), p. 47.

10. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 49.
11. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 47.
12. Compare the criticism of Mapplethorpe, made much earlier, by photography critic Ben Lifson: "I don't care who Mapplethorpe photographs. Every photographer has to depict or describe the milieu which fascinates him most. You've got to go where your passion lies, where your feelings are most in conflict. But Mapplethorpe's feelings are glossed over. There is no feeling in that work. Common sense tells us that those situations are charged with conflict" (Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photophilia," *October*, no. 16 [Spring 1981], p. 111).
13. The single exception that I know of, outside the gay press, of course, was the invitation—following my suggestion—of Gayle Rubin to speak at a symposium on Mapplethorpe organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in the fall of 1990. Rubin is an active participant in the gay and lesbian S/M subculture in San Francisco, has published on the subject, and has long been at work on a doctoral dissertation on gay male S/M practices.
14. Hilton Kramer, "Is Art above the Laws of Decency?" *New York Times*, July 2, 1989, section 2, p. 7.
15. Allan Sekula makes this point by contrasting Kramer's attack on Mapplethorpe with his approval of a work by Gaston Lachaise: "We can find a similar reduction of the female subject to breasts and vagina in the work of Lachaise (*Breasts with Female Organ Between*, 1930-1932). Kramer argued, however, that 'even at his most extreme moments of expressiveness in dealing with the female figure, Lachaise conveys a sense of complete and unstrained mastery in realizing his sensations.' Kramer's notions of subjectivity seem to be quite gender-specific. Lachaise, of course can be claimed for a 'vitalist ideal' while Mapplethorpe stands condemned for 'social pathology'" (Allan Sekula, "Some American Notes," *Art in America* 78, no. 2 (February 1990), p. 43).
16. Of course, feminism is concerned with sexuality, and antihomophobic analysis must take account of questions of gender; nevertheless, it has been persuasively argued that the two forms of inquiry need to be conceptualized separately. See Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 287-319; and Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, esp. pp. 27-35.

17. The Museum of Modern Art, which had commissioned my essay for the catalogue of its Serra exhibition, reacted very strongly against the Marxist interpretation. Knowing that Serra supported the essay, however, and wanting to avoid controversy after the recent debacle over the decision by federal authorities to destroy Serra's *Tilted Arc*, the museum was in no position to refuse the text. In his catalogue preface, William Rubin, then Director of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, wrote, "Given the extraordinary circumstances of last spring's hearing on the fate of *Tilted Arc* and the outpouring of comment it occasioned, we felt it appropriate that the artist's position on these matters should be represented in the catalog in the way he personally deemed most effective. The Museum of Modern Art disagrees with the rhetorical tone and historical polemic of much that has been written about *Tilted Arc*, here as elsewhere. Yet, however differently our curators would argue for Serra's position, we have chosen, at an exceptionally embattled moment in the artist's career, to air this debate in the fashion he and his guest curator requested—thereby fulfilling one of the Museum's roles, as a forum for the widely differing ideas and opinions that give dynamism to public dialogue on the art of our time" ("Preface," *Richard Serra/Sculpture*, [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986], pp. 9–10). Needless to say, the position argued in my essay is my own, not Serra's or guest curator Rosalind Krauss's; nor was the particular argument requested as such by them. And since the museum's initial impulse was to refuse my text altogether or to force me to change it beyond recognition, it is the height of hypocrisy for Rubin to assert the museum's liberal role in providing a forum for differing ideas and opinions.
18. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), pp. 22 and 49.
19. Ibid., p. 54.
20. Ibid., p. 58; see also footnote 4, p. 109.
21. Bürger, a literary critic, published *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in Germany in 1974, before much of the art discussed in my essays was well known or even produced.
22. Bürger nods to the greater potential of the Soviet avant-garde in the building of a socialist society; see Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, footnote 21, p. 114.
23. Ibid., p. 50.
24. The most telling example of the museum's failure to reexamine its assumptions regarding the high art/popular culture divide was *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, organized for the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1990 by Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik. The premise of the exhibition was simple: artists sometimes transform aspects of popular and mass culture into high art, just as they transform "primitive" art into high Western expression. *High and Low* was quite uniformly condemned in the press for its simple-minded thesis and for its wholesale exclusion of contemporary practices that break down the distinctions the museum so unthinkingly reiterated. Introducing a series of art historical essays on the subject of high and low in a companion volume to the exhibition catalogue, Varnedoe and Gopnik summarily dismiss the entire range of serious thinking about their subject, from Frankfurt School mass culture and aesthetic theory and

- the cultural studies initiated during the 1960s at Birmingham to disparate contemporary feminist and postmodernist analyses: "Although an enormous body of writing about 'mass culture' and the avant-garde already existed, this corpus seemed disproportionately weighted by the work of commissars and scholiasts. The pronouncements of the theorists appeared all too frequently to be engaged, at best, in the skillful juggling of abstract concepts; and seemed, at worst, to insist on imposing dogmatic, narrow, and historically untenable (not to say untestable) categories on the complex realities of modern history" ("Introduction," in Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High & Low* [New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1990], p. 11. Scanning the book's index turns up not a single name in a list of writers one might expect to find: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, Meagan Morris, etc.
25. See Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988); and Douglas Crimp, with Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).
  26. Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 209.
  27. I am referring to the foundationalist totalizing theory of postmodernism propounded most influentially by Fredric Jameson (*Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991]) and to a book heavily indebted to Jameson's work: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). For feminist critiques of these works, see Rosalyn Deutsche, "Men in Space," *Artforum* 28, no. 6 (February 1990), pp. 21–23; Rosalyn Deutsche, "Boys Town," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9, no. 1 (March 1991), pp. 5–30; Doreen Massey, "Flexible Sexism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9, no. 1 (March 1991), pp. 31–57; Meaghan Morris, "The Man in the Mirror: David Harvey's 'Condition' of Postmodernity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 9 (1992), pp. 253–279; Gillian Rose, review of Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* and David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 17 (1991), pp. 118–121.
  28. See Peter Galassi, *Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988).
  29. Quoted from the flier handed out at ACT UP's demonstration at the Museum of Modern Art, October 1988.
  30. Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 130.
  31. Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), pp. 169–210.