COMPLICITY AND CRITICISM: "NEO-GEO" ART OF THE 1980'S

BY

AMY L. BRANDT

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Dr. Anna Chave

Chair of Examining Committee

Dr. Kevin Murphy

Executive Officer

Dr. Anna Chave

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Dr. Katy Siegel

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Complicity and Criticism: Neo-Geo art of the 1980's

By

Amy L. Brandt

Advisor: Dr. Anna Chave

This dissertation examines the deconstructive underpinnings of the so-called Neo-Geo group of the 1980's and explores links between Neo-Geo and the Pictures or Appropriation artists of the late 1970's. Neo-Geo emerged in the early 1980's as one aspect of New York's nascent East Village arts scene. The movement--also dubbed Simulationism, Neo-Pop, Neo-Minimalism or Post-Abstraction--primarily encompassed eight independent-minded artists, including painters Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959), Peter Halley (b. 1953), Sherrie Levine (b. 1947), Allan McCollum (b. 1944), Philip Taaffe (b. 1953) and Meyer Vaisman (b.1960). These artists were attributed the Neo-Geo moniker in 1986 based on their use of geometric forms and their appropriation of art historical motifs and styles from well-established artists. Sculptors Jeff Koons (b. 1955) and Haim Steinbach (b. 1944) were initially labeled as Neo-Geo, then also as Commodity Artists beginning in 1986. The varied epithets for this group represent critics' attempts to understand and classify the broad range of mediums and appropriative methodologies employed by these artists. It has all along been a questionable act to characterize this group under one cohesive name, as if they constituted a singular movement. Many of these artists had been a part of the East Village scene since 1980 or earlier, but they were only discussed and labeled by the art press at a time when their work gained significant popularity among prominent collectors and dealers. While the Neo-Geo artists differ substantially, their work nonetheless

explored some common themes and pursued some strategies in common. Neo-Geo artists created paintings and sculptures that functioned, in a sense, in a textual manner. This diverse group collectively shared an interest in examining the terms, limits and structures of art history and various aspects of the society-at-large, including commodity capitalism and digital culture, in a deconstructive manner. Rooted within an amalgamation of art historical sources, Neo-Geo built upon the strategies of Pop, Minimalist, Conceptualist and Pictures artists in the creation of a diverse body of work. As I demonstrate, Neo-Geo used pastiche and strategies of parodying certain art historical paradigms to create new dialogues within contemporary art.

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INTRODUCTION

The "Neo-Geo" Moniker

Neo-Geo emerged in the early 1980's as one aspect of New York's nascent East Village arts scene. The movement--also dubbed Simulationism, Neo-Pop, Neo-Minimalism or Post-Abstraction--primarily encompassed eight independent-minded artists. Critics such as Hal Foster and Eleanor Heartney designated painters Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959), Peter Halley (b. 1953), Sherrie Levine (b. 1947), Allan McCollum (b. 1944), Philip Taaffe (b. 1953) and Meyer Vaisman (b.1960) Neo-Geo in 1986 based on the artists' use of geometric forms and their appropriation of art historical motifs and styles from well-established artists.[1] Sculptors Jeff Koons (b. 1955) and Haim Steinbach (b. 1944) were initially labeled as Neo-Geo, then also as Commodity Artists beginning in 1986.[2] Although these artists had been a part of the East Village scene since 1980, the above assortment of names designated as Neo-Geo artists sprang up in the press at a time when this work had gained significant popularity among prominent collectors and dealers, such as Illeana Sonnabend, important collectors Eugene, Barbara, and Michael Schwartz, Charles Saatchi, and Jeffrey Deitch, then a collector for Citibank's Corporate Collection.

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[1] Eleanor Heartney, "Neo-Geo Storms New York," *New Art Examiner* 14, no. 1 (September 1986): 26-29; Hal Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," *Art in America* 74, no. 6 (June 1986): 80-91. The Neo-Geo designation in part allowed critics to distinguish the above artists from the Neo-Expressionist painters who likewise attained visibility in New York in the 1980's, such as Julian Schnabel, Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer.

[2] The earliest use of the term "commodity art" that I have found is Daniela Salvioni, "Interview with McCollum and Koons," *Flash Art (International Edition)* 131 (December-January 1986-87): 66-68.

The varied epithets for this group, including Simulationism, Neo-Pop, Neo-Minimalism, Post-Abstraction, or finally, Neo-Geo, represent critics' attempts to understand and classify the broad range of mediums and appropriative methodologies employed by the artists in question. Although these epithets had already been circulating around the East Village, Foster was the first to publicly propose them in his 1986 article and Heartney quickly followed suit. One year later, as many East Village galleries were closing and several of the artists had moved on to Sonnabend Gallery, Grace Glueck published an article in the *New York Times* on the continued difficulty in labeling them under one cohesive name.[3] It was, and it remains, a questionable act to characterize these artists as constituting a singular movement. While Halley, Koons, Vaisman and Bickerton had exhibitions at International with Monument and at Sonnabend Gallery, Levine, McCollum, Steinbach, and Taaffe were showing at different galleries and alternative art spaces located in the East Village and in Soho such as Pat Hearn (opened in 1984), the Cable Gallery, Baskerville + Watson, Artists Space, the Kitchen, and White Columns. Levine was also showing in the East Village at Nature Morte gallery, as was McCollum.

The critics' desire to characterize and to name the new work being produced in the East Village led to a diverse roster of artists who were considered "Neo-Geo." In their 1986 reviews of Neo-Geo work, Heartney and Foster included several artists who were known predominantly for their photographic work, such as Gretchen Bender (b. 1951),

[3] Grace Glueck, "What Do You Call Art's Newest Trend: 'Neo-Geo' Maybe," *New York Times*, July 6, 1987, 13.

Goldstein (b. 1945), and Welling (b. 1951). So as to include them in the Neo-Geo rubric, Heartney and Foster essentially selected anomalous examples of works by these artists that contained a specifically geometric quality. CalArts graduates Goldstein and Welling were not directly involved with the East Village scene, but more directly associated with Metro Pictures, a Soho gallery that became known for promoting new photography and video work. Although Welling was trained as a painter at CalArts, he worked primarily in photography and video in the mid to late 1970's, as did Goldstein. Mixed-media artist Annette Lemieux (b. 1957) was occasionally associated with Neo-Geo in the exhibitions curated by the independent curatorial team of Collins and Milazzo. Lemieux had connections to the East Village scene, having shown her work in three solo exhibitions at the East Village gallery of Cash/Newhouse in 1984, 1986, and 1987. In *Arts Magazine*'s 1986 special section on Neo-Geo work, Jeanne Siegel included Ross Bleckner (b. 1949), Ellen Carey (b. 1954) and Welling in her discussion, which also included Halley, Levine and Taaffe. Since 1983, Carey had been predominantly known for her photographic work using a Polaroid, 20 x 24," large-format camera. Siegel discussed Carey's *Self-Portraits*, in which the artist projected geometric designs on her body. Bleckner produced geometric stripe paintings beginning in 1981, but was less involved in the East Village scene. In 1983, 1986, 1987 and 1988, Bleckner had solo shows at Mary Boone, another prominent Soho gallery, which was then associated with Neo-Expressionism.

The association of these artists' work with geometric forms was also a somewhat nebulous characterization. The Neo-Geo term aptly described Halley's Day-Glo paintings incorporating what he termed "cells" and "conduits" and, to a lesser degree, Taaffe's stripe paintings. Koons and Steinbach's sculptures displayed an attention to

geometry and design in their pristine and symmetrical arrangements of everyday objects, such as kitchen pots, lava lamps and vaccum cleaners. Most of the artists were interested in the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. However, the geometric quality of these artists' work is not its most predominant characteristic. While many of the Neo-Geo artists acknowledged connections among their diverse bodies of work, the majority did not and still do not support the Neo-Geo epithet. Halley and McCollum now consider the term, Neo-Geo, to be a joke, or a facetious neologism that intended to undermine the seriousness of their work. McCollum believes it represented bad journalism and a faulty logic deployed in order to position artists dubbed as Neo-Geo against the Neo-Expressionist artists in reaction to their gestural, emotional painting.[4] In fact, as mentioned, many of the Neo-Geo artists were working in New York before or during the rise of Neo-Expressionist painting in the late 1970's. In 1986, Bickerton ironically mocked the term Neo-Geo in a series of parodistic paintings. Bickerton's *Abstract Painting for People*, 1986, consisted of an over-sized, box-like painting covered with diverse geometric shapes in monochromatic colors (Fig.1). Bickerton commented on these works:

> This series came about in a moment when the term 'Neo-Geo' started being bandied about. Naturally 'we' hated the term and I personally felt much more in line with what was being called 'Commodity Art' and 'Neo-Conceptualism' rather than with the diagrammatic pseudo-abstraction of 'Neo-Geo.' But then I felt if they're inevitably going to label, I'll give them 'Neo-Geo' alright. These works were actually a direct attempt to expose what I thought was an overly simplistic and somewhat false conceit.[5]

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[4] Allan McCollum, email message to author, September 24, 2009; Peter Halley, interview by author, New York, NY, January 7, 2010.

[5] Ashley Bickerton, unpublished personal notes, undated, collection of Ashley Bickerton.

Bickerton's account corresponds with the other artists' general sentiments toward the terminology attached to their practices and towards critics' reviews. In 2003, Steinbach recalled how Heartney's 1986 article "Neo-Geo Storms New York" came about:

> Around that time, Eleanor Heartney came knocking on the doors of a number of artists to interview them. She came to my studio, and I carefully went through my history. The next thing you know, there's this big article, 'Neo-Geo Storms New York,' in the *New Art Examiner*. It didn't deal with the specifics of what I said, because it looked at the work generally. I mean, it was a three-page article discussing something like twenty artists.[6]

Steinbach felt that critics generally mischaracterized his work and overlooked its deeper meaning; and these sentiments were shared by many of the artists in question. Nevertheless, Heartney now, as before, characterizes Bickerton, Halley, Levine, McCollum, Taaffe, Koons, Steinbach and Vaisman artists as painters and sculptors who created seductive works that dealt with issues of consumer desire, commercialism, representation and simulation.[7]

As I will argue, while the Neo-Geo artists related to one other differently, their work nonetheless explored some common themes and pursued some strategies in common. The alternate names attached to Neo-Geo, such as Simulationism, Neo-Pop, Neo-Minimalism, etcetera, connected these artists to the earlier movements and styles referenced in their work. Neo-Geo artists created paintings and sculptures that functioned, in a sense, in a textual manner. This diverse group collectively shared an interest in examining the terms, limits and structures of art history and various aspects of the society-at-large, including commodity capitalism and digital culture. As scholar

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[6] Quoted in Tim Griffin, "Haim Steinbach Talks to Tim Griffin," *Artforum* 41, no. 8 (April 2003): 54-55.

[7] Eleanor Heartney, interview by author, New York, May 25, 2010.

Edward Said pointed out in 1978, textuality is a practice and a methodology in which a single source, or a text, can be examined and unpacked to reveal its exclusions or biases and to undermine dominant modes of thought.[8] In this sense, Neo-Geo artists tended to use canonical art works as texts, visually manipulating the recognizable motifs and materials of previous artists in an effort to dismantle customary notions concerning the history of art. Neo-Geo artists also became known for adopting the practices of painting or sculpture at a time when these mediums had somewhat lost their stature among critics. The years directly following the conceptual art movements of the late 1960's and 70's saw a so-called renewal of painting in the form of Neo-Expressionism, which was accompanied by a resurgence of photographic and video practices by the next generation of artists involved in Appropriation Art. However, as Katy Siegel argued most convincingly in the 2007 exhibition catalogue, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-75*, painting continued to function as a viable medium in the years when Performance, Earth and Conceptual art favored the dematerialization of the art object. Certain Neo-Geo artists reinvigorated painting practices in ways that reflected the social and cultural environment of the 1980's.

Neo-Geo artists were of course not the first to resist a label attached to them by critics. Many of the Pop artists, for example, also refused to be collectively labeled or to have their work considered as belonging to a cohesive movement. Roy Lichtenstein, referring to the Pop art terminology, commented: "I don't think it is a good idea to group

[8] Edward Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 673-714.

everybody together and think we are all doing the same thing."[9] The term Pop was used to encompass a wide variety of artistic techniques and mediums by British and American artists, such as Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, and Tom Wesselmann. For that matter, the diverse roster of artists considered under the Neo-Geo moniker can be compared to the roster attached to the germinal phase of Minimalism, when the list of Minimalist painters and sculptors ranged widely and changed from critic to critic.[10] In 1965 Barbara Rose used the term ABC Art to describe Minimalist works by Richard Tuttle, Anne Truitt, Ronald Bladen, Darby Bannard, Larry Zox, and Lyman Kipp, and to distinguish these artists from Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Dan Flavin. [11] Clement Greenberg, in his 1967 essay, "The Recentness of Sculpture," grouped together the work of Truitt, Judd, Morris, Andre, Steiner and Bannard.[12] Gregory Battcock included Ellsworth Kelly and John McCracken in his discussion of Minimalism, which included a wide range of artists, from Georgia O'Keeffe to Morris Louis.[13] Although curator Kynaston McShine did not intend it as such, the 1966 *Primary Structures* exhibition is now viewed as the first major exhibition of Minimalist work. Critics focused on the more Minimalist work in the show including that of: Richard Artschwager, Ronald Bladen, Judy Chicago, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, Forest Myers, Robert Smithson, Salvatore Romano, David Von

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[9] Bruce Glaser, "Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Warhol: A Discussion," *Artforum* 4, no. 6 (February 1966): 22.
[10] See James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2001), 142-51.
[11] Barbara Rose, "ABC Art," *Art in America* 53, no. 5 (October/November, 1965): 57-69.
[12] Clement Greenberg, "The Recentness of Sculpture" in *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 24-26.
[13] Gregory Battcock, "The Art of the Real: The Development of a Style, 1948-1968," *Arts Magazine* 42, no. 8 (June/Summer 1968): 44-47.

Schlegell, Anne Truitt, among others. Also similar to the Minimalists, the Neo-Geo artists were of different ages and came from different generations. Steinbach (b.1944) and McCollum (b.1944) were the oldest, while Bickerton (b.1959) was the youngest. Likewise, Judd and Irwin were born in 1928, while Flavin Andre, Stella and Turrell were born in 1933, 1935, 1936 and 1943 respectively.

The intent of my dissertation is to construct a history of the Neo-Geo group and to explore Neo-Geo's theoretical, art historical and socio-cultural underpinnings. Chapter one discusses the "death of painting" rhetoric of the late 1970's and critics' bias toward photography and video practices. Influenced by this discussion, Neo-Geo artists played with the conceptual limits of modernism using the techniques of wit and visual interplay.[14] I argue that structuralist and post-structuralist theories allowed Neo-Geo art to function as deconstructive works that critically investigated the institutional frameworks of modernism, postmodernism, art history and society-at-large during the 1980's. Chapter two explores the strong relationships between Neo-Geo, Pictures and Appropriation artists. These artists shared a strong interest in their theoretical source material and in commodity culture and the media. While these artists share many commonalities, Neo-Geo artists reacted, in part, to the dry photography-based approaches of the Pictures and Appropriation artists by creating flashy and alluring paintings and sculptures. Chapters three and four delve into Neo-Geo's art historical references, exploring this group's specific connections to the earlier movements of Color Field, Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism. Neo-Geo built upon the materials and methods of these

[14] See *Artforum*'s September 1975 issue as well as Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, ed. David A. Ross (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986), 29-49.

movements and translated their strategies into commentary rooted in the artistic environment of the 1980's. Constraints in the length of this dissertation prohibit me from discussing the reception of Neo-Geo work in Europe. For the most part, I examine U.S. based critics' reviews of Neo-Geo and the reasons behind the negative reception of this work.

I will argue that Neo-Geo artists were linked by their manipulation of representation and presentation. The content or underlying socio-political associations in Neo-Geo work vied with the abstract or representational colors and forms. For example, deeply rooted in hyperbole and irony, Halley's *Two Cells with Circulating Conduit*, 1985, appropriated from and reused the signature styles and motifs of well-known artists, such as Malevich, Albers and Newman (Fig. 2). Halley's work can be read in various ways, since his paintings inundated the viewer with multiple, conflicting signifiers. His facetious sampling of forms, colors and mediums served to question previous artistic practices. The interplay of geometry and colors somewhat resembled Albers' *Homage to the Square* series, which he worked on from 1950 until his death in 1976. Similarly, the repetition of red and blue lines in the center of the work references what Newman eventually called his zips, or the penetratingly bright lines in his large color field works such as *Vir Heroicis Sublimis*, 1951 (Fig. 3). Halley ironically played with these references that point to the history of abstract, geometric painting. The title of Halley's work, *Prison of History*, mischievously suggested that the artists of the 1980's were fettered to the history of art and confined by the formal advancements made by artists like Albers, Mondrian and Newman. (Fig. 4) Not simply diagrammatic, as I will argue, Halley's work enacted a critical re-reading of art history, challenging the metaphysical

symbolism often attaching to the modernist geometric forms of, for instance, Malevich's Suprematist or Mondrian's Neoplastic works. Halley's analytical process entailed new juxtapositions, put into the service of both socio-cultural and artistic forms of commentary.

Likewise, in Steinbach's work, *Ultra Red#1*, 1986, (Fig. 5) the precise numerical arrangement of red objects-- including four lava lamps, nine enamel pots and six digital clocks-- recalled the linguistic and permutational aspects of Conceptual work such as Sol LeWitt's *Red Square, White Letters*, 1962, (Fig. 6) *ABCD 9 (Row)*, 1966 (Fig. 7), or Mel Bochner's work based on a Fibonacci Progression, such as *Three-Way Fibonacci Progression*, 1966 (Fig. 8). Yet, Steinbach pulled his unmanipulated materials from store shelves, and placed found objects on hand-crafted shelves. These store-bought objects linked Steinbach's sculpture to the world-at-large and the intricate mechanisms of commodity capitalism.

Neo-Geo artists were not the only ones in the East Village who were playing with the formal and material traditions of art. Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring were inspired by Jean Dubuffet's concept of Art Brut, creating sometimes simplistic, primitivistic figures, signs and symbols. Kenny Scharf's work was reminiscent of aspects of Pop art, in its inclusion of low-brow imagery from cartoons such as the Jetsons and the Flintstones. In 1980, these three artists exhibited their work, along with that of more than one hundred other artists, in the *Times Square Show*. Located in a former bus depot and massage parlor at 41st Street and 7th Avenue, the exhibition was organized by the art collective, Colab, or Collaborative Projects, Inc. In contrast to the stark linearity of Halley's work, Kenny Scharf's *Felix on a Pedestal*, 1982, displayed recognizable cartoon

characters inhabiting a cosmic universe layered with brightly colored celestial orbs and structural elements (Fig. 9). Scharf's playful work fused kitschy subjects lifted from mass culture in a Pop-like manner with elements reminiscent of street or graffiti art. The cartoon characters transgressed the boundaries of conventional artistic subjects. Laughing hysterically, Felix appears to taunt the viewer with his very presence. The illicit quality of these figures was reinforced by the timeless quality of the Greek architectural elements. These cartoon characters functioned more as representations for what should not be depicted in a work of art.

Neo-Geo evinced commonalities with certain East Village styles, such as an interest in the popular media, a commercialized response to the burgeoning art market of the 1980's, and an inability to be pinned down to one category or another. As with Neo-Geo, the characterizations of other East Village styles, and their associated artists, also frequently shifted from one writer to another. Haring, Scharf, and Mark Kostabi were labeled as either graffiti or cartoon artists depending on the writer or critic. Haring and Scharf were also occasionally referred to as street artists, along with Basquiat, who can also be considered a Neo-Expressionist. The commercial art market and surrounding media hype affected all East Villagers, not just the Neo-Geo group. By the late 80's, East Village artists Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf gained new levels of fame and notoriety by frequenting the most popular New York clubs, like the Palladium, Paradise Garage, Mudd Club, or Club 57. While the Neo-Geo artists and their work remained firmly associated with the realm of fine art, Haring used the New York City subway as his studio, produced hundreds of drawings between 1981 and 1985 on unused advertisement panels. Haring covered the panels with black paper and drew on them with white chalk.

Many of these drawings were ephemeral in nature and were eventually covered by sold advertisements. Haring also began directly selling images of his artwork in the form of inexpensive commercial merchandise in 1986 with the opening of his Pop Shop at 292 Lafayette Street. Haring opened a store in Tokyo two years later. The media hype of the 1980's also resulted directly in dazzling auction results at Sotheby's and Christie's and an increased popular interest in these artists as members of New York's hippest cultural elite. From 1981 to 1987, the over one hundred galleries that opened in the East Village catered to a hybrid range of artistic styles and mediums including Graffiti, Appropriation, Performance, painting, sculpture, dance, and street art.[15] McCormick and Robinson described the East Village scene as, "hardly homogeneous--it is not a new style, but rather a 'reinvention' of the art world in all its variety."[16] However, as I will demonstrate, Neo-Geo work differed from other East Village art due to its recognizable art historical references and its theoretical underpinnings. Neo-Geo artists were consumed by the conventions of modern art in ways that differed from other East Village artists.

In chapters one through four, I argue that Neo-Geo's critical strategies were intentionally deconstructive. In contradistinction to other East Village styles, the *modus operandi* of Neo-Geo artists generally stemmed from theories of postmodernism, from the philosophy of deconstruction, and from texts by French post-structural theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. Translated into English in the late 1960's and 70's, these texts were still considered novel in the U.S.

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[15] For a lengthy discussion of the East Village, see Janet Kardon, ed., *The East Village Scene* (Philadelphia: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1984); and Dan Cameron, "It Takes a Village," in *East Village USA* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005).

[16] Robinson and McCormick, "Report from the East Village: Slouching Toward Avenue D," *Art in America* 72, no. 6 (June 1984): 134-61.

in the 1980's.[17] Neo-Geo's association with French theory distinguished these artists both from their contemporaries during the 1980's and from their predecessors of the 1960's and 70's. As I will demonstrate,theoretical sources became easier to obtain in the 1970's and 80's, through journals such as Semiotext(e). At the same time, artists became more highly educated and were more likely to attend art school. For the most part, deconstruction, as a literary theory, has almost exclusively been associated with the photography and media-based techniques of the so-called Pictures group. However, close analysis of Neo-Geo work, amplified by interviews conducted in the 1980's with Neo-Geo artists, will demonstrate the deconstructive impetus of this movement. Further, as I will show, Neo-Geo's critical ambitions extended into the socio-political and socio-cultural realms.

Neo-Geo and the East Village scene

The Neo-Geo artists arrived in New York through diverse routes. Levine and McCollum moved separately to New York in 1975. McCollum had pursued odd jobs in his native California. Levine had attended art school at the University of Wisconsin. Similar to the appropriation artists, including Richard Prince and James Welling, Levine drew inspiration from a variety of media sources. In her early works, she clipped ads

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[17] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), originally published as *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de la Minuit, 1966); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), originally published as *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), originally published as *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), originally published as *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

from magazines and experimented with photo-collage. Beginning in 1976, she created the *Sons and Lovers* series, using the recognizable silhouettes of the heads of famous presidents, such as Abraham Lincoln or John F. Kennedy. Soon after, she began superimposing the silhouettes over advertising images in works that incited questions about American history and identity through these visual associations (Fig. 10). Levine's inclusion in the 1977 *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space curated by Douglas Crimp associated her with a new generation of photography and media-based artists.[18] Two years later, Levine's *After* photographs, in which the artist photographed the work of well-known male photographers Edward Weston and Walker Evans, incited much controversy and debate over the terms of authorship and artistic creativity (Fig. 11). In 1983, Levine began to reintroduce the artist's hand in her work and continued to create a dialogue with preceding artists, artistic forms, styles and movements. She created watercolor copies of reproductions of works by famous artists, such as Arthur Dove, Fernand Léger or Miró, that were illustrated in art history books (Fig. 12). She showed her *After* watercolors of works by Kazimir Malevich and Egon Schiele in a show entitled *1917* at the East Village gallery, Nature Morte, in 1984. In 1985, Levine produced geometric works in the form of stripes and checks that were loosely reminiscent of the

[18] The Pictures group received its name from Douglas Crimp's 1977 exhibition, *Pictures*, at Artists' Space. The artists in Crimp's exhibition included Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. Artists later added to this nomination included Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince. The work of this group as a whole is frequently referred to as Appropriation Art. See Douglas Crimp, *Pictures: An Exhibition of the Work of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Philip Smith* (New York: Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977); and Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88. Other notable texts on the Pictures group include Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2009 exhibition catalogue, Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2009).

work of early modernists such as Piet Mondrian or certain painters broadly associated with Minimalism, such as Frank Stella, Brice Marden or Ellsworth Kelly (Fig. 13).

After being included in the 1975 Whitney Biennial, McCollum gained notoriety for his *Surrogate* paintings in 1978 (Fig. 14). To create these small works, McCollum glued wood and museum board together, then applied multiple layers of paint. McCollum discussed the *Surrogates* as caricatures of paintings created after studying the work of Robert Ryman, Roy Lichtenstein and Stella. In 1985, McCollum described the focus of his work and the *Surrogate* paintings as follows:

> [I'm] trying to create an experience of subjectivity rather than creating a subjective experience…this focus grew out of an interest in the area of 'defining' painting, the notion of reducing painting to a set of essential terms, and then 'expressing' yourself within those terms. This is what a lot of painters seemed to be doing in the late Sixties and early Seventies. I began to see this sort of thinking as really absurd somehow. It seemed to me that every conceivable description of painting that one might offer as its 'essence' or its 'terms' could always be found to also define some other similar object which was not a painting.[19]

In 1980, he showed the *Surrogates* in an exhibition at Artists Space and at Marian Goodman Gallery. In 1985, he had exhibitions of his *Surrogate* paintings at the East Village galleries of Cash Newhouse and at Nature Morte. McCollum also began his *Perfect Vehicles* sculptures in this year (Fig. 15). These works consisted of cast and painted replicas of a vase, the form of which appears to be imbued with a cultural aura and quality that is difficult to link to an exact, art historical reference. McCollum's *Surrogates* and *Perfect Vehicles*, among other series, were hand-crafted, yet ironically then produced by the artist en masse. This system of fabrication responded to the

[19] D. A. Robbins, "An Interview with Alan McCollum," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 2 (October 1985): 41.

proliferation of objects within capitalism. It also spoke to the complicit role of art objects within this system.

Born in Rehovot, Israel, Steinbach had been living in New York since 1957. Steinbach received an M.F.A. degree at Yale University in 1973. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, he showed with the artist collaborative, Group Material, which opened an exhibition space at 244 East 13th Street in October 1980, and at the alternative art space, Fashion Moda, which opened in 1978 in a storefront in the South Bronx. In 1975, Steinbach began creating sculptures with used objects found in flea markets, yard sales or other second-hand stores. From this point forward, his work examined the physical and psychological effects of commodities. Steinbach created special environments to display his objects, such as shelves and walls covered with wallpaper on which the shelves were hung. Using the language of Minimalism and Conceptualism, his work aimed at unpacking the socio-cultural structures of capitalism and the ways individuals interact with saleable objects. In 1993, Steinbach explained his work as follows: "I went through an evolution in my own work from a minimal, reductive language based on the conceptual activity of the late 1960's and early 1970's, toward a point at which a whole other range of discussions began to emerge."[20] Exhibitions of his work were held at Artists Space in 1979, Fashion Moda in 1980, the Cable Gallery in 1985 and Sonnabend Gallery in 1987.

Jeff Koons moved to New York in 1977, after having studied at the Maryland Institute College of Art and later, at the Art Institute of Chicago. Originally trained as a painter, Koons began making sculpture in 1978 with his *Inflatable Flowers* series, in

[20] Joshua Decter, "Haim Steinbach," *Journal of Contemporary Art* 6 (Winter 1993): 111.

which plastic inflatable flowers and rabbits are attached to square mirrors. Koons joined the staff of the Museum of Modern Art in 1977--as artists Sol Le Witt, Dan Flavin, and Robert Mangold had done for "day jobs" before him--and worked at the Membership Desk. Around 1982, he transitioned into banking and worked as a commodities broker in order to finance his *New* series, which consisted of household appliances that were glued to the front of fluorescent bulbs and hung on the wall. Koons later commented on this series as follows: "I would glue or bolt an appliance to a modernist background. These pieces were directing themselves to be as objective as possible. They wanted to deal with the history of the readymade, and hopefully to add to that history. And I believe that with the *New* I did add to that Duchampian history."[21] Koons installed several Plexiglas-encased vacuums from his *New* series in the front windows of the New Museum's 1980's 14th street location (Fig.16). Having invested all his savings in the *New* series, which did not garner any sales at the time, Koons briefly moved back in with his parents in upstate New York in order to get back on his feet. After returning to New York, Koons began working on his *Equilibrium* series, in which he suspended one, two or three Spalding Dr. J. basketballs in a fish tank. Koons and Halley had successive solo shows at International with Monument in 1985, which sold out and one year later, these artists were included, with Vaisman and Bickerton, at Sonnabend in the 1986 Neo-Geo group show.

Bickerton was born in Barbados and came to New York in 1982 as a recent graduate of the CalArts B.F.A. program. He continued his studies in the Whitney Independent Scholars Program and began showing his work at Artists Space and White Columns in 1984, the Cable Gallery, International with Monument and Sonnabend

[21] Jeff Koons, interview by Anthony Haden-Guest, in Angelika Muthesius, ed., *Jeff Koons* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1992), 13-14.

Gallery in 1986 and 1987. Bickerton created bulky paintings loosely reminiscent of Donald Judd's "*stacks*" under his own fabricated brand name, SUSIE throughout the 1980's. In 1988, he explained the Susie boxes as follows: "I attempt a full frontal attack on the artist, the artist's work, the artist's identity that is ascribed into the system of information which ultimately manifests itself as history true or false."[22] His *Wall-Wall* and *Monosyllabic Word* series played with the idea of the falseness of advertising and language in expressing universal concepts. His Susie boxes began to incorporate ecological themes and natural materials in the late 1980's. He was included in several important Neo-Geo group shows including *New York Art Now* at the Saatchi Gallery in London and *Cultural Geometry* at the Deste Foundation in Athens in 1987. Bickerton moved permanently to Bali in 1993.

Peter Halley was a pivotal member of the East Village arts scene and the Neo-Geo group. Halley was born in New York and grew up in midtown Manhattan. He attended art schools outside of New York and returned to the city in 1980. His involvement as one of the more outspoken Neo-Geo artists began in the early 1980's, when he began his career as an art critic. He wrote on Ross Bleckner's work in a 1982 article in *Arts Magazine* that correlated this slightly older artist with the Neo-Geo group.[23] At the time, Bleckner was showing with Mary Boone Gallery in Soho, along with David Salle and Julian Schnabel. In 1983, Halley curated the exhibition *Science Fiction* at the John Weber Gallery. The show examined the growing interest in technology and science fiction among artists, including his contemporaries Koons, Prince and Bleckner, as well

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[22] Quoted in Shaun Caley, "Ashley Bickerton: A Revealing Expose of the Application of Art," *Flash Art* (*International Edition*) 143 (November/December 1988): 80.
[23] Peter Halley, "Ross Bleckner: Painting at the End of History," *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 9 (May 1982): 132-33.

as artists of the previous generation, such as Donald Judd and Robert Smithson. By including Judd and Smithson, who were typically associated with Minimalism and Earth Art, Halley established new connections within the history of art. Similar to the other Neo-Geo artists, Halley's work displayed the desire to re-configure traditional art historical narratives. *Science Fiction* marked Jeff Koons' first entrée into the East Village art scene; the accompanying catalogue, *New Observations*, which was edited and introduced by Halley, included an essay by Smithson.[24] *Science Fiction* served as an important precursor to Halley's later writings and work, which manifest strong theoretical and socio-cultural agendas. In his essay for the catalogue, Halley argued that an ironic and self-conscious use of science fiction functioned as a vehicle for advancing the attack on scientism "that is finally being made under the banner of structuralism."[25] He cited a creative, visual use of parody, or the reuse of previous artists' signature styles in a deconstructive manner, as an important aspect of the art of the 1980's.

In 1984, Halley published the article for which he is probably the most renowned, "The Crisis in Geometry," in the June issue of *Arts Magazine*. Halley seemed to follow the example of artist-critics like Judd and Thomas Lawson, who were by then considered established artist-critics.[26] In this essay, Halley presented a limited outline of the evolution of geometric forms from their purportedly neutral standing during early

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[24] John Weber Gallery, *New Observations: 17, Science Fiction Issue* (New York: New Observations Publications, 1983).
[25] David Craven, "Science Fiction and the Future of Art," *Arts Magazine* 59, no. 9 (May 1984): 125-29.
[26] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965); repr. in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings, 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 181-89. Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," *Arts Magazine* 58, no. 10 (June 1984): 111-15. Halley's articles and reviews were compiled in Peter Halley, *Collected Essays, 1981-87* (New York: Sonnabend Gallery, 1991). Lawson's most famous article concerns the death of painting; see "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 40-47.

modernism to their constrictive employment in social and governmental architectural and technological structures in the post-war period. Halley's essay largely functioned as an explanatory text, relating his art works to his theoretical ideas. The geometric forms represented in *Prison of History*, 1981, for example, were meant to mirror the simulated space of the videogame, of the microchip and of the office tower (Fig. 4). At the same time, the lines and forms in Halley's work functioned ironically as art historical signifiers, referencing painters like Joseph Albers and Barnett Newman. Strongly reliant on Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1977, as well as Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*, 1984, Halley stated that these theoretical sources are implicit to the understanding of the geometric art of the 1980's.[27] While Halley was a very informed writer, the publication of "The Crisis in Geometry" at such an early point in the Neo-Geo scene, unfortunately functioned inversely to limit the understanding of Neo-Geo work. Many art historians and critics did not, and still do not, look beyond Halley's essay and his affinities with Jean Baudrillard, in particular. Much of the criticism of Neo-Geo work was made almost exclusively on the basis of Halley's arguments. As a result, the deconstructive tactics of Neo-Geo work have generally been overlooked and its critical potential has been considered illusive.[28]

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[27] Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," in *Collected Essays*, 76.

[28] The exceptions include Dan Cameron, a curator and writer who has been sympathetic toward Neo-Geo work from its beginning. More recently, Alison Pearlman recognized the critical aspects of Neo-Geo work in Alison Pearlman, "Unpackaging the 1980's: A History of Artistic Trends in New York" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1997); her dissertation was subsequently published as *Unpackaging Art of the 1980's* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). So too was Neo-Geo critically affirmed in Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

The East Village galleries most associated with Neo-Geo painting opened successively over the course of the early 1980's and were reputed for their receptivity to artists who exhibited work with a theoretical grounding.[29] Civilian Warfare, known for conceptualist painting and sculpture and Nature Morte, known for postmodern art and photography, both opened in 1981. International with Monument opened a few years later in 1984 and became known for practically cornering the Neo-Geo market. Started by three artist-friends, Kent Klamen, Meyer Vaisman, and Elizabeth Koury, the gallery was housed in a storefront on East Seventh Street between First Avenue and Avenue A. The name was derived from a partially obscured sign found in the basement.[30] East Village artists were attracted to International with Monument's critical edge. Halley brought in slides of his work in January 1984 and his first solo show at the gallery was in 1985.[31] Koons had a solo show at the gallery the same year. Artists Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons and Sarah Charlesworth were also shown in exhibitions at the gallery.[32]

Independent curators and dealers, Trisha Collins and Richard Milazzo arrived on the East Village scene in 1982 and provided Neo-Geo artists with support and recognition before the opening of many East Village galleries and after most of them had either

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[29] See Walter Robinson, "Eye on the East Village," in *Art Talk: The Early 80's*, ed. Jeanne Siegel (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988); and Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, "Report from the East Village: Slouching Toward Avenue D," *Art in America* 72, no. 6 (June 1984): 134-61.
[30] Dan Cameron, "International with Monument," *Artforum* 32, no. 2 (October 1999): 127-28.
[31] Paul Taylor, "The Hot Four: Get Ready for the New Art Stars," *New York Magazine*, October 27, 1986, 52.
[32] Cited in Cameron, "International with Monument,"127-28.

moved to Soho or closed around 1987-88.[33] The couple curated over forty exhibitions between the years of 1984 and 1993 ofNeo-Geo and other East Village artists, the majority of which were accompanied by a catalogue and lengthy, theoretically informed essays on the work by the curators.[34] Collins and Milazzo recognized the Neo-Geo artists at an early point in their careers and discussed their referential techniques alongside the tactics of Appropriation artists, who were exploring similar strategies in the mediums of photography and video. In their abstruse writings and essays, the couple also helped to situate Neo-Geo as a somewhat cohesive group by emphasizing the common elements and themes among the artists' work. In the shows called *The New Capital* and *The New Poverty*, for example, the curators linked Neo-Geo work to the then-current theoretical discourse on postmodernism and highlighted the artists' use of irony as a critical strategy. In *Spiritual America*, Collins and Milazzo continued these arguments and demonstrated how Neo-Geo ironically manipulated signs of culture, technology and other aspects of society-at-large. Working as private dealers without an actual gallery space, the couple charged commissions on the works they sold as a result of their exhibitions, the earliest of which were held at Nature Morte gallery, Cash Newhouse, and International with Monument. In addition to their curatorial ventures, Collins and Milazzo frequently held

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[33] For two good discussions of the impact of Collins and Milazzo, see Dan Cameron, "Collins and Milazzo," *Artforum* 38, no. 2 (October 1999), 125; and Pearlman. *Unpackaging Art of the 1980's*, 115-24.

[34] Collins and Milazzo's more significant exhibitions include *Natural Genre* (Fine Arts Gallery, Florida State University, 1984), *The New Capital* (White Columns, New York, 1984), *Paravision* (Postmasters Gallery, 1985), *Final Love* (Cash/Newhouse Gallery, New York, 1985), *Spiritual America* (CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1986), *The New Poverty* (John Gibson Gallery, New York, 1987), and *Hybrid Neutral* (organized by Independent Curators International: toured to six US venues, 1988-1990).

salons in their East Village apartment, where older and younger generations of artists could meet and discuss their work.

By 1986, Neo-Geo had reached its blockbuster year. The successive solo shows of work by Jeff Koons and Peter Halley at International with Monument in 1985 had completely sold out. Soho dealers such as Illeana Sonnabend, important collectors Eugene, Barbara, and Michael Schwartz, Charles Saatchi, and Jeffrey Deitch, then a collector for Citibank's Corporate Collection, began to frequent East Village galleries and purchase Neo-Geo work. By 1986, Halley, Koons, Vaisman and Bickerton moved from their small East Village gallery to the larger and more high-profile Sonnabend Gallery.

Sonnabend's 1986 Neo-Geo show was described as one of the most talked about shows of the decade (Figs. 17, 18, 19, 20). Sonnabend's Director, Antonio Homem was reported as stating that it was best attended show in the gallery's history and a quick sell-out to collectors from the United States, Europe and South America.[35] The prices of the works included in the show ranged between ten to fifty thousand dollars. The cost of Koons' works in particular rose exponentially within less than a year. The number of articles and critical reviews of Neo-Geo, which sprang up in the art press beginning in 1985 and '86 in magazines such as *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Arts Magazine*, *New Art Examiner*, and *Flash Art* attested to the work's market success. The flashy and seductive qualities of Neo-Geo work captured the attention of major collectors and gallerists. The high quality, clean look attracted the attention of Eugene and Barbara Schwartz, who were significant collectors of Pop art.[36] Eugene, Barbara and their son, Michael

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[35] Heartney, "The Hot New Cool Art: Simulationism," *ARTnews* 86, no. 1 (January 1987): 32.
[36] Ibid., 32.

Schwartz, were also collecting work by artists associated with the Pictures Group, such as Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman. Michael Schwartz met Bickerton, Halley, and Koons while frequenting the East Village and International with Monument Gallery. He considered Neo-Geo work to have a stronger critical edge than the Pictures artists. Schwartz was also attracted to the artists' strategies of sampling styles and motifs from previous art movements. He commented: "[Neo-Geo] had the means of Minimalism and the attitude of Pop."[37] The bright Day-Glo colors and rough textural surfaces of Halley's large paintings imbued them with a strongly object-like quality that was evocative of Stella's *Black, Aluminum* and *Protractor* series. Four of Halley's paintings were included in the 1986 Sonnabend show. Schwartz began collecting Bickerton's work in 1984 as a result of his solo show at White Columns in New York.

Included in the Sonnabend show, the aluminum box structure of Bickerton's *Abstract Painting for People*, 1986 and *Gugug*, 1986, loosely resembled the work of Judd. The generic geometric shapes lacquered on the front of Bickerton's boxes undermined the ubiquity of these forms in abstract works by Modern artists, such as Kandinsky, Malevich or Mondrian. Two Bickerton *Wall-Wall* paintings of 1986, fabricated with chromatic sign paint, white gypsum cement, resin, acrylic, wood, Formica, and aluminum, consisted of over-sized hanging reliefs that imitated the stone walls surrounding outdoor gardens. Vaisman's work consisted of laminated canvases printed with photomechanical reproductions of magnified canvas weave. The 1986 Sonnabend show included three of Vaisman's paintings--*Filler*, 1986; *The Uffizi Portrait*, 1986; and *Painting of Depth*, 1986-- and one sculpture, *The Whole Public Thing*, 1986, in

[37] Michael Schwartz, interview by author, New York, NY, May 12, 2010.

which the magnified canvas weave covered a rectangular box displaying four toilet seats. Koons' shiny, stainless-steel *Rabbit,* 1985, stared out at the viewer with a feature-less regard reminiscent of space suits and science fiction movies. Halley's flashy colors, also used in commercial culture and advertising, were a reminder of Pop art's commentary on the American experience of billboards, blinking neon lights, and product labels. Koons' *Rabbit,* while fabricated in stainless steel, loosely recalled the smooth reflective surfaces of Brancusi's polished bronze sculptures, such as *Prometheus*, 1911, or *The Beginning of the World*, 1924 (Fig. 21).

The East Village art scene was touted in the 1980's as a true rags-to-riches story of the gentrification of an underdeveloped area of Manhattan.[38] However, by 1984, artist-critic Walter Robinson and arts writer Carlo McCormick were already predicting the scene's demise.[39] Robinson and McCormick called it, "so much a 'ready-made' that it seems uncanny, a marketing masterpiece based on felicitous coincidences…" Additionally, the bohemian character of which the East Village scene at once relied on, benefited from, and was threatened by rapid gentrification of "Lower Manhattan's last slum."[40] Nevertheless, Neo-Geo work continued to gain popularity and influence in international art circles, especially in Great Britain. From September 1987 to January 1988, Charles Saatchi opened the Saatchi Gallery in St. John's Wood, London, with the exhibition, *New York Art Now*, and featured the work of Neo-Geo artists. The exhibition influenced a younger generation of British artists, now known as YBAs, or Young British Artists. In 1986, Dan Cameron curated the blockbuster exhibition, *Art and Its Double*:

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[38] Deborah Phillips, "Bright Lights, Big City,"*ARTnews* 84, no. 7 (September 1985): 82-91.
[39] Robinson and McCormick, "Report from the East Village."
[40] Ibid., 135.

Panorama of Art in New York, at the Fundacio Caixa de Pensions in Barcelona, Spain. The exhibition included Neo-Geo artists Taaffe, Bickerton, Koons, Levine, Halley, and Steinbach, as well as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth, Matt Mulican, Robert Gober, Louise Lawler, Jenny Holzer, Peter Schuyff, and Tim Rollins and the K.O.S. By 1988, in the U.S, the East Village scene expanded to other areas of Manhattan. The most successful East Village galleries relocated to Soho, including International with Monument, and the Pat Hearn Gallery. The London and Barcelona exhibitions signaled a strong interest on the part of European institutions and audiences toward Neo-Geo art in the decades to come that was not present in the U.S. Several of the artists, including Levine, Halley, Steinbach, and Taaffe, had major exhibitions in Europe, which did not travel to the U.S., despite these artists' strong New York roots.[41] Likewise, many of the strongest collectors and dealers of Neo-Geo work, with the exception of New York collector Michael Schwartz, reside in Europe, including Thomas Ammann in Zurich, Switzerland; Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich, Switzerland; and Rafael Jablonka in Cologne, Germany.

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[41] David Deitcher and Jeanne Siegel, *Sherrie Levine* (Zurich: Kunsthalle Zurich, 1991); Jean-Marc Avrilla, Jean-Louis Froment, Marc Sanchez, and Kathryn Hixson, *Peter Halley, Oeuvres de 1982 à 1991* (Bordeaux: Le Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 1992); Arnulf Rohsmann, Jean Pierre Dubois, and Trevor Smith, *Haim Steinbach* (Klagenfurt, Germany: Ritter, 1994); and Brooks Adams, Holger Broeker, and Markus Brüderlin, *Philip Taaffe: The Life of Forms: Works, 1980-2008* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2008).

Structuralism and Post-Structuralism in the United States

Structuralism arose in France as a philosophical movement about forty years after Ferdinand de Saussure's influential lectures on the structure of linguistics at the University of Geneva from 1906 to 1912. Published by his former students in 1916, Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* paved the way for the French philosophies of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. Saussure's concept of the division of the formal system of language into the categories of the sign, the signifier and the signified formed the central component of Structuralism. Linguists, philosophers and other academics applied Saussure's ideas on the breakdown of language into multiple, arbitrary units to areas outside of linguistics. Saussure's concepts provided a basis for further examination into the structure of, and inconsistencies within, larger philosophical ideas and sociological systems that rely on language in the form of writing and speaking.

The term "structuralism" contained passive and active roots in the Latin words, *struere*, which means to build and *structura*, which more actively means building. The dual connotation emphasizes structuralism's approach as a philosophical concept as well as a methodological system. Structuralism was posited as a multivalent approach rather than a unilateral system. It examined the organization and configuration of domains, fields, and social systems using a variety of theoretical methods, each of which varies slightly from theorist to theorist. The principal writers on structuralism included Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, although Lévi-Strauss and Foucault rejected the term for the latter half of their careers. Structuralist thought took root in France during the late 1950's. Martin Heidegger was already popular in France within Existentialist circles due to his 1927 book, *Being and*

Time, and his 1957 book, *On the Way to Language*, signaled a linguistic turn within the domain of philosophy. Heidegger's work, coupled with new thought within the domain of structuralism, effectively issued a challenge to the philosophy of existentialism developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, which had dominated French literary circles since the 1940's. The criticism of a linear model of history inherent to structuralism departed from Existentialism's focus on the human subject and causal human relations.[42] Existentialism was concerned with subjectivity, lived experience and the plight of the individual, whereas structuralism examined the formal, systematic and arbitrary properties of signs. As the first of the five major structuralists, Lévi-Strauss, in his *Anthropologie Structurale*, of 1958, examined the limits of anthropology using Saussure's theories and launched structuralism as an influential intellectual movement.[43] Other important structuralist texts followed including: Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), Lacan's *Ecrits* (1966), and Foucault's *L'ordre des choses* (1966).[44]

By 1968, however, structuralism began to receive criticism and to lose influence. The political upheaval of May '68 in France was viewed by many as, in part, a reaction to structuralist thought and its critique of bourgeois humanism.[45] Several critical voices emerged after the structuralists had enjoyed a period of strongly positive press. For

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[42] See Roland A. Champagne, *French Structuralism* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 4-5.
[43] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), originally published as *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958).
[44] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin Publishers, 1972), originally published as *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1953).
[45] For more detailed accounts, see Michael A. Peters and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Poststructuralism and Educational Research* (Lantham, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 161; Champagne, *French Structuralism*, 60-62; and François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2:112-88.

example, in his book, *Structuralism*, of 1968, psychologist Jean Piaget pointed out that structuralism's attempts to enact transformations and overturn hierarchies would never escape the constraints of wholeness inherent to the concept of structure.[46] In his view, the definition of the term, structure, was always rooted in an organization of parts to form a coherent totality, which the structuralists sought to dismantle. French sociologist Raymond Bourdon argued that the polysemic quality of structuralism's dissimilar approaches promoted by theorists, such as Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, prevented any real impact from occurring.[47] In 1967, Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre accused the structuralists of supporting a passive consumer-driven society that suppressed individualism.[48]

By the end of the 1960's, most French theorists had moved away from the term structuralism, but still relied on its legacy to explore new directions in philosophical thought. The new writings and thought arising after the decline of structuralism is referred to broadly as post-structuralism. Although post-structuralism remains a somewhat contested term, this domain generally encompassed the writings of Foucault and Barthes, who sought to correct the errors of structuralism. As Foucault and Lévi-Strauss began to distance themselves from structuralism, new theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard entered the community. Derrida, Deleuze, and Baudrillard introduced new methodologies and ways of thinking about the application of linguistics to social structures. But, collectively, these writers still relied

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[46]Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. Chaninah Maschler (New York: Basic Books, 1970), originally published as *Le Structuralisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968).
[47] François Dosse's two-volume *History of Structuralism* is a pivotal source.
[48] See Henri Lefebvre, *Position: contre les technocrats* (Paris: Editions Gonthier, 1967). See also Dosse's discussion of Lefebvre's critique against structuralism; Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 2:101.

on Saussure's theories, especially his emphasis on the arbitrary character of the signifier and signified, to examine the underlying, hidden points of error beneath larger social or philosophical systems.

Deleuze described the impetus of structuralism and post-structuralism as follows: "A cold and concerted destruction of the subject, a lively distaste for notions of origin, of lost origin, of recovered origin, a dismantling of unifying pseudo-syntheses of consciousness, a denunciation of all the mystifications of history performed in the name of progress, of consciousness, and of the future of reason."[49] Structuralism and post-structuralism both took the arbitrary quality that existed between a signifier and the correlative signified idea as a point of departure in order to point out further instabilities in systems of thought and social organizations. The work of these five writers contributed to the reformulation of the domains of anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, literary theory and the social sciences; for example: Lévi-Strauss and Barthes unpacked the social construction of myth during the 1960's while Foucault focused on humanism and history.

According to Philosophy Professor Irene Harvey, for one, French theory enacted a revolution in literary criticism, particularly in the United States.[50] Derrida's lecture, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," delivered at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, is often cited as the moment when French theory entered the

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[49] As cited in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), x.

[50] Irene Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Differance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), ix-x.

United States.[51] Derrida's lecture and his books, *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*, published in French in 1966 and 1967, introduced readers to the philosophy of deconstruction.[52] As a literary tool, methodology and self-reflexive form of analysis, deconstruction critically examines the presuppositions and hidden agendas within texts and structures of thought.[53] Derrida's subsequent lectures and courses taught at universities throughout the United States allowed him to gain a foothold in the U.S. academic system in advance of other of his structuralist and post-structuralist colleagues. Derrida was a visiting professor at Yale University, New York University, SUNY Stony Brook and the New School of Economics before joining the faculty of the University of California, Irvine in 1986. The writings of Derrida, Barthes, Foucault and Deleuze were translated into English during the 1960's and 70's and Derrida's countrymen began also to gain currency in U.S. academic circles during this period. While the French structuralists and post-structuralists were never a cohesive group in France, they were treated as such in the United States and grouped under the rubric of "French theory" and "critical theory."[54]

Derrida met the Belgian-born literary critic and theorist, Paul de Man, at Johns Hopkins University and their friendship continued until de Man's death in 1983. While a professor in the French and Comparative Literature Department at Yale University, de

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[51]Champagne, *French Structuralism*, 4-5; Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, eds., *French Theory in America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.
[52] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), originally published as *La voix et le phénomène: Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1967).
[53] Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Difference*, ix.
[54] See Lotringer, "Doing Theory," in Lotringer and Cohen, *French Theory in the United States*, 125-61.

Man played a pivotal role as a member of the so-called Yale School of Deconstruction. The group included de Man and his Yale colleagues, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Harold Bloom (de Man's writings, especially his 1967 essay, *Criticism and Crisis*, will be discussed in detail later in Chapter 1.)[55] While heavily influenced by Derrida's writings and the concept of deconstruction, the Yale School's ideas on the concepts of structure and language were distinguishable from the ideas of their French counterparts. The Yale School was concerned with the classification and taxonomic structure of language, while Derrida's theories focused more on the structure of language within a larger over-arching system.[56] While the Yale School was comprised of the most widely recognized proponents of Derrida's writings, a variety of supporters existed in English, French Studies, and Linguistic Departments across the United States.

French theory also gained currency in the U.S. through several important journals, published writings and conferences. During the late 1970's and 80's, the journals *Critical Theory* and *Semiotext(e)* introduced North American readers to French theory.[57] *Critical Theory* was founded in 1974 by Wayne Booth, Arthur Heiserman and Sheldon Sacks at the University of Chicago and focused on the writings of the Yale School of deconstruction.[58] Also founded in 1974, the journal *Semiotext(e)* was established by Sylvère Lotringer, a professor of French and Comparative Literature at Columbia

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[55] Paul de Man, "Criticism and Crisis," in *Blindness and Insight*: *Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism,* rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 3-19.
[56] Champagne, *French Structuralism*, 4-5.
[57] Sylvère Lotringer, "My '80s: Better Than Life," *Artforum* 41, no. 8 (April 2003): 194-97, 252-53.
[58] For a detailed account of the founding of the journal *Critical Theory*, see Cohen, "Critical Inquiry, October, and Historicizing French Theory," in *French Theory in America*, 191-215.

University. *Semiotext(e)* introduced New York to French structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy. The "Schizo Culture Conference" on Prision and Madness organized by *Semiotext(e)* in 1975 at Columbia University, which included papers by Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault and Lyotard, is cited as another influential moment of cross-cultural academic exchange between the United States and France.[59] The conference marked Deleuze's, Guattari's, Foucault's and Lyotard's first public appearances in the United States. The 1978 issue of *Semiotext(e)*, entitled *Nietzsche's Return*, featured texts by Derrida, John Cage, Lyotard, Foucault and Deleuze. The intermixing of images and documents from mass culture with the theoretical texts in the journal's regular issues worked to popularize French theory and to draw connections between French theory and everyday life. Beginning in 1983, the *Foreign Agents* series of books included texts by Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, and Baudrillard. The small, pocket-size dimensions of the *Foreign Agents* texts and their likewise diminutive prices encouraged a young readership and helped to bring French theory to a broader audience. Lotringer worked to keep the U.S. up-to-date with the current ideas coming out of France. Many writings were featured in *Semiotex(e)* and in the *Foreign Agents* series before they were published in regular book form.

As Halley pointed out in his 1984 essay, "The Crisis in Geometry," French theory inspired many artists during a period that was characterized in the Euro-American realm by an influx of digital technology and a shift from an industrial to a so-called post-industrial, or a technology- and service-oriented economy. Ideas about semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism were circulating around the East Village scene and

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[59] Lotringer and Cohen, "Introduction: A Few Theses on French Theory in America," in *French Theory in America*, 2.

heavily contributed to the dialogue within that milieu. Included in the 1983 *Foreign Agents* issue was Baudrillard's essay, "Simulations," which elicited a dramatic response from artists, art historians, and critics.[60] Reworking many ideas found in Marxist theory, Baudrillard's essay relies on the analysis of signs and referents in structuralist and post-structuralist theory. In addition to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Baudrillard analyzes the mechanisms of capitalism and their effects on daily life. When Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulations* was published in English in 1985, Lotringer immediately organized a series of lectures for the philosopher, events which proved popular within the New York art world.[61] According to Bill Arning, the former director of White Columns, an alternative exhibition space that sometimes featured the work of "Neo-Geo" artists, "within two years everyone had read *Simulations*."[62] As a measure of the popularity of the philosopher, and of French theory in general, Baudrillard's scheduled lecture at the Whitney Museum in 1987 was sold out months in advance. A second lecture at Columbia University was quickly organized and, notably, "Neo-Geo" artists Jeff Koons, Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, and Ross Bleckner attended.[63] Baudrillard's ideas, along with Deleuze's and Lyotard's writings on the relationship between signs and referents within the external world of post-industrial capitalism, responded to the socio-economic changes taking place in the late 70's and early 80's.

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[60] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman, Foreign Agents Series (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
[61] Lotringer, "My '80s," 252; Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981).
[62] As cited in Lotringer, "Doing Theory," 148. White Columns featured the work of Halley and Koons in the exhibition *New Capital* in 1984.
[63] Ibid., 150.

CHAPTER ONE

NEO-GEO'S THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Structuralism is not a new method; it is the awakened and troubled consciousness of modern thought.

--Michel Foucault[64]

According to Foucault's above observation, made in 1966, structuralist initiatives operated from within existing academic and social systems to perform critical re-readings of ideas, texts and models of thought. Discarding authorship as a key category, structuralism focused instead on larger, putatively all-encompassing language systems that were said to encompass and impose meaning upon texts, a category that was newly, broadly constructed. For structuralists, an author constructed a text within a pre-existing system of language, an idea that contradicted the notion of authorship as an original, creative endeavor.[65] Almost fifteen years after Foucault's above-cited remark, Neo-Geo artists in New York intellectually grappled with structuralist and post-structuralist thought and to attempt to find ways to translate these theoretical ideas into aesthetic terms. Similar to Foucault's insight, as I will argue, Neo-Geo work by artists ranging from Halley and Koons to Bickerton, generally operated within the existing boundaries of art and society-at-large in order to problematize a linear notion of history and to question the possibilies for authoritative points of view. This chapter will assert that the *modus*

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[64] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 226.

[65] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Wang and Hill, 1977), 142-48; and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-38. The Foucault essay was first published in *Aspen* magazine in 1967. *Aspen* was published by Phyllis Johnson from 1965-1971 and each issue included texts, photographs, recordings, posters, postcards, and, in some cases, 16mm films.

operandi of Neo-Geo work generally stemmed from the philosophy of deconstruction, and from texts by French theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard. Deeply influenced by these authors, Neo-Geo artists implicitly questioned art historical and societal structures by highlighting their conventions. Their methods included an ironic and critically-minded referencing of previous art historical movements, artists and styles. Neo-Geo's self-referential and insurgent techniques effectively generated new dialogues and, ultimately, an alternative outlook on the history of art.

From the 1970's onward, the most vocal art historians and critics have applied structuralist and post-structuralist theories to artistic practice in a somewhat limited manner. Structuralist and post-structuralist writings have been almost exclusively discussed alongside certain photographic practices of the 1970's and 80's. The development of anti-formalist discourse in the 1970's led to a predisposition on the part of critics toward photography, video, and certain forms of sculpture, such as Earth art or Performance art, which are documented by photography and video, has negatively affected the study and the critical reception of Neo-Geo work.

The Death of Painting Rhetoric; the Debate over Modernism, Postmodernism and the *October* Group

According to Homi Bhabha, "no critical term, in recent memory, had developed such instant street credibility as 'postmodernism' did in the late 1970's and the 1980's."[66] The term postmodernism was coined by architectural historian Charles Jencks in 1975 to

[66] Homi K. Bhabha, "Postmodernism/Postcolonialism," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 435.

describe the new, playful and ironic style of architect Robert Venturi.[67] The term signaled the arrival and the impact of French and American theoretical and philosophical ideas beginning in mid-1970, which have been much discussed within academia and the art world. The term "postmodern" carries different meanings for different individuals. As Christopher McAuliffe has shown, the term, postmodernism, had been used and debated in the art world since 1968.[68] The term remained tied to a series of local debates and ceased to have any singular or cohesive definition. Beginning in the late 1970's, postmodernism was tied to certain photographic and sculptural practices of the 1960's and 1970's by some of the most dominant art historians and critics. Many of these individuals contributed to *October*, a theoretically-oriented art journal that strongly supported the death of painting rhetoric in the 1970's and 80's. *October*'s key writers then viewed postmodernism as occurring, in artistic terms, within a strict set of photographic and sculptural practices. *October* was founded by Rosalind Krauss,

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[67]See Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977); and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972). The term "postmodernism" was concretized by French post-structuralist Jean-François Lyotard as well as American theorist Fredric Jameson. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* described the economic, social, and cultural conditions arising within a postmodern age. Characterized by a seamless flow of capital among multi-national corporations such as IBM or Coca-Cola, postmodernism signaled for Jameson and Lyotard shifts in technology, cybernetics and the control of knowledge. Lyotard argued that the overarching meta-narratives, such as "history" and "progress" that have constituted a Western view of society since the Enlightenment are no longer applicable. In the postmodern era, these all-encompassing concepts are replaced by a multiplicity of micro-narratives. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), originally published as *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979); and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

[68] See Christopher McAuliffe, "Idées Reçues: The Role of Theory in the Formation of Postmodernism in the United States, 1965-1985" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1997), 7.

Annette Michelson and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe in 1976, one year after *Semiotext(e)*'s "Schizo Culture Conference" at Columbia University. Other contributors in this period included Douglas Crimp, who became managing editor of *October* in 1977, Benjamin Buchloh, Craig Owens and Foster (Owens and Foster also began writing for *Art in America* in 1981.) Krauss (a former acolyte of Greenberg) and other *October* writers formulated the staunchest attack on Greenberg's views of modernism, arguing in favor of postmodernism which, in their view, encompassed shifts in the socio-political, cultural and artistic realms since the 1960's.[69]

The prolific writings of this group of writers from the late 1970's and early 1980's included some of the first examples of an art historical incorporation of French theory into contemporary art criticism. However, in their attempts to distance themselves from Greenbergian formalism, these art historians and critics formulated a strict definition of postmodernism that, for the most part, did not include painting or sculpture. Many of the writers associated with *October* held a bias against these mediums as being characteristic of a bygone era of modernism, hence as in appropriate for the postmodern era. Foster, Bois and Crow, for example, viewed Neo-Geo's use of art historical signs as signaling the emptiness and failure of painting.[70]

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[69] See for example, Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44; or Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

[70] See Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," 88; Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 100-101; Thomas Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron" (1986), in *Modern Art in Common Culture* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1996), 18; Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, 29-49.

The term postmodernism was debated in a symposium organized in March 1981 by the Young Architects Circle of New York. In this year, Halley and Koons were recent arrivals to the New York art scene, which already included Levine, Bleckner, McCollum, and Steinbach. Bickerton arrived one year later in 1982. In the early 1980's, before the Neo-Geo moniker had been ascribed to this group, artist and critic, Walter Robinson referred to these specific East Village artists as "postmodern," to signal their theoretical roots.[71] The Young Architect's Circle panelists included art historian Christian Hubert, Owens, Levine, as well as painters David Salle and Julian Schnabel. In his opening remarks, Hubert acknowledged: "The term Post-Modernism gained currency in architecture before taking hold in the other arts, but more recent criticism suggests some very different definitions from what the term has meant for architects."[72] Hubert included painting within the debate on the artistic terms of postmodernism and characterized the medium as follows:

> Painting today seems in some respects to be attempting to take revenge on the photographic image, to appropriate it, to break its spell…One concern [these artists] share is with the appropriation, the possession of the image. Can it be owned by an individual artist who invests his personae into the act of drawing? Or do images own and manipulate us?[73]

As early as 1981, Hubert recognized the critical potential of painting, at a time when many critics held little regard for the medium. His comment drew connections between the contemporary photographic work of artists in the late 1970's, such as Prince, Levine and Goldstein, and the painters of the next generation, such as David Salle and Halley, and Bickerton. Hubert's remarks suggested the possibility for an alternative

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[71] Jeanne Siegel, ed. *Art Talk: The Early 80s*, 183.
[72] Christian Hubert, "The Young Architects League Symposium on Post-Modernism," in *Real Life Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects, 1974-1994*, ed. Miriam Katzeff, Thomas Lawson, and Susan Morgan (New York: Primary Information, 2006), 89-95.
[73] Ibid., 89.

reading of the art historical criticism of this period and raised interesting questions about contemporary works that were overlooked by the major art historians and critics of this time. This section examines the death of painting rhetoric and the favoritism toward certain sculptural and photographic practices occurring in writings published in *October* and in *Artforum*. Neo-Geo artists produced work and gained market popularity during a period when their painting and sculpture was misaligned or ignored.

The concept of the death of painting regained theoretical currency in the mid-1970's while art historians and critics began processing French theory and the above-mentioned writings on postmodernity, structuralism and post-structuralism. The gradual dematerialization of art, as seen in the Post-Minimalist, Earth, Performance, Conceptual and media art movements of the late 1960's and early 1970's, brought new forms of art that shied away from the Greenbergian definition of modernism and the materialist concerns of painting. Greenberg's narrow definition of modernism and his longtime belief in painting as the primary, avant-garde medium prompted a reaction from a generation of critics to follow.[74] This anti-formalist rhetoric seemed to coalesce in *Artforum*'s September 1975 special issue on the death of painting, which proclaimed that painting had "ceased to be the dominant artistic medium of the moment…And that the debates between its two major ideologies, abstract and representational, have outlived their usefulness to the current scene."[75]

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[74] See Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939); "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940); "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" (1948); and "American Type Painting" (1955) in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[75] General letter from the editors, *Artforum* 14, no. 1 (September 1975): 26.

Strongly influenced by the writings of Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, Deleuze, and other French theorists, many *October* writers writers drew their arguments against formalism and modernism from structuralist and post-structuralist thought.[76] The journal was named after the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and Sergei Eisenstein's film, *October*, 1927-28. Throughout the 1970's and 80's, the writings in *October* magazine focused generally on the mechanical arts, viewing these mediums as preeminent in their ability to promote radical subject matter and reach wide audiences. Within *October* writings of this period, structuralist and post-structuralist theories are linked to the semiological and fragmented character of Conceptual, Performance, and Earth Art in the 1960's and 70's.[77] Many artists within these movements focused on creating works that removed art from its comfortable, saleable position within the gallery or museum. For example, in his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," published in 1967, Sol LeWitt argued that the idea was the most important aspect of the work of art.[78] His statement pointed to the separation of a work into a sign, or the idea, and its referent, the object. Earth artists Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson used the land as their medium in remote Earthworks such as *Double Negative* and *Spiral Jetty*, 1969-70. French theory was used as a critical tool to support this type of Postminimalist, media and Conceptual Art by artists such as Smithson, Morris, John Baldessari, and Joseph Kosuth, as well as

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[76] For an account of the development of *October* magazine, see Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960's to the Early 1990's* (New York: Icon Editions, 1996; repr., Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 332-74. Greenberg and Michael Fried were the foremost critics and proponents of modern formalism in the U.S.

[77] See, for example, Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68-81; Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part Two," *October* 4 (Fall 1977): 58-67.

[78] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 79-83.

those included in Crimp's 1977 *Pictures* exhibition. For example: Smithson's *Non-Site* (Franklin, New Jersey), 1968 disassociated a sign from its referent or rocks from their initial location in a salt mine in Franklin, NJ (Fig. 22). When removed from their habitual setting and placed within a museum or gallery, the rocks took on a metaphorical significance, representing the larger natural world. The artist's decision to displace natural materials to the gallery setting undermined the pristine quality of this space. Smithson's site vs. non-site works also caused spatial and temporal shifts that changed the traditional definition of a work of art from a static object to a multi-faceted environment.

The *October* group's arguments in favor of photography and video were based in part on their readings of Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, "Photography in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[79] Written while in exile in Paris and working on his book, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin's essay described the loss of authenticity and aura surrounding a work of art as a result of the new means of mass reproduction, distribution and the rise of photography as an art within the early twentieth century. In Benjamin's view, mechanical reproduction:

> substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition, which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements.[80]

The aura and presence of the original work of art is connected to the structure and rituals of the church and the state. A photograph, in contrast, contained the capacity to be mass-

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[79] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 217-51.
[80] Ibid., 223.

produced, put to new uses and viewed in different contexts. Once reproduced, the copy was severed from its connection to the original. For this reason, painting and sculpture, embedded within the cult of beauty established during the Renaissance, maintained their aura and presence, while film and some forms of photography do not. For Benjamin, the era of contemplation of a singular, autonomous work of art was over, considering the rise of Fascism and the new threat of war in Germany. He considered photography and film to be the ideal mediums to reach the masses, because of their reproducible quality. The concept of a mass audience changed with the development of film, since many individuals in several different locations can simultaneously view a film.

At the same time, Benjamin's essay underscored the inherent contradictions in the mediums of photography and film, which also contained the capacity to assuage revolutionary activities. After all, from the period of its inception until today, new forms of print media and advertising served mass consumption as well. Having developed as a result of industry and capitalism, these mediums simultaneously could be said to contain the capacity to produce submissiveness and, in his epilogue, Benjamin specifically discussed the use of photography and film under Fascism. The innovative juxtapositions and ideas produced by filmic and photographic images produced a shock-like effect in the viewer, who could potentially fall under its "covert control."[81] Nevertheless, photography and film were inherently modern in Benjamin's view, since these mediums were capable of changing the nature of perception. With the assistance of the camera, a photographer or filmmaker depicted aspects of reality in a new, unique manner.

[81] Ibid, 240.

Many *October* writers aligned Benjamin's ideas on the impact of the reproducible mediums of photography and film with art of the 1960's and 70's. On one hand, Benjamin viewed photography and film as potential weapons against the impending rise of Fascism in Europe during the 1930's. Almost four decades after Benjamin's iconic essay was published, many *October* writers largely promoted the innovatory and subversive capabilities of these mediums, such as their capacity to deconstruct larger, even monolithic, socio-cultural entities, including modernism, art history, museums, or the rise of commercialization and the culture industry in post-war America. [82] The shifting, fragmented quality of photography, film and video described above putatively facilitated a pointed critique of the culture industry, for example, in as much as it allows for an inversion or reversal of norms. In his essay published in the 1977 *Pictures* exhibition, Crimp argued for the subversive quality of photographic imagery as deployed by the new generation of artists. Sherman, Brauntuch, Goldstein, Levine, Longo and Smith presented recognizable cultural images, but manipulated "the illusion that they are directly transparent to a signified."[83] For example, Levine's simple profiles of presidents George Washington and John F. Kennedy depicted in Levine's *President Collages*, are removed from their habitual context or use in history books or political ad campaigns (Fig. 23). Levine assigned to these signs, or this imagery, a new referent or signified idea, which, in turn, served to question, rather than support, the larger concepts of U.S.

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[82] Culture industry is a term coined by theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who argued against popular culture and the standardization of its forms-- such as radio, magazines and films-- under capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer viewed mass culture as a threat to high art. This view was later taken up by Greenberg in his 1939 article "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and by some contributors to *October* magazine, such as Crimp, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh and Rosalind Krauss.

[83] Crimp, *Pictures*, 5.

history and nationality. The different combinations of imagery contained the capacity to alter the viewer's perspective on the structure of society.

The *October* group nominally shared and shares the French theorists' distrust of institutions, canons, and ideologies. Yet, in many ways, these art historians instituted their own canon, including in discussions only works that support their own views.[84] These art historians applied structuralism's methods of exposing the underlying structural fallacies in a text to the modernist canon of art history. Barthes' writings on the idea of myth, for example, sustain Rosalind Krauss's reworking of the notion of the grid in modernist painting.[85] Barthes' 1957 book, *Mythologies*, was pressed into service to support Krauss's argument that the grid, as seen in paintings such as Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray*, 1921, or Malevich's *Suprematist Painting* (White on White), 1918, is emblematic of a strictly modernist tradition (Figs. 24, 25). In this essay, Krauss effectively portrayed modernist painting as infertile ground or as an isolated, hermetic field detached from reality.

The structuralist and post-structuralist emphasis on the arbitrary quality of signs and signifiers likewise provided backing for Krauss' arguments in favor of a strict definition of postmodern art, in which the only "painting" to be included was Richard Serra's *Casting*, 1969.[86] In this performance piece, initially documented only by photographs, Serra threw hot molten lead against the walls of Jasper Johns' studio in a

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[84] In the "Greenberg at 100 Conference" at Harvard University in April 2009, for example, Krauss and Buchloh discussed their disdain for Surrealist painting. While Krauss has written on Surrealist photography, neither she nor Buchloh have discussed Surrealist painters in-depth.

[85] Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 8-23.

[86] Krauss, "Notes on the Index." In his piece, *Casting*, Serra threw pots of molten lead against the studio walls. Krauss argues in favor of this work's indexical quality, or its act of severing a sign from its referent.

manner loosely reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's process in executing his drip paintings (Fig. 26). The sculptural performance was eventually remade in 1995 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and kept. For Krauss, Serra's *Casting* represented a new type of artistic practice beginning in the 1970's that eschewed a complete link between the signifier and signified. The photographs of *Casting* severed the image from the actual performance event. Without a proper canvas, Serra's "action painting" existed strictly as a performance, the traces of which were, at least initially, only seen through documentary photographs.[87] Krauss' arguments relied on structuralist theory and Barthes' ideas on photography.

Krauss' textbook, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 1977, and her essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," published in *October* in 1979 similarly relied on notions of post-structuralism in order to construct a case in favor of a distinct definition of postmodern art. In her essay, Krauss built a structural argument in which sculpture's modernist qualities are inverted to signal the transition from modernism to postmodernism in art. Modernism's most negative attributes are transformed into the key characteristics of postmodernism. For example: Smithson's *Spiral Jetty, 1969,* fell into Krauss' category of not-landscape because of his use of natural materials in an innovative manner. Smithson's work eschewed the traditional definition of sculpture as a static and contained three-dimensional object residing in a museum gallery. In these writings, Krauss began making arguments against the reigning formalists Greenberg and Fried, casting the notions of theatricality and presentness as the positive attributes of a postmodern art.

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[87] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

Certain forms of sculpture, photography and film were included in Krauss's definition of postmodern art due to their phenomenological capabilities.

In his 1984 article, "For a Concept of the Political in Art," Foster summarized the standpoint of the *October* group by enlisting artists in the struggle against capitalism's control mechanisms. Foster's argument was largely based on writings of the Frankfurt school and post-structuralists such as Baudrillard, Lyotard and Jameson. [88] The avant-garde movements of early modernism, he argued, have been replaced by the need for critical resistance against the media-dominated society. Whereas the modernist artist revolted against the restrictions of the academy of fine art and bourgeois society, for Foster, the postmodern artist should oppose the totalizing aspects of media domination. In his view, the continuance of an avant-garde initiative relied not on painting, but for the most part on sculpture, photography, video and other media-based techniques.[89]

As a contributor to *October*, Crimp further correlated photographic practice with French theory in a manner that excluded painting and sculpture from postmodern practice. The opening sentences of Crimp's 1980 essay, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," hailed photography as the postmodern medium par excellence stating:

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[88] Hal Foster, *Recodings* (New York: The New Press, 1985), 149-56. American theorist Fredric Jameson used the term "late-capitalism" to describe the conditions of capitalism from the 1950's onward. Jameson's 1991 book is based on Marxist economist Ernest Mandel's use of the term and his framing of the three distinct periods in the development of capitalism, including market, monopoly and late capitalism. The term somewhat pessimistically describes the fluid characteristics of financial capital within a globalized system dominated by computers, multi-national corporations, international banking, new forms of media and planned obsolescence. See Jameson, *Postmodernism*; and Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Humanities Press, 1975).

[89] Foster continued this argument in *The Return of the Real* (1996), in which he viewed Neo-Dada and Minimalism as neo-avant-garde movements due to their innovative use of sculptural materials. Foster argued against "Neo-Geo" as a neo-avant-garde movement because of the artists' return to painting and use of store-bought commodities.

> That photography had overturned the judgment-seat of art is a fact which the discourse of modernism found it necessary to repress, and so it seems that we may accurately say of postmodernism that it constitutes the return of the repressed. Postmodernism can only be understood as a specific breach with modernism, with those institutions, which are the preconditions for and which shape the discourse of modernism.[90]

As a "return of the repressed," Crimp's definition of postmodernism performed a critical self-analysis that parallels structuralist and post-structuralist methods for re-evaluating historical structures. In the words of Gilles Deleuze, post-structuralism is the "denunciation of all the mystifications of history performed in the name of progress, of consciousness, and of the future of reason."[91] Postmodern thought questions the terms of modernism while post-structuralist theory severs ties with Enlightenment philosophy. In artistic terms, however, Crimp claimed that photography alone has the capacity to single-handedly overturn the dictates of modernism and bring about the beginnings of postmodernism in art. Within modernism, photography and other reproducible mediums were held apart from the more traditional art forms of painting and sculpture. According to Crimp, the rise of the status of photography as an artistic medium within its own right signaled the transition of modernism to postmodernism.[92] With its references to the everyday world outside of museum walls, the entrance of photography into the museum disrupts the aura and autonomous status of the other works of art. In Crimp's view, this action overturned the conventional reception of a work of art. However, Crimp's essay essentially revealed the static intellectual biases at the time toward these mediums.

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[90] Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 91-101.
[91] Macksey and Donato, *Structuralist Controversy*, x.
[92] See also Douglas Crimp and Louise Lawler, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 2-43

Krauss examined the reproducible quality of modernist sculpture in "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition."[93] In Krauss's view, the multiple, posthumous casts of Rodin's works made by the French government after the artist's death in 1918 raised questions on the unique and authentic quality works of art. As it were, photography and sculpture had more in common than Crimp acknowledged.

In his 1980 essay, "The End of Painting," Crimp constructed a targeted argument against painting. In his view, painting of the 1970's simply refuses to suggest meaning or to offer a legitimate subject. Daniel Buren's installation of striped paintings in the Museum of Modern Art New York in 1974 was used as an example. Buren's work signaled painting's obsolescence since it relied on exterior surroundings for its full meaning.[94] By deploying his simple stripe pattern, Buren remained more focused on institutional critique, or on uncovering the structural and visual components of the museum than on the medium of painting. Unlike the New York School of the 1950's, certain painting initiatives of the 1960's and 70's offered forms of self-criticism and a refusal to adhere to the notion of the artist as a genius-creator. The strong humanism, embrace of myth, and attachment to Jungian psychology evident in the work of Jackson Pollock or Adolph Gottlieb, for instance, differs greatly from the self-sabotage inherent to Buren's work. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, and in chapters three and four, Neo-Geo artists learned from the example of their predecessors to perform similar critical acts in order to uncover the limitations of art history.

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[93] Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition," *October* 18 (Autumn 1981): 47-66.
[94] Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 72.

Benjamin Buchloh's 1981 essay, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return to Representation in European Painting," offered another argument on the inadequacies of painting.[95] Buchloh bemoaned the then-current trend of Neo-Expressionist painting as signaling what he characterized as a similar lack of political instrumentalism to that found during the return to figuration that occurred in Europe between World Wars I and II. The breakdown of Cubism and putative decline of Picasso's Cubist work as seen in his *Three Musicians* of 1921 were said to have transformed Cubism from an avant-garde style to mere pastiche. In Buchloh's view, early Cubist work served the ground-breaking purpose of separating representation into the signifier and the signified. The forms of late Cubism, however, purportedly repeated this accomplishment, managing only to reflect a muted, more sedate version of themselves in their former glory. Buchloh related late Cubism to Neo-Expressionism's tendency to borrow stylistic modes from previous artists and periods. According to Buchloh, recent trends in painting continued to be subject to the stronghold of commodity capitalism. As a result, the reuse of earlier artistic forms remained vacuous and without political or social effect. The Neo-Classicism of the inter-war period, Buchloh argued, symbolizes a regression, which led directly to National Socialism and Fascism. This relapse was compared to painting of the 1980's in its support of the ever-expanding grasp of the "bourgeois spectacle of availability."[96] For Buchloh, the "Neo" painting of the 1980's contained no critical value and functioned only in the service of commodity

[95] Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 39-68.
[96] Ibid., 59.

capitalism. In the words of Foster, as a "pre-industrial craft," or a vestige of an aristocratic order, painting was unable to promote revolutionary or postindustrial ideals.[97]

In a discussion of the *October* writers, Thomas Crow summarized the views of these fellow art historians and critics as follows:

> Likewise dissenters from art history's established regime, their [the *October* writers] emphasis lay more centrally on the semiotic turn in the humanities, and their suspicion of painting was thorough and programmatic. Among the *October* writers' shared preoccupations…was the undecidability that they inserted between an original object or gesture and its proliferation of doubles. This theoretical stance did more than undermine the last defenses of unique synthetic creation as a requirement for artistic seriousness (it had pretty much finished anyway); it had the perhaps unintended effect of putting the artwork on the same plane as mass-produced products of all kinds, including, most importantly, the images generated by the entertainment industries.[98]

Crow identified the *October* writers' bias against painting as well as their nagging fear of the culture industry. A comparable trepidation toward the effects of mass culture on the fine arts was expressed by Clement Greenberg in his 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In the 1980's, many art historians and critics still viewed the culture industry as pervading all aspects of daily life. For the *October* group, photography and film contained the potential to resist commodity capitalism and reach a broader public. As Crow suggested, however, since these mediums rely on the same techniques as the culture industry, there are inherent risks involved. Pushing his thought one step further, viewers might confuse the work of the Pictures group with the entities that their artwork

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[97] Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," 88. In this section of his article, Foster discusses his views on the limitations of "Neo-Geo" painting within the context of post-structuralist and postindustrial theorists including Lyotard, Daniel Bell, and Ernest Mandel. Foster argues that "Neo-Geo" painting supported rather then refuted capitalist ideals.

[98] Thomas Crow, "Marx to Sharks: Thomas Crow on the Art-Historical '80s," *Artforum* 41, no. 8 (April 2003): 45.

is meant to critique. For example: Jack Goldstein's *Metro-Goldwyn Mayer*, 1975, showed the movie studio's trademark lion roaring ad infinitum, locked within a two-minute film loop (Fig. 27). The film may appear, on the one hand, to question the mass media's illusion of transparency. On the other hand, the film could be taken as a simple reproduction of the film producer's logo. Distinctions between mass media and Goldstein's work can be difficult to discern. Similarly, Richard Prince saved sections of advertisements during his day job working as a "clipper" for *Time Life* magazines monitoring advertisements and simply reproduced them in works such as *Untitled* (Living Rooms), 1977 or *Untitled* (Couple), 1977 (Figs. 28, 29). Prince's work then consisted simply of his decision to reproduce an advertisement and position it within a museum or gallery setting. Goldstein's and Prince's work muddied the boundaries between the culture industry and the work of art to the point where, as with Buren's striped fabrics, only context allows any distinctions to be made. The mass-production capability of these artists' chosen mediums caused their work to be viewed from multiple perspectives. In some cases, the museum or gallery context within which these works are placed functions as the sole distinguishing factor separating them from the everyday world of commercial advertising or the film industry. As a result, these works cannot be read in any singular manner. Without any contextual information on the artist's intentions, these works may appear to be continuous with, or critical of, the commercial realm.

Essays by *October* writers generally outlined a theoretical sub-theme within art history that begins with Benjamin's essay and leads to the French structuralists and post-structuralists, such as Barthes, Lyotard and Jameson. Much of the theory and work

discussed by the *October* group in the 1970's and 80's supported the idea that postmodernism dismantles modernism's claims of autonomy. Benjamin's ideas on the problematic notions of authenticity and originality in modernism, precipitated by the rise of a mechanical means of reproduction, relate in some ways to certain writings by French theorists. Barthes 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author," for example, reaffirmed Benjamin's ideas by arguing against originality and authenticity and in favor of multiplicity and intertextuality, that is, a type of writing that involved incorporating a plethora of sources. Barthes' notion of the death of the author replaced the notion of creativity as arising from the genius of a single author or artist with a multivalent form of appropriation is reminiscent of the endlessly reproducible quality of photography and film.

As I will discuss in chapter two, Neo-Geo work may be seen to have continued the Pictures group's errand of undermining aspects of art history and commodity capitalism. Contrary to much of the critical commentary during the 1980's, the hand-made quality and strong materiality of Neo-Geo painting distinguished this work from the output of the culture industry. On the other hand, similarly to the work of what we now call the Pictures group, Neo-Geo sculpture continued to muddle the boundaries between the work of art and the products of commodity capitalism. While some Pictures artists used effectively untouched advertisements in their work, some Neo-Geo sculptors used store-bought commodities along with, in Steinbach's case, distinctive shelves made of mass-produced materials, such as Formica. The objects used in Koons and Steinbach's sculptures are distinguished from the general economy by way of their placement within a museum or gallery context. Also a characteristic of the Pictures artists, this point was

overlooked by *October* critics at the same time as it was used as a strong point of attack against the Neo-Geo artists. Unlike the work of the Pictures group, Neo-Geo sculpture contained targeted art historical references. Aspects of Koons and Steinbach's work paid homage to their modernist and Minimalist predecessors. Furthermore, Koons and Steinbach were of course not the first to use store-bought objects in their work. Dada artist Marcel Duchamp and Neo-Dadaists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns incorporated manufactured objects into their work. (This phenomenon will be examined in further detail in chapter three.)

While the "death of painting" rhetoric flourished during the late 1970's and 1980's, painter and critic Thomas Lawson appeared to be one of the few outspoken supporters of painting within the dominant critical conversation. The Scottish-born painter moved to New York in 1975 and started the now defunct *Real Life* magazine with Susan Morgan. Published in 23 issues from 1974 to 1993, *Real Life* became an underground site of literary and artistic exchange for the diverse and loose group of artists and writers of this period. Artists such as Kruger, Levine, Prince, McCollum and others published essays in *Real Life* on their own work and that of their colleagues. Lawson describes *Real Life* as follows: "a forum for artists to talk about the issues that were of vital importance to them and it was a vehicle for a younger generation to speak about each other."[99] The cover of the first issue featured the work of Sherrie Levine. Lawson attended the Graduate Center at City University of New York, where Krauss was on the faculty, as did *October* writers Crimp and Owens. Lawson became involved with East Village galleries, including Nature Morte, and contributed essays to exhibition

[99] Thomas Lawson, "GI Symposium: Painting as a New Medium," *Art and Research* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 1

catalogues, such as the touring show curated by Collins and Milazzo, *Infotainment*, 1985. Nature Morte owner and East Village artist Peter Nagy also wrote for the *Infotainment* catalogue. Thirty years later in his analysis of the Lawson's article, Jack Bankowsky noted the immediate discussion Lawson's "survey-cum-manifesto" incited within the New York art world, which was divided between Neo-Expressionism and the Pictures artists.[100]

In the Young Architects Circle symposium in 1981, Hubert also commented on the important and subversive role of painting and sculpture within postmodernism. Lawson made a similar argument for a newly critical type of painting that could be aligned with Neo-Geo work. In his article, "Last Exit: Painting," published in *Artforum* in October 1981, Lawson described a dire situation during the late modern period, where his fellow artists were locked into practices evoking "blind contentment."[101] Lawson summarized the view of many artists and dominant critics, who saw contemporary painting as antiquated, or as simply a repetition of older, more laudable forms and movements. The intellectual basis of much conceptual art centered on the artists' subversive attempts to challenge the traditional format of the object, as seen in, for example, Lawrence Weiner's *EARTH TO EARTH ASHES TO ASHES DUST TO DUST*, 1970. In his *Statements*, 1968, Weiner contended: "(1) The artist may construct the piece. (2) The piece may be fabricated. (3) The piece may not be built." [102] By the early 1980's, as Lawson pointed out, this work had entered the very institutions it was meant to

[100] For a discussion of Lawson's article and the dialogue it engendered see Jack Bankowsky, "October 1981," *Artforum* 40, no. 2 (October 2001): 60.
[101] Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 40-47.
[102] Lawrence Weiner, *Statements* (New York: Louis Kellner Foundation and Seth Siegelaub, 1968).

critique, much as the early avant-garde was absorbed into museums and other institutions. (Fig. 30). Within this bewildering atmosphere, he suggested, artists were forced to adhere to one stylistic form or another, choosing either observance or insurrection with respect to traditional institutions and practices. Lawson summarized the sentiments of many '80's critics such as Crimp, Foster and Buchloh, who felt that painting had no further place in art, since it had no new directions to explore. In their view, painting could no longer demonstrate inventiveness or originality, but could only evoke grief and mourning for the heydays of early modernism. As Lawson saw it, Neo-Expressionist painters such as Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, Jonathan Borofsky, and Julian Schnabel continued to propagate a type of co-opted modernist formalism. As Lawson stated, painting had become "a funereal procession of tired clichés paraded as if still fresh, a corpse made up to look forever young."[103] The Neo-Expressionists expressed the "last decadent flowering of the modernist spirit."[104]

On a more positive note, however, Lawson suggested that a number of new artists had managed to successfully work within the death of painting rhetoric. In his view, those new forms of painting managed to undermine the very institutional structures that confine the medium. Lawson's response to the dilemma of painting in the 1980's entailed a type of subversive complicity, as it were, that is also exhibited in the work of the Pictures' group. Lawson advocated the use of painting as a "camouflage…a device of misrepresentation, a deconstructive tool designed to undermine the certainty of appearances," in other words, a type of art that engaged with aspects of art history, the culture industry or society at large and, as a result, elicited multiple readings and

[103] Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," 40.
[104] Ibid., 41.

responses.[105] Paintings by Lawson and his fellow artist-critic, Walter Robinson, served as examples of the concept of painting-cum-camouflage. Lawson's article was influential to certain young painters working in New York at the time, including Halley, artists who were exploring the concept of painting and sculpture as deconstructive mediums.[106]

Neo-Geo, Structuralist and Post-structuralist Case Studies

A strong correlation existed between the literary and philosophical movements of structuralism and post-structuralism and Neo-Geo work. A discussion of Neo-Geo work in terms of structuralist theory will serve to underscore the artwork's theoretical underpinnings. As this next section will demonstrate, Neo-Geo artists used the mediums of painting and sculpture in a playful, ironic and critical manner, which evoked theories of deconstruction, intertextuality and the death of the author. This section focuses on Neo-Geo's semiological content to closely compare Neo-Geo work with the philosophy of deconstruction, intertextuality and Barthes' concept of the death of the author.

Neo-Geo and Deconstruction

As Derrida demonstrated in *Writing and Difference* and in *Dissemination*, knowledge in the West is rooted in the concepts of Western metaphysics and is constructed in terms of dialectics or over-arching, oppositional concepts (i.e. good versus evil, being versus nothingness, truth versus error).[107] Derrida's notion of deconstruction carefully analyzed these constructs to demonstrate that these systems are actually

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[105] Ibid., 45.
[106] Halley, interview.
[107] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

founded on or created by the terms they exclude. Within this arrangement, one term consistently dominates the other.[108] For example, in Western society, the values of goodness and truth dominate over evil and error. Similarly, an understanding of being and presence dominates over nothingness. Deconstruction reversed the opposing terms in order to undermine these hegemonic systems of thought. Instead of supporting a linear relationship between sign and signifier, deconstruction promoted multiple associations and meanings within existing linguistic and literary structures. A deconstructive methodology does not simply accept the existing structures, but works from within to suggest alternative meanings. In this way, a deconstructive analysis is, in a sense, complicit with existing systems of thought at the same time as it remains critical and defiant. Uncovering the relativities or exclusions within totalizing concepts and systems of knowledge exposes their inadequacies and allows for the questioning of their assumed infallibility.

For Derrida, deconstruction was not a purely literary strategy, but a method that contains socio-political implications. In 1982, he summarized the philosophy of deconstruction as follows:

> Precisely because it is never concerned only with signified content, deconstruction should not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic and should seek a new investigation of responsibility, an investigation which questions the codes inherited from ethics and politics. This means that, too political for some, it will seem paralyzing to those who only recognize politics by the most familiar road signs.[109]

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[108] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143.

[109] Jacques Derrida, "The Conflict of Faculties," in *Languages of Knowledge and of Inquiry*, ed. Michael Riffaterre (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Also cited in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 156. It is important to note that the term "deconstruction" was not coined by Derrida, but by the Yale literary theorists, Paul de

In this passage, Derrida sought to differentiate the philosophy of deconstruction from previous literary methods, on the basis of deconstruction's capacity to affect change by undermining totalizing systems of thought. Deconstruction contained the ability to target and analyze the structural mechanisms of overarching socio-political and philosophical structures. Derrida's notion of deconstruction received criticism for destabilizing the category of authorship at a time when women and many minority groups sought agency. However, Derrida emphasized that deconstruction does not concern continental philosophy alone, but pertained to social systems that construct a Western way of life. The effectual aims of a deconstructive analysis therefore extended from the hermetic field of literature theory into the political and institutional realm of society-at-large. The "politico-institutional problematic" that deconstruction targets describes the ways this analysis can also be defined as a general strategy of resistance, which seeks to re-attribute a more powerful position to an inferior entity. Deconstruction sought to reverse these social hierarchies. It allowed a consideration of the conditions and structures that compose reality rather than reality itself. Derrida's statement revealed that the correction enacted by a deconstructive analysis is not always a peaceful process because it shifts entire systems of thought and notions of history. Contemporaneous examples of this type of reversal of hierarchies from within a socio-political realm may be found within the Women's and Gay Rights movements, or in post-colonial literature, which seeks to ascribe agency to groups oppressed as a result of colonialism.[110]

Man and J. Hillis Miller; see Roland A. Champagne, *Jacques Derrida* (New York: Twane Publishers, 1995), xii.

[110] While French theory prompted new understandings of a Western history and historical consciousness, a backlash against French theory and the loss of the subject entailed new thinking about the exclusion of minorities, so-called non-Westerners, women and other

The effects of Derrida's writings, along with those of other French theorists, precipitated a crisis within the realms of critical theory and academia.[111] Previously stable concepts and systems of knowledge were called into question, such as the French intellectual system and Sartre's philosophical ideas on Existentialism. Sartrean existentialism was concerned with a single, omnipotent, transcendental subject, from which all meaning was derived. Structuralism, on the other hand, promoted a decentering of the subject and a polysemy of meanings, resulting from the interplay of multiple sign systems.[112] Derrida's concept of deconstruction, for example, suggested that philosophy concerns the notion of being, as discussed by Sartre, as well as those differences that separated individuals. Although Derrida called structuralism into question in *Of Grammatology*, 1967, and *Writing and Difference*, 1967, he shared with the French theorists an inclination toward new ways of thinking within academic disciplines and a desire to break down the accepted boundaries between domains of study. French theory promoted connections between multiple disciplines and, held down by the weight of tradition, the French university system remained conservative and impervious to change. These qualities helped to bring about the May 1968 demonstrations that brought in modifications to the French academy and social structure. French theorists also sought to incorporate the social sciences into their analyses at a time when the social sciences were struggling to gain recognition by the French academy. Foucault's analysis of

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subjects often excluded from dominant Western accounts. Key texts on post-colonial thought include Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

[111] See Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 1:191-201; and Andrea Loselle, "How French Is It?" in *French Theory in America*, 218-35.

[112] Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, I:382-93.

classification systems in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, published in French in 1966, can be cited as an example of the integration of social sciences and the humanities that had a broad impact on many disciplines and the visual arts.

Ideas inherent to the literary and philosophical theories of deconstruction can be constructively discussed alongside Neo-Geo work. Space requirements necessitate here the isolating of signal case studies by artists, namely those of Ashley Bickerton, Alan McCollum, Jeff Koons and Philip Taaffe, whose work most clearly illustrates these connections. In his 1986 article in *Art in America*, "Signs Taken for Wonders," Foster barraged Neo-Geo stating that this art "evinces a posthistorical attitude whereby art, stripped in the 'museum without walls' of its material context and discursive entanglements, appears as a synchronous array of so many styles, devices, or signs to collect, pastiche or otherwise manipulate."[113] Although his statement was meant to serve as an insult, in this remark, Foster inadvertently identified "Neo-Geo's" strongest characteristics. By functioning as painting and also as a sign of painting, Neo-Geo work created a critical commentary on the medium itself from within its own boundaries. As I will demonstrate, such a form of insider critique relates directly to the philosophy of deconstruction.

Bickerton's *Tormented Self-Portrait* (SUSIE at Arles), 1987-88, for example, exaggerates aspects related to the selling, purchasing, and packaging of the work in order to indicate its complicit role in the activities of cultural materialism (Fig. 31). This immense, jolting work consisted of a black box that was attached to the wall using large,

[113] Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," 86.

metal hinges. The front of the canvas is plastered with logos of brand names, many of which are still current. Bickerton gave the painting a new, streamlined appearance by using synthetic, industrial materials such as polymer paint, used on the exterior of cars and other machines, chrome-plated steel, leather, Formica, rubber and anodized aluminum. A thin metal frame surrounds the edges of the work, replacing a traditional frame. As a visible form of protection, a thick leather covering has been rolled up and attached to the underside. In 1986, Bickerton explained the personal philosophy behind his work as follows: "These are not exactly paintings. These are paradigms of paintings resonant with form, content, style and information, yet paradoxically unable to hold or fix meaning."[114] Elaborating on Bickerton's comment, the work is unable to retain meaning because it simultaneously adheres to and rejects the traditional definition of a work of art. In Bickerton's work, visual irony and hyperbole play a strong role in deconstructing the traditional notion of art. *Tormented Self-Portrait* is a strange, hybrid object that hangs from the wall like a painting, but is made with hard, industrial paints and materials. While canvas is listed as a material used in the fabrication of the work, it is not visible to the viewer. The façade appears glossy and new. The logos look fresh and brilliant, just as they would on a billboard or in a magazine. At the same time, Bickerton hyperbolized all the formal elements of the work. Instead of one or two logos, at least twenty decorate the surface. Also, the painting does not simply hang from the wall; it juts out toward the viewer by at least one foot. Moreover, the work is physically bound to the wall by the hinges and bolts, as if it were confined within the gallery. All the visual elements have been used to emphasize the contradictory or marginal aspects of artistic production and

[114] Cable Gallery, New York, "Ashley Bickerton," Press Release, undated [1986], Artist's file, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

installation that are typically hidden from the viewer or the collector. As a painting and a "paradigm of a painting," *Tormented Self-Portrait* performs a critical analysis of the history of art from within its boundaries.

Bickerton's critical regard for the object and the role of painting related to Derrida's concept of *aporia*, the Greek word for a seemingly insoluble logical difficulty. Emphasizing doubt and uncertainty, *aporia* is referred to in Derrida's writings as a tool for calling attention to the blind spots, or exclusions in a text.[115] In Derrida's view, every philosophical system is founded on the Greek principle of *archia* or the regulation by true, original principles of Enlightenment thought. The process of deconstruction perturbed the *archia*, or foundational structures of the domain of literature, philosophy, or the arts, and uncovered the exclusions, or *aporia*, upon which the *archia* is based.[116] These exclusions consisted of the differential interstices, which were inherently a part of the true, original structuring principles, but were revealed only when submitted to a deconstructive uncovering. Derrida's concept of *différance* also functions as a type of *aporia*. As an active process, *différance* refers to the affirmation of meaning that occurs when accounting for differences or distinctions.

Bickerton's work evokes the concept of *différance* by actively forcing the viewer to notice the differences between his work and a more conventional painting. Bickerton appeared to agree with the judgment set forth by Mininimalist sculptor Donald Judd in his 1964 article, "Specific Objects": "The main thing wrong with a painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall…A rectangle is a shape itself…it

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[115] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, xvi-xvii.
[116] Ibid.

determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it."[117] Bickerton's *Self-Portrait* at once highlights and challenges Judd's assessment by calling attention to and hyperbolizing painting's limitations. Measuring over seven-feet tall, Bickerton's self-portrait dwarfs many modernist works, which tended to remain in the realm of the easel painting, such as Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow and Gray*, 29 7/8 x 20 5/8 in., or Picasso's *Ma Jolie*, 1912, 39 3/8 x 25 3/4 in. (Fig. 32). The dimensions of *Tormented Self-Portrait* are more aligned with those of the large Abstract Expressionist and Color Field canvases of Still or Newman. Bickerton's work hyperbolized the conventional techniques of fabrication and methods of installation. Instead of presenting a simple canvas hanging neatly from the wall, Bickerton's work consists of an intrusive box-like metal structure secured with visible bolts and oversized hinges. The mechanical aspects of Bickerton's work were amplified in ways that detract from the work's overall visual quality. The surface of the canvas is typically the most distinct aspect of a painting. In Bickerton's work, the logos and brand graphics covering the face of the canvas visually compete with the chrome edges, securing devices and other material aspects of the work. The viewer is first confronted by the immense size of the chrome metal box that stands out from the wall in a very pronounced manner. Large plated hinges, which hold five bolts each, extend several inches from the top and side edges of the painting. A thick leather covering was rolled and fastened to the bottom edge of the painting.

In the tradition of Pop, Minimalist and Post-Minimalist works such as Oldenburg's *Soft Pay-Telephone*, 1963, Judd's *Untitled*, 1968, or Eva Hesse's *Hang Up*,

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[117] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" (1965), in Meyer, ed., *Minimalism*, 207-10.

1965-66, Bickerton's work continued to confuse the boundaries between painting and sculpture (Figs. 33, 34). *Tormented Self-Portrait* hangs obtrusively on the wall, jutting out into the viewer's space by over 15 inches. While paintings are normally discretely secured by invisible nails and hooks, *Self-Portrait* is visibly bolted to the wall. As Bickerton explained:

> The aluminum brackets on the corners of the objects provide some protection in storage and transit. During its time on the wall as an object of authentic reckoning, the brackets serve as a fact of that objects' total function…There is in the hanging methodology an almost angry assertion that the art object, whether it wants to or not, must sit its ass on the wall and belligerently proclaim meaning. Through the last few decades it has been ripped off the wall and twisted through every conceivable permutation, yet back to the wall it insists on going. So be it, on the wall it shall sit but with aggressive discomfort and complicit defiance [sic].[118]

Hence, the brackets emphasize the limited placement and role of painting as wall decoration. The mounting devices demonstrate that painting has historically been required to proclaim meaning in a two-dimensional format. Bickerton's work exists as a painting, but also reminds the viewer of the traditional mechanical and symbolic aspects of this medium and, more generally, of the work of art. Along with many of Bickerton's works from the 1980's, *Tormented Self-Portrait*, served a dual purpose: it functioned as a work of art, but simultaneously underwent a form of self-criticism. At the same time, the blatantly oversized hanging mechanisms served as an exaggerated reminder of the work of the Minimalist painter Robert Ryman, who used fasteners and mounting devices in practical as well as aesthetic ways. But, the protective leather covering rolled up underneath Bickerton's work also gives it a hard-core, punk edge, alien to Ryman's work, and reminiscent instead of 80's fashion and music. While packing materials are usually placed in storage with their crates and other shipping materials, Bickerton's work came

[118] Cable Gallery, New York, "Ashley Bickerton."

fully ready to be packed and shipped. The covering can be easily detached and unrolled from the work. Instead of paint applied across the surface, the viewer is confronted with brazen logos in various sizes and colors.

Bickerton, who grew up in Hawaii, was inspired by surfboards from the 1970's, which were covered with various emblems referring to the surfer's sponsors. Listed on the sides of the work are the materials used in its fabrication, an aspect that any conservator would surely find very useful. In Bickerton's other *Logo* paintings, such as *Le Art* (Composition with Logos), 1987, the work's materials are referenced through their specific brand names. The logos plastered on the surface of *Tormented Self-Portrait*, however, referenced the formulation of identity within commodity culture, in which individuals often adorn themselves with brand-name clothing, accessories, and objects. Bickerton's *Self-Portrait* is composed of brands that play an important role in the artist's own life. Inspired by the 1984 Van Gogh retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bickerton states:

> I found myself at the Metropolitan Museum walking around the Van Gogh retrospective. After what felt like an eternity of innumerable self-portraits, lost in the infinite angst-oozing chasms that were Vincent's eyes, I said, 'Hey, I want to do that too!' It wasn't until I put the problem in the context of logos that it all clicked. What is a self-portrait anyway? We wake up in the morning and select our individuality from a finite catalogue of ready-made possibilities.[119]

In place of the artist's image, *Tormented Self-Portrait* presents the viewer with a motley array of brands, none of which provide a very personal rendering of the artist. The CalArts logo marked where Bickerton went to art school. But companies such as Samsung, Sprint and Citibank were paired with names that many viewers might have

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[119] Bickerton, unpublished personal notes. See also Cable Gallery, New York, "Ashley Bickerton" and Ronald Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Arles* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984).

recognized as playing a role in their own daily lives such as Bayer aspirin, Close Up toothpaste, TV Guide or Con Edison. Together, they paint a picture of the brand competition that plays an important role in capitalism as well as the uniformity that is produced as a result.

On the back of the work, invisible to the gallery viewer, Bickerton included special jokes for the art handlers to see when lifting the work from its crate and installing it on the gallery wall.[120] In this way, Bickerton's work predated the photographer Vik Muniz, who presented large-scale images of the back of famous paintings in his *Verso* series (2008). The jokes make this perhaps tedious job slightly more enjoyable and also challenge the work's status as art object. These secret jokes also further degrade the work's aura of autonomy, serving as a reminder of the factors and individuals outside of the work itself that contribute to its full meaning and context. As an even more rebellious and dramatic act of subversion, Bickerton stuffed the inside of the work with objects and personal items such as underwear, cryptic images, parking tickets, marbles, chickpeas and broken glass.[121] As a result, *Tormented Self-Portrait* makes a horrible loud noise when it is moved. The clamor is disconcerting and uncharacteristic of any traditional painting. This surprising characteristic could give the impression that the work had somehow been damaged or destroyed, or was in the process of self-destructing. This gambit can be traced to a variety of sources from Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise*, 1916, to Jean Tinguely's *Hommage to New York*, 1960, a work he designed to self-destruct.

Bickerton's *Tormented Self-Portrait* challenged conventional notions of creativity by seeming to live up only to the standards the artist set for the work. The work

[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.

exhibited creativity in an intellectual sense, where free-flowing impulses or pure visual forms have been replaced by calculated implicit questions about the work of art and its larger environment. Irony and hyperbole played a strong role in this process. Every detail of the work was meant to deconstruct the metaphorical weight imposed upon it by the conventional standards set by art history and by socio-cultural conditions such as the art market, critics and dealers. Instead of depicting a realistic image of the artist, *Tormented Self-Portrait* sarcastically displayed a plethora of graphic brand names. Moreover, in case the museum visitor missed the label, Bickerton explicitly labeled the work as a self-portrait on the top edge. The labeling and the logos confronted the long history of self-portraiture that began in the Renaissance era, while simultaneously presenting an image of contemporary identity during the height of capitalism in the 1980's.

The mechanical and visual aspects of Bickerton's work questioned established notions of aesthetics and beauty. Brackets, coverings, and other structural mechanisms, which are usually hidden from view in order to enhance a work's beauty, are enhanced and aggrandized. While Ryman's paintings still conformed to the standards of modernist painting in terms of size and materials, Bickerton created enormous, metal box structures made with rubber, plastic, Formica, steel and car paint. Bickerton's brackets are approximately two or three times the size of Ryman's in works such as *Archive*, 1979 or *Journal*, 1988 (Fig. 35). For me, these aspects, along with the work's large size and aluminum encasement, produce uneasiness. The discomfort arises from the work's blatant disavowal of all the traditional conventions of painting. Bickerton's *Tormented*

Self-Portrait functioned less as a window to the world than as a window to the perhaps overlooked structural mechanisms of painting and its role as a cultural object.

In addition to the CalArts emblem and other logos, reference to Bickerton also appears in the form of his own invented label, a blue and yellow circular form at either end and a rectangular form at the bottom of the work. The words CULTURE-LUX, or cultural-luxury, wrap around the bottom part of the label, while Bickerton's motto, "SUSIE," and the words "the best in sensory and intellectual experiences" appear in small print across the top.[122] Bickerton's *SUSIE* paintings were some of the first works the artist created after arriving in New York in 1982. The *SUSIE* paintings played with the concept of identity and brand, since the name of this series functioned as a personal name and indicator of the artist's invented brand identity. Bickerton commented:

> "It was first realizing that all important art in the catalogue of art history is indexed by the time and place it was made and this is what gives it its value, status, and ultimately because of these factors, its meaning: i.e. Picasso, 1928…So when I came up with the SUSIE logo...I decided that artists are usually catalogued in the formal surname of the father. By choosing a phonetically casual, female first name, that whole agenda is thrown into some discursive light. In a sense it becomes the artist's name brand. It breaks down the individual creator and they are no more Bickertons than they are Susies.[123]

The SUSIE logo not only attempted to unpacked the system of attribution in the canon of art history, but, in my view, it also assayed as a feminist gesture in attempting to ascribe more agency to women. Bickerton's motto, "the best in sensory and intellectual

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[122] Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 487.
[123] Caley, "Ashley Bickerton," 79.

experiences," also indicated his art work's role within the art market and culture industry, but in a flagrantly exaggerated manner. This combination of diverse logos, words, and meanings is suggestive of a type of multiplicity that relates to Derrida's concept of textual grafting. Textual grafting can be defined as the splicing and the interposing of lines of arguments on to each other in order to identify points of error and to disrupt traditional habits of thought.[124] Bickerton's *Tormented Self-Portrait* performed textual grafting in its combination of various corporate logos on the surface of the work and in proximity to the artist's own created brand. Marlboro, Con Edison, Sprint and Body Glove emblems represented the identity of the artist and his consumer preferences. At the same time, these logos pointed to the larger corporations, their products, their activity within the market and their success as brands. Bickerton's combination of these various logos and brands disassociated these corporate signs from their usual context, thereby undermining or complicating the original meaning and effect. Within a new context, the logos take on new meanings. On the one hand, they appear simply as brightly colored graphic signs. Small details of form, color, and font become more noticeable. To catch the eye, the majority of the emblems were created with primary colors of blue, red, yellow, black and white. Clear-cut block lettering was used in conjunction with simple circular, rectangular or square shapes, which made the brands easy to read and remember. The appearance of these recognizable brands in a non-commercial space, removed from advertising, may prompt questions as to the importance, value and long-term viability of these products and companies. Within the museum, gallery or private home, the viewer may begin to contemplate the formulation, use and role of these brands and whether they

[124] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 102.

serve a purpose within their own lives. The emblems covering Bickerton's work provided a tiny sampling of the thousands of others that assaulted the viewer on a daily basis and form a pervasive part of T.V., magazines and newspapers.

By incorporating these logos, Bickerton loosely associated his work with every other commodity in the marketplace and emphasized its role as an object. Instead of inciting consumer desire, these brands and logos were assigned a newly subversive role that undermined their persuasive intentions. By removing these well-known brands from their usual context and inserting them into the domain of art, Bickerton might have shifted the way viewers considered these companies and their corporate identities. The inclusion of these brands within the context of a nominal "self-portrait" suggested that identity in our contemporary age is determined by commodity capitalism. Combining these logos with his own fabricated brand, CULTURELUX, emphasized their contrived quality and, in turn, potentially affects how these companies are viewed. Alternately, within the museum or gallery environment, the representative corporate identity behind each logo could slowly lose its impact to the formal qualities of line, text, and color. The logos served as visual reminders of the financial partnerships between museums and corporations and the occasional censorship of works or exhibitions that these relationships can cause. In her study of the changes in the New York art world from 1940 to 1985, Diana Crane remarked that corporate spending in the arts saw an astronomical increase from 1965 to 1983, jumping from 22 to 436 million dollars, with museums receiving the largest share of funds. At the same time, the number of museums

also drastically increased: 67 percent of all museums in the U.S.in 1985 were founded after 1940.[125]

In an interview describing the work in his 1987 exhibition at International with Monument, Bickerton explained, "when Judd used a screw, it was just a screw, now it has metaphorical meaning. He is boiling art down to what it is. Something that sits on a wall or gets taken off a wall and shipped. In a way, I've tried to be Stella. He left out the fact that it's bought and sold."[126] Bickerton exploited the example of Stella's experiments with the limits of painting as an object in, for example, the older artist's *Black* and *Aluminum* paintings from 1958 to 60 and 1960 to 65, respectively. Influenced by Minimalism's simple forms and use of industrial materials, Bickerton's works exuded an exaggerated and flagrant critique of the buying and selling of art. His works also negated the idealized conceit of art as an autonomous object, but in a way that immediately situated it within the realm of commodity capitalism. Jean Baudrillard's criticism of Karl Marx and his discussion of the implications of commodificiation in society impacted cultural discourse in the late 1970's and 80's. Baudrillard's argued that commodificiation had reached new, disturbing levels in contemporary society. His ideas offered a new stimulus for discussing the distinctions between fine art and commodity culture.[127] Bickerton's work addressed this debate by highlighting its own complicity in the realm of commercial goods and services. The artist's Warholean gesture emphasized the art work's role as commodity, or its economic exchange and purchase by those who

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[125] Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4-5.
[126] Quoted in Kim Levine, "Package Tour," *Village Voice,* June 2, 1987, 88.
[127] See Sandler's discussion, "Commodity Art, Neo-Geo, and the East Village Scene," in *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 482-522.

typically have the financial resources to afford fine art, namely members of the upper class. At the same time, by drawing attention to this unavoidable factor, Bickerton was able to create an insider critique of capitalism's stronghold, where every object, even fine art, was reduced to a commodity. Bickerton's open admittance of the commodity status of his work, by his labeling and promoting it as a cultural luxury, served simultaneously as a critique of that status.

By deconstructing the structures of commodification through irony and hyperbole, Bickerton offered an alternative reading of the work of art. Instead of demonstrating submissive acceptance of that role, however, Bickerton managed to remain one step ahead by openly declaring his work to have already been co-opted by the museum and gallery system. Through the artist's act of self-subversion, the work managed to perform an insider commentary on the role of art within society and the art market. Bickerton's self-degradation, or his ironic declaration that his work is in fact just a cultural luxury, exposed the totalizing system that encompasses works of art, which are caught between the realms of avant-gardism and of the commodity. The creation of a painting that flagrantly hyperbolized its own commodity status seems nonsensical within this dialectic of the art world. The role of the artist is to create avant-garde works, which in theory do not participate in the market system. *Self-Portrait* took this totalizing logic to its most illogical conclusion, exposing the structural constraints governing this system.

Bickerton's work unpacks the *archia*, or true, original principles of painting and functions as an *aporia*, revealing the exclusions within the structure of this medium. Bickerton describes *Tormented Self-Portrait* as "the ultimate object in all its glory,

imploded into one event."[128] All the different stages of a work's life, from its fabrication to the economic exchange that takes place when the work is purchased by a museum or collector, have been collapsed onto this single cultural artifact. Inversely, *Tormented Self Portrait* metaphorically stood for the larger economic and cultural milieu that imposes meaning upon a work of art. In this way, it functioned less as a work of art than as a deconstructive model of the art market and the larger realm of commodity capitalism.

Artist Allan McCollum similarly used visual irony as a strategy to assert the endless variations of commodities exchanged within a capitalist system (Fig. 36). Suggesting an endless play of substitutions and classifications, McCollum's near replication of small, black paintings in his *Surrogates* series played with the visual limits of painting and, in doing so, effectively emphasized Derrida's concept of *différance.* *Différence* played on the French word *différer*, which means to differ and to defer. For Derrida, words and signs create signification by continuously deferring meaning, or by referencing only the aspects from which they differ. In the concept of *différance,* meaning is never created by direct, positive attributes, but according to deferrals of negative characteristics. Deconstruction, through the process of *différance*, intervened within a field to re-appropriate those aspects that have been overlooked. The examination of differences, or those aspects an author does not describe or visualize, allows for the creation of new meanings. Derrida's concept marks a critical distance from and a de-stabilization of the structuring of discourse within the West by examining differences, instead of similarities.

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[128] Bickerton, unpublished personal notes.

For example, McCollum's work created meaning by playing on the differences distinguishing his *Surrogate* paintings from other examples from the history of art. Hung as groups, these apparently identical, yet individually-painted works emphasized the marginal and the liminal. An installation of surrogates at Metro Pictures Gallery in 1984 displays row after row of the little black canvases repeated ad infinitum to the point of absurdity. The *Surrogates* paintings are purposefully hung in a group format of no fewer than five. The repetition evoked the manufactured, serialized quality of commodity capitalism. Ironically, however, the wide array of *Surrogate*s also caused the viewer to notice the hand-painted quality of each work and the small, minute characteristics that differentiated them. McCollum's *Surrogates* thus might be seen to have exploded the long-respected notions of uniqueness and of authorship that have animated the history of art since its inception.

McCollum's *Surrogates* took the self-referential and autonomous qualities of painting, so important to early modernist painters, to an illogical and absurd extreme. These empty canvases wavered on the cusp between absence and presence. Rows of the monochromatic paintings appeared initially lacking in subject matter and purpose. McCollum's *Surrogates* invoked comparisons with certain "masterpieces" of art history, raising questions as to why the generic black *Surrogates* should be considered on par with, for example, a Malevich or a Stella Black painting. The abstract black paintings referenced the underlying philosophical concepts attaching to early modernist geometric painting. Alexander Rodchenko's *Black-on-Black* paintings, 1918, signaled a tabula rasa for artists. The new path of non-objective painting among Constructivist and Suprematist artists such as Malevich and Rodchenko allowed them to reject the traditional techniques

and realistic modes associated with this medium and, as they saw it, to focus on the pure, essence of painting.[129] As a pure investigation into the visual effects of color, Rodchenko's 5 X 5 exhibition in 1921 presented five monochrome canvases in primary colors such as blue, red and yellow. The artist claimed to have proposed the end of painting by pushing the medium to its most logical conclusion. In his *Black Square*, 1915, Malevich intended to issue a radical pictorial language free from any political associations (Fig. 37). This work took on a spiritual significance in the 0.10 exhibition in Moscow in 1915, when Malevich hung the painting in the upper corner of the gallery, a location usually reserved for religious icons. Rodchenko's proposition was discussed by Buchloh in a 1984 reference to the death of painting. Buchloh supported Rodchenko's propositions, agreeing that the flat planes of color signaled the expiration of a realistic mode of representation.[130] McCollum's *Surrogates* presented a more tongue-in-cheek response to these claims.

Yet, painting and monochromatic painting continued in Russia and in other countries in the work of Yves Klein, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Rauschenberg, for example. In the 1950's, Klein, Reinhardt and Rauschenberg's blue and black paintings reclaimed notions of non-communicative emptiness that occasionally characterized monochromatic painting. Prior to McCollum, these artists imbued the concept of the void with new meaning. They reversed the conditions of meaning associated with painting, demonstrating that the flat planes of color were not empty but full of significance. Rauschenberg's *Untitled* (Glossy Black Painting), 1951 revealed a thick

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[129] See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1983).

[130] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Factura to Factography," *October* 30 (Fall 1984): 82-119.

surface of papers attached to the surface of the work[131] (Fig. 38). Since paper usually contains type print and compose books and newspapers, the use of this material could be read as a parody of the illiterate quality of abstract painting. Klein's electric blue paintings assaulted the viewer's visual senses and represented the physical manifestation of an intangible cosmic energy. He patented the powdery cobalt blue pigment used in these works, calling it International Klein Blue. Reinhardt's black paintings assumed identical square formats. But a closer inspection of his *Abstract Painting*, 1957, for example, reveals a wealth of green, blue, and red undertones that fade in and out. Reinhardt's work relied on sensual, visual perception and a slow processing of color and forms.[132] McCollum's work evinced a more cerebral and deadpan quality. Underneath their simple format, the *Surrogates* conjured up the long history of modernist abstraction. McCollum thwarted perceptual interplay by coating the surface of the *Surrogates* with wide, thick brushstrokes using commercially available enamel paint. McCollum undercut the viewer's conventional encounter with a painting by hanging the *Surrogates* in groups of no fewer than five. Their meaning lies in their abundance. Instead of a single, solitary painting, the viewer is confronted with a multitude of nearly similar paintings. Next to a Reinhardt, McCollum's work may appear dry and heartless, lacking any sensual or engaging quality. The *Surrogates* might even appear to be bad impostors of such earlier precedents. But, considering this work as such ignores its ironic, playful and theoretical underpinnings. One understanding of McCollum's work relies on this long lineage of art

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[131] See Branden Joseph's discussion of Rauschenberg and Reinhardt in Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

[132] See William Rubin, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991); Yve-Alain Bois, "What is There to See? On a Painting by Ad Reinhardt," *MoMA* 8 (Summer 1991): 2-3.

history, the philosophical concepts inherent to Suprematism, Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada and the other –isms of modernism.

The *Surrogates* created meaning through the act of articulating the differences between these works and a "singular" work of art. The abundance of the *Surrogates* forces the viewer to decide, not what these paintings are or what they do, but what they are not and what they do not do. Faced with a multitude of black facades, the Surrogates could incite contemplation on the definition of a work of art and how these paintings do not fit into that category. Put simply, these paintings are not serving a decorative role, and, if anything, they detract from the aesthetic sensibility of the space around them. This effect is demonstrated by an image of twelve tiny *Surrogates* in a prominent spot in a bank waiting area (Fig. 39). The installation seems very tongue-in-cheek. McCollum's work severed the customary link between painting's sign and its referent. By reversing the customary attributes of painting and emphasizing the contradictions of this medium, the *Surrogates* incited questions and produce new aesthetic possibilities for painting within postmodernism.

The work of Jeff Koons emphasizes the subtle differences that distinguish his sculptures from store-bought objects. Koons' *New Hoover Convertibles, New Sheldon Wet/Dry*, 1981-85, displays two store-bought vacuum cleaners and a Sheldon Wet/Dry cleaning machine inside two stacked and sealed Plexiglas vitrines (Fig. 40). Toward the mid-1980's, Koons began exhibiting advertisement posters in Duratran light boxes along with the vacuum cleaners. The selected posters of Merit Cigarettes, Toyota cars, and Smirnoff vodka, for example, all incorporated the word "new" in the text. Relying on Duchamp's notion of the readymade, Koons' work combined an untouchable,

unmanipulated quality with references to the ever-present cult of the new in contemporary society. Similar to Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917, Koons' direct use of store-bought items aimed to shock viewers and to provoke questions about the notion of the art work as a unique object. Koons' work removed ordinary vacuum cleaners from everyday life and placed them in an art context. While Duchamp's *Fountain* was exhibited on a base, in the same manner as a traditional sculpture, Koons' vacuums are sealed within Plexiglas and remain separated from the viewing public. The Plexiglas encasement served as a visual reminder that the vacuums are valuable objects, since department stores typically display only smaller, valuable items, such as jewelry, within cases. Store vitrines serve as a barrier used to maintain the pristine quality of the objects and to enhance commodity fetishism. At the same time, Plexiglas cases are also associated with the environment of the museum gallery, since they are frequently used to display works and protect large or small objects. Within the museum context, the cases also serve to immediately historicize the vacuums, which might appear as the cultural products of a bygone era. Today, the vacuums could be included in a display about U.S. culture, technology, or product design of the 1980's. Koons' work purposefully manipulated these cultural signs and the way the public interacts with objects, either in a department store or in a museum. By removing department store objects from their original location and context, Koons confused the habitual signs and referents for the work of art and the commodity. In a museum or gallery setting, viewers expect to see works of art inside these vitrines, not every day store-bought objects, or commodities. For example, in 1980, when works from his *New* series were shown in the front window of the New Museum at its previous location on 14th street, the museum guards became very upset because all day

long visitors were coming into the museum to purchase vacuum cleaners (Fig. 16). This swapping of objects and meanings incited commentary and debate on the definition of the work of art, the conditions of its reception, and what these aspects mean in contemporary society.

At the same time, *New Hoover Convertibles* referenced the cool simplicity and borderline commodity status of Minimalist sculpture, such as Judd's *Untitled*, 1968, which was also partially fabricated with Plexiglas (Fig. 41). The shiny, colored Plexiglas gave Judd's work a flashy and new appearance, which is a vital aspect of the advertising and selling of commodities. Judd's early boxes were composed of clear Plexiglas with tension wires strung on the inside. The top and bottom segments of Koons work are separated by six fluorescent light bulbs, which directly reference the sculpture of Minimalist artist Dan Flavin. Flavin's *Alternate Diagonals* (Monument to Donald Judd), 1963 and *Monument I* (to Vladimir Tatlin), 1964 is composed of four to seven fluorescent bulbs laid side by side. The cool, white light emanating from the bulbs is reminiscent of the overhead lighting in stores (Fig. 42). In 1967, Greenberg criticized the object-like quality of Minimalist work, or its tendency to approach "good design."[133] Koons' work took Greenberg's condemnation of Minimalism to an extreme by openly displaying store-bought commodities as art. *New Hoover Convertibles* can be seen as a hyperbolic response to Minimalist sculpture, such as Judd's shiny stacks.

Koons playfully adjusted the form and materials of these early Minimalist works and updated them to reflect the socio-cultural concerns of the 1980's. Judd's work was a

[133] Greenberg, "The Recentness of Sculpture" (1967), in *Minimalism*, ed. James Sampson Meyer (London: Phaidon, 2000), 233-34.

sign of its times, produced with new industrial materials of the 1960's, such as colored plastics and colored aluminum. Koons' work was fabricated of similar industrial materials and, two decades later, *New Hoover Convertibles* reflected the movement of the U.S. from an industrial to a service and commodity-oriented economy. Rapidly growing economies in Asia, most notably Japan and China, presented a challenge to the United States. The U.S. trend toward importing rather than exporting goods and services began in the 1980's and continues today. At the same time, Koons' work turned commodities against themselves by reversing habitual display structures. Displaced presence and function potentially affect how the viewer reads these objects, for a substitution in meaning occurs due to the repositioning of the sculpture as commodity within the white, pristine gallery or museum space. By removing the commodities from their normal site of exchange, Koons' work deconstructed the commodity, exposing the underlying fetishistic quality at work within a capitalistic system.

The term "posthistorical," invoked by Foster in his article, "Signs Taken For Wonders," can be interestingly related to the procedure of deconstruction, in its attempts to disrupt traditional belief systems and forge new connections. Although he did not explicitly define this term in his article, Foster used it to evoke a lack of meaning, context, and evolutionary relationship with art history. However, within the context of deconstruction, the term "posthistorical" can refer to a shift beyond the conventional boundaries of Western history, where the limitations within our Westernized belief systems on the field of art history and the definition of a work of art are opened up to include the *aporia*, or those aspects that have been marginalized and excluded.

The work of Philip Taaffe created a similar dialogue with the art historical past and its avant-gardist models of painterly idealism (Figs. 43, 44). Taaffe's early work from the 1980's appropriated found motifs from artists such as Henri Matisse, Barnett Newman, or Bridget Riley as well as from previous art movements like Op Art and Color Field painting. Taaffe's paintings are carefully hand-crafted versions of their antecedents, displaying similar painterly qualities of color, line, and form. At the same time, in several small works from 1983 and 1984, Taaffe reproduced by hand works by the little-known abstractionist Myron Stout (Figs. 45 and 46). Similar to Levine in her *After* series, Taaffe's act of replication was a literal example of Neo-Geo's endeavor to broaden or rewrite the canon of art history. As art critic Jerry Saltz testified: "Taaffe took the resurrection of painting in a very literal sense...[Taaffe] made the way painters build on previous painting tangible."[134] At the same time, Saltz hailed Taaffe for his "voluptuous touch," or his sense of artistic creativity that extended beyond the act of slavishly reproducing works by preceeding "masters."[135] Similar to Bickerton's and Koons' work, Taaffe's paintings effectively deconstructed art history at the same time as they presented a uniquely postmodern artistic sensibility.

The formal components in Taaffe's work served as visual reminders of an earlier artist, art historical movement, or style and in many ways, functioned to dismantle their iconic stature. In *Brest*, 1985, the tight, compact, parallel lines and interplay of light and dark colors directly resembled the work of Op Artist Bridget Riley in her painting *Crest*, 1964. As a homonym of the word "breast," the title of Taaffe's work may serve as an allusion to Riley's female sex and the influx of Op Art's patterns into the female fashion

[134] Jerry Saltz, "Pattern and Dissipation," *Village Voice*, June 22, 1999, 159.
[135] Ibid., 159.

world of the 1960's. Nevertheless, similar to Sherrie Levine's strategy in her *After* series (discussed in the next section of this chapter), Taaffe appeared to directly copy Riley's motif, in an artistic form of identity theft. Riley's 1965 statement on her work also applies to Taaffe's work: "I want the disturbance or 'event' to arise naturally in visual terms out of the inherent energies and characteristics which I use. I also want it to have a quality of inevitability."[136] The wavy patterns of Riley's and Taaffe's work provoked a physical effect in the viewer, as he or she may be visually disturbed by the pattern. However, *Brest* is less a copy of Riley's painting than an intense study of her work. Taaffe reversed Riley's wave pattern and added brownish and greenish hues. *Brest* was also created in a completely different manner than *Crest*. Taaffe explained the difficult process of creating *Brest* and the long hours required to create the work:

> then I just thought that I had always wanted to surgically dissect a Bridget Riley painting, or just take it apart and put it back together again, and I thought with all of these rolls of paper and all of the supplies, and I had the wall in my cold water flat in Jersey City, I had one great big wall that I could use, and I just decided to make linoleum carvings and dissect the wave in one of her paintings, and then another one of her paintings, and then a third, and make the carvings based upon projections of these sections of the waves. And they were very carefully engineered and surgically constructed and very similar to how these were made. These were made in very surgical [manner].[137]

At the time, Taaffe was strongly influenced by Levine's work and the work of precedent Mike Bidlo, whose paintings at the time were would-be exact replicas of work by Jackson Pollock, Warhol, Matisse, among others. Bidlo was already working in New York on his appropriationist painting when many of the Neo-Geo artists arrived on the scene. In this passage, Taaffe described his painstaking process of creating *Brest* over the

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[136] Bridget Riley, "Perception is the Medium," *ARTnews* 64, no. 2 (October 1965): 32-33.
[137] Taaffe, interview by Bob Nickas, 2003, transcript, courtesy of Raymond Foye.

course of three to four weeks, during which tape was applied to the surface, layer by layer, then slowly removed. He also indicated the extent to which his curiosity toward Riley's work affected his own creative process. In fabricating *Brest*, Taaffe used his analysis of Riley's painting to create an entirely new work that merged past and present in a unique manner. He discussed his thoughts on Riley's painting as follows:

> And the thing that was important to me about these paintings were the scale of the lines and the infinitude of -- every point was a very deep point, and every length of line -- they're all straight lines, and every -- the length of every line was extremely -- had an incredible sense of scale for me. So there were really -- even though they were very limited in size, they grew architecturally to encompass this vast space in terms of what I was imagining was taking place with them. And so it was just a very, very torturous process, and one day I just decided not to make any more.[138]

Taaffe's careful study of Riley's work included an examination of the lines that compose *Crest* as well as the white space interspersed between the undulating black lines. The dead space of the painting was given equal importance. In this manner, *Brest* can be viewed as a tribute to Riley as well as a point of creative departure for Taaffe. Riley and other Op Artists created a kind of art historical brand out of motifs like this. Taaffe's appropriation intended to raise questions about the inherent simplicity of Op Art's formal characteristics.

Op Art is widely considered to be a comparatively ephemeral art movement of the 1960's, having disappeared as quickly as it appeared.[139] The Museum of Modern Art's

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[138] Ibid.

[139] For brief critical reviews of Op Art, see David Rimanelli, "Beautiful Loser: Op Art Revisited," *Artforum* 45, no. 9 (May 2007): 315-26; and Sarah K. Rich, "Allegories of Op," *Artforum* 45, no. 9 (May 2007): 315-26. Rich counters Rosalind Krauss' dismissive review of Op Art in 1965 by examining recent studies of the movement in the 2007 exhibitions *Optic Nerve: Perceptual Art of the 1960's* (Columbus Museum of Art) and *Op Art* (Shirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt). For Krauss' review, see Rosalind Krauss, "Afterthoughts on Op," *Art International* 9, no. 5 (June 1965): 75-76. See also Pamela Lee, "Bridget Riley's Eye/Body Problem," *October* 98 (Autumn 2001): 26-46.

1965 blockbuster exhibition *The Responsive Eye* marked the beginning of the movement and its appearance within the mainstream media. The MoMA exhibition featuring over one hundred artists from fifteen countries. Issues of *Time*, *Life*, and *Vogue* magazines from the same year documented the integration of Riley's and other Op artists' patterns into the fashion industry. Taaffe's painting speaks to this heightened popularity, but also to the critical failure of Op Art to make a great impact or to exert influence on subsequent artists or movements. Op artists' use of visual patterns and optical movement invoked an illusion of three-dimensional space at a time when reigning critic Greenberg was hailing the flatness of the picture plane. Taaffe's work brought attention to this somewhat overlooked moment of art history, which has only recently begun to be re-examined by critics and art historians such as David Rimanelli, Sarah K. Rich and Pamela Lee. In many ways, Taaffe's painting also sought to attribute new significance to Riley's work. *Brest* gave credit to the work of a female artist who struggled in her own day to gain acceptance within a field dominated by male painters. In my view, *Brest* marked an artistic examination of gender relations and the history of painting. It stood as a new point of departure, in which a male painter of a younger generation acknowledges his skillful female predecessor.

Similar to Derrida's description of deconstruction, discussed earlier in this section, Neo-Geo artists questioned some inherited codes of art history together with the discipline's "politico-institutional problematic." For Derrida, deconstruction as a literary method sought to uncover the contradictions, marginalia or differences from within literary texts and overarching narratives. In this analysis, Derrida created a set of new meanings and understandings. Neo-Geo work should be considered within this

theoretical framework. Bickerton, McCollum, Koons, and Taaffe produced works that similarly questioned certain boundaries and conventions within the domain of art history. Instead of passively residing within a museum or gallery, Neo-Geo works probed the structure and conventions of art and evoked multiple readings. Similar to deconstruction, Neo-Geo work did not create an entirely new framework for artistic creation or production, but moved within existing boundaries in a self–reflexive manner, producing reversals and displacements within the canon of art history.

"Neo-Geo," Intertextuality, and the Death of the Author

When considering the work of the Neo-Geo artists, Roland Barthes' 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author" immediately comes to mind. As described in the previous section, Neo-Geo artists Bickerton, Taaffe, McCollum and Koons, as well as Levine and Halley, freely borrowed from and manipulated stylistic references to previous artists and art historical movements. Barthes' essay described writing and literature as a reciprocal space of liberal exchange, in which several voices conversed within any given text and no singular voice dominated over another. The author and the reader brought to the text a wealth of intellectual experiences and knowledge of previous, perhaps related, texts. For Barthes, this interaction between a reader and the reader's previous intellectual experiences materialized externally in an open interchange between the reader and the text.

Barthes' ideas also apply to the domain of art, where a viewer's interpretation of a work is based on his or her encounter with other works of different or similar periods or artists. A convenient substitution of "author" with artist extends this reciprocal exchange

into the domain of artistic creation, where the meaning of the work of art resides in the viewer's interpretation. Artist Sherrie Levine indicated her adherence to Barthes' ideas in 1982 when she paraphrased sections of Barthes essay in an artist's statement: "a painting's meaning lies not in its origin, but in its destination. The birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the death of the author."[140] In the previous section, I pointed out the strong correlation between Neo-Geo work and the philosophy of deconstruction. This section builds upon my earlier arguments connecting Neo-Geo to deconstruction and creates further affiliations between Neo-Geo work, the writings of Barthes, and theories of intertextuality.

For Barthes, the hypothetical "death" of the author did not signal a moment of strong mourning, but a renewal of the text and a liberation from the tyranny of meaning. First published in the American journal, *Aspen*, in 1967, Barthes' essay very concisely recapitulated the post-structrualist view of semiology and literature. Arguably one of the first intellectual proclamations of death in the postmodern era, Barthes' essay traced the historical notion of the author from its birth in medieval times to its purported demise. Published during a time of political and social upheaval in France, his unconventional notions diverged from those prevalent before May of 1968. In Barthes' view, writing translated to performance and authorship to a loss of identity. The writer no longer enjoyed the same preeminent position as in the Renaissance or Enlightenment era. The new success of the author resided not in his creativity or originality, but in his ability to

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[140] Levine's "Three Statements" were first published in *Style* to coincide with the exhibition *Mannerism: A Theory of Culture* (Vancouver Art Gallery, March/April 1982). Her statement was later reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 1066-67; and *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Artists' Writings,* ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), 92.

synthesize past texts with his own critical thoughts. Writing, for Barthes, is an appropriative process where the author's text consciously or subconsciously incorporated references to past sources. Historically grounding his arguments in the Enlightenment period allowed Barthes to make assertions about his own changing intellectual climate. By employing the rhetoric of death and loss, Barthes pointed to a renewal in the definition of authorship, which accurately reflected the evolving intellectual concerns of his time. The author's "death" did not, of course, literally refer to his or her expiring, but to the infinite possibilities of a work's reception and interpretation. This identifiable loss of "theological meaning" dictated by an "Author-God" was conceived as a liberal eventuality, which admits, for the first time, the vantage point of the reader.[141] Barthes' view of writing was of an open-ended, infinitely evolving course, where the reader was involved at every point along the way. In his view, assigning a singular, dogmatic interpretation to a text effectively led to its termination. For the artist, the importance of Barthes' essay lies in its new perspective on appropriation, in which this technique was viewed as a renewal of earlier artistic forms.

Similarly, Foucault's 1969 essay, "What is an Author?," problematized the notion of the author that has existed in the West since the Enlightenment period by discussing how definitions of the author varied over the centuries.[142] He argued that our Western notion of an author has its roots in early Christianity and the Bible. For Foucault, writing "unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits."[143] Similarly to Barthes, Foucault also viewed authorship as a platform for

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[141] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 147.
[142] Foucault, "What is an Author?" 113-38.
[143] Ibid, 114.

discourse. In his view, the death of the author was less an expiring than a liberation of fixed definitions of the author. Foucault's and Barthes' views can be applied to the appropriative characteristics of "Neo-Geo" work. Thus, Neo-Geo's referential use of previous art historical periods and styles did not indicate the extinction of painting or sculpture, but rather, it created a new platform for discussing the notion of creativity and influence within art. Neo-Geo moved beyond the perceived limits of art history to create textual works of art.

In her *After* series, Levine expressed the extent of her engagement with the concept of intertextuality and Barthes' concept of the death of the author. As Howard Singerman has pointed out, the drawings and paintings of Levine's *After* series engaged with an "endgame" or death of painting philosophy[144] (Fig. 47). In her essay, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition," Krauss discussed the impact of Sherrie Levine's *After* series on the notion of originality and authorship, which are pivotal concepts within the history of modernism. Levine's act of re-photographing a photograph by Edward Weston in *Untitled* (After Edward Weston), 1981, undermined the authoritative role of the original work (Fig. 11). Krauss suggested that Levine's appropriation of Weston's work follows, in a way, Weston's own appropriation of the form of a Greek *kouros*; for Weston's close-up shot of his son's torso and lower body might recall the idealized male bodies of Greek sculpture. However, the boy's slightly raised leg and outspread arms remain a strong example of Weston's creative form of portraiture that was derived from a variety of artistic influences during the artist's

[144] Howard Singerman, "Seeing Sherrie Levine," *October* 67 (Winter 1994): 82. See also Howard Singerman, "Sherrie Levine's Art History," *October* 101 (Summer 2002): 96-121.

sojourns in California, New York and Mexico. Levine's act is clearly appropriative, since it questions the direct relationship between sign and referent. In *Untitled* (After Edward Weston), the significance of Weston's work is filtered through Levine's lens. As Howard Singerman pointed out, Levine's re-photograph inherently relied upon the cerebral involvement of the spectator, who is called forth to evaluate Weston's work in light of Levine's re-photograph. The viewer, art historian or critic, in turn, might feel compelled to cast aside Levine's work as uncreative and uninspired, or inversely, to defend Levine's self-insertion into the canon of art history, which consisted of a long list of male artists. In his 1977 exhibition catalogue *Pictures*, Crimp presented a pointed argument about the deconstructive and postmodern quality of photography and film by artists Brauntuch, Levine, Goldstein, Longo, and Smith, who were included in his show at Metro Pictures Gallery. Connections between the Pictures group and Neo-Geo artists will be explored in more detail in chapter two.

In a brief 1981 exhibition at A&M Artworks, Levine mounted six high-quality reproductions of paintings by the Blaue Reiter artist, Franz Marc. For two hours only, the one-night exhibition, "Six Pictures After Franz Marc," displayed Marc's mounted and framed images under the auspices of Sherrie Levine as the artist and the independent curator of the project. In other works in her *After* series, Levine hand-painted images of signature works from art history textbooks in the same scale as the reproductions. At the 1982 Documenta 7 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, Levine exhibited eighteen hand-drawn works copying the work of Expressionist Egon Schiele, among others. In an explanation of her Documenta 7 exhibition Levine elaborated on the creative potential for the act of appropriation as follows:

> In the seventeenth century, Miguel de Cervantes published Don Quixote. In 1962, Jorge Luis Borges published "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote." His aim was never to produce a mechanical transcription of the original, he did not want to copy it. His ambition was to propose pages which would coincide with those of Cervantes, to continue being Pierre Menard and to arrive at Don Quixote through the experience of Pierre Menard. My motivations were similar when I produced eighteen reproductions of Egon Schiele's self-portraits in 1982. Like Menard, I have allowed myself variants of a formal and psychological nature.[145]

Levine's *After* series visually illustrated the death of painting by looking back analytically at major artists and moments of modernism and commenting on the futility or impossibility of pure or unfettered creative expression. By reproducing the work of some of the major forefathers of art history, Levine directly inserted herself into the canon of art history. Her replication of existing art works demonstrates the subtle differences and variations that can occur during the creative process. This phenomenon was demonstrated some twenty years earlier by Robert Rauschenberg in his combine paintings, *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957). Despite Rauschenberg's attempts at verisimilitude, the two paintings maintained their own uniqueness.[146] As Levine's above comment suggests, her gesture was a form of imitation that critically engaged with overarching concepts of originality, authorship, modernism and the canon of art history.

In a way comparable to Taaffe, Levine used the work of other artists as a point of departure for her own creative endeavors. Levine's appropriative and self-negating acts opened up new meanings in a manner that paralleled Barthes and Foucault's notion of the death of the author. Her *After* series thwarted any single authoritative voice or interpretation in favor of a multiplicity of voices and readings. Any reading of Levine's

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[145] Sherrie Levine, "Five Comments (1980-1985)," in *Blasted Allegories*, 92-3.
[146] See Joseph Branden's discussion of Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and *Factum II* in Branden, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, 173-209.

hand-crafted sketches and watercolors "after" Joan Miró, El Lissitsky, Fernand Léger, Arthur Dove, Egon Schiele and Stuart Davis had to encompass, not one, but two creative voices. Levine's *After* series also intended to examine the potential shifts in meaning that occur when the gender of the artwork's maker conceivably changes from male to female (Fig. 48). Levine purposefully selected icons of modern art and tried to create a visual conundrum in the viewer.[147] An interplay of meaning occurs as the viewer simultaneously perceives the reference to the modernist male artist and Levine's reproduction of his work. In these works, Levine referenced a long, linear history of art and included herself within its structure by the simple act of copying.

Levine's *After* works breathe life into Barthes' 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author." More than mere copies, the *After* works—like Duchamp's readymades--required the participation of the viewer to achieve their full meaning and comprehension. In regard to her appropriative technique, Levine has stated that her interest lies in what happens in the space between the knowledge of the referenced artist and the awareness of her work, where their interaction causes "vibrations."[148] The absence and the presence of authorship collide in this space, where the viewer's expectations of the work are initially thwarted, then perhaps reconstructed. Within this ambiguous space, it is difficult to determine which is more disruptive: Levine's appropriative act or its effects on art historical discourse. At first glance, the viewer recognizes, say, the artistic style of Miró, but a closer look at the label reveals the true creator of the work and its appropriative status. Left to contemplate the consequences of Levine's disruptive act, the viewer enters

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[147] Constance Lewallen, "Sherrie Levine," *Journal of Contemporary Art* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 59-83.
[148] Jeanne Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine" (1985), in *Art Talk: The Early 80s*, 245-57.

into, in Barthes' term, the "multi-dimensionality" of this appropriated space. Faced with the impossibility of attaching any singular meaning to the work, the viewer is confronted with the significance of Levine's initial act as well as the work's indexing of earlier artists, past periods, events and art historical ideologies. The distance created between the original and Levine's hand-crafted replica raises questions about the primary work's status and aura. Instead, encountering *After Joan Miró* prompts many significant questions regarding the role of women in the canon of art history as well as regarding the autonomy and putative aura surrounding works by artists of such genius status. The semiological vibrations of *After Joan Miró* are so discomforting that the viewer might be shocked to learn that the artist is female. In effect, standing face to face with an emblem of the canon itself, the viewer may be reminded how few female artists reached such heights.

In Levine's diverse *After* series, her simulative and analytical tactics united Baudrillard's concept of simulation with Barthes' idea of creative appropriation in order to examine art historical structures and unpack their formulation of ostensible certainties. Exemplifying Baudrillard's so-called third level of simulation, also known as hyperreality, her technique of copying works by "master" artists from the canon references, in a way, what Baudrillard describes as contemporary society's increased reliance on images in lieu of tangible reality. Levine's work exemplified the concept of hyperreality through its use of concrete art historical sources, inducing its own set of questions on both works' authority and status. Levine's references to modernist works are based, not on actual paintings or drawings, but on images of these modernist works in

art history textbooks.[149] Three times removed from their source, the *After* works ambiguously confuse any linear sign to referent relationship. They also disrupt the coded importance of the source works within the art historical canon. The meaning of the modernist work Levine references is largely usurped by her act of appropriation. Viewers perceive the earlier work through the lens of Levine's creative act, not the original work of art. Captions serve to concretize the shifting meaning of the work, which might otherwise be attributed to the prior artist. By adopting the work of the "masters" of art history, Levine was also able to comment on the intrinsic aura surrounding works of art. This specific technique displayed Levine's distrust of the earlier work's authoritative position and a desire to adopt a post-structuralist definition of authenticity in her own work.

Her appropriative method might evince certain ambitions of the feminist movements of the preceding decades, when numerous female artists sought consideration and equal treatment from prominent art institutions, such as the MoMA. In Levine's hands, art works are transformed into deconstructive tools that remind the viewer of these unresolved issues. Remarking on her position as a woman within the art world, Levine noted in 1985 her difficulty in trying to situate herself within an arena that is "so much a celebration of male desire."[150] Her *Presidents* and *After* series represented a more cerebral form of feminist art that differed from the work of Body and Performance artists, such as Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture,* 1971, in which the artist

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[149] See Levine's description of her working process in ibid., 247.

[150] Ibid.,249. A link between Levine and feminism is hinted at in Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2, " *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 77; and briefly mentioned in Abigail Solomon Godeau, "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics," *Social Text* 21 (1989): 191-213.

placed herself on a strict diet for forty-five days and documented her body with photographs, or Carolee Schneemann's, *Interior Scroll*, 1975, in which the artist slowly extracted and read from a small, paper scroll that was placed in her vagina. Nevertheless, Levine's works called forth a somewhat comparable form of active viewing, where the onlooker is called upon to recognize Levine's reference, her critical act and its consequences.

While Levine's *After* series demonstrated in a way the progress women had made since the 1970's, it also potentially points to certain costs and setbacks. These works beg the question of how far women had to go in order to be included in or valued by high art establishments. Levine's creative act arose from a playful gesture of admiration toward the forbearers of modern art that somewhat depends on a denial of her own unfettered expression. She poured through art history textbooks, selecting her source imagery. But, is appropriating the work of a male artist the answer? Her simulative technique functioned in an insidious and theoretical manner, questioning the confining and hierarchical constitution of the canon of art history.

Levine's *Knot* and *Check* paintings of the late 1980's also function as referential and rhetorical signifiers to be investigated by the viewer. The simple forms of these two series of paintings raised questions on the artistic purpose of these works. Levine has forfeited the traditional notion of the work of art as a reflection of free-flowing creativity, in favor of an intertextual form of artistic creation. In her *Knot* series, Levine painted gold colored leaves over each knot in the plywood panels that comprise the works, which were often displayed within shadowbox frames under Plexiglas (Figs. 49, 50). By painting the leaves only over the knots in the wood, Levine created a Duchampean pun

with the dual meaning of *Knot* painting and "not painting."[151] In his reading of the *Knot* paintings, Robert C. Morgan relates Levine's technique to language games described by Austrian Philosopher Ludwig Wittigenstein.[152] The witticism can also be correlated with the aims of deconstruction, whose self-subverting process, starts with that which is lacking from the text in order to reattribute presence. Similarly to McCollum's *Surrogates*, Levine's pun and her *Knot* painting reverse the terms of painting to focus on, not what painting is or does, but what painting is not and what it does not do. A knot typically is the weakest, most unfavorable part of timber, an incident that can cause the plywood to crack or warp. On the other hand, a knot is composed of stem fibers that form new branches in a tree. In another sense, the knots represent also new growth. In a literal and metaphorical manner, the *Knot* paintings examined the overlooked or unfavorable aspects of painting.

Levine's *Knots* and *Checks* series are composed of purposefully simple renderings of paintings. Levine chose not to depict painting's most awe-inspiring characteristics. The *Knot* paintings do not display a strong painterly bravado, an interplay of light and shadow or a large canvas with sweeping brushstrokes. Instead, Levine created humble works with average dimensions. She limited the work's terms to the bare minimum that still allowed it to be called a painting. Painting on board was common among painters of the late Renaissance, especially in the Northern Regions of Europe, who used it as a support for their realistic renderings of still life and portraiture. Painters during this period expertly concealed the painting's surface under layers of paint. Levine left the

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[151] Regarding Levine's paintings from the 1980's, see Stephen Melville, "Not Painting: The New Work of Sherrie Levine," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 6 (February 1986): 23-25.
[152] Robert C. Morgan, "Sherrie Levine: Language Games," *Arts Magazine* 62, no. 4 (December 1987): 88.

wood largely untouched, giving her work a bare-bones quality. The knot paintings could also refer to psychiatrist R.D. Laing's book, *Knots* (1970), in which the author poetically relays internal conversations and obsessions that can cause miscommunication between individuals and hinder relationships. [153] In Laing's book, knots refer to moments of disruption or self-doubt.

Levine's *Knot* works should be construed within a theoretical frame, since they deconstruct the terms and conventions of painting. In this manner, Levine's simply painted, geometric leaves encapsulated an entire discourse surrounding the weight of the historical within painting and the role of the commodity in postmodern society. The painted leaves covering each knot hinted at Jean Arp's biomorphic sculptures and paper experiments with the laws of chance during the 1920's (Figs. 51, 52). Their golden color is distantly reminiscent of the gilded retables of the late Medieval and Renaissance periods. The use of plywood, a manufactured material, is a reminder of Duchamp's readymades and Judd's Minimalist, plywood boxes. With their carefully painted leaves, which appear to float over each naturally occurring knot, Levine's series played on the dialectic between craftsmanship and industrialization, modernism and postmodernism. Like the past supporting the present, the wood sustains the golden leaves in a symbiotic and fragile relationship. Continuing the themes in Laing's book, Levine's *Knot* paintings raise questions about painting's role within the history of modernism.

The semiological vibrations evinced by Levine's *After*, *Knot* and *Check* paintings relate to Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality. Barthes' concept of the death of the author is situated within Kristeva's ideas on intertextuality, which are generally defined

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[153] R.D. Laing, *Knots* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970).

as the discursive space surrounding a text that relates it to a body of discourse.[154] A former student of Barthes, Kristeva coined the term in 1966, two years before his essay was published in France. Similarly rooted in structuralist theory and Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, Kristeva's work illustrated the playful, non-linear quality of signifiers. According to Kristeva, one sign has the potential to carry several different meanings to different individuals. Language, which is based on established systems of signs and referents, expresses a plurality of meanings and voices. Kristeva defined these concepts as *dialogism* (a plurality of meanings) and *heteroglossia* (a plurality of voices behind each word). Instances of speech, or in French, *paroles*, refer to other *paroles* within the more encompassing system of language.

Kristeva's notion of intertextuality also applies to broader concepts and fields of study, such as history or art. In her view, every cultural formation represents a text within the general semiotics of culture.[155] The language and writing within these fields simultaneously exists within an external network of current and past social and historical phenomena, which attribute additional meanings and structures. Readers of history texts or viewers of artworks, for example, read and view a text or an artwork through their own personal and learned bodies of knowledge, or rather, their own networks of interrelated signifiers and codes. The result is not a single-channel relationship from author or artist to reader or viewer, but a complex of interconnections and references that bounce from the reader or viewer's mind to other texts and works and back again.

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[154] See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Graham Allan, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000); Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (New York: Routledge, 1981); and William Irwin, "Against Intertextuality," *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 2 (October 2004): 227-42.

[155] Irwin, "Against Intertextuality," 229.

Levine's *Check #2*, 1986, may be said to elicit semiological vibrations in an intertextual manner. The artist's purposeful creation of incomplete signifiers allows the viewer to draw multiple connections from her abstract forms (Fig. 53). The check pattern in Levine's paintings gives the works a generic, non-specific quality. But the construction of *Check #2* with lead or casein paint and wax on mahogany may induce something like the intense sense of materiality that is famously found in, for example, Jasper Johns' *Flag*, 1954 or Brice Marden's, *Grove Group 1*, 1971, both of which entail wax or encaustic (Fig. 54). By using a lead or casein paint with the wax, Levine purposefully evoked the sensuous quality of such works. The *Check* works also call forth previous representations of the grid in early modernism, evoking meaning in a hazy, yet reminiscent manner. The primary colors and simple, geometric forms conjure up works from the early abstraction of the twentieth century. Levine's intermingled red and blue squares might remind the viewer of the bold, repeated squares in Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow and Gray*, 1921, or the simple square form in Malevich's *Red Square*, 1915 (Fig. 55). These early modernist works reflected the metaphysical concepts inherent to the work of Mondrian and Malevich and the development of these artists' ideas on Theosophy, NeoPlasticism and Suprematism, respectively. Levine's painting, created almost seventy years later in an entirely different country and cultural context, has been emptied of this spiritual content. Yet, by referencing these earlier consequential moments of art history, *Check #2* remains charged with a new set of meanings and questions. Levine's work reminds us of the extent to which avant-garde artists' views on art have shifted since the early twentieth century.

Levine's *Checks* series comment on the contradictory relationship between history and modernity. The geometrically arranged pattern of blue and red squares of Levine's *Check #2* evoked the vacillating evolution of past and present in their formal co-dependency. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, for Krauss, grids functioned both spatially and temporally to denote the evolution from figuration to abstraction.[156] The modernist grid's flattened, methodical arrangement was said to deny the natural-looking, perspectival regression that artists had sought in figurative styles since the Renaissance. By asserting an autonomous, anti-real aesthetic and material quality, modernist grids vehemently opposed all the formal aspects of figuration. More importantly, however, Krauss discussed the symbolic power of the grids as an emblem or myth. Looking beyond its geometric simplicity, a Malevich painting was intended to evoke an inner dimension, which idealistically imbricates spiritual and social harmony. The formal, non-referential quality of the grid neatlyencapsulated these larger philosophical ideas within its organizational structure.

Keeping Krauss's analysis in mind, Levine's *Check #2,* 1986, promoted a similar reading of the grid as myth, but questioned the inconsistencies of this approach at the same time. Levine's work retained its composure as an emblem or myth, but reflected the cultural and artistic concerns of postmodern culture. Her postmodern grid has been purged of modernism's idealistic claims, which many artists felt had become unrealistic and implausible. On this subject Levine stated: "We no longer have the naïve optimism in art's capacity to change political systems—an aspiration that many modernist projects shared. As postmodernists we find that simple faith very moving, but our relationship to

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[156] Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 9.

that simplicity is necessarily complex."[157] Levine's work simultaneously reveled in and parodied these characteristics of modernist abstraction. The *Check* #2 reminds us of previous artists and moments in art history, but the painting also stands on its own as a generic, yet beautifully, hand-crafted work. Like an unfinished sentence, *Check #2* looks back on our art historical past from the vantage point of postmodernism, but fails to make any definite conclusions. It produces a space of intertextual creativity, where no single reading dominates over another. The infinite, invariable repetition of squares in *Check #2* functions as a visual metaphor for the mental compartmentalization of knowledge. The organized pattern references the wealth of information and references filed in the brain that are waiting to be called upon. Beyond the unframed boundaries of the canvas, this dialogic space extends into the viewer's mind.

Levine's use of materials such as encaustic, mahogany, metallic, casein and lead paints make it difficult to avoid the strong artistic feel and presence of her works. Her works have difficulty being set aside as copies or replicas of a by-gone era of art. More than just readymades, these objects require intense viewer observation and demand to be recognized for their aesthetic and referential qualities. Like a Pandora's box, Levine's references are waiting to be unlocked and discovered by the viewer. They require thoughtful contemplation. On this subject, in 1985, Levine stated; "I like to think of my paintings as membranes, permeable from both sides so there is an easy flow between the past and the future, between my history and yours."[158] Levine chose her references carefully, often copying the work of those artists to whom she feels a strong

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[157] Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine," 270.
[158] Susan Krane and Phyllis Rosenzweig, *Art At the Edge: Sherrie Levine* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1988), 5.

connection.[159] Levine especially admired the work of Schiele and Marden, for example. As much personal as referential, Levine's work created an intertextual dialogue with those artists and with the viewer, who is left to interpret her creative synthesis of appropriated signifiers. More than simple art objects, Levine's work represents a careful method of study and analysis. She picked apart art historical structures and searched for their points of weakness. Her research consisted of exposing the authoritative quality of their compositional make-up to the viewer, who is the last judge of the work. The concluding thoughts and observations the viewer takes away complete the work.

Discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to Derrida's ideas on deconstruction, the work of artist Philip Taaffe also demonstrates an engagement with Barthes and Kristeva's theories of intertextuality and the death of the author. Taaffe's painting, *We Are Not Afraid*, 1985, looks back to Color Field works of the 1950's and 60's and irreverently answered the question posed by Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?*, 1966 (Figs. 56, 57). The lines, shapes, and colors of *We Are Not Afraid* reflect the style of Barnett Newman and remind the viewer of Newman's monumental painting, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis,* 1950-51 (Fig. 3). In *We Are Not Afraid*, 1985, Taaffe built on the forms and colors of Newman's later work. At the same time, *We Are Not Afraid* parodied the symbolic humanism of Newman's work by twisting and contorting the "zip" into oscillating lines. The curving lines are reminiscent of a DNA double-helix, which perhaps metaphorically connects the two artists within a similar creative genome. Taaffe also retained a somewhat comparable scale to the earlier work. Taaffe's painting measures 10 feet by 8 feet, 11 inches while Newman's measures 17

[159] Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine," 268.

feet, 9 ¼ inches by 11 3/8 inches. First exhibited in a solo exhibition at Pat Hearn Gallery in January 1986, Taaffe's *We Are Not Afraid* instantly sparked controversy and multiple interpretations that are vividly recalled more than twenty years later in the exhibition catalogue for Taaffe's mid-career retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. [160] Many considered it a betrayal of the heroic painting of the New York school. When older artist Malcolm Morley viewed Taaffe's work, Morley reportedly said: "You shouldn't have done that, you know."[161] On the other hand, Taaffe reported that Annalee Newman, Barnett Newman's wife, was pleased with Taaffe's work. The controversy surrounding Taaffe's work can be accurately measured in the 1986 *Endgame* exhibition catalogue. Taaffe's *We Are Not Afraid,* 1985, is discussed three times by three different essay contributors. While Crow and Bois view this work as devoid of content or as a secondary degradation of Newman's much more important work, Elisabeth Sussman saw Taaffe's referential strategy as illustrating a new beginning for modernism. She acknowledged the critical conversation that took place within Neo-Geo work and argued that it allows for new consideration of the terms of modernism. [162]

Taaffe's work functioned defiantly to mitigate the aura and the genius status of one of the major painters of the Color Field movement. By reproducing Newman's quintessential zip with a decorative surrogate, Taaffe demonstrated the extent to which this form has turned into an art historical signifier or brand identity for the artist himself. In some of Newman's earlier works, such as *Onement I,* the edges of the tape, which

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[160] Adams, Broeker, and Brüderlin, *Philip Taaffe, The Life of Forms*, 6.
[161] Taaffe, interview by Bob Nickas, 2003, transcript, courtesy of Raymond Foye.
[162] Taaffe's *We Are Not Afraid* was discussed by Bois, Crow, and Sussman in their contributions to the *Endgame* exhibition catalogue; see Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning"; Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron," in *Endgame*, 12; and Elizabeth Sussman, "The Last Picture Show," in *Endgame*, 64.

remains on the canvas, served in a way as a visible trace of the hand of the artist (Fig. 58). The existence of the tape, which was initially meant to be removed, marked the aleatory or contingent quality of artistic creation. The myth or cult of the artist is built upon such semi-accidental moments of creative genius, where the artist's artistic soul is said to shine through. By the 1960's, however, Newman began to use acrylic paints for his large-scale canvases because of its quick-drying quality. He also began to look at the bright colors and forms of the work of Pop artists who had arrived on the New York scene beginning in the late 1950's and 60's, such as James Rosenquist's and Roy Lichtenstein's large-scale paintings. The origins of the "zip" term have been traced to the Pop moment, for that matter, by Sarah Rich.[163] Newman began using the term in the mid-1960's, when he took up acrylic paint with frequency in works such as, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?.*

Newman's work demonstrated a new era of American painting, which attempted to liberate itself from European influence. Taaffe's work gently chided the spiritual or sublime ambitions of Newman's painting and the very notion of painting as a tabula rasa or open field of pure aesthetics. Taaffe's reuse of Newman's forms inverted the would-be universal and symbolic aspects of the earlier artist's work, which allowed for questioning and critique. The younger artist's zips and paint application suggest a contrived notion of artistic creativity and cast doubt on the strong dualities that metaphorically present themselves in Newman's work such as life, death, order, chaos, presence and emptiness.

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[163] Sarah K. Rich, "Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?*" *American Art* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 17-39. See also Ann Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," in *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 69.

Taaffe's forms also question Newman's use of the zip as a metaphor for the human body and for the spiritual origins of life.

Serge Guilbaut and Michael Leja described painting in the U.S. during the years after World War II as characterized by an underlying spirituality and a quest for independence from the European avant-garde. [164] New York painters were indebted to their European counterparts, but they also attempted to distance themselves during the post-war years in order to form a uniquely American avant-garde. Leja discussed post-war artists as coming to terms with the harsh realities of industrialism and the threat of nuclear war through a type of mythmaking and a return to would-be unconscious or primitive forms. Gottlieb, Still, and Pollock, used abstraction and invoked myth in their work as a means of addressing the realities and horror of the war and also to communicate universal notions of humanity. Taaffe's work somewhat contradicts this notion, proposing that artistic creation is always fettered by previous artistic influences and the weight of art history. Taaffe's work suggests that artists are always indebted in some manner to their artist predecessors.

As a follow-up to his painting, *We are Not Afraid*, Taaffe published the article, "Sublimity, Now and Forever, Amen," in the May 1986 issue of *Arts Magazine*. He called attention to the implausibility of Newman's notion of the sublime, deeming it a

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[164] The most recent substantive work on Newman is Ann Temkin, ed., *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002). See also Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstraction, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 101-65; and Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1993).

"negative sublime" and a "Great Refusal of the Sublime." [165] Taaffe induced doubt on the heroic and monumental allure of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus,* 1950-51 by illustrating his own parody of this painting, *Homo Fortissimus Excelus,* 1985, complete with his twisted version of Newman's zips (Fig. 59). A sarcastic *clin d'oeil* to the title of Newman's work which means, "man heroic and sublime," Taaffe's painting roughly translates to "man, strong and superior," using a combination of real and made-up Latin words. Taaffe's work, however, is less a copy of Newman's hard-edge painting than an intertextual form of creativity. Taaffe's creative method resides not only the strong material qualities of his work, but also resides in the form of a concept or an idea. The artist's abstract forms traced back to earlier movements, artists, or periods. The theoretical and temporal distance between Taaffe's traces and the work, artist, or period referenced allows for questioning and critique. Taaffe's painting took the concept of artistic influence literally by responding directly to Newman's earlier work and by offering the viewer an open arena, where questions are posed, but not necessarily answered. Within the "no man's land" of the death of painting rhetoric, Taaffe's work demonstrated a strong artistic license to manipulate Newman's zips any way he liked.

Levine's and Taaffe's unsettling artistic acts functioned to disturb the complacency that surrounds the major works of art and artists within the canon of art history. Works in Levine's *After, Knots,* and *Checks* series deconstructed traditional notions of authorship, artistic creativity and originality. Her reproductions in the *After* series severed ties to the earlier, highly-valued works of art by presenting the viewer with a hand-reproduced version. At the same time, Levine's source imagery stemmed from

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[165] Philip Taaffe, "Sublimity, Now and Forever, Amen," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 7 (March 1986): 18-19.

the form of art that most individuals can see and afford: illustrations in art history textbooks or poster reproductions. Similarly, Taaffe directly engaged with art history by sampling the colors and forms already made famous by his predecessors. Taaffe's reuse of Newman's zip exposed the readymade quality of these abstract forms. His paintings interrogated the underlying would-be emotional force of those lines and the metaphysical ideas often attached to Newman's painting. Levine and Taaffe's intertextual approach to painting disrupted the canon of art history and created a multi-vocal, polysemous space for art.

For Neo-Geo artists, the history of art may be perceived as a game, in which the major canonical artists and works serve as the pawns. "Neo-Geo" work examined art history from a structuralist and post-structuralist point of view. These artists unpack and question assumed formulations within the field of art. In a 1986 panel sponsored by the magazine *Flash Art* and moderated by artist and Nature Morte gallery owner, Peter Nagy, Sherrie Levine commented: "I think there's a long modernist tradition of endgame art--starting with dada and the suprematists (if you like), and a lot of artists have made the last painting ever to be made. It's a no-man's land that a lot of us enjoy moving around in."[166]

As the above statement by Levine suggests, "Neo-Geo' artists were not discouraged by the purported death of modernism. Neo-Geo artists used the death of painting rhetoric to their advantage, creating works that opened new platforms for discussing the role of painting and sculpture after modernism. Neo-Geo artists no longer

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[166] Peter Nagy, "*Flash Art* Panel: From Criticism to Complicity," *Flash Art* (*International Edition*) 129 (Summer 1986): 49.

believed in the all-encompassing painterly and spiritual qualities of early modernist abstraction and abstract expressionism. The dialogue surrounding postmodern, structuralist, and post-structuralist thought in the New York art world in the 1970's and 80's provided a fruitful environment for many artists to rethink certain terms and structures of art and art history. The discussion of painting's death engendered a strong questioning by Neo-Geo artists on the limits of this medium. If painting had been killed, rhetorically speaking, by the influx of conceptual, photo and media-based arts of the 1970's, then Neo-Geo artists worked within this so-called endgame to breathe new life into the medium.

In summary, Neo-Geo artists produced paintings and sculptures that functioned in a textual manner. Neo-Geo's manipulation of previous art historical styles and periods probed and collapsed the assumed narratives about these past artists and movements. Neo-Geo did not formulate a new system or structure for art, so much as it worked within the existing boundaries of art to break-down a linear notion of art history. Neo-Geo work functioned in accordance with the conventions of art and the art world but also very subtly drew attention to their endemic discrepancies. In this manner, Neo-Geo's semiological methodologies revamped the conventions of painting or sculpture in ways that conformed to the standards of a typical saleable, art object, yet performed an underlying critical operation. Operating on a deconstructive level, Neo-Geo work reversed the superior and inferior hierarchies at play within some of the structures of art history and society-at-large. Neo-Geo's references to previous artists and works disrupted the linear relationship between a sign and its referent, allowing for a new context and significance to appear. These artists managed to attribute new meanings as

they unpacked a number of assumptions and identities involving previous artists and movements. This project of appropriation was inherently self-subverting because their criticism was focused on the then-current structures of art history and society that enclosed them.

Neo-Geo and Modernism

As traditional painterly methods were revived by the Neo-Expressionists in the late 1970's, Neo-Geo artists reacted to the cult of the esteemed art object. The notion that art could return to its previous seemingly autonomous and venerable position seemed dubious. The disbelief shared by Neo-Geo artists toward the conventional role of art in society is best described as deconstructionist and intertextual in nature. The anti-essentialist views of the French theorists encouraged artists of the 1980's to think of ways to overturn art history's and capitalism's seemingly imprisoning grasp. On the subject of his work, Taaffe states: "I am not interested in making a pretty object. It has to be ruthless…It is obliquely referential. I want to make it into a deeper artifact than either thing itself. I want my paintings to become primeval Riley or, with my Newman paintings, primeval Color Field painting."[167] Taaffe's comment illustrated the deconstructive tendencies in his art as well as his interest in reconstructing the very foundations of art history through the medium of painting. His works did not function as purely decorative objects or signs of paintings because of the references internalized within them. Similarly, 80's painter Ross Bleckner commented:

[167] Quoted in Lily Wei, "Talking Abstract, Part Two," *Art in America* 75, no. 12 (December 1987): 122.

> Unlike those abstract painters who see themselves as defenders of the faith, I do not see myself as the guardian of universal values…Current painting--the new abstraction--shares certain kinds of expressions, certain world views, but these refer less to abstraction than to a demystification of the concept of universality and to the equivocal nature of abstract images. Current abstraction, I believe, is trying to create a polyvocal voice.[168]

Bleckner's statement evidenced less an acceptance of art's failure, than recognition of those aspects that art history has overlooked. Neo-Geo artists worked to formulate new perspectives within limits and rules imposed by art history. This appropriative regard for the past inspired new ways of analyzing the canon of art history and formulating a historical perspective. Levine similarly described the critical stance surrounding art of this period.[169]

For the Neo-Geo artists, an analytical attitude or a critical unraveling of the past was necessary to move forward within the endgame frameworks of 1980's criticism. Working within an era heralding the end of modernism and the death of painting, Neo-Geo artists exhibited a type of complicit defiance of the traditional rules and regulations imposed on the work of art. For the Neo-Geo group, complicit defiance consisted of a demystification of the past in order to acknowledge the ineffective or anachronistic aspects of history and art history.

Neo-Geo's deconstructive methods include a recycling of art historical signs into polyvalent referents. The artists' deconstructive methods served to demystify aspects of art history and possessed the ability to disrupt the informed visitor's museum or gallery experience, when compared to the experiences on offer in modernist works the Neo-Geo artists referenced. The mental or physical juxtaposition of these pairs of images provoked a questioning of the linear trajectory of history as well as art history. As a

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[168] Lily Wei, "Talking Abstract, Part One," *Art in America* 75, no. 7 (July 1987): 84.
[169] See Levine's comment in Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine," 252-53.

result, Neo-Geo artists analyzed the postmodern issues that affect contemporary artists. These artists were not simply replacing the historical with its simulative equal or lamenting the death of modernism as argued by some art historians. Rather, they aesthetically confront the historical weight of modernism in order to convey a more realistic portrayal of the artist's position during the 1980's. Neo-Geo work represented a new outlook on modernism as a past period as well as on then-current cultural developments and changes. A statement by Taaffe summarized this new attitude: "we've gotten to the point now where it's been proven that painting cannot be killed, you can't kill painting. It won't die, and we have to accept that fact."[170] Neo-Geo artists provided proof of the enduring aesthetic and deconstructive value of the time-honored mediums of painting and sculpture. Unafraid of a non-authoritative, non-linear historical and societal structure, they delved into key issues and presented them in an analytical, visual manner for the viewer's consideration. Reflecting on this and on his techniques, Halley states:

> Doing something eccentric, but not necessarily being an artist in terms of being a virtuoso who can do everything, but pursuing one task that is eccentric, that is interesting to me. The idea of stylistic change is not important to me because I see my work as research into certain issues, rather than as an attempt to create a stylistic statement.[171]

Halley concentrated on the intellectual or historical issues he found the most provocative. Due to the pluralistic character of postmodernism, he no longer felt the need to adhere to one formal style or movement. His subject matter mirrored his own, personal research interests, not the whims of the art market. Halley's statement also

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[170] Nagy, "*Flash Art* Panel," 49.
[171] Michèle C. Cone, "Peter Halley," *Flash Art* (*International Edition*) 126 (February/March 1986): 36.

revealed his acceptance of the changing role of the artist as a historical entity. Similarly, Levine stated:

> The thing about the art world is that it's not about real power. I think its highly developed play--for us and also for the people who do have real power…I don't think that play is that empty. On the level of the symbolic, it's very important. But it's a different kind of importance from direct political power. I think that artists and critics sometimes confuse the two things and there's a kind of apology for their own limited activity. The notion of an artist does not have as much importance to me as it used to.[172]

Levine described the type of power dynamic that relates key figures in the art world, where critics, artists and the art market itself all performed their own, specific roles. Instead of expressing discontent, she confronted her role as an artist and sought out creative ways to engage herself within this network. Neo-Geo artists were not saddened by the loss of the romanticism attaching to increasingly tenuous categories such as 'artist' or 'style,' rather they recognized these terms as evolving within a larger historical and societal framework. What is questionable, however, is what type of viewer is equipped to recognize the critical component of their work, which dependents on a degree of erudition. To the knowledgeable viewer, "Neo-Geo's" art historical or theoretical references contained and contain a critical, destabilizing quality.

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[172] Paul Taylor, "Sherrie Levine Plays with Paul Taylor," *Flash Art* (*International Edition*) 135 (Summer 1987): 59.

CHAPTER TWO

NEO-GEO, THE PICTURES GROUP, AND THE NOTION OF COMPLICIT DEFIANCE

Neo-Geo artists arrived on the New York art scene in the early 1980's at a time when the Pictures and Appropriation artists had reached the height of their popularity, after Crimp's 1977 *Pictures* show. Pictures and Appropriation artists commented on the culture industry, but from the standpoint of film, media and advertising. Artists such as Richard Prince and James Welling reproduced segments and clippings of advertisements. Barbara Kruger's large-scale photographic assemblages reproduced the strong language and dictates of advertising companies. Cindy Sherman's photographs replicated Hollywood imagery of women in domestic and urban situations. This chapter explores the strong connections between these groups of artists in the 1970's and 80's.

Founded in 1980 by Helene Winer, the former director of Artists Space, and Janelle Reiring formerly of Leo Castelli Gallery, Metro Pictures Gallery was considered a major promoter of the photographic work of this new generation of artists. What has not been discussed, however, is the Gallery's diverse exhibition roster of the early 1980's which also included the painters Walter Robinson and Thomas Lawson, and several group shows that included the Neo-Geo artists Bickerton, McCollum, Halley, Steinbach and Levine, featuring the paintings she created beginning in 1985. These several groups shared many important connections and their members were shown together in many exhibitions in the mid to late 80's. This chapter examines the commonalities and differences between the U.S. based artists associated with Neo-Geo and the Pictures

group. It traces the notion of complicity and strategies of complicit defiance in the work of the Pictures and Neo-Geo artists and elaborates on the strong links between these two groups in the 1980's. I assert that there was a close relationship between these two groups of artists and that, collectively, they were the first American artists to address French structuralist and post-structuralist theory in their work. As discussed in chapter one, an examination of the work of these groups alongside French theory allows for a reading of the critical strategies used by these artists.

The 1977 *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space is typically cited as generating a new group of artists, who were informed by media imagery and strategies of appropriation. Crimp's exhibition launched the career of those artists included--Levine, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith-- as well as several others who later became associated with the group through Metro Pictures Gallery, including Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman. At the time, Crimp was a student at The Graduate Center, CUNY, studying under Rosalind Krauss. The *Pictures* show allowed him to apply the new poststructuralist theories he was studying to contemporary photography.[173] It also allowed Crimp, who became managing editor of *October* magazine in 1977, to advance the premises of the journal by promoting a theoretically-informed construction of the content of new photographic and media-based art. Crimp argued that many of the Pictures artists commented critically on the media and on commodity capitalism by manipulating the favorite mediums of these industries, namely photography and film.

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[173] Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 111.

In many ways, Crimp appeared to be the promoter of a new, deconstructive mode of photography, film, and new media that drew from recognizable imagery in media advertising in a new form of insider critique. Pictures and Appropriation artists putatively used the strategies of the culture industry against itself in ways that called attention to its covert mechanisms of persuasion and control. By appropriating media advertising and reusing it in a different manner, the Pictures and Appropriation artists allowed the original image to be recontextualized and, in doing so, these artists generated new meanings.

A few of the works by Pictures artists engaged with historical themes in interesting ways. Goldstein and Brauntuch manipulated imagery associated with the Nazi regime in two of their works, *The Jump*, 1978, and *Untitled* (Mercedes), 1978, as perhaps a *clin d'oeil* to earlier artists' use of highly charged words and symbols (Figs. 60, 63). Stella referenced the Nazi Party in the titles of two of his *Black* Paintings: *Die Fahne Hoch!*, 1959, which refers to the first phrase of the Nazi anthem, "The Flag Up High," used from 1930 to 1945, and *Arbeit Macht Frei*, 1968, which translates "work will make you free" and refers to the slogan placed at the entrance to a Nazi concentration camp.[174] De Maria's *Museum Piece*, 1967, consisted of a swastika fabricated in aluminum. While these earlier artists' works reflected the post-war climate of Greenbergian formalism, which prohibited the discussion of the content of a work in favor of its formal qualities, the Pictures artists demonstrated a desire to engage with the presentation of history in new ways using the mediums of photography and film.

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[174] See Anna Chave's discussion of Stella's *Die Fahne Hoch!* and *Arbeit Macht Frei* in Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 47-48.

In *The Jump*, Goldstein manipulated the original footage from Leni Riefenstahl's chronicle of a diver from the 1936 Berlin Olympics, a fact not mentioned in Crimp's essays.[175] In the film, the figure performs a somersault from a high board. By isolating the figure in gold tint and by removing the contextual background imagery, Goldstein made the shimmery diver perform leaps and turns in mid-air. Crimp states, "In making this picture of a dive, Goldstein is performing a set of operations that isolate, distill, alter and augment the filmed recording of an actual event. He does this in order to impose a distance between the event and its viewers because, according to Goldstein, 'it is only through a distance that we can understand the world.'"[176] Goldstein's simple, yet would-be subversive technique putatively shifted the relationship between the sign of the diver and its customary referent. Instead of seeing the image of a man in a bathing suit jumping from a platform into a pool, the viewer saw the outline of a gold figure twisting and turning through the air. The realistic image of a diver was replaced with a newly aestheticized rendering that emphasized the movement of the figure. Overlooked in Crimp's analysis, Goldstein's act is based on Riefenstahl's own aestheticized rendering of the Olympians' idealized, muscular bodies. At the same time, the glittery lights that composed the figure are reminiscent of the flashing lights found on street signs and in discotheques of the 1970's. In effect, Goldstein's appropriation contaminated or weakened the political context and effect of the original image. This attenuation allowed for a potential shift in focus from the representation of reality to an examination of the operations behind the representation of reality.

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[175] Crimp, *Pictures*; Crimp, "Pictures"; and Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 121.
[176] Crimp, *Pictures*, 3.

Goldstein's appropriated imagery was also removed from its historical context and associations with Nazi Germany. The 1936 Olympics marked the height of Hitler's regime. While other European countries suffered from the aftermath of the economic depression, Germany's economy was on the mend. Thanks in part to American businessmen including Henry Ford, Nazi Germany maintained a stable economy and low unemployment rates. In 1936, Hitler was a highly regarded figure and signs of the pending Nazi aggression were not yet visible. Yet, construction had already begun on several concentration camps and Jewish citizens were beginning to leave Germany. The participation of an all-white German Olympic team accentuated the ethnocentric underpinnings of Hitler's regime. At the same time, African-American Track and Field athlete Jesse Owens broke the racial divides by winning four gold medals in the 100 metres, 200 metres, long jump and 100 meter relay race.

Deferring this broader historical context, Goldstein's video relayed only the physical motion of the diver's body. Most likely, most viewers examined his doctored film clip from the 1936 Olympic Games without knowledge of or attention to its historical circumstances. Goldstein reworked the original imagery to such an extent that any reference to Riefenstahl's original footage was not discernable. Moreover, in his catalogue essay and 1979 publication on the exhibition in *October*, Crimp did not mention the connection to Riefenstahl's film, but merely referred to Goldstein's source as "stock footage."[177] Goldstein's work relied on a knowledgeable viewer in order to contemplate its full meaning and to generate a possible critical dialogue. Without access to these historical connotations, *The Jump* remained a simply a short art film.

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[177] Crimp, *Pictures*, 6.

In spite of this limitation, for Crimp, Goldstein's work still contained the capacity to allow viewers to visualize the world around them in a different manner. Crimp stated, "For their pictures, these artists have turned to the available images in the culture around them. But they subvert the standard signifying function of those pictures, tied to their captions, their commentaries, their narrative sequences—tied, that is, to the illusion that they are directly transparent to a signified."[178] This would-be subversion or distance between the original and the manipulated image arguably exposed the structural mechanisms behind the creation of media imagery and photographic representations of the everyday. The sampling and reworking of Riefenstahl's film formed the essence of Goldstein's creative act. In a way, *The Jump* hyperbolized Riefenstahl's presentation of the Olympic games as a world spectacle of athletic achievement by transforming the diver into a flashy version of the original. Instead of seeing black and white imagery of athletes competing on an international level, viewers were left with a glittering form that twisted in multiple directions against a dark background. An informed viewer might have been able to grasp the underlying subject of Goldstein's film, which was his act of appropriation and his rewriting of this small moment in history. Although this is not how Crimp positioned Goldstein's work, when viewed as a manipulated and altered version of Riefenstahl's film, *The Jump* raised questions on the authority of the original images. Goldstein's act turned the historical imagery back onto itself. In effect, *The Jump* replaced one mediated vision of reality with another, potentially disruptive version. It prompted the knowledgeable viewer to think about how history is presented. Historically grounded in the Performance art of the 1970's by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Dan

[178] Ibid., 5.

Graham and Peter Campus, the work of Pictures and Appropriation artists reinvested themselves in pictorial imagery and the representation of images in a new manner.[179] While some of Goldstein's works examined the repercussions of reusing historical imagery, many other Pictures and Appropriation artists used advertising and other commercial print media sources.

Although Appropriation art and the Pictures group are now considered to largely encompass photography-based practices, this was not necessarily the case at the time. Douglas Eklund's 2009 exhibition and catalogue, *The Pictures Generation: 1974-1984*, explored that generation's early beginnings at The California Institute of Arts, knowns as CalArts, where many of the artists, including Goldstein, James Welling, David Salle, and Paul McMahon, studied with Conceptual artist John Baldessari and then-associate dean Allan Kaprow. In his review of the exhibition, Singerman points out that Eklund's construction of an "Oedipal narrative" allowed the curator to "bring out a ready-made…cast of characters to enact an old art-historical narrative: the relationship of fathers and sons."[180] Nevertheless, Eklund's account somewhat complicated Crimp's account of the Pictures group as débuting with his 1977 *Pictures* show.[181] Baldessari's witty video, *I Will Not Make Anymore Boring Art*, 1971 featured the artist writing out the work's title for thirteen minutes on lined paper like a punished schoolboy (Fig. 61). Baldessari's ironic painting, *What is a Painting*, 1966-68, textually described the basic components of painting using letters painted on canvas, instead of images. In Eklund's account, works such as *The Spectator is Compelled*…, 1967-68, served as a precursor to

[179] Crimp, "Pictures," 77.
[180] Howard Singerman, "Language Games," *Artforum* 48, no. 1 (September 2009): 259.
[181] See Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*.

the work of the Pictures group due to its incorporation of text and images in a similarly unconventional, structuralist manner (Fig. 62). This work played with the associations between an image and its caption by displaying a photograph depicting the back of a man standing in the middle of a street in L.A. and the words, "The spectator is compelled to look directly down the road and into the middle of the picture." Baldessari's work caused the viewer to contemplate the meaning of the words in association to the image. These works focused on ideas, language and actions over the formal components of painting.

Taking Baldessari's and Kosuth's work as examples, Pictures artists such as Troy Brauntuch continued to manipulate source imagery in various ways. Brauntuch's three-part work *Untitled* (Mercedes), 1978, for example, first exhibited at a solo show at the alternative art space, The Kitchen in New York in 1979, re-examined the documentation of the Nazi regime during World War II (Fig. 63). It consisted of two vertical images framed in black on either side of a horizontal image framed in red. In the central horizontal frame, a larger image to the left displays a photograph taken from behind of a driver and a passenger. Wearing an old driving cap, the passenger's head is slumped, as if he has passed out. The image to the right displays a close-up excerpt of a building in the background of the image to the left. In a technique similar to Levine's early photographic work, Brauntuch has re-photographed the photograph, *Hitler Asleep in His Mercedes*, 1934, from Albert Speer's memoirs, *Inside the Third Reich* published in 1970. Written under the auspices of his position as Hitler's chief architect and minister, Speer's bestselling book provided insight into the inner workings of the Nazi party. The vertical side images reproduced the vertical light effects used to illuminate Speer's 1937 Zeppelinfeld Stadium on the Nuremberg parade grounds, which the architect surrounded

with 130 antiaircraft lights. On an adjacent gallery wall at The Kitchen, Brauntuch displayed *Play/Fame/Song*, 1975-76, which consisted of appropriated drawings by Hitler (Fig. 64). Brauntuch's twice-removed photograph added new meanings to Speer's memories of Hitler and the Nazi regime. The physical and temporal distance between Speer's and Brauntuch's photographs allowed for contemplation of the historical and social changes that had taken place since the image of Hitler was captured in 1934. By removing the photographs of Hitler from their original context and inserting them into another, Brauntuch's work manipulated the relationship between sign and referent. Comparable to Sherrie Levine's *After* series or Philip Taaffe's paintings after little-known artists such as Myron Stout, discussed in chapter one, Goldstein's and Brauntuch's work displayed the desire to question or rewrite the terms of history.

In a more playful tone, Sherman's now-renowned film stills, in which the artist dressed and posed in shots reminiscent of scenes from films of the 1950's, can be read as critiquing aspects of the structure, including the voyeuristic quality, of mainstream film. But as with McCollum's *Surrogate* paintings, Sherman's *Untitled*, 1978, for one, raised more questions than it answered (Fig. 65). In this work, Sherman created a fictitious scene, reminiscent of a still from a 1950's B-rated movie, in a staged and fragmented manner. The viewer is confronted with a close-up of Sherman's questioning face and the Manhattan buildings looming behind her. No details of her actual location or situation are provided. Crimp described Sherman's film stills as innovatively contradicting photography's customary use as a documentation of reality.[182] Danto pointed out that

[182] Ibid., 80.

Sherman's film stills celebrate a bygone era of Hollywood cinema.[183] By the time they were produced, he commented, the type of stills she fabricated or simulated was more likely to be found in a film archive than in mainstream cinemas. Sherman's focus on the female figure incited questions regarding the role of women as weak sex objects on the "big screen." On one hand, the re-creation of such scenes by a female artist arguably attributed a level of agency to the female role. Similar to the technique of the 1920's Surrealist photographer, Claude Cahun, Sherman's technique of self-portraiture might be said to have subverted the operations of a straight male gaze on a passive female subject. In these photographs, Sherman acted as an agent by choosing to position herself as the object of desire. On the other hand, despite Crimp's celebration of Sherman's images for their fragmentary and deconstructive quality, it could be argued that these images simply reproduce tropes of the culture industry and effectively re-inscribe such feeble roles for women. So imperceptible are the distinctions between much of Sherman's work and the imagery of Hollywood cinema that some viewers reportedly claimed to know the films from which the stills were taken.[184]

Eklund also importantly pointed out that Crimp's *Pictures* show presented a very limited representation of the larger body of work that was being produced by the CalArts graduates and other Appropriation artists working in New York during the late 1970's. Artists Space's policy of not showing the work of an artist more than once affected some who otherwise could have been included in *Pictures*. CalArts graduates and painters Matt Mullican and David Salle were left out, despite their relevance to the Pictures

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[183] Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 43.
[184] Ibid, 43.

group.[185] After completing an M.F.A. degree at CalArts in 1975, Salle moved to New York and had his first show at Artists Space in 1976. Although he is predominantly known as a painter who benefitted from the tutelage of Baldessari, Salle's early work consisted of manipulating or appropriating advertising imagery in work such as *Untitled*, 1973 (Fig. 66). In this series of six prints, Salle recreated the look of advertising by snapping wistful shots of his female friends in the kitchen drinking coffee and affixing coffee labels to the bottom of the image. By contrast with Prince's practice in *Untitled* (couple), 1978 or *Untitled* (living room), 1978, the attachment of the labels to the bottom of the image gave the series a collage-like, hand-made quality that prevented these particular works from being read as straight advertisements (Figs. 28, 29).

Although the groups seem distinct, at the time, there were many connections between those artists associated with Appropriation art, the Pictures Group and Neo-Geo. In the years before and following the *Pictures* exhibition, Eklund pointed out that Helene Winer, then the Director of Artists Space, organized many noteworthy exhibitions by Pictures and Appropriation artists Dara Birnbaum, Laurie Simmons, Richard Prince, Michael Smith and Barbara Bloom. As Eklund comments, "Pictures—although a definite statement of intent—was but one exhibition in a run of important shows and performances organized by Helene Winer during her five years at the helm of Artists Space."[186] Neo-Geo artists were also being shown at Artists Space during this period including Steinbach in a solo exhibition in 1979 and Bickerton in a solo exhibition in 1984. Koons was included in several group shows at Artists Space, including *Hundreds of Drawings*, 1983, also with Steinbach, and *A Likely Story*, in 1982. Peter Halley was

[185] Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 66.
[186] Ibid, 66.

included in the *Selections* show in 1984. Levine was included in Artists Space's *Tenth Anniversary* show in 1984. On the same note, Metro Pictures Gallery--typically regarded as promoting only the work of the Pictures and Appropriation artists--showed the work of several Neo-Geo artists in several exhibitions of the 1980's.[187]

Eklund's account of the Pictures and Appropriation artists demonstrated that photography was one of many mediums being explored during this period of experimentation from the late 1970's to the mid-1980's. As mentioned, David Salle produced photographs before turning to painting, which became his signature medium. Robert Longo became most famous for his 1979 *Men in the Cities* series, which consisted of large, charcoal and graphite drawings of individuals in various contorted poses. Created by projecting film stills onto paper, these works merged the two mediums of film and drawing in a new, thought-provoking manner. Some of Longo's early works, such as *The Silence*, 1977, use the same industrial materials as Bickerton's paintings and display a similarly fresh and shiny appearance (Fig. 67). *The Silence* was a cast-aluminum relief, which was lacquered with coats of bright red automobile paint. Troy Brauntuch and Jack Goldstein also produced sculptures, drawings and paintings during this time, in works such as Brauntuch's *Three Effects*, 1977 (ink rubber-stamped on paper) and Goldstein's *A Suite of Nine 7-Inch Records with Sound Effects*, 1977 (sound recordings on colored vinyl

[187] Neo-Geo work was included in five Metro Pictures exhibitions from 1984 to 1988. *Group Show*, December 7, 1984-January 18, 1985, included work by Bickerton, Halley, McCollum, Nagy, and Gretchen Bender; *Selected Works*, September 7-28, 1985, included works by Halley, Walter Robinson, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, and Goldstein; *Group Show*, December 7, 1985-January 18, 1986, included works by Bickerton, Halley, Louise Lawler, McCollum, Peter Nagy; *Signs of Painting*, April 5-26, 1986, included works by Bickerton, Goldstein, Halley, Levine, McCollum, Robinson, Taaffe, John Miller, and Gerwald Rockenschaub; and *Hover Culture*, May 28-June 25, 1988, included works by Halley, Levine, Prince, Steinbach, Jennifer Bolande, and Jiri George Dokoupil.

discs) (Figs. 68, 69). Goldstein turned to the traditional medium of painting, as did Levine by the early 1980's. Goldstein's paintings were based on found imagery and were actually produced by Bickerton for a period of two years, while he was working as an assistant in Goldstein's studio. After Bickerton left, the paintings were produced by commercial artists. It is important to note that some well-known artists in the 1960's began their careers as commercial illustrators or billboard painters, such as Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist, respectively. Comparable to Levine's strategy, Goldstein's act thwarted notions of authenticity and autonomy which are commonly attached to the medium of painting.

The deconstructive techniques that were associated with the Pictures artists are not exclusively limited to the mediums of photography or film (as I demonstrated also in chapter 1.) Influenced by its cultural milieu, Neo-Geo work also disrupted the linear relationships between art historical or social signs and their referents. Neo-Geo painting and sculpture critically commented on the canon of art history as well as aspects of the mass media and commodity culture. In his 1979 follow-up to the *Pictures* show, Crimp promoted the work of the Pictures artists as illustrating a "prominent sensibility" among a new generation of artists whose work "is not confined to any particular medium; instead it makes use of photography, film, performance, as well as traditional modes of painting, drawing, and sculpture."[188] (But, one year later, Crimp hailed photography as the quintessential medium for evoking the conditions of postmodernism.)[189]

In 1986, in a panel organized by *Flash Art* magazine at the Pat Hearn Gallery, Ashley Bickerton stated:

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[188] Crimp, "Pictures," 75.
[189] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 91-101.

> After years of pulling the object off the wall, smearing it across the fields in the Utah desert, and playing it out with our bodily secretions, the artwork has not awkwardly, but aggressively asserted itself back into the gallery context: the space of art-but this with an aggressive discomfort and a complicit defiance.[190]

This panel, which included Neo-Geo artists Halley, Koons, Steinbach, Taaffe, Levine, and Bickerton, effectively helped to launch Neo-Geo work and consolidate the group's reputation.

The coining of the term "complicit defiance" can be loosely traced back to the artists associated with the Pictures group. In his 1982 article, "Back to the Studio," Craig Owens reviewed the CalArts Tenth Anniversary exhibition.[191] Owens traced CalArts graduates' return to the studio after the movements of the 1970's. For Owens, the advent of post-studio art began with the discussion of phenomenology and perception through Minimalist practices. In his 1967 essay, "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried acknowledged the performative and theatrical aspects of Minimalist sculpture, whereby the work's surrounding physical and spatial aspects became an important aspect of its meaning. [192]

Some artists of the 1970's spent less time isolated in the studio and more time creating art against the backdrop of everyday life. Robert Morris' *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 1970, for example, was performed at the Whitney museum and recorded by a film crew. The work consisted of a pile of dirt and objects such as electrical cord, pieces of metal, grass and rope that Morris would alter on a daily basis. Yvonne Rainer conceptualized a dance piece to accompany the installation. The new generation of

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[190] Quoted in Nagy, "*Flash Art* Panel," 49.
[191] Craig Owens, "Back to the Studio," *Art in America* 70, no. 1 (January 1982): 99-107.
[192] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in Battcock,ed., *Minimal Art*, 116-47. The essay originally appeared in *Artforum*.

artists of the 1980's, in contrast, retreated back to the studio to create photo-based works and transportable paintings. Owens described the motivations of the painters as follows: "Thus, more and more often do we hear apologies which invoke the seductive notion of a 'subversive complicity' with art-world institutions; the only way to destroy a painting, we are told, is from within, by exposing its own internal contradictions." Owens cited the paintings of David Salle as an example of the tactic of subversive complicity, for positing the "established conventions against themselves in the hope of exposing cultural repression."[193] Many of Salle's paintings, such as *Gericault's Arm*, 1985, combined a set of distinct, fragmentary images in different formal styles that prompted questioning on the part of the viewer, or a desire for a more whole or complete figure or meaning (Fig. 74). Using art history books, the mass media, or fashion magazines as sources, Salle's appropriation and re-presentation of public imagery in parts caused recognizable subjects to become unrecognizable. In *Gericault's Arm*, for example, an image of a semi-nude model is combined with references to nineteenth-century French painter Théodore Géricault's rendering of corpses in studies for his canonical work, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819 (Fig. 75). Salle's work pitted the history of painting against itself by manipulating high and low sources in new ways.

Although the connection has never quite been made in the literature on Neo-Geo, the roots and definition of subversive complicity stem from theories of deconstruction and post-structuralism. Using examples of work by Sherman, Longo and Brauntuch, Crimp argued that these artists' photographic and filmic manipulations of historical and commercial imagery simultaneously fetishize and criticize their sources. The artists'

[193] Owens, "Back to the Studio," 64.

appropriative act created a distance from the original image and, in turn, a space for critique. Although Crimp cited Barthes' 1977 book, *Image-Music-Text* in his articles[194] on the Pictures, he never fully discussed the connections between appropriation and French theory. Pictures, Appropriation and Neo-Geo work all elicited a subversive relationship with art history, the art market, the mass media and commodity capitalism: so I am arguing. The formal and semiological ambiguities created by these artists' work related to structuralism and post-structuralism's critical regard of larger historical structures. Pictures and Neo-Geo artists interacted in various ways in New York during this period and developed comparable, theoretically-informed strategies.

Dan Cameron asserted that subversive complicity was an important characteristic of painting and sculpture of the 1980's. In his 1987 article, "Art and its Double: A New York Perspective," Cameron comments:

> David Salle and the Photo-Conceptualists at Metro Pictures were obviously not the only artists in New York engaged in representation and the lessons of semiotics…those artists who engage the language of simulation assert that art cannot be manipulated into the passive support of societal hierarchies if it is fully aware of its operative role as a sign within the larger hierarchy of representation.[195]

Cameron's article stemmed from his exhibition of the same title that was on view from November 27 to January 11, 1987 at the Centre Cultural de la Fundacio Caixa de Pensions in Barcelona, Spain. Cameron's exhibition included the work of Appropriation and Neo-Geo artists: Charlesworth, Bickerton, Robert Gober, Halley, Holzer, Koons, Kruger, Louise Lawler, Levine, Mullican, Rollins & K.O.S., Schuyff, Sherman, Steinbach and Taaffe. Referencing the writings of post-structuralist, Jean Baudrillard,

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[194] Crimp, *Pictures*; and Crimp, "Pictures."
[195] Dan Cameron, "Art and its Double—A New York Perspective," *Flash Art* (*International Edition*), no. 134 (May 1987): 57-72.

Cameron used the term "simulation" to refer to the theoretical underpinnings of these artists' methods of appropriation and their manipulation of photographic, art historical or social signs.

The Pictures group, Appropriation artists and Neo-Geo artists were the first U.S. artists to address French theories of deconstruction, structuralism and post-structuralism.[196] Certainly French artists had access to French theories of deconstruction, structuralism and post-structuralism before artists in the U.S., since translations of the texts in question mostly did not appear in English until the 1970's. French artists Bertrand Lavier and Sylvie Fleury and Swiss artist John Armleder engaged with art history and commodity culture in ways that could be seen as aligned with Neo-Geo. Born in 1949, Lavier was included in *An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture* in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and in a show at the John Gibson Gallery in New York in 1986. Armleder, born in 1948, was involved in the Fluxus movement in the 1960's and 70's and the New York art scene of the 1980's. He had a solo exhibition at the John Gibson Gallery in 1985 and in 1987. Sylvie Fleury, born in 1961, was Armleder's assistant in the early 1990's and was influenced by Neo-Geo work. French artists, however, were not as interested in French theory as their U.S. counterparts. Lavier comments:

> Those texts held nothing particularly exotic or attractive for us. Lyotard might have been involved to some extent with the art of the '70s, but not really with that of the '80s. In the US the French thinkers were received in

[196] See Daniel Birnbaum, "Bertrand Lavier Talks to Daniel Birnbaum," *Artforum* 41, no. 8 (April 2003): 66-67; Daniel Birnbaum, *Bertrand Lavier* (Paris-Musées, 2002); Lionel Bovier, *John Armleder* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005); Lionel Bovier and David Radzinowicz, *John Armleder* (Paris: Flammarion; and New York: Rizzoli, 2005); and Renate Wiehager, *Sylvie Fleury* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz; and New York: D.A.P., 1999).

> a different way. Philosophy tends to suffer from a kind of jet lag; it seems to take about a decade for a text to cross the Atlantic. At that point things are twisted and distorted--and made productive in a new way. That happened with French thought of the '60s and '70s. Baudrillard was, of course, quite important for people like Peter Halley.[197]

Art and theory merged in new and interesting ways in the U.S. in the work of the Pictures and Appropriation artists in the late 1970's, and the Neo-Geo artists of the early 1980's. The usage and importance of theoretical sources distinguished Appropriation and Neo-Geo art from the contemporaneous efforts of the Neo-Expressionists, such as Julian Schnabel or Francisco Clemente. Numerous Neo-Geo artists read, discussed and referenced French theory in a direct manner. As Halley recently indicated:

> I came of age at a very special time, when post-structuralist theory was being disseminated. There was a lot to be excited about. I had had a very traditional liberal arts education, so post-structuralism was my own personal revolution against humanist values. Humanism and enlightenment values were thrown out the window with post-structuralism. Post-structuralist ideas had the aspect of revelation for me. It was also exciting because post-structuralism wasn't Marxist. A lot of people in the original *October* crowd, and their inheritors like Benjamin Buchloh, formed a separate camp in the '80's, centered around the influence of the Frankfurt School. For me, French theory was premised on this great sense of play. It was not so serious.[198]

Halley's comments shed light on the significance of French theory to Neo-Geo artists broadly in the 1980's. For Halley, as well as the other Neo-Geo artists, French theory provided the impetus for greater artistic freedom or "play." Halley described the strong distinctions between his working methods and the criticism produced by the *October* group, who did not consider the visual interplay in Neo-Geo painting and sculpture a productive strategy.

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[197] Birnbaum, "Bertrand Lavier Talks to Daniel Birnbaum," 66.
[198] Halley, interview.

Critic Eleanor Heartney describes Pictures work as constituting an anti-aesthetic, or as dry and analytical, in comparison to Neo-Geo's seductive, object-based approach. Neo-Geo works were more hedonistic, incorporating flashy colors, materials and new objects, and responded ambivalently to the rise in the market during the course of the early to mid-1980's. These market changes were not yet apparent during the height of the Pictures group in the mid to late 1970's. Heartney recalled:

> There was a kind of asceticism to [the Pictures Group]. It was not meant to be seductive. It was anti-seductive. [The Pictures Group] would take these seductive images but then deal with them in a more analytical way. The sentiment of desire was in quotes, but was taken away from the actual artworks. Whereas, the notion of desire was inherent to Neo-Geo works. They were about seduction. It was about making seductive objects and how objects seduce us, for commodity purposes, but also psychologically, how we surround ourselves with objects and how they provide us with a sense of who we are. Neo-Geo was also concerned with the notion of art as an object that is seductive. That was an important part of the work. Pictures gave Neo-Geo a critical framework, but it had a very different dialogue. [sic][199]

Neo-Geo work generally addressed the issues of simulation, representation and consumer desire in a more tangible manner than the Pictures work, who were also incorporating visual signs and commodities taken from everyday life. Halley, for one, created paintings using Day-Glo paint and Roll-a-Tex, a building material that used to coat the walls and ceilings of office buildings and homes (Halley's work will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3). For their part, Steinbach and Koons directly sampled material goods, creating art works out of basketballs, aquariums, lava lamps, and inflatable toys, as in for example, Steinbach's *Ultra Red #2*, 1986 (Fig. 5). The result was work that responded to the phenomenon of cultural materialism in a distinct and comparatively direct manner.

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[199] Heartney, interview.

In contrast, Prince's work replicated the same simulated version of reality provided by the media and advertising industries. Prince's early photographs, for example, in works such as *Untitled* (living rooms), 1977, and *Untitled* (fashion), 1982-84 are derived directly from advertisements and reflected their ideals of everyday living. In *Untitled* (fashion), a series of close-up images of female fashion models clipped from images magazines represent a complicit, as well as an arguably critical portrayal of mass-media and the advertising industry (Fig. 70). Prince clipped from *Allure* and other magazines and transposed the media imagery into the domain of art. The removal of the images from their original context within a fashion magazine could be said to allow for a certain distance for contemplating the motivations behind their creation. Prince's art work called attention to the purpose of this imagery as it promoted a certain ideal standard of beauty and luxury.

However, in Koons' work, the viewer is physically confronted with objects that have been displaced from their habitual context. Koons' early sculptures from his *Inflatables* series, such as *Inflatable Flower and Bunny* (Tall White, Pink Bunny), 1979, entailed a related focus on commodity fetishism (Fig. 71). In this series, cheap, plastic inflatable objects were blown up and attached to square mirrors. Prince's and Koons' work both provided commentary on consumer desire, but, at least in this comparison, from opposite ends of the class spectrum. While Prince's work focused on images of luxury items and ideal standards of living, Koons *Inflatable* series commented on kitsch and the low use-value of certain commodities.[200]

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[200] For definitions of kitsch, see Harold Rosenberg, "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism," in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 259-68; Gillo Dorfles and

The notion of kitsch arose in the nineteenth century alongside industrial production and the massive proliferation of commodities.[201] Defined, in part, as a source of pleasure for a mass audience, kitsch is typically discussed in a pejorative manner as an inferior copy of a high art original. It can also refer to an outlandishly excessive style or mode of creation. In his iconic, 1939 article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," published in *Partisan Review*, Greenberg formulated a strong dialectic between the high art of the avant-garde and the low art or kitsch produced for the middle and working classes. While the masses remain largely indifferent to high cultural production, by Greenberg's account, he called forth the avant-garde to defend itself against the invading force of kitsch. Celeste Olalquiaga discusses kitsch as a "suspended memory whose elusiveness is made ever more keen by its extreme iconicity. Despite appearance, kitsch is not an active commodity…but rather a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be—a virtual image, existing in the impossibility of fully being."[202] With little or no use value, for Olalquiaga, kitsch can be intimately linked to personal memory, nostalgia and experience. In her 1961 essay, "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag offered an alternative way of perceiving kitsch or camp that celebrated a sense of pleasure in the popular arts.[203] Sontag appreciated a camp style because of its excessiveness, artifice and frivolity.

John McHale, eds., *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969); Tomás Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996).

[201] For a history of kitsch, see Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

[202] Ibid, 28.

[203] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" (1961), in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (London: Vintage, 1994), 275-92.

Koons's *Inflatables* series taps into these notions of kitsch. The playful, irreverent quality of the inflatable flower and bunny represented cheap, mass-produced objects created for broad appeal and purchase. At the same time, the flower and bunny exuded nostalgia for the natural world as artificial representations of a living plant and animal. Addressing only superficial desires or the whims of the marketplace, the inflatable toys symbolized the height of commodity fetishism. By creating art with such an obvious example of kitsch, Koons commented on the putative inability of art to be owned by broad audiences, since it is typically bought and sold at very high prices that are out of reach to the middle and lower-classes. Ironically, Koons' work was immediately purchased and collected by members of the upper class. Roberta Smith summarized the critical operation at work in Koons' sculpture as follows: "Koons's forté is a dazzling visual and conceptual equilibrium in which a recognizable object is drastically transformed, its social function interrupted and supplemented by an esthetic one so that we are forced to weigh both anew."[204] In other words, Koons' inflatables no longer existed as mere blow-up toys, but as metaphorical stand-ins for certain unquantifiable aspects of consumerism in post-war society. These works also played with the concept of a low-brow aesthetic. By placing such obvious examples of kitsch in the realm of art, Koons incited questions on the terms and conditions of commodity capitalism as well as on the value of art as a commodity created exclusively to be bought and sold by the upper classes.

Koons might be seen to have a lot in common with Appropriation artist Barbara Kruger. Kruger's large-scale photomontages appropriated the look and feel of advertising

[204] Roberta Smith, "Rituals of Consumption," *Art in America* 76, no. 5 (May 1988): 164.

with their large-scale format and bold words. While Prince's and Koons' work emphasized the sex appeal of consumerism and commodities, Kruger's work functioned in a more piercing manner. Works such as *Untitled* (I Shop Therefore I Am), 1987, and *Untitled* (You Are Not Yourself), 1982, drew from the visual vocabulary of advertising to uncover the inner workings of commodity fetishism (Figs. 72, 73). In *Untitled* (You Are Not Yourself), 1982, broken mirrors display a fragmented view of a woman as she attempts to gaze at herself. The work conjures up images of women trying on clothes and accessories in department store dressing rooms. In 1992, Mignon Nixon argued that Kruger's fragmented images of female bodies effectively destabilized dominant notions of subjectivity and broke social stereotypes as well as the desire to visually reconstitute the image.[205] Nixon commented that the "double displacement not only disturbs the security of conventional viewing positions…but also sets up a different scene by reframing looking as loss or as masochism.[206] The broken mirror putatively discouraged the purchasing of commodities by thwarting any allure they might have had. The statement "You are Not Yourself" reinforced this attitude of deterrence. It was suggestive of the artifice and falsity behind the fashion and makeup industry as they promote an unnatural portrayal of women's bodies.

Kruger's *Untitled* (I Shop Therefore I Am) operated on a simpler level, presenting the viewer with an ironic dictum that initially seems to encourage consumerism. A simple gray background highlighted a hand holding a sign marked with the words "I Shop Therefore I Am." Kruger reworked the famous, statement of René Descartes, sometimes called the Father of Modern Philosophy, "I think, therefore I am," and applied

[205] Mignon Nixon, "You Thrive on Mistaken Identity," *October* 60 (Spring 1992): 58-81.
[206] Ibid., 61.

it in a degraded manner to the realm of commercialism. Descartes' statement promoted his thoughts on the importance of scientific knowledge and reason over sentiment and religiosity during the Enlightenment. Kruger's appropriation of Descartes' words was suggestive of the public's inability to think and to reason within capitalism's stronghold, which encourages impulse buying and excessive spending. By taking Descartes' words and applying them in a new manner, her dictum might seem funny or sardonic to most viewers. Her gesture was based on a strong level of irony that could cause reflection on the artificial fabrication of individuality with clothes or bodily accessories and the ways in which purchased items contain the capacity to promote certain facets of an individual's personality.

However, in his review of Kate Linker's large-format book on Kruger published in 1991, John Loughery, questioned the deconstructionist stance of Kruger's artwork-cum-advertisements. He asks, "How radical a 'social commentator and political agitator' can anyone be who is represented by New York City's high-profile Mary Boone Gallery and whose billboard images are mounted in cities across the world?"[207] He commented that an installation of Kruger's photographs in a Soho gallery or in a "lavish coffee-table book," such as Linker's, deflated the critical impact of the work. Additionally, an image of Kruger's "I Shop Therefore I Am" was produced on tote bags by the Whitney Museum of Art in an act that collapsed the boundaries between art and commodity. Furthermore, Kruger's long-time background as a designer, art director and picture editor for Condé Nast Publications might be seen as affording a basis from which to question her work's adversarial stance toward the advertising industry.

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[207] John Loughery, Review of *Love for Sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger* by Kate Linker, *Women's Art Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1991): 56.

Nevertheless, in a press release for a 1981 exhibition at the Kitchen, called *Pictures and Promises: A Display of Advertisings, Slogans, and Interventions*, Kruger described the full spectrum of her work as follows: "magazine and newspaper advertisements, artists' works, television commercials, posters, 'commercial' photography, corporate insignia and public signage…" But she added, "The quotational qualities of these words and pictures [in her artwork] remove them and their 'originals' from their seemingly natural position within the flow of dominant social directives, into the realm of commentary."[208] Kruger admitted to her borrowing of the language of commodity capitalism, that is, and described her strategy as a complicit, yet critical commentary on these operatives. She reused the operations of capitalism to potentially afford the viewer with a critical awakening on the occasional subversive intentions of this economic system.

While Kruger and Prince mined commercial photography and advertising for their source imagery and visual techniques, Koons and Steinbach mined stores for commodities. These Neo-Geo artists explored the cultivation of consumer desire, the relationships individuals had with commodities, and the important role objects played in everyday life as well as in the development of personal or collective identities. Unlike Kruger's and Prince's photographs, Koons' and Steinbach's sculptures contained pointed art historical references to previous artists and works. The Neo-Geo sculpture functioned in part by hyperrealizing the work of previous, influential artists. In 1988, Koons commented on the differences between his sculpture and Prince's photographs, "Richard

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[208] Barbara Kruger, press release for *Pictures and Promises: A Display of Advertisings, Slogans, and Interventions*, exhibition at The Kitchen, New York, January 8-February 5, 1981; quoted in Kate Linker, *Love for Sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 17.

and I have been friends for many years. His work is more involved in the appropriation aspect--the aspect of theft--while my work comes from the history of the ready-made…"[209] Steinbach's sculptures updated the concept of the readymade to reflect contemporary society and the escalation of the commodity culture.

Steinbach's and Koons' sculpture incorporated new objects in ways that may remind viewers of their experience browsing through stores and purchasing items. Similarly to Kruger's process, they removed the objects from their habitual location, placing them into a new context and a new sign system. While artfully arranged in a manner comparable to some department store arrangements, Steinbach's and Koons' objects were not located on store shelves and they were not independently available for purchase. Just as Prince and Kruger differently reproduced the look and feel of commercial photography, Koons and Steinbach replicated aspects of the conditions of commodity fetishism and consumer desire. Pictures and Neo-Geo artists purposefully straddled the fine line between art and advertising or commodity capitalism. Instead of presenting a full endorsement of consumerism and commodity fetishism, this work might be seen as manipulating the customary relationships between commodity signs and their referents.

There were many connections among the work of the Pictures group, Appropriation artists and Neo-Geo artists during the late 1970's and early 1980's. Artists Koons and Prince met in New York in 1978.[210] They shared a fascination with material goods and the cult of the new in commodity culture. Many Neo-Geo artists learned about

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[209] Klaus Ottmann, "Jeff Koons," *Journal of Contemporary Art* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 18-23.
[210] Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 162.

French theory in part from the Pictures artists and also began reading structuralist and post-structuralist theory in the late 1970's. Levine began reading continental theory in 1977, after her involvement in Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition.[211] She cited Barthes' writings in artist's statements in the early 1980's and Levine's works can be closely examined in parallel to his writings. Her statements pointed to the deconstructive and intertextual aspects of her work as well as of Neo-Geo work in general. On her working method, Levine stated, "Obviously as an artist, I make pictures that I want to make and I look for theory that I think is going to help me in a different kind of language."[212] Levine's comments are indicative of the manner in which numerous artists of this period looked to theoretical sources for inspiration.

McCollum also cites structuralism as retaining a strong influence on his work from this period, including the *Surrogates* and *Perfect Vehicles* series. Recently, McCollum commented: "if I were to take an overview of my whole career, I would have to say that you are looking at it from a structuralist angle."[213] McCollum read the writings of structuralist anthropologists, such as Lévi-Strauss, and was influenced by structuralism's questioning of master narratives, or universal concepts. Halley cited the *Semiotext(e)* books published in the 1980's as an important source. "Whatever [Semiotext(e)] was publishing," Halley states, "I was reading."[214] In 1982 and 1983, Halley participated in a discussion group with young artists and critics.[215] In that context,

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[211] Singerman, "Sherrie Levine Talks to Howard Singerman," *Artforum* 41, no. 8 (April 2003): 191.
[212] Taylor, "Sherrie Levine Plays with Paul Taylor," 55.
[213] Alan McCollum, "A Conversation with Allan McCollum," (lecture, New York Public Library, Stephen A. Schwartzman Building, New York, Tuesday, October 6, 2009).
[214] Halley, interview.
[215] Ibid.

Halley discussed the writings of Barthes and the work of fellow artist Sherrie Levine. Art historian Jonathan Crary was also a personal mentor in the 1980's. In 1986, Crary was one of the founders (and continues to be a co-editor) of Zone Books, a press now internationally noted for its publications in intellectual history, art theory, politics, anthropology and philosophy, including texts by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Bataille, and many others. Crary's writings examined the links between art and post-structuralist theory. Halley remembered first learning about Baudrillard in 1983 from Kruger.[216]

French theory offered Pictures, Appropriation and Neo-Geo artists an unconventional way of looking at art and media. It provided new methods that enabled these artists to question authority and to emphasize the interplay of meanings. By analyzing the non-linear relationship between sign and signifier, structuralist and post-structuralist theory promoted multiple readings and relationships. Uncovering the contingency of meanings became an important means of undermining master narratives. By liberating the unilateral relationship between the author and text, Barthes' and Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, for example, relied on contingency, since the meaning produced by a text within a reader is contingent upon this individual's specific body of knowledge. Interpretations change from one reader to another based on each individual's personal knowledge base. The play between signs and their links to various referents was also at the root of Derrida's writings on deconstruction and Baudrillard's ideas on the precession of the simulacra. Influenced in part by Marshall McLuhan's writings on theories of communications, Baudrillard examined the mass media and

[216] Ibid.

looked at systems of representation from a semiological and structuralist point-of-view. In his view, the proliferation of signs in commodity culture caused a break-down between sign and referent, replacing an actual experience of reality with simulation. In 1986, Koons explained the importance of aesthetic contingency within his own work:

> I would like to offer up a term that had vital currency in the process of my own thinking: contingency. I think that through this procession of contingencies, discourses are being pulled together into the object itself, promoting an awareness of the fact that all meanings are contingent upon some other meaning, where meanings are appropriated for their relationship to external forces, the larger social schema in which they're involved.[217]

Talking amidst other Neo-Geo artists in the 1986 *Flash Art* panel, Koons described how Neo-Geo artists' knowledge of Continental theory and discourse seeped into their individual working processes and, in turn, affected their artists' perception of how their artwork is received and relates to the external world. Neo-Geo artists strategically used the notion of contingency as a way to create works that functioned simultaneously as art and as signs of art. Contingency also allowed Neo-Geo work to carry multiple references and to produce multiple readings. Similar to deconstruction's attack on a "politico-institutional problematic," Koons advanced a commentary on the value and placement of art within the art market of the 1980's. Koons' work relied on the concept of contingency due to its manipulation of the meanings already assigned to ordinary objects and their position inside as well as outside the realm of art.

Halley now considers his work and that of his Neo-Geo contemporaries during this period to be the "Pictures generation two."[218] But, despite their shared theoretical underpinnings and attentiveness to contemporary culture, Neo-Geo artists distinguished

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[217] Nagy, "*Flash Art* Panel," 48.
[218] Halley, interview.

themselves from the Pictures group by their continued interest in the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. Eklund's characterization of the Pictures generation as "the first born into the swarm of images spawned by the rapidly expanding postwar consumer culture" also applied to the Neo-Geo artists, many of whom were of similar ages.[219] However, many of the Neo-Geo artists specifically reacted to the photo-based work of the Appropriation artists and the Pictures group. They intended to create works in other mediums that functioned on a theoretical and general level to address art historical and contemporary concerns. Referring to the Pictures group, Taaffe states, "I think that a lot of people felt that some of the photo-based, appropriative work was a little dry, and that mine was concerning itself with the romance of painting, the facture of painting and craft. I think it was intriguing to people that someone could have a strong conceptual bias and yet make something that held up as a crafted painting."[220] The "conceptual bias" behind Taaffe's work and Neo-Geo work in general stemmed from these artists' familiarity with French theory. Taaffe's comment on the "romance of painting" alluded to the strong aesthetic qualities of certain Neo-Geo works and its use of materials in innovative ways. Taaffe's works evinced a strong formal presence in their combination of several different graphic and painterly techniques. Halley's work also innovatively combined Day-Glo paint and Roll-a-Tex in an interesting visual manner; and the latter became a signature textural surface covering the certain forms in his paintings.

In the 1986 *Flash Art*-sponsored panel at Pat Hearn Gallery, Steinbach commented:

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[219] Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 16.
[220] Bob Nickas, "Philip Taaffe Talks to Bob Nickas," *Artforum* 41, no. 8 (April 2003): 181.

> I feel the Pictures group was after a particular deconstruction or breakdown of the process of the corruption of truth, whereas at this point I feel we are utilizing that process of corruption as a poetic form, a platform or launching pad for poetic discourse itself…the Pictures group was essentially deconstructive and task-oriented in its spectacular didacticism. It was a cool approach to hot culture, whereas this new work of which we speak has more to do with information in general, specifically the schism that exists between information and assumed meanings, particularly how formal elaborations of information necessarily effects its possible meanings… we are now able to step back and merge, in fact, to *implode* a variety of different strategies and epistemologies into the total art object that is capable of speaking of its own predicament as well as in general.[221]

In other words, although the Neo-Geo artists came to New York through diverse routes and at different points in the late 1970's and early 1980's, they shared a reaction to the photo-based techniques of the Appropriation artists and a desire to forge ahead in new artistic ways. Steinbach's comment illustrated Neo-Geo's desire to create work that specifically commented on the state of society and culture in the 1980's. Neo-Geo painting and sculpture used hyperbole, irony, and critical theory in a diverse set of strategies to unpack societal constructs and the assumed meanings placed on the art object in contemporary society. In Steinbach's words, Neo-Geo painting and sculpture functioned as a "platform or launching pad" for the theoretical and contemporary discourse of the period.

Neo-Geo and Pictures artists addressed the wealth of imagery produced by the burgeoning commercial advertising industries. In contrast to photography, painting and sculpture have always been comfortably situated within the realm of fine arts and aesthetics. By the early 1980's, however, some artists were developing targeted reactions to photography and video work. Furthermore, after the recession hit in 1982, the Soho-based Metro Pictures Gallery, once a strong supporter of Pictures and Appropriation

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[221] Nagy, "*Flash Art* Panel," 46.

artists, began showing some Neo-Expressionist painting.[222] Many Pictures and Appropriation artists such as Levine, McCollum, and Prince, moved into the East Village scene. But the work of the Pictures and Appropriation artists was shown alongside Neo-Geo work in some exhibitions at this time. For example, the *Science Fiction* exhibition at the Soho-based John Weber Gallery in 1984 featured the work of Prince, Halley, Koons, Judd, Smithson, R.M. Fischer, Taro Suzuki, Jim Biederman and David Deutsch. International with Monument gallery showed the work of Halley, Sarah Charlesworth, Koons, Peter Nagy and Laurie Simmons in 1986. Similarly, the exhibition entitled *Spiritual America* curated by Trisha Collins and Richard Milazzo at the CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, New York, in 1986 included the work of Gretchen Bender, Charlesworth, Nancy Dwyer, McCollum, Halley, and Koons, among others. Neo-Geo artists were either directly involved with appropriation art in the late 1970's, in the case of Levine and McCollum, or they were directly taught by the Appropriation artists, such as Bickerton. Bickerton studied with conceptual artist Baldessari at CalArts, along with Pictures artists Goldstein, Salle, Mullican and others. When he arrived in New York, Bickerton worked for Goldstein as a studio assistant and he has cited Sherrie Levine's *Untitled* (President) series from 1979 as a major influence[223] (Fig. 23).

Despite these proximities, many Neo-Geo artists felt the photo-based techniques of the Appropriation and Pictures artists did not address current issues in contemporary

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[222] Metro Pictures featured a solo exhibition of German painter Rene Daniels from March 31 to April 21, 1984, and a group exhibition with works by Werner Büttner, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Markus Oehlen from October 20 to November 17, 1984.

[223] Bickerton, unpublished personal notes. For a discussion of John Baldessari's teaching at CalArts and influence on the Pictures artists see Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 22-118.

culture in an appropriate or accurate manner. These groups were united in their use of irony and contingency to examine assumed meanings concerning the role of art. But Steinbach expressed the desire to "return" to painting and sculpture and to use these mediums in a critical manner. The "process of corruption" mentioned by Steinbach relates to structuralism's internal critique of larger institutional structures. While the Pictures and Appropriation artists used photography to target the corporate media and advertising industries, Neo-Geo used painting and sculpture to perform a related, but somewhat broader commentary on art, the history of art, aesthetics, social structures and commodity culture.

For example, the medium, colors and forms in Halley's Day-Glo conduit paintings comment on the digital culture of the 1980's. Neo-Geo artists came of age during the Microelectronics Revolution, when silicon chips replaced the millions of interconnected transistors previously needed for computer mainframes in a mass-produced process.[224] Following in the footsteps of Levine's *After* photographs, the colors, lines, and forms of Halley's paintings functioned as a playful homage to Halley's artistic predecessors, that is to canonical artists such as Albers, Newman, and Mondrian. Beginning in 1979, Levine re-photographed the work of canonical male photographers such as Edward Weston in a straightforward mode of appropriation. Levine's version of Evans' Farm Security Administration photography of the 1930's in *Untitled* (After Edward Weston), 1981, becomes a more nuanced critical unraveling in Halley's *Two Cells with Circulating Conduit*, 1986 (Figs. 2, 11). Halley's work deconstructed art history at the same time as it commented on the effects of the digital age. Halley

[224] See Tom Forester, *The Microelectronics Revolution: The Complete Guide to the New Technology and Its Impact on Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).

comments: "At the beginning of the digital age, we were the first group to deal with French theory, which has now been completely assimilated by later generations of artists and academics, who are so well-versed in it."[225] At the *Flash Art* panel in 1986, Halley explained the deconstructive underpinnings of his work as follows:

> My relationship to previous geometric art has both an analytical and a synthetic aspect. It's analytic, because I think of my work as being a deconstruction of themes of Mondrian or Donald Judd…It's synthetic because I'm not so much appropriating motifs from such art as hyperrealizing them—in other words, taking themes that have a certain reality in one social setting and sort of boosting them up into another reality.[226]

For the Neo-Geo artists, hyperrealization served as a strategy that consisted of aggrandizing or hyperbolizing certain themes, styles, formal or social modes. For Halley, the process of hyperrealizing the forms and styles of previous canonical artists was most suited to painting, which allows for an expressive manipulation of creative influences. The mediums of painting and sculpture allowed Halley and other Neo-Geo artists to perform a more in-depth critique of aesthetics and of the development of fine art in the twentieth century.

By 1986, Neo-Geo work was selling well in New York's burgeoning gallery world and many Neo-Geo artists had left the East Village and were showing at the same galleries as the Neo-Expressionist painters (i.e. Sonnabend and Mary Boone Gallery).[227] Neo-Geo painters Taaffe, Halley, Levine, and Bickerton worked within the time-honored

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[225] Halley, interview.
[226] Nagy, "*Flash Art* Panel," 49.
[227] Neo-Expressionism met with a strong critical backlash from those who viewed this work as reflecting the conservativism of the Reagan era. See Crimp, "The End of Painting," 74-75; Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression"; and Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (January 1983): 80-83, 137.

medium of painting and continued to draw inspiration from the elements of style and facture of previous well-known abstract painters.

In the introduction to the 1988 exhibition, *Art at the End of the Social*, which involved Neo-Geo as well as Pictures and Appropriation artists, including Prince, Bender, Charlesworth, Bleckner, Steinbach, Taaffe, Koons and Halley, among others, Collins and Milazzo continued to promote a type of subversive complicity as a key strategy for this new generation of artists. The curators advocated a new relationship between the work of art and society, suggesting that distance from the structures of commodity capitalism was no longer needed in order to formulate a critical dialogue.[228] They argued that the structure of society in the 1980's no longer permitted autonomous forms of art. In their view, art was embedded within and reacted to the systems that surrounded it. Although the East Village scene had slowed down by then due to the economic recession, just two years earlier, the gallery scene was showing no sign of decelerating. From 1980 to 1986, the number of East Village galleries grew from zero to one hundred.[229] In 1976, there were two-hundred galleries in the New York metropolitan area, mostly located in midtown near 57th street and in Soho, but by 1986, there were over five-hundred. New York's contemporary art scene was transformed in a few short years into the beginnings of the large, thriving industry that is familiar today. Collins and Milazzo suggested that the work of the artists whom they showcased evoked a specifically postmodern, post-conceptualist form of irony that reacted to this environment of excess in the 1980's. In their lengthy, but somewhat vague catalogue essay, Collins and Milazzo described the

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[228] Trisha Collins and Richard Milazzo, *Art at the End of the Social* (Mälmo, Sweden: Rooseum, 1988), 33.
[229] Douglas McGill, "The Lower East Side's New Artists," *The New York Times*, June 3, 1986, 13.

techniques of these artists as critical tools, which are used to break down universals and, to use Guy Debord's term, our society of the spectacle. The curators stated:

> In a sense, the new work may be perceived as the delinquent child of Pop Art--not because it is willing to contradict Universals but because it aggressively seeks out contradictions in the Social…this tactic must be credited with the adulterations of all the 'canons' of art that have obtained to date--the canons of quantity (Minimalism, Conceptual and Pop Art) as well as quality (Abstract Expressionism), the canon of appropriation (picture theory and critical photography), the canon of abstraction (critical abstraction), the canon of simulation as well as of originality. Because it is inevitably compromised by this tactic, the new work is necessarily hybridized by the negations it effects.[230]

The ambiguity and contradiction that were inherent to Neo-Geo art of the 1980's initiated criticism and dialogue, just as the Pop and Minimalist movements did before it. In Collins and Milazzo's view, the conceptual, hybrid art forms of the 1980's merged abstraction and figuration in ways that engendered commentary on aspects of late capitalism, such as commodity fetishism and the media-saturated environment. The curators commented:

> Unlike any art before it, this new work is profoundly steeped in these negations, in these working contradictions, in the dynamics of culture and mass consumption, in advertising imagery and mass media, in technology's usurpation of History, and, ultimately, it is steeped implacably in the Post-modern dynamics of the Spectacle.[231]

Collins and Milazzo's view was predicated on the writings of American theorist Fredric Jameson and French theorists Baudrillard and Guy Debord, all of whom wrote on the pervasive characteristics of late capitalism. Jameson's, Baudrillard's and Debord's writings were, for the most part, characterized by an all-encompassing view of capitalism, which, in their view, largely controlled the political, cultural and social realms. From this point of view, a critique of the structures of capitalism was only

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[230] Collins and Milazzo, *Art at the End of the Social*, 23.

possible from within these very boundaries.

Debord's 1967 book, *La société du spectacle*, for example, discussed and expanded Karl Marx's concepts of commodity fetishism, its effects on society, and the alienation of the labor class from the goods they produce. Debord's ideas can be correlated with the later writings of Baudrillard, especially his comments concerning the degradation of life into a mere representation of reality. To both authors, late capitalism and the proliferation of the mass media caused a society of the spectacle, whereby social relations were mediated by images, rather than interactions among individuals. Debord's text was translated into English in 1977, around the same time as many important writings by Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and others.[232] Debord was a key member of the Situationist Internationale [SI] a Marxist, revolutionary group of artists and writers, including Scandinavian painter Asger Jorn, Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys, and English artist Ralph Rumney, among others. The SI group worked within the boundaries of capitalism to disturb its complacency, performing what they called *détournement*, or a variation on a previous or existing work or situation that opposes the existing order.

The term "postmodernism" was concretized by French post-structuralist Jean-François Lyotard as well as American theorist Fredric Jameson. Lyotard's book, *The Postmodern Condition*, 1979, and Jameson's 1991 book *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, describe the economic, social, and cultural conditions arising within a postmodern age. In his essay, Jameson continued to elaborate on the economic and cultural terms of postmodernity. Characterized by a seamless flow of capital among multi-national corporations such as IBM or Coca-Cola, postmodernism signaled for

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[231] Ibid.
[232] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977).

Jameson and Lyotard shifts in technology, cybernetics and the control of knowledge. Lyotard argued that the overarching meta-narratives, such as "history" and "progress" that have constituted a Western view of society since the Enlightenment were no longer applicable. In the postmodern era, these all-encompassing concepts were replaced by a multiplicity of micro-narratives.

Jameson shared Lyotard's deep suspicion of meta-narratives and, in his view, postmodernism was characterized by an omnipresent form of global capitalism. Jameson's discussion of architecture and the visual arts stems from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's 1944 book, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. Jameson's arguments were predicated on Adorno and Horkheimer's belief that corporate and multi-national capitalism has overrun the culture industry.[233] The older forms of industrial and monopoly capitalism slowly mutated into a new form ruled by speculative finance. The new, insidious form of global capitalism resulted in the complete commodification of western society. Pervading all aspects of daily life, global capitalism engendered a "de-differentiation" among the cultural, economic and political aspects of society. For Jameson, postmodernity is characterized by the disappearance of the individual subject; a so-called schizophrenic, postmodern consciousness; a crisis in historicity and the ascendancy of pastiche.

Many of the characteristics and ideas prevalent to postmodernism were rooted in structuralist and post-structuralist theory. For example, Jameson's concept of pastiche stemmed from Barthes' notion of the death of the author. In Barthes view, the loss of a

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[233] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1992), 94-137.

single, unitary notion of the author allowed writers and artists to appropriate from and manipulate past styles at will. Jameson called this act of appropriation and manipulation of previous cultural materials "pastiche." Pastiche, or "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" was a type of cultural appropriation, which, for Jameson, results in the loss of all historical grounding or perspective.[234] Pastiche was one of several signs of a crisis in historicity, or the loss of an historical present, caused by capitalism's manipulation of imagery.

Relying on Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of art in Berlin in 1928, Danto described a type of crisis of historicity or a post-historical period of art that differs from Jameson's and Foster's somewhat inimical consideration of this topic. For Danto, Warhol's *Brillo Box*, with its commentary on the definition of the work of art, also signaled the point at which art has become philosophy. Danto commented: "In brief, art gives rise to the question of its true identity, and when that happens, it has become the occasion of philosophy."[235] According to Danto, art has reached the end of its art historical narrative and had finished defining all of its foremost formal issues. Beginning in the 1960's, art had entered a period of self-consideration as to its very nature that only the field of philosophy could settle. But this so-called end of art engendered new beginnings. Danto states:

> The narrative has come to an end. But this in fact was a liberating idea, or I thought it could be. It liberated artists from the task of making more history. It liberated artists from having to follow the 'correct historical line.' It really did mean that anything could be art, in the sense that nothing could any longer be excluded. I would say it was the moment—when perfect artistic freedom had become real. Dada had believed itself a

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[234] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.
[235] Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 8-9.

> form of artistic freedom, but was in fact a style. But once art had ended, you could be an abstractionist, a realist, an allegorist, a metaphysical painter, a surrealist.[236]

Neo-Geo artists signaled this type of postmodern, post-historical form of artistic creation with their diverse range of techniques and their tendency toward self-examination.

[236] Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

NEO-GEO'S RELATION TO POP ART

Deconstructing Neo-Geo's Art Historical Influences: Pop

This chapter builds upon the arguments of chapter one in order to explore the relationship between Neo-Geo and its art historical past. In chapter one, I elaborated on the structural and post-structural tendencies in Neo-Geo work that have allowed it to function on two levels; as works of art and as a theoretical model, whether of art history, or of the art market and/or of commodity capitalism. Neo-Geo artists manipulated and reused art historical and socio-cultural references in ironic and deconstructive ways that allowed for a new outlook on art history. The specific art historical and socio-cultural references in Neo-Geo work as well as these artists' complicit relationship with commodity culture can be traced back to the Dada, Neo-Dada, and Pop movements.

The work of art's insidious relationship with commodity culture might be said to have begun with Marcel Duchamp's invention of the readymade in his 1913 work *Bicycle Wheel*. By simply placing a bicycle wheel on top of an ordinary kitchen stool, Duchamp conceptually reduced the work of art to any manufactured object selected by the artist. The word "readymade" was first used in 1915 to describe Duchamp's, *Bottle Rack* and *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, 1915, sculptures, which consisted of a rack used to dry bottles and a snow shovel. These were inscribed with their respective titles and proclaimed as art. André Breton described the readymade as any manufactured object promoted to the

dignity of art through the choice of the artist.[237] In the 1917 Society for Independent Artists exhibition in New York, Duchamp submitted his notorious sculpture, *Fountain*, 1917, which consisted of a urinal rotated ninety degrees and signed by the artist with the pseudonym R.Mutt. In *Fountain*, Duchamp intended to call into question the status and originality attaching to a work of art by generally insinuating a piece of ordinary plumbing into a high art context.

Four decades later, Neo-Dada and Pop artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Tom Wesselmann, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Marisol and Rosalyn Drexler built upon Duchamp's gesture and continued to cultivate new relationships between high and low. In the 1950's and 60's, the work of these artists eroded the boundaries between art and the commodity in ways that distinctively separated their practices from Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. Rauschenberg's *Bed*, 1955, for example, was composed of a pillow and a quilt (formerly belonging to artist Dorothea Rockburne) that were hung on the wall in a similar manner to a painting and splattered with paint in a gestural manner loosely reminiscent of the work of Jackson Pollock. Jasper Johns' *Flag*, 1954-55, used the iconic symbol of the American flag as a readymade image that ironically questioned notions of artistic creativity. These pre-determined forms and found-objects presented a challenge to the conventions of paintings and sculpture. The thick, encaustic surface of Johns' *Flag* and the paint drips in Rauschenberg's *Bed* tacitly poked fun at the gestural painting of the recent Abstract Expressionist movement.

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[237] André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 2: 837.

Pop artists, in particular, engaged with commodity culture and consumerism by integrating consumer products and labels, advertising techniques and commercial or so-called popular culture in their work. Pop art built upon the example of the readymade by sampling objects and images from popular culture. In works such as *Floor Cake* (Giant Piece of Cake), 1962, Claes Oldenburg, with his then-wife Patty Mucha, created a large-scale, sewn replica of a piece of cake from canvas, paint and latex. Richard Artschwager's *Chair*, 1966, is fabricated with Formica, a plastic laminate material created in 1912 that became popular during World War II and was used in the creation of airplane propellers. As did Duchamp's readymades, Artschwager's sculpture challenged the boundaries between art and non-art. *Chair*, however, relied on Artschwager's experience as a furniture designer in the 1950's to create a work of art that incorporated many of the characteristics of this everyday object. Unlike Duchamp's readymades, Artschwager's work was designed and fabricated according to the artist's specifications. Pop commented on the socio-political and cultural environment of the post-war era, during a period of economic boom.

In many ways, Neo-Geo work was a conglomeration of elements stemming from Pop, Minimalist and Conceptualist work. In this chapter and the next, I will explore Neo-Geo's relationships with the prior movements of Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism. The present chapter traces the roots of complicity and the strategy of complicit defiance in the Pop art movement and in Neo-Geo work. Beginning in the post-World War II era, art and society intermingled in new and interesting ways that arguably still continue today. The notion of art's complicity with commodity culture became an important factor distinguishing Pop art from the earlier Abstract Expressionist

or Color Field movements and later, Neo-Geo from Neo-Expressionism and Graffiti art in the 1980's. I examine these movements from a socio-cultural perspective to trace how artists from these eras were affected by their changing economic environments.

Neo-Geo is indebted to Neo-Dada, Pop and Minimalism for its aesthetic vocabulary and for its delineation of an ambiguous relationship between fine art and the commodity. Neo-Geo built upon these previous artistic vocabularies within the time-honored mediums of painting and sculpture in ways that allowed for an at once formal, art historical and socio-political critique of their current situation. The later generation of artists continued to be affected by new techniques of advertising and the commercialism of their age. While Pop addressed the surge of post-war consumerism, the Pictures and Neo-Geo artists pointed to the pervasive structures of commodity capitalism during the late-industrial period. Consumption in the 1950's and 60's was promoted as a positive reaction to the economic depression of the 1930's and the totalitarian forces that were put to rest during Word War II. The 1980's were characterized by the conspicuous consumption, greed and decadence of the Reagan era. By reevaluating Neo-Geo work alongside its art historical counterparts, I will argue that in its apparent facetiousness, there is more than meets the eye.

While Minimalism played a large role in the Neo-Geo artists' creation of an artistic or working formal vocabulary (as I will show in the chapter to follow), Pop art contributed to Neo-Geo's cool edge and complicit attitude toward commodity culture. In her 1966 book *Pop Art*, Lucy Lippard observed that Pop art's most important contribution was the use of advertising, illustration and commercial art conventions in the

context of high art.[238] Lichtenstein replicated the look and feel of comic book imagery on large-scale canvases using sharp lines and simulated Ben-Day dots. Focusing on the dramatic heartbreak of a capsized girl, the imagery in Lichtenstein's painting *Drowning Girl*, 1963, stems from a 1962 issue of DC Comics entitled, *Run for Love!*[239] (Fig. 76). James Rosenquist capitalized on his experience as a billboard painter in his large-scale paintings that assimilated fragments of advertisement imagery. Rosenquist's *Nomad*, 1963, for example, combined real objects with advertising imagery in a fragmented, confused manner (Fig. 77). Images of bright red spaghetti, a picnic table, a light bulb, a microphone and a patch of green grass float randomly across the canvas. A painted plastic bag hangs from two wooden attachments in the upper right corner of the painting and pile of wood lies on the floor underneath. The word NEW appears to the left side in large, block letters in front of a label for Oxydol cleaner. As Michael Lobel argues, Rosenquist's paintings acknowledged the predominance of the cult of the new in the commodity culture of the 1960's, when viewers were bombarded with media imagery and planned obsolescence.[240] Wesselmann's *Still Life Number 30*, 1963, provides the viewer with a glimpse into a simulated kitchen, complete with real and painted objects (Fig. 78). The relief-style painting depicts a pink refrigerator, stove, countertop and table displaying an array of food items. On the window sill above the sink are two painted oranges and a pot of plastic flowers. The collage painting included labels from some of

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[238] Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1966), 148.
[239] Recent studies on Lichtenstein include Graham Bader, *Hall of Mirrors: Roy Lichtenstein and the Face of Painting in the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010); and Michael Lobel, *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2002).
[240] Lobel, *James Rosenquist: Pop Art, Politics and History in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

the most popular brand names of the time, including Kellogg's Rice Krispies, Dole Pineapple, and Breakstone's yogurt.

The decades after the post-war era were marked by a rise in consumerism that took on an increasingly strong role in life in the United States. Consumerism is defined as the social and economic value and impact of goods, which provide meaning to individuals and their role within society.[241] It was brought about by the shifts in technology and mass production during the rise of industrialism at the beginning of the twentieth century. The invention of the assembly line by Henry Ford in 1913 suggested that the production of goods could outweigh their demand. In order to increase demand, businesses and advertisers employed increasingly aggressive strategies to raise consumer desire. Efforts to ascertain market research were introduced in the early 1900's and George W. Gallup developed the Gallup opinion poll in 1932.[242] In the 1950's and 60's, simple, direct statements in ads were replaced with sub-texts, or subliminal messages based on psychological analysis. The use-value of a product became separated from its exchange-value and necessity was no longer an important selling point. The creation of superfluous needs kept the demand and, so, too, industrial production levels high. Historian Gary Cross described this process as follows:

> Consumerism succeeded where other ideologies failed because it concretely expressed the cardinal political ideals of the century—liberty and democracy—and with relatively little self-destructive behavior or personal humiliation. Consumer goods allowed Americans to free themselves from their old, relatively secure, but closed communities and enter the expressive individualism of a dynamic 'mass' society.[243]

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[241] Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 1.
[242] Dave Saunders, *Twentieth Century Advertising* (London: Carlton, 1999), 9.
[243] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*, 2.

In 1946, personal consumption was twenty percent higher than in 1945 and seventy percent higher than in 1941.[244] The baby boomer generation was the largest in American history. In 1954, eighty percent of households had a telephone, compared to thirty-six percent in 1940 and ninety-one percent had a refrigerator.[245] Average incomes, houses and families were getting larger during this period. Productivity rose at a rate of more than two percent a year in the decade after World War II, as the nation's manufacturing base shifted from the production of materials for war to materials for everyday life.[246] Cross observed: "Commodities gave people a sense of freedom, sometimes serving as a substitute for the independence of the shop, craft, or farm that was disappearing as Americans joined the work world.[247] His commentary described some of the reasons that inanimate objects may become imbued with a social and moral value.

Historian Thomas Hine uses the term "populuxe" to describe the rise in popular luxuries of the 1950's and 60's within middle and upper class households.[248] Populuxe referred to the celebration of consumerism and material wealth that characterized the period from 1954 to 1964. During this decade, the fear of McCarthyism and the Korean War subsided and the Vietnam War remained largely unnoticed until large amounts of troops were deployed beginning in 1965. It was a period of relative stability for white, middle-class households. Hine comments:

> The essence of Populuxe is not merely having things. It is having things in a way that they had never been had before, and it is an expression of outright, thoroughly vulgar joy in being able to live so well. 'You will have a greater chance to be yourself than any people in the history of

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[244] Ibid., 88.
[245] Ibid., 89.
[246] Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 15.
[247] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*, 2.
[248] Ibid., 4.

> civilization,' *House Beautiful* told its readers in 1953. The greatness of America would be expressed by enrichment of the environment, by the addition of new equipment to the household and by giving up European models and, instead, finding inspiration in the American past and, most of all, in its promising future.[249]

In the 1950's, hard work was promoted as an ideal and as a means of achieving economic and political freedom. Individuals worked hard in order to provide their families with a wealth of material items: a house, a car, new kitchen appliances and furnishings. These consumer goods signaled a sense of achievement and class status. During the era of McCarthyism, consumerism, as one aspect of liberal capitalism, was distinguished from Communist societies, where individuals did not have such motivating factors. In the years after World War II, rising consumption patterns became a key component of American economic success. Without the extensive buying and spending, the economy would have dwindled.

Hine's notion of populuxe admittedly described a trend found mostly among white, middle-class Americans. African-Americans and other minorities still suffered from racial discrimination, poverty, lack of affordable housing and police abuse. The Supreme Court's 1954 decision to desegregate public schools in Brown vs. The Board of Education marked one momentous win for African-Americans in a long struggle toward equality during the 1950's and 60's. Events such as the Detroit race riots of 1967 and Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 represented the culmination of racial tensions during this period.

The economic and socio-cultural environment of the 1950's and 60's generated

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[249] Ibid., 4.

new attitudes toward kitsch and commodity culture that hitherto had not been possible.[250] Economic expansion coupled with the growth of the mass media allowed greater amounts of goods to become known and available to a wider base of consumers. New forms of advertising and new critical attitudes toward the mass media incited the rise of communication and information studies departments at universities across the country. The simple jingles in advertisements of the 1950's were perfected and streamlined during the 1970's and aided by technological improvements within the television and print industries.[251] Advancements to the advertising and culture industries from the 1950's to the 1980's increased the frequency and prevalence of commodity signs. Marshall McLuhan's 1951 book, *The Mechanical Bride*, for example, examined the persuasive strategies of popular culture. His 1967 book, *The Medium is the Massage*, became a cult classic. Unlike many of his colleagues, McLuhan sought to make communications theory comprehensible to a wide public. Produced with the assistance of graphic designer Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* contained experimental visual elements, including collages and photographs designed to illustrate McLuhan's larger point about the media's pervasive presence and its negative social consequences. McLuhan's investigation of the effects of new technologies on humankind carries a resounding effect even today. McLuhan's ideas on the media and its effect on society foreshadowed some of the ideas couched in the postmodern and post-structuralist writings of Jameson, Deleuze and Baudillard.

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[250] See Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

[251] See Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, "Advertising in the Age of Hypersignification," *Theory, Culture and Society* 11, no. 3 (August 1994): 23-53; and Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising* (New York: Guildford Press, 1996).

In the decade after 1947, the number of television sets found in U.S. households increased from ten thousand to forty million.[252] T.V. effectively changed the way individuals lived their lives. It also helped to shape the way in which Americans related to each other, through a shared culture of advertisements, programs, and images of an increasing number of goods that were sold in stores.[253] Television impacted many aspects of daily life for the average, middle-class American. Living room furniture was rearranged in order to accommodate a T.V. T.V. dinners were introduced as more families ate in front of their set instead of at the dining room table. As more middle-class families moved from the city to suburban areas into housing developments, television became their lifeline to the new age of American consumption. Society as well as the visual arts was impacted by these fluctuations.

American Sign Painters

The New Realists show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in the fall of 1962 officially launched the Pop art movement within this environment of burgeoning consumerism. The exhibition featured the work of Wesselmann, Oldenburg, George Segal, Warhol, Robert Indiana, Mimo Rotella and Peter Agostini. Much of the imagery of Pop art stemmed from everyday life and, as Robert Rosenblum observed, Pop entailed an authentic, visual vocabulary that was based on mass production.[254] In 1966, Warhol famously stated, "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol…just look at the surface of

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[252] Ibid., 81.
[253] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*, 109. Cross also includes a note on consumerism as a class-based phenomenon that affected the lower and working classes less than the middle and upper classes.
[254] Robert Rosenblum, "Pop Art and Non Pop Art," *Art and Literature* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1964): 89.

my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."[255] Warhol's comment, coupled with his work, spoke to a shift in contemporary art paradigms from a type of metaphysical symbolism or expression of an internal form of angst to an everyday vernacular. It also suggested that the artist is a product of the times. The images represented in Warhol's photo-based, silk-screened works of famous celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe or Liz Taylor, for example, were taken directly from tabloid magazines.[256] Lichtenstein's imagery stemmed directly from comic books and other sources of popular culture. In 1961, Oldenburg opened an environment he called *The Store* on East 2nd Street, where he fabricated painted plaster replicas of some of the cheap commodities sold in shops around New York's Lower East Side.

In 1962, critic G.R. Swenson called the Pop artists the "New American Sign Painters," stating:

> Words, trade marks, commercial symbols and fragments of billboards are molded and fused into visual statements organized by the personality of the artist; they cannot be understood through formulas or some conventional pattern of visual grammar one or more remove from experience…these painters force a re-examination of the nature of painting and its changing reputation to the world.[257]

Swenson's comment described the colloquial characteristic of Pop or its focus on an everyday vernacular. Rosenquist's *Nomad,* 1963, presented brand names and labels in a fragmented, indirect manner. The artist leaves the viewer to fill-in the remaining letters of Oxydol, displaying only the Oxy. Other objects are similarly blocked from full view,

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[255] Robert Hughes, "The Rise of Andy Warhol," *New York Review of Books*, February 18, 1982, 7. The quote is taken from Gretchen Berg, "Andy Warhol: My True Story," *East Village Other* (November 1, 1966).

[256] See Thomas Crow's problematizing of Warhol's early work in Crow, "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, 49-69.

[257] G. R. Swenson, "The New American Sign Painters" (1962), in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 34-39.

such as the plate of spaghetti and the light bulb. Rosenquist playfully taunts the viewer with these brief portions and segments. His paintings conjured thoughts about the unabbreviated versions of these items, as they are typically viewed in the grocery store, in restaurants or at home. The illegibility of the canvas, with its lack of focus and direction, can be viewed as a critique of commercialism, since print, television and street advertisements normally presented a clear product image and were meant to be read quickly by passers-by. At the same time, the images still retain their illustrative quality and largely appear as painted forms on a canvas. Rosenquist, who had worked as a billboard painter, uses the language of commercial advertising to formulate a new perspective toward commodity capitalism.

The critical potential of Rosenquist's work is perhaps more evident in the titles of his works such as *I Love You With My Ford*, 1961, in which suggests that emotions can be derived directly from commodities. Lobel argues that the fragmented nature of Rosenquist's signs and images reflected the disjointed visual character of television, which, at the time, was considered to be showcasing new and exciting means of advertising.[258] While Rosenquist's paintings highlight the large-scale format of billboards and the fragmented visual experience of passing them on the highway, they also call attention to the techniques behind the fabrication of these advertisements. Lobel comments:

> By displaying billboard techniques in a fine art context, Rosenquist exposed them to a much different set of viewing conditions…his images could be examined close up and with the extended contemplation afforded to works of art…That commercial paint handling underscores the

[258] Lobel, *James Rosenquist*, 48.

> artificiality and vapidness of the depicted emotional state: advertising's smile of pleasure is here transformed into a hollow rictus.[259]

By reproducing the techniques of advertising within the context of fine art, Rosenquist created a critical space of discernment for the viewing public, who were potentially made aware of the commercial techniques of persuasion. Lobel suggests that the large-scale size and disjunctive visual character of Rosenquist's paintings illustrated the artist's desire to merge the old and the new. Rosenquist's affinity for the painted billboard format at this critical juncture might also have shown the artist's concerns about the role of painting in the face of new technologies, such as television, and in view of rapid cultural change more generally. Rosenquist's work sheds light on the ways artists manage to engage with aspects of society within the context of fine art. Twenty years later, Neo-Geo artists , such as Bickerton, Koons, Steinbach and Halley, reacted to the increasing commodification of society in the 1980's and the transition from an analog to a digital age.

Swenson's remarks on painters Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Oldenburg and Rosenquist seem remarkably applicable to Neo-Geo artists Bickerton, Koons and Steinbach. Similar to Rosenquist's *Nomad* or Warhol's *Campbell Soup Cans*, 1964, Bickerton's Susie boxes recontextualized major brands and labels of the 1980's. Bickerton's *Tormented Self-Portrait*, 1988, and *Le Art*, 1987, are to reiterate, covered with logos of well-known companies such as Samsung, Tylenol, and Nike (Figs. 31, 79). *Tormented Self-Portrait* built on the notion of the artist as a product of the times by suggesting that Bickerton's identity stemmed primarily from the brand names and material goods of commodity culture. The artist's likeness has been replaced with the

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[259] Ibid., 15.

signs of commercialism in the form of company and product logos. The title, *Tormented Self-Portrait,* pointed to a conflicting sense of self within this bewildering atmosphere of competing brand names and products. Over the course of the 1970's and 80's, companies increased strategies for building their brand names and recognition value. Brands and advertisements, which were originally created to sell products, slowly shifted to selling a particular type of lifestyle.[260] The Marlboro brand and advertisements in the 1970's and 80's, for example, featured depictions of a lone cowboy in the American wilderness in an effort to associate the product with the ideas of self-reliance, adventure and rugged masculinity. Prince arguably called attention to the manipulative techniques of the advertising industry in his own appropriations of the Marlboro ad campaign.

Bickerton's *Le Art* presented a more direct commentary on brands related to the fabrication of works of art. Similar to Bickerton's other Susie boxes, the work was constructed using acrylic, plywood, chrome-plated brass, and anodized aluminum. The horizontal painting is attached to the wall with over-sized brackets. The silk-screened labels that composed the surface of *Le Art* represented the materials used to fabricate the work, such as Formica, X-Acto, Liquitex, and Pearl. The brand names and labels underscored the techniques and methods necessary to construct the work and the artist's skills in transforming these materials into an aesthetic object. Centuries ago, a list of artist's materials might have simply consisted of canvas, different paint binders and pigments. Bickerton's list contained many materials that were developed and improved over the course of the twentieth century. These products also contain specific references to artistic production within the post-war era. Liquitex, for example, is a brand of acrylic

[260] See, for example, Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim At The Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 2000).

house paint developed in the 1950's, which was known for its rapid drying time. Liquitex launched the first water-soluble acrylic paint in 1955 that was used by a number of artists, including Frankenthaler and Warhol. Alcoa referenced the manufacturers of aluminum, a product that was more frequently used in public art of the post-war era, including the refurbished version of Oldenburg's *Lipstick (Ascending) Caterpillar Tracks*, 1969-74 and Minimalist sculptures such as Judd's *Untitled*, 1965 stacks, which were fabricated in galvanized steel or aluminum. Bickerton's inclusion of these artistic brands pointed to the perhaps overlooked history of these materials and their impact on the development of art since the 1950's. The work's ironic title, *Le Art*, pointed to the changes in the definition of a work of art as a result of the development of these new materials.

Bickerton's work, *The Ideal Collection*, 1987, takes new American sign painting one step further by emphasizing the brand-identity of well-known works within the history of art (Fig. 80). *An Ideal Collection* consists of one of Bickerton's trademarked boxes plastered with many small photographs of works by important artists of the 1960's. Playing the role of curator, Bickerton assembled images that represent for him an "Ideal Collection" of artwork. Underneath the image of each work are candid descriptions, such as "A current Ryman," "A Brillo Box by Warhol," and "An Eva Hesse vertical wall piece." Although essentially subjective, Bickerton's selection included some artists considered to be the most important contributors to post-war art. In a way, his choice also relayed the impact of these earlier artists on his own artistic production. The tiny images included in *The Ideal Collection* essentially reduced Ryman, Warhol, Hesse, among others, to art historical brand names. The selection of works stood as concise

signifiers pointing to the significant moments in the artist's career and their larger contribution to art history. Bickerton's painting also emphasized the monetary value underlying such important works of art, since the most highly regarded works in art history are usually the ones that generate the most money in the art market. *The Ideal Collection* proposed a reversal of the traditional relationship between dealer and collector. Typically, a collector approaches a dealer for advice on purchasing works. In turn, the dealer recommends works and provides reasons for the purchase pertaining to the artist's importance within the field of art history. Bickerton cut this relationship short by providing a list of his own suggestions, thereby proposing an alternative role for the artist. Instead of a mere creator or fabricator of art work, Bickerton stepped into the role of a critic, a dealer or another arbiter of aesthetic taste.[261] Unlike Rosenquist, Bickerton's painting deconstructed the status and role of a work of art within the art market and canon of art history.

By including recognizable brand names in their work, Pop artists such as Rosenquist and Neo-Geo artists such as Bickerton commented on the cult of the new in consumer society. Similar to the Pop artists, Bickerton's work muddled the boundaries between art and advertising. His works realistically reproduced the brand names in full view using a combination of synthetic paints, silk-screens and lacquer. Unlike Rosenquist's hand-painted labels and brand names, Bickerton's logos provided a clean, slick finish that closely resembled the graphics seen on T.V., in print and on product labels. Rosenquist's paintings reflect the techniques of advertising and his early days as a billboard painter. Similarly, Bickerton's work relates to his experience as a professional

[261] Bickerton raised this question in his unpublished personal notes.

surf-board painter. The logos on surfboards signaled corporate sponsorship and financial support of athletic training. Similar to Bickerton's Susie boxes, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, 1964, were also constructed using methods of hand-fabrication as well as industrial materials and techniques. The *Brillo Boxes* were initially made with cardboard. Warhol, unhappy with the unprofessional visual effect, had the boxes constructed by trained carpenters. The boxes were then painted white and sent to Aetna Silk Screen Products in Manhattan. Aetna produced the screens and sent them back to Warhol's studio, called The Factory, where his assistants Gerard Malanga and Billy Linich silk-screened them.[262] While silk-screening evoked the repetitive processes of industrial production, Warhol often emphasized its potential for imperfections by using too much ink or slightly off-setting the printing. These techniques gave Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* a somewhat hand-crafted appearance that differs from the manufactured look of Bickerton's work.

Unlike Appropriation artist, Richard Prince, who presented Marlboro advertisements as such, Bickerton incorporated the logos within the larger formal and material arrangement of his paintings. The logos served as readymade imagery for Bickerton's larger creative endeavor. While the reproduction of logos could be viewed as an extended support of these companies, Bickerton, like Prince, succeeded in removing the brands from their habitual context, which arguably allows them to be viewed in a different manner. Moreover, by transferring the complex world of brand identity into the domain of art, Bickerton acknowledged the larger financial systems that encompassed the buying, selling and creation of works of art.

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[262] See Michael J. Golec, *The Brillo Box Archive: Aesthetics, Design, and Art* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2008), 109; and Arthur Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2009), 50-56.

Pop and Neo-Geo works reflected the shifts in capitalism and the market economy in the decades after the 1950's. To varying degrees, Warhol and Bickerton's commercial techniques emphasized the role of the work of art as an object that is integrated within larger socio-cultural systems. While Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* replicated a consumer product in a deadpan manner, Bickerton's Susie boxes assaulted the viewer with an assortment of brands that commented on the inescapable presence of media, advertising and product placement within everyday life. Bickerton promoted Susie as his own brand identity, in an act that further commented on the inevitable role of art as a commodity. The formulation of the Susie brand was a way of openly and actively acknowledging the complicit role of art as a cultural commodity in the art market. Bickerton's work commented on commodity culture and used irony and hyperbole as strategies for emphasizing the role of his paintings as material objects in a more direct manner. Although his works were also handcrafted to some degree, Bickerton's paintings seemed to hyperbolize this quality of Pop art.

The Pop artists' lighthearted reproduction and incorporation of hand-painted and silk-screened media imagery turned into a more aggressive socio-cultural campaign in Bickerton's work. In *Commercial Piece # 3*, 1990 Bickerton specifically targeted the New York gallery world and art market (Fig. 81). In this work, a large box-like structure was bolted to the wall at the top and along the bottom with large, yellow-orange brackets. *Commercial Piece #3* contains a bar alongside the top of the work that snaps into place at four locations on the brackets. In order to avoid any outward pivoting, the work is attached to the wall again along the bottom edge. The bright yellow-orange brackets draw the viewer's attention, since the rest of the work is predominantly black. As in the

other Susie boxes, Bickerton acknowledged the mechanisms for unpacking and installing the work. The sides contain two thick black handles for lifting and transporting the work in two different positions; outward in a vertical manner and upward in a horizontal manner. A thick leather covering neatly rolls along the bottom edge and is tied in three spots. The ends of the ties float down from the underside of the work. The front of the work is decorated with an assortment of labels. In this case, instead of merely reproducing the logos, Bickerton purportedly received compensation for their placement on his work.[263] Reputable New York galleries, businesses and individuals such as Sonnabend, Leo Castelli, Hotel Maclowe and Nina Ricci Gallery in Paris, as well as fellow artist, Jeff Koons, purchased advertisements on the surface of the work.

Bickerton invalidated the habitual terms of the sale of a work of art by luring companies and individuals to invest in a work that would, in turn, be sold to another individual, institution or corporation. His action manipulated the customary relationships that occur between the artist, the dealer and the client. Normally, the client purchases the work from a dealer, who in turn splits a percentage of the profits with the artist. In Bickerton's case, by selling spots on the surface of the work, he generated a certain amount of profits for the fabrication of the work before its actual sale. Bickerton's work took the reflection of commodity culture in Pop one step further by brokering his own deals and by turning his work into a site for advertisements. In some ways, Bickerton's act pushed art into the arena of individual and corporate promotion.

Certainly, Bickerton is not the first artist since Pop to aggressively experiment with the realm of advertising or to experiment with the ways in which art interacts with

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[263] Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 487; Kay Larson, "Nature's Nobleman," *New York Magazine,* November 13, 1989, 128.

commodity culture. In the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*, Lynda Benglis published a nude photograph of herself holding a pink dildo as an advertisement for her solo show at Paula Cooper Gallery (Fig 82). The image of her tanned, well-oiled body was a response to Minimalist sculptor Robert Morris' photographic self-portrait, which showed the bare-chested artist wrapped in chains, wearing sunglasses and a motorcycle helmet, as an advertisement for his 1974 solo exhibition at Castelli and Sonnabend Galleries (Fig. 83). Similar to Bickerton, Benglis' and Morris' methods of self-promotion set these works apart from the traditional structure and form of art. Looking forward, *Commercial Piece #3*, foreshadowed certain developments that have lately occurred between artists, clients, dealers, and auction houses and controversial events such as Damien Hirst's direct auction of two-hundred and twenty-three works of art at Sotheby's in 2008, in which the artist conveniently cut out the split that would normally go to Gagosian Gallery, in a regular gallery sales transaction. [264] The idealistic concept of the isolated artist working diligently away in his studio, as Pollock did in his farm house on the East end of Long Island, New York, for instance, has been replaced by the figure of the artist as entrepreneur and savvy manipulator of the art market.

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[264] Many critics of the 1980's wrote about the booming art industry, the rising prices, and the insidious or questionable relationships between dealers, auction houses, artists, museums and corporations. More recently, *New York Magazine* critic Jerry Saltz has become one of the most prominent spokespeople about the changing relationship between art and money in exhibitions such as *Giorgio Armani* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2000 or *Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection* at the New Museum in 2010. *Skin Fruit* was curated not by museum staff but by Jeff Koons, and highlighted the work of a single collector. See, for example, Douglas Davis, "The Billion Dollar Picture?" *Art in America* 76, no. 7 (July 1988): 21-23; J. M. Montias, "On Art and Economic Reasoning," *Art in America* 76, no. 7 (July 1988): 23-33; Lisbet Nilson, "Making it Neo," *ARTnews* 82, no. 7 (September 1983): 62-70; Andrew Decker, "Inside the Art Market," *ARTnews* 87, no. 9 (November 1988): 130-33; and Jerry Saltz, "Has Money Ruined Art?," *Village Voice* (October 7, 2007).

Art as Commodity: From the Brillo Box to Alarm Clocks and Lava Lamps

In Arthur Danto's view, to reiterate, Pop art of the 1960's was revolutionary because it enacted a philosophical revolution in the definition and in the concept of the work of art.[265] In his discussion of Andy Warhol's, *Brillo Box*, 1964, Danto describes the dismantling of the philosophical and social conditions of a work of art. The aesthetic differences between art and ordinary objects, or for example, between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the product found in stores, could not solely be discerned through the act of looking (Fig. 84). The definition of a work of art had shifted and expanded to include objects and aspects of social existence. This metamorphosis related to the Pop artists' exploration of the proximities between art and life. Danto commented:

> *Brillo Box* had a shot at being a work of art because of the fact that so many features, thought to be central to something's identity as art, in the years leading up to that, had been rejected as part of the essence of art, so that the definition itself had become attenuated to the point where pretty much anything could be a work of art…What was remarkable about *Brillo Box* was that it was drawn from a kind of underground of familiar imagery so seemingly distant from aesthetic preoccupations of those nominally interested in art that it came as a shock to see it in an art gallery, while at the same time, there was nothing in the prevailing concept of art to rule it out.[266]

Danto points out that the history of modernism is concerned with the slow dissolution of the concept of art or the subtraction of some conditions of its existence. Warhol's purported dictum, "Art is anything you can get away with," aptly described the cultural

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[265] Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box,* 4-5. See also Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
[266] Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box*, 40. See also Danto's interpretation in his address to the American Philosophical Society, Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 580.

environment of the late 1950's and 60's, in which the gap or distinctions between art and everyday life were muddled.[267]

The *Supermarket Exhibition* at Bianchini Gallery in 1964, for example, assembled the work of Pop Artists Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann, Artschwager and Watts in an evocation of an ordinary supermarket complete with food items, a freezer section, aisle markers and Muzak (Fig. 85). Stacks of Warhol's paintings of *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, and Robert Watt's *Black Eggs*, 1964, were paired alongside their real counterparts. Visitors could pick up and examine food products at the same time as they gazed at a three-dimensional painting of a turkey by Wesselmann or Warhol's *Brillo Box*. The exhibition drew attention to the similarities between Pop art and consumer products in ways that led to a questioning of the definition of a work of art.

In Rosenblum's view, "The authentic Pop artist offers a coincidence of style and subject, that is, he represents mass-produced images and objects using a style which is also based upon the visual vocabulary of mass-production."[268] Neo-Geo artists Koons and Steinbach persisted in this questioning of the foundations of art by integrating store-bought commodities into their work. The confusion of a work of art with the materials of everyday life stemmed from the concept of the readymade. For Duchamp, what became known as the readymade was an avant-garde tactic used as a Dadaist assault on the traditional definitions of a work of art. Duchamp was said to have purposefully selected banal objects such as a shovel, bottle rack, and bicycle wheel. Warhol, however, selected widely recognized commercial products, such as Coca-Cola bottles or Campbell's soup

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[267] The quote originated from McCluhan's *The Medium is the Massage*; see Marshall McCluhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (London: Penguin Books, 1967).

[268] Rosenblum, "Pop and Non-Pop Art," 89.

cans as well as renowned Hollywood stars such as Liz Taylor or Marilyn Monroe, as readymade images for his silk-screened paintings. Koons' and Steinbach's sculptures relied on these earlier strategies for their full meaning and consideration as works of art. Without knowledge of these earlier artists, movements and techniques, it is difficult to distinguish Koons' and Steinbach's works as more than simple designs or arrangements of commodities.

For example, Steinbach's *Ultra Red #1* 1/2, 1986, situated red cooking pots, electrical alarm clocks and lava lamps on differently colored red plywood shelves (Fig. 17). Steinbach's handcrafted shelves were slightly reminiscent of those found in store displays. Playing the role of a store associate, in a sense, Steinbach carefully arranged the objects to enhance their strong visual quality and allure. The red cooking pots were stacked within each other according to size. They form two tall towers with the largest ones on the bottom and the smallest ones on the very top. The clocks form a zigzag pattern as some are pushed forward toward the viewer and some are pushed back toward the wall. Color patterns formed by the red bubbles in the lava lamps play off the clock's digital numbers and the saturated red color of the pots. But Steinbach's shelves evince a hand-made quality that differs from the industrial metal shelving typically found in stores. The artist's selection of objects also revealed a personal idiosyncrasy that would not necessarily be found in a store, where objects are generally sorted according to type and brand name. According to Neo-Geo collector Eugene Schwartz, Steinbach purchased many of his objects at The Conran Shop, which sells well designed household products at prices aimed for middle income buyers.[269]

[269] Dinitia Smith, "Art Fever," *New York Magazine*, April 20, 1987, 38.

Steinbach's work invokes connections to many well-known artists such as Rauschenberg, Johns and Warhol, all of whom worked early on in window design, selecting objects for display. Steinbach began his shelf sculptures in 1979, when he placed variously selected objects on pre-fabricated shelving units. He created an installation by placing the shelving in sections of floor-to-ceiling solid color or patterned wallpaper. These early works were shown at Artists Space in 1979--the venue where Bickerton, Halley and Koons also had important exhibitions in 1982 and 1984--but were not given the same attention as the photographic or filmic works of the Pictures or Appropriation group. Steinbach attributed the lack of interest to favoritism among critics toward the two-dimensional mediums of photography and film.[270]

Ultra Red #2 appeared sleek and impressive when compared to *Shelf with Coach*, 1983, or *Un-Color Becomes Alter-Ego #2*, 1984, which included a boom box and three Yoda masks (Yoda being a character from the 1980 film *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*) (Figs. 86, 87). Steinbach began creating the hand-made shelves beginning in 1984. At that time, he also began to arrange the objects on the shelves in a purposeful manner. Steinbach comments:

> In each group of objects, a certain relationship of a function, protection or narrative was underscored. On a formal level, the colors of the laminates covering the shelves were designed to play off of the objects. Objects are designed to deliver certain messages and meanings…I am interested in how objects are conceived and fashioned, in their look and appeal as well as their social codifications. I wish to get a hold of their appearance, to grasp how they may be recognized and I do that by staging them.[271]

Steinbach combined some cheap articles of kitsch with then-current electronics or house wares. For the artist, the store-bought objects revamped the question of the readymade

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[270] Decter, "Haim Steinbach," (1993) in *Haim Steinbach*, ed. Arnulf Rohsmann, 101.
[271] Ibid., 101-02.

by representing the cultivation of consumer desires and how quickly new objects become de-valued. Steinbach used Pop's cool attitude toward consumer culture to formulate a targeted commentary on the cult of the new. The cassette player in *Un-Color Becomes Alter-Ego #2* was already outdated in 1984, since the music industry began producing compact discs in 1982. Compact discs in time became outdated as well, with the introduction of digital MP3 files in 1995. The boom box also referenced street culture of the 1980's, when it was not uncommon to see individuals dancing or listening to music in the streets of New York City on a similar device. The Yoda masks referenced the large business of film marketing. Catering to the whims of many potential fans, film production companies undertake a sizable amount of work and financial risk to produce thousands of cheaply-made likenesses of film characters. If unsold in the months surrounding the film's release, objects like the Yoda mask could have been found at discount prices at novelty stores. The arrangement of the objects revealed a sense of irony, since a similar combination is not likely to be found in a store. Boom boxes would normally be placed with other electronics and Yoda masks would be seen along with similar novelty items. Also, the shelving units in these works do not match and are covered with different colors of plywood laminate. In *Untitled #1*, each object or group of similar objects is displayed on its own color shelf.

In Oldenburg's 1961 installation, *The Store*, the artist created a venue for the buying and selling of his work in Manhattan's lower east side (Fig. 88). For a period of two months, the small space on East Second Street was filled with over one–hundred sculptures exemplifying a range of inexpensive goods, from food items to clothes. Oldenburg's hand-crafted goods emulated the manufactured commodities sold in the

stores in the neighborhood and were sorted in a similar manner using similar techniques of display. Clothing, food and other items were crowded in the window and filled all available space from floor to ceiling. *The Store* made viewers feel as if they were in a real commercial venue. Critic Ellen Johnson commented: "After seeing Oldenburg's *Store*, or a performance of his theatre, one feels compelled to walk and linger through the Lower East Side, suddenly aware of the curious, tawdry beauty of store-windows full of stale hors d'oeuvres, hamburgers on Reingold ads, stockinged legs."[272] Yet, at the same time, the plaster sculptures were imperfectly molded and covered with drips of paint in ways that distinguished them from store-bought items. Johnson's statement reflects the ways in which Oldenburg's replica incited new feelings toward the actual stores and items on sale in the neighborhood. The artist's parody of consumer culture affected Johnson's perception and experience of commodity culture. Neo-Geo's manipulation and re-arrangement of commodities potentially promoted a similar sentiment in the viewer, who might be driven to reflect on consumer culture in new ways.

In 1980, Haim Steinbach installed *Changing Displays* at Fashion Moda (Fig. 89). Similarly to Oldenburg, he packed the floors, ceiling and windows with an assortment of items found in second-hand stores and covered the walls with different strips of wallpaper. As the title suggested, Steinbach changed the assortment of items, doing so on a daily basis. The refreshment of goods pointed to shopkeeper attempts to keep merchandise looking up-to-date with the latest styles and trends, as changing displays and merchandise is designed to draw and maintain shoppers' interest in the store.

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[272] Ellen Johnson, "The Living Object" (1963), as cited in Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25.

As Giorgio Verzotti points out, the innocuous use of the term "display," in Steinbach's work points to the act of showing, organizing and cataloguing objects for viewing or for purchase.[273] It points to the act of looking, picking up and examining objects. The title contained a psychological element that relates to the act of discerning the value and purpose of the object as it is being contemplated.

Steinbach's displays and objects referred to the process of commodity fetishism, or the superfluous desires attaching to commodities as they are increasingly separated from their use-value. Mechanisms of display, along with packaging and advertisements, enhanced the non-use value of commodities and increased the likelihood of fetishization. Steinbach priced his works in conjunction with the assortment and price of the objects that he situated on the shelves. The price of the work of art was determined by the actual price of the store-bought objects that he included. Steinbach explains:

> When my work began to be successful, each piece--the shelves with objects--was priced the way you price a work of art: Here's a work of art, and this is what the price is. Of course, that becomes a problem, because if my work is going for $12,000, what happens when you have a group of objects worth $30,000? Do you still sell it at the value of the art? I devised a formula by which there would be a price for the work--plus the price of the objects. Let's say a shelf has three cornflakes boxes and six ceramic ghosts on it. If the ceramic ghosts are $10 apiece, that's $60; the boxes, at $2 each, would make $6, bringing the total of the objects to $66. So if the price of a given work is $12,000, that's $12,066.[274]

Referencing works such as *Un-Color Becomes Alter-Ego #2*, 1984, Steinbach connected the store-bought objects with the work of art in a unique and direct manner that undermined the value of the sculpture as high art (Fig. 87). He essentially conflated the value of high-brow, middle-brow and low-brow by basing the price of his sculptures on

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[273] Giorgio Verzoitti, "Object, Sign, Community: On the Art of Haim Steinbach," in *Haim Steinbach*, ed. Ida Gianelli et al. (Milan: Charta Books; and [Rivoli]: Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'arte contemporanea,1995), 55-56.
[274] Griffin, "Haim Steinbach Talks to Tim Griffin," 230.

the sale amount of the everyday objects incorporated into the work. The kitsch or low-brow objects and the middle-brow objects were therefore attributed a much higher value due to their inclusion within the work of art. Reciprocally, the value of the work of art is dependent on the price of the inexpensive objects included in the work.

Oldenburg's objects were handcrafted with plaster and paint. The surface of the sculptures constructed for *The Store* contained thick drips of enamel paint that pointed to the gestural brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionist painters such as Pollock, Hans Hoffman or Franz Kline. In 1962, critic Jill Johnston stated, "Oldenburg has refined an Action-like technique, many objects being pleasurable in pure color and spontaneous design."[275] While Steinbach's shelves were constructed by hand, his use of new objects atop the shelves pointed to their identity as pure commodities and tacitly invoked the discernment of their value within a larger economic system. The construction of shelves and the display of the objects on one or multiple shelves pointed to the techniques of enhancement used to lure buyers. The shelf also contained historical associations, referring to cabinets of curiosity, which were invented in the 16th century and housed a diverse assortment of objects and collections, especially those owned by the ruling classes.[276] Precious items in an individual or royal *kunstkammer* or *wunderkammer* were kept on shelves. The 17th century *wunderkammer* of Olaus Wormius contained multiple shelves that held sculptures, natural specimens, skeletons, minerals among many other items. Steinbach commented, "The shelf with objects is a nexus of social interaction. I tested the physical presence of an object—something loaded with the patina, evocations, and the markings of its history. People have strong feelings about objects, because

[275] Jill Johnston, "Claes Oldenburg," *ARTnews* 61, no. 7 (November 1962): 13.
[276] Verzotti, "Object, Sign, Community," 56.

they're in their space. In this regard, the shelf with objects is a display, a presentation."[277]

Similar to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, in which a bicycle was attached to a kitchen stool, Koons manipulated the objects included in his *Pre-New* series by attaching appliances to bulbs in various manners. In the *New* series, however, assorted types of vacuum cleaners were displayed as is. They were not bolted or glued to bulbs, but showcased in Plexiglas displays (Fig. 90). As Katy Siegel points out, many of the works in Koons' *New* series contained identical models of the same vacuum cleaner, such as a Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polisher or a Sheldon Wet/Dry.[278] Koons' repetition of the same appliance model within a particular sculpture differed from Duchamp's selection of a single object in *Bottle Rack* or *In Advance of a Broken Arm* that commented on the unique, autonomous quality of a work of art. By doing so, Koons's sculptures evinced serial production and the eventual obsolescence of each vacuum or appliance in the face of newly-generated features and design characteristics.

Unlike Duchamp's readymades and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, the sculptures in Koons' 1985 solo show at International with Monument gallery conflated representation and reality in interesting ways (Fig. 91). Viewers of the exhibition were confronted with works such as *Lifeboat*, *Snorkel* and *Aqualung*, in which ordinary objects were cast in bronze (Figs. 92, 93, 94). Koons' *Equilibrium* series displayed basketballs which were half-way or fully submerged within tanks of water, filled to varying degrees[279] (Fig. 95).

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[277] Griffin, "Haim Steinbach Talks to Tim Griffin," 55.
[278] Katy Siegel, "The New, 1980-1987," in *Jeff Koons*, ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth (Cologne: Taschen, 2009).
[279] The basketballs are filled with distilled water and submerged in a tank two-thirds full with a solution of distilled water and salt and one-third distilled water. The correct

Koons' work consisted of simply removing objects from daily life and placing them within the realm of art. In distinction from the *Brillo Box*, however, the bronze casting of *Lifeboat*, *Snorkel* and *Aqualung* visually distinguished these works from the store-bought objects. As an artistic medium with a long history, the bronze in Koons' sculptures conjured Greco-Roman sculptures and equestrian statuary.

At the same time, Koons' bronze casting of these ordinary materials references more recent works such as Johns' *Painted Bronze*, 1960, in which the artist cast Balentine Ale cans in bronze and hand-painted the labels in oil on metal (Fig. 96). For the informed viewer, Koons' bronze sculptures recalled these associations of works from earlier periods of art history. These connections are quickly thwarted, however, by Koons' subject matter. Similar to Warhol, Koons' sculptures incited questions on the value of art and of the commodity. *Lifeboat*, *Snorkel* and *Aqualung* invited comparison with their store-bought counterparts. While a snorkel found in a scuba store might cost ten to twenty dollars, Koons' bronze snorkel costs much more because of its value as high art. Koons' *Snorkel* currently sells for about a hundred thousand dollars.

The *One-*, *Two-*, and *Three-Ball Equilibrium Tanks* utilized real objects, but their situation was not reflective of everyday life. Removed from their habitual location in a basketball court, the balls floated within a tank, half-way under the surface of the water. Each ball is half submerged with an extreme precision. Koons claimed to have worked with over fifty physicists in order to achieve the perfect equilibrium of these works, including Dr. Richard P. Feynman, a Nobel Prize winning physicist for quantum

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proportions of salt and distilled water allow the basketballs in Koons' *Equlibrium* series to float either half-way or fully submerged. See Ingrid Sischy, "Jeff Koons' World," in *Jeff Koons*, 12; and Jeanne Siegel, "Equilibrium, 1983-1993" in *Jeff Koons*, 146.

dynamics. Koons described the process: "Permanent equilibrium in the tanks is unachievable. The basketballs always sank to the bottom. But I went for it. I pushed it to the limit. I could have created permanent equilibrium with oils. But I wanted to keep it a very womb-like situation with water. I like the purity of water. So I arrived at an equilibrium which is not permanent but very pure."[280] As a result, the installation of Koons' *Equilibrium* tanks requires diligent maintenance. The shifting balls must be adjusted and the tank must be cleaned and re-filled with a mixture of sodium chloride reagent and distilled water.[281]

Unlike the readymade and most Pop art, Koons' works contained a contradiction in terms of the materials, arrangement and actual usage of consumer objects. Koons' sculptures used commodities in ways that contradicted their normal usage in everyday life. In Koons' case, basketballs floated in a tank as opposed to being bounced around on the court; deep fryers and refrigerators hung from fluorescent bulbs attached to the wall as opposed to being used in the kitchen; and scuba equipment took on sculptural connotations by being cast in bronze. Koons' sculptures can also be compared to Oldenburg's soft sculptures, in which everyday objects and food items, such as a toilet, or a piece of cake are rendered in vinyl (Fig. 33). Koons' *Lifeboat*, *Snorkel,* and *Aqualung* pushed the idea of the Duchampian readymade one step further by casting the ordinary objects in bronze, as did Oldenburg. In *Lifeboat*, 1985, this actual-size life saving device, complete with oars is cast in bronze and rendered useless. The lightweight object can typically be lifted by passengers and thrown overboard. Koons transformed the lifeboat

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[280] Koons, interview by Haden-Guest, in Angelika Muthesius, ed., *Jeff Koons,* 18.
[281] Jude Palmese, Senior Associate Registrar of Collections, Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago, letters to author, June 9 and June 17, 2010.

into an abnormally heavy object that would sink if placed in water. Likewise, Koons' *Snorkel*, 1985, consisted simply of a snorkel cast in bronze. The change in medium also rendered the snorkel useless and, in effect, the object has the capacity to drown a swimmer if used in the water.

Steinbach's and Koons' selections of commodities paralleled Duchamp's own choices of the bottle rack and shovel and Warhol's simulated *Brillo Boxes*. As readymades, these commodities are elevated to the status of art. The atypical placement of these commodities, which are removed from their habitual location in stores, could putatively allow for a certain critical distance from their important social and cultural roles in daily life. In Warhol's and Steinbach's work, the Duchampian readymade evolved into a savvy assessment of consumer desire and the state of life within capitalism. But while the readymade referenced visual indifference and Warhol's *Brillo Box* a deadpan aesthetic, Steinbach's sculptures emphasized the allure and appeal of inanimate objects, conjured through the processes of product design, store-displays, and finally consumer selection. Unlike Duchamp's readymades, Koons' and Steinbach's works used some distinctively kitschy items as well as some luxury goods that allowed for a specifically class-based reading. Some of Koons and Steinbach's objects contained a targeted cultural appeal, such as a basketball, or a Yoda mask.

The low quality, run-of-the-mill craftsmanship and moderate price of the objects used in some of these artists' works are targeted toward the masses and to appeal to those with undiscriminating taste, as was the case in Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and Rosenquist's painted segments of Ford cars and Oxydol labels. Nevertheless, the masses were not typically those visiting art galleries in the 1960's or in the 1980's. Steinbach comments

on the distinction between his sculptures and the Duchampian readymade, describing it as follows, " In the mid-1970's, I realized that objects in and of themselves may be considered a material for art, not in the sense of the Duchampian 'readymade,' but rather in the commonly shared social ritual of collecting, arranging, and presenting objects."[282] Similar, in a way, to cultural anthropologists, Koons and Steinbach unpacked the phenomenon of commodity fetishism and provided a tacit commentary on the extent to which objects are involved in everyday life. On the other hand, some of the objects included in Koons' and Steinbach's works are indistinguishable from those found in many stores. Answering to Danto's description of Warhol's work, Steinbach's and Koons' sculptures contributed to the dissolution of the definition of a work of art and its proximity to a commodity.

From High-brow to Low-brow: Neo-Geo, Pop and Class Bias

In the 1960's, Pop art was poised at the center of a debate that addressed the interchange between high, low and middle-brow culture. This debate might be said to have begun with Greenberg's 1939 article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." According to Greenberg, kitsch stood in opposition to the work of avant-garde artists such as Picasso, Braque, Mondrian and Kandinsky, who were critical of the elite, yet paradoxically dependent upon them for support. As a product of the industrial revolution, kitsch, or in Greenberg's words, "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc," existed largely as a mode of consumption for the

[282] Decter, "Haim Steinbach," 101.

masses.[283] Kitsch reinforced a shared set of cultural sensibilities and appealed to mass taste. As a debased version of high art, for Greenberg, kitsch was dependent upon the whims and forces of capitalism as well as on the avant-garde for its inspiration. Adorno similarly viewed kitsch as a threat to the last remnants of high culture.[284] In opposition to Pop, Greenberg promoted Abstract Expressionism and the work of David Smith as the new American avant-garde.

These types of class stereotypes were problematic, in part, because they framed an elitist role for art, a role that failed to account for certain developments at the time--as did Greenberg's writings. These arguments also unrealistically posited art as a cultural phenomenon that was separated from simultaneously occurring social, political and economic events. In his 1975 essay, "The Cultural Politics of Pop," Andreas Huyssen discussed the democratization of art that was putatively instigated by the Pop art movement with its emphasis on play and frivolity.[285] Art movements of the 1950's onward played with the concept of kitsch and popular culture in diverse and interesting ways that reflected the socio-political environment of the time.

Cécile Whiting discussed the class-bias inherent to the work of Pop artists such as Wesselmann, Oldenburg and Lichtenstein, as their work conflated high-brow with middle or low-brow taste. [286] Whiting viewed Pop through the lens of gender and sexuality,

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[283] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 5-22.
[284] See Theodor Adorno, "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1941): 17-48.
[285] Andreas Huyssen, "The Cultural Politics of Pop: Reception and Critique of U.S. Pop Art in the Federal Republic of Germany," *New German Critique*, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 77-79. See also Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
[286] Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*.

observing how these male artists moved into spheres typically considered to be the domain of women. Her line of reasoning relied on Huyssen's article, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in which he linked the discussion of mass culture at the turn of the century with the ideals of femininity. Huyssen stated that the "political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities."[287] Whiting indicated that consumer culture in the postwar era continues to be discussed in female terms, while high culture remained largely a masculine domain. In order to support her argument, she provided examples of works by Pop artists Lichtenstein, Wesselmann and Warhol. Wesselmann, for example, rendered female figures in the interiors of kitchens and bathrooms, surrounded by the objects of everyday life. Lichtenstein's paintings, which borrowed imagery from popular comic books of the 1950's, also focused in part on female subjects and romantic relationships. Oldenburg's sculptures created for his 1961 installation *The Store* and Warhol's 1964 Supermarket exhibition at Bianchini Gallery, likewise, replicated the food items found in grocery stores or shopping centers. Stores and supermarkets were typically considered the domain of women, since they did the majority of the shopping at the time.

Whiting summarized many similarly negative attitudes toward middle and low-brow consumer culture, which was associated with kitsch in the 1950's and 60's. Consumer culture was considered to be a debased version of the avant-garde and other forms of high art. Whiting demonstrated how cultural critics of the 1950's used the terms

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[287] Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide,* 47-48.

high-brow, middle-brow, and low-brow to formulate class stereotypes and to separate the criteria for taste among these social groups. Whiting argued that Pop artists, in particular, managed to collapse the boundaries between high art and commodity culture with the incorporation of these social references in their work. She commented, "Wesselmann's interiors implicated high art in consumer culture, subordinating the high-art aesthetic to consumer taste. Of course, this argument could be turned on its head: Rather than suggesting that consumer culture had commandeered high art modernism, it could be argued that Wesselmann's images aspired to the merit of high art."[288] The interiors represented in Wesselmann's works represented a distinctively middle-class suburban interior and décor. Whiting added:

> *Still Life #30* performs the myth of postwar American economic egalitarianism, presenting middle-class domestic space as the norm. The relatively modest size of the interior and the quantity and midrange price of the appliances and goods establish the middle-class status of Wesselmann's domestic space. The lack of any luxury items, which would openly declare class distinction, allows mere standard to become national standard.[289]

Wesselmann's interiors reflected the images of kitchens and interiors displayed in the pages of women's magazines at the time including *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal*.

Two decades later, Neo-Geo artists Koons and Steinbach achieved a similar merging of high art and commodity culture. These Neo-Geo artists continued to renegotiate the terms of high, middle and low-brow taste with their selection of images and objects. Koons' and Steinbach's work provided insight into the construction of consumer desire and value within the art market. While Wesselmann's *Still Life #30*

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[288] Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 72.
[289] Ibid., 56.

presented middle-brow domestic space as the norm of the 1960's, many of Koons' and Steinbach's works positioned the low-brow as the norm of the 1980's. Their selection of objects evoked targeted, class-based readings.

Koons' *Equilibrium* sculptures, for example, commented on the low socio-economic position of African-Americans. In the 1985 International with Monument exhibition, the One-, Two- and Three-Ball equilibrium tanks were paired with framed Nike advertisements of professional African-American basketball players, in *The Dynasty on 34th Street*, 1985, *The Secretary of Defense*, 1985, and *Board Room*, 1985 (Figs. 97, 98, 99). Koons also used unmanipulated ads in conjunction with the *New* series. *The Dynasty on 34th Street* shows a group of amateur African-American basketball players gathered in an outdoor basketball court. Large cracks appear in the pavement, signaling that the court has not been maintained. Adjacent buildings in the neighborhood appear to be run-down and dilapidated. Some boys look defiantly at the camera, while others motion to the viewer in what appears to be a direct challenge. Their cocky and defiant attitudes exude confidence in their abilities and mastery of the game. All the boys wear bright white athletic socks and Nike basketball shoes with the signature swoop logo. The caption, "The Dynasty on 34th Street" implies that these boys rule a particular court on a particular Street. The neglected court situated within a poor neighborhood is their domain. The words and the image provide a warning to anyone who decides to venture into the neighborhood. The ad associates African-Americans with poor, run-down neighborhoods in an inner-city. Although the boys invite challengers, the ad has already framed them as the winners of an imaginary game that takes place on their turf.

In the 1985 International with Monument installation, Koons placed *The Dynasty on 34th Street* directly across from *Secretary of Defense,* 1985, which depicts a white basketball player in a luxurious U.S. government office leisurely leaning against a desk. A lush office rug displays the Nike logo. In contrast to the young, African-Americans, the white player is not dressed in his basketball uniform, but instead wears a suit and tie. The caption, "The Secretary of Defense," associates the white individual with a governmental position. From 1983 to 1985, approximately twenty African-Americans held positions in the 98th U.S. Congress (as opposed to ten in the 91st conference between 1969 and 1971 and forty in the 103rd Congress from 1993-1995.)[290] Only one percent of the total number of all members of Congress in U.S. history has been African-American.[291] The Nike advertisements appear to confirm these figures and the fact that a position in the federal government was much more likely to be held by a white rather than an African-American male.

Koons' *Board Room,* 1985, was installed on the wall adjacent to *The Secretary of Defense*. The poster displays a professional basketball team formally posing for a portrait shot on a basketball court. Only four out of the twenty-eight men are white. While the white player was shown wearing a suit and tie in an office setting, the predominantly African-American team is shown on the court ironically wearing suits and ties. Instead of dress shoes, however, they are wearing brand-new white Nike basketball shoes. They are gathered in front of a large table that is placed in the middle of the court. The caption, "Board Room" appears on an office door label at the bottom of the image. The

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[290] Jennifer E. Manning and Colleen J. Schogan, *African American Members of the United States Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2010), 2.
[291] Ibid., 3.

label draws connections between corporate offices and the basketball court. Briefcases and have been conveniently placed on either side of the table. With such a large majority of African-American players on the team, the ad implies that the basketball court is the African-American version of the corporate boardroom. Taken out of context, the suits, briefcases and door plaques add an element of irony or humor to the scene, undercutting the idea that African-Americans would be effective in such a high-level position. Collectively, the ads insinuate that African-Americans do not belong in corporate or governmental offices, which are the domain of whites, but on the basketball court.

As Carol Stabile points out, in the 1980's and 90's, Nike shifted its target marketing audience from the middle class whites to inner city blacks in order to broaden its consumer base.[292] The company also associated well-known African-American figures with the Nike brand, such as Michael Jordan, in an attempt to provide positive role-models for African-American consumers. This campaign worked perhaps too well. In 1989 and 1990, the media, including *Sports Illustrated*, reported that inner-city black youth were killing each other over Nike Air Jordans.[293] As Stabile comments, many Nike ads from these years relied on Stuart Hall's concept of inferential racism or the all-too-frequent instances where racism is presented as an unquestioned, naturalized assumption within a representation of an individual, culture or group.[294] Koons' selection of Nike ads revealed these racial biases. The ads created sharp binaries between amateur or professional sports and corporate America and marked the concept of difference or

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[292] Carol Stabile, "Nike Social Responsibility and the Hidden Abode of Production," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17, no. 2 (June 2000): 193.
[293] Ibid., 187.
[294] Ibid., 200; Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications in Association with the Open University, 1997), 223-91.

otherness among African-American populations.[295] As Katy Siegel comments, "Nike conjures up a dream, one that the superstars of the NBA embody for millions of people, particularly young black men…Koons' choices foreground the way these almost exclusively black athletes are cast not just as stars, but in roles whose claim to power and respect reflects a traditional social system that in fact denies power or respect to most African-Americans."[296]

Unlike appropriation artists Levine and Prince, who clipped segments of ads and illicitly used them in their works, Koons purchased the poster ads and requested permission from Nike, or the advertiser.[297] By framing the actual Nike advertisement posters and presenting them as art, Koons created a new context and environment for viewing the images. Typically seen on the streets, in magazines, or generally within the atmosphere of daily life, Koons' selection of posters was recontextualized within the white-walled space of the art gallery. By isolating the ads outside of their habitual context and positioning them next to each other in different ways, Koons' work arguably calls attention to these racist insinuations. The idea of professional basketball as a means of social mobility and escape for many poor African-Americans, who were often otherwise confined to housing projects, was emphasized in the arrangement of the posters. *Board Room,* for example, seemed to suggest that the only way African Americans would ever reach a comparable level of success as a corporate board member was through basketball. The ad relied on a certain level of irony in visualizing a group of mostly African-American men posing as successful members of the board of a

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[295]See Hall's discussion of these concepts in the domain of advertising; Hall, *Representation,* 229-39.
[296] Siegel, "Equilibrium," 148.
[297] Ibid.

corporation. Moreover, as works that were purchased by members of the upper class who could afford them, Koons' *Equilibrium* series linked two very diverse worlds.[298] Koons commented on the series as follows: "I looked at the athletes in those posters as representing the artists of the moment, and the idea that we were using art for social mobility the way other ethnic groups have used sports. We were middle-class white kids using art to move up into another social class."[299] Works from Koons' *Equilibrium* series reminded viewers of the situation of some African-Americans.

Steinbach's sculptures implicitly conducted a somewhat similar socio-economic analysis through the selection of objects and their evocation of cultural associations. His work focused on examining the terms and conditions surrounding different types of objects. Steinbach's sculpture, *Untitled* (cabbage, pumpkin pitchers) #1, 1986, presented a distinctive, low-brow sensibility that causes tensions when examined alongside the high-brow definition of the work of art (Fig. 100). In this work, brown, black and red shelves display a cabbage-like soup tureen, stuffed pumpkin doll and three black water pitchers. The stuffed pumpkin doll stands as an example of kitsch, while the black design-conscious pitchers cater to a more middle-brow audience. The shelves are fabricated from plywood and covered with a plastic laminate. The brown shelf, covered with a faux-wood laminate typically used in low to middle-income housing construction, gives the work a tawdry appearance and feel. The inclusion of these mismatching items within the context of fine art is jolting, since some of these objects are usually seen in novelty stores or at garage sales. Likewise, Steinbach's *Untitled* (Stay with Friend's

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[298] Neo-Geo collector Michael Schwartz owns at least one of Koons' framed Nike advertisements.

[299] Koons, interview by Haden-Guest, in Angelika Muthesius, ed., *Jeff Koons*, 19.

Kellogg's) 1B, 1986, paired three boxes of Kellogg's Corn Flakes with a small collection of urns (Fig. 101). The archaic look of the urns suggests that they are perhaps valuable treasures from an archeological dig. As potential remnants from an ancient civilization, the urns testify to a set of cultural and sociological circumstances surrounding a particular region and its inhabitants. Kellogg's Corn Flakes, however, conjure up associations with those states situated in the Corn Belt, such as Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri, where corn has been the predominant agricultural crop since the mid-1800's. The juxtaposition of an everyday food item, such as cereal, with potential remnants of an ancient civilization ironically calls attention to the low value of the everyday food stuffs compared to the high value of the art object. It also raises questions on which aspects of our current society will be remembered and preserved in the coming centuries. By including low value items within the context of fine art, Steinbach's work called attention to the value of culture and art within contemporary society.

Likewise, Meyer Vaisman's *The Uffizi Portrait*, 1987, commented on the commodificiation of fine art by including a self-portrait drawn by a street artist outside the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy (Fig. 102). Costing only a modest sum per drawing, street portraiture is accessible to a wide public, while Vaisman's work was purchased for a much higher price in fine art galleries, such as Sonnabend. The inclusion of this inexpensive drawing in Vaisman's work raises questions on the value of fine art and the difference between these two works and the two artists' mode of practice. The background of the painting depicts an image of magnified canvas weave that was applied using a photomechanical silkscreen process. The enlarged weave pattern gives the work a cheap, inauthentic quality that debases the notion of art as a precious, hand-crafted

object. Vaisman's work provides a tongue-in-cheek criticism of fine art and the role of connoisseurship in determining the value of a work.

Similar to Neo-Geo, Pop artists integrated references to earlier artists and movements in their work in an ironic manner. Neo-Geo's art historical references were used in a deconstructive manner that related to the writings of French theorists that circulated during the late 1970's and early 1980's. But for many Pop artists, the references to previous "masters" of art history amounted to less a theoretical gesture than a commentary on the integration of high art into the domain of everyday life. For example, Lichtenstein ironically aggrandized the putative heroism of Expressionism's brushstrokes in *Little Big Painting*, 1965, turning de Kooning-like gestural spontaneity into a precise rendering using thick lines and Ben-Day dots (Fig. 103). The decisive quality of Lichtenstein's brushstroke was contrary to the free-flowing spirit of Abstract Expressionism and ironically poked fun at it. Lichtenstein reduced the Abstract Expressionist style of painting into a sign of the movement or into a low-brow type of art that was associated with comic books and popular culture. Sandler linked Lichtenstein's factual style of painting and denial of painterly touch with the depersonalized character of commodity culture and advertising at the time.[300] Lichtenstein wanted his paintings "to look programmed and impersonal," similar to the work of the erstwhile Minimalist painter Frank Stella.[301] The changing socio-political and cultural environment impacted the work of these artists and their mode of painting.

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[300] Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s*, 149.
[301] Quoted in Glaser, "Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Warhol," 22. Sandler, "American Art of the 1960's," 149.

Whiting pointed out that by including mass reproductions of famous paintings in his work, Wesselmann essentially equated high art with consumer culture. In *Great American Nude #6*, 1961, Wesselmann alludes to Matisse with his freely-drawn female figure loosely reminiscent of those found in works such as Matisse's *The Dance*, 1908 (Fig. 104). The woman reclines with one arm behind her back in a manner similar to Matisse's odalisques during his Nice period. Wesselmann's rendering of floral wallpaper and an intricate oriental carpet support this connection. A portrait by Amedeo Modigliani hangs in the background. In *Still Life #31*, 1963, Wesselmann includes an image of a famous portrait of George Washington painted by early American painter Gilbert Stuart (Fig. 105). An arrangement of fruit and flowers on the table below is taken from a Matisse still life painting. In *Great American Nude #48*, Wesselmann included a reproduction of Matisse's painting, *Plum Blossom, Green Background* of 1948 in its entirety. Whiting comments, "Famous paintings in Wesselmann's interiors took the guise of posters or postcards, and as reproductions, these high-art images lost their status as unique objects above the economic fray. Indeed, posters and postcards blurred the line between commerce and art because they transformed modernist icons into reproductions disseminated on a mass scale."[302] Wesselmann's *Still Life #20*, 1962 supports this point with its depiction of a painting by Mondrian placed within a kitchen and located directly above images of an assortment of food items with brand names, including a Diet Lite loaf of bread, a glass of Coca-Cola and a bottle of Ballantine Ale. Actual containers of S.O.S. pads, Ajax and other cleaning items rest on a shelf next to the reproduction (Fig. 106). The viewer feels compelled to draw connections between the clear-cut geometric style of

[302] Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 69.

Mondrian's work and the brand labels. Mondrian's painting was placed on a par with all other commodities. Comparable to Levine's *After* works, Wesselmann inserted himself into the canon of art history through a type of artistic appropriation by reproducing paintings by, in his case, Mondrian, Modigliani and Matisse.

The type of attitude toward novelty, kitsch and consumer culture that animated Wesselmann's work carried over into Neo-Geo art. Koons' and Steinbach's work in particular referenced Minimalist sculpture and equated it with commodity fetishism. Steinbach's shelves referenced Judd's early plywood boxes and stacked sculptures. Neo-Geo artists were informed by Pop art's manipulation of the signs of commodity culture in their work. In his *Pre-New* series, Koons also removed kitchen appliances from their habitual context and bolted or glued them to fluorescent lights. In *Nelson Automatic Cooker/Deep Fryer*, 1979 a deep fryer was attached to the front of two translucent plastic tubes housing vertical fluorescent bulbs, which in turn are attached to the wall (Fig.107). Electrical cords, which can be switched on and off, hang from the bottom of the bulbs. The white light from the bulbs reflects the shiny new metal of the fryer and emphasizes its clean, pristine quality. As a testament to its newness, the fryer's black cord is neatly wrapped and hangs out several inches from the side of the machine. The controls invite manipulation since they are directly facing the viewer.

Similarly, *New Excellence Refrigerator*, 1979-80, showed a small, cube-shaped refrigerator hanging from the front of two vertical fluorescent bulbs (Fig. 108). Although Koons' kitchen appliances were taken directly from the store, the *Pre-New* sculptures caused the viewer to notice the small differences that distinguish his commodities from those seen on store shelves. The juxtaposition of the new fryer and the refrigerator with

the bulbs was visually jarring. The appliances hung precariously from the bulbs in a very simple, yet strange manner that does not resemble their typical display in a store. In contrast to Wesselmann, these ordinary appliances appeared to be exalted by their placement on the bulbs. The light provided a fluorescent glow, forming a quasi-halo around the objects. Koons transformed these inexpensive items into quasi-sacred objects that exuded a religiosity loosely reminiscent of religious icons. At the same time, the *Pre-New* series provided a literal depiction of commodity fetishism. The embellished objects demonstrate, in a way, the value placed on consumer goods, new technologies and brand names. Working with three-dimensional objects allowed Steinbach and Koons to penetrate the world of commodity fetishism in a way that undermines the objects' typical role in society. The objects maintain a tangible presence and connection to reality that is not possible in two-dimensional imagery.

In the post-war era, new technologies in household appliances and the introduction of processed foods were hailed as innovations that drastically improved women's lives. In the 1959 Kitchen Debate at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, Vice-President Nixon celebrated the advancements made in the cultural and domestic realm under Capitalism in a discussion with the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. According to Nixon, the U.S. dominated Communist Russia because of its ability to produce commodities such as lawnmowers, hi-fi stereos, washing machines and other devices that would improve the populace's standard of living. Koons' work from the 1980's might be seen as recalling such idealistic moments in the crux of the free enterprise system in the United States.

In 1963, Sandler labeled Pop art's detachment and distance from the self "Cool Art."[303] Sandler comments: "During the last five or six years, a growing number of young artists have rejected the premises of Abstract Expressionism…The upshot of this approach has been an art so dead-pan, so devoid of signs of emotion, that I have called it cool art."[304] The cool attitude of the sixties distinguished itself from the humanist, ethically-minded, and spiritually committed art of the post-war era by way of its realistic reflection of everyday life. While Pollock's drip paintings such as *White Light*, 1954, conveyed an expressionistic display of the artist's sense of self, Lichtenstein hand-painted scenes placed images from popular comic books within the context of high art (Fig. 109). Lichtenstein's method consisted of creating a small sketch based on a comic book image, then magnifying and projecting it on to canvas. Finally, Lichtenstein traced the larger projected image and painted it.[305] The varied degrees of intermixing the artist's hand and the machine in Warhol and Lichtenstein's work signaled a new approach to the traditional notion of creativity.[306] Sandler considered Lichtenstein and Warhol to be "the most notorious of the cool artists" because of the mechanical look and feel of their work.[307] Although done laboriously by hand, Lichtenstein's work, in a sense, replicated the printing technique widespread in cheap books and magazines in his day with his exaggerated replication of Ben-Day dots. Warhol called his studio "The Factory" and

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[303] Irving Sandler, "The New Cool-Art," *Art in America* 53, no. 1 (February 1965): 96.
[304] Sandler, *American Art of the 1960's*, 60.
[305] Lobel, *Image Duplicator*, 13.
[306] Lobel argues that Warhol frequently used techniques that distanced the hand of the artist from the creation of his works. Caroline Jones emphasized Warhol's desire for a managerial role in his studio. See Ibid., 26; and Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artis*t (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 264.
[307] Sandler, "The New Cool-Art," 99.

employed a number of assistants to assist in the fabrication of his silk-screens, lithographs, and films. Bickerton's exact rendering of logos and brand names continued this mechanical aesthetic to an exaggerated degree.

Sandler also called attention to the simulative quality of Pop art in a way that might evoke also some strategies of Neo-Geo work. He commented:

> non-transformation, it seems to me, is precisely the point. It enables Warhol, for the first time in history, to produce an utterly impassive representational art. If seen in a supermarket window display, Warhol's sculptures of Brillo boxes would be unnoticeable. But exhibited as art in a gallery, they shock, for by presenting objects that resemble non-art as art, Warhol calls into question traditional definitions of art…In adopting a non-transformation as an artistic strategy, Warhol and Lichtenstein have come up with a novel solution to a problem which has occupied artists for more than a century: how to stress the reality of subject-matter and of the work of art at the same time. Their answer: make them as indistinguishable as possible.[308]

Similar to Danto, Sandler sees much of Pop art as indistinguishable from daily life and views this as its primary characteristic. For example, Wesselmann's *Great American Nude* series, 1962-64, putatively portrayed its subject matter in a manner that reflected the cultural materialism of everyday life. In this series, the female figure is treated in a comparable manner to contemporary advertising. A sexualized, yet depersonalized woman is surrounded by objects of everyday life. At the same time, however, these artists' work did contain a transformative quality, since they aesthetically manipulated the elements or objects sampled from daily life. Lichtenstein's paintings were not direct reproductions of comic books, but were instead, hand-painted scenes from these popular sources. Similarly, Wesselmann's paintings integrated real and painted objects in diverse ways. In *Bathtub Nude Number 3*, 1963, viewers were confronted with a real bathroom rug, door, light switch, shower curtain and tiled wall that might have resembled their own

[308] Ibid., 101.

(Fig. 110). Some of the painted elements, such as the bathroom tiles, were created in *trompe l'oeil* style in order to look realistic. The artist's figure of a woman drying off, however, is painted with little physical details except for her lips and genitals. Warhol, for aesthetic reasons, began to construct his *Brillo Boxes* out of wood, which differed from the store-bought versions made from cardboard. Warhol, Wesselmann, Lichtenstein, and later, the Neo-Geo artists, confused the boundaries between art and everyday life by sampling materials and items from commercial culture and by combining mundane life and aesthetics in new and different ways. These artists continued to examine the evolving definitions of a work of art and to explore the intermingling of art and society.

In 1964, Robert Indiana commented: "Pop is everything art hasn't been for the past two decades. It is basically a U-turn back to representational visual communication."[309] For Wesselmann and for other Pop artists, this return to representational painting translated to a reflection of aspects of everyday life. Wesselmann's paintings demonstrated the cult of the new in an era that called for the fabrication of new product models, colors and designs at an ever-increasing pace. Architects and designers of middle-income housing projects such as Levittown, Pennsylvania, introduced new spatial plans and modifications that called for new types of furniture and appliances. Partially open-plans of houses became popular and furniture had to newly accommodate a lack of walls separating the living and dining rooms or sometimes, the kitchen.[310] Appliance manufacturers introduced new features and designs for kitchens and bathrooms. Colored refrigerators, stoves and sinks were available for the

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[309] G. R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art? Interviews by G. R. Swenson," *ARTnews* 62, no. 7 (February 1964): 27.
[310] Hine, *Populuxe,* 20.

first time. In *Bathtub Nude Number 3*, the bright turquoise tub and matching laundry hamper evoke this transition in home furnishings, as does the pink refrigerator and sink in *Still Life Number 30*, 1963. Magazines such as *House Beautiful* introduced variations of color schemes and "colors of the year." Hine explains that many of the colors introduced in interior decoration magazines, which were used for home furnishings, stemmed from Technicolor television and movies.[311] (Color television did not gain popularity in the United States until the 1960's.)

Similar to the Neo-Geo artists, Pop artists were aware of and concerned with the cultural materialism of their time. Rosenquist commented:

> I'm amazed and excited and fascinated about the way things are thrust at us. [We are] attacked by radio and television and visual communications…at such a speed and with such force that painting…now seem[s] very old-fashioned…Painting is probably more exciting than advertising—so why shouldn't it be done with that power and gusto, with that impact.[312]

In a statement for the *Situation and Spaces* exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery, Oldenburg stated:

> I am for an art that is political-erotical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum…I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top. I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary. I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself…I am for Kool-art, 7-UP art, Pepsi-art, Sunshine-art, 39-cents art, 15 cents art, Vatronol art, Dro-bomb art, Vam art, Menthol art, L&M art, Ex-Lax art…[313]

Thus, like many other artists of this period associated with the Neo-Dada and Pop movements, Oldenburg and Rosenquist both expressed a desire to change the conventions

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[311] Ibid.
[312] Swenson, "What is Pop Art?," 63.
[313] Claes Oldenburg, "Documents from The Store" (1961), in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory* , 744-747

of the work of art from a static to a dynamic object that is embroiled within the sometimes messy and complicated structures of daily life. By reeling off a long list of recognizable brand names, Oldenburg appeared to acknowledge the confines of commodity culture in a very tongue-in-cheek manner.

Twenty years later, Bickerton, perhaps referencing Oldenburg's well-known statement, described his Susie boxes as angrily asserting that the "art object, whether it wants to or not, must sit its ass on the wall and belligerently proclaim meaning." In 1986, Jeff Koons described the impetus behind his work as follows:

> I'm interested in the morality of what it means to be an artist…And my next concern is my actions, the responsibility of my own actions with regard to other artists, then to a wider range of the art audience, such as critics, museum people, collectors, etc. Art to me is a humanitarian act…I love the gallery, the arena of representation. It's a commercial world, and morality is based generally around economics, and that's taking place in the art gallery. I like the tension of accessibility and inaccessibility, and the morality in the art gallery. I believe that my art gets across the point that I'm in this morality theatre trying to help the under-dog, and I'm speaking socially here, showing concern and making psychological and philosophical statements for the underdog.[314]

Faced with the in-built constraints of the work of art as a saleable object, Neo-Geo artists continued to experiment with these limitations in new and different ways.

During the 1970's and 80's, the baby boomer and hippie generation of the 1960's grew up and joined the work force. The pressure to expand economic markets incited an uninhibited growth of consumption. At the same time, advertisement campaigns became more sophisticated and less tied to one particular radio or television program. Gary Cross argued that the countercultural events of the 1960's and its emphasis on nonconformity and individualism were eventually assimilated by the media to a specific advertising strategy. For example, car advertisements in the late 1960's focused on

[314] Ottman, "Jeff Koons," 18-19.

inciting a rebellious attitude among buyers. The 1970's were sometimes called the "me decade" and were characterized by a loss of idealism among youth and a rise in business, medicine, journalism and law majors among college students, who were attracted to the promise of high-paying jobs. During the 1960's and 70's, the concept of the retail chain developed, expanded, and became a part of everyday life for most Americans. Stores located in downtown areas opened much larger spaces in the suburbs. It became common for stores to buy in bulk in order to keep prices down. Large-scale department stores were slowly replaced by shopping malls, which dramatically changed the nature of the traditional market center. As Cross explained, malls were privately controlled social spaces that lacked a mixing of social, public, and commercial activities.[315] Shopping malls were typically located some distance from residential zones, promoting a controlled, artificial space of pure consumerism.

By 1980, there were far more cars, ads, and credit cards and many more ways of expressing oneself through material goods than there had been in 1960. Within this environment of excess, some argued that an autonomous, distanced critique was no longer possible. In a discussion of Levine's and Lawson's work in 1982, art critic Carter Ratcliff commented: "American art is largely a matter of transforming resentments felt toward the culture at large into privileged emblems of that very resentment…in the naïve hope that the result is somehow a defeat for corporate 'depersonalization.' "[316] Ratcliff placed art of the 1980's within the same trajectory as Pop and Minimalist art of the 1960's. In his view, art of the 1960's is characterized by a reaction to Greenbergian aesthetics and the influx of low-brow culture into the domain of art. Ratcliff added: "At

[315] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*, l71-72.
[316] Carter Ratcliff, "Art and Resentment," *Art in America* 70, no. 6 (Summer 1982): 9.

best, 60's absolutism was an unconscious expression of the resentment from which it tried to flee. Its apodictic 'truths' were sullenly, high flown reworkings of those glamorous, endlessly dubious images which consumer culture endows with such authority." Ratcliff cited Levine and Lawson as artists who "question the ties of the artwork to intention, the intention of the world; artists whose images hint at the way in which 'serious' artistic endeavor is implicated in the consumer world against which 'seriousness' sets itself."[317] But Pop and Neo-Geo artists' reactions to consumer culture appeared to be less about resentment than about a willingness to experiment with and to manipulate the terms of commodity capitalism in a more direct performance of insider critique.

In the 1980's, inflation, coupled with a burgeoning art market, boosted the prices of art to a level that had never been seen before. Auction houses also gained increasing power as buyers and sellers of major works of art. In 1987, for example, Van Gogh's *Irises*, 1889, fetched a record price of $53.9 million dollars at Sotheby's.[318] In 1988, Leo Castelli commented in an interview with Ratcliff:

> Of course, you must allow for inflation in judging these things. But there has been another inflation, an art-inflation, over the past three decades that has raised prices in actual terms. Only real estate is comparable…The public has begun to look at prices rather than paintings. In the beginning, when my gallery was small, I sold works for $500 to $1200. Now I am not astonished when I sell one for $1 million.[319]

In the 1980's, auction houses such as Sotheby's began to compete with galleries in the contemporary art market and began lending money to collectors who used their art as

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[317] Ibid.
[318] Carter Ratcliff, "The Marriage of Art and Money," *Art in America* 76, no. 7 (July 1988): 81; Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 425.
[319] Ratcliff, "The Marriage of Art and Money," 78.

equity.[320] In 1983, for example, a painting by Schnabel, worth just $3000 in 1979, sold at Sotheby's for $93,500. Similarly, Bleckner's painting, *One Wish*, 1986, originally sold for $30,000, came up at auction two years after it was created and was sold again for $187,000.[321] Investing in art became a big business in the 1980's. Competition among collectors, along with inflation, brought prices to record highs. At the same time, art was considered a safe method of investment and speculation. As they generally did with stocks, collectors attempted to buy low and sell high.

Irving Sandler has written on the increasing importance of hype to the 1980's art market, where discussion and gossip among critics, dealers, artists, collectors and other participants helped establish the level of prices at auctions.[322] In 1988, Jeffrey Deitch, then a Vice President of Citibank and initiator of the company's art advisory services, commented: "There is certainly the perception that hype itself is perhaps the most important new medium in the corporate world as well as in the art world. The process of promotion, the selling, the culturalization of art ideas and images has become an art form itself."[323] The art media's coverage of auction results produced sought-after information about the current market stars and their worth. Deitch characterized the rise of the art market and the differences in the art world from the 1960's to the 1980's as follows:

> Fifteen years ago, people didn't expect that there was always going to be a secondary market, even for works by a great artist. If you bought a Carl Andre work you had to buy it just because you believed in it. You couldn't buy it because you thought you could resell it for a profit, or even because you thought you could get your money out of it. Very few collectors thought that way. Now there's this expectation among art collectors that

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[320] Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 427.
[321] Decker, "Inside the Art Market," 130-33.
[322] Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 425-55.
[323] Ibid., 431; and Jeffrey Deitch and Martin Guttman, "Art and Corporations," *Flash Art* (*International Edition*), no. 139 (March/April 1988): 79.

you deserve to get your money back out of everything you buy--at least.[324]

In addition to these changes, a professionalization of the artist also took place, as artists increasingly graduated from MFA programs. Artists had a greater opportunity to make a living from their artwork or to teach in art programs.

In 1986 Halley commented: "For me, I see the yielding of the social as a way of getting deeper inside the social, and a lot of younger artists I know do that too."[325] Halley's comment referred to Neo-Geo's strategy of complicit defiance, which was putatively viewed as both supporting and criticizing commodity capitalism. Halley later elaborated on this sentiment stating, "Rather than fight the culture, you allow the culture in as much as possible. That act of non-judgemental embrace can flip around to become a critical act."[326] These artists continued to acknowledge and to study the pervasiveness of capitalism by reading the then-current theories and writings of post-strucuralist writers, such as Baudrillard, Jameson or Deleuze. In many ways, Neo-Geo artists continued Pop's blurring of the boundaries between high and low. Similar to Pop, Neo-Geo artists were inundated with ever-expanding forms of media imagery, persuasive advertising and the cult of the new. Pop and Minimalism's socio-political interactions during the 1960's turned into a more pointed social-cultural critique by the 1980's, by the Pictures and Neo-Geo artists who questioned the media's smooth presentation of reality and its illusion of transparency.

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[324] Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 433; and Gilda Williams, "Jeffrey Deitch," *Flash Art* (*International Edition*), no. 153 (Summer 1990): 169.
[325] Cone, "Peter Halley," 38.
[326] Kathryn Hixson, "Interview with Peter Halley," in *Peter Halley: Oeuvres de 1982 à 1991,* 20.

Neo-Geo artists came of age in a period when theories of post-structuralism, post-industrialism and globalism thrived, and in many ways, concretized the social and economic changes that had begun in the 1950's and 60's. The New York art market and gallery sector, which was just beginning to flourish in the 1960's, was completely burgeoning by the 1980's. A debate surrounding mass culture and the avant-garde once again came to the forefront as a result. In comparison to Pop, the content and the socio-cultural implications of Neo-Geo work were amplified within this atmosphere. By this time, questions concerning the modernist goal of establishing art's autonomy and the avant-garde's oppositional political role within a capitalistic society were put forth by the most vocal art historians and critics. Neo-Geo artists responded by creating work that addressed these issues, at once acknowledging and manipulating the commodity status of their work. They accepted the inevitability of the age of consumerism and worked within its boundaries to formulate new perspectives, as the Pop artists did twenty years earlier. But innovative ideas in literary and cultural theory provided Neo-Geo artists with different strategies for unpacking the commodity culture of the 1980's in a subversive manner.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEO-GEO'S RELATION TO COLOR FIELD, MINIMALISM AND CONCEPTUALISM

In this chapter, I continue to explore Neo-Geo's art historical past and its connections to Color Field, Minimalism and Conceptualism of the 1950's, 1960's and 70's. While Neo-Geo artists were influenced by French Structuralist and Post-structuralist theory, they built aesthetically upon the techniques of Conceptualism and the possibilities inherent in the break-down of the work of art into systems of language. Neo-Geo's commentary on the socio-economic culture of the 1980's was rooted in the work of Conceptualists John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and Sol LeWitt, and in their methods of engaging the mind of the viewer. Conceptual art in the U.S. began in the early 1960's with the emergence of the Fluxus group in New York. It also stemmed in part from Minimalism's often intellectually, rigorous approach, and from artists such as Le Witt, who created cubic and geometric sculptures based on mathematical systems. Key participants and publications in the Conceptual movement included Le Witt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," 1967, and Kosuth's 1969 "Art after Philosophy."[327]

Cognition became the driving principle behind Conceptualist work, which minimized aesthetic experience in favor of an idea as the force behind artistic creation.

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[327] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 10 (June 1967): 79-83; LeWitt, 'Sentences on Conceptual Art', *Art Language* 1 (May 1969): 11; Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy(1969) ," in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory* , 852-61.

LeWitt's wall drawings, for example, relied on the artist's initial creative plan, which was carried out by a number of assistants. Thus, LeWitt's *Plan for a Wall Drawing*, 1969, consisted of paper instructions for an ephemeral wall drawing that was executed by Adrian Piper, Jerry Orter and LeWitt at Paula Cooper Gallery on May 20, 1969 (Fig. 111). The design was composed of a rigid organization of straight, intersecting lines. More than one decade later Neo-Geo artists continued to place an emphasis on the idea behind a work of art in their referencing of previous styles and movements. Neo-Geo artists emphasized the role of these formal elements and styles as art historical signs, rather than focusing on the aesthetic impulses driving these prior generations of artists and movements.

Neo-Geo artists also exaggerated and played off of the principle techniques of Minimalism, very much aware of the history of this movement as entailing a simplified, often geometrically-founded artistic style that relied on industrial materials and their potential connotations. For example, Judd's *Untitled*, 1968 consisted of a rectangular box fabricated with blue Plexiglas and stainless steel. Likewise, Flavin's *Alternate Diagonals* (Monument to Donald Judd), 1963, composed of a simple fluorescent light bulb, relied on the physicality of the bulb and the diffused light it provided for its overall signification and meaning (Figs. 41, 42). Halley, Koons, Bickerton, and Steinbach augmented the ambiguities attaching to Minimalist sculpture in ways that allowed for an at once formal and social commentary. Stella used Day-Glo colors in his paintings in the 1960's and so did Halley twenty years later. After Judd forged a position for his work within the canon of art history in part through his commentary and writings, Halley

attempted this as well, publishing articles in *Arts Magazine*.[328] In comparison to Stella or Judd, however, Halley's colors are not only bright, but practically blinding. Halley also did not simply write about contemporary art and art history, he theorized and aggrandized it.[329] Minimalists, such as Judd, often had their work industrially fabricated in order to replicate the high-quality look and regular feel of industrial production.[330] Judd's early work was produced by the Bernstein Brothers Sheet Metal Specialties, Long Island City, NY; Treitel-Gratz, Long Island City, NY; and Milgo Industrial (now Milgo/Bufkin), Brooklyn, NY. Bickerton, Koons and Steinbach continued this practice, accentuating the role of their art works as cultural objects in an ironic and exaggerated manner. Stella's enamel house paint and the linear, geometric surface of his *Black Paintings* emphasized the object-like quality of his work. Halley achieved this by creating his own rigid formal vocabulary of cells and conduits and by applying Roll-a-Tex to the surface of his paintings. Rooted within an amalgamation of art historical sources, Neo-Geo culled aspects of many different movements in the creation of a diverse body of work. As I argue, in what follows, Neo-Geo's pastiche and parody of art historical periods and styles built upon the artistic vocabulary advanced by Minimalists like Judd and Stella, at the same time as it advanced its own creative impulses.

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[328] See Halley, *Collected Essays.*

[329] See, for example, Halley's notion of the impact of abstraction and geometry in modernism in "The Crisis in Geometry" and "Against Postmodernism: Reconsidering Ortega," in *Collected Essays*.

[330] For a brief history of industrial fabrication and artistic practice from the 1960's to the present, see Michele Kuo, "Industrial Revolution: Michele Kuo on the History of Fabrication," *Artforum* 46, no. 2 (October 2007): 306-15, 396.

Neo-Geo, Minimalism and Form

The Minimalists straddled a fine line between fine art and "good design," to use Greenberg's terminology, in ways that allowed for the social to creep into readings of their work. The Minimalists grappled with many issues concerning the making, materials, and reception of their art. In 1967, Greenberg commented: "Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today--including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper…The continuing infiltration of Good Design into what purports to be advanced and high-brow art now depresses sculpture as it does painting."[331] Arising in the years following World War II, the concept of Good Design was promoted by the Museum of Modern Art in a series of exhibitions from 1944 to 1956, which displayed a range of household objects, appliances, textiles and graphics by prominent designers such as Marcel Breuer, Charles and Ray Eames and Eero Saarinen. MoMA also held competitions among designers for printed textiles in 1946, low-cost furniture in 1948 and lighting in 1950. Greenberg's use of the term draws connections between Minimalist works, domestic furnishings and popular taste.[332]

The Minimalists' experimentation with materials and formal techniques engendered a strong object-like quality to their work that was read by Greenberg as representing a removal of aesthetics and a decline in high quality, a response comparable to that later drawn by Neo-Geo work. Minimalism's sleek, simple lines and fabricated

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[331] Greenberg, "The Recentness of Sculpture," in *Minimalism*, 234.

[332] The Museum of Modern Art mounted the exhibition "What was Good Design? MoMA's Message, 1944-56" from May 6-November 30, 2009. See "MoMA Revisits What 'Good Design' Was Over 50 Years Later," press release, April 29, 2009, Museum of Modern Art, New York, http://press.moma.org/images/press/gooddesign/GoodDesign_Release.pdf (accessed January 16, 2011).

appearance prompted confusion among many viewers and critics, who questioned the quality and status of these works as fine art objects. Minimalism's use of rudimentary, found systems of order served as a means of eliminating any gestural components in art. This artistic vocabulary was built upon the theories of gestalt, as well as an investigation of the integrity of materials. Stella's *Black* and *Aluminum Paintings* evoked a strong sense of repetition and logical order with their precisely measured lines and symmetrical forms. Le Witt's *Serial Project No. 1* was similarly fabricated according to an intricate system and permutation of open and closed cubes. Stella and Le Witt's works explored the artistic possibilities of enamel paint and aluminum and relied on the perception of the interstitial spaces between the lines and the cubes, respectively.

In fact, the Minimalists themselves did not necessarily or invariably view their work as fine art. In a 1964 interview with Bruce Glaser, Flavin and Stella, Judd explained the extent to which their work had broken away from European painting and sculptural traditions. Judd commented:

> There's an enormous break between that work [European geometric painting, such as Mondrian or Victor Vasarly] and other work present in the U.S., despite similar patterns or anything. The scale itself is just one thing to pin down. Vasarely's work had a smaller scale and a great deal of composition and qualities that European geometric painting of the 1920's and 30's had. He is part of a continuous development and he was doing it himself then.[333]

In the above commentary, Judd expressed his view of art as a linear history that had been disrupted by his own work and other formal approaches of 1960's, which conflated the boundaries between painting and sculpture. In the same interview, Judd commented; "I'm totally uninterested in European Art and I think it's over with…Old Master painting

[333] Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd" (1964), in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, 148-64.

has a great reputation for being profound, universal and all that, and it isn't necessarily."[334] Beginning in the post-war era, easel painting had been replaced by experimentation with forms, scale and materials. Pop, Happenings and Minimalist artists took their subjects, forms and techniques in part from everyday life. Oldenburg and Wesselmann created work that commented on commodity culture, while Judd, Flavin and Andre produced sculptures fabricated from industrial or commercial materials. In interviews and in his 1965 "Specific Objects" essay, Judd openly implied that his work helped create a new and needed artistic vocabulary for contemporary practice in the 1960's.[335] Judd saw his work as operating within a new set of open-ended rules concerning the definition of art and art-making. However, in 1966, in an interview with Barbara Rose and Judd, Marc di Suvero claimed that Judd did not qualify as an artist, since his work was not hand-crafted, but produced by industrial fabricators. Judd defended himself, commenting, "The point is not whether one makes a work oneself or not. The point is that it's all a case of technique that makes the thing visible, so that I don't see in the long run why one technique is any more essentially art than another technique."[336] For Judd, the question of whether a work of art was hand-produced played a secondary role to the artist's creative concepts and the materialization of this concept using the latest techniques and materials.

In the 1964 interview with Bruce Glaser, Stella spoke openly in favor of the object quality of his work, commenting:

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[334] Ibid.
[335] Judd, "Specific Objects."
[336] Quoted in Barbara Rose, Mark di Suvero, Donald Judd, Kynaston McShine, and Robert Morris, "Symposium on the New Sculpture" (1966), in Meyer, ed., *Minimalism*, 220-21.

> My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is he's doing. He is making a thing…All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without confusion….What you see is what you see.[337]

In this famous citation, Stella proposed to strip painting down to its essential components. In a way, Judd and Stella's no-frills, unromantic and direct attitudes toward the work of art were continued by Neo-Geo work. Stella's open admission of painting's status as an object allowed for an increased emphasis on the strictly formal and material aspects of his work. By stripping painting and sculpture down to what they conceived as its bare essentials, Stella and Judd were able to construct a new process of art-making, in which the artist played the role of fabricator, more than creator. Minimalism straddled the fine line between art and object in ways that allowed these works to be interpreted on the basis of socio-cultural as well as formal characteristics.

Neo-Geo artists built upon these prominent characteristics of Minimalism. It is difficult to think about Halley, for example, without entertaining multiple, conflicting ideas concerning the formal qualities of his art, its market status during the 80's and 90's and finally, the ambitious social dimension of his writings. One one hand, Halley can be considered the quintessential postmodern artist due to his manipulation and recycling of art historical signifiers in a new, contemporary manner. The bright squares and thick lines in Halley's *Yellow Cell with Conduit*, 1985, honored his Color Field and Minimalist predecessors (Fig. 112). Recognizable in his works were the traces of artists now considered to be the forefathers and fathers of Minimalism. Newman and Reinhardt as well as Judd and Stella emanated from his work like the ghosts of art history past. On the

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[337] Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd" (1964), in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, 149.

other hand, the geometric motifs found in Halley's paintings contained strategic socio-cultural connotations, in as much as he framed them as schematically representing the underlying structures of postmodern society. Halley built upon the example of his Color Field and Minimalist predecessors with a view to creating paintings that functioned on a formal as well as social level.

The bright thick lines in Halley's *Yellow Cell* were reminiscent of Newman's zips in paintings such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, 1950-51 (Fig. 3). When Newman's work appeared in the 1965 Sao Paolo Biennial with Judd, Poons, Stella, Irwin and Bell, he appeared to be the forerunner of a new formal movement, not yet known as Minimalism. The connections between Newman's work and Minimalism were again emphasized in his 1971 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Measuring eighteen feet long and eight feet high, the red fields of color in *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* declared the wide, expansive space of the canvas as the subject of the work. Newman's aesthetic had the goal of liberating painting from the constraints of beauty and European tradition. Without any notion of foreground or background, the vertical zip sliced through the flat, red fields of color. Yet Newman's work not was meant to be purely abstract. A self-described anarchist, Newman's paintings represented the artist's visual response to the political terror of the 1930's and 40's: the rise of Nazism and the dropping of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. By his own accounts, his works, in a way, encapsulated these historical events and their socio-political implications. In a deliberately rhetorical statement of 1962, Newman explained that his paintings promoted the "assertion of

freedom" and "the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism."[338] Newman's commentary seemed, in part, to reaffirm the heroic ambitions of Abstract Expressionist painting, which by the early 1960's, had already been somewhat displaced by Neo-Dada, Happenings and Pop art. Some Neo-Geo artists, such as Halley, took up a comparably lofty set of goals in the face of the death of painting rhetoric of the 1970's and 80's.

Continuing along these lines, Halley's paintings represented a subtle critique of commodity capitalism and its pervasive structure. The lines in Halley's work were supposed to stand for conduits, which support underlying informational and structural components of contemporary society. The geometric structure of *Yellow Cell with Conduit* generally referenced the technology boom of the 1970's and 80's, which facilitated newer, more prolific forms of advertising and business. Halley's forms pointed to the integrated circuit components of computer systems, such as the memory blocks, logic, and input/output pads on computer chips, or the linear grid structure of many major U.S. cities, which are organized into streets and blocks (Figs. 113, 114). What Halley called his cells and conduits also referenced the late modernist architecture of the International Style, advanced by figures such as Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Philip Johnson (Fig. 115). These architects' emphasis on a stark, geometric style and exposed use of industrial materials, such as steel and glass, came to dominate city skylines in buildings such as, I.M. Pei's Hancock Place in Boston, 1977, or Skidmore, Owings and Merill's Saatchi and Saatchi World Headquarters building in New York, 1987. Similar to Newman's painting, *Yellow Cell* was also motivated by larger

[338] Dorothy Gees Seckler, "The Frontiers of Space [Interview with Barnett Newman]" (1962), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Knopf, 1990), 251.

ambitions: in Halley's case, to incite public awareness of the confining, underlying structures of industrialized society and commodity capitalism.

Halley's *Day-Glo Prison*, 1981, demonstrated a formal irony through the use of materials and color (Fig. 116). Halley continued Minimalism's use of found systems of order and built upon it in a new, hyperbolized manner. The simple and sometimes modular forms of Minimalist painting and sculpture emphasized the formal and phenomenological relationships between segments, lines or parts. The squares in Halley's work functioned as a reminder of the breakthroughs made to the modernist and postmodernist grid found in works such as Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915; Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray*, 1921; Stella's *Fez* (2), 1964; or Le Witt's *Serial Project No.1*, 1966 (Figs. 37, 24, 117, 118). One year after graduating from Princeton University, Stella emerged on the New York art scene in 1959, in the Museum of Modern Art's *Sixteen Americans* exhibition with four of his *Black Paintings*, including, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II*, 1959 (Fig. 119). In this painting, concentric, thin white stripes consisting of reserved (unpainted) canvas form inverted U-shapes on the right and left sides of the work. Irving Sandler later noted that the geometric linearity of Stella's work seemed simple and boring at the time, when compared to the strong, gestural characteristics of much of New York School painting.[339] According to Sandler, after attending a Frank Stella talk at New York University in 1960, Robert Goldwater snapped, "That man is not an artist, he's a juvenile delinquent." [340] In the 1940's and 50's, Abstract Expressionist painting held a dominant presence in the art

[339] Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s*, 1.
[340] Ibid., 2.

scene. But, by 1959, three years after the death of Jackson Pollock, Abstract Expressionism seemed to have lost its avant-garde edge.

The rigid composition of Stella's *Marriage of Reason and Squalor* ironically responded to Abstract Expressionism and to Greenberg's ideas on flatness as the most desirable aspect of painting. In Sandler's view, the title of the work, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor,* spoke to the high position of the New York School and the new artistic styles of the so-called Neo-Dada, Pop, and Minimalist movements that threatened to displace its reputation as an avant-garde movement.[341] The title could suggest that a would-be partnership between the squalor of Abstract Expressionism's active, emotional brushstrokes--based in part in the Surrealist technique of automatic writing--and reason or rationalism could have resulted in Stella's geometrically organized paintings. Carl Andre, who shared a studio with Stella at the time, suggested the title of the work. Stella's process consisted of penciling in a strict arrangement of lines on raw canvas, then filling in the spaces with black house paint. Stella's new cerebral mode of painting pointed to the future of the medium among a new generation of artists, such as Brice Marden, or Robert Ryman. In opposition to the gestural quality of Abstract Expressionism, which focused on the hand of the artist, Stella's composition demonstrated a rigid linearity that advanced a logic of extreme precision. In a lecture at Pratt University in 1960, Stella discussed the problems inherent to painting and elaborated on his methods for addressing them. He commented:

> I had to do something about relational painting, i.e., the balancing of the various parts of the painting with and against each other. The obvious answer was symmetry—make it the same all over…The remaining problem was simply to find a method of paint application which followed

[341] Ibid., 6.

> and complemented the design solution. This was done by using the house painter's technique and tools.[342]

Halley's and Levine's paintings from the 1980's maintained the stark linearity, and simplicity of Stella's early work. Halley's concept of formal irony, in particular, purposefully imitated certain formal and material components found in Stella's Minimalist paintings. Halley's *Two Cells with Circulating Conduit*, 1986, displayed two squares lodged within a flat, monochrome background with lines or conduits departing from either or all sides (Fig. 2). Similar to Stella's *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, the formal structure of Halley's painting was composed on a thick stretcher using basic geometry, which gave the work an object-like quality. The two large, yellow cells sit side-by-side and are connected by lines departing from the top and bottom edge of the squares. The blue and red colors of the lines prevent them from being read as a single square unit. In Halley's work, symmetry played an equally important role in the structure of the canvas. Similar to Stella's work, Halley's painting is vertically, but not horizontally, symmetrical.

Levine's *Check* paintings relied on a terse symmetry and logic, with their block patterns of interspersed colored squares (Fig. 53). At the same time, Levine's works were created using a mixture of lead paint and encaustic. This gave the surface a thickness that, to reiterate, ironically referenced the Neo-Dada works of Johns. Levine's irony, however, was couched within a specific argument about art history and gender relations. Unlike Stella's work, Levine's *Check* paintings did not delve into new artistic territory, but instead loosely reused familiar forms and techniques vaguely reminiscent of earlier generations of artists. In 1986, Levine commented on the motivations behind her

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[342] Stella, "The Pratt Lecture" (1960), in *Minimalism*, 193.

work at the time as a response to the rise of Neo-Expressionism in the late 1970's and early 1980's:

> I felt angry at being excluded. As a woman, I felt that there was no room for me. There was all this representation, all this new painting, of male desire. The whole art system was geared to celebrating these objects of male desire. Where, as a woman artist, could I situate myself? What I was doing was making this explicit: how this oedipal relationship artists have with artists of the past gets repressed; and how I as a woman was only allowed to represent male desire.[343]

Levine's comments can be viewed more generally as a reaction to art history's failure to recognize the work of women artists.

The *Check* paintings continued the artist's research into the limited role of female painters in the canon of art history. Levine's self-deprecating act of referencing previous artists' works represented a reaction to the so-called death of painting rhetoric of the late 1970's and 1980's. In the same year, Levine commented on her stripe paintings as follows:

> I think of them as distillations of formalist, late modern paintings…They are stripe paintings, but I don't think they give you that kind of satisfaction—the closure, balance, harmony. There's the sense of things being all there, all sewed up, that you get from classic formalist painting. I wanted the ones I was making to be uneasy. They are about death in a way: the uneasy death of modernism…When I work, I project an ideal viewer, someone who knows the history of my work, who knows the things my work has been about.[344]

Unlike in Stella's striped works, the strict linear qualities of Levine's paintings were less about formality as such. For the knowledgeable viewer, Levine's *Checks* and *Stripes* were imbued with a larger art historical and socio-cultural significance. For Levine and other Neo-Geo artists, the terms of art history were examined through a targeted manipulation of previous styles and forms.

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[343] Gerald Marzorati, "Art in the (Re)making," *ARTnews* 85, no. 5 (May 1986): 97.
[344] Ibid., 96.

Greenberg and Fried called forth a restriction on the painting's formal terms in ways that isolated artists of the late 1960's and 70's from the social phenomena of the time. In his 1961 essay, "Modernist Painting," Greenberg discussed the role of flatness and medium specificity as important to painting's continuation. An avowal of the process and medium of painting was hailed by Greenberg as one of most important qualities of modern art. Stella's paintings were viewed by some critics as one response to a Greenbergian view of art history. His work excluded those elements Greenberg deemed unnecessary, including representation and narrative, in favor of a would-be iteration of painting as such. Two decades later, Levine continued to question the impact of these debates on modernist painting. Despite their deconstructive underpinnings, Levine's paintings evoked a desire to be included as a part of the larger body of influential work within the canon of art history. Levine's paintings unpacked the formal qualities of other artists' work at the same time as they were meant to promote gender equality. Her art historical references shifted the largely formalist debates on the medium of painting in the post-war period into a socio-political context. Levine's paintings effectively built upon Stella's formal research in a new manner that targeted gender inequality. Stella shifted painting, perhaps unwittingly, toward Minimalism, while Levine intentionally pushed it toward an ideal of the equal treatment of men and women in the canon of art history.

The thick layers of acrylic, fluorescent paint and Roll-a-Tex, or a simulated stucco, on the surface of Halley's paintings create a flat, two-dimensional surface. The boxy structure and negation of visible brushwork of Halley's works recall Stella's *Black* and *Aluminum Paintings*. The strict, exact lines in Halley's paintings are precisely

executed and form a thick layer on the canvas. This technique added an impersonal and mechanical aspect to the painting that was echoed in Stella's later work from the 1960's, such as *Gran Cairo*, 1962, or *Sunset Beach, Sketch*, 1967 (Figs. 120, 121). The bright, multi-colored works *Gran Cairo*, 1962, and *Sunset Beach, Sketch*, 1967, were created with fluorescent and alkyd-based paints. Alkyd paints, typically used to cover the exterior or interior of houses or wood furniture, were known among artists for their hard enamel surface that eliminated all evidence of brushstrokes.

Stella's research into the formal qualities of painting reflected a desire to assert the continued dominance of the medium, when faced with advances made by sculptor colleagues, like Judd, Flavin, and Andre. At the same time, this impetus was affected by the ever-expanding presence of mass culture and cultural production. Artists such as Warhol and Stella began to use Day-Glo color, an industrial invention of the 1960's. Stella might not have openly admitted to its commercial connotations, but Halley certainly did. Halley also proposed formal and economic inconsistencies in his work with the use of industrially produced materials, bright colors and simple forms that recalled the advertising and culture industry. For Halley, Day-Glo contained multiple connotations, referring to the diverse fields of recent art history, or functional, governmental uses, as in warning or preventative signage for streets and workers. Halley stated his reasons as follows: "the idea was to project the painting into relief so that it would have a kind of space projected forward from real space that it was hung in."[345] The stretchers, combined with the industrial paints and textures, caused Halley's paintings to appear almost to bounce off the surface of the canvas into the viewer's space.

[345] Hixson, "Interview with Peter Halley," 15.

His paintings are imbued with a phenomenological quality that requires an active type of viewing reminiscent of that demanded by the bright colors and interlocking lines of Stella's *Gran Cairo* and *Sunset Beach, Sketch.*

Stella's and Halley's use of industrial materials maintained a connection to aspects of the everyday and the world outside the museum or gallery. However, Stella's paintings were largely considered a self-reflexive gesture or an investigation into painting's structure and limitations. The interlocked squares in Stella's *Gran Cairo* and *Sunset Beach, Sketch* were multiplied and layered in a concise spatial and geometric organization. Halley built upon Stella's example and intentionally infused socio-political connotations into his work through the use of mediums and forms. Hyperbole also played a key role in Halley's work and its relationship to contemporary society. In Halley's paintings from the 1990's to today, such as *Super-Size,* 2000, the seriality and repetition of the simple cell and conduits design of the 1980's gives way to mass confusion that was meant to reflect the increasing proliferation of commodity culture, advertising and computer networks throughout the decades (Fig. 122).

In the 1980's, Halley and other Neo-Geo artists transformed the simple lines and forms of Minimalist painting into a deconstructive commentary on art history and aspects of society-at-large. In 1991, commenting on his first "prison" works, Halley noted: "I wasn't too worried about Mondrian or Malevich. I was thinking about Stella, Judd, Newman and Rothko…Since I began painting in the era of Color Field painting, the idea of putting this terse rigid connotation of a prison on a transcendentalist expanse of raw canvas seemed very funny and tart to me."[346] Grouping Newman with the Minimalists in

[346] Ibid., 16

his comment, Halley shows the extent to which deconstructive irony and formal play formed the basis of his work. In this respect, the bars in *Day-Glo Prison*, seem to at once pay homage to and mock Newman's zips (Fig.116). The thick, parallel vertical lines of Halley's painting entailed less a direct appropriation of Newman's zips, such as Taaffe performed in *We are Not Afraid*, 1985, than a vague, would-be reference to the universality of this older artist's forms (Fig. 56). Instead of one line, there are seven that surround, entrap and enclose themselves within the restrictive geometry of the square. Newman's work also involved an element of pictorial play between the vertical zip lines and the expansive blocks of color. Newman's paintings such as *Onement* and *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* relied on the visual interplay between the thin lines and the large color fields (Figs. 58, 16). The expansive red color and enormous scale of *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* contained a phenomenological quality as it enveloped and surrounded the viewer. The canvas was pierced with interspersed zips, which functioned as a formal support for the viewer's eye. The verticality of the zips metaphorically conveyed a human presence.[347]

Newman's later works, such as *Who's Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue*, 1967, built upon a more invigorated sense of color, which relayed the influence of Pop art (Fig. 57). Sarah Rich has discussed Newman's painting in terms of the older artist's anxiety about creating work that continued to be viable in view of the cool attitude of Minimalism and Pop.[348] Newman's title contained a sense of verbal irony, since the question Newman asks was rhetorical. Newman's painting, *Who's Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue*

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[347] See, for example, Yve-Alain Bois, "Perceiving Newman," in *Barnett Newman: Paintings* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1988), 1-13.
[348] Rich, "Bridging the Generation Gaps," 17-39.

represented the artist's assimilation of the work of his younger colleagues, such as Stella and Ellsworth Kelly. Newman's work also pointed to the emphasis on pure, vibrant fields of color and his reaction to painters such as Mondrian, whose blocks and intersections of color referenced the abstract ideas of theosophy. In his later work, Newman formally manipulated and played with the location of the zips. In *White and Hot*, 1967, due to his enlarging and pushing the zips to the edges of the painting, the central block of color gained more significance (Fig.123).

Halley retained and hyperbolized Newman's strong sense of color as a perceptual experience. The fluorescent Day-Glo colors in *Day-Glo Prison* activated the viewer's eye and, arguably, allowed for a greater sense of interaction with the work. The repeating lines of the central square loosely resembled zips, but even more so evoked the iron bars that are placed within prison windows. The fluorescent colors provided a sensory overload, in a similar manner as bright lights or innumerous advertisements within large cities. Perhaps responding to Newman's grandiose assertions concerning his paintings, Halley's works were meant to visually reference and uncover the controlling structural aspects of society for the viewer.

Halley used color as a transgressive element that emanated a deep nostalgia for previous artistic movements like Pop art and Color Field painting. At the same time, the flashiness of Halley's works evoked corporate and media advertising. Appearances are deceptive, however, as even the most simple formal qualities were never quite what they seemed. The bright colors in *Glowing Cell with Conduit* were composed of the more conventional Cadmium Red in addition to Day-Glo pink. By mixing Judd's preferred color with an even brighter tone, Halley hyperbolized a Minimalist palette in what could

be called a competitive effort to make his paintings appear more shiny and attractive than Judd's early wooden boxes. The shimmery blue Plexiglas of Judd's *Untitled*, 1968, while covering the work's central, stainless steel core, asserted a physical and perceptual presence comparable to Halley's *Blue Cell with Smokestack and Conduit*, 1985 (Figs. 124, 125).

In "Specific Objects," Judd asserted, "the main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines the limits and arrangements of whatever is on or inside of it."[349] Halley's work seemed to take this statement as a literal challenge, building upon and emphasizing the limitations of the square, much as Stella did in his *Black* and *Aluminum* paintings. In his description of the constraints of the canvas, Judd underlined painting's narrow lifespan and deadening quality, in order to emphasize the important role of new art forms and mediums. In his turn, Halley took on painting's putatively negative characteristics in new ways. The elimination of nearly all visual perspective gives *Day-Glo Prison* a flat and deadening quality. The monochromatic background and lack of foreground causes the lines and cells to appear strongly one-dimensional. One on hand, the bright colors and Roll-a-Tex manage to rejuvenate the painting, giving it a vibrant, flashy quality. On the other hand, the artificial quality of the colors appears to memorialize and embalm the rectangle within the flat, superficial space of the canvas.

In *Glowing Cell with Conduits*, 1985, Halley played with different shades of Day-Glo to delineate spatial boundaries, proving that even Day-Glo contained distinguishing

[349] Judd, "Specific Objects," 207.

subtleties in color and hue (Fig. 126). The large, central cell was created with a color tone that is ever-so-slightly lighter than the background so that it appears to hover over the surface of the work. This effect, however, was thwarted by the condensed layer of Roll-a-Tex, which clings to its broad surface. Thick, black lines flee from the central stronghold and take a hard right and left turn before leading the viewer's eyes directly off the sides of the canvas. The history of these lines may be found in paintings like Newman's *Onement I*, 1948 or Stella's *Empress of India*, 1965 (Figs. 58, 127). Their vector-like movement was a reminder of the progress made by Newman and Stella in expanding painting's vocabulary, but also in underlining its limitations and objecthood. Halley's work continues this research into the uniqueness and the constraints of this medium in an ironic and ambiguous manner. In Halley's paintings, the simple, structural delineations of the lines conflict with the bright, gaudy colors, which in turn, conflict with the thick, material presence of the Roll-a-Tex. Color formed an essential component of the work, as was also the case for Color Field artists like Rothko and Newman, and Minimalists such as Judd. *Day-Glo Prison* and *Glowing Cell with Conduits*, for example, translated Rothko's soft, vibrating fields of color into blinding, hyper-realized forms.

Neo-Geo, Minimalism and Materiality

In many ways, Rosalind Krauss' early analysis of the ambiguous quality of Judd's work in her 1966 review, "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," could also serve as a description for Halley's paintings. Krauss found a certain level of formal and material ambiguity in Judd's work that might also be applied to Halley's *Blue Cell with Smokestack and Conduit*. Krauss stated:

> But it would seem that in Judd's case the strength of the sculptures derives from the fact that grasping the works by means of their physical properties, no matter how complete, is both possible and impossible. They both insist upon and deny the adequacy of such definitions themselves, because they are not developed from 'assertions' about materials or shapes, assertions, that is, which are given a priori and convert the objects into examples of a theorem or more general case, but are obviously meant as objects of perception, objects to be grasped in the experience of looking at them.[350]

Krauss accounted for the phenomenological aspects of Minimalist work, in which meaning was accrued though the work's color and material presence. Judd's new type of sculptural object confounded the viewer with its industrial materials, repetition and order. Comparable to Halley's paintings, in *Untitled,* 1968, the visual effects of the flashy Plexiglas coating enlivened the strictly rational, geometric format. Judd's depersonalized forms and his emphasis on the space and scale of the work provided a personal experience for the viewer though the visual and phenomenological effects of the shiny, sleek, azure Plexiglas. The color and material served as a reminder of the sculpture's status as an object and were reminiscent of everyday items also fabricated with plastic such as furniture, jewelry, or household items. Yet the work's strictly geometric shape and its inclusion within a fine art context deterred a reading of the sculpture as an everyday object. In Judd's sculpture, as in Halley's paintings, color, form, and material vied with one another for precedence.

Halley translated Minimalism's perceptual and physical aspects into aesthetic terms, where the banal quality of the thick Roll-a-Tex combined with the brilliance of the colors simultaneously invaded and thwarted the viewer's spatial perception. The intensity of the Day-Glo demanded the viewer's attention and invoked a

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[350] Rosalind Krauss, "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," in Meyer, ed., *Minimalism*, 211.

phenomenological prescence, while the Roll-a-Tex brought any hint of perspectival space to a screeching halt. A superficial layer of Roll-a-Tex coated the surface of the square just as Judd's Plexiglas covers its own steel core. The thick, bumpy surface of the Roll-a-Tex in *Blue Cell* added a three-dimensional quality that was immediately counteracted by the strictly rectangular format of the work. With its roots in works like Eva Hesse's *Hang Up*, 1966, the material and phenomenological presence of *Blue Cell* combined aspects of painting and sculpture, while forcing itself into the viewer's space (Fig. 34).

The Minimalist use of industrial materials such as house paint, aluminum, and stainless steel served to counteract the romanticized notion of the artist as creator. Chave's comment on Minimalist work also applied to Halley and the Neo-Geo artists: "By manufacturing objects with common industrial and commercial materials in a restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes, Judd and the other Minimalist artists availed themselves of the cultural authority of the markers of industry and technology."[351] Similar to Minimalism, Neo-Geo's use of industrial, pre-fabricated materials referenced the realm of the everyday and the work's status as a commodity within the art market. Halley manipulated industrial paints and Roll-a-Tex in a visual manner that was uncharacteristic of their prescribed use. In Halley's paintings, as well as Koons' and Steinbach's sculptures, the formal qualities of the materials and objects competed with the larger cultural references attached to them. As Halley noted, "the 'stucco' texture is reminiscent of motel ceilings. The Day-Glo paint is a signifier of 'low budget mysticism.' It is the afterglow of radiation."[352] The formal ambiguity present in Neo-Geo work

[351] Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 44.
[352] Halley, *Collected Essays*, 23.

pointed to Minimalism as much as it engaged in a diverse range of interactions with the socio-cultural and socio-political realms.

Halley's use of Day-Glo and Roll-a-Tex delved even deeper into formal and material concerns, since these substances contain connotations attaching to class and economic status. Just as the Minimalists experimented with new materials in the 1960's, so did Halley in the 80's. A simulated stucco, or Roll-a-Tex, functioned as a sign of the times, situated within a history of new materials in the post-war period. A dry element that is added to paint, Roll-a-Tex was essentially a low-budget replacement for a stucco finish. It was and still is used as a cheap, quick fix for traditional plaster work or tape and mud drywall methods.[353] Roll-a-Tex can be rapidly applied in several different grades, from fine to very coarse, to walls that are in poor conditions, have been patched, are uneven, or have cracks. In the 1970's, it was a fashionable way to decorate the walls and ceilings of certain upper to middle-class homes. In recent years, Roll-a-Tex has been replaced by an Orange Peel finish, which is applied with a machine and contains a somewhat smoother appearance. Roll-a-Tex was and still is commonly used in low-rise concrete construction, such as motels or apartment buildings, where it was applied directly to the concrete structure.

Aluminum was still relatively new when Stella picked it up in the 1950's, and Judd in the 1960's. First used to construct planes during World War II, aluminum proved very useful in the construction of housing during the Baby Boom years. Unlike the Pop and Neo-Dada artists, who used forms and materials inspired by the interior, domestic or

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[353] Information about the history and uses of Roll-a-Tex provided by Dustin Struckmeyer, LEED AP, Interior Design Instructor, Madison College, Madison, Wisconsin., email message to author, November 12, 2010.

commercial realm, as seen in, for example, Tom Wesselman's *Still Life #30*, 1963, the Minimalists' use of aluminum strongly had a manufactured, mechanized connotation (Fig. 78). Aluminum, like Roll-a-Tex, conjured up references to the construction of middle class housing complexes as well as some corporate office buildings. Similar to Stella's aluminum, Halley's Roll-a-Tex remained a relatively new material in the 1980's and one used, in part, for its rapidity and facility of use. But for Halley, Roll-a-Tex directly related to the intended audience for his work, whom he, perhaps mistakenly, viewed as the "progressive bourgeoisie," or "those with the funds to support culture."[354] Roll-a-Tex functioned as a form of readymade with connotations pointing to a specific arena of political economy and function.

The materiality of Halley's work hyperbolized Minimalism's simple forms and served as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the artists' process of creation. Fellow painter Thomas Lawson remarked that by 1981, painting had become "a funereal procession of tired clichés paraded as if still fresh, a corpse made up to look forever young."[355] Lawson and his fellow colleagues were locked into artistic practices evoking either "blind contentment" or "pluralism." In Halley's work, the Roll-a-Tex acted as a portable, easy-to-use impasto. This pre-fabricated, textural material invoked, in a way, Stella and the Minimalist's workman-like techniques and industrial processes of fabrication. In works such as *Day-Glo Prison*, Halley openly acknowledged the artificiality of these materials, which suggested that the act of painting had become an increasingly regularized, non-emotional activity. Halley's deconstructive approach

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[354] Giancarlo Politi, "Interview with Peter Halley," *Flash Art (International Edition),* no. 150 (January/February 1990): 87.
[355] Thomas Lawson,"Last Exit: Painting." 40.

represented a new outlook on modernist painting. A statement by Taaffe summarized this new attitude: "We've gotten to the point now where it's been proven that painting cannot be killed, you can't kill painting. It won't die, and we have to accept that fact."[356]

Halley's paintings also strongly related to his own writings on art and art history. Reevaluating earlier geometric abstract works by Mondrian, Malevich, Rothko and Newman, Halley questioned these artists' ability to present geometric forms in a stable, impartial and spiritual manner. Published in 1984, several years before his work became popular, Halley's essay, "The Crisis in Geometry," briefly outlined a concise social history of geometry from Roman times to the 1980's. He linked the concepts discussed in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, 1975, and Baudrillard's *Simulations*, 1984, to the work of contemporary artists, stating: "Twentieth century artists have often claimed legitimacy for their use of geometry by reference to both ancient and religious sources. Ironically, these same sources are cited by Foucault as the actual models of the geometric patterns of confinement and surveillance present in industrial society."[357] While Malevich sought to "free art from the burden of the object," in paintings such as *Black Square*, 1915, Halley argued that the geometric form would be used in the postwar era as a subtle means of organizing and controlling individuals within society (Fig. 37). While some consider early modernist abstraction a golden age of artistic production, Halley invoked a different view:

> The modernism I grew up with was that it was spiritual, it was about a kind of purity and Emersonian transcendentalism, and that it had a very linear history. Feeling less and less comfortable with that, I decided that

[356] Peter Nagy, "*Flash Art* Panel," 49.
[357] Halley, *Collected Essays*, 80.

> for me modernism was really about skepticism, doubt and questioning. Things that we now say are part of a postmodern sensibility.[358]

He noted that the propagation and dissemination of geometry by artists throughout the decades had not led to the formulation of a social utopia; instead, it had reinforced the hegemonic structures and effects of late capitalism.

According to Halley's largely Neo-Marxist critique, the historic, putatively spiritual role of geometric abstraction was dubious considering the art object's fundamental character as an element of materialist culture within a rapidly developing capitalistic society. Constantly driven by a quest for novelty, capitalism, as a socio-economic phenomenon, strives toward the goal of accumulating ever increasing amounts of capital through whatever means necessary. Discussing the role of art within a capitalistic society, Halley asserted that Minimalist works operated against capitalism's mechanisms of social control and placed his own paintings within this context. In a way, his view paralleled Anna Chave's observations on the materiality and scale of Minimalism and its connection with the hegemonic authority of capitalism and masculinity. Nevertheless, Halley's account improperly implicated the early modernists in the developments of post-war capitalism. His essay removed the work of these early geometric abstractionists from their original social, political and cultural contexts and placed it within the constraints of his own arguments.

In the 1980's, critics such as Joshua Decter questioned the reductive quality and limited formulation of Halley's arguments and accused the artist of propagating conspicuously one-dimensional, flawed theories in a disingenuous manner.[359] To a great

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[358] As noted in Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (New York: Art Publishers, 1996), 96.
[359] Decter, "Peter Halley," 110.

extent, Halley gained notoriety from critics who felt compelled to point out the errors in his thinking. Unfortunately, by including a discussion of his own paintings in "The Crisis in Geometry," Halley set himself up, in a way, for critics' dismissive, critical reactions of his work, which proliferated.

Still, the increasingly hyperbolic effect of Halley's paintings effectively paralleled certain shifts in postmodern society. Halley's paintings were meant to expose schematic or coded models of commodity capitalism to the viewing public, which was called upon to recognize and analyze his appropriation. Halley derived the cell and conduit structure of his work from research done at the New York Public Library on the schematic plans of computers, on building and drainage networks, and on the increasingly complicated structure of cities.[360] Isolated areas of these plans were incorporated into Halley's paintings and, later, into his large-scale installations (Fig. 128). Halley commented, "By the time I had codified that system of imagery—of cells and conduits—I began to feel that I had come up with a kind of paradigm, or model, or representation of a very basic kind of space and spatial experience in our society. And the fact that it was so hidden made it seem all the more interesting to me."[361]

Jameson described the period of late industrialism as the "purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas."[362] Less the social or political utopia that large-scale industry would like us to believe, in Jameson's view, postmodern society builds up a massive profusion of technical information, while debasing human relations, by compartmentalizing and

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[360] See Politi, "Interview with Peter Halley," 82, 86.
[361] Hixson, "Interview with Peter Halley," 18.
[362] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 35-36.

specializing some aspects of social living. The expansion of global and multi-national companies, such as Microsoft, Apple, and Coca-Cola, took place through various networks linking to diverse parts of the world through satellites, the internet and other technological systems. In Jameson's view, this expansion has produced "high-tech paranoia" or a fear of the uncontrollable or unmanageable aspects of the complex organization of computer circuits and networks.[363] The number of films produced from the 1980's forward that touched on the topics of technology and cyber-space testified to the presence of fascination with, as well as apprehension toward technology and global enterprise; as cases in point, consider: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968; *Tron*, 1982; *Sneakers*, 1992; *Hackers*, 1995; *The Net*, 1995; *Colossus: Forbin Project*, 1998, *Enemy of the State*, 1998; *Matrix*, 1999; and most recently *Tron: Legacy*, 2010. In its own way, Halley's work reflected these new social conditions and his paintings were purposefully meant to conjure up such associations. Thus, the artist specifically mentioned the film *Tron* as influencing his thoughts and work in the early 80's. [364]

However, the socially-driven goals that drove Halley's art in the 1980's came across as equally utopian as the modernist impetus that inspired many abstract artists in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. As is also the case with much of early modern abstraction, the question of just how effective Halley's paintings were in their didactic moment is still up for debate. Yet, to the knowledgeable viewer, Halley's formal, abstract references vied with larger diagrammatic signs of the external world in a

[363] Ibid., 38.
[364] See Jeanne Siegel's interview with Halley, "The Artist/Critic of the 80's: Peter Halley," in *Art Talk: The Early 80s*, 236.

uniquely ambiguous manner. To contemplate Halley's work was to grapple with these obstinate and irreconcilable factors.

Halley's paintings were meant to function as reflections of current society and culture and to perform an analysis of contemporary conditions in relation to Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality.[365] In Baudrillard's view, hyperreality is the postmodern, post-industrial inability to distinguish reality from non-reality, or fantasy. Baudrillard's concept involved a characterization of contemporary society as based on the interchange of signs or images, as seen, heard or read on television, the radio, in email messages, telephone conversations, text messages, or video chat, rather than through a tangible presence or contact. Baudrillard described the concept of hypperreality as an extensive, totalizing or all-encompassing system that does not allow for any form of critique.[366] In Baudrillard's somewhat defeatist view, the state of hyperreality, or simulation, converts all forms of representation into a simulacrum, making visual critique impossible. Without any direct means of communication, information is exchanged by means of indirect images and messages. The putatively identical status of these ancillary exchanges within hyperreality does not allow for critical evaluation.

In his critique of Halley's work, Decter took Baudrillard's theories at face value and debased Halley's attempts to provide an illustrative model of hyperreality. Halley, however, described his works as emphasizing "the role of the model in the

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[365] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1-3.

[366] Critics have found fault with Baudrillard's unilateral characterization of contemporary society. See Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992); Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998); and Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1989).

simulacrum."[367] In other words, Halley's works depicted potential models or diagrams of contemporary society, symbolically representing its structural and organizational form. Similar to Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle, the simulacrum was defined as the envelopment of societal structures by their own illusory models, which confound reality enough to eventually overcome it. Thus, the spatial structure in Halley's works mirrored simulacral space, with its digital fields of cells and interconnected conduits. "Like the simulated space of the videogame, of the microchip and of the office tower," Halley stated, directly citing Baudrillard, his paintings reflected this "cyberneticized social exchange, in which the social body irradiates with its operational circuits."[368] In this manner, Halley considered his work more diagrammatic than geometric. His paintings were meant to uncover and alert viewers to the structural mechanisms of the simulacra that surrounded them on a daily basis. In 1987, Cameron pointed out that curators and critics were unable to see Halley's work as anything but a diagram of Baudrillard's theories. Halley's work suffered from an over-identification with the philosopher. [369]

Nevertheless, Halley's paintings shed light on the socio-cultural and socio-political phenomena of the 1980's and the connections between Halley's work and postmodern or poststructuralist theory are worth examining. Halley's first works may be correlated with Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* in their schematic depiction of prison cells. In *Freudian Painting*, 1981, the uniformity of the beige background

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[367] Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," 114.
[368] Ibid., 103. Halley was criticized by many critics for being overly dependent on Baudrillard's theories. See Joshua Decter, "Peter Halley," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 10 (June 1986): 110; Dan Cameron, "In the Path of Peter Halley," *Arts Magazine* 62, no. 4 (December 1987): 70-73; and Rosalind Krauss, "Theories of Art After Minimalism and Pop," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 76, 82.
[369] Cameron, "In the Path of Peter Halley," 72.

functioned to reduce all space such that it seems to possess a restrictive, confining hold on the two squares (Fig. 129). Frozen within this two-dimensional surface plane, the larger squares are accentuated by smaller, inner squares that display a black prison-bar structure. In this early work, the two-toned beige conjured up images of the neutral color tones habitually used in the decoration of hospitals and offices. Operating as a quick referent to prison cells, the simple, black lines functioned less to bar off an interior space--for there is no perspectival space in the painting-- than to provoke the viewer's reaction. The juxtaposition of the beige with the straight black lines is meant to suggest the mental prisons caused by institutional power structures that restrict thoughts and actions. The normality of the colors and their disinterested tonality is appeasing, while the prison referents and their insinuations can be visually alarming. *Freudian Paintings* served as an early example of this key characteristic of Halley's works, namely that the viewer was arguably both attracted to the cultural signs and dismayed at their implication. The knowledgeable viewer was putatively coerced into witnessing a side of reality he or she did not necessarily want to see.

White Cell with Conduit, 1981, evoked aspects of social reality that are customarily concealed (Fig. 130). In this work, Halley depicted an underlying, superstructure of conduits supporting a larger, unified white cell. Halley's white cell is sustained by a network of lines that was meant to reflect the structural mechanisms of a technological or digitalized configuration. Like the system of ducts maintaining the daily operations of any building, *White Cell with Conduit* was suggestive of a schematic model of society. Some of Halley's later works reflect these structures in their materiality. The Roll-a-Tex coating the surface of *White Cell with Conduit* as well as *Two Cells with*

Circulating Conduit, 1986, called attention to the intensely flat character of the canvas, where the dazzling colors actually assist in projecting space outwards toward the viewer. Proceeding in an opposite manner from the traditional rendering of space in perspective, Halley's paintings seemed to reach out to viewers and to directly invade their territory. The fake stucco and Day-Glo colors operated as reminders of motel walls and the flashiness of advertisements. Relying on methods somewhat similar to those of media advertising, Halley at once seduced and repelled viewers with assaults on their senses of sight and touch. Separated from their habitual realm, these commonplace materials took on new meanings and associations. By subversively separating these signs from their normal referents, Halley attempted to provide commentary on the structural mechanisms of commodity culture. He injected the formal components of his work with larger meaning, such that the color, material and form codified creative and linguistic concepts. At the same time, these concepts intertwined and contradicted each other, preventing any singular reading of the work.

For Halley and the other Neo-Geo artists, irony and pastiche, or an imitation of previous works, were powerful techniques used to deconstruct overarching ideological constructs. Halley openly identified these qualities in his work, commenting that his paintings contain a high amount of irony and play.[370] Like a marketing guru of the art world, Halley took certain themes and issues that held specific meanings and connotations in certain socio-political settings and transferred them into a different context. He hyperrealized art historical motifs as well, stating "if you take a glowing transcendental image in a Rothko, in my work that is replaced by Day-Glo. I also often

[370] See Hixson, "Interview with Peter Halley," 17.

say that I've taken Newman's zip and made it into plumbing."[371] Acknowledging his targeted use of art historical references, Halley laid claim to his own manipulation and rearrangement of their meanings. He imbued art historical signs with newer, trendier referents associated with current social, political and economic phenomena. Once abstractly referencing the human form in Newman's paintings, the zip was reconfigured by Halley into a symbol for the structure of postmodern society. The social significance of Halley's signs and referents, however, is largely left up to the viewer who must recognize the multi-layered symbolism behind his cells and conduits. Halley undertook to insert his work into the canon of art history with his targeted references to previous styles and artists. At the same time, his manipulation of signs and signifiers also served, in a way, to question and to undermine the canon and the elevated position of numerous artists within it.

Halley's writings and paintings display a near-religious reverence toward Baudrillard and Foucault, and he creatively cited these theorists' views much as religious fanatics cite verses of the bible. For Halley – who also cites Joseph Beuys as a major source – this was but one play in a larger game of textual and formal parody.[372] Although postmodern theory played a large role in Halley's work, it is important not to overlook the strong formal and material qualities of his paintings, which are indebted to his Minimalist predecessors.

Halley was not the only Neo-Geo artist referencing Color Field painting, Minimalist sculpture or Conceptual Art practices in the 1980's. Steinbach, Koons, and Bickerton also picked up on and aggrandized the formal ambiguities inherent to

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[371] "*Flash Art* Panel," 49.
[372] Hixson, "Interview with Peter Halley," 13.

Conceptual and Minimalist work in ways that commented on capitalism and the effects of commodity fetishism. Bickerton cited Judd in the creation of his Susie Boxes, such as *Le Art* and *Tormented Self-Portrait*, which consisted of isolated and hyperbolized versions of the Minimalist artist's stacked aluminum sculptures (Figs. 31, 79). Bickerton's works also reflected Judd's concept of a "Specific Object," which described the tendency in recent art to muddle the formal and material concerns of painting and sculpture. Fabricated with a wide range of industrial materials, the large scale of some of the Susie Boxes took on a three-dimensional quality that directly invaded the viewer's space. Bickerton nevertheless considered these works to be paintings.[373] They were created in part with canvas and hung on the wall.

At the same time, Bickerton's Susie Boxes are reminiscent of Stella's *Aluminum* paintings, which were first shown at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1960. Stella's *Six Mile Bottom*, 1960 (Fig. 131) continued the strict stripe pattern of the *Black* Paintings. Stella's stripes are applied to the surface of the canvas in a geometric pattern. The notches in the canvas accentuated the painting's overall shape and status as an object. The vertical stripes in *Six Mile Bottom* bent outward and formed a square shape in the central portion of the work. This caused the form of the painting to shift from a rectangle to a square. Although Bickerton's Susie Boxes maintained the traditional shape of a painting, the edges of the works were covered with oversized metal rims that pointed to the painting's object quality. As with Stella's early striped paintings, the edges of *Le Art* served a vital role in the viewer's perception of the work. The rim wraps around the top and bottom sections of Bickerton's painting and is used to physically bolt the work to the

[373] Bickerton, personal notes.

wall. A closer examination revealed that the surface of *Le Art* actually adhered to a strict organization of colors and forms. In Stella's work, the aluminum paint and the geometric stripe pattern were meant to deny all illusionism and brushstrokes. Bickerton achieved these aims by covering his surface with high-quality graphic logos and advertisements that formed their own geometric pattern. Two thick yellow and black stripes are placed along the sides of the work and provide a framing structure for the assortment of logos. The logos were placed within a largely horizontal framework and many are composed of rectangular boxes. Bickerton's signature was placed in large format across the bottom left and upper right corner of the work. The primary colors of blue, yellow, and red used throughout the work are devoid of any shading and any perception of depth. In *Le Art*, Bickerton seemed to learn from Judd and Stella and augment their artistic practices.

Koons and Steinbach translated the object quality prevalent in Minimalist painting and sculpture into store-bought objects. Koon's *New Excellence Refrigerator*, 1979-80 ironically built on the trope of the grid or the box in Minimalist work by incorporating a small, cubic refrigerator into the work (Fig. 108). Koons' work hung on the wall and consisted of a refrigerator attached to the front of two vertical fluorescent bulbs. Koons took Stella's famous comment, "it really is an object," literally by turning painting into three store-bought objects. Koons hyperbolized Minimalism's ambiguous relationship with the art object by referencing its aesthetic techniques and by using store-bought commodities. LeWitt's cubic units, which are made from steel and aluminum, then coated with baked enamel paint, were fabricated with some of the same materials as Koons' refrigerator. The long, vertical fluorescent bulbs used in Koons' *New Excellence Refrigerator*, 1979-80, were reminiscent of Flavin's light sculptures from the 1960's and

works such as *The Diagonal of May 25, 1963* (to Robert Rosenblum), 1963 (Fig. 132). Flavin's work simply consisted of six store-bought fluorescent bulbs placed at intervals alongside each other. First exhibited at the Green Gallery in 1964, Flavin's bulbs were arranged closely together.[374] Chave commented on Flavin's work, *The Diagonal of May 25, 1963* (to Robert Rosenblum), 1963:

> Flavin's *Diagonal* not only looks technological and commercial—like Minimalism generally—it is an industrial product and as such, speaks of the extensive power exercised by the commodity in a society where virtually everything is for sale…Further, in its identity as object or commodity, Flavin's work may arouse our ambivalence toward those ever-proliferating commodities around us for which we have a hunger that is bound to be insatiable, as they will never fully gratify us.[375]

Koons work undermined the proximity of Flavin's light sculptures to commodities by attaching an assortment of store-bought kitchen appliances to the front of the bulbs. Along the same lines as Flavin's *Pink Out of a Corner--To Jasper Johns*, 1963 (Fig. 133), which displays a single pink-colored fluorescent bulb placed in the corner of a gallery, Koons' *New Excellence Refrigerator* incited questions as to the limits and definition of art. The bulbs and the stark, white cubic refrigerator also ironically commented on the geometric simplicity of Minimalism, or to use Barbara Rose's term, "ABC Art," and works such as LeWitt's *Serial Project I* (ABCD), 1966, or Judd's steel and Plexiglas boxes in *Untitled*, 1968. In spite of its simple form, Flavin's *Pink Out of a Corner--To Jasper Johns* also inserted an underlying *clin d'oeil* to Johns' sexuality by using a pink-colored bulb. Koons' sculpture elevated this type of at once personal and socio-cultural reference to a broader level.

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[374] Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 63.
[375] Ibid., 45-46.

Minimalists, such as Judd or LeWitt, experimented with industrial materials and began to have their works produced by commercial fabricators. This allowed the artists to formulate a cogent reaction to the expressionistic brushwork of the Abstract Expressionists and to give their work a sense of directness, which was in turn read by critics as a sleek, manufactured finish. While initially Judd's boxes were created from plywood, he later had many of his boxes produced by a steel or aluminum fabricator in order to achieve a high-quality look. Koons continued this interest in a direct aesthetic experience and the tradition of industrial production and experimentation with industrial materials in *New Excellence Refrigerator* and in other works. In 1986, Koons commented on the fabrication of his works: "I'm basically the idea person. I'm not physically involved in the production. I don't have the necessary abilities, so I go to the top people, whether I'm working with my foundry--Tallix--or in physics. I'm always trying to maintain the integrity of the work."[376] Koons' reason for using industrial production is reminiscent of Judd's 1966 response to di Suvero, cited earlier.[377] In *Rabbit*, 1986, for example, the original, inflatable toy was cast in highly polished stainless steel. Similar to Judd, Koons used methods of industrial fabrication in order to maintain a high-quality look and finish. While Judd's brightly colored Plexiglas is suggestive of commodity culture, Koons' works maintain a direct connection with the use of actual commodities as source objects. Koons' works also reproduce the tangible quality of the inanimate objects referenced in his work. For example, the casting process

[376] Ottman, "Jeff Koons," 18.
[377] Barbara Rose, Mark di Suvero, Donald Judd, Kynaston McShine, and Robert Morris, "Symposium on the New Sculpture" (1966), in Meyer, ed., *Minimalism*, 220-21.

of Koons' *Rabbit* paradoxically allowed the work to maintain the squishy look of the inflatable toy, but the hard feel of metal.

Some of Koons' work continued to underline the trope of the square or the box in Minimalist and other painting and sculpture from the late 1960's and the diverse assortment of permutations of that simple form, such as Andre's *144 Magnesium Square*, 1969, Judd's *Untitled*, 1968, or Serra's *One Ton Prop* (House of Cards), 1969, and paintings such as Jo Baer's *Primary Light Group: Red, Green, Blue*, 1964-68, Agnes Martin's *The Tree*, 1964, to name a few (Figs. 134 to 136). At the same time, some Minimalist works contained indirect socio-cultural references. LeWitt's *Serial Project I*, for example, explored a set of permutations or step-by-step modifications of open and closed cubes. The regularly spaced intervals between each open or closed form became the subject of LeWitt's work, which placed equal importance on each square. The pristine quality of LeWitt's white cubic units was echoed in Koons' *New Excellence Refrigerator*. However, since it was displayed on the floor, LeWitt's standardized grid structure also recalled the plans or models of pre-fabricated architectural units, such as often comprise apartment complexes, schools, hospitals, or post-war housing. Koons played on Minimalism's material ambivalence and took these references one step further by integrating actual objects into his works. The three-dimensionality of Koons and Steinbach's work, in a way, relies on the phenomenological activities of Minimalist sculpture and promotes an interactive dialogue between the work and the viewer, who is arguably compelled to view the objects in a critical manner.

Neo-Geo, Post Minimalism and Conceptualism

In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," published in *Artforum* in 1967, LeWitt emphasized the primacy of the idea or of the concept over aesthetics as a new mode of artistic creation. Conceptual artists such as LeWitt, Kosuth or Baldessari made works that emphasized a concept or idea over the aesthetic or material aspects of the work. LeWitt, for example, created *Serial Project I* according to a set of mathematical rules, instead of an aesthetic impulse. Beginning in 1965, Kosuth investigated language as a naming system and the semiological components of language. Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, broke down the semiotic references to a chair by displaying a photocopy of the dictionary definition of a chair, an image of a chair and the physical object (Fig. 137). The sign of the chair was paired with its linguistic and physical referent as well as a simulated copy (or an image of the object). One year later, Kosuth began his *Art as Idea as Idea* series, which focused entirely on language and consisted of enlarged photocopies of dictionary definitions. This series focused on the conceptual underpinnings of art as purely an analytical, not an aesthetic idea. It also demonstrated the underlying randomness of language systems and their need to assign structure in order to evoke meaning. Dictionaries provide language with specific structure and meaning, creating unilateral relationships between signs and their referents. Kosuth became the U.S. editor of *Art & Language*, which was a British art group and journal devoted to conceptualist art. Founded in 1967 by Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge and Harold Hurrell, the journal was later edited in 1971 by art critic Charles Harrison.

Koons' *Pre-New* and *New* sculptures centered on the artist's concept or idea in the selection of an assortment of vacuum cleaners and kitchen appliances. His works drew

from and hyperbolized certain aspects of Minimalism and Conceptualism in order to create works of art with cogent socio-political connotations. In Koons' case, the language of Minimalism was used to comment on social uniformity, where every kitchen or student dormitory could have potentially displayed the same white cubic refrigerator. Seriality and limited choices remained a fundamental principle of capitalism with its multiplication of identical commodities that are destined for consumption. In this manner, Koons *Pre-New* series can be compared to Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, 1966 (Fig. 138). In this conceptual piece created for *Arts* Magazine, Graham photographed pre-fabricated, post-war housing developments in New Jersey with a Kodak Instamatic camera. In a deadpan, documentary style, Graham's piece emphasized repetition and sameness in style, color and form, as well as the restrictive choices available to consumers. The repeated images of housing units and architectural elements approached the repetition prevalent in Minimalist sculpture with a critical social commentary. Catering to a mass market, Graham seemed to indicate, resulted in architectural uniformity and a common aesthetic. Similar to Koons' work, Graham's work also contained a class-bias, since the majority of individuals who purchased houses in the developments in question were of the lower or middle class.

Koons also cited post-Minimalist sculptor and writer Robert Smithson as a strong influence on his work. He comments, "When I ultimately lost interest in painting, I enjoyed seeing art that used display, like Robert Smithson's. My own earliest works present themselves as Smithson-like displays."[378] Smithson used the language of Minimalism to create site-specific works that referenced the landscape. Koons

[378] Quoted in Katy Siegel, "Jeff Koons Talks to Katy Siegel," *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003): 252.

specifically referred to Smithson in his *Inflatable* series, which displayed inflatable toys attached to mirrored squares (Fig. 71). *Inflatable Flower and Bunny,* 1979, loosely resembled Smithson's site sculptures from the late 1960's, such as *Red Sandstone Corner Piece,* 1968 (Fig. 139). In Smithson's work, a pile of red sandstones was placed on top of mirrors, which were attached at the edges. The square mirrors formed an open encasement to hold and reflect the pile of rocks. While Smithson's mirrors reflected elements from the natural environment, Koons' mirrors displayed cheap, mass-produced objects. The mirrors were reminiscent of store displays, which made the inflatable toys appear more at home in their surroundings than the sandstone rocks. For Smithson, the mirror functioned on two levels as a physical object and as a reflection or an abstracted view of reality. The mirror allowed for a fractured, multi-faceted view of the rocks, which represented a displaced site or physical location. At the same time, the mirrors allowed the external environment to play a role in the meaning of the work.

In this manner, Koons' work is also reminiscent of Dan Graham's *Video Piece for Showcase Windows in a Shopping Arcade*, 1976, which was originally set-up in a shopping arcade in Gronigen, The Netherlands (Fig. 140). In the installation, window cases were positioned on either side of a pedestrian passage. Interaction took place when viewers passed back and forth through the site.[379] Each shop window contained a mirror on the back wall that reflected the items in the showcase and the glass window front as well as the viewer. Monitors and video cameras posed in front of the windows recorded

[379] As described in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Michael Asher, and Dara Birnbaum, *Dan Graham: Video/Architecture/Television: Writings on Video and Video Works, 1970-1978* (New York: New York University Press; and Halifax: Halifax Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1979), 48.

the activity in the arcade both in time and with a few seconds' delay. The mirrors and the monitors reflected the viewers' image in relation to the commodities inside each of the cases. Viewers saw either their interaction with the commodities in the display in time or their interaction in the recent past. The showcase windows and the objects displayed within them add a further element of complication to the viewer's experience and interaction with his or her own projected image, and with the image of other spectators, as well as the commodified objects.

Koons' mirrors functioned in a similar manner, offering a discontinuous image of the viewer in relationship to commodities. The flower and rabbit functioned as metaphorical stand-ins for the endless range of useless commodities fabricated within commodity capitalism. The viewer is confronted with the physical objects as well as their representation in the mirrors. Koons' manipulation of the consumer objects and their reflections paralleled Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. Smithson's works also spoke to the dialectic between nature and culture or between image and representation. Smithson and Koons had in common an interest in the links between the work of art and the art market. With his site and "non/site" works, Smithson's works explored the relationship between consumption and the impossibility of consumption. While *Red Sandstone Corner Piece* was created for a museum or gallery, numerous of Smithson's other works, such as *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, or *The Yucatan Mirror Displacements*, 1969, were placed in isolated or distant locations (Fig. 141). These essentially unsaleable works were documented only by photographs or in film.

For Smithson and for Koons, their mirrors presented a simulated view of the objects that rest on them, which in turn reflect the increasing abstraction of daily life. In

1968, Smithson commented, "the mirror in a sense is both the physical mirror and the reflection…it is a concept and an abstraction… a displacement of properties…Reflections fall onto the mirrors without logic, and in doing so, invalidate every rational assertion."[380] The mirrors confused the direct relationship between the eye and the object of sight. The mirror presented an image of the object that created a certain amount of distance from the actual object and an intangible quality. Smithson continued, "the reflections are fleeting instances that evade measure."[381] The distance created by Smithson's site, non-site and displacement works played out larger ideas inherent in entropy, natural history, and shifts within the landscape, which are the result of social or biological changes. In 2001, Graham likewise commented on the use of the mirror in postmodern architecture; "It is a kind of surveillance system, and when it was first used in glass office buildings, the Bauhaus idea of transparency was replaced by surveillance." [382] Koons' sculptures continued this research into consumption and the structural mechanisms of commodity culture. But Koons replaced Smithson's natural artifacts with manufactured plastic objects that spoke to the United States' throw-away society.

Smithson was also interested in the increasing commodification of society and in the consequences of the urban sprawl that drastically changed the urban and natural landscape in the years after World War II. Smithson wrote:

> the urban sprawl, and the infinite number, of housing developments of the postwar boom have contributed to the architecture of entropy…Near the super highways surrounding the city, we find the discount centers and cut-rate stores with their sterile facades. On the inside of such places are the

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[380] Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" (1968), in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 97.
[381] Ibid., 96.
[382] Graham, interview by Mark Francis, in *Dan Graham*, ed. Birgit Pelzer, Mark Francis, and Beatriz Colomina (New York: Phaidon, 2001), 20.

> maze-like counters with piles of neatly stacked merchandise; rank on rank it goes into a consumer oblivion. The lugubrious complexities of these interiors have brought art a new consciousness of the vapid and dull.[383]

Anticipating certain ideas expressed in Halley's essay, "The Crisis in Geometry," Smithson linked some Minimalist work with the realization of these conditions, such as Flavin's light sculptures, Ronald Bladen's untitled, large-scale leaning sculptures made from aluminum and wood from 1965, and Robert Grosvenor's *Transoxiana*, 1965, are plain, austere structures.

The 1960's saw the development of architecture and suburban life, with its endless strip malls and chain restaurants. By the 1980's this phenomenon was a fact of life. The consumer oblivion Smithson described escaladed into mega-mergers, leveraged buyouts and multi-national corporations that promoted more heavily than ever the age of the consumer. Koons' work suggested that the austere language of Minimalism alone could not properly address the cultural concerns of his age. His inclusion of inflatable toys or store-bought objects in his work also added a level of commentary on the widening gap between the rich and the poor that began in the 1980's and continues today. During the 1980's, President Ronald Reagan's so-called trickle-down governmental economic policies favored the upper class at the expense of the disadvantaged. Income levels rose for the wealthy and fell for the poor, as the number of Americans below the poverty level increased throughout the decade. Recently, the results from the 2010 census discovered that the gap between the rich and the poor has continued to increase,

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[383] Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments (1966)," in Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 11-12.

marking the U.S. as the country with the greatest income disparity among Western industrialized nations. [384]

Besides Koons, Steinbach's and Bickerton's work also relied on and hyperbolized aspects of Minimalist and Conceptualist work. The shelves holding various objects in Steinbach's work made reference to Judd's early plywood boxes and stacked sculptures in works such as *Untitled*, 1967 (Fig. 142). Raised by a linguist and a psychologist, Bickerton made his first works, his *Word* paintings of 1982, based on simple utterances that recalled the work of Baldessari and Weiner. During the 1980's, Bickerton's Susie boxes and his *Landscape* works of the late 1980's recall instead the work of Judd and Stella. In Judd's sculpture, the orderly placement of the stacks and their production in aluminum and in Plexiglas avoided any references to the hand of the artist. Steinbach's wood shelves referenced Judd's usage of plywood and his method of hanging shelf-like aluminum units directly on the wall. Bickerton's *Me Portrait #1* (Wildcat), 1987 presents an ironic and hyperbolized view of Judd's stacks (Figs. 143, 142). Similar to Judd's *Untitled*, 1967, Bickerton's work consisted of an object comparable to one isolated stack element from a sculpture by Judd, which was, however not free-floating, but attached to the wall using a complex arrangement of mounting devices and support wires. His brand name, Susie, is inscribed in large red and orange letters on the sides of the work. As a tongue-in-cheek indication of the work's role as a self-portrait, the front of the rectangular box reads, "Ashley Wildcat Bickerton" and "Season 86-87." The work was labeled with words describing popular vacation spots, such as Aruba and

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[384] Hope Yen, "Income Gap Widens: Census Find Record Gap Between Rich and Poor," *Huffington Post*, September 28, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com (accessed 11/20/10). Many other news sources, including ABC and NBC, reported this story as well.

Ixtapa. "Looking at great art," Bickerton recalled in 1988, "is like seven days and nights in Ixtapa." [385] The work was shown at Bickerton's International with Monument solo show in 1987. In her review of the exhibition, *Village Voice* writer Kim Levin commented, "That's not as silly as it sounds; the ultimate yuppie vacation and the museum masterpiece both offer packaged experiences." Bickerton called his *Susie* boxes, "wall contemplation units." Acknowledging the artist's intelligent combination of references from multiple art historical movements, Levin described Bickerton's work as "a Judd wall piece that acquired a Pop mentality, a consumer consciousness, and a sense of its own absurdity."

Bickerton's work, however absurd, also reflects a thoughtful examination of certain events in art history and of the artists involved. In 1988, Bickerton commented:

> my work is about painting. In art history Stella marked an absolute point when he broke down the art process: the stretcher defined the image, the image defined the stretcher. What you saw was an absolute, final, endgame equation. What Stella left undone was the fact that this object was catalogued and indexed into art history—his paintings became logos essentially for the corporation of Stella. But he left out the backside, the placement, the value, the recognition and the objectness as it existed outside of that point of authentic/aesthetic reckoning on the gallery wall. I wanted to address this and take it to its logical, or illogical if you like, extreme: what the object is, how it operates, how one contemplates exactly what it is one is dealing with in all of its facets.[386]

Bickerton continued Stella and Judd's strong attention to the formal properties of their work and their use of industrial materials, but in an aggrandized manner. Stella and Judd's use of aluminum seemed uncomplicated and humble when compared to the list of materials used to fabricate *Me Portrait No.1*, which included acrylic, anodized aluminum, plywood, aniline dye, bronzing powders and lacquer. The logos on *Tormented Self*

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[385] Quoted in Levin, "Package Tour," 88.
[386] Caley, "Ashley Bickerton," 79.

Portrait and *Le Art (Composition with Logos) #2*, 1987 were skillfully applied using X-Acto blades. The works recalled custom car culture and the work of the California Minimalists, such as Craig Kauffman's vacuum-formed Plexiglas wall pieces, as in *Untitled* (Blue Wall Relief), 1968, or John McCracken's thick, leaning planks, such as *Red Plank*, 1969, which were created with fiberglass and lacquer (Figs. 145, 146). As a self-portrait, Bickerton's "wall contemplation unit" promoted the artist as a savvy manipulator of cultural objects with a consumer edge. The bright colors, logos and professional inscriptions resembled the packaging of objects bought in stores. Bickerton packaged his artwork in a comparable manner and acknowledged its complicity with the art market. At the same time, these portraits demonstrated the artist's struggle to find his position as an avant-garde artist within a world increasingly driven by capitalism and the production of commodities.

In Judd's stacks, the mechanisms used to attach each box to the wall were hidden from the viewer's sight, so that the mounting or hanging hardware would not detract from the contemplation of the work overall. Bickerton's Susie Boxes emphasized the hanging mechanisms in an overt and ironic manner. *Me Portrait #1* (Wildcat) was not just bolted to the wall, but strapped on by eight metal wires, which are attached to the four front corners. The oversized brackets that were used to hang *Tormented Self-Portrait* have been enlarged by several feet in *Me Portrait No. 1*. Bickerton's work provided a slick, trendy appearance when compared to Judd's stacks. Bickerton acknowledged the role of his work as a saleable object and attempted to surpass the expectations placed upon it by the art world.

In *Stratified Landscape #1*, 1989, Bickerton made a more oblique reference to Judd's stacks with a view to providing commentary on the state of the environment (Fig. 146). First exhibited in a 1989 solo show at Sonnabend Gallery entitled, "Landscapes and Seascapes," Bickerton's *Stratified Landscape* works provided a wealth of formal contradictions. *New York Times* critic Michael Brenson humorously described the show as follows: "With its leathery and black futuristic surfaces and its catalogue of ecological problems, the show is like a heavy-metal band asking its audience to join hands and pray for the whales."[387] Brenson, like Levin, picked up on the ambiguities and contradictions inherent to Bickerton's work and in Neo-Geo work more generally. The Sonnabend exhibition included eleven box-like works, all of which contained an ecological commentary. *Stratified Landscape #1* was constructed with a motley mix of industrial and bio-degradable materials including: corroded steel corroded copper, anodized aluminum, fiberglass, leather, canvas, wood, netting, ropes, beans, resin, decomposed seaweed and coral. The interesting mix of man-made and natural materials stood as a metaphor for the ways in which these two entities struggle to co-exist in today's society.

Bickerton's work maintains a contemporary edge even today. His materials referenced, in a way, the purposeful or inadvertent destruction human beings have inflicted on nature through so-called technological advancements such as plastics. Fiberglass consists of many small fibers of glass-reinforced by plastic. Invented during the 19th century, plastic production tripled during the war years and was used to create a wealth of domestic products in the decades after. In 1957, Walt Disney World's "Tomorrowland" exhibit featured the first all-plastic house as a model of future living.

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[387] Michael Brenson, "Ashley Bickerton's Pleas to Rescue a Threatened Earth," *New York Times*, October 27, 1989, 32.

However, recent discoveries such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch have confirmed the problems endemic in non-bio-degradable materials that at one time were considered to represent progress.

Two decades after the 1966 *Primary Structures* exhibition at the Jewish museum effectively launched the Minimalist movement, artists working in New York in the 1980's were still caught within a significant, art historical and critical debate concerning the relation between the work of art and the commercial market. Like Stella, Halley struggled with formal and material concerns in his work. Halley and other artists working in New York during the 1980's such as Levine, Bickerton and Steinbach built upon the complication of the artistic process propagated by Stella and the other Minimalists. Koons', Steinbach's and Bickerton's works combined the look and feel of consumer goods and of the commodity culture with art, in a way that incited questions regarding the boundaries between these realms. The Neo-Geo artists' work does not quite have the look and feel of traditional forms of painting and sculpture, but it does not give way to the form of a pure commodity either. These artists transported the formal vocabulary of Color Field, Minimalism and Conceptualism into a new mode of socio-cultural existence that referenced the accelerated commercialism and economy of the 1980's.

CONCLUSION

Ever since Neo-Geo artists gained visibility in the art press in 1986, art historians and critics have questioned their ability to confront larger ideological issues within traditional, pre-industrial mediums such as painting. Even as Neo-Geo received positive attention from many art dealers and collectors beginning in 1984, this work was heavily disparaged by many art historians and journalists, who have been unable to grasp the work's criticality. During the 1980's, critical tactics and strategies of deconstruction were almost exclusively associated with the photography and media-based techniques of Appropriation artists and of the Pictures group.

For example, the 1986 *Endgame* exhibition served as the first major museum exhibition of Neo-Geo work. Yet, three out of the six catalogue contributors (Crow, Bois and Foster) openly dismissed Neo-Geo work in their essays. David Joselit, Elizabeth Sussman and Bob Riley provided a somewhat more nuanced understanding of the referential characteristics of this work and its relationship to an "endgame" or to the death of painting rhetoric. This divide reflected the contentious attitudes surrounding Neo-Geo work in the mid-80's. Many of the most-recognized critics and art historians welcomed new art which addressed postmodern and contemporary culture, but only that which corresponded to a particular modality.

In essence, the Neo-Geo group received the "Neo" epithet due to the artists' reuse of previous historical styles. Foster, along with critics Holland Cotter, Carter Radcliff, and Heartney employed this term in a negative manner. For Foster, appropriation was associated with photo-based techniques that did not translate well into painterly terms. But similarly to Plagens and Crow, Foster took Neo-Geo at face-value and didn't dig

much deeper in his research on the artists in question than Halley's 1984 essay, "The Crisis in Geometry." Neo-Geo artists' engagement with social and art historical signs and referents was deemed decorative and deflated. Further, as Alison Pearlman recently pointed out, many critics of Neo-Geo opposed the pluralistic quality that the work engendered.[388] Foster and Donald Kuspit, for example, associated pluralism with a loss of history, authority, and identity.[389]

This dissertation has demonstrated that Neo-Geo works did not function as mere copies of putatively more important contributors to the canon of art history. On the contrary, these works of art posed questions and invited multiple readings. As art historian E.H. Gombrich has pointed out, even the act of slavish copying is dependent upon a complex relationship of perception and illusionistic device, which takes place within the person of the artist.[390] Throughout the history of art, style has been subject to divergent modes of seeing within different periods. For example, though they were completed just a few decades apart, in 1867 and 1890, Van Gogh's rendering of Millet's *The Cornfield* is easily distinguishable from the original. Along these same lines, Neo-Geo displayed a distinct mode of visual representation and artistic strategies, which diverged from the previous periods and artists referenced in this work as well as from commodity culture. Applying Gombrich's terms, Neo-Geo works muddled the clear

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[388] Pearlman, *Unpackaging Art of the 1980s*, 29-30.
[389] See Hal Foster, "The Problem of Pluralism," *Art in America* 70, no. 1 (January 1982): 9-15; Hal Foster, "Against Pluralism" in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1985), p. 13-32; Donald Kuspit, "Young Necrophiliacs, Old Narcissists: Art About the Death of Art," *Artscribe International*, no. 57 (April-May 1986): 27-31; and Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 21.
[390] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 365.

distinctions between "making" and "matching" a work of art. However, the artists' analytical techniques entailed less an act of copying than a creative manipulation of compact references to past artistic movements and to aspects of contemporary society. The art historical references exuded by Levine's *Check* paintings, for example, are too numerous and too difficult to pin down; certainly the works do not answer to the description of an exact copy.

Two essays by Yale deconstructionist, Paul de Man, written during the 1970's, "Literary History and Literary Modernity" and "Criticism and Crisis," can be correlated to Neo-Geo's critical methods and these artists' examination of larger art historical structures.[391] In these writings, de Man explored the paradoxical relationship between history and modernity in order to ascertain the nature of progress. He presented the notion of "demystification," in which past hegemonic structures are critically assessed to reveal an inner clarity and truth.

Describing the then-current trends in continental criticism, Yale deconstructionist de Man contended that the critics of his period had gotten in the habit of using a language of crisis in their account of new developments in literature.[392] A crisis occurs when a form of literature or domain of study has broken away from the established norms. In this situation, the critic's role was to assess this rupture and to determine the extent of conformity or non-conformity to an established point of origin. In their proclamation of a crisis, critics were inadvertently exposing the "truths" or preconceived points of authenticity of their respective domains. As de Man finally affirmed, there are no structures which can function validly as a model for other structures; all are equally

[391] De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 150.
[392] Ibid., 8.

fallacious and are therefore called myths.[393] The usage of a language of crisis was therefore contradictory to the objectives of these linguistic developments. Where past domains were based on erroneous "truths" instead of "untruths," de Man asserted that philosophical knowledge could be attained only through self-critique and revisionism. By uncovering the romantic delusions and myths of its past, literature finally gained an element of legitimacy. Applying de Man's arguments to "Neo-Geo," art historians' and critics' inimical consideration of this work in the 1980's actually functioned to highlight the most important aspects of this work.

De Man described modernity as a historical structure as well as a humanistic principle that functions to at once prevent and facilitate progress. Human beings are fettered by their remembrance of past events at the same time as they are inspired by their desire to generate change. Modernity is therefore consistently fluctuating between the remembrance of past events and the obliteration of their historical weight. During these singular moments of amnesia, the weight of the past ceases to limit advancement toward the future. De Man remarked: "Moments of genuine humanity thus are moments at which all anteriority vanishes, annihilated by the power of an absolute forgetting."[394] Calling upon the writings of Nietzsche, de Man observed that progress is less an act of obliterating the past than a critical judgment: "as soon as modernism becomes conscious of its own strategies…it discovers itself to be a generative power that not only engenders history, but is part of a generative scheme that extends far into the past."[395] In these critical moments, modernity temporally transforms rigidity and privilege into criticality

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[393] Ibid., 10.
[394] De Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," *Dedalus* 99, no. 2 (Spring 1970): 388.
[395] Ibid., 390.

and reflection, thereby ensuring progression. De Man argued that this type of critical and analytical revision of dominant historical structures can lead to the attainment of authenticity in our current postmodern era.

Relevant on a more general level, de Man's writings described the intellectual movements of our era as continuously vacillating between historical limitations and spontaneous ruptures. De Man argued against structural formalism, which seemed to ignore modernity's dualistic status as a structural entity as well as a progressive force. On the other hand, he did not promote its distinct bifurcation into creative and analytical parts, where the second passively theorizes the first. Citing writers from the 18th century onward, de Man pointed out that a critical regard of history is not purely a modern characteristic. On the contrary, it is a crucial aspect of our natural, historical momentum, consistently fluctuating between the weight of history and the dynamism of modernity. Although the present period is bound to the past for its own insights and development, questioning its structural boundaries conveys accuracy and advancement. Though his work primarily concerned the study of literature, de Man asserted that "demythification" can occur within other domains that contain a linguistic structure, such as art or music. His arguments provoked a desire to progress forward, as well as an optimistic outlook on the issues of postmodernism, typically regarded in a pessimistic manner by many art historians during the 1980's.

De Man's ideas permit a more lucid understanding of Neo-Geo's relationship with the historical entities they struggled against. In poststructuralist terms, Neo-Geo work illustrated de Man's notion of an oblivious temporal moment in history, when

modernism succeeds in reverting back on itself in self-evaluation. Taaffe, for example, shares de Man's cyclical view of history. As Taaffe observed:

> The reason there have been these modernist ruptures is because it was always a way of building upon what was there, by obliterating the existence of the preceding work. It was less about constructing something than it was about rupture, a breaking apart. It was an issue of cataclysmic change that the art was reflecting, but now there are all kinds of different connections that need to be made within our understanding of twentieth century movements and art history. It's a wider picture. I think that the timeline has expanded. What all of this rupturing has done, and what modernism has shown to us, is that we need a longer perspective. All of these fractures have ended up deepening our understanding of where painting is coming from and why the culture needs it.[396]

Taaffe elaborated on the poststructuralist sensibility of his work, which, in a way comparable to that of other Neo-Geo artists, exposed and confronted certain ideological constructs within history, art history and society-at-large.

As one of the first groups to grapple with the new trends in literary theory, Neo-Geo reflected shifting tendencies in the analysis of history and modernity. These artists employed multiple visual and creative processes to demystify art historical and socio-economic structures. From this point of view, Neo-Geo's revisionary act of demythification, using de Man's terminology, presented the knowledgable viewer with a more authentic outlook on art history. Neo-Geo artists playfully updated the forms and materials of Color Field, Pop and Minimalist works to reflect the socio-cultural concerns of the 1980's. Steinbach and Koons cultivated new relationships between high and low as well as art and the commodity in ways that were reminiscent of Pop art, but spoke to the continued expansion of the culture industry. Bickerton, Levine, Halley, McCollum, and Taaffe created paintings that functioned as paradigms of paintings, or rather works

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[396] Taaffe, interview by Elisabeth Sussman, New York, undated (1998), typescript, courtesy of Ramond Foye.

that commented on the ongoing role of the work of art and its relationship to postmodernism. Bickerton's invasive Susie boxes exaggerated and deconstructed aspects related to the selling, purchasing and packaging of a work of art. Using strategies of visual irony, Taaffe and Halley pushed the limits of artistic influence by manipulating stylistic aspects of previous artists' works. One of the common denominators linking this diverse group of artists is the notion that a work of art should uneasily question and prod the terms and conditions of art's relation to history and to society.

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