The Return of the Real

The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century

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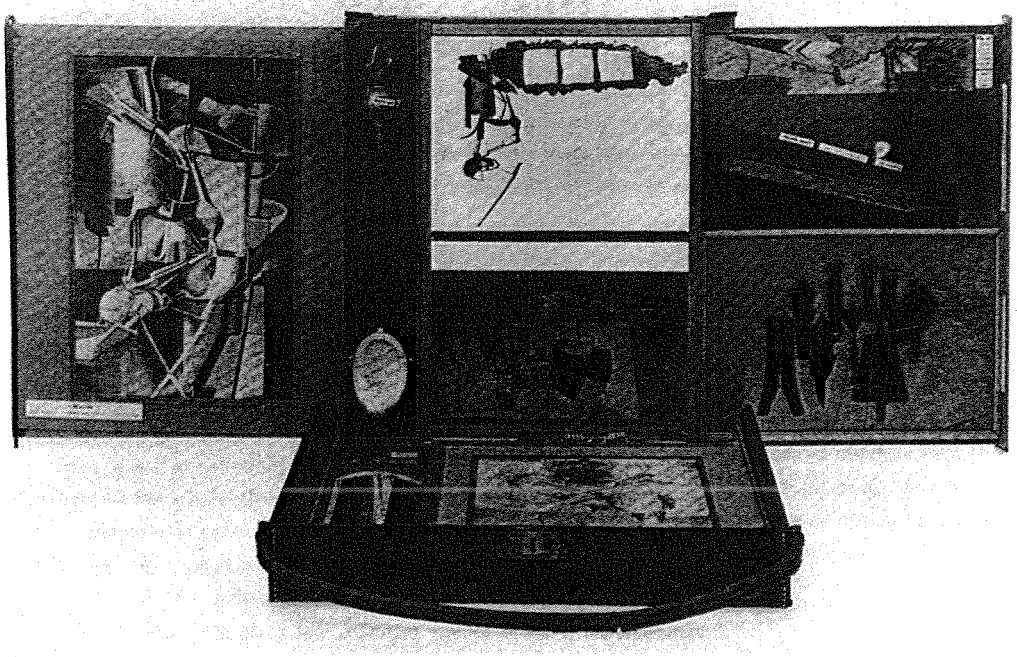


Marcel Duchamp, *Box-in-a-Valise,* deluxe edition, 1941, with miniatures (clockwise) of *The Bride* (1912), *Paris Air* (1919), *The Large Glass* (1915–23), *Tu m'* (1918), *Comb* (1916), *Nine Malic Molds* (1914–15), *Glider Containing a Water Mill* (1913–15), *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14), *Fountain*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

1

Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?

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

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

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

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

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

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

to move beyond "objectivity" (whether in the nominalist version of Duchamp or in the formalist version of the New York School) to "specific objects."[7]

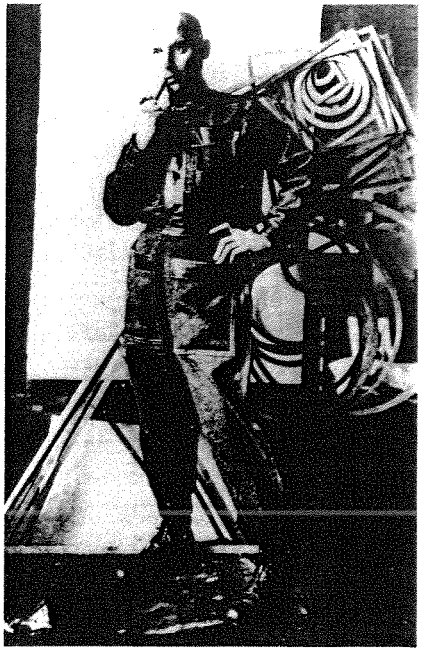
These moves involve the two returns in the late 1950s and early 1960s that might qualify as radical in the sense sketched above: the readymades of Duchampian dada and the contingent structures of Russian constructivism—that is, structures, like the counterreliefs of Tatlin or the hanging constructions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

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

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

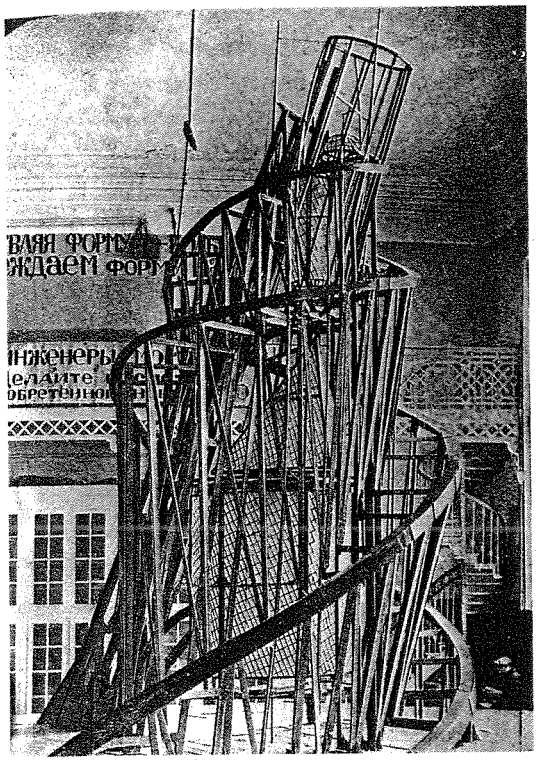
For the most part these recoveries were self-aware. Often trained in novel academic programs (the master of fine arts degree was developed at this time), many artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s studied prewar avant-gardes with a new theoretical rigor; and some began to practice as critics in ways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

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

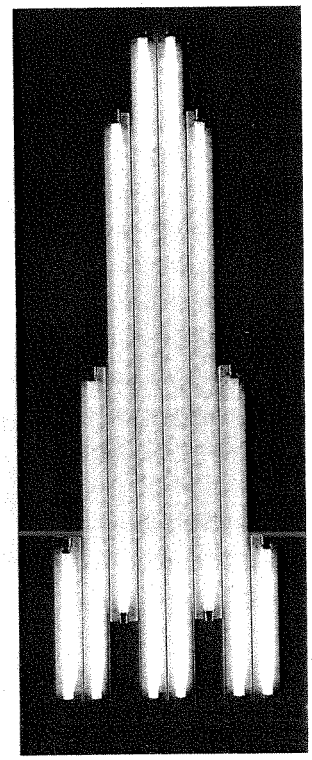


Alexander Rodchenko, with constructions, c. 1922.

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



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



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

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

THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE II

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

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

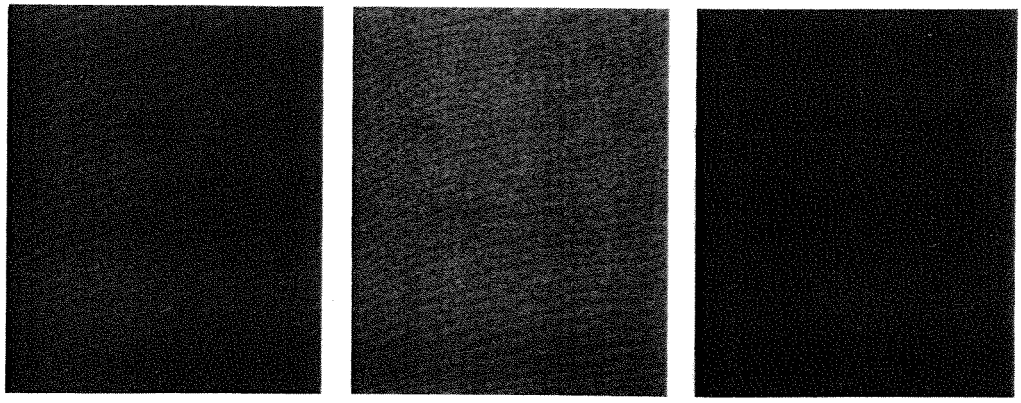
but to mock it (as in Cologne dada). He also misses its *utopian* dimension, whereby the avant-garde proposes not what can be so much as what *cannot* be—again as a critique of what is (as in de Stijl). To speak of the avant-garde in these terms of rhetoric is not to dismiss it as merely rhetorical.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

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

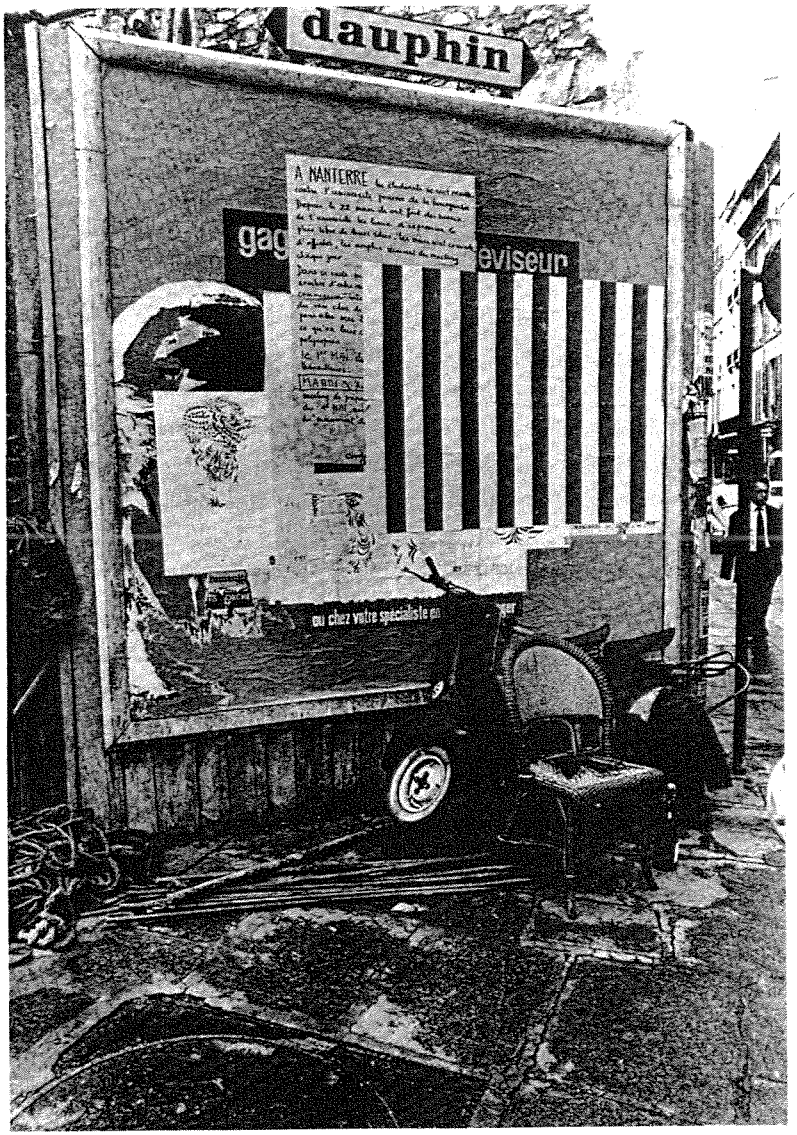
loyal to the line of reconnection, seeks not to undo the "traditional identities" of art forms—this is a given for him—but to test the "frames or formats" of aesthetic experience as defined at a particular time and place. This testing of frames or formats drives the neo-avant-garde in its contemporary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

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

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



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



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

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

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

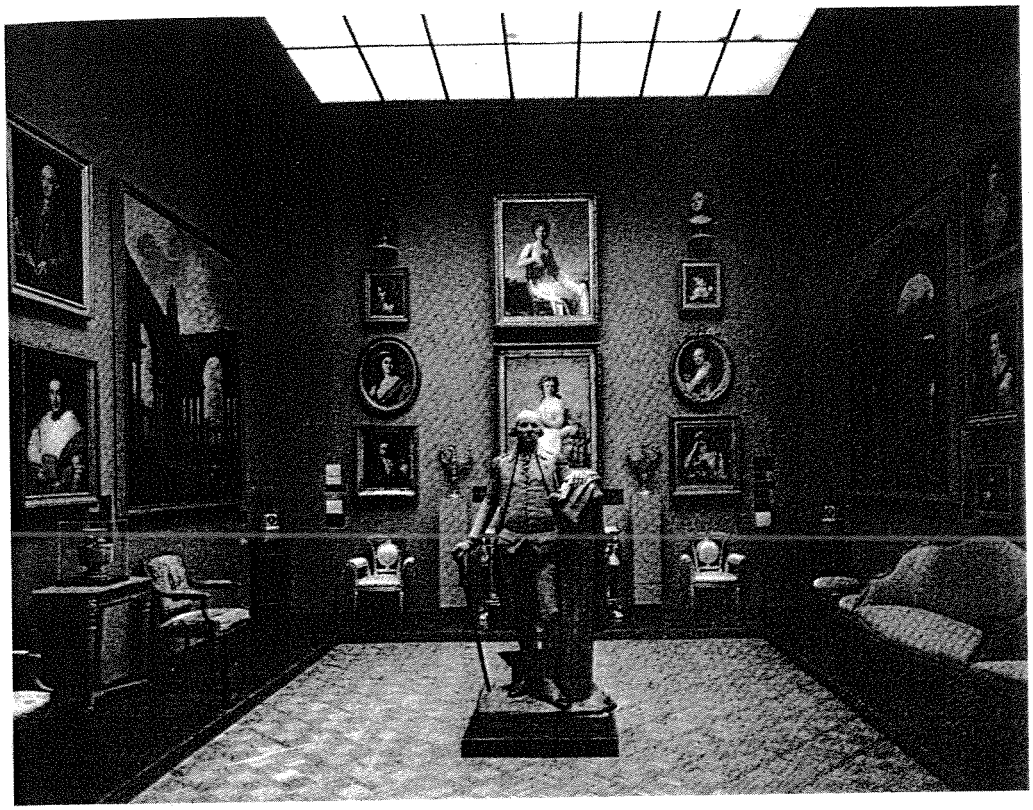
RESISTANCE AND RECOLLECTION

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Hans Haacke, *MetroMobilitan,* 1985.

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

Deferred Action

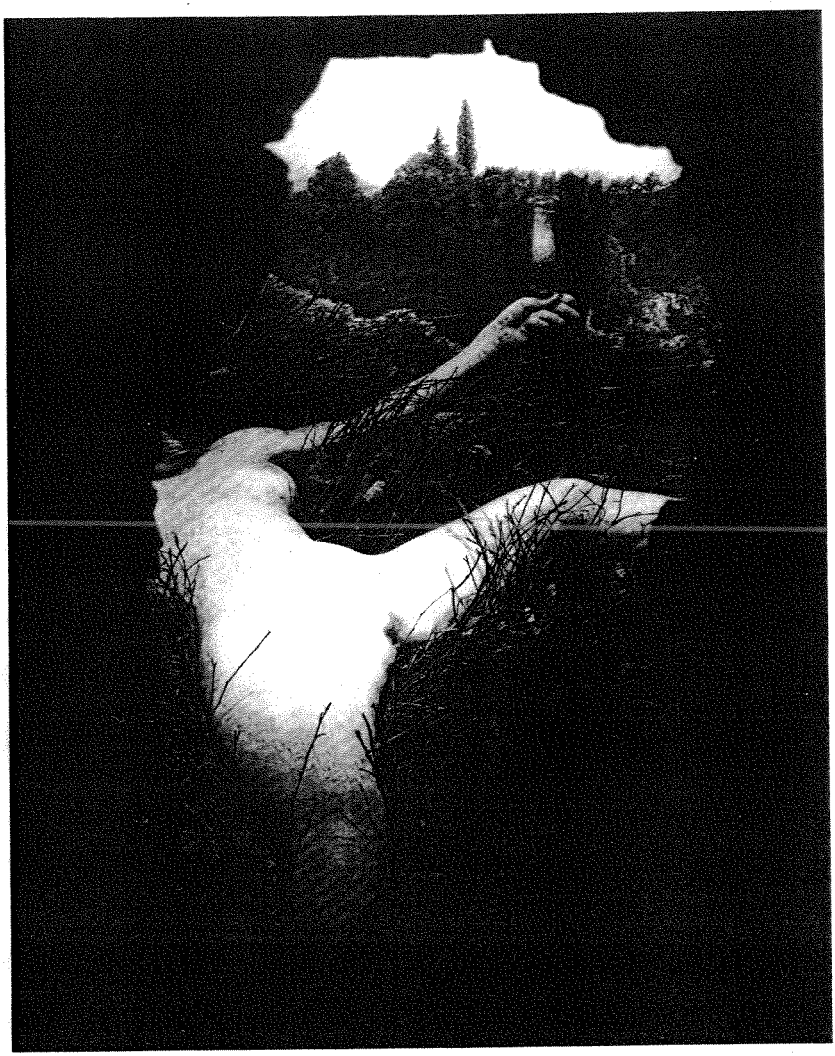
Perhaps now we can return to the initial question: how to narrate this revised relation between historical and neo-avant-gardes? The premise that an understanding of an art can only be as developed as the art must be retained, but again not along historicist lines, whether in analogy to anatomical development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

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

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

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

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

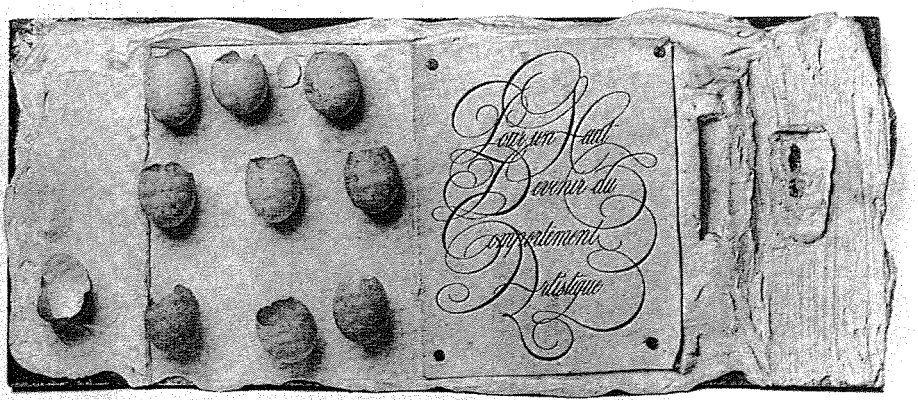


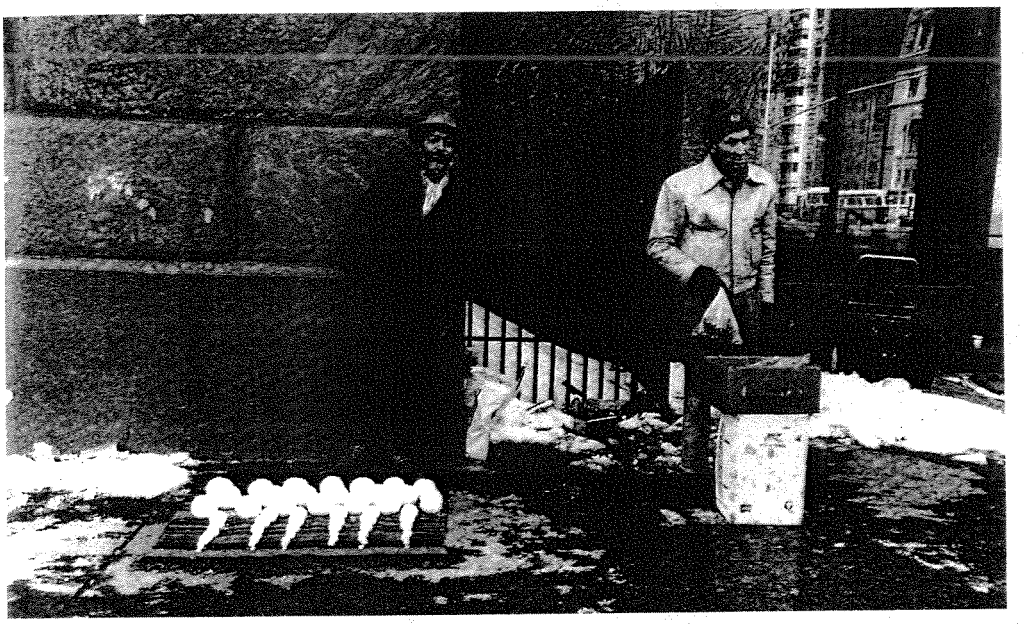
Marcel Duchamp, *Given: 1. the Waterfall, 2. the Illuminating Gas,* 1946–66, detail.

Silvia Kolbowski, *Already,* 1992, detail.

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

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





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

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