

What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?

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It is no secret that postwar culture in North America and Western Europe is swamped by *neos* and *posts*. Apart from the eclecticism of recent art and architecture, there are a myriad repetitions in the postwar period: how are we to distinguish them in kind? How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working? Or, in the register of history, how to tell the difference between a revisionist account written in support of the cultural status quo and a genealogical account that seeks to challenge it? In reality these returns are more complicated, even more compulsive—especially now at the end 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 the problem of repetition is primarily the problem of the neo-avant-garde, a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and '60s who reprised and revised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and '20s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture.¹ No rule governs the return of these devices: no one instance is strictly contrived, concerted, or compulsive. Here I want to focus on recapitulations that aspire to criticality, and to do so initially through a remark of Michel Foucault made in early 1969, i.e., in the heyday of such returns.

In "What Is an Author?" 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

1. Peter Bürger poses the problem of the neo-avant-garde in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), more on which below; but it is Benjamin Buchloh who has developed the specific problematic of these paradigm repetitions in several texts over the last fifteen years, most directly in "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 (Summer 1986). My text is written in close dialogue with his fundamental body of criticism, and I will try to clarify my debts as well as my differences as I go along. I also want to thank audiences at the CUNY Graduate Center, the Université de Montréal (especially Johanne Lamoureux), and the Center for twentieth-Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (especially Kathleen Woodward, Jane Gallop, and Herbert Blau).

Constructivism—in any case to reposition art in relation not only to mundane space-time but to social practice as well. Of course the repression of these practices within the dominant account only added to the attraction, according to the old avant-gardist association of the critical with the marginal.

For the most part these recoveries were self-aware: often trained in novel academic programs (the M.F.A. degree was developed at this time), many artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s studied prewar avant-gardes with a theoretical rigor new to this generation; and some began to practice as critics in ways quite distinct from 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 further 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.⁹ It is this complicated relation between prewar and postwar avant-gardes, the theoretical question of avant-garde causality, temporality, and narrativity, that 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 century now that we approach its end.¹⁰

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The central text on this question remains *Theory of the Avant-Garde* by the German critic Peter Bürger. Now twenty years old, it still frames intelligent discussions of historical and neo-avant-gardes (indeed 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.¹¹ His description is often inexact, and his definition is overly selective (Bürger focuses on the early readymades of

9. On this score the opposition of American "formalism" and European "historicity" that structures the Buchloh text on "Changing Concepts in American and European Art Since 1945" is too stark.
10. I should clarify the two major presuppositions of this text: the value of the construct of the avant-garde and the need for new narratives of its genealogy. The problems with the avant-garde should be familiar, especially to readers of this journal: its ideology of progress, its presumption of originality, its elitist hermeticism, its historical exclusivity, its appropriation by culture industries, and so on. And yet this construct remains the crucial co-articulation of cultural and political forms of thought and action within modernity—an obvious fact that is often dismissed today as a deluded Leninist hangover. It is this co-articulation that a posthistorical account of the neo-avant-garde, as well as an eclecticist notion of the postmodern, works to undo. Thus the need for new genealogies of the avant-garde, ones that both complicate its past and pluralize its present.

11. *Theory of the Avant-Garde* provoked immediate debate in Germany, and a collection of responses was published in 1976 (W. M. Lüdke, ed., "Theorie der Avant-garde." *Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag], to which Bürger responded in a 1979 essay that now introduces the English version of his book (trans. Michael Shaw [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]; all subsequent citations in the text). There are also many reviews and responses in English, the most pointed of which remains that of Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America*, vol. 72 (November 1984); it informs some of the points made below.

Duchamp, the early chance experiments of André Breton and Louis Aragon, the early photomontages of John Heartfield). Moreover, his very premise is problematic—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. And 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 such a claim of self-presence is theological; for a theorist of reception it is impossible. Did Duchamp *appear* as “Duchamp”? Of course not, and yet he is often presented thus, 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, and yet it is often treated as immaculate in conception and reception. 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.¹² This blind spot in Bürger concerning the deferred temporality of artistic signification is especially ironic, for he is often praised for his attention to the historicity of aesthetic categories, and, to a certain degree, this praise is earned.¹³ So where (at least according to my lights) does he go astray?

Bürger begins with the premise fundamental to Marxist criticism, for it alone permits one to historicize, the premise of “a *connection* between the development of [an] object and the possibility of [its] cognition” (li).¹⁴ According to this premise, our understanding of an art can be only as advanced as the art, and it leads Bürger to his principal argument: that 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 when the autonomy of art is proclaimed by the end of the eighteenth century, that is, in Enlightenment aesthetics. The second stage occurs when this autonomy is made over into the very subject of art by the end of the nineteenth century, that is, in art that aspires not so much to abstraction

12. Of course encounters with art and between artists can be punctual, but the effects of these *puncta* (to borrow a term from the Barthes of *Camera Lucida*) are not often immediate. Nevertheless, it is in terms of immediate influence that narratives of both avant-garde and traditional art are written.

13. “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 true of its theoretical preconditions, especially as given by the Frankfurt School, but not of its artistic preconditions. As Buchloh notes in his review and as I develop below, Bürger is oblivious to practices within the neo-avant-garde that do precisely what he says it cannot do, which is to develop the critique of the institution of art.

14. 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: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 41–53.

as to aestheticism. And the third stage occurs when this aestheticism comes under attack by the historical avant-garde at the beginning of this century, for example, in the explicit Productivist demand that art regain a use-value, or the implicit Dadaist demand that it at least acknowledge its uselessness-value—i.e., the actual affirmation of the cultural order concealed in its apparent withdrawal from it.¹⁵ 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 he could not conceive it otherwise, given his strict reading of the Marxist premise about the connection between an object and its understanding.

Marx advances this premise 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 extraordinary sketches Marx muses that his fundamental insights—not only the labor theory of value but the historical dynamic of class struggle—could not be articulated until his own time, the time 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.¹⁶

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 there in his epistemological horizon for Marx to think; 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 the ideological one *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 development—how we think causality, temporality, narrativity. Clearly it cannot be thought in terms of historicism

15. A Productivist demand may also be implicit in some readymades, even in the otherwise 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], p. 32).

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

(defined most simply as the conflation of *before* and *after* with *cause* and *effect*). Despite many critiques in different disciplines, historicism still pervades art history, especially modernist studies, as it has from its Hegelian founders to curators and critics like Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg and beyond.¹⁷ Above all else it is this persistent historicism that condemns contemporary art to the status of the belated, the redundant, the 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 is only 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 them. So, too, if Dada attacks audience and market alike, neo-Dada gestures are adapted to them. And so on down the line: for Bürger the repetition of the historical avant-garde by the neo-avant-garde can only turn the antiaesthetic into the artistic, the transgressive into the institutional.

There is truth here of course. The proto-Pop and *nouveau-réaliste* reception of the readymade did tend to render it formal and/or arbitrary, to recoup it as art and/or 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 performative of the urinal as an ambiguous (non)work of art. So, too, when Arman collected and composed his assisted readymades, he did invert the Duchampian principle of aesthetic indifference. More egregiously, with figures like Klein Dadaist transgression is turned into bourgeois spectacle, "an avant-garde of dissipated scandals," as Smithson once remarked.¹⁸ But this is not the entire story of the neo-avant-garde, nor does it end there. (One project in the 1960s, I will argue, is

17. 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 has its historicisms too, as is manifest in the Greenbergian historicism whereby artistic innovation proceeds through formal self-criticism. In several texts in the 1970s Rosalind Krauss attacked this particular historicism (e.g., "A View of Modernism," "Sense and Sensibility," "Notes on the Index," "Sculpture in the Expanded Field"), often from a structuralist perspective, but today, of course, this historicist/structuralist opposition must also be exceeded.

18. Smithson in response to a question from Irving Sandler concerning the status of the avant-garde in 1966, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 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*, 1 [1961]). In this text of Pop "affirmation" Hamilton seems to welcome the shift from the transgression-value of the avant-garde *object* to the spectacle-value of the neo-avant-garde *celebrity*.

to *critique* the old charlatany of the bohemian artist as well as the new institutionality of the avant-garde.)¹⁹ Yet the story does end there for Bürger, mostly because he fails to recognize the ambitious art of his time—a potentially fatal flaw of any historian-theorist 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 values of authenticity, originality, and singularity. Critical of the avant-garde in other respects, he remains within its value system in this respect.

However simple, this structure of heroic past versus failed present is not stable. Sometimes *the successes* Bürger credits to the historical avant-garde are difficult to distinguish from *the failures* he ascribes to the neo-avant-garde. For example, he argues that the historical avant-garde reveals artistic “styles” to be historical conventions and treats historical conventions as practical “means” (18–19), a double move fundamental to its critique of art as beyond history and without purpose. But this move from styles to means, this passage from a “historical succession of techniques” to a posthistorical “simultaneity of the radically disparate” (63), would seem to push art into the arbitrary. If this is so, how is this arbitrariness of the historical avant-garde different from the absurdity of the neo-avant-garde, “a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever” (61)?²⁰ There is a difference, to be sure, but it is one of degree not of kind, which points to a *flow* between the two avant-gardes that Bürger does not otherwise allow.

My purpose is not to pick apart this text twenty years after the fact, and its important thesis is too influential to dismiss out of hand now. Rather I want to improve on it if I can, to complicate it through its own ambiguities—in particular to intimate a temporal *exchange* between historical and neo-avant-gardes, a complex relation of anticipation and reconstruction. The Bürger narrative of direct cause and effect, of lapsarian before and after, of heroic origin and farcical repetition, which many of us recite with unconscious condescension toward the very possibility of contemporary art, this narrative will no longer do.

At times Bürger approaches such complication, but ultimately to resist it. This is most manifest in his account of the failure of the avant-garde. For Bürger the historical avant-garde *also* failed—Duchamp to destroy traditional art categories, Breton and Aragon to reconcile subjective transgression and social revolution, the Constructivists to make the cultural means of production collective—but it failed heroically, tragically. Merely to fail *again*, as the neo-avant-garde does according to

19. On the latter point see Buchloh, “Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant-Garde,” *Artforum* vol. 18 (May 1980), p. 56.

20. This is strangely similar to the charge made by Greenberg, the great enemy of avant-gardism, against Minimalism in particular. See his “Recentness of Sculpture” (1967), in *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968).

Bürger, is at best pathetic and farcical, at worst 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 is concerned with the "tragedy" of Napoleon, master of the first French Empire, followed by the "farce" of his nephew Louis Bonaparte, manager 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. And yet in subtle ways it pervades criticism of contemporary art and culture, where its effect is first to *construct* the contemporary as *posthistorical*, a simulacral world of failed repetitions and pathetic pastiches, and then to *condemn* it as such from a mythical point of critical escape beyond it all. Ultimately it is *this* point that is posthistorical, and its perspective is most mythical where it purports to be most critical.²¹

For Bürger, then, the failure of both historical and neo-avant-gardes spills us all into pluralistic irrelevance, "the positing of any meaning whatever." And he concludes: "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 shares.²² And the conclusion is *mistaken*; it is mistaken historically, politically, and ethically. First, it neglects the very lesson of the avant-garde that Bürger teaches elsewhere: the historicity of art, of *all* art including the contemporary. It also neglects that an understanding of this historicity may be *one* criterion by which art

21. This rhetorical model of tragedy-and-farce, it is important to note, need not produce posthistorical effects, nor need it affirm the grandeur of the first term. 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 questioned as such. 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, the rhetorical model may not be. On repetition in Marx also see Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and on rhetoricity in Marx see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). On the posthistorical see Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1992). In contemporary North American culture there is a transvaluation of the pathetic and the failed, but that is another story.

22. Both present and past are projections here, but what exactly is this past, this lost object of the melancholic critic? For Bürger it is not the historical avant-garde alone, despite the fact that he castigates it like a melancholic betrayed by his love object. Most critics harbor some such lost ideal against which (post)modernism is secretly judged, and often, as per the formula of melancholia, this ideal is unconscious.

can claim to be advanced as art today.²³ 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 in the form of a 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, too, creative analysis is *interminable*.²⁴

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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

23. In other words, the recognition of conventionality need not issue in the "simultaneity of the radically disparate"; on the contrary it can prompt a historicization of the radically necessary. See n. 24.

24. Some comparison of Bürger and Buchloh might be 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 *Performance, Text(e)s & Documents*, ed. Chantal Pontbriand (Montreal: Parachute, 1981), p. 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" (p. 21). For Buchloh this is "aesthetic passivism," and it 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*. And 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," p. 59). According to this same dialectic of failure, Buchloh considers the practice of repetition to be the authentic meaning of the neo-avant-garde ("Primary Colors," p. 43). This dialectic is seductive, but it limits the possibilities of the neo-avant-garde before the fact—a paradox, for me at least, in the work of this most important advocate of its practices. Even if Buchloh (or any of us) gauges these limits precisely, from what purchase does he (do we) do so?

seems simple. For what is "art" here, and what is "life"? Already the opposition tends to cede to art the autonomy that is in question, and to position life at a point beyond reach. In its 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 experience, to which Benjamin is also inclined, leads Bürger to read the avant-garde as transgression pure and simple.²⁵ More specifically, it prompts him to see its primary device, the readymade, 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, its *mimetic* dimension, whereby the avant-garde mimes the degraded world of capitalist modernity in order not to embrace it but to mock it (e.g., Cologne Dada), and its *utopian* dimension, whereby the avant-garde does not pose what could be so much as what *cannot* be—precisely, again, as a critique of what is (e.g., de Stijl). Now to speak of the avant-garde in 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 the sense that the cabaret nihilism of the Zurich branch of Dada is a critical elaboration of the nihilism of World War I, or that the aesthetic anarchism of the Berlin branch of Dada is a critical elaboration of the anarchism of a country defeated militarily and torn up politically; and *performative* in the sense that both these attacks on art are waged, necessarily, in relation to it—to its languages, institutions, 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, one that 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 deconstructed form; an emancipatory effect does not follow."²⁶ Some respondents to Bürger

25. 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 of 16 March 1936, in *Aesthetics and Politics* [London: New Left Books, 1977], p. 123). For instances of the Dadaist ideology of immediacy, see almost any relevant text by Tristan Tzara, Richard Hülsenbeck, etc.

26. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p. 11. A complementary critique argues that the avant-garde *succeeded*—but only at the cost of us all; that it penetrated other aspects of social

push this critique further: in its attempt to negate art, it is argued, the avant-garde *preserves* it, preserves the category of art-as-such. Thus, rather than break with the ideology of aesthetic autonomy, it is but "a reversal phenomenon on the identical ideological level."²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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 dialectical, even rhizomatic. 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.)"²⁹ 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.³⁰ And it is this testing of "frames or formats" that drives the neo-avant-garde in its contemporary phases.³¹

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 exactly was effected by the signal acts of the historical avant-garde, as when 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

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).

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

28. This rhetorical understanding of the historical avant-garde also qualifies criticism of it from within the ranks of the neo-avant-garde, more on which below.

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

30. Thus his development as suggested by the title of one of his books: Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966).

31. The first serious intimation of postmodernism in visual art draws on this avant-garde project to challenge the modernism advanced by Greenberg. In "Other Criteria" (1968/72) 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" [1961/65]), Steinberg calls on art to "redefine the area of its competence by testing its limits" (*Other Criteria* [London: Oxford University Press, 1972], p. 77).

there will be no more representation."³² Here Rodchenko *declares* the *end* of painting, but what he *demonstrates* is different. It 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 they are not identical. To collapse convention *into* institution produces a type of determinism; to read institution *as* convention produces a type of formalism. The institution of art *enframes* conventions, but it does not *constitute* them, not entirely. However heuristic, this difference does help to distinguish the emphases of historical and neo-avant-gardes: if the first focuses on the conventional, the second concentrates on the institutional.³³

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 specific medium from within as does Rodchenko, Duchamp articulates "the enunciative conditions" of the modern art work from without.³⁴ But the effect is similar: 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 Constructivism in 1921 are radically different). And here, too, apart from the local outrage provoked by the vulgar object, the institution of art is not much defined. Indeed, the rejection of *Fountain* by the Society of Independent Artists exposed its discursive parameters more than the work *per se*.³⁵ In any case, like the Rodchenko, the Duchamp is a declaration, a performative: Rodchenko "affirms"; Duchamp, in the guise of R. Mutt, "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 indeed are the limitations underscored fifty years later by artists like

32. Alexander Rodchenko, "Working with Mayakowsky," in *From Painting to Design: Russian Constructivist Art of the Twenties* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzyska, 1981), p. 191. How are we to read the retrospective aspect of this statement? How retroactive is it? For a different account, see Buchloh, "Primary Colors," pp. 43–45.

33. My account of this difference is informed by Frazer Ward, "Institutional Critique and Publicity" (manuscript).

34. See Thierry de Duve's "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism" in this issue.

35. But then is there a *per se* here apart from this rejection? It may also be that the policy of the 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 *nonexhibited*: 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 another important instance of a work turned into a fetish that covers its own absence, a process that I attempt to theorize below in terms of trauma.) Of course the *nonexhibited* is its own avant-garde paradigm, indeed its own tradition, from the Salon des refusés and the Secession movements of the nineteenth century to canceled exhibitions in our own time, most significantly that of Hans Haacke at the Guggenheim in 1971—an example that again may point to the heuristic difference between convention-critique and institution-critique.

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 more systematically.³⁶ To my mind this is the essential relation between the most significant 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) that the institution of art is grasped as such not with the historical avant-garde but with the neo-avant-garde; (2) that 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) that, 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.* It is thus that the Bürger dialectic of the avant-garde might be righted.

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Of course 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, aspects of which are appropriated by spectacular culture in part through its neo repetitions. This much is due the devil, but only this much.³⁷ Rather than render the avant-garde

36. The *Musée d'art moderne* of Marcel Broodthaers is the 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 was the statue allowed to become historical. Here Asher elaborates the readymade paradigm into a situational aesthetics (“In this work,” Asher comments in *Writings*, “I was the author of the *situation*, not of the elements” [p. 209]) in which certain limitations of the art museum as a place of historical memory are underscored.

My other example is also an elaboration of the readymade paradigm, but one that traces extrinsic affiliations. *MetroMobiltan* (1985) by Hans Haacke consists of a miniature facade of the Metropolitan Museum replete with its noble motto about the disinterested nature of art. 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 are quotations from policy statements of Mobil, sponsor of the Nigeria show, about its involvement with the apartheid regime of South Africa. In this work the double-talk, the co-duplicity, of corporation and museum is made patent, again through the simple use of the applied readymade.

37. Bürger acknowledges this “false elimination of the distance between art and life” and draws from it two conclusions: “the contradictoriness of the avant-gardiste undertaking” (50) and the