

**ESTRANGEMENT AND POLITICIZATION:
BERTOLT BRECHT AND AMERICAN ART, 1967-79**

by

PHILIP GLAHN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Abstract

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Adviser: Professor Geoffrey Batchen

This dissertation examines the “Brecht-effect” in postwar American art: the reception of the work of German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht in the U.S. visual arts from the mid-1960s until the late 1970s.

Depoliticized during the McCarthy era and rediscovered during the '60s, Brechtian aesthetics were submitted to a wide range of appropriations and applications in postwar American art. Notions such as Epic Theater and “estrangement,” initially integral parts of an artistic imagination that sought political and cultural revolution, found new actuality in the visual arts and art criticism of the 1960s and '70s, from the politically committed works of Dan Graham and Martha Rosler to the more formalist writings of Michael Fried and Roland Barthes. The history of the reception of Brecht’s work, the choices between and combinations of Brechtian performative didacticism and perceptive pleasure, formal dissociation and political materialism, reflects a trajectory of evolving sensibilities and goals in American artistic production and criticism.

Rather than providing a comprehensive survey of the reception of Brecht’s work in the American art world, this dissertation discusses the influence of Brechtian aesthetics on the work of Martha Rosler, Hans Haacke, and Yvonne Rainer. In Rosler’s case, a

consideration of Brecht's work produces a rearticulation of documentary practice and visual resistance in collage, photomontage, and photography. Haacke's sculpture develops into an investigation of the politics of science and a commitment to 'truth-telling' in art. Rainer's use of film transcends conventional definitions of private and public experience to provide a critical dialogue on political violence. Through an assessment of their work, this project addresses the quality of the changing relation between art and politics, providing a case study in the history of what could be considered the perennial problem of political engagement in art. The ultimate goal of this dissertation is to establish a basis for the much-needed articulation of a model of political art now.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the “Brecht-effect” in postwar American art: the reception of the work of German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht in the U.S. visual arts from the mid-1960s until the late 1970s.

To look at the Brecht-effect during this period means to reassess a moment in American history when an activist relation between art and politics seemed to matter, when art could be considered a meaningful contribution to a larger project of social and political change. After a long period of relative obscurity, Brecht was rediscovered during the early '60s, and his plays enjoyed great popularity during the decade as intelligent and technically savvy gestures of rebellion. His name was frequently mentioned in art journals and artists' interviews and applied to an amazingly broad spectrum of arguments and positions: from Andy Warhol's invocation of the German playwright as a doctrinaire Stalinist to Michael Fried's presentation of Brecht as a renegade of formalist modernism.¹ Yet few of the works and arguments that were called Brechtian actually struck that fine balance between what Walter Benjamin (in reference to Brecht) called “[political] tendency” and “technique.”²

So, why was Brecht invoked? How were strategies of “estrangement” and viewer participation translated from 1920s and '30s theatrical concerns and applied to the visual arts of the era of anti-war protests and Civil Rights marches? How were his ideas implemented in an art of protest and refusal, the demand for a participatory democracy, for an access to the tools and institutions of social and cultural life? My dissertation

¹ See Andy Warhol in his interview with Gene Swenson, “What Is Pop Art?” *Art News* (November 1963): 24–27, 60–64 and Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* (Summer 1967): 12–23.

² Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” (1934), reprinted in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 85–103.

argues that a full understanding of the activist art of the 1960s and '70s can only be obtained through an account of the Brecht-effect. Moreover I argue that this accounting is necessary if we are to develop an effective model of engagement with art and politics today.

To ensure that this accounting will be truly substantive, I decided to examine the work of three artists in depth, rather than attempt a comprehensive—and thus superficial—survey of the reception of Brecht's work in the American art world. Martha Rosler, Hans Haacke, and Yvonne Rainer have often acknowledged the profound influence of Brechtian strategies on their art. Through an assessment of their work, this dissertation addresses the quality of the evolving relation between art and politics, providing a case study in the history of what could be considered the perennial problem of political engagement in art.

A consideration of the Brecht-effect is relevant for two reasons. One, this study establishes a basis for the much-needed articulation of a model of political art now. As Frederic Jameson noted, Brecht's aesthetics are a method rather than a static paradigm.³ Tracing the development of Brechtian strategies within the work of a few selected artists in the 1960s and '70s shows these aesthetics to be a diverse, historical approach to art as a tool of critical analysis and knowledgeable pleasure. Given the political climate today and the current popularity of the "Sixties," a critical consideration of the possibilities of contemporary art activism is vital. Two, the study of the Brecht-effect presents an alternative art-historical perspective on the work of Rosler, Haacke, and Rainer. These three prolific and very influential artists have seen their work at once simplistically

³ Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York, Verso, 1998).

embraced and depoliticized in a nostalgia for authentic expressions of communal anti-establishment rebellion, and reappropriated for a negative critique of an allegedly omnipotent culture industry. This project, in contrast, provides a proper analytical framework of social and political engagement. In essence, this dissertation argues for the continuity of a revolutionary modernism—a Brechtian modernism. It argues for the possibility of producing artistic and art historical spaces of resistance and, ultimately, change.

The literature on the Brecht-effect is generally restricted to theater studies and, interestingly enough, within theater studies it is further restricted to geographic and cultural areas with a historically genial relation to Socialist politics, such as Latin America and Asia.⁴ There is no substantial study of the influence of Brecht on art practice in the United States. My account is therefore a first step in that direction.

The writer and Marxist critic Lee Baxandall has published one of the most insightful, if brief accounts of the influence of Brecht on the so-called New Left. Baxandall looks at Brecht's popularity as a figure of creative political dissent and the American vanguard theater's fascination with Brecht's anarchist content and formal unconventionality.⁵ While Baxandall discusses examples such as the San Francisco Mime

⁴ See, for example, the essays in two of the canonical Brecht reference books, Siegfried Mews (ed.), *Bertolt Brecht Reference Companion* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1997), including Carl Weber, "Brecht and the American Theater," 339–355, Marina Pianca, "Brecht in Latin America: Theater Bearing Witness," 356–378, and Michael Bodden, "Brecht in Asia: New Agendas, National Traditions, and Critical Consciousness," 379–398; Carol Martin and Henry Bial (eds.), *Brecht Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), including Barclay Goldsmith, "Brecht and Chicano Theater," 163–171, Tadashi Uchino, "Political Displacements: Toward Historicizing Brecht in Japan, 1932–1998," 185–205, and Carol Matin, "Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theater," 228–236.

⁵ Lee Baxandall, "The Americanization of Bert Brecht," *Brecht Heute-Brecht Today*, vol.1, n.1 (1971): 151–167.

Troupe and the Living Theatre in more detail, the visual arts are relegated to a mere two sentences.⁶

In postwar American art history and criticism, Brecht's name appears frequently, but almost always in passing and in general terms. "Brechtian" is usually equated with the idea of perceptual shock, anti-illusionism, semiotic ruptures, and with an old-fashioned, political attitude toward art making.⁷ Interpretations based on an individual artist's actual interest in Brecht are less common. Some are discussed in this dissertation, including, for example, Yve-Alain Bois' structuralist reading of Haacke's adaptation of Brecht and Carrie Lambert's declaration of the Brechtian dimension of Rainer's—in my opinion rather *un*-Brechtian—work in dance.⁸ In almost all of these cases, Brecht is made to fit the works or vice versa. What is lacking is a sustained dialogue between the critical model and the art.

It is the understanding of Brecht's reception in its historically specific complexity and contradictions that enables a full understanding of the potential of Brechtian aesthetics today. Charting the Brecht-effect in Rosler, Haacke, and Rainer, as it develops and changes within each individual artists' oeuvre, provides an invaluable insight into the age-old problem of the relations of art and politics: it signals how to make a politically

⁶ "Among painters, already in the 1930s, the *Threepenny Novel* struck a loud note of recognition in Jack Levine. The Brecht plays have influenced some important younger artists; for instance, John Dobbs, who did a number of colored drawings based on *A Man's a Man* in the Bentley/Hancock version. The New Left's comixbooks reflect the outreach of Brecht, for example, in the quotation from 'To Prosperity' appended to one of Gilbert Shelton's 'Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers' strips." *Ibid.*, 165.

⁷ See, for example, Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October* (Winter 1981): 3–34; Kate Linker, "Representation and Sexuality," in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York and Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Godine Publishers, 1984), 391–416; James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); and Jean Fisher, "The Place of the Spectator in the Work of James Coleman" (1983), reprinted in George Baker (ed.), *James Coleman—October Files* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 19–36.

⁸ Yve-Alain Bois, "The Antidote," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 128–144; Carrie Lambert, *Yvonne Rainer's Media: Performance and the Image* (Diss. Stanford University, 2002).

engaged art that neither resigns itself to the ever-evolving forces of capitalist appropriation, nor blindly reproduces gestures of protest that rely on bygone visual and political structures. As discussed in the following chapters, a Brechtian aesthetic situates the artist and the viewer within and in conscious relation to the historical present in order to construct a position of active, critical involvement in the knowing and making of the world.

The Brecht-effect is determined by the complexity of the dialectics of Brecht's method and its specific application in postwar American art. Brecht's theater has mostly been known for its *Verfremdungseffekt*, the "alienation effect" or strategy of "estrangement."⁹ In order to avoid the spectator's passive and contemplative consumption of the drama presented on stage, the playwright sought to destroy any form of theatrical illusionism. Brecht wrote in 1927 that "the essential point of the Epic Theater is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things."¹⁰ Brecht had his actors turn to the audience and address it directly, openly display light sources and other technical equipment, employ music not to complement but to disrupt any mood created on stage, and hang banners of texts from the rafters. Terry Eagleton recently wrote that "Brecht also kept the Exit signs lit not just for safety reasons but to remind the audience that there was a real world out there."¹¹ Brecht wanted to deny his viewers the possibility of escape from everyday concerns, seeking instead to produce a consciousness

⁹ For a selection of Brecht's theoretical writings that provide thorough insight into the playwright's ideas and strategies concerning theater, art, and politics see John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

¹⁰ Bertolt Brecht, "The Epic Theater and Its Difficulties" (1927), reprinted in Willet (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 23.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, "A Note on Brecht," *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* (1999): 91.

of the arts as an apparatus that produces ideas and identities, values and meanings. When Brecht turned “oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market [into] subjects for theatrical representation,” he wanted the audience not only to see the workings of the present world but to understand how seeing the world works.¹²

In this instructive mission, the Epic Theater was complex and contradictory. Brecht thought of his work as didactic but, because of its auto-referentiality, he never saw it as being dogmatic. Because of his efforts to make complicated matters both accessible and enjoyable to the layman, Eagleton describes Brecht as “that most contradictory of creatures, a modernist, avant-garde writer who was also popular, who wrote theater which the ordinary men and women of the Weimar Republic could come to and appreciate.”¹³ Brecht never felt that pleasure and knowledge were mutually exclusive—it was such only to those who separated art from politics and politics from art.

The separation between art and politics determined much of the Brecht-effect prior to the 1960s and is briefly discussed in the first chapter. Since the earliest presentation of plays such as *The Mother* and *The Threepenny Opera* on a few American stages in the 1930s, the reception of Brecht’s work has been highly problematic. To some, his treatment of war and exploitation, of gangsters and debauchery, was too didactic. To others, the Epic Theater’s formal explorations were inaccessibly elitist. On many occasions, his plays were streamlined and their political message deemphasized. Even in more faithful productions, the dimension of material and ideological self-referentiality was all but eliminated.

¹² Bertolt Brecht, “Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Learning” (c. 1936), reprinted in Willet (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 71.

¹³ Eagleton, “A Note on Brecht,” 89.

My first chapter looks at the reception of Brecht's theater and poetry in the immensely influential work of Clement Greenberg, John Cage, and Allan Kaprow as examples of the American visual arts' early encounter with the German playwright. Greenberg's affinity for Brecht may seem unexpected, but the critic had kept extensive notes on Brecht since the early 1930s, finding in the playwright's "authenticity" and "originality" the seeds of his own infamously doctrinaire formalism and his concept of medium-specificity.¹⁴ In contrast, while Brechtian concerns with the dissolution of canonical ideas concerning the place of stage and audience, of performance and reception, appear to abound in Cage's staged events and Kaprow's Happenings, neither artist ever so much as alluded to Brecht. In both cases the Brecht-effect is constituted by an absence.

A comparison between Brechtian strategies and intentions and those of Cage and Kaprow sheds light on the possibilities and limits of an engaged and progressive art during the 1950s. It also serves as an alternative to the recent art historical radicalization of Cage's and Kaprow's work based on the "failure of... earlier vanguard models."¹⁵ Art historian Judith Rodenbeck has argued that the "postmodern" appropriation of avant-garde strategies such as collage and montage in the staged events and performances of the 1950s provided "points of resistance" precisely because they lacked the coherence of the

¹⁴ Clement Greenberg, "Bertolt Brecht's Poetry," (originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1941), reprinted in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 62. For a brief discussion of Greenberg's changing relation to Socialist politics see O'Brian's introduction in *ibid.*, xvii–xxv.

¹⁵ Judith Rodenbeck, *Crash: Happenings (as) the Black Box of Experience, 1958–1966* (Dissertation, Columbia University, 2003) 9.

modernist drive for socio-political transformation.¹⁶ A look at Cage and Kaprow from a Brechtian perspective, on the contrary, provides an understanding of the quality of their challenge to 1950s visual culture—of how “radical” or conventional in their rejection of direct political engagement they actually were. At the same time this perspective acknowledges the space opened by these works for the politicization of the American arts to come.

The second chapter presents Martha Rosler’s collages and photomontages, postcard novels and photo installations as a Brechtian form of refusal.¹⁷ In the late-1960s atmosphere of resistance to social and artistic norms, to preconceived ways of how to think and see war and gender, work and poverty, protest art nonetheless often took the form of sloganeering.¹⁸ An avid reader of Brecht, Rosler shares his concern with “bourgeois conventions not only as content, by representing them, but also through the manner in which it does so.”¹⁹ A work like *Red Stripe Kitchen*, from the series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967–72) (fig. 1), forcefully removes the Vietnam War from its psychologically secure representation as a foreign affair and relocates it in an uncomfortable visual and political proximity to the serenity of domestic comfort. But the montage does not merely resist canonical readings of war and home; it also challenges

¹⁶ Ibid., 12, 85. Rodenbeck writes, “And yet, though the American works appeared to eschew political engagement, this very avoidance may have been... strategically related to an analysis of neo-capitalism in which a defined and positive commitment would have been ripe for cooptation.” Ibid., 18.

¹⁷ Rosler discusses her debt to Brecht’s work in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh: “A Conversation with Martha Rosler,” in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1998), 23–55.

¹⁸ Examples of a simplistic protest art discussed in this chapter include by the *Artists’ Tower of Protest* (1966) (fig. 13) and the *Collage of Indignation* (1967) (fig. 14). On the 1960s as an era of dissent and the problems of a dualist model of affirmation and resistance in art and intellectual history see Howard Brock, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture of the 1960s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998).

¹⁹ Bertolt Brecht, “The Literalization of the Theatre” (1931), reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 43.

the boundaries between artistic autonomy and political engagement. To use Brecht's words, *Red Stripe Kitchen* "literalizes" artistic production and reception, "punctuating 'representation' with 'formulation'; giving [art] the possibility of making contact with other institutions for intellectual activities."²⁰ Rosler employed what Brecht called "social" or "popular realism"—an artistic language that would speak to large, non-specialized audiences while at the same time "laying bare society's causal networks," the mechanisms of communication, and the cultural formation of identity.²¹ In their reflexivity, these works comment on the overt romanticization of anti-establishment politics as a crude celebration of difference and defiance. Indeed, part of the overall task of this chapter is to cast a critical eye on the development of politically engaged art and Leftist politics at large. I will examine the initial goals and enthusiasm of the Left as well as the shift from refusal to denial, when, in the early 1970s, the idea of radical political and cultural change had to face a very real but defeatist disillusionment.

Since Rosler's work is concerned with the conditions of both facts and fictions, this chapter positions her art within a discourse of the photographic and documentary practice of her peers—Allan Sekula, Fred Lonidier, and Victor Burgin, who themselves looked to Brecht's aesthetic theory—and discusses her serial work in the context of a then-recurring interest in American photographic traditions of the 1920s and '30s.²² I

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Bertolt Brecht, "The Popular and the Realistic" (1958), reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 107–115.

²² See, for example, Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," in Jerome Liebling, *Photography—Current Perspectives*, special issue of the *Massachusetts Review* (1971): 231–255 and Victor Burgin, "Photographic Practice and Art Theory," in *Art and Photography*, special issue of *Studio International* (July–August 1975): 39–51. For the recurring interest in U.S. photographic traditions see Edward Steichen, *The Bitter Years: 1935–1941. Rural America As Seen by the Photographers of the Farm Security Administration* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Double Day, Garden City, NY, 1962) and John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Double Day, Garden City, NY, 1966).

similarly position Rosler's work vis-à-vis documentary representations of poverty, labor, and foreign cultures that were gaining great popularity in the late 1970s and early '80s, such as the photo-reportages of Susan Meiselas and Sebastião Salgado.²³

Hans Haacke knew of Brecht early on, having grown up in West Germany, where Brecht's plays and writings were part of the high-school curriculum. Haacke had read Brecht's *Versuche* (*Attempts*—a collection of essays, notes, and aphorisms) and *Mother Courage*, published with Brecht's 1934/35 text "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties," which the artist would return to many times.²⁴ Taking these and other references to Brecht's work as empirical points of departure, Chapter Three discusses Haacke's work as a Brechtian project of demystification, an ever-expanding exploration of socio-aesthetic myths, involving everything from the notion of authorship to the place and institutional space of the art object. Haacke's work consistently involves the historical contextualization of artistic production and reception through the use of nature, systems, structures, and the question of science as objective consciousness. Like Brecht, the artist's playful, yet rational, systemic, and systematic approach to art and culture forcefully criticizes and dismantles romantic, bourgeois humanism and its institutions.²⁵

²³ Susan Meiselas, *Nicaragua: June 1978–July 1979* (New York: Doubleday, 1981); Sebastião Salgado, *Other Americas* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) and Sebastião Salgado, *Sahel: Man in Distress* (New York: Aperture, 1986).

²⁴ Conversation with Hans Haacke, May 18, 2004, New York.

²⁵ "Bourgeois" or "liberal humanism" refers to the development of humanist philosophy under capitalism that results in an individualist, separatist affirmation of subjectivity rather than a socio-political one. While the latter defines the modern subject in reciprocal relation to its social environment, dependent on its function as part of that environment, the former identifies individuality as a sphere of defense against modernity's psychological and moral disorientation and fragmentation of identity. As an individual, the bourgeois subject views itself not as social but necessarily as anti-social, due to its introverted assertion of coherent selfhood, and as necessarily non-political and non-ideological, since its identity needs to transcend the whims and contingency of political opinion and ideological formations. Bourgeois art and culture serve to maintain a solipsistic perspective on the world predicated on individual reception and contemplation,

It replaces the idea of art as an autonomous sensory and psychological affirmation of individuality with an investigation of art's relation to physical and biological, and, ultimately, to historical and ideological forces.

Early works like *Wave* (1964) (fig. 2) and *Condensation Cube* (1963–65) (fig. 3) are objects that rely on the viewer's manipulation and therefore aim to question the passive, privileged cognitive position of the individual vis-à-vis the object. They are read here in relation to the 1966 American publication, and 1967 New York production, of Brecht's *Galileo* (1938)—a play that in both content and form seeks a critically rational rather than subjective approach to history. Haacke's interactive objects are also looked at in relation to Michael Fried's seminal critique of Minimalism, published in *Artforum* in 1967. Both Brecht's and Fried's texts provide poignant rejections of an anthropocentric worldview, albeit for very different reasons and purposes.²⁶ The works are furthermore discussed in the context of the American publications of the writings of Roland Barthes (whose *Critical Essays* and *Mythologies* were heavily influenced by the philosopher's

rooted in part in the historical development of the privileged position of individual sensory perception. Claude Lévi-Strauss speaks of a possessive humanism in Western art; the social, psychological, physical, ideological, economic positioning of the viewing subject as cognitive-existential axis, through and for whom aesthetic experience exists as an act of owning the world: "... the tendency of Occidental art to possess the object through illusion initiated in Greek sculpture and the painting of the Renaissance." Cited in Annette Michelson, "Art and the Structuralist Perspective," in *On the Future of Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 50. For a discussion of humanism's philosophical and political history, see William F. Warde, "Socialism and Humanism," *International Socialist Review* (Winter 1959): 13–16. On "Cartesian perspectivalism," the congruence of "Renaissance notions of perspective and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality," as an integral part of the bourgeois ethic of the modern world, see Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (New York: The New Press, 1988), 3–23.

²⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo*, edited and with an introduction by Eric Bentley, English version by Charles Laughton (New York: Grove Press, 1966). The play was staged by the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center in New York. *The New York Times* alone reviewed the play three times (Walter Kerr, "Theater: Lincoln Repertory's 'Galileo,'" *The New York Times* [April 14, 1967]: 31; Walter Kerr, "'Galileo'—A New Hope?" *The New York Times* [April 23, 1967]: 97; Eric Bentley, "'Galileo': What Kind of Hero?" *The New York Times* [April 30, 1967]: 113). Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (Summer 1967): 12–23.

exposure to Brecht and increasingly influential on American artists) and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* and the therein-contained notion of anti-humanist writing.²⁷

Toward the end of the '60s, Haacke's growing interest in scientific rationality extended his investigation of the art object's interactivity to systemic relations and transformations. "Real Time Systems" such as *Chickens Hatching* (1969) (fig. 4) substitute a verifiable physical or biological structure for a traditional set of aesthetic beliefs that defines the artist as originator and the viewer as centralized subject. Haacke replaced representation with operations around the same time that a structuralist Barthes killed the author, emphasizing text over narrative and speech over myth, and on American stages Brecht's Galileo exchanges an anthropocentric worldview for the abstract relativism of scientific knowledge. Haacke's Real Time Systems are read against the ambivalent position of the neo-avant-garde and the New Left with regard to the revolutionary and destructive potential of technological progress, the aesthetic-scientific musings of Jack Burnham, the craze for "cybernetics" and Marshall McLuhan, and the historical avant-garde's, specifically Constructivism's, appreciation for machines and engineering.²⁸

With his turn to Real Time *Social* Systems in the early 1970s, Haacke reinstated the notion of authorship as a central factor in the writing of myth and history. The artist's analysis increasingly focused on his own practice and introduced factors of political and

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1972) and *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). Examples of Alain Robbe-Grillet's work published in the U.S. at the time include *Jealousy* (New York: Grove Press, 1964) and *Erasers* (New York: Grove Press, 1964). Grove Press also published *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, the author's theoretical musings on literature in 1966. Other texts include "From Realism to Reality," *Evergreen Review* (February 1966): 50–53, 83 and "Anti-Humanism in Art," *Studio International* (April 1968): 168–169.

²⁸ Haacke's work was included in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibitions *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968) and *Information* (1970) as well as the *Software* exhibition held at the Jewish Museum (1970). The accompanying catalogues' notion of the artist as engineer, controller, and programmer makes indirect, and in some cases direct, reference to the work of the Russian avant-garde.

ideological power into his systems. Following Brecht, Haacke turns the artist into a truth-teller within a system of social and ideological mapping and naming. Within this system where cultural production means the power to actively produce devices of experiential and ideological orientation and navigation, the scientific artist must act from a position of political responsibility rather than disinterested neutrality. In their commitment to expose and, in turn, provide access to the mechanisms of cognitive production, Haacke's late works are Brechtian exercises in aesthetic reflection and self-reflection, interventionist rather than descriptive, historical rather than mythical. A Brechtian reading shows Haacke's art to be an example of a politically committed, revolutionary modernism.

The final chapter discusses Yvonne Rainer's 1979 film *Journeys from Berlin/1971* as a so-called counter-public work of art. Despite the artist's own references to Brecht and several art-historical interpretations of Rainer's work as being generally Brechtian, it is this feature-length movie that constitutes the artist's first truly politically engaged and engaging work. It comes closest to Brecht's own cinematic attempts and his contemplation of film as a public medium.²⁹ *Journeys* was inspired by and partially shot during Rainer's 1976/77 stay in West Berlin, where she saw Brecht's only full-length film, *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), and immersed herself in the work of the New German Cinema and feminist film studies, both of which were influenced by Brecht.³⁰ The films of Alexander Kluge, Rainer-Werner Fassbinder, and others, as well as the volatile political climate in Germany at the time, forced Rainer to reconsider her own approach to

²⁹ For an interpretation of Rainer's work as generally Brechtian see Carrie Lambert, who makes the claim that the artist's early oeuvre "could be considered a 1960s correlate of... the work of Bertolt Brecht." *Yvonne Rainer's Media: Performance and the Image* (Dissertation, Stanford University, 2002), 29.

³⁰ Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts; A Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 453.

filmmaking. This reconsideration affords the opportunity to revisit examples of Rainer's cinematic development: from the private, intersubjective aesthetic of her late-'60s performances and early-'70s films to the structuralist appropriation of her films as disinterested, universal, and therefore essentially public media. The trajectory culminates in the ultimately Brechtian politicization of the medium in *Journeys*: a convoluted meditation on suicide and political violence. A collage of personal and official perspectives on terrorism, the role of women in politics, and institutional and domestic violence, as well as the role institutions such as art and psychoanalysis play in managing socio-political discontent, the film challenges the viewer's conception of private and public.

In both the New German Cinema and feminist film, the traditional notion of an inclusive and accessible public sphere, of what German filmmaker Alexander Kluge called the "social horizon of experience," was challenged.³¹ The official public sphere and its media relegated the experiences of women and minorities, of political dissent and social alienation, to the sphere of private concerns. Furthermore, the tools of the production and distribution of experience—the media and education, art and film—was not only not public, that is, not universally accessible, but in many cases these media were privately owned and controlled. A counter- or proletarian public sphere would therefore have to include concerns, interests, and fantasies traditionally excluded from the public sphere. Additionally, it had to provide a participatory, dialogic forum wherein the social relevance of events and opinions, stories and histories, could be negotiated. Within limits, *Journeys* offers such a space of negotiation. Like Brecht, and like Rosler and

³¹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Proletarian Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (orig. published in 1972), translated by Peter Labanyi, et al. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 2.

Haacke, Rainer employs and explicates art as an arena of social and political articulation, a sphere wherein war and terror, oppression and liberation, history and memory are made more or less visible and knowable. She seeks to facilitate a position from which one can, in Brecht's sense, "come to grips with things." To evaluate and actively shape the myths and experiences, the fantasies and circumstances, that at a given point determine what we call reality, is what it means to produce a Brechtian work of art.

There are, then, a number of ways and forms in which Brecht's work was evoked. To look at the reception of Brecht in the practices of Rosler, Haacke, and Rainer means to trace a self-reflective development in political art making and to point to the possibilities of such art making today. While Brecht was rediscovered during the 1960s, his aesthetic strategies found their most nuanced application during the '70s. During those years, the artists discussed here continued to reexamine their own work in light of the growing fragmentation of Leftists politics and a visual mainstream culture with an ever-growing appetite for radical appearances. During the 1980s, Brecht's work was yet again marginalized. An increasingly theoretical art discourse, on the one hand, and an outer-institutional, community-based New Public Art, on the other, showed little interest in what seemed to be a bygone model of doctrinaire radicalism. Now, as the '80s—its politics, its art making and art thinking—has itself come under historical scrutiny, and pragmatic political engagement in the arts and elsewhere has yet again become urgent necessity, Brechtian aesthetics as a valid method of such engagement deserve critical reconsideration.

CHAPTER ONE.

Three pre-1960s Case Studies: Greenberg, Cage, and Kaprow

The Brecht-effect in the U.S. before the 1960s was mediated by what Walter Benjamin called the dialectics of “tendency” and “technique.”³² To many American theater companies, the German playwright’s drama seemed too politically radical and dogmatic, whereas others found the experimental dimension of his Epic Theater too elitist. Some writers, including Clement Greenberg, carefully separated Brecht’s political aspirations from his formal innovations in theater and poetry. Artists such as John Cage and Allan Kaprow evidently never showed any interest in Brecht at a time when politically engaged art and avant-garde production were considered antithetical. Greenberg, Cage, and Kaprow are landmarks on the path from the depoliticization to the repoliticization of art in the U.S. A look at the remarkable interest in (as for Greenberg) and surprising indifference to (in Cage and Kaprow’s case) Brecht’s work, his dialectics of art’s content

³² Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” (1934), reprinted in *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973). In this, one of his most Brechtian texts, Benjamin defined his terms for a politically engaged literature and art. The producer, as opposed to the presumably autonomous poet or artist, has to consider both “tendency” and “technique.” The former denotes the producer’s acknowledgement of the historical reality that is class struggle and the necessity to put his practice into the service of the proletariat. The latter addresses the function of the work “within the literary relations of production of its time.” (Ibid., 103) The artist’s alignment with the revolutionary struggle itself is not sufficient: in order for aesthetic practice to fulfill a liberating pedagogical role it has to reflect and adjust its usefulness in the light of constantly changing relations of cultural production. Technique therefore includes formal and medium-related concerns such as modes of representation and address as they relate to prevalent conditions of cultural production. Benjamin then cites Brecht’s Epic Theater as an example of such tendentious technique. In Epic Theater not only the content of the play but its formal devices are employed as tools for the transformation of institutions and the creation of participatory thinking on behalf of the viewer.

A number of Benjamin’s essays, including the important “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” rely heavily on his reading of and conversations with Brecht. The essay “What Is Epic Theater?” was first published anonymously in the U.S. in Thomas Mann’s magazine *Mass und Wert*, then translated by Eric Bentley and printed under Benjamin’s name in *The Western Review*, Spring, 1948. One of the earliest and maybe the first translated American publication of the “Work of Art” essay appeared in the New Left journal *Studies on the Left* in the Winter issue of 1960. The reception of Brecht’s work via the writings of Benjamin would provide an insightful and interesting dimension to this project but is beyond its scope.

and form, of reference and self-reference, sets the stage for the Brecht-effect in the 1960s and beyond.

After World War II, a vigorous affirmation of American capitalism in the form of material affluence and military might coupled with Cold War anti-Communism provided an unfavorable climate for revolutionary Brechtian methods in the American arts. Through the '50s, any interest in Brecht's work was relegated to a few small bohemiae of avant-garde culture and political dissent, such as the Living Theatre and the *Evergreen Review*. Performances of Brecht's plays appeared far off Broadway on college stages and downtown lofts, while New Directions and Grove Press published a small number of Brecht's works in translation.³³

The relative absence of Brecht at this time—a negative Brecht-effect—proves as insightful as his presence. Whether it stems from the McCarthyian witch-hunt or a lingering distrust in ideological commitment, it is remarkable that his work would be ignored or rejected by artists who knew of him and to whose work an understanding of Brechtian strategies would appear to be of central importance. Like many other artists at the time, Cage and Merce Cunningham frequently visited the Living Theatre, attending performances of Brecht adaptations. Yet nowhere in Cage's writings or interviews does one find a reference to Brecht. In 1965, the *Tulane Drama Review* published a special issue dedicated to Happenings and Fluxus, including discussions of Action Theater, the difference between Happenings and traditional theater, issues of spectatorship, stage and environment, improvisation and everyday experience. Brecht is not mentioned once. This is even more surprising since *TDR* had brought out a special issue on Brecht a few years

³³ For a list of Brecht's work in translation published in the U.S. see Martin Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Work*, revised edition (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971), 338–340.

earlier and would go on to publish two more.³⁴ Asked recently why Kaprow never showed any interest in Brechtian theater, the editor of his writings, Jeff Kelley, pointed out that “Kaprow’s work, while often resonating with the social implications of the day, was a-political, unlike Brecht.”³⁵ Brecht simply equaled politics to many artists who were trying to avoid the complications of ideological involvement.

The American postwar avant-garde struggled to revise the overbearing legacy of Greenbergian formalism from within its framework, expanding the narrow definition of aesthetic experience beyond self-sufficient medium-specificity. Still apprehensive of considering art’s ideological dimensions, artists such as Cage and Kaprow included the “everyday” less as a political or social concept than as a physical and phenomenological one. These artists could be considered part of what historian Todd Gitlin has called the “old New Left”—disenchanted with the shallow promises of freedom and equality to be delivered by the dream of affluence and with the cathartic idyll of pleasurable entertainment and introverted art. Aiming for an art of inclusion without a new political utopia, maintaining a “folk culture in the absence of an actual folk,” these artists opened the confines of artistic production and reception for the radical repoliticization to come.³⁶

Brecht, the American Left, and Its Theater

Brecht’s first real encounter with the American left ended in the playwright’s being

³⁴ The TDR’s special issues on Brecht appeared in September 1961, Autumn 1967, and Winter 1968. The Fluxus/Happenings issue was published in Winter 1965.

³⁵ Correspondence with Jeff Kelley, April 22, 2004.

³⁶ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 22, 28.

thrown out of rehearsals and a lot of bad press.³⁷ The Theater Union's 1935 production of *The Mother* in New York—for which Brecht was shipped in from his exile in Denmark—had been streamlined by its translators in anticipation of the intellectual limitations of its proletarian audience.³⁸ This *Lehrstück*, or “play for learning,” with its purposely fragmented and shockingly contradictory format, was simplified into a more palatable play that the press dismissed as “didactic” and “pretentious,” “amateurish” and “affected,” “an entertainment for children, for it is a simple kindergarten for Communist tots.”³⁹ In the climate of Popular Front alliances and the economic successes of the New Deal, the Brecht-effect was a divorce of tendency and technique.⁴⁰ Rather than acknowledging the dialectical interplay of the commitment to social change and the cognitive-aesthetic politics of form, the reception of Brecht's work was marked by either the rejection of its revolutionary content as “Communist infantilism” or the dismissal of

³⁷ Although the *Threepenny Opera* and *He Who Said Yes* were staged in New York as early as 1933, it was the Theatre Union's 1935 production of *The Mother* that brought the first thorough engagement of the American left with Brecht's work. See Lee Baxandall, “Brecht in America, 1935,” *The Drama Review* (Fall 1967): 69–87. Baxandall's article provides an in-depth discussion and survey of the critical response to Brecht's 1935 encounter with the left American theater.

³⁸ The Theatre Union was enthusiastic about the production of *The Mother* but problems with Brecht's technique became apparent from the very start. Like most members of the Theatre Union, the translator of the play was unfamiliar with the Brechtian notion of epic theater and even though he liked the text, he was disturbed and puzzled by what he found to be a fragmentary style and insufficient dramatization. The Theatre Union had enjoyed great success with its plays and reached a large working-class audience (according to the Theatre Union, by April 1935 its four previous productions had been attended by more than 500,00 viewers, “75% of them workers, many of whom had never before been in a theatre.” Cited in Baxandall, “Brecht in America, 1935,” 72). This popularity was attributed to the political clarity of the productions and the easy access to the story presented.

³⁹ E.J.R. Isaacs in *Theatre Arts*, no. 20 (1936): 13; *Daily Mirror* (November 20, 1935); *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* ((November 20, 1935), respectively. The latter two are cited in Brecht's own remarks regarding the play (Bertolt Brecht, “Anmerkungen zur *Mutter*,” 1932 and 1936, reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 17 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 1058.

⁴⁰ For a detailed account of shifting political alliances and climates in the U.S. from the 1920s through the 1950s see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

its anti-illusionist dramaturgy and prose as elitist and over-intellectualized.⁴¹

Aware of this split reception, Brecht tailored his next two plays to be explicitly anti-Fascist in message and (as he later admitted to the set designer Mordecai Gorelik) directed at an American middle-class audience.⁴² *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, performed in the 1940s as *The Private Life of the Master Race*, received favorable reviews that recast Brecht as a pacifist playwright rather than one devoted to class struggle.⁴³ This tailored approach would determine the critical response to Brecht's theater and aesthetic politics in general—the playwright aided his critics in further separating his revolutionary intentions from his poetic and dramatic work. A painful absence of direction on the American left is voiced by critic Andrews Wanning's 1944 discussion of Brecht's short radio play *The Trial of Lucullus* in the *Partisan Review*: "As a radio play it seems easily the most successful I have ever read... But I suspect that my main reason for liking it... is the fact that it has a simple and impersonal thing to say... What is needed... is something to say with conviction. Where the conviction is to come from I can't pretend to know."⁴⁴

Only a small faction of the Old Left maintained a concern for socialist content *and* form in its appropriation of Brechtian aesthetics. Among these, critic and novelist Eva Goldbeck elaborated on the revolutionary importance of the *Lehrstück* in a 1935 article published in *The New Masses*. Goldbeck argued that to teach the worker to think

⁴¹ David Bathrick, "Brecht's Marxism and America," in Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust, eds., *Essays on Brecht: Theater and Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 212.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴³ Bertolt Brecht, *The Private Life of the Master Race*, translated and introduced by Eric Bentley (New York: New Directions, 1944). The play was staged by, for example, the Little Theater at UCLA's Wheeler Auditorium in Los Angeles, CA and by the Theater of All Nations at the Pauline Edwards Theater in New York, NY, both in 1945.

⁴⁴ Andrews Wanning, "Poetry in Wartime," *Partisan Review* (Spring 1944): 215.

dialectically, not to present him with some sort of illusionist and affected spectacle, was at the heart of Brecht's original effort: "The emotional excitement that is always present in the theater is of course not ignored; but it is minimized and used not to obscure but to clarify the intelligence. Significantly... this new dramaturgy is called the Study play (*Lehrstück*)."⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Goldbeck's husband, the composer Marc Blitzstein, had found in Brecht the "solvent of his career."⁴⁶ In 1936 Blitzstein produced the famous play *The Cradle Will Rock*, fusing his interest in popular music and speech with radical social consciousness. Dedicated to Brecht, *The Cradle Will Rock* resulted from a conversation with the German playwright concerning prostitution as a modern condition permeating all areas of ideological production, including the press, the clergy, and intellectual life.⁴⁷

The next year, Brecht's friend the set designer Mordecai Gorelik published his own translation of some early Brechtian theoretical tracts under the title "Epic Realism: Brecht's Notes on the Threepenny Opera."⁴⁸ This included his own elaborations on these theories. Gorelik would soon go on to discuss Brecht's theater at length in his influential 1940 book *New Theatres for the Old*.⁴⁹ Gorelik's study offered one of the first historical

⁴⁵ Eva Goldbeck in *New Masses* (December 31, 1935): 27.

⁴⁶ James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁴⁷ For an in-depth discussion of the relation between Brecht's and Blitzstein's work see Robert Dietz, "Marc Blitzstein and the 'Agit-Prop' Theater of the 1930s," *Anuario Interamericano de Investigacion Musical* (1970): 51–66

⁴⁸ Gorelik, "Epic Realism: Brecht's Notes on the Threepenny Opera," *Theatre Workshop* (April–July 1937): 29–40.

⁴⁹ Mordecai Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old* (New York: Samuel French, 1940). It has been argued that this book would have an impact on the young Andy Warhol. For a Brechtian reading of Warhol's work as mediated in part by Gorelik's studies, see Rainer Crone, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Praeger, 1970) and Rainer Crone (ed.), *Andy Warhol: A Picture Show by the Artist* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987). In his Warhol biography Victor Bockris mentions the artist's exposure to Gorelik and Brecht's work during the time Warhol was designing programs and sets for the Theater 12 Group in the early 1950s in New York. Bockris writes, "From an older member of the group, Aaron Fine... Warhol was introduced to the 'alienation effects' of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, which Andy later acknowledged had helped him shape his own aesthetic." *Warhol—The Biography* (London: Da Capo Press, 2003), 110. Yet Warhol's only reference to Brecht was made when the artist claimed in his interview with Gene Swenson that "Brecht wanted everybody to think alike." "What Is Pop Art?" *ArtNews* (November 1963): 25. A Brechtian

discussions of Epic Theater, drawing parallels to related phenomena such as Soviet theater, Erwin Piscator's political theater, and the Living Newspaper, an American Federal Theater Project "producing organization" established in 1935 and sponsored by the national union of newspaper workers.⁵⁰

But it was Eric Bentley who came to be the major translator and proponent of Brecht's work during Brecht's exile in the U.S. from 1941 to 1947. Bentley produced a great number of Brecht translations, staged several of his plays, and published his own interpretations of Brechtian aesthetics and reviews of its applications. Throughout the 1940s, Bentley's translations and reviews appeared in *The Nation*, *Theatre Arts*, and *The New York Times*, among other publications. He translated *The Private Life of the Master Race*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which was then performed throughout the U.S.⁵¹ Unlike Goldbeck, Blitzstein, or Gorelik, Bentley separated Brecht's art from his politics and he has therefore been accused of attempting the playwright's "political nullification."⁵² He did not deny Brecht's political convictions—on the contrary, he exaggerated them, unapologetically casting the German

approach to Warhol's work would therefore, like Crone's, be a largely interpretive one, whereas it is the aim of this study to discuss examples of artistic production that sought an intentionally political engagement.

⁵⁰ The Living Newspaper's goal was to "bring journalism into the theatre: to dramatize the most important social and political issues of the day in terms not of romantic stories but of the documented facts themselves."⁵⁰ Even though obvious parallels in format and aesthetic strategy existed between the epic theater and the productions of the Living Newspaper, the directors of the journalistic drama ensemble, denied any dependence on Brecht. Part of the Federal Arts Project's attempt to define and promote an American culture, the Living Newspaper insisted that its style was a "native technique," even that it may have been Brecht who appropriated elements for the development of his own dramatic form. Bernhard Sobel, ed., *The New Theatre Handbook and Digest of Plays* (New York: Crown, 1959), 429.

⁵¹ For an account of Bentley's work on Brecht (including translations, stagings, and critical writings) see Eric Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries* (New York: Grove Press, 1981). See also Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Work*. Bentley was not the only one reading and writing on Brecht but according to many critics, he was one of the most important for shaping Brecht's reception during the 1940s and '50s: "It is difficult to escape the feeling that Brecht speaks only to Bentley, and that Bentley speaks only to God." Walter Kerr, *Herald Tribune Book Review* (April 5, 1953), cited in Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries*, 281.

⁵² Bathrick, "Brecht's Marxism and America," 218.

playwright as an opportunistic Stalinist on more than one occasion—but found merit in his work *despite* its revolutionary tendency.⁵³ Bentley chose to promote what he referred to as “documentary plays” over the didactic *Lehrstücke*. He presented the former as humanist stories about good and evil, wherein the stylistic devices of the Epic Theater were to be appreciated for their modernist concern with form, as an alternative to the dogmatic rhetoric of Socialist Realism.⁵⁴ Bentley did more than most critics to familiarize an American audience with the works and theories of Brecht, but ultimately, according to theater and film historian David Bathrick, “begins another separation process central to Brecht’s reception in this country; he begins to salvage Brecht for the intellectuals in order to preserve him for literary posterity. ... [He] save[s] the poet from his political self.”⁵⁵

Greenberg’s Brecht

In 1939 Clement Greenberg published an article on Brecht in the *Partisan Review*.⁵⁶ This text, along with Greenberg’s 1941 essay “Bertolt Brecht’s Poetry,” are early and

⁵³ See, for example, Vera Stegmann’s recent interview with Bentley, in which Bentley claims that Brecht “accepted the Soviet Union as the carrier of absolute truths.” *The Brecht Yearbook* 28 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 60. Elsewhere, Bentley says that he “never accepted [Brecht’s] ideology... Soviet Communism.” N. Graham Nesmith, “An Interview with Eric Bentley,” *Yale Review* (July 2003): 97.

⁵⁴ For publication in 1944 and production in 1945 in New York, Bentley chose *The Private Life of the Master Race*, which *The New York Times* reviewed as “forceful” and as having “contempt for the Nazis” without being “didactic, obvious, pretentious.” Another reviewer observed that “Brecht manages to keep Propaganda subservient to art... even his workers are human.” Marjorie Faber, “Herrenvolk at Home,” *The New York Times* (December 17, 1944): BR6 and Lewis Nichols, “The Play, Nazi World,” *The New York Times* (June 13, 1945): 28, respectively.

In his writings about Brecht, Bentley furthers this kind of reception by dividing Brecht’s plays into two categories: that of the didactic *Lehrstück* and that of the documentary play, *The Private Life of the Master Race* being a prime instance of the latter. See Eric Bentley, afterword to Bertolt Brecht, *The Private Life of the Master Race* (New York: New Directions, 1944). Reprinted in Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries*, 23–37.

⁵⁵ Bathrick, “Brecht’s Marxism and America,” 217–218, 221.

⁵⁶ Clement Greenberg, “The Beggar’s Opera—After Marx: Review of *A Penny for the Poor* by Bertolt Brecht,” (1939), reprinted in John O’Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3–5.

important instances of Greenberg's influential depoliticization of the historical avant-gardes.⁵⁷ In light of the harsh realities of existing Communist and Socialist totalitarianism, Greenberg's Marxism turned defensive, and he tried avidly to separate Brecht's poetry from its author's political inclinations.⁵⁸ Greenberg casts Brecht as a humanist rather than a Socialist, arguing that his poetic form, not his prose, provides respite from the ideological corruption of political intent: the collage-compositions of various popular elements provide a contradiction and reflective distance that foregoes any extra-aesthetic purpose. For Greenberg, Brecht's contribution to modern art lies in his rejection of illusionism through the sensual and physical affirmation of the medium's materiality. But rather than serving as a "difficult, powerful counterexample to all the critic wished to see as the main line of avant-garde activity," as he does for T.J. Clark, I would argue that Brecht had a decisive and *positive* formative effect on Greenberg: Brechtian strategies of estrangement and distanciation, of rejecting any kind of cathartic

⁵⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Bertolt Brecht's Poetry," (1941), reprinted in O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg*, vol. 1, 49–62.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the development of Leftist politics in the U.S. in the 1930s and '40s in the context of the New Deal and the Federal Art Project, the Popular Front and the American response to the Stalin Show Trials and the Hitler-Stalin pact, the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism, founded under Dwight Macdonald from the *Partisan Review*, and the House of Un-American Activities Committee, see Susan Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism and Americanism* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1999). While Alfred Barr Jr. had begun his very own rescue mission of modern art, saving purity of style as freedom of expression from the ideological appropriation of culture under Fascism as early as 1936, Greenberg began to articulate his related narrative of modernism. While he described his parents as "free-thinking socialists," Greenberg's more developed approach to politics, his concept of history, and his understanding of the mechanisms of capitalism, are clearly Marxist in origin. (Platt, *Art and Politics* 164). In 1948, Greenberg referred to himself as an "ex- or disabused Marxist." (O'Brian, "Introduction," xx). Yet his rejection of Marxism in the late 1930s is rather a historically specific rejection of Stalinist Communism aided in general by the increasingly anti-Communist climate in the U.S. and specifically by the inquisitory practices of the HUAC as well as the *Partisan Review*'s own Trotskyite version of cultural politics. The rejection of art with an explicit political tendency was not a general rejection but one occurring in the light of the abuses of artistic expression under a totalitarian Soviet regime. Macdonald and Greenberg appropriated Trotsky's argument for their own agenda of an autonomous and self-sufficient art. (For an in-depth discussion of Greenberg, Trotskyism and the *Partisan Review*, see Platt, *Art and Politics*, especially 239–250).

illusionism in art, made the progressive, committed production of art seem possible.⁵⁹

Greenberg's first published piece of writing, "The Beggar's Opera—After Marx: Review of *A Penny for the Poor* by Bertolt Brecht," appeared in the Winter issue of the *Partisan Review* in 1939, roughly half a year before the publication of the hugely influential "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."⁶⁰ This review of Brecht's 1934 attempt at writing a novel (based loosely on the 1928 *Threepenny Opera*), revises a common and convenient categorization of Brecht's work, distinguishing the early, anarchist Brecht from the later, Communist Brecht. Greenberg writes that as a scenario of autonomous lawlessness, as in the *Threepenny Opera*, the underworld successfully serves as an *opposition* to the "society whose hypocritical rules it disregards."⁶¹ But when in *A Penny for the Poor* the "Communist Brecht" presents this world of crime and asocial behavior as "no longer cut off cleanly from the remainder of society," but casts it in *relation* to the milieu it aims to subvert, he is accused by Greenberg of writing a "morality tale."⁶² The subversive potential of the underworld no longer relies on the specificity of its unassimilable differences but is transformed into the doctrine of Marxist paradigm.

What Greenberg most appreciates in Brecht in 1939 are his formal abilities: he praises the playwright's "virtuosity as a master of language" and his "prose which for its firmness and sensitivity might serve as a model to any writer of German." In addition, he lauds Brecht's "collage compositions," while regretting that the English translation is

⁵⁹ T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art" (1982), reprinted in Francis Frascina (ed.), *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 74.

⁶⁰ Greenberg, "The Beggar's Opera—After Marx: Review of *A Penny for the Poor* by Bertolt Brecht," (1939), reprinted in O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg*, vol. 1, 3–5. Brecht's novel, originally titled *Dreigroschenroman* (1934) was loosely based on the hugely successful *Dreigroschenoper* (*Threepenny Opera*) (1928). *A Penny for the Poor* was first published in English in 1938. It was republished in a new translation as *Threepenny Novel* by Grove Press, New York in 1956.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

banal.⁶³ Greenberg cannot reconcile Brecht's technique with Brecht's political aspirations. Originally, the fragmentation and dissociation provided in its content by the unpredictable behavior of villains and desperados finds its formal equivalent in the collage compositions. Yet, according to Greenberg, the form of a novel, which "shall deal with actual experience," clashes with the overriding concern with a rigid political theory and a conclusive logic based on formulas of class antagonism.⁶⁴ To Greenberg, this clash produces "absurdity" and contradiction.⁶⁵ At this point, even though he deems Brecht's literary attempt a failure, Greenberg finds authenticity in both its form and in a somewhat nostalgic and naive delight in the protagonists' asocial behavior that ideally exist *beyond* considerations of class. Only from this position of objectivity and autonomy can the beggars' tale function as a successful critique of capitalism and its hypocrisy. This argument for a necessarily absolute autonomy of aesthetic production would dictate Greenberg's criticism for the rest of his life.

A slightly later encounter with Brecht provides deeper insight into Greenberg's active formalization and depoliticization of the historical avant-garde. Published in 1941, also in the *Partisan Review*, "Bertolt Brecht's Poetry" discusses the playwright's poetic production as an oeuvre, from the crude and asocial ballads of the late 1910s and early '20s, to the didactic aspirations following the poet's Communist turn, to the anti-Fascist works written in early exile.⁶⁶ What these phases have in common, according to Greenberg, is an authenticity provided by the poetic dimension that permeates all of

⁶³ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶ Brecht originally published the ballads of the 1910s and '20s in the collection *Die Hauspostille* in 1927 (translated and published as *Die Hauspostille—Manual of Piety* New York: Grove Press, 1966). The "Hauspostille" was published the same year that Greenberg and other historians associate with Brecht's conversion to Marxism.

Brecht's writing, including the didactically prosaic and dramatic: "It is poetry that 'sparks' Brecht's work, whether in verse or in prose."⁶⁷ And, again, it is in the "disparity" and "incongruity" of Brecht's formal innovations that Greenberg locates this originality.⁶⁸

Greenberg's analysis of Brecht's poetry remains an entirely formalist exercise. As he discusses the "Legende vom Toten Soldaten" ("The Legend of the Dead Soldier"), a bitter critique of German nationalism and its tragically absurd manifestations in the realities of World War I, Greenberg turns history into a historicist analysis.⁶⁹ Completely stripped of any reference to the context (or content) of its origin, the "Legend" is reduced to a disinterested, albeit insightful and thorough meta-discourse in aesthetic originality. While Greenberg emphasizes the fact that Brecht appropriated a form of German folklore, the ballad, for his end-of-war poem, no mention is made of the dead soldier's corpse or the gruesomely enthusiastic parade of Prussian subservience he leads despite the country's brutal defeat. Brecht wanted to write "popular," so Greenberg argues,

⁶⁷ Greenberg, "Bertolt Brecht's Poetry," in O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg*, vol.1, 62.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51. Greenberg argues that while other modernist poets such as Apollinaire or Mayakovsky capitalize on an appropriation of folk or popular culture as an anti-literary device that traditionally exists outside of high culture, Brecht is faced with a more complex scenario. According to Greenberg, the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow in German poetry is not as obvious as in other literary traditions. The popular, he argues, is part of German literature as much as kitsch is intimately associated with folk culture. Hence, Brecht's appropriation of a form like the German ballad enables the poet to create a more subversive and unexpected rearticulation of a conventional and acquainted form, producing irony through a lack of distance rather than the "humor of the ridiculous" based on the combination of already categorically separated elements. (*Ibid.*) Greenberg's emphasis lies on a notion of the new, of a progressive history of artistic development that allows for cultural resistance. As popular forms such as the folk ballad are inscribed in the history of literature, categorized and normalized as a form other than and in binary opposition to classic or highbrow literature, they lose their subversive potential, preempting the tension potentially created by their appropriation by a modernist avant-garde. Only when these forms "still live respectably outside the textbook" and their "associations are part of the life of almost every German" does the acclimatization of these forms produce a disharmony that allows for an adequate expression of critique and discontent. (*Ibid.*)

⁶⁹ Brecht, "Legende vom toten Soldaten—Legend of the Dead Soldier," in *Die Hauspostille—Manual of Piety*, 222–229.

because his position was that of the “pariah who has no patience with the formalities, either of living or of literature.”⁷⁰

For Greenberg, Brecht’s contribution to modern art lies in his ability to create a sphere of authenticity and autonomy that resides beyond the known binaries of past and present, high and low. It relies on an absolute refusal of the binary mechanisms of capitalist culture: “Until 1927 at least, Brecht rejected everything, Lenin as well as the Kaiser.”⁷¹ And even after 1927, Brecht’s work pursues the same formal originality, despite his “change of personality.”⁷² As the poet turned didactic, developing the praxis of the Epic Theater and writing the *Lehrstücke* in order to provide the working class with the ideas leading to the fulfillment of a necessary revolution, Greenberg finds a transgressive objectivity. Convinced that Brecht’s new politically committed style results from his previous poetry rather than his new revolutionary intentions, Greenberg creates a poetic superstructure that finds its various applications throughout Brecht’s life and its changing agendas. Not only does this superstructure remain intact and viable in the light

⁷⁰ Greenberg, “Bertolt Brecht’s Poetry,” in O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg*, vol.1, 56.

Walter Benjamin discusses the same collection of texts in 1938–39. The *Hauspostille*, once called “the devil’s prayer book” by a German critic, serves a specifically political and tendentious function for Benjamin. (Walter Benjamin, *Versuche über Brecht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 65.) Benjamin identifies the mechanisms of how the poems invert their traditional function through their Brechtian appropriation in a manner very similar to Greenberg’s. Yet Benjamin’s analysis focuses as much on the “teachings” that the *Hauspostille* communicates to its readers as on those ideas disseminated by its original sources. Benjamin defines popular and folk culture as central to the understanding of the bourgeoisie’s own existence. In Brecht’s hands the certainty of a literary tradition that reflects a reliable (because historic) source of nationalist wisdoms and values is used to create not an absolute but a relative autonomy. From this relatively autonomous position of critique that is produced not for the sake of extra-discursive separation but intra-ideological analysis, Brecht uses the forms of artificial familiarity and stability to “uninhibitedly articulate the being of its [the bourgeoisie’s] rule.” (Ibid.) And, referring to the development of Brecht’s poetry from the “asocial attitude” of the *Hauspostille* to the more outspokenly Marxist poems included in the *Svenborger Gedichte*, Benjamin observes in contrast to Greenberg that among all the works’ differences, the reader will “look in vain for one thing: the apolitical, the non-social.” (Ibid.) To Benjamin, Brecht’s poetry reflects a revolutionary political commitment, not a defensive one, even in its most lyrical passages.

⁷¹ Greenberg, “Bertolt Brecht’s Poetry,” 58.

⁷² Ibid.

of historical change, but the Epic Theater as well as all other didactic pieces aid Brecht in refining the mechanisms central to his form: estrangement and distancing through contradiction. That contradiction is produced by the subversive appropriation and transformation of given literary and dramatic forms. For Greenberg, therein lies Brecht's originality—an originality anchored in poetry (hence, art) rather than political purpose: “And for all his sobriety, for all the strenuous simplicity and earnestness and angularity of his manner, Brecht remained all poet—in the old-fashioned sense that he tried to repudiate—and when he put Lenin's precepts into poetry he transformed them into parables and their settings into mythology.”⁷³

Presenting Brecht's poetic work as an example for artistic production within a pressing and progressive modernism, Greenberg's own writings can certainly be understood as congruent with his formalization of the German poet he admired so much.⁷⁴ Greenberg's formalism has long come under much scrutiny and some critics have discussed the regression of Greenberg's Marxism into a legitimizing tool for his defensive and intra-aesthetic modernism.⁷⁵ Yet central to the argument developed here is Greenberg's reduction of a historical, Brechtian avant-garde to an emphasis on the

⁷³ Greenberg, “Bertolt Brecht's Poetry,” 60. This differentiation of the poetic and the political is recast by Greenberg in more drastic terms in the 1961 republication of “Bertolt Brecht's Poetry” as part of the collection of essays in *Art and Culture*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 252–265. In this substantially changed version, Greenberg further radicalizes Brecht's artistic virtues: Brecht “joins the modernist and Rimbaudian tradition,” remains “profoundly” poetic even in his most prosaic, and his overall style is “highly personal and consistent.” (Ibid., 253–256.) Over his theory of the epic theater “hovers... a suspicion of straight-face clowning... as if he were parodying, this time, Marx and Lenin as well as Aristotle.” (Ibid.) In the end, Brecht's political or Marxist episode does little to corrupt his artistic integrity and therefore value within the history of modernism: “Indeed, Brecht can be said to be the only writer to have wrested from genuine Stalinism anything that is or resembles high art.” (Ibid.)

⁷⁴ “It is Brecht's originality that I want to emphasize, not simply as a virtue in itself, but as a germinative influence, as something that can deflect the course of poets in English as well as in German from over-graced and backward provinces to fresher and richer territories.” Greenberg, “Bertolt Brecht's Poetry,” *Clement Greenberg*, 62.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Clark, “Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art,” in Frascina (ed.), *Pollock and After*, 71–86 and Serge Guilbaut's “The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the ‘Vital Center’,” in *ibid.*, 197–210.

“sensuous” and “physical” nature of art and its experience.⁷⁶ This turn from a historical materialism to a reductive materiality will have lasting consequences for the praxis of the American postwar avant-garde and its rejection of Brechtian aesthetics even where Brecht’s work is visible and viable to the artistic tasks at hand.

Published within a year of the essays on Brecht, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) and “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940) exemplify Greenberg’s articulation of a Marxist position that substitutes a vulgar Hegelian idealism for the nuances and complexities of dynamic dialectics. Rather than defining the task of the avant-garde as the critical mediation between traditional notions of art as substitutive experience and the sociopolitical realities of life under capitalism, Greenberg posits high art as a defensive and traditionally bourgeois opposite to the decay of culture in the face of academicism and commercialism. And even though he is aware of the paradox presented by the “umbilical cord of gold” that links the avant-garde to the “ruling class” in a relation of economic and intellectual dependence, Greenberg’s notion of high or autonomous art reproduces the core function of bourgeois culture.⁷⁷ Its political commitment lies in the preservation of culture as a progressive historical force *apart* from the decline of Western society. The avant-garde, according to Greenberg, “repudiate[s] revolutionary as well as bourgeois politics. The revolution was left inside society.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940), reprinted in O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg*, vol. 1, 32–33.

⁷⁷ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), reprinted in O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg*, vol. 1, 10–11.

⁷⁸ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 7. At this point Greenberg’s argument relies on a nostalgic and ideal concept of bourgeois culture, which he shares with critics before and after him, such as Georg Lukács and Jürgen Habermas: that bourgeois culture was once, as a revolutionary culture challenging political and religious absolutism, a fully autonomous sphere of critical dialogue (see Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* [New York and Evanston, IL: Harper and Row, 1964] and Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989]). Yet as the bourgeoisie lost its revolutionary momentum and was

While kitsch or “ersatz” culture rely on illusionism and the lack of dissonance between art and life, avant-garde art flees “from spirit to matter” and seeks “above all else to affect the spectator physically.”⁷⁹ As in his reading of Brecht, Greenberg finds contradiction and disharmony either (like Brecht) within the elements of the medium and its refusal to provide an easy consumption of culture (illusionism) or (also like Brecht) in the discrepancy between art as a sphere of critical analysis and the experience of everyday life. Yet, unlike Brecht’s, Greenberg’s notion of estrangement does not extend to include the *mechanisms* of the historically determined construct that is the dialectic between the autonomy of art as material and the ideological dimension of socio-political reality. By reducing avant-garde art to the tangible, physical essence of the medium, Greenberg necessarily denies it any revolutionary or utopian dimension. Indeed, Greenberg looks to socialism “simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.”⁸⁰ Abstraction in painting and sculpture is the climax of the history of avant-garde art. The arts hibernate while Greenberg struggles to believe in the historical inevitability of socialism and the culture that will somehow “appear” with it.

Motivated only by a defensive, apolitical negation, Greenberg’s fervent but ambiguous vision for the implications of the liberating development of abstract art recalls Andrews Wanning’s above-cited uncertainty regarding Brecht’s work as a source of

unable to extend the rights and freedoms it projected as being universal to the subjects of their rule and power, this sphere became one of residual needs. As Peter Bürger argues, “All those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life, because the principle of competition pervades all spheres, can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were, and preserved in art.” (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], 50). Greenberg’s notion of an autonomous avant-garde is preservative as well, though to him the decisive difference is its lack of projection: separated from all concerns but the physical assertion of its specific medium, the arts find autarchy and safety. Truth is a physical manifestation that rejects all ideological implication, and the avant-garde finds a defense of cultural progress and autonomy in the pure form of “plastic values” rather than visual ones. (Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 16).

⁷⁹ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 29, 33.

⁸⁰ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 22.

philosophical or ethical conviction. In the last paragraph of “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Greenberg openly states his (and art’s) lack of direction: “Where to? I do not know.”⁸¹ The critic rejects the complexities of an Epic Theater that he knew and had described so insightfully for a vulgar Marxism that relies on the physical certainties of a material base in refuge from a looming and seemingly all-encompassing superstructure. Brecht is thereby transformed into an artist preserving rather than challenging bourgeois art. For Greenberg, estrangement and distanciation provide an independent and original experience from within art, actually sustaining notions of coherence and totality as well as intellectual and moral superiority rather than triggering a crisis based on the acknowledgement and articulation of the alienation inherent in a capitalist society. The former is the manifested experience of an ideal social order, the latter the historical experience of a given social order as a precondition for active change. For Greenberg, art’s contribution to society is not communication with it but resistance to it.

Cage and the Non-Politics of Inclusive Aesthetics

When Eric Bentley arrived at Black Mountain in 1942 (bringing with him an enthusiastic devotion to his version of Brecht), the college was defined in proximity to a national and philosophical identity shaped by a world war against totalitarianism.⁸² Here, refugee artists and writers found personal and intellectual freedom, united with their American

⁸¹ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 38.

⁸² Bentley’s main project at Black Mountain had been the translation of Brecht’s play *Private Life of the Master Race* and he staged two readings with sound effects and organ music composed and performed by Fritz Cohen. The evenings proved to be a great success in provocation since the large number of Germans in the audience reacted quite emotionally to the scathing depiction of the German people as well as Cohen’s distorted interpretation of the *Horst Wessel Lied*. It was the experience of “interruption” that made Brecht’s work such a powerful tool in Bentley’s eyes. Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries*, 35.

counterparts by an agenda of pacifism and democracy.⁸³ The artists that Greenberg championed showed no interest in Brecht. Neither the playwright's political leanings nor the medium he worked in appeared to have much in common with the Abstract Expressionists' quest for an introspective form of aesthetic production.⁸⁴ At Black Mountain College and elsewhere, an experimental approach to art was bound neither to the nationalist demands of the New Deal and the guidelines of the Federal Arts Project. Nor was it bound to the pacifist bipartisanship of the Popular Front nor to a devout affirmation of the postwar nation's newfound position as a land of abundance and international guarantor of liberty. The students and curriculum at Black Mountain favored

⁸³ As "our world goes to pieces," Anni Albers wrote in 1944, the experience of creation and community provided an idea of stability, even of moral values: "Out of the chaos of collapse we can save the lasting: we still have our 'right' or 'wrong,' the absolute of our inner voice—we still know beauty, freedom, happiness... unexplained and unquestioned." "One Aspect of Art Work" (1944), reprinted in Vincent Katz (ed.), *Black Mountain College—Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2002), 31.

⁸⁴ Less concerned with external considerations than those of medium and maker, Robert Motherwell wrote in 1944 that modern artists "value personal liberty because they do not find positive liberties in the concrete character of the modern state... Modern artists have not a social, but an individualist experience of freedom." (Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painter's World," reprinted in Barbara Rose, *Readings in American Art since 1900* [New York and Washington: Praeger, 1968], 130–131.) Elsewhere, Motherwell warns of any aesthetic and moral compromise: "The temptation is to conclude that organized social thinking is 'more serious' than the act that sets free in contemporary experience forms which that experience has made possible... Once the political choice has been made, art and literature ought of course be given up... Political commitment in our times means logically—no art, no literature." (Rosenberg and Motherwell, reprinted in *ibid.*, 129–130.)

The rejection of an affiliation of the arts with greater political causes and ideologies was mirrored in the fear that an "other-directed" America interested solely in the accumulation of goods and status, of economic as well as social and cultural capital would lead to a loss of individual autonomy and a new conformity. The concept of "other-directedness" was coined by sociologist David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd: a Study of the Changing American Character* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950]). To Riesman, the study of inner- and other-directed behavior is one of individual orientation. The other-directed individual seeks conformity by aspiring to the social and economic codes of his peer group while the inner-directed type finds direction in the traditions and education "implanted early in life by the elders." (*Ibid.*, 15) Greenberg's notion of artistic medium-specificity resembles that of Riesman's inner-directedness, not so much in its definition as a conservative and retrograde traditionalism, but as a rejection of the consumer's orientation toward superficial values as well as modern art's continuation of a historical, inner-aesthetic project that transcends the contingency of capitalist culture.

Motherwell over Ben Shahn, Arnold Schönberg over Kurt Weill, Antonin Artaud over Brecht.⁸⁵

Appointed in 1950 to teach drama at Black Mountain College, Wesley Huss staged Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in the spring of 1953. He also rehearsed *Mother Courage* as well as a number of other plays, among them works by Ibsen and Molière, Beckett and Chekhov. (Unfortunately there exist no records of how the plays were staged or perceived or who acted in them. Eric Bentley stated that *The Good Woman of Setzuan*'s producers and cast had included John Cage and Merce Cunningham but this claim has not been confirmed.⁸⁶) In fact, it seems that Huss began to explore performance and experimental theater after Cage had staged what came to be known as the first "Happening" at the college in the summer of 1952. In this case, the Brecht adaptation came under a Cagean influence rather than the other way around. The November 1952 bulletin described Huss' theater course as "an analysis of theatre and a

⁸⁵ In the midst of this atmosphere, Hannah Arendt published the essay "Beyond Personal Frustration: The Poetry of Bertolt Brecht" (*Kenyon Review*, vol. X, [1948]: 305–312). Written as a review of a selection of poems translated by H. R. Hays published the same year, Arendt laments the fact that Brecht remains "one of the least known figures in contemporary literature." She puts this down to his refusal to contribute to a substitute culture of inner-directedness, which in Arendt's view is one of complaint and self-pity. Even though he is part of what Arendt calls the "three lost generations"—the first having lived through the First World War, the second through the Depression and unemployment that followed, and the third was educated by Nazism, the Spanish Civil War, or the Moscow Trials—none of the experiences turned Brecht into a defensive and introverted artist. (Ibid., 304) For himself as an artist, Brecht rejects any frustrated romanticism and claim for individual reassertion, the personalized *working through* the trauma via inner-directed cultural production as an appropriate means of coming to terms with horror and terror. According to Arendt, the events that make up the catastrophes of history can never be measured by the yardstick of individual experiences and aspirations: the death of millions not by tales of personal loss, the fate of an entire class not by songs of individual frustration, the betrayal of political conviction not by private disillusionment. This "essentially individualistic attitude—individualistic though it frequently has as subject the decomposition of the individual"—never entered Brecht's work. (Ibid.) Always aware that the individual and the psychological are dialectically bound to the depersonalization and mechanization of modernity, Brecht's poetry exposed the quest for personal autonomy and freedom as a necessarily social and ideological phenomenon.

⁸⁶ Conversation with Eric Bentley, New York, December 2003. Upon my inquiry, Cunningham himself had no recollection of such involvement.

search for its primary energies. Theater history, i.e. factual information is dealt with but with the concentration on the propelling forces in Theater.”⁸⁷

At this point Brecht may have been far from a household name in the U.S., but he was present in the theaters and journals of the American avant-garde and intellectual community. The persona “Brecht” and the core principles of the Epic Theater had been discussed throughout the 1940s in magazines and journals such as *The Nation*, the *Kenyon Review*, and the *Partisan Review*.⁸⁸ During the same decade, Brecht adaptations were being performed throughout the country on small, experimental stages and college campuses as well as Off-Broadway in New York.⁸⁹ Cage and Cunningham were introduced to Judith Malina—the Living Theatre’s co-founder with Julian Beck—in 1951. Malina had worked with Erwin Piscator at the New School and read Brecht, and the 1951 program of the *Living Theatre* included performances of Brecht’s *He who Says Yes* and *He Who Says No*, wherein one of Cunningham’s dancers was assigned a main part. According to Malina’s diary, Cage and Cunningham remained in constant dialogue with the Living Theatre, both attending performances throughout the 1950s, including

⁸⁷ Cited in Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1987), 212. Cage and Cunningham had first worked and taught at Black Mountain College during the 1948 summer session. Both returned to teach music and dance over the summer months of 1952 and 1953. These visits proved to be extremely viable for the development of Cage’s and Cunningham’s work, given the space for experiment and emphasis on artistic diversity that the college provided as well as the eagerness on behalf of the students to gain access to methods of even greater liberation from traditional norms of aesthetic production. Cage later recalled that “the Happening business [1952] came about through circumstances of being at Black Mountain where there were a number of people present—Merce was there, David Tudor was there, there was an audience. The Happening resulted from the fact that there were many people and many possibilities and that we could do it quickly.” Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 110.

⁸⁸ See Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Work*, 342–349 and Bathrick, “Brecht’s Marxism and America,” 216.

⁸⁹ For an account of productions of Brecht plays in the U.S. up to 1956 (the year Brecht died) see *ibid.*, 352–363.

plays by Brecht.⁹⁰ The artists and the theater even shared a space together in New York for several years. Yet in their work, Cage and Cunningham (and later Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg), neither at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s and '50s nor at any other time and place, never turned to Brecht, despite their ongoing dialogue with the theories and practices of avant-garde theater.

Artists like Cage and Cunningham were negating as well as expanding aesthetic definitions of postwar American painting. They purged art from emotional introversion and “psychological expressionism” while maintaining an emphasis on material reality, a physical exploration and tactile affirmation of the everyday.⁹¹ At Black Mountain College in 1948, Cage turned to the work of French composer Erik Satie as an attack on the traditions of German romanticism that had been “deadening to the art of music” and its search for harmony that dominated American musical life and the music program at the college.⁹² Cage rehearsed and organized a performance of Satie’s *Ruse of the Medusa* during that summer, its cast including Buckminster Fuller, Elaine de Kooning, and Cunningham. Each rehearsal was accompanied by a short introductory talk wherein Cage explained his departure from musical and theatrical conventions to open up the aesthetic space to the elements of daily life. By 1950, Cage had made his breakthrough to “chance operations,” using the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes* to determine the composition of a piece or score. Chance became a method of practice that relied on acceptance rather than control. And rather than separating the self (or ego) from its experiences by rationally attempting to control the irrational or emotionally compensate for the over-rationalization

⁹⁰ Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina, 1947–57* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), throughout.

⁹¹ Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 156.

⁹² Cage quoted in *ibid.*, 154.

and bureaucratization of one's environment, art was to provide a new experience of totality. Yet for Cage this path was not inward but outward: an opening up of the mind and the senses to the surrounding phenomena. He did not seek an inner-directed, psychological affirmation of the producer or the audience but, like Brecht, strove to articulate a dialectical relation between self and world. Yet unlike Brecht, Cage saw this relation as being circular, timeless, and cosmic, while for Brecht it was progressive, historical, and political.⁹³

Cage sought to make an art beyond institutions, "offerings beyond the law within the limits of practicality."⁹⁴ But rather than providing a political critique of cultural conventions or the dialectical operations of culture and politics, he aimed to transcend the limiting boundaries of the institutional paradigms altogether. Art following this example could—in an extension of Kantian principles—serve as an example of social existence unfettered by limitations of hierarchy, authority, and application. Stating that art and music are "anything a man makes," Cage staged the abovementioned "Happening" in the summer of 1952 at Black Mountain College.⁹⁵ Later entitled *Theater Piece No. 1* and regarded as a "seminal piece in the development of American theater," the performance

⁹³ Around the same time Cage turned to what he called "Oriental thought," Brecht's own interest in Chinese acting methods and Maoist philosophy culminated in the writing of a text never to be published during his lifetime titled *Me-Ti. Buch der Wendungen (Book of Change)* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992). Even though very similar in title to the locus of Cage's studies, *Me-Ti* retains the strategies central to Brecht's work: it is an appropriation of Chinese tales of wisdom that are turned into self-reflective parables about contemporary politics. The characters (some appearing under pseudonyms) range from Stalin and Lenin to peasants and workers to Brecht himself. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, *Me-Ti* is a text of reference and self-reference, an open and articulate positioning of the writer and reader in a world of political and social realities. (Jameson, *Brecht and Method*). Yet here the elements of daily life are the actualities of ideologies and political conduct and their repercussions rather than the tactile and phenomenological dimensions of the everyday. Always a teacher, Brecht was never willing to give up control and direction, to relinquish power to those invisible yet very real mechanisms that in his eyes determined the sense-able behavior and palpable appearances of everyday life.

⁹⁴ John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University, 1967), 92.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 182.

had no script, no costumes, and no rehearsals. Cage had a broad idea of what each performer would do but did not assign specific roles or give directions.⁹⁶ Each person was supposed to be himself, not a fictional character, and assigned a time bracket during which to enact a particular activity, determined by chance procedures.⁹⁷ Actions could exist independently next to one another: “theater could take place free of a text, that if a text were in it, it needn’t determine the other actions, that sounds, that activities, and so forth, could all be free rather than tied together.”⁹⁸ During the same year, Cage composed *4’33”*. He describes the piece, its absence of composition and harmony, of any musical performance in the traditional sense, as being “full of accidental sounds... I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall.”⁹⁹ The audience is presented with a radical deconstruction of aesthetic definitions and with an art of indifference. And it is precisely this indifference that makes Cage’s negative aesthetics different from the estrangement and negation of Brecht’s epic theater.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁹⁷ The audience was seated in concentric circles and the activities were to take place in the aisles and between the circles. The accounts of the actual performance differ but all describe the fragmented, disorganized, and estranging experience of the piece, with Cage reading various texts aloud while standing on a ladder, Cunningham dancing through the chairs followed by a dog, and Robert Rauschenberg standing in front of his *White Paintings* hung specifically for this occasion or playing scratched records of Edith Piaf at double speed among many other activities occurring simultaneously. Cage had found inspiration in Artaud’s *The Theater and Its Double*, wherein he found an affirmation of his own principles in the idea that the production of a performance needn’t rely on a core concept or thesis around which to revolve or evolve.

⁹⁸ Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage*, 110. While for some, this was a groundbreaking experience that expanded and opened the confines of artistic production, others found it contrived and boring, even threatening: after the event, bookbinding instructor and refugee faculty member Johanna Jalowetz remarked that “this is the dark ages.” Quoted in Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 228.

⁹⁹ Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage*, 70.

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of *4’33”* as the embodiment of the objectives and contradictions that governed Cage’s career, specifically in the modernist musical tradition of Arnold Schoenberg and Theodor Adorno, see Ian Pepper, “From the ‘Aesthetics of Indifference’ to ‘Negative Aesthetics’: John Cage and Germany 1958–1972,” *October* 82 (Fall 1997): 31–47.

In light of the historical avant-garde's failure to achieve social change through art and the institutionalization of self-declared apolitical postwar painting and sculpture, Cage sought to transcend the dichotomy of aesthetics and politics altogether. His idea of an all-encompassing aesthetic, one that renounced hierarchy and selection, authority and authorship, specialization and differentiation, was designed to be a precursor to necessary social change. Art's function was to open people's eyes and ears: "I may be wrong, but I think art's work is done... We must turn our attention now I think to other things, and those things are social."¹⁰¹ To Cage, art was potentially socialist, or anarchist, as life was not. But it was not so in its expression and projection of socio-political ideals but in its negation of that very structure. Where Greenberg's materialism and the experience of it is defensive and introverted, Cage's "aesthetic of indifference" is inclusive and outer-directed. In Theodor Adorno's writings one finds a critique of Cage's work that resembles Brecht's own position on the function of the artist as producer and the framework of production. Adorno argues that the absolute freedom assigned by Cage to the open work of art in the embrace of its environment may negate the role of the subjectivity of the individual creator but fails to critically engage with the crisis of the subject (as author and spectator) and its place assigned within that environment. According to Adorno, Cage's "*Materialfetischismus*" is a "misplaced positivism" that as an "abstract negation of musical order" leads to the delusion that one can "escape from reification directly into a non-existent immediacy."¹⁰² What is absent from Cage—but central to Brecht and to Adorno, albeit in a negative and dystopian sense in the latter—is the possibility of human intervention. For Cage, human impact needs to be transcended

¹⁰¹ Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage*, 287.

¹⁰² Theodor Adorno, "Schwierigkeiten beim Komponieren," quoted in Pepper, "From the 'Aesthetics of Indifference' to 'Negative Aesthetics,'" 38.

through chance: for Adorno, monopolized human control has to be made discursive as critical observation exempt from reification. For Brecht, it has to be articulated *as well as* reappropriated and redistributed as a practice of liberation and the facilitation of change. Cage can certainly be criticized for his conscious neglect of the political and ideological dimensions and for the repercussions of his practice: his lack of analysis of applied methods and of the historical context of the everyday itself that his work opened up to, his “regression into false myth,” a spectacle and display of radical defiance and disharmony in a culture of conformity. Yet a historical reading has to acknowledge the fact that Cage’s work took postwar American art a first step toward an awareness of its environment. Rather than being directed by a misleadingly relative individualism or dictated by an external agenda, art was to be determined socially for the first time. The experience of Cage’s art was that of the physical and sensual environment of its production and reception, the material-cum-psychological affirmation of presence and participation.

Kaprow: From Material to Experience

A positive Brecht-effect is furthermore absent in the postwar American avant-garde practices derived from and related to those of Cage and Cunningham: Happenings. Even though Allan Kaprow’s work is criticized by Cage for its direction and intentionality—“when I go to a Happening that seems to me to have intention in it I go away, saying that I am not interested”—it resembles the latter’s performances in its extension of the aesthetic arena beyond the confines of the canvas into the sphere of physical, social

encounters.¹⁰³ Despite Happenings' interest in a performative and participatory function for the work of art, the break with traditional models of production and reception divided along the physical and psychological lines of creator and spectator, Kaprow never articulated any interest in the Epic Theater's strategies of estrangement and distancing. Recently, some art historians have made an attempt to read Kaprow's work through a Brechtian lens and, admittedly, there are many shared concerns.¹⁰⁴ But while, as Judith Rodenbeck observes, the "logic" of Happenings draws on "theatrical models of Brechtian marking and quotation and Artaudian fragmentation and objectification," the conscious ignorance of or resistance to Brecht lies, I would argue, in Kaprow's initial attempt to *correct the experience* of modern life rather than to analyze and change the circumstances that determine that experience.¹⁰⁵

Kaprow's work was at once theatrical and anti-theatrical. Extending the reach of Pollock's art to what he saw as its logical conclusion—not just beyond the boundaries of the canvas but beyond the medium of painting altogether into the streets and the stores and the garbage of everyday life—he relied on the performative dimension of theater and its immediacy as much as on the rejection of the conventions of stage and the illusion of its projections.¹⁰⁶ As Lee Baxandall has observed, "Happenings remove people from the illusory world which, swathed in abstractions, is their everyday life, and put people into the actual world through devices which freshen perception."¹⁰⁷ Kaprow's attempt to de-

¹⁰³ Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage*, 119.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Judith Rodenbeck, "Madness and Method: Before Theatricality," *Grey Room* 13 (Fall 2003): 54–79. For a further articulation of Kaprow's Happenings as a critical, Brechtian expansion of Pollock's "painter's theater" see Rodenbeck's dissertation *Crash: Happenings (as) the Black Box of Experience, 1958–1966* (Columbia University, 2003).

¹⁰⁵ Rodenbeck, "Madness and Method: Before Theatricality," 69.

¹⁰⁶ Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *ArtNews* (October 1958): 50–72.

¹⁰⁷ Lee Baxandall, "Beyond Brecht: The Happenings," *Studies on the Left* (January–February 1966): 30.

aestheticize art and to reintroduce the viewer to the aesthetic dimension of daily life was strongly influenced by American philosopher John Dewey's notion of experience. Published in 1934 and studied closely by Kaprow, Dewey's *Art as Experience* draws a distinction between experience at large and *an* experience.¹⁰⁸ An experience has a beginning and an end—it is the totality of a series of engagements between “a desiring subject and a resisting object that comes to some kind of resolution.”¹⁰⁹ To Dewey, this engagement can be pragmatic or physical as well as intellectual. In a continuation of Pollock and Cage, Kaprow's Happenings attempted to provide a sensual and temporal authenticity in a culture of appearances and illusions.¹¹⁰

A work like *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*, presented over six evenings in New York in 1959, best exemplified the rerouting of the two distinct but related forms of experience. Highly orchestrated and meticulously planned, *Eighteen Happenings* provided the viewer with a number of independent but conclusive actions. The visitors were asked to move throughout the various rooms during the performance, following instructions distributed before the beginning of the show. The performers played games and walked around, operated tape players and squeezed oranges, read aloud and painted walls without any discernible attempt to create or illustrate a preconceived story or narrative. And while the disjunction of the experience at large defied theatrical and artistic conventions of constructed totality, the individual acts observed were to provide a perceptive purity in their spatial and temporal immediacy. Following Dewey, the

¹⁰⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934).

¹⁰⁹ David Antin, “Foreword: Allan at Work,” in Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), xv.

¹¹⁰ The physical act of lifting an object from one plane to another, sweeping an area and thereby altering its state of cleanliness, walking from one point to the next or licking something to change its surface pattern is a “true experience” beyond the inchoate experience of alienation produced by a culture of substitute satisfactions.

spectator was supposed to discover that the aesthetic dimension of experience, hence its unalienated wholeness and coherence, an experience of understanding and intelligibility, lies with the everyday rather than the artificial and projected meaning constantly de-located by the institutions of religion, culture, and consumption. Kaprow's Happenings were a rejection of the extra-experiential, an affirmative negation of the self as other-directed and removed from the actualities of the world.¹¹¹

In an attempt to explain the absence of Brecht's work in the theories and practices of Happenings, Baxandall wrote in 1966 that "Action Theatre"—including Happenings as well as "related but extended stage works" by such groups as the Living Theatre and the Open Theater—is "beyond Brecht": while Action Theatre shares Brecht's analysis of the "barriers to communication," it "exceeds Brecht's in pessimism."¹¹² According to Baxandall, the culture industry and its means of mass manipulation had grown so complex and its effects on how the workings of the world were perceived had become so distorting that a Brechtian approach to reason—the attempt to explain to the viewer the relations and mechanisms of power, to make him think dialectically—were naive and dated. Moving "beyond Brecht" meant to re-educate the audience's perception, to depollute the senses, to "create experiences which will force and entice reasoning into touch with specific daily reality."¹¹³ At stake was perspective as such, not the presentation of a new perspective or a perspective *on* perspective. In order to avoid the conundrum of past political disorientation, in order for human beings to regain autonomous action, reasoning and perspective had to be stripped of intent and function. Once relearned as the

¹¹¹ "Other-directed" refers to an individual's concern with goods and appearances, economic and social status, and how he/she is perceived by others. See note 55.

¹¹² Baxandall, "Beyond Brecht: The Happenings," 28–29.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

mechanisms of the production of meaning, the balance struck by Brecht between reasoning and alienation effect, so Baxandall says, “may become the just balance. One hopes so.”¹¹⁴ As with Greenberg in 1939, socialism was residing within the arts, for the moment, while its realization in the political sphere (or at least the productive connection between aesthetic and political socialism) would have to be postponed: “Brecht’s theatre will speak at last directly about great changes necessary in social organization, to Americans who will be able to see and hear.”¹¹⁵

The Sixties: Changing Perspectives

In the mid- to late 1960s, the New Left grew increasingly critical of the passive consumerism and individualist complacency that defined the climate of postwar America. Activists and intellectuals aimed to bring about a culture of participation and direct action. In 1969 the Art Workers’ Coalition demanded that artists reconsider the art of the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s and ’30s: that they make “socially good works” and “change affect into effecting changes.”¹¹⁶ As the artists of the New Left sought to politicize art and to make politics a public and cultural matter, Brecht’s theory of art as social practice and as an articulation of political awareness regained currency. Brecht’s dialectics of modernist aesthetics and revolutionary politics served as a model to a number of artists and provided an alternative to the esoteric experimentalism that dominated large segments of the advanced American arts.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁶ Dan Graham, “Art Workers’ Coalition Open Hearing Presentation,” *Art Workers’ Coalition—Open Hearing* (New York: Art Workers’ Coalition, 1969), 39.

Brecht's work was rediscovered during the 1960s in a climate of a generally renewed interest in social and political issues spurred by the war in Vietnam and the student and Civil Rights movements.¹¹⁷ There was a boom in the publication of his works and theoretical writings in translation as well as off- and on-Broadway productions of his plays. He was discussed in influential publications such as *Studies on the Left* and in the *Partisan Review*, *Studio International* and *Artforum*. He inspired the songs of Bob Dylan and the movies of Jean-Luc Godard.¹¹⁸ The anti-illusionism of Brecht's Epic Theater and his strategy of "estrangement," of jolting the complacent spectator into a self-conscious state of perception, are referred to in the writings of artists ranging from Andy Warhol to Dan Graham, Victor Burgin to Yvonne Rainer. Brecht also found his way into the central discourses and texts of the postwar years. His poetry and theater are discussed by Michael Fried, Herbert Marcuse, and Roland Barthes, among others.

Brecht's notion of art as an active form of political engagement appealed to a particular segment of the American arts community of the 1960s. In order to overcome the consensus-politics of postwar American liberalism that viewed ideology as "defunct and exhausted" and social problems as "discrete, isolated, and manageable," the New

¹¹⁷ For an in-depth history of the "1960s," the much-mythologized era of dissent and counter-culture, from its origins in the late 1950s to the radicalization and ultimate fragmentation of its energies and goals, see Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

¹¹⁸ Bob Dylan's encounter with Brecht was of a musical nature. According to Dylan's *Chronologies. Vol. 1* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) the folk singer attended a performance of Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* in the early 1960s at the Theatre de Lys in New York, an event that, he writes, would have an enormous effect on him: "My little shack in the universe was about to expand into some glorious cathedral, at least in songwriting terms." (Ibid., 272) Dylan was taken by the songs' simultaneous appropriation of folklore and their formal innovation. He was also interested in political songwriting but less in Brecht's political orientation: "Rightly impressed by the physical and ideological possibilities within the confines of the lyric and melody," Dylan was "totally influenced by 'Pirate Jenny' [one of the play's ballads] though staying far away from its ideological heart." (Ibid., 276) See also Jason Zinoman, "When Bobby Met Bertolt, Times Changed," *The New York Times* (October 8, 2006): Section 2, page 7.

For Godard's interest in Brecht see, for example, his *Godard On Godard: Critical Writings* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), James Monaco, *The French New Wave* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), and Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1981).

Left would have to revise leftist politics.¹¹⁹ By the early '60s publications such as *Studies on the Left* had located the failures of the Old Left in its anti-ideological stance, theoretical impoverishment, and intellectual passivity.¹²⁰ Given this lack of active involvement and the conviction that “liberalism is not a neutral system of political thought but an ideology that sustains and strengthens the existing social structure,” a New Left agenda would focus on the redefinition of the agent of social change, the proletariat, and the reconstruction of its arena of political participation.¹²¹ Any form of social change required a consciousness on behalf of those who were excluded from the active articulation of experience and identity. Therefore the definition of “proletarian,” i.e. those separated from the means of production, needed to be expanded to designate not merely the labor characteristics of the industrial proletariat but also the degree of access to the tools that produce social and individual experience.¹²² The public sphere—as the arena of experience provided by the media and education, culture and the arts—was seen as what makes experience possible or, on the other hand, what restricts it.

To some visual artists of this period, Brecht’s work served as an example of a revolutionary modernism, as the possibility to move beyond the deadlocked opposition of political commitment and artistic autonomy. Brechtian aesthetics allowed artists to

¹¹⁹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 18.

¹²⁰ See, for example, Martin J. Sklar and James Weinstein, “Socialism and the New Left,” *Studies on the Left* (March–April 1966), reprinted in James Weinstein and David W. Eakins (eds.), *For a New America: Essays in History and Politics from ‘Studies on the Left,’ 1956–1967* (New York: Random House, 1970), 317–327.

¹²¹ James Weinstein, “Notes on the Need for a Socialist Party,” *Studies on the Left* (January–February 1967), reprinted in Weinstein and Eakins (eds.), *For a New America*, 328–329.

¹²² See *ibid.* Carl Ogelsby discusses the need to rethink Marxism and its terminology in “The Idea of the New Left,” *Evergreen Review* (February 1969): 51–54, 83–88. The redefinition of the notion of the “proletariat” as part of the New Left’s attempt to revitalize Marxist theory as an appropriate model of analysis for the 1960s has been most poignantly theorized in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Proletarian Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (orig. published in German, 1972), translated by Peter Labanyi, et al. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Negt and Kluge’s work will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

address issues such as war and sexism, exploitation and corruption. In addition, Brecht's notion of the "gestus," of the work of art as socialist practice, turned form into political action.

One artist who adopted this form of practice to an art of political engagement was Martha Rosler.

CHAPTER TWO.

Martha Rosler: Refusal, Documentation, and Realism

Martha Rosler's contribution to the catalogue for the 1979 exhibition *Social Works* opens with the following statement: "I want to make work that illuminates social life. I want to make art about complicated things yet that helps bring them into focus. I want to make art that promotes critical consciousness about everyday things. I want to make art that unfreezes our experiences and penetrates the frozen block of the present moment, its 'facts' and our 'feelings,' with an understanding of the historical currents bringing that moment into being."¹²³ This declaration articulates the ambition, breadth, and complexity of Rosler's oeuvre. It indicates a project of resistance to aesthetic and social norms, of observation of the mechanics that put these norms into place, and of a realism committed to historical awareness.

Rosler's work of the 1960s and early '70s is strongly influenced by Brechtian politics: it seeks the articulation of a popular language, embodying at once a vehement rejection of then-current forms of representation as well as a reconsideration of an appropriate form of social realism. The artist's collages and series of photomontages, her postcard novels and photo installations, all share a concern for contemporary politics and the politics of form, a concern for how to make issues of public interest intelligible and accessible to a multiplicity of audiences.¹²⁴ As with Brecht, who wanted his works to be

¹²³ Martha Rosler, "I'm thinking about making art about life..." in Nancy Buchanan (ed.), *Social Works: An Exhibition of Art Concerned With Social Change* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1979), 35.

¹²⁴ Like many forms of photomontage, Rosler's re-photographed collages combine the functions of collage and montage form: like collages, they display a somewhat violent (cut, torn) dislocation of the individual elements from their original context as well as a rough and sometimes disproportionate reassembly. The newly-combined elements create a unique and original work of art. Like montages, these re-photographed

like sports—real-time events that ideally draw a class-transcending audience, in which everybody is an expert, passionately and knowledgeably immersed in discussions on form and performance—Rosler has sought to create a language that would present its viewers with an engaged and engaging dialogue on topics that are (or at least ought to be) at the very center of their lives.¹²⁵

In order to address the war in Vietnam, the role of women in American culture, or the conditions of immigrant labor, Rosler turned to Brecht's work to find a model of aesthetic *and* political usefulness, a method that not only takes into consideration both form and content but renders them inseparable. Like most other artists and activists who rediscovered the German poet and playwright during the general repoliticization of the 1960s, Rosler was interested in Brecht's strategies of anti-illusionism, distancing, and participation. But her position as a young artist in New York and California, as a reader and student of Herbert Marcuse (who had his own distinct interest in Brecht), and as a photographer and writer, turned this general interest into a very specific engagement with an increasingly popular Brecht and a related tradition of tendentious avant-garde art.¹²⁶ In

collages are reproducible, which not only leads to their potentially-wide dissemination but in addition deauratizes the original they are based on. Such images articulate the dialectic between art and reproduction, questioning the usefulness of both. This dialectic will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

This project excludes Rosler's performances and video pieces because her printed work shows more efficiently the artist's early engagement with the strategies and methods of the historical avant-garde, instances of Brechtian estrangement through fragmentation, and the politics of medial self-referentiality. The focus of this chapter is on Rosler's work during a time affected by the political climate of 1968 and its aftermath (her first video was produced in 1974). Chapter Four will discuss the influence of Brecht's work on film and video in American art of the late 1960s and early '70s.

¹²⁵ "There seems to be nothing to stop the theater having its own form of 'sport.' If only someone could take those buildings designed for theatrical purposes which are now standing eating their heads off in interest, and treat them more or less as empty spaces for the successful pursuit of 'sport,' then they would be used in a way that might mean something to a contemporary public that earns real contemporary money and eats real contemporary beef." Bertolt Brecht, "Emphasis on Sport" (1916) reprinted in John Willett (ed.) (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 6–7.

¹²⁶ For a closer look at California as a site of political art and activism during the 1960s, in contrast to the New York avant-garde's hesitation when it came to mixing aesthetics and current politics, see Peter Selz,

Rosler's work, Brecht surfaces as a writer of refusal, in critical dialogue with a '60s counter-culture and an intellectual environment that demanded a rupture with the ideological and representational manifestations of postwar American life.¹²⁷ But, as argued here, Rosler's work of the 1960s and '70s amounts to more than merely a defensively negative critique, as the artist's work would be cast in the 1980s.¹²⁸ Rosler's reevaluation of photomontage and documentary photography is an attempt to find a non-fictive language, a language of the "real." This language would transcend the limits of sensual materiality as exhibited by artists of the American neo-avant-garde and the programmatic demagogy of its formal and political counterpart, Socialist Realism. It

The Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press: 2006).

The reference to tendency or "tendentious" art is taken from the text by Walter Benjamin, quoted in Chapter 1, "The Author as Producer," wherein Benjamin uses Brecht as an example to define a revolutionary modernism committed to aesthetic considerations as much as political purposes, to "technique" and "tendency." This essay, published in English in *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973), can be found in Rosler's library (the "Martha Rosler Library" was available to the public as an *e-flux* project at 53 Ludlow Street in New York from November 15, 2005 until April 15, 2006).

¹²⁷ This refusal is guided by an understanding of Brecht's work as an act of non-compliance with cultural and intellectual norms. The tearing and pasting of the collages and even the relocation of imagery in the photomontages are acts of violence and defiance. So-called Neo-Dadaists like Robert Rauschenberg have been aligned with a postwar aestheticization, personalization, and functionalization of the political legacy of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield. Rosler, in contrast, revisits the history of modern art in order to rediscover an alternative to a canonical non-referential formalism and experiential materialism—a revolutionary modernism, which thrived on the dialectical tension between content and form, tendency and technique. See, for example, William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968). Thomas Hess in his "Collage As an Historical Method" gives Rauschenberg's combines a mere mention as "episodes of autobiography as art." *Art News* (November 1961): 70. "Functionalization" refers to Leo Steinberg's influential *Artforum* article "Reflections on the State of Criticism" wherein the author reassesses Rauschenberg's work in and beyond the context of Greenberg's limiting formalist doctrines. Yet Steinberg's reading of Rauschenberg's collages and assemblages is less interested in the symbolic or allegorical content of the elements juxtaposed than in the alteration of the function of the picture plane. "Involved with the physical material of plans," Rauschenberg used newsprint "to activate the ground" as an acknowledgement of the space of *experience* between the viewer and the work rather than the projection beyond the plane (as in illusionist space) or the self-referential, solipsistic surface (as in formalist-modernist painting). Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," *Artforum* (March 1972), reprinted in Branden Joseph (ed.), *Robert Rauschenberg* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002), 29.

¹²⁸ See, for example, Benjamin Buchloh's account of Rosler's work in "Since Realism There Was...(On the Current Conditions of Factographic Art)," *Art and Ideology* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 5–11. Buchloh's influential appropriation of the artist's montages and photography will be discussed at greater length below.

would be “realist” in a Brechtian sense, “lay[ing] bare the dialectical laws of movement of the social mechanism... provoking pleasure in their recognition and observation.”¹²⁹

According to Brecht, the goal of this analysis is not merely to delight in knowledge but to enable its active transformation: “This entails a great change.”¹³⁰

Refusal

Rosler’s Brechtian “refusal” operates on two different, yet related levels. First, Rosler resists traditional depictions of American life, including war, sexuality, and labor, instead re-situating visual and narrative methods, forms, and mediums.¹³¹ Secondly, she refuses to adapt and implicitly critiques certain forms of visual and political counter-culture. Most American artists during the late 1960s and early ’70s either maintained a strict separation between artistic production and political engagement or created works of placative outrage that had little in common with the artists’ regular modes of working. Rosler casts such work as reactionary and ideologically reproductive complements to a status quo that already relies on the dichotomies of similitude and difference, center and margin, art and politics.

Between 1967 and 1972, Rosler produced a series of twenty photomontages about the Vietnam War. Titled *Bringing the War Home*, the images were disseminated in

¹²⁹ Bertolt Brecht, untitled note, dated September 1954, reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 269.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Brecht called such appropriation “Umfunktionierung”—re-functioning or “functional transformation.” Walter Benjamin describes Brecht’s concept of *Umfunktionierung* in his essay “The Author as Producer” as “the transformation of the forms and instruments of production in the way desired by a progressive intelligentsia—that is, one interested in freeing the means of production and serving the class struggle.” *Understanding Brecht*, 93.

underground newspapers and on flyers.¹³² The series has two parts. One, subtitled *In Vietnam*, comprises five montages consisting mostly of photographic representations of soldiers in combat (fig. 5). The second, larger part of *Bringing the War Home* offers fifteen images under the subtitle *House Beautiful*. Here, media images of the war are combined with representations of serene and comfortable domestic interiors from architectural design and home improvement magazines such as *House Beautiful* and *Ladies Home Journal* (examples, figs. 6, 7).¹³³ In *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, pictures of American soldiers, crying children, and corpses are juxtaposed with upper-middle-class American standards of living.

As a self-described “reader of Brecht,” Rosler makes many references to the playwright’s work and thought in interviews and her own writings.¹³⁴ She also owns a number of books by and about Brecht and was exposed to adaptations of Brecht’s plays by, among others, the Living Theater as well as the Brechtian cinema of Godard.¹³⁵ Most importantly, however it is in the artist’s works that Brecht’s thinking plays a central role. Rosler’s montages lend themselves perfectly to what Brecht called “crude thinking”: they use an easily accessible everyday language to articulate complex relations of property and violence, freedom and oppression.¹³⁶

¹³² See, for example, *Goodbye to All That—Newspaper for San Diego Women*, issues 3 (October 13, 1970) and 10 (March 9–23, 1971), featuring the montages *Tron (Amputee)* and *Vacation Getaway*, respectively.

¹³³ Rosler has recently produced a current version of *Bringing the War Home* addressing the United States’ war in Iraq (examples, figs. 8, 9). *Bringing the War Home: Iraq* was on view as part of the exhibition *Martha Rosler: Photomontages 1965–2004* at Gorey, Bravin, and Lee in New York, November 1, 2004 through January 8, 2005.

¹³⁴ Rosler in Benjamin Buchloh: “A Conversation with Martha Rosler,” in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1998), 33.

¹³⁵ The essays and interviews wherein the artist mentions Brecht will be referred to throughout this chapter. Brecht works owned by Rosler were on display during the above-mentioned exhibition of the “Martha Rosler Library” in New York.

¹³⁶ “The main objective is to learn to think crudely. Crude thinking is the great ones’ thinking.” Bertolt Brecht, *Dreigroschenroman* (1934), reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main:

Patio View (fig. 10), a montage from the subseries *House Beautiful*, makes a poignant remark about culture, while refusing its function as a sphere of separation, substitute, and artifice. Through a large panoramic window, the viewer is witness to a street battle. To the left, their backs to the onlooker, soldiers hide behind two tanks. The right third of the window is taken up by a sidewalk that leads one's view past the tanks into the very center of the picture, where it loses focus in the distance. Scattered along the sidewalk and among the huts and small houses lining it are a few bodies and debris. This view is framed by an awning and drawn curtains, with two partially visible chairs turned toward the spectacle. The setting is that of a theater, the subject theatricality. Rosler articulates precisely the type of relation between audience and event that Brecht seeks to undermine in his Epic Theater: the viewer's encounter with what is presented to him remains without consequences.¹³⁷ It does so not because the event—in this case the brutality of the Vietnam War—is somehow withheld or beautified, but because it is experienced emotionally rather than intellectually. And the emotional response allows for a personal, subjective approach to the subject matter rather than an intellectual awareness

Suhrkamp, 1967), 916. This kind of thought ought not to be confused with a simplified, doctrinaire instillment of ideas on the lowest common denominator. Rather, it aims to address the dialectic relation between modernity's complexity and simplicity. Brecht, like many other Marxist thinkers, believed that capitalism succeeded in making its motivations and operations appear convoluted and indecipherable thereby preemptively discouraging actions of analysis and change. Walter Benjamin defends Brecht's notion of crude thinking against accusations of being part of a reductivist and vulgar Marxism when he remarks that crude thinking is not the opposite but an integral part of a dialectical, practical thinking as it is "theory's instruction onto praxis... a thought has to be crude to come to its right in execution." Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 81. For a critique of Brecht's "populism" and "vulgar materialism" see, for example, Adorno, "Commitment" (1962), reprinted in Ernst Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1980) (first published as a New Left Book in 1977), 177–195.

¹³⁷ "The theater as we know it shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium)... We need a theater which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself." Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theater" (1949) in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 189–190.

of its socio-political breadth and consequences. What happens on the stage remains on the stage.

By 1966, the stage presenting the American war in Southeast Asia was certainly set and the spectacle unfolding thereon viewed nightly by the broadest possible audience. In *The New York Times*, renowned psychiatrist Fredric Wertham discussed the psychological effects of the abundance of war imagery in the media, especially television.¹³⁸ Unlike today's relative lack of visual representation of military operations and their violent effects in Iraq in the print and broadcast news (whether caused by moral concerns or state-deployed regulations), images of the Vietnam War were an essential part of the evening news during the 1960s and '70s.¹³⁹ In "Is TV Hardening Us to the War in Vietnam?" Wertham argues that the "daily exposure to the rigors of the battlefield" in the news as well as in "Vietnam war films" encourages the acceptance of warfare rather than educating its viewers against it.¹⁴⁰ Paraphrasing Brecht, Wertham concludes that, as "the truth can be concealed in many ways and can be told in many ways," the quantity and constant availability of visualized violence contributes as much

¹³⁸ Fredric Wertham, "Is TV Hardening Us to the War in Vietnam?," *The New York Times* (December 4, 1966): x23.

¹³⁹ For the influence of the media's dissemination of war images from Vietnam on the subsequent censorship and selective reportage in the first Gulf War see, for example, John Fialka, *Hotel Warriors: Covering the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1991); John MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); and Jacqueline Sharkey, *Under Fire: U.S. Military Restrictions on the Media From Grenada to the Persian Gulf* (Washington, DC: The Center for Public Integrity, 1992). On media censorship and selective broadcast policies during the current war in Iraq see, for example, Jonathan Alter and Martha Brant, "The Other Air Battle," *Newsweek* (April 7, 2003): 38–49; Alexandra Boulat, "On Ethics and Censorship," *Afterimage* (May–June 2004): 8; and John Pilger, "The Real First Casualty of War," *New Statesman* (April 24, 2006): 18–19.

¹⁴⁰ Wertham, "Is TV Hardening Us to the War in Vietnam?" x23.

to this hardening of the viewer as does the arrangement and composition of the individual images.¹⁴¹

The contribution and usefulness of *Bringing the War Home* therefore does not lie with a greater general visibility of the war but in its challenge to how the war is represented and where it is being seen. Rosler's work refuses to comply with the representation of male heroism and of combat as the selfless action of liberation necessary to ensure global freedom and democracy. As with Brecht's early plays and poems written in response to the realities of World War I, *Bringing the War Home* addresses the myths of war and the function of war imagery as a public pacifier.

Part of the subseries *In Vietnam*, the photomontage *Empty Boys* (fig. 11) consists of twelve silhouette cutouts of a soldier's torso arranged in a grid. The cutouts allow a vista onto a battlefield: soldiers running with their rifles raised, stirring up dust, holding onto their helmets. The impression given is one familiar to the viewer, as it resembles the portrayal of the U.S. armed forces as a driving force made up of heroic individuals: each and every soldier filled with a similar code of conduct and call-of-duty necessity. But while the top row of silhouettes affirms the mass media's depiction of the war as an active and progressive endeavor and the soldier as its responsible executive power, the middle row is determined by an absence of fighting men, with the soldier's torso filled only by an empty battlefield. This field, made of grass and dirt, is no longer a battlefield but simply a piece of land and, in the absence of the distracting action of warfare, poses questions of geography and property: Who does this land belong to? Who are the people who live here? What is the original purpose of the land and, by extension, how is this

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

land transformed by the war and for what purpose? What land fills the cutout warrior, determines his mission, his identity? In the bottom row the soldier-silhouettes are completely empty. The background or interior of the soldier is white, emptied or waiting to be filled. Here then, Rosler does not turn the mainstream image of the soldier as hero into its opposite, into the killer and murderer, as was often done by contemporaneous anti-war protests. Instead, *Empty Boys* raises questions of identity, of abuse and relations of power, and of public psycho-social projections onto its men in uniform.

Rather than accusing the soldiers of gruesome acts of violence or portraying them as the harbingers of freedom and democracy, Rosler casts a critical look at a military apparatus that fills its soldiers and its public with certain expectations and assumptions concerning individual behavior and an overall mission. These are far from the realities of combat in general and this war in particular. And as the battle progressed, with U.S. and enemy casualties on the rise and an increasing loss of control over the disputed territories and its inhabitants, *Empty Boys* testified to a public and individual disillusionment. Upon their return home, these soldiers were drained of the purpose and support originally projected onto them by the very nature of their vocation and their representation in the media.

The notion of the soldier as a screen upon which a country projects its moral and national identity appears throughout Brecht's oeuvre, most significantly in his "Legend of the Dead Soldier." Part of the *Hauspostille* or *Manual for Piety*, the "Legend" was originally published in 1927 and re-published in translation by Grove Press in 1966.¹⁴² This collection of songs, poems, and ballads, "designed for the reader's use," not to be

¹⁴² Bertolt Brecht, "Legende vom toten Soldaten—Legend of the Dead Soldier," in *Die Hauspostille—Manual of Piety* (originally published in German in 1927) (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 222–229.

“senselessly wolfed down,” is prefaced by the author with a “guide.”¹⁴³ The fifth section contains “the little hours of the dead” and is to be read in moments of remembrance.¹⁴⁴ In the original German version, “the dead” (*Abgestorbene*) refers not only to those who have physically died but those who have grown numb, whose emotional and social circulation has been cut off, having grown accustomed to violence and injustice. Rather than supporting the canonical justifications for the necessity of war, Brecht tells the tale of a soldier’s premature heroic death and the subsequent need on the part of the authorities to dig him up, dress him, and parade him to the sounds of a marching band in the company of priests and officials all over the countryside. And nobody seems to notice or care that the soldier is dead and rotting. Like Rosler’s *Empty Boys*, “Legend of the Dead Soldier” relies on a familiar narrative form to present the reader with a lesson on the socio-political mechanisms of warfare. Whereas Rosler employs the visual language of mass media as found in the photo essays in *Life* magazine and *Newsweek*, Brecht appropriates the rhyme and verse of the German folk ballad. From the first sentences on, Brecht confronts his audience with the familiarity and comfort of a seemingly timeless form, steeped in tradition and abiding by conservative standards regarding its contents and the values espoused therein. But the “Legend” is far from legendary and heroic—the intelligibility and accessibility of the ballad is shamelessly abused in favor of a bitter and crude portrayal of wasted human life and opportunism, corruption, and nationalism.

Rosler’s fighting men reprise Brecht’s premise of the soldier as an empty boy, to be filled with psycho-social attributes and expectations that make warfare bearable, maybe even justifiable. Brecht appropriates the medium that traditionally hails the glory

¹⁴³ Bertolt Brecht, “Anleitung zum Gebrauch der einzelnen Lektionen—Guide to the Use of the Individual Lessons,” in *ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

of warfare despite the death and destruction it leaves in its wake, and makes this vehicle strange. With her montages, Rosler achieves a quite similar effect, disrupting the reassuring normality of viewing or reading the world through the accustomed channels (in this case, the mass media).

But Brecht also strikes a different note: his *Legend* is not only dark and bitter, but humorous as well. The ultra-correct and eager to please—hence “German”—soldier is, in death, unable to fulfill the tasks expected of him (march in line, be clean and orderly, be heroic). This satire evokes in the reader an active awareness, a distance and feeling of complicit knowledge caused by humor. Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home* lacks this mood, maintaining a more serious air. There is a pressing and immediate realism to the photographic images of dead bodies and the assumed objectivity of mass-produced information that lacks the playfulness of the ballad’s rhyme. What Rosler shares with Brecht in this case is the attempt to critically articulate the experience of war in culture. By appropriating familiar forms of visual language, *Bringing the War Home* sheds light on the intellectual and ideological dimension of its address and reception. The notion of experience is expanded from postwar modernism’s material and corporeal assertion of reality over the ideological to emphasize the experience of receiving information and one’s knowledge of the world. Whereas the painters of the New York School and artists such as Cage and Kaprow turned to physical experience of a medium’s materiality or one’s immediate surroundings in order to defy the traps and artifice of ideology at large, Rosler’s refusal lies with what Brecht called “reason’s power of resistance.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Bertolt Brecht, “Rede über die Widerstandskraft der Vernunft” (1937/38), reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 20, 255-259. With regard to Cage and Kaprow, Rosler has said, “Cage annoyed the hell out of me. It was the opposite of what it intended to be... It so much was about a quietism that it extracted you from the world... It extracted all experience and content and left you with phenomena. Kaprow... I didn’t

Rosler's project of refusal however is marked not only by her rejection of the dominant representations and mediated experiences of warfare, but also by her critical dismantling of Leftist notions of opposition, in the arts as well as in politics. Rosler, who identifies herself as having been part of the New Left, discovered Brecht during a general repoliticization of American life and culture in the 1960s.¹⁴⁶ In a decade marked by various examples of resistance and counter-cultural efforts, ranging from draft-card burnings and protest marches to the creation of communes and alternative lifestyles, the war in Vietnam became a rallying point for the New Left and reintroduced Brecht as a figure of political engagement.¹⁴⁷ For many activists, the war in Vietnam was not just an

see his work but I got to know him as a person in California and had some very interesting discussions with him but... in a way he was the perfect fatalist. I just recommended to [one of my students] that they read "The Education of the Un-Artist" from 1971. It's an inarguable piece. It basically says 'art can't do anything' because we lost, it's the 'negative critique' that we've been talking about. But his answer was: 'What ever made you think that you should be looking for a larger audience? Be happy with the small audience.' I always felt that that was a bad place to stop, that that creates a kind of chamber music. I love chamber music but as an artist I don't want to be a chamber artist." Conversation with the artist, New York, July 27, 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Regarding Rosler's relation to the politics and activism of the New Left, see Rosler in Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 23.

¹⁴⁷ The decade was marked by all kinds of refusals, a few at first, later growing in size and frequency. In 1960, four black students sat down at a Woolworth whites-only lunch counter, claimed their right to be served, and refused to leave. There were civil rights sit-ins and quiet protests against university admission policies and the forceful occupation of administrative offices at various campuses, including UC San Diego and Columbia University. Protestors marched into Washington, appropriated land to create People's Parks, and resisted the violence of the executive branches of the system with counter-violence as self-defense. Feminists called for the refusal to participate in traditionally gendered roles and behavior, while anti-HUAC protests rejected a national identity based on political fear and mystification. The anti-war movement combined and united many of these disparate refusals under the banner of a general disenchantment with and objection to "the system." This union crossed issues of imperialism and racism, of capitalism and democracy, and manifested itself in various forms of protest ranging from peaceful demonstrations, the burning of draft cards with homemade napalm, and the slogan "Girls Say Yes to Men Who Say No," to violent battles with the police, Canadian exile, and the destroying of files of Dow Chemical and General Electric, two companies actively engaged in the war effort. The violence and radicalism of the movement spiked in 1968—resistance and refusal seemed to make the revolution possible. "It was a time suited to the poem found over many a movement desk in which Bertolt Brecht told posterity, 'Alas, we/Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness/Could not ourselves be kind./But you, when at last it comes to pass/That man can help his fellow man/Do not judge us/too harshly.'" Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 347. See also Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) and

issue but *the* issue. Especially during the late '60s, as the hopes for a revolution waned and the New Left began to fragment, the war became a uniting cause and an identity. Whereas the beginning of the decade had been marked by an enthusiastic reevaluation of revolutionary thought and action, at its end stood the more sober, pragmatic politics of resistance—resistance to the American presence in Southeast Asia and to a regressive system of domestic politics, culture, and information.

In 1981, Eric Bentley wrote that “until the sixties, Brecht never caught on in America. It was Vietnam that made the difference.”¹⁴⁸ Certainly the publication and presentation of Brecht’s work increased dramatically during the 1960s.¹⁴⁹ Grove Press and Methuen (the latter published in London but also distributed in the U.S.) provided the interested reader with an abundance of Brecht’s plays, stories, and poetry in translation, offering more than twenty publications between 1959 and 1970.¹⁵⁰ In addition, a growing number of studies about the playwright’s life, his writing, and his theatrical practice

Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture—Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Doubleday, 1968).

¹⁴⁸ Eric Bentley, introductory remarks to the 1981 reprinting of Bentley’s essay first published as a preface to the Grove paperback of Brecht’s play “A Man’s a Man” in 1964, *The Brecht Commentaries* (New York: Grove Press, 1981), 108.

¹⁴⁹ For an account of Brecht’s rising popularity see, for example, Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries*; Howard Taubman, “The Enigma of Brecht: His Work, Like His Career, Abounds in Ambiguities and Paradoxes,” *The New York Times* (January 15, 1961): x1; L. Weis Funke, “Brecht on the Rise,” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1962): 109; Edith Anderson, “The Restoration of Brecht,” *The Nation* (march 4, 1968): 310–11; Lee Baxandall, “Brecht Returns as a Classic,” *The Nation* (April 19, 1971): 458–9; David Bathrick, “Brecht’s Marxism and America,” in Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust (eds.), *Essays on Brecht—Theater and Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 209–225; and Darko Suvin, “The Mirror and the Dynamo,” *Tulane Drama Review*, v.12, n.1 (1967): 56–67.

¹⁵⁰ These include *Seven Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1961); *Mother Courage and her Children* (London: Methuen, 1962); *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (London: Methuen, 1963); *The Life of Galileo* (London: Methuen, 1963); *Baal, A Man's a Man, and The Elephant Calf; Early Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); *The Threepenny Opera* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); *Edward II: a Chronicle Play* (New York: Grove Press, 1966); *Jungle of the Cities and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1966); and the *Collected Plays*, edited by John Willett (ed.) and Ralph Mannheim (London: Methuen, 1970).

reached the book market.¹⁵¹ The staging of Brecht's plays graduated from college campuses to Broadway and Lincoln Center.¹⁵² To the New Left, one of the things that Brecht initially represented was a call to analysis and action. In the early '60s, the *Evergreen Review* claimed that Brecht's theater was stimulating its viewer to "exercise one's critical powers."¹⁵³ To the *Partisan Review*, now striking a different note than when Greenberg strictly separated the playwright's poetry from his political agenda two decades earlier, "Brecht will *always* be asking when things will improve, or when men will think clearly and act firmly enough to improve them."¹⁵⁴ And to Lee Baxandall, Brecht's champion in the *Studies on the Left*, the leading and recurrent concern of Brecht's work lay with "the problem of the achievement of freedom through conscious transformation."¹⁵⁵ More importantly, Brecht was a figure of resistance and rebellion and, by the mid-'60s, his plays had found their way into the repertoires of a Harlem church project and the Free Southern Theater.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Martin Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and his Work* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960); Peter Demetz (ed.), *Brecht: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962); Fredric Ewen's 1967 biography *Bertolt Brecht; His Life, His Art, and His Times* (New York: Citadel Press); and Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*.

¹⁵² The *Threepenny Opera* celebrated its 2,250th performance at the Theatre de Luys and Jerome Robbins directed *Mother Courage* on Broadway in 1963 with a cast that included Anne Bancroft and Gene Wilder. The production was nominated for four Tony Awards, including Best Play. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Galileo* made it all the way to Lincoln Center and were performed there in 1966 and 1967, respectively.

¹⁵³ Lionel Abel, "Brecht," *Evergreen Review* (September–October, 1960): 139.

¹⁵⁴ G.S. Fraser, "Brecht, Grass, Voznesensky," *Partisan Review* (Winter 1967): 153.

¹⁵⁵ Lee Baxandall, "Brecht's Theater of Transformation," *Studies on the Left*, vol.1, n.4 (1961): 95.

¹⁵⁶ The latter performed *The Rifles of Señora Carrar*, a drama set in the Spanish Civil War, revolving around the notion that a mother's love emerges from selfishness, ready to sacrifice her own children in the fight against the class enemy. This play, to some of Brecht's critics "oversimplified politically and clearly a potboiler," was staged as a parable of struggle and solidarity. (Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and his Work*, 69.) When, after the performance, a young black viewer asked the director what Spain in 1937 had to do with the South of 1965, he replied, "I think Brecht was saying that you can't stand aside and do nothing while people all around you are being shot, because you yourself will be shot." ("Free Southern Theater Seeks to Build Negroes' Self-Esteem," *The New York Times* (July 30, 1965): 15.) Here, the resistance lies with the decision to refuse complacency in the light of injustice, to turn toward an acceptance and incorporation of politics into an individual's everyday behavior.

This is the New Left context, then, in which Rosler conceived *Bringing the War Home*. However, the series exceeds the artist's commitment to critically incorporate the reality of the war into a politically aware and engaged life. As a work of art, it mounts a double-refusal: the series refuses and in some cases even critically addresses the art world's inability and reluctance to make the war in Vietnam—or, for that matter, politics in general—part of its production. *Giacometti* (fig. 12) juxtaposes the opulence of a well-kept and richly-furnished living room with the aftermath of a mass killing. Here, a modernist coffee table, a life-size Giacometti sculpture, and an ornate couch positioned under what appears to be a Delaunay painting provide an environment of comfortable relaxation and bourgeois intellectual exchange. However, a sliding glass door to the outside reveals scattered, lifeless bodies lying in the mud of a riverbed. The shelter and exclusivity of the private sphere here exists parallel to the events of warfare politics. The separation remains intact; the proximity of the slaughtered bodies at this point presents only a negligible threat to the working division between public and private. Rosler comments on the function of culture and, more specifically, of art: the Cubist painting calmly mirrors the random assembly of limbs outside, while Giacometti's withered existentialist figure passively casts his eye over a field of death and destruction. Art, and modern art in particular, affords its viewer a moment in which to ponder the questions of life at large, while guarding against the intrusion of its specific manifestations. The work targets the majority of postwar American artists who continued this separation of art and politics, of their private enterprise and public responsibility as citizens.¹⁵⁷ By no means pro-war, they were the “inactivists” of the Old Left.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Barbara Rose and Irving Sandler, “The Sensibility of the Sixties,” *Art in America* (January–February 1967): 44–57; “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” *Artforum* (September 1970):

The disillusioning realities of Stalinist politics, the loss of faith in the proletariat as the revolutionary body, and the abuse of culture for purposes of propaganda by Communists and Fascists alike had put Greenberg's generation of artists and intellectuals on the defensive. Deep distrust of the social and moral mobilization and education of the masses through art and language still lingered in the 1960s. The art world was particularly hesitant in overcoming its profound ambivalence toward mixing art and politics.¹⁵⁹ As Susan Sontag observed, the New York avant-garde responded to the war in Vietnam with an "aesthetic of silence."¹⁶⁰ The first public statement from the artistic community against the war in Southeast Asia came in the form of the full-page ad, "End Your Silence," taken out in *The New York Times* on June 27, 1965. This declaration of a "concern for humanity" and demand to put "an end to the dirty war" was signed by more

35–39.

¹⁵⁸ The desire by certain artists to maintain a cautious distance from revolutionary politics which transgressed the boundaries of cultural autonomy found its parallel in the struggle of Old Left intellectuals to come to terms with the radical demand of the New Left to put politics into action. The Old Leftists were considered "inactivists," comfortably arranged around Rosler's coffee table, their political exercise reduced to armchair socialism. They were incapacitated by a fervent anti-Communism and managerial liberalism, while the New Left sought practice: "They *had* politics, we *were* politics." Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 173-174. The New Left was not pro-Communist but it was willing to rethink the Socialist and Marxist traditions of its own past as well as acknowledge the difference between socialist thought and Stalinist oppression. There was a difference to be found within the various approaches to socialist revolution and the New Left wanted the Third World to overturn the Soviet model. Che Guevara and Fidel Castro were the theoretical markers of the movement—not Trotsky and Lenin: "It would be more accurate to call them *fidelistas*, for Castro is their hero, not Mao or Krushchev, let alone the late Joseph Stalin. And Bertolt Brecht is their hero, too, if they are at all interested in theater, poetry, or drama." Bentley, "A Man's a Man" (1962), 108.

On the issue of the divergent positions between the Old and the New Left, see, for example, Irving Howe, "New Styles in Leftism" (1965), reprinted in Howe (ed.), *Beyond the New Left* (New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1970), 19-32 and C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left" (1960), reprinted in Judith and Stewart Albert (eds.), *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 86–92. See also Carl Ogelsby, "The Idea of the New Left," *Evergreen Review* (February 1969): 51–54, 83–88.

¹⁵⁹ Regarding the politicization (or lack thereof) of the 1960s U.S. art world see, for example, Selz, *The Art of Engagement*; Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent, 1955–69* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996); Lucy Lippard, *A Different War* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1990); and Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

¹⁶⁰ Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969). See also Moira Roth, "The Aesthetics of Indifference," *Artforum* (November 1977): 46-53.

than five hundred artists.¹⁶¹ Here, artists reacted to the atrocities of the Vietnam War as citizens, their form of protest indistinguishable from those of other professional groups. For some, the prospect of using their art as a vehicle of protest bore the danger of compromising essential aesthetic properties.¹⁶² Others believed that art was simply inadequate in addressing an event as complex and pressing as the Vietnam War.¹⁶³

The remaining part of the decade saw the formation of several artists' organizations, such as the Artists Poster Committee and the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), and further instances of artists' protests in the form of anti-war demonstrations and rallies.¹⁶⁴ But just as parts of the Civil Rights Movement and the Student Movement felt an increasing disillusionment with the limited effectiveness of marches, petitions, and sit-ins, some artists felt that the next step was to use their art to increase the range and visibility of their anti-war engagement. Projects such as the Los Angeles Artists Protest Committee's *Artists' Tower of Protest* or "Peace Tower" (fig. 13) built in 1966, and the *Collage of Indignation* (fig. 14) created as part of the *Angry Arts Week* held in New York

¹⁶¹ Cited in Therese Schwartz, "The Politicization of the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* (November–December 1971): 97.

¹⁶² Stating that he was honored to have been part of the ad and that the fine artist "should keep his legs in shape for long marches on the Pentagon," Abe Ajay declared that "as a strict Constructivist... an artist's work should be as clean as a hound's tooth of politics and social protest imagery. It is always bad art, sad and dreary and witless, and persuades one of nothing so much as the artist's poverty of hand and mind and spirit." Cited in *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Jack Levine, a so-called Social Realist Painter and contemporary of Ben Shahn and Philip Evergood who had illustrated a 1960s limited edition of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, remarked with regard to his involvement in the anti-war protest that "I always hoped that I would get to do something about it as a painter, but I never arrived at it. Painting is a very cumbersome operation. You can't quite react with the urgency the situation needs and if you do you lose." Cited in *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ For a list of New York artists' organization see Julie Ault, "A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists' Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965–85," in Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17–76.

in 1967, exhibited many artists' bewilderment and anger at the politics of the day.¹⁶⁵ Yet, to some they also constituted a naive and reactionary revival of poster and slogan art.¹⁶⁶ In both cases, the fusion of art and politics proved to be somewhat cumbersome. One problem, as Therese Schwartz has pointed out, was that many of the 418 artists participating in the Peace Tower did not make war, peace, or any other kind of non-art subject part of their contribution but simply added a work in their signature style to the tower's mosaic.¹⁶⁷ Schwartz writes, "Not all of the art could be called 'protest'... In fact, was the art important at all? The crowds came to see what the *artists* were doing. What has the mass public always wanted but the artists without the art?"¹⁶⁸ Theirs, as well as the tower's overall contribution was less about art's critical involvement in the pressing matters at hand (the war's social injustice and physical violence; economic opportunism and political hypocrisy; the war's misrepresentation in the media and exclusion from the arts) than what lay beyond it. The Peace Tower was a gesture of solidarity with a greater movement of resistance and with a generalized, faceless notion of the "oppressed," both in the publicity it gained through the tumultuous events surrounding it and through the participation of well-known artists. "But," Schwartz asks, "did the unique, artistic nature

¹⁶⁵ The *Peace Tower* was recently reincarnated for the 2006 Whitney Biennial, featuring panels by contemporary artists (figs. 15, 16). The appropriation of the design and mission of the 1966 tower and the resulting problems are discussed at the end of this dissertation.

¹⁶⁶ For a detailed account of the events surrounding the *Angry Arts Week* and the "Peace Tower" see Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent*; Lippard, *A Different War*; and Marcia Eymann and Charles Wollenberg (eds.), *What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). The Peace Tower's reception in the media was very limited at the time; art magazines printed only brief responses, if any (see Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent*, 100 for a complete list of articles local and national articles and reviews). Only in 1971, five years after the event, did *Art in America* feature the tower on its cover in conjunction with the abovementioned article by Therese Schwartz, "The Politicization of the Avant-Garde," one of the event's few critical accounts.

¹⁶⁷ Among the artists were Elaine de Kooning and Philip Guston, Eva Hesse and Donald Judd, Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt and Alice Neal. See Schwartz, "The Politicization of the Avant-Garde," 99.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

of the Tower in fact deflect attention from the dirty truths of the war?”¹⁶⁹ Susan Sontag had been among the original defenders of the Peace Tower and had spoken at its dedication, declaring the project a sign of solidarity and communal expression: “Today we’re doing something else—establishing a big thing to stand here, to remind other people and ourselves that we feel the way that we do... Let’s be angry, truly angry. Let’s be horrified. And let’s be afraid.”¹⁷⁰

According to its critics, other contributions to the Peace Tower (“Stop the War” signs and “Johnson Is a Murderer” slogans) shared a number of problems with its New York counterpart. For the *Collage of Indignation*, many of the involved artists departed from their usual styles in order to meet what was conceived of as being the requirement for political art. The result was a wall of word paintings, gestures of aggression, and obscene slogans.¹⁷¹ Writing in *The Nation*, Max Kozloff was one of the few to cast an analytic look at the collective visual effort of the “Angry Arts Week”—publications such as *Artforum* and *Art in America* made no mention of the event. In his article, Kozloff identifies the contemporary artists’ failure to act within the gap between art and life, exacerbated by the public’s increasingly image-saturated understanding of the world. The daily flood of pictures of the war failed to produce horror or disgust about American foreign policy put into action but also did not stimulate the viewer to look behind the pictures and access the causal complexities of their existence and circulation. In an

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Susan Sontag, “Inventing and Sustaining an Appropriate Response,” speech given at the Peace Tower dedication, reprinted in *Los Angeles Free Press* (March 4, 1966): 4.

¹⁷¹ Over 150 artists contributed, including Roberto Matta, Jacob Lawrence, and Richard Serra. Mark di Suvero showed a slab of rusty metal with the torch-cut inscription “Johnson is a murderer—In memory of the women and children killed by bombs in Vietnam.” Nancy Graves’s contribution read “Hump War,” Georgakos’s panel stated “Fuck Hate.” Michelle Stuart’s panel was turned into an envelope with a black border for mourning, and James Rosenquist contributed a coil of barbed wire.

atmosphere characterized by “freedom from anxiety” and “insulation of disturbance,” Kozloff contends, the *Collage of Indignation* artists failed to provide the viewer with adequate visual and intellectual stimulation.¹⁷² Imprecations against Johnson as murderer and phalluses dressed as American flags never reached beyond clichés. Here, Kozloff points out, the political was merely aestheticized, reflecting an apparent lack of conviction on behalf of the artists to politicize their own work and production: the artist and his political opinion (in this case, anger over the war) remain separate, just like the visual arts and the posters that comprised the *Collage of Indignation*.

Indeed, for many artists involved in the *Collage*, the departure from so-called non-political styles of artistic production did not lead to a critique of the war or the socio-political, militaristic-economic system it was based on. On the contrary, the turn toward the political had precisely the affirming effect that had kept the canon of postwar American art at a safe distance from all things political in the first place: the *Collage* was vulgar and populist, as well as intellectually and artistically simplistic. In this case the notion of “collage” as a strategy of representation was itself highly abbreviated. Rather than combining various, seemingly separate views, issues, and appearances in order to articulate the complexities of the war in Vietnam and its historical context (i.e., its economic causes and geo-political reach, its effects on psychological and physical health, its representation in the domestic media), this “aesthetic wailing wall,” as Kozloff called it, was simply a kaleidoscope of expressions of personal frustration and impotent solidarity.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Max Kozloff, “...A Collage of Indignation,” *The Nation* (February 20, 1967): 248–249.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 249.

Rosler's montages, by contrast, allowed for the visual and intellectual stimulation demanded by critics such as Kozloff. Like the other works in *Bringing the War Home*, *Beauty Rest* (fig. 17) combines seemingly disparate visual elements, emphasizing the fact of its own constructedness through the incompatibility of its imagery. *Beauty Rest* portrays the American family as a unit providing its members with identity and shelter in light of the desolation raging beyond the island that is the family bed. In the context of the art world's anti-war efforts and given the work's title, Rosler's montage raises the question of how a sense of domestic security and well-being is both connected and disconnected from a war being fought halfway around the globe. It also addresses the issue of art's complicity in conveying such a sense of security, even when—or especially when—it attempts to offer a critique of war. The juxtaposition of the family in pajamas sprawled out over an expensive-looking bed, the mother leafing through a magazine while father and son play with a toy airplane, within a room flooded and ransacked by war, articulates the dependency of postwar American affluence on the global expansion of an economic and ideological model that made this prosperity possible. The family is occupied with consumption and play, their backs turned toward the crucifix hanging on the wall. The conflict in Southeast Asia is not driven by religious conviction, Rosler suggests, but by capitalist interests—if not for something as banal as the expansion of a global market or the exploitation of local resources, then at least for the symbolic triumph of freedom over Communist oppression. (Capitalism relies intrinsically on its own appearance as an embodiment of democratic values. Therefore the systematic destruction of one national will enables the other's understanding of itself as just and righteous.) The family is not oblivious to the war but it can't be bothered by its ideological causes and

destructive quality. The toy plane looks very much like a bomber, and it is perceived by the men on the bed the way armed combat is perceived by the average consumer: depersonalized, heroic, somewhat romantic, and a technological marvel. Like a toy, the fighter plane is not a symbol of an extraordinary event but one thing among many that make up the arsenal of everyday reality.

Beauty rests here and so, by extension, does art. Conventional protest art provides at once a way of dealing with and a way of sidestepping the complexities of the conflict in Vietnam and its representation. By returning on occasion to outmoded forms of artistic expression, sloganeering and simplified agit-prop—the Peace Tower and the Collage being only the most famous examples—many artists provided cover for their own formalist, personal or otherwise disengaged practice without having to address the schism between contemporary art and politics. *Bringing the War Home* offers a more nuanced and less restricting form of opposition. As individual images and as a series, Rosler's montages address the very notion of oppositionality and demand a dialectical reading when those spheres of psychological and physical comfort (be it in the form of the home as private space or the countercultural withdrawal into alternate states of mind and antiauthoritarian gestures of defiance) are put into causal relation with the rather uncomfortable realms of political and public reality, the ones that define and often enable those comforts in the first place. Rosler employs what Lucy Lippard later called "Collage as dialectic. Collage as revolution. Collage as images and words exposing the cultural structure of a society in which art has been turned against itself and against the public."¹⁷⁴ The juxtaposition of elements enables the artist, in the manner of Brecht, to "lay bare the

¹⁷⁴ Lucy Lippard, "Hot Potatoes: Art and Politics in 1980" (1981), reprinted in *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 169.

device,” to expose the underlying mechanisms of reality, rather than represent its surfaces. Referring explicitly to Brecht’s notion of estrangement, Rosler has repeatedly chosen photomontage as a technique that rejects the authoritative claim for objective truth by art, the news media, and the advertising industry: “In choosing representational strategies I aim for the distancing (*ostranenie*, the *Verfremdungseffekt*), the distanciation occasioned by a refusal of realism, by foiled expectations, by palpably flouted conventions.”¹⁷⁵

These conventions and expectations include the reception of the prewar avant-garde and, in this case, more specifically, of historical examples of collage and photomontage as produced by the Berlin Dadaists. During his presentation at the Art Workers’ Coalition’s Open Hearing, Dan Graham demanded that artists reconsider the art of the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s and ’30s, that they make “socially good works” and as in “Marx, Zola, and Brecht’s time... change affect into effecting changes.”¹⁷⁶ When founded in 1969, the AWC was not, as Lippard has pointed out, conceived of as a political group. It was first and foremost concerned with artists’ access to institutional power and representation, but so-called non-art issues would assume a major rhetorical importance.¹⁷⁷ Graham was alluding to the fact that throughout the 1960s, political issues were artistically dealt with in an affective rather than effective

¹⁷⁵ Martha Rosler, “To Argue for a Video of Representation. To Argue for a Video Against the Mythology of Everyday Life” (1977), reprinted in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2000), 369.

¹⁷⁶ Dan Graham, “Art Workers’ Coalition Open Hearing Presentation” (1969), reprinted in Alberro and Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art*, 93–94.

¹⁷⁷ Lucy Lippard, “The Art Workers’ Coalition: Not a History” (1970), reprinted in *Get the Message?* 15. The Art Workers’ Coalition was involved in some of the main rallies and actions against the war in Vietnam including the 1969 Moratorium Day and the production and distribution of the My Lai massacre protest poster, and the 1970 “Art Strike Against Racism, War, Oppression,” triggered by the brutal and deadly display of state force in Cambodia, Kent State, and Jackson State. Lippard’s text provides a detailed account of AWC events, activities, and problems. The next chapter of this dissertation will take a closer look at the Coalition’s forms of institutional critique.

manner (outrage and anger rather than analysis and empowerment). But the historical presentation and reception of these “socially good works” suffered from the same expectations of spectacular gestures of negation. The history of Constructivism had long been subject to a complete dissociation from its context of the October Revolution and the Russian artists’ ensuing effort to actively participate in the construction of a Communist society.¹⁷⁸ Only by the early ’60s did a number of studies such as Camilla Gray’s *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863–1922* (1962) revise the formalist Cold War accounts of Constructivist activities.¹⁷⁹ But even this newer scholarship usually excluded the collages and photomontages of artists such as Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky or presented them as the imminent return to figuration under Stalinist propaganda and the failure of the Constructivist experiment.¹⁸⁰

The 1960s reception of Dadaist collage and photomontage was similarly dehistoricized. While most writers and historians relegated the politico-didactic phenomenon of Berlin Dada to being the bastard child of the movement, other examples of collage and montage—for example, the work of Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters—were discussed in purely formal terms. Robert Motherwell’s influential 400-page anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951) dedicates a mere thirteen pages to the art of Raoul Hausmann and John Heartfield (Hannah Höch’s name is mentioned only once in

¹⁷⁸ For one account of this dissociation see Benjamin Buchloh, “Cold War Constructivism,” in Serge Guilbaut (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945–1964* (Cambridge, M.A. and London: MIT Press, 1990), 85–110. The 1960s and ’70s American reception of Constructivism and Productivism will be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter Three.

¹⁷⁹ Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863–1922* (New York: Abrams, 1962). See also George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (New York: G. Braziller, 1967).

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, John Bowlt, “The Failed Utopia: Russian Art 1917–32,” *Art in America* (July 1971): 40–51.

passing).¹⁸¹ Reminiscent of Greenberg's attempt to distinguish between Brecht's poetic and prosaic qualities, the French poet and critic Georges Hugnet, writing the anthology's section on "The Dada Spirit in Painting," deems Berlin Dada to be an application of Zurich strategies onto a context of moral crisis: "poetry, with which the Berlin Dadaists were not concerned, had no place in their pure revolutionary propaganda." Compared to Zurich, Paris, and Cologne Dadas, the plastic manifestations of the Berlin movement supposedly had an "appearance of sterility" and were "appreciably less moving." Collages were "composed at random and not very seriously," as the general enterprise suffered from an attempt to make matters intelligible, trading in its anarchic force for the dictatorship of human force and the cause of battle.¹⁸² In the end, Hugnet claims, "politics absorbed Dada" and the movement "died of its transposition into reality."¹⁸³

Ten years later, in 1961, Thomas Hess looked for a similarly depoliticized appreciation of collage in Dada. The original "bit of paper that was pasted to the Cubist still-life" introduced a visual dialectic to the image: "the allusive had been added to the illusive. A strong effect of alienation was created, like the one Brecht noted in the Chinese theater."¹⁸⁴ But according to Hess, this effect and achievement of collage, Brechtian or otherwise, was hijacked by the Dadaists and incorporated into their "social collage" in order to add an element of visual surprise to their anarchistic desires. Hess writes, "[It is] an ultimate joke [that] Communist slogans, pacifist demonstrations,

¹⁸¹ Georges Hugnet, "The Dada Spirit in Painting—2. Berlin (1918–1922)" in Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, originally published in 1951 (Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 141–153.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁸⁴ Hess, "Collage As an Historical Method," 69.

‘shocking’ *vers libres* are the context for works by Arp and Duchamp which were pure studies in cold form, as esthetic as it could possibly get.”¹⁸⁵

Yet maybe the most incapacitating understanding of Dada’s aesthetic politics was that which saw it as an outmoded form of shock. Prominent works such as Höch’s 1919 collage *Cut With the Kitchen Knife* and Hausmann’s 1920 *Tatlin at Home*, were presented in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1968 exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and their Heritage*. The Berlin group’s collages and montages were interpreted as an attack on the bourgeoisie via appropriation of their own means of communication (images from advertising and reports in newspapers and magazines) and as the “man on the street’s” disorientation upon encountering the components of familiar visual orientation turned “topsy-turvy” and “running amuck.”¹⁸⁶ William Rubin, curator of the show and author of the accompanying catalogue, then discusses Max Ernst’s collages (another influence on Rosler’s work) in a slightly more insightful way, regarding the possible cognitive and intellectual function of the collage form. Citing Ernst, Rubin presents the artist’s intentions as “conceiving of collage as ‘a meeting of two distant realities on a plane foreign to them both’ or as a ‘culture of systematic displacements and its effects.’”¹⁸⁷ Yet, the author adds, in a manner reminiscent of Hess’s argument, this kind of collage diverts from the original and more formalist enterprise of the Cubists, for whom “collage elements were a counterpoint to the painted lines of shapes in a whole oriented toward

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, 42.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 50. Rubin cites from a text by Ernst titled “Au-delà de la peinture,” first published in *Cahiers d’Art* (Paris), vol.11, no.6/7 (1936): 169–72.

formal values.” Since it “hardly necessitated gluing elements together,” Cubism was essentially different from the project of Dada at large as exemplified by Duchamp.¹⁸⁸

But it was not the socio-political de-contextualization of Dada and Surrealism, collage and montage, that upset the press and the public. According to Dore Ashton, the main reaction to the exhibition was disappointment: “Expectations primed by the wild mythology of these movements were left cruelly unfulfilled.”¹⁸⁹ Not even a so-called hippie demonstration, complete with hurled insults and stink bombs at the opening, satisfied the audience. Both the popular and the specialized press accused the museum and its curator of having coolly tamed an inherently wild and violent avant-garde.¹⁹⁰ But, as Ashton argues, the main reason for the general disappointment resided not with the exhibition’s “calm historical and stylistic approach.”¹⁹¹ Rather it lies with the cultural and ideological co-option of spectacular shock as an authentic and effective device of oppositionality. Ashton states that “Even the shocking spectacle, at which the old masters were masters, has little hope of success today... Scandal is a way of life so much taken for granted in America that the best-intentioned artist would be hard put to find a root definition of the term.”¹⁹²

The institutionalization and active de-politicization of Dada collage and montage was part and parcel of the annals of postwar American art history. The nostalgia for an authentic manifestation of shock and resistance lacked the same historic specificity which determines the circumstances and context wherein certain visual strategies make for

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Dore Ashton, “New York Commentary,” *Studio International* (June 1968): 320.

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, “Dada at MoMA,” *Newsweek* (April 8, 1968): 132–133; “The Hobbyhorse Rides Again,” *Time* (April 5, 1968): 84–87; Nicolas Calas, “Surrealist Heritage? Focus on Super-Reality at the Museum of Modern Art,” *Arts Magazine* (March 1968): 24–9.

¹⁹¹ Ashton, “New York Commentary,” 320.

¹⁹² Ibid., 321.

effective devices of estrangement. Assessing the “Dada Legacy,” Amy Goldin notes in 1965 the increased difficulties in falling back on artistic models half a century old: “Our society, on the other hand [as compared to that of the 1910s and ’20s], seems to have become increasingly aesthetic and sometimes even Dada in tone... We seem to have a taste for a multi-focus, mobile spectacle that underlines a sense of activity.” The outlook for an engaged and critical artistic practice is bleak: “The artistic problems implicit in this fragmentation of focus are very great, possibly even insoluble.”¹⁹³

The question then remained as to what kind of model was available for artists that sought to productively and critically engage with the problems of the visual culture of their time? What kind of pictorial practice was possible in a climate where ideals of

¹⁹³ Amy Goldin, “The Dada Legacy,” *Arts Magazine* (September–October 1965): 28. Peter Schjeldahl’s review of the most recent Dada exhibition (on view at the MoMA, June 18–September 11, 2006) ends on a similar note: “Dada was and remains a drug, of the hallucinatory type. What young self-styled bohemian of the past ninety years hasn’t got at least briefly high on it? I sure did, back in the sixties. It was temporary heaven to believe that your besetting mentality—adolescent hysteria in the face of a world that had somehow failed to take your point of view into account—was a state of history-blessed grace. Industries of popular culture have since mastered the formula: mix innocence and cynicism, drizzle with hormones, stand back. Today, it can be 1916 again anytime, at the flash of a credit card.” “Young at Heart: Dada at MoMA,” *New Yorker* (June 26, 2006): n.pag.. Even though as a historical survey this exhibition (the first in the U.S. devoted exclusively to the movement) when used with the accompanying catalogue succeeds in differentiating between the different circumstances and goals of Dada’s various locales, most critics miss the opportunity to assess the varying degrees of negotiation between aesthetic and political commitment, historically specific possibilities of protest, negation, and subversion, and the consequences for artistic production at the beginning of the 21st century. Michael Kimmelman, for example (“Dada at the MoMA: The Moment When Artists Took Over the Asylum,” *The New York Times* [June 16, 2006]: n.pag.), ends his somewhat descriptive overview with the statement: “Dada, it turned out, was never really as impotent as it feared. It still isn’t.” But, unfortunately, he never elaborates. A longer, more thorough review by Charles Simic can be found in the *New York Review of Books*, “Dada in New York” (August 10, 2006): 10–13. The most insightful in terms of historical poignancy appeared in *Los Angeles Times*, where Christopher Knight briefly discusses Dada’s origins and recurring reception in relation to socio-political upheaval: how Dada emerged in response to World War I and why it mattered again after World War II. With regard to the recent New York exhibition he writes, “The narcissism of MoMA’s installation would be funny if it weren’t for the larger social context. America is now in its own war in Iraq, with at least 52,000 corpses and counting. From a Dada perspective, our new millennium’s most powerful drawings are the ones showing nonexistent mobile weapons labs that then Secretary of State Colin L. Powell exhibited at the United Nations. Dada’s traumatic genesis in the savage trenches that split Europe apart gets blunted and obscured. Famously, Duchamp claimed that Dada was just a life-passage from making art to playing chess. That strategic board game is about bloodless war. MoMA’s crass installation celebrates its anemic spirit.” “A Little Skewering Music, Please,” *Los Angeles Times* (June 28, 2006): n.pag.

aesthetic autonomy silently supported the actions of the economic-military apparatus? What kind of resistance is imaginable in a culture that thrives on gestures of radicalism and oppositionality as long as they remain simply gestures? The very notion of “refusal” had to be rethought.

Rosler’s work benefited from a reappraisal of revolutionary action, most prominently by Herbert Marcuse, who championed Brecht as the essential practitioner and historical model of a contemporary aesthetic of change. Individual images from *Bringing the War Home* were first published in underground newspapers such as *Goodbye to All That—Newspaper for San Diego Women* (figs. 18, 19). Rosler recalls, “At the time it seemed imperative not to show these works—particularly the antiwar montages—in an art context. To show antiwar agitation in such a context seemed obscene, for its site seemed more properly ‘the street’ or the underground press, where such material could help marshal the troops, and that is where they appeared.”¹⁹⁴ The images were reproduced in black and white on cheap newsprint surrounded by stories addressing a wide spectrum of local and international politics, feminist and otherwise. Images like *Tron (Amputee)* (fig. 16) are printed in the same publication, which in a later issue would feature a story titled “Meeting Vietnamese Women” on female Vietnamese soldiers.¹⁹⁵ The image of a Vietnamese girl, leaning exhausted against the frame of the montage, her right leg amputated below the knee, an expansive and expensive living room stretching out behind her, becomes ambiguous when juxtaposed with the photographs of women soldiers

¹⁹⁴ Martha Rosler, “Place, Position, Power, Politics” (1994), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), 355.

¹⁹⁵ “Meeting Vietnamese Women,” *Goodbye to All That—Newspaper for San Diego Women*, issue 5 (December 2, 1970): n.pag.

illustrating “Meeting Vietnamese Women.” The soldiers carry weapons; they look proud, strong, determined. *Tron* and the images of the fighters articulate different approaches to resistance and reality. While the latter representations are not false, in the sense that they were not staged, they provide the reader of *Goodbye to All That* with a romanticized portrait that complements the mass media’s depiction of “the enemy.”

The visual representation of the women soldiers is founded upon the ideological structure of “us and them”: the foreign fighter is associated with an independence and drive—the result of violently resisting the complacent consumerism of mainstream America. And, by extension, she also refuses to succumb to the patriarchal structure of capitalism. This exotic depiction of “them” functions as an idealized tale of opposition that, according to Marcuse’s writings of the 1960s, has lost its liberatory potential in a society where the spheres of reality and fiction have been collapsed into a singular dimension of all-encompassing availability. *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse’s influential 1964 publication, analyses contemporary problems of revolutionary thought and action.¹⁹⁶ For Marcuse, the collapse of a two-dimensional society informs all spheres: political and social, economic and cultural. In modern, “pre-technocratic” society, the tension between the existing order and its alternative—the real and the ideal—allowed for a balance of forces and the notion of improvement, of change and progress: “The critique of industrial society attained concreteness in a historical meditation between theory and

¹⁹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). Of course, Marcuse’s investigation of the relation between the mainstream and its alternatives has its predecessors and parallel discourses in other disciplines. For an earlier, insightful discussion of the relation between “the Organized System of semimonopolies, government, advertisers, etc. and the disaffection of the growing generation,” see Paul Goodman’s “Why Are There No Alternatives?” *Evergreen Review* (January–February 1961): 1.

practice, values and facts, needs and goals.”¹⁹⁷ This mediation manifested itself in the consciousness and political action of the antagonistic classes in capitalism: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. According to Marcuse, the function of advanced or avant-garde art was to postulate the ideal: an ideal that was not a reality, that had yet to be achieved. He posited a potential for political action through the alienation produced by art’s difference from life. In a technocratic, one-dimensional society the contradiction of difference has collapsed and the quest for totality realizes itself as a false totality: any distinction between true and false, between reality and fiction, becomes impossible. Idealized fictions of perfect beauty, of freedom and equality, of individual fulfillment as formerly articulated in art, become seemingly attainable through the availability of consumer products and the values attached to them. Everything is desublimated, Marcuse argues, but is in turn used as an instrument of repression. Information and access to media multiply but espouse less and less variety of ideas. As alternatives (i.e., the heroic female Vietnamese soldier) cease to be such—“They are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order”—the avant-garde must create forms of estrangement that make the “artistic truth” of reflective and analytic distance once again communicable.¹⁹⁸

Tron (Amputee) defies expectations of art (and, by extension, non-art): as a montage published in an underground newspaper, the image falls safely into the category of neither documentation nor artistic creation. (*Bringing the War Home* was not exhibited in an art context until October 1991, when ten images of the series were shown at the

¹⁹⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xii.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

Simon Watson Gallery in New York.) Informed by but not presented as part of the tradition of collage-as-shock through violent fragmentation, the montage derives its estrangement from a more subtle recombination of visual elements in a context defined by the very photographic language appropriated. In addition, it provides neither the fiction of an intact and autonomous domestic (national) sphere, nor the removed and “far away” brutality of war. Rosler was well acquainted with Marcuse and his work, and *Bringing the War Home* can appropriately be read as an embodiment of his “Great Refusal”—a negative critique in the form of non-participation in the conventional mechanisms of cultural and socio-political reproduction.¹⁹⁹ Only this form of non-participation, she believed, would eventually enable social and political change.

For Marcuse, as for Rosler, it was Brecht who “has sketched the theoretical foundations for these efforts” in art.²⁰⁰ Marcuse calls Brecht’s theater a “classic” in a genealogy of artistic production that, at the end of the 1960s, demands a radical rejection of bourgeois culture—an art that does “spark action, practice... break[ing] through this universe of mental and physical pollution in which we live.”²⁰¹ Confronted with the total character of established society, Brecht had attempted to develop an artistic method that acknowledges art’s dialectic of critique and affirmation. Brechtian theater is founded on the presumption of change—the contemporary world is represented as subject to change. The *Verfremdungseffekt* makes the natural appear extraordinary, as, in Brecht’s words,

¹⁹⁹ Looking back at her time at UCSD, Rosler states, “We read political theory and art and film theory and criticism, especially *Screen* magazine, discussed contemporary work, talked and argued with David Antin, met with a literary group organized by Fred Jameson, and interacted with Herbert Marcuse and his students—who included Angela Davis—in class situations and in conjunction with the constant protest events.” Rosler in Buchloh, “A Conversation with Martha Rosler,” 32.

²⁰⁰ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 66.

²⁰¹ Herbert Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality,” 1969 lecture at the Guggenheim Museum, reprinted in *On the Future of Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 123.

“the things of everyday life are lifted out of the realm of the self-evident.”²⁰² The Vietnamese girl is cut from a story that had turned the loss of her limb into a moving description of individual recuperation sponsored by the advances of American medicine. The opulent home is torn from its context of home improvement, where it had provided its audience with the physical, social, and psychological privacy that defines the private sphere.²⁰³ Reproduced and published in newsprint, the collage defies standards of artistic autonomy as well as of journalistic objectivity. The confrontation between the visual and narrative elements as an unresolved encounter between two familiar but incompatible factors, both of which determined experience in 1960s America, can be seen, in Marcuse’s terms, as “the liberation of the object from the automatism of perception which distorts and restricts what things are and what things can be.” “Accordingly,” Marcuse continues in a notably Brechtian manner, “we may say that art discovers and creates a new immediacy which emerges only with the destruction of the old. The new immediacy is attained in a process of recollection: images, concepts, ideas long since ‘known’ find, in the work of art, their sensuous representation and —verification.”²⁰⁴

Bringing the War Home is the culmination of this formula. It presents images as the material elements of communication and ideology. The series openly refuses to deliver fictional accounts of domestic well-being and the cruelty of war as separate events and therefore as known quantities, a negation of the negative: “Only in this manner,” as Marcuse argues in *One-Dimensional Man*, “can the laws of cause and effect

²⁰² Brecht cited in Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 67.

²⁰³ “The Edge of Peace,” *Life* (November 8, 1968): 27–37. Rosler used the cover image for her montage. The original photograph shows the girl watching her new wooden leg being made; the headline reads, “As the bombing stops—THIS GIRL TRON.”

²⁰⁴ Herbert Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” *Arts Magazine* (May 1967): 29.

reveal themselves.”²⁰⁵ Like Kozloff, Marcuse demands that the artist create the possibility of “imagination”—to think and see beyond predictable channels of knowledge.²⁰⁶

Rosler’s refusal to depict and understand the war in Vietnam in known terms and categories extends to her visual treatment of women in *Bringing the War Home* and works from the same period, such as the series *Beauty Knows No Pain, or Body Beautiful* (1966–1972) (fig. 21) and *Untitled (Playboy)* (1972) (fig. 22). As a series, *Bringing the War Home* juxtaposes the sphere of feminine domesticity with the masculine world of war. Kitchens, bedrooms, and living rooms are clean, orderly, and tastefully furnished—they display a “woman’s touch.” In comparison, the world outside the house is rough, dirty, and cruel. In *Cleaning the Drapes* (fig. 23) a woman of Asian descent is vacuuming the curtains while outside her window two U.S. soldiers in a trench are having a smoke. While attributing and pointing out traditional male and female roles as defined by their occupation, Rosler emphasizes two related projects of domestication: the American market aims to “civilize” the Asian woman as much as the U.S. military machine attempts to “civilize” her country. *Cleaning the Drapes* de- and recontextualizes notions of identity and belonging ascribed through identity, ethnicity, and gender. The removal of the familiar from its known visual context estranges preconceived ways of seeing the world and forces the viewer to re-read the causal relations between seemingly disparate elements: this is art as practice—it depends on the active involvement of its audience in making sense (visually and intellectually) of what is seen while denying the easy re-categorization of the aesthetic experience into existing channels of knowledge.

²⁰⁵ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 67.

²⁰⁶ See Gérard Raulet, “Marcuse’s Negative Dialectics of Imagination,” in John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (eds.), *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 119.

More literally torn apart and out of their original context are the Playmates from the 1972 collage *Untitled (Playboy)*. This work consists of a plethora of breasts, buttocks, and limbs, sensuous smiles and daring gazes. There is hardly any background to the image except for the occasional piece of bedding visible between the bodies. This sea of female forms is arranged around a central figure that is somewhat upright, kneeling in profile, while all the other women are reclining. The composition adheres to a sense of perspective by placing the largest fragments at the bottom and in the front of the picture, layered upon others gradually receding and diminishing in size toward the back. The tears and cuts are visible, outlining the women's hair and skin, clearly marking the selective accumulation of uniform images. The point here, driven home quite obviously by simply piling body upon body, turning what are supposed to be erotic smiles into somewhat desperate and comical grimaces, is that of a media-driven meat market.²⁰⁷

Rosler literalizes Marcuse's notion of "repressive desublimation" as elaborated in *One-Dimensional Man*—the idea that the abolishment of (sexual) taboos leads, not to greater freedom, but to increasing control as these taboos are reified and redistributed as part of a commodity culture. The display of nudity does not result in any form of sexual liberation and the transcendence of capitalism's produced desire for immediate gratification; quite the opposite—the liberatory power of the libido becomes "less capable of eroticism beyond localized sexuality," a pre-packaged sensation, a commodity fetish that simultaneously acknowledges and disavows the merely virtual satisfaction of

²⁰⁷ The debate concerning pornography and morality, censorship and freedom (sexual and expressive) had entered the mainstream media during the late 1960s. See, for example, "Pornography Goes Public," a special section in *Life* magazine, comprised of the articles "Presses and Cameras Grind It Out," "There Is Trouble Right Here in Mason City," and "Trying to Mesh Morality With Freedom," *Life* (August 28, 1970): 20–25.

desires in a one-dimensional society.²⁰⁸ Yet the most powerful effect of estrangement lies within the collage's form—in its arrangement and density of bodies, the apparent harmony and consistency with the original representation of the softcore magazine. At first glance the abundance of nudity seems erotic, drawing the (male) viewer in, taunting him. But the nudity is immediately broken up into its components of aestheticism and nakedness and the private sexual fantasy becomes an encounter with the objectification of the female body, stripped of all the usual narrative and presentation that accompany these secret adventures.

Created between 1966 and 1972, the series of photomontages *Beauty Knows No Pain, or Body Beautiful* recalls the work of the Dadaist Hannah Höch while lacking its confidence in feminine power.²⁰⁹ Höch's 1920 collage *Das schöne Mädchen* (*The Beautiful Girl*) (fig. 24) juxtaposes the female body with emblems and hardware of the automotive industry, inviting a reading that reflects on the relation between objectified sexuality and feminine qualities for purposes of advertising as well as the parallel transformation of woman into machine. But the tone of accusation and revelation finds its counterpart in a simultaneous celebration of the emancipation and independence of the Weimar woman. The central figure has, as often in Höch's work, the body of a female athlete, signifying self-control and competitive success, and a light bulb for a head,

²⁰⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 73.

²⁰⁹ The reception of Höch's work in the U.S. was slow during the 1960s and early '70s, often relying on British and other European art magazines available in America. For example, her name is briefly mentioned in a special issue on German photography in *Camera* (April 1967), a publication that Rosler read at the time. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* was included in the abovementioned 1968 MoMA exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*; a reproduction of *Hausprüche* (1922) is included in John Willett (ed.)'s discussion of R.B. Kitaj, "Where to Stick It," *Art International* (November 1970): 28–36; *Studio International* publishes further examples of Höch's work: *Hausprüche* (February 1972): 49 and *Dada-Ernst* (1920) (October 1972): 62. Edward Roditi's 1959 "Interview with Hannah Höch," originally published in *Arts*, was reprinted in Lucy Lippard (ed.), *Dadas on Art* (Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), 70–77.

standing for creation and genius without sacrificing beauty and grace. The women in Rosler's *Untitled (S, M, L)* (fig. 25) have no such luck: their bodies strike the stiff and awkward poses of fashion photography, their eyes are empty and their looks convey a feeling of absent-mindedness, if not outright stupidity.

Culling figures from advertisements for underwear, lingerie, and other women's fashion found in *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*, Rosler has removed the fabric and made explicit what female couture so tauntingly (barely) covers: breasts and pudendas, taken from pornography magazines and montages and placed into the chaste but highly suggestive ads. Bustiers and panties are cut and torn open in a display of sexual anatomy, letting repressed desires surface. Once again, Rosler violently takes apart the lucrative image of female submission and stereotypical beauty as well as the spectator's confirmation of his own position vis-à-vis the opposite gender and as an owner of actual, social, and cultural property. *Wallpaper* (fig. 26) consists of neatly arranged body parts on a wooden surface: mouth, eyes, chin, hair, knee, foot, breast, navel, etc. Rosler taunts the viewer by spelling out what the advertising industry does ever so subtly: the sexually charged fragments stimulate as well as repel, offering on a platter that which should but can't satisfy, since it lacks the appearance and unity of cohesion necessary for the viewer's psychological and social navigation and placement. As in Brecht's work, the parts fail to add up, addressing the spectator directly and demanding a new contextualization that includes the function of the audience.

Yet the presentation of female sexuality does not result in a celebration of the feminine. The women in *Beauty Knows No Pain, or Body Beautiful* lack any emancipatory power, even beauty. In *Baby Dolls (Isn't It Nice)* (fig. 27), a seemingly

unconcerned model standing at the beach, her flimsy negligee cut to reveal her breasts and pubic hair, is juxtaposed with the header “Isn’t it nice to feel feminine again?” It is hard not to take this as a parody of the essentialist direction pursued as part of the women’s liberation movement and the feminist art of the late 1960s and early ’70s.²¹⁰ Within its historical context, this image reads as a backlash either against the stalling achievements of woman’s rights and counterproductive infighting within the movement and or against the abovementioned reproductive and ultimately repressive celebration of free sexuality and feminine essentialism.²¹¹ In Rosler’s montages, women and the female body do not carry intrinsic values and liberatory powers as they do in the work of such artists as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro; female sexuality (as in the celebration of vaginal forms in Chicago’s 1974–79 *Dinner Party* [fig. 28]) and feminine attributes (as in the salute to female creativity, craft, and motherhood in Schapiro’s 1975 *Mary Cassatt and Me* [fig. 29]) are, to Rosler, like all other phenomena in a modern, capitalist society, subject to inscription and projection.²¹² Regarding a “language of liberation” predicated

²¹⁰ The work intentionally referred to the dialectics of feminine essentialism in mainstream media and in counter-culture, to what Rosler calls the notion of “earth-mother.” Conversation with the artist, New York, July 27, 2006.

²¹¹ An insightful analysis regarding the development of identity politics and the problems posed by the assumption of “identity categories... to be foundational to feminist politics, that is deemed necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up,” can be found in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 147. For a history of the feminist movement in the U.S. see Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women’s Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991) and Judith Papachristou, *History Together: A History in Documents of the Women’s Movement in the United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), especially pages 216–255.

For an in retrospect surprisingly insightful portrayal of the women’s movement’s problems and ambiguities in the print media at the time see, for example, “The New Feminists: Revolt Against ‘Sexism,’” *Time* (November 21, 1969): 53–56; “(On the March For What They Still Haven’t Got) Women Arise,” *Life* (September 4, 1970): 16B–24; “The Woman Problem—Then and Now,” *Life* (August 13, 1971): 41–55; “The American Woman—Special Issue,” *Time* (March 20, 1972).

²¹² For a discussion of essentialism in feminist art and the logic of representation see, for example, Lawrence Alloway, “Women’s Art in the ’70s,” *Art in America* (May-June 1976): 64–72; Griselda Pollock, “What’s Wrong With ‘Images of Women’?” (1977), reprinted in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock,

on sexual difference an easy target for the “new commodifications of our lives,” Rosler writes that “we seem to slip back toward object status, accepting without complaint the new ways in which we remain defined by *how we look* and by the style in which we perform our lives.”²¹³ Or, as Lucy Lippard put it regarding the essentialist reappropriation of femaleness in art: “A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men’s use of women for sexual titillation from women’s use of women to expose that insult.”²¹⁴ Rather than offering what Marcuse calls “adjusted desublimation,” Rosler provides a sublimation that does not deliver instant gratification but, through its fragmentation and alienation, creates a critical, intellectual distance: “sublimation preserves the consciousness of the renunciations which the repressive society inflicts upon the individual, and thereby preserves the need for liberation.”²¹⁵ Addressing the image of the sexualized, domestic, and objectified body as, what the artist calls “socially produced rather than as ‘natural’” and, by extension, “not only as imposed but also as remediable,” *Bringing the War Home* and *Body Beautiful* present early examples of a meta-critique of gender and subjectivity.²¹⁶

Documentation

Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970–85 (London and New York: Pandora Press, 1987), 132–138; Judith Barry and Sandra Flitterman-Lewis, “Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-making,” *Screen* 21:2 (1980): 35–48; Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women Artists and Ideology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1981); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

²¹³ Martha Rosler, “For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life” (1977/79), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 6.

²¹⁴ Lucy Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth,” *Art in America* (May–June 1976): 77.

²¹⁵ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 75.

²¹⁶ Martha Rosler, “The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman” (1983), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 101.

Rosler's emphasis on the social production of images and the meaning attached to them necessarily includes a reevaluation of the notion of art as the ideally alternative (because fictional, autonomous) sphere to reality. But it also includes an examination of art's traditionally complementary form: documentation. Rosler cites the tradition of European and especially American documentary photography as being among her most important influences.²¹⁷ But rather than merely falling back onto an available historical model of representation, Rosler sought to combine her analysis of art and photography with a performative aesthetic and political purpose. This analysis never remained "intra-aesthetic," which she felt was too limiting a tradition in postwar American art and an ideological burden still carried by Post-Minimalist and Conceptual artists.²¹⁸ Rejecting "photographic conceptualism" as "idealist, formalist" while rediscovering the work of the FSA photographers and the Workers' Film and Photo League, Rosler states that:

representing the social and even employing narrative was our intention...

We were interested in developing an aesthetics of photography that rejected formalist modernism while still believing in the power of the formal elements. We wanted to be documentarians in a way that documentarians hadn't been... As readers of Brecht, we wanted to use obviously theatrical or dramatized sequences or performance elements

²¹⁷ See Rosler in Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," especially pages 33–45.

²¹⁸ I use the term "intra-aesthetic" to denote a modernist-formalist tradition limited to a critical self-examination of form and medium, an "immanent critique," operating under the assumption of and a claim to historical and political autonomy. Discussing the work of John Cage, Rosler articulates these limitations as they extend even to an artist who made a critical contribution to the development of the postwar American avant-garde: "Cage and company taught a quietist attention to the vernacular of everyday life, an attention to perception and sensibility that was inclusive rather than exclusive but that made a radical closure when it came to divining the causes of what entered the perceptual field." "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment" (1984), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 75.

together with more traditional documentary strategies, to use text, irony, absurdity, mixed forms of all types...²¹⁹

The abovementioned 1968 *Life* magazine feature story “As the Bombing Stops—This Girl Tron/The Edge of Peace,” the cover of which (fig. 30) supplies the image for Rosler’s montage *Tron (Amputee)*, is half a written article, half a photographic essay.²²⁰ It tells the story of a twelve-year-old Vietnamese girl who, hit by gunfire from an American helicopter, had the lower half of her leg amputated, and was consequently “struggling to readjust herself.”²²¹ The photos guide the viewer through the girl’s rehabilitation, the fitting of her artificial limb, her brave efforts at walking, of keeping up with her peers on the way to school, refusing to lag behind (figs. 31–35). Tron’s effort is similar to the endeavor sought by the story itself: to find the normal, the human, the empathetic. Unlike Rosler’s montage, which seeks to politicize the image by considering the proximity of the young girl’s story to the public consciousness of liberal America, the *Life* story portrays the circumstances leading to Tron’s injury as accidental. The girl was shot, the accompanying article tells the reader, in a “fire-free zone that Americans had warned everybody to stay out of,” a fact “well publicized in Tron’s village,” an area Tron entered knowingly and despite her sister’s attempt “to dissuade her from going.”²²² The subsequent paragraphs describe her rescue by American soldiers, the small monetary compensation her family received from the U.S. government, and Tron’s return to her village. But despite this dramatically written account of the events, it is the photo essay

²¹⁹ Rosler in Buchloh, “A Conversation with Martha Rosler,” 33.

²²⁰ “The Edge of Peace,” 27–37.

The original photo-stories used here to provide a media-related context for Rosler’s montage-series are directly taken from *Life* magazine. They have not, to my knowledge, been discussed in the literature pertaining to the artist’s work in general or to *Bringing the War Home* in particular.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²²² *Ibid.*, 27, 29.

that carries the greatest empathetical effect: the pictorial witness to the fears and coping, the love and the friendship, the tears and the laughter-despite-it-all actively substitute the personal for the political dimension of war. The viewer deals with this story on an emotional rather than rational level, and the act of viewing is reduced to a private experience rather than a matter of public discourse.

Rosler's "recovery" of the political dimension of the photo-as-document is further evident in her appropriation of a different *Life* story, this one about a group of Marines in Vietnam. The story turns from a military beach assault to the rescue operation of a small wounded child to the portrait of United States Navy Hospitalman "Doc Lucier, who fights his war with a tin washbasin."²²³ The photographic essay is a visual tour de force, a humanist and humanitarian depiction of conduct, mission, and sympathy (examples, figs. 36–40). Rosler's selection of the image of the mother holding her wounded child is in comparison like a film still, dislocating and distancing the original picture from its narrative development from warfare to friendship. The discontinuity serves to provide a relation of a different kind—the visual relocation of the image aims for a Brechtian, pedagogical effect ("the spectator stands outside, studies") rather than for catharsis ("the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience").²²⁴

In *Ballons* (fig. 41) the gap between inside and outside, private and public, stage and floor has been broken, and the sanctity of the home (physical and psychological) has been compromised. The Vietnamese woman carrying her wounded child has made her way from the patio through the living room halfway up the stairs. The doors to the backyard are wide open and the distraught woman seems to be walking directly at the

²²³ "In They Go to the Reality of This War," *Life* (November 27, 1965): 66.

²²⁴ Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre" (1920), reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 37.

viewer. The unsettling continuity between inner and outer space is further emphasized by the juxtaposition of the jungle visible through windows and doors, the camouflage pattern of the armchairs and ottoman, and the bushy, fernlike plants along the stairs.

Ballons critically examines the claim of the editors of *Life*, who state that “one realizes rather quickly that the greatest photo essays have to do with people: with human dilemmas; with human challenges; with human danger and suffering; *with the places that humans can return to as part of their own experience.*”²²⁵ But it is precisely the *lack* of actual experience and its virtual substitution through the stories presented by the mass media that Rosler’s work addresses, exposing the photographic documentary of publications like *Life* magazine as what Rosler calls “combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting—and careerism.”²²⁶ Brecht made the following claim regarding the subversion of emotional identification through the intellectual awareness of the act of empathic viewing: “The text had to be neither moralizing nor sentimental, but put morals and sentimentality on view.”²²⁷ In *Ballons*, the spectator’s lack of experience of and distance from the site and the people who are at the locus of the described experience is made painfully obvious by the visual proximity that Rosler’s montages establish between the space of the viewer and the space of the viewed.

These montages reclaim and reappropriate the documentary practice of contemporary photojournalism by pointing to its selectivity in choosing its images and stories, to its betrayal of the public belief in the objective realism and truthfulness of the photographic picture. But, as discussed below, Rosler’s work is also actively engaged in a

²²⁵ *Great Photographic Essays from Life* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978), 20. Emphasis added.

²²⁶ Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)” (1981), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 178.

²²⁷ Brecht, “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre,” 38.

discourse surrounding the possibilities of photography as documentation in the 1960s and '70s. Many historians and critics at the time felt that the function of the “photograph as witness” as practiced by an American tradition of documentary photography had been compromised.²²⁸

Brecht had been an advocate of reportage as a tool that would enable the theater to instruct as well as entertain. Not only would the documentary depiction of an incident or story present a historical-political alternative to fictionalized accounts of human behavior. It meant adding the dimension of reporting to the audience in the very act of acting. Documenting socio-political realities included self-reference to the medium: “Standing in a free and direct relationship to it, the actor allows his character to speak and move; he presents a report.”²²⁹ The reportage therefore functions on two levels: on that which is being reported and on the very act of reporting itself. Without the latter, the documentary was in danger of being relegated to the same affective distance as the fictional. The documentary, as well as the arts, present, after all, a picture of an event or thing. It is therefore a matter of the quality of the distance between the object and its depiction that, in Brecht’s as well as in Rosler’s view, determine the triangular and historically specific relation between the viewer, the object portrayed, and the means of representation.

To Rosler, who had studied with Walter Rosenblum, a “social realist” photographer and prominent member of the Photo League, the function of American

²²⁸ For a (problematic) account of this change in photography’s function as witness see Gretchen Garner, *Disappearing Witness—Change in Twentieth Century Photography* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

²²⁹ Bertolt Brecht, “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting” (1940), reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 142.

documentary photography had changed with its historical context.²³⁰ The pictures of Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and others argued for the rectification of wrongs and, as Rosler writes in a reevaluation of the history of documentary photography, their photographs of poverty, slum life, and abject conditions of labor relied on an effect of alienation, on de- and re-familiarizing the American public with cognitive incompleteness of its everyday reality: “An insistence, further, that the ordered world of business-as-usual take account of that reality behind those images newly seen, a reality newly elevated into consideration by *being photographed* and thus exemplified and made concrete.”²³¹ According to Rosler, the potential of the documentary photograph resided in its unsettling power, its argument for social reform as part of a social discourse. It depended on a social and political structure that actively sought to right those wrongs it was presented with—whether for reasons of humanist idealism or self-preservation.

But with the abandonment of the utopian and reformist projects of the New Deal, and the absence of an organized Left, so Rosler argues, the documentary had been institutionalized and ritualized: “The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position; especially the latter, now that even the veneer of social concern has dropped away from the upwardly mobile and

²³⁰ Milton Brown, “Introduction,” *Walter Rosenblum—Photographer* (Cambridge M.A.: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1975), n.p.

²³¹ Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 176. This text was first published in Martha Rosler, *3 Works* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981). In “In, Around, and Afterthoughts” the main body of text is juxtaposed with the footnotes appearing next to it on the same page in order to operate like a collage: “The essay was divided into sections, but it also had a second, auxiliary track in the form of extended footnotes, meant to be read in counterpoint to the text.” Rosler, “Afterword,” in the 2006 republication of *3 Works*, 98.

comfortable sectors.”²³² This meant that the practice of documentary photography had to be reconsidered at a time when a considerable number of publications presented its historical and original task as “honest documentation” and the “intent to communicate something important—to make a comment—that will be understood by the viewer.”²³³ It aimed for nothing less than the “understanding of society and man.”²³⁴

The introduction to 1972’s *Social-Documentary Photography in the USA* quotes Roy Stryker, director of the FSA photography project, regarding the difference between the artist and the documentary photographer: “The main difference between the man who is called the pictorialist and the man who is misnamed the documentarian is this: what to the first is either a way to embellish or a purpose sufficient in itself, to the other becomes a means to an end... ‘Documentary’ is an affirmation, not a negation. Certainly the documentary photographer is a realist rather than an escapist...”²³⁵ Rosler was not the only one realizing that the function of such claims to realism had changed. If the social-documentary had been deformed, as Max Kozloff wrote in *The Nation*, from a “revelation of actuality” into “clichés masquerading as protest,” the question was how to recover a practice of documentary-aesthetic engagement that would neither embellish, resign to formalist self-sufficiency, provide escape, nor feign protest.²³⁶

Kozloff’s ruminations on the current state of photography were sparked by John Szarkowski’s *New Documents* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in the spring of

²³² Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 178.

²³³ F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade—Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1972), viii and *Documentary Photography* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1972), 12, respectively.

²³⁴ *Documentary Photography*, 15.

²³⁵ R.J. Doherty, *Social-Documentary Photography in the USA* (Garden City N.Y.: American Photographic Book Publishing, 1976), 9.

²³⁶ Max Kozloff, “Photography,” *The Nation* (May 1, 1967): 571.

1967.²³⁷ Szarkowski, the institution's curator of photography, who organized several influential exhibitions for the museum during the 1960s and '70s, advocated documentary photography's return to the personal. Rosler recalls the situation as follows: "This is the moment in the late 1960s in which the dead weight of social documentary was jettisoned by the art world, thrown overboard from the Museum of Modern Art's ship of state in favor of a group of practices that marked the long retreat from social explanation, advocacy, or politically partisan outrage in favor of another, already existing set of interests: psychologized humanism (or its mirror twin, antihumanism), or universal diagnosis (or its mirror twin, implicit de-identification with Others)."²³⁸ Establishing a genealogy that runs from Walker Evans to Robert Frank to the subjects of the 1967 show—Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, and Lee Friedlander—Szarkowski argued for a reconsideration of the original qualities of American photography, inherent in the photographic apparatus itself. These qualities of democratic access to the camera and its application (cheaper than painting and easier to do) as well as a democratic approach to its subject matter (anything too banal for painting was still good enough to take a snapshot of), disengaged the photographer from overarching and eventually misleading social and ideological concerns.²³⁹

To Szarkowski, the photographer's obligation is to point, to embrace all that is before him as an impartial acknowledgement of reality's diversity without the

²³⁷ The exhibition was not accompanied by a catalogue. For reviews of the *New Documents* exhibition see, for example, "Diane Arbus in *New Documents*," *Arts Magazine* (April 1967): 54 and Jacob Deschin, "People Seen As Curiosity," *The New York Times* (March 5, 1967): 129. Both reviews are mostly descriptive and rely for statements of profundity on the curator's wall texts; yet the latter review's title appropriately captures (unknowingly?) the relation between the museum's visitor and the photographs' subjects.

²³⁸ Martha Rosler, "Afterword," in the 2006 republication of *3 Works*, (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), 98.

²³⁹ For Szarkowski's detailed reconsideration of photographic style and tradition see John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

compulsion to change it. Echoing the above-discussed mid-'60s separation of artists' practice and their political activism, the photographer, so Szarkowski claims, is driven by a public sense of commitment rather than a private one. As the maker of pictures, he is a humanist and fellow citizen, while his political opinion and concern are relegated to the private sphere.²⁴⁰ Szarkowski writes,

Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago... made their pictures in the service of a social cause... to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right... A new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and the frailties of society. They like the real world and its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value—no less precious for being irrational... What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.²⁴¹

Here, Stryker's observation of the difference between the pictorialist and the documentarian has been collapsed (or, as Marcuse would look at it, has come full circle): reality's terrors are embellished as likeable and no longer are they cause for concern but rather for affective and sympathetic wonder.

²⁴⁰ For a discussion of the development of the structure of the public sphere and the enduring assumption of the valid dissociation of private interest and public life see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere—An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (orig. German 1962), (Cambridge M.A.: MIT Press, 1989).

²⁴¹ John Szarkowski, introduction/wall text to the *New Documents* exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 28–May 7, 1967, quoted in Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts," 189.

The question then was: what is the alternative to such an institutionalized, romanticized portrayal of poverty, of labor, of the desolation of urban and rural America, of those differences in class and sex, in ethnicity and geography that make some fall through the cracks, relegated to the margins of a one-dimensional society that demands pictures, artistic or documentary, in order to affirm the very difference on which the social structure is based? How could an artistic photographic practice fulfill the demands for an “opposite or alternative mode of the medium”? Kozloff describes this as follows: “I mean that attitude which will always see spontaneity as inherently compromised, and which leans deliberately and unashamedly toward the controlled and the monumental, admitting, as it does so, the immobilized condition that photography imposes upon its motifs.”²⁴² The idea then is to document causality: the reasons for why one sees certain things a certain way and how these ways of seeing in their personal, ahistorical approach determine the reality of what is depicted.

Photomontage is one of the narrative, analytical documentary forms chosen by Rosler due to its ability to articulate this causality, to acknowledge control and monumentality in order to counter “both anxiety and perverse fascination” and “impotent rage masquerading as varyingly invested snoop sociology” in documentary photography.²⁴³ In a reconsideration of Friedlander’s work (and its reappropriation from Szarkowski’s inscription as a disinterested and relativist appreciation of life’s diversity), Rosler discovers an example of photography’s ability to enable Brechtian insights: “What is required in such work is aggressively conscious, critical intelligence (as opposed to

²⁴² Kozloff, “Photography,” 572.

²⁴³ Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 190–191.

sensibility or expressiveness), signaled by aesthetic distancing.”²⁴⁴ The deliberate use of mirrors, reflections, shadows, and consciously narrative compositions within the single picture lead Rosler to assign to Friedlander’s work a meta-criticality and visual awareness, subverting the assumptions of photography’s disinterestedness and objectivity as reliant on the snapshot’s chance encounter with its object (figs. 42, 43). Yet Friedlander’s “collages” restrict themselves to an important but ultimately formal awareness as they “are not consciously invested with social meaning and may or may not aspire to universal import.”²⁴⁵ This is how Friedlander is an “exemplary modern” photographer.²⁴⁶

Rosler, on the other hand, wanted to “use obviously theatrical or dramatized sequences or performance elements together with more traditional documentary strategies,” to articulate and perform relationships within the work, between the work and the viewer, between the work and its historical context.²⁴⁷ Such theatricality could be found in Dadaist and Surrealist collages and photomontages, which the artist discovered during the 1960s and ’70s. Despite the mainstream reception of collage and montage as art-despite-politics, as disappointed expectations of shock or as the affirmative reproduction of socio-psychological fragmentation, Rosler found in John Heartfield’s work a discourse about representing politics and the politics of representation: “In every photomontage was the implicit message that photography alone cannot ‘tell the truth’ and

²⁴⁴ Martha Rosler, “Lee Friedlander, An Exemplary Modern Photographer” (1975), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 118.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁴⁶ Rosler’s observation regarding the modernist qualities of photography has recently been brought to its extreme conclusion by Michael Fried in an extension of his article “Art and Objecthood,” (*Artforum* [Summer 1967]: 12–23) saving the artistic exploration of medium (again) from any theatrical dimension in favor of “ontological” considerations. See Michael Fried, “Without a Trace: The Art of Thomas Demand,” *Artforum* (March 2005): 199–203 and “Thomas Struth,” *Artforum* (Summer 2005): 322.

²⁴⁷ Cited op.

also the reminder that fact itself is a social construction.”²⁴⁸ This statement recalls Brecht’s thoughts on the appearance of reality as distributed in photographic form by the mass media and the operation of Heartfield’s montages as an investigation into the causes of social inequality:

In the hands of the bourgeoisie, photography has been transformed into a weapon *against* the truth. In reality, the huge amount of visual material, spit out daily by the presses and maintaining an appearance of truthfulness, only serves to obfuscate the circumstances of the crime. The photographic apparatus can lie just as much as the typewriter. The task of the A-I-Z [the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*, a Left-wing working class paper, which published Heartfield’s work frequently] to serve the truth and to re-create the real circumstances of the crime is of unsurpassed importance and brilliantly solved.²⁴⁹

If not quite as euphoric as Brecht, a small number of studies in the late ’60s and ’70s struck a more positive tone regarding photomontage’s historic mission and function. Reevaluating Berlin Dada and the practice of photomontage, these authors emphasized the power of the medium’s visual and intellectual combination and its practitioners’ faith in its reproductive qualities.²⁵⁰ Within such a genealogy, Rosler’s photomontages, like those of the Berlin Dadaists, could be considered to be as “highly articulate,” easily

²⁴⁸ Martha Rosler, “Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations” (1989), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 279.

²⁴⁹ Bertolt Brecht, “Zum zehnjährigen Bestehen der A-I-Z” (1931), reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 20, 43.

²⁵⁰ See, for example, Aaron Scharf, “John Heartfield, Berlin Dada, and the Weapon of Photomontage,” *Studio International* (October 1968): 134–139; “John Heartfield: Manifestos and Related Statements,” *Studio International* (September 1969): 102–104; Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

reproduced and disseminated beyond the confines of artistic expectations, and a “kind of motionless moving picture,” combining simultaneously different viewpoints and subjects, that transcend the narrative and cognitive possibilities of the single-image photograph.²⁵¹

Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home* recalls Heartfield’s 1936 *Das ist das Heil, das sie bringen/This Is the ‘Heil’ They Bring*, published in the *A-I-Z*: Heartfield’s montage combines dead bodies with the flight-show presentation of technological progress and the salvation promised by the Enlightenment as well as National Socialist politics (fig. 44). *Hurra, die Butter ist alle/Hurray, the Butter Is Gone* (1935) (fig. 45) juxtaposes the domestic sphere of the German dining room with the reality of inflation and the Nazis’ rhetoric of steeling the German people’s attitudes and bodies. It spotlights the government’s failure to adequately care for its subjects and the people’s gullibility for propaganda, the power of representation over the tangible reality of human suffering.

In comparison to Heartfield’s, however, Rosler’s montages seem more subtle in form and choice of material. While Heartfield relies on skeletons and skulls, blood and axes, and a sometimes grotesque combination of gestures, facial expressions, and sizes of body parts, Rosler’s images blend in more easily with the visual language of her time. They lack the titles and subtitles of the *A-I-Z* works that sometimes explain, sometimes emphasize, sometimes seemingly contradict what is expressed visually. Heartfield depicted the truly outrageous as irrationally real; Rosler sought to show the opposite ends of everyday normality as determining the ordinary: “In these works, it was important that

²⁵¹ Hans Richter, cited in Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (London: Penguin Press, 1968), 282.

the space itself appear rational and possible; it was my version of the world as a coherent space—‘a place.’”²⁵²

To Rosler, as well as other artists and photographers at the time, it became increasingly clear that this “place” included not only the spaces and objects depicted by the photograph but the visual and ideological environments of their reception. “The meaning of a photograph,” Allan Sekula wrote in 1975, “is inevitably subject to cultural definition,” relying as much on the “myth of photographic truth... as a re-presentation of nature itself” as it does on the context in which it is presented and experienced.²⁵³ Rosler had chosen early on to distribute her photomontages in print media in order to reach a specific audience; the discourse about photography as language, as symbols and significations read within a structure of signs, increasingly informed her work and that of her peers in the beginning of the 1970s.²⁵⁴ Attempting to devise a space of analysis, of

²⁵² Martha Rosler, “Place, Position, Power, Politics” (1994), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 355.

²⁵³ Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” *Artforum* (January 1975): 37.

²⁵⁴ The artist’s review of Susan Meiselas’s 1981 book *Nicaragua* (fig. 46) provides an interesting retrospective insight into Rosler’s own development in documentary practice from photomontage to her deconstruction of photography as a descriptive system to the absence of the visual image in some of her postcard novels (Rosler never abandoned photography, yet this development within her body of work has to be understood as an exploration of the possibilities and limits of photographic representation and documentation, an exploration which allowed the artist to continue to create an engaged representational practice that never fell prey to the relativist tendencies of postmodernism, deconstructivism, and post-structuralism). Martha Rosler, “Wars and Metaphors” (1981), reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*, 245–258. Rosler discusses Susan Meiselas’ book *Nicaragua: June 1978–July 1979* (New York: Doubleday, 1981). To Rosler, Meiselas is a photographer of commitment and conviction, her book being “one of the very few journalistic works that are sympathetic to a popular struggle.” (Rosler, “Wars and Metaphors,” 246.) *Nicaragua*, “a high-budget, high-profile book, put out by the important publisher Pantheon Books, about a leftist revolution in the Third World,” has all the right intentions. Yet, while Meiselas provides “many images that are affecting and convincing... the sympathy the book intends to incite falls short of the political complexities of reconstruction.” (Ibid., 245, 253.) Rosler blames this on the absence of the above-cited coherent space or “place,” which, far from rational and possible—due to its presentation of individual large-format high-gloss color images, separated from captions and an informatively historical accompanying text—resembles a fashion-shoot or art catalogue more than a reportage. “Even the most committed photographer, such as Meiselas, is so far hostage to the interests of editors and publishers and their products, which in the main have little to do with ‘truth’ but which willingly merchandise a nihilistic fascination with death, death, and more death, to help us steer a course between intolerable personal anxiety and its alternative numbness.” Ibid., 258. Even though this text by Rosler expresses the influence of a climate of determinist Marxism (see the popularity of Louis Althusser’s writings during the early 1980s)

“articulating the complexities of social relations” as well as the complexities of their representation, led Rosler to *The Bowery In Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*.²⁵⁵ The work was first exhibited as an installation in 1974–75 and subsequently distributed in book form.²⁵⁶

The artist calls *The Bowery* “a work of refusal.”²⁵⁷ The title, which Rosler considers to be part of the work, refers the viewer to a twofold inadequacy: that of the pictorial and textual descriptions of a specific social space and that of the therein-contained “humanist notion of the commensurability between representation and experience.”²⁵⁸ *The Bowery* consists of twenty-one black-and-white photographs of New York’s skid row, paired with photos of text (fig. 47). The pictures taken on the Bowery show littered sidewalks and padlocked doors, boarded-up facades and decrepit shop windows (figs. 48–50). They do not contain any people and the only signs of human presence are empty liquor bottles and cigarette packs lying in the gutter and leaning against walls. Equally void of subjects are the accompanying panels of text that are restricted to adjectives and proverbial descriptions of the Bowery’s nightly inhabitants—such as “wino,” “rubbydub,” and “barrelhouse bum”—and of alcohol-induced conditions—“stewed,” “pickled,” and “out like a light” among many others (figs. 51–53). The work is “not defiant anti-humanism” but an articulation of the “impoverishment of

and a rather dystopian belief in the production of false consciousness by the ideological apparatus and its institutions, it is nonetheless instructive regarding the artist’s struggle to chart that place of critical artistic practice while never dismissing overt political commitment as naive, nostalgic or infantile. The absence of a space for self-reference, of narrating the act of narration, relegates *Nicaragua* to a quasi-illusionist, non-Brechtian sphere of visual consumption.

²⁵⁵ Martha Rosler, “Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations,” 279.

²⁵⁶ Unfortunately neither the artist, nor her gallery, nor any other sources I consulted has any record of where this installation was first shown. The work was first published in Rosler, *3 Works*.

²⁵⁷ Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 190–191.

²⁵⁸ Rosler in Buchloh, “A Conversation with Martha Rosler,” 44.

representational strategies.”²⁵⁹ The photographs are relatively small in size and their juxtaposition with the text just barely curb the “tourism” that Rosler finds in so much documentary photography. The reading of text and pictures, of text as pictures and pictures as text reminds the viewer of the action of mapping and naming. The search for the bum that goes with the bottle, the audience’s object of empathy, remains conspicuously absent, while the suspended adjectives turn the viewer into the speaker and the description into the act of giving form. The list of words and the array of pictures are an act of metonymy, a way of describing by adding signs but without ever really approaching completion. Metonymy avoids the metaphorical stand-in, the transformation, the finite act of making fully comprehensible. Discussing *The Bowery*, Sekula puts it this way: “The simple listings of names for drunks and drunkenness suggests both the signifying richness of the metaphor as well as its referential poverty, the failure of metaphor to ‘encompass,’ to explain adequately, the material reality to which it refers.”²⁶⁰ The public social spaces of the Bowery and of art articulate their complexity as separate entities and in relation to one another. Just as the Bowery is more than can be represented in the pictures and text, the artwork is more than the ability to transform public experiences into private ones.

The Bowery reflects a specific reading of Brecht’s aesthetic theory during the 1970s. Following the utopian and pleasurable notions of resistance and revolution during the late 1960s, many artists and writers now turned to Brecht as an example of a purely rational display of ideological and cultural mechanisms of production. Brecht was cast as a cold, empirical Marxist whose dissecting distanciation aimed to rid art of all falsifying

²⁵⁹ Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 191–194.

²⁶⁰ Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Photography,” *The Massachusetts Review* (1978): 239.

illusionist traces as well as all forms of pleasure on behalf of the viewer. Brechtian theater became a model of scientific analysis. By Roland Barthes' own account, his widely influential work in Structuralism had its origins in Brecht.²⁶¹ Victor Burgin's 1974 treatise on "Photographic Practice and Art Theory" begins with Brecht's famous observation that "a photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions," then proceeds to lead its readers through a tedious exercise in the semiotics of photographic representation with the help of formulas, graphs, and diagrams, Barthes, Saussure, and Metz.²⁶² Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," though not mentioning Brecht directly, was published in the self-declared Brechtian British journal *Screen* in 1975. It demands the "destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon" leading to the liberation of "the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment."²⁶³

The Bowery was originally conceived as an installation, hence to be shown to an art audience. It is thus easy to mistake the piece as a conceptualist meditation on the impossibility and bankruptcy of creating a valid form of documentary-aesthetic engagement that could productively inform a public understanding of poverty, alcoholism, and homelessness and its representation. *The Bowery* certainly can be said to

²⁶¹ Roland Barthes, "Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity," in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 211–222. In this text, Barthes discusses Brecht, not, as expected, Saussure as the intellectual foundation for his structuralist work. The relation between Barthes' readings of Brecht and its influence on American postwar art will be discussed in the next chapter.

²⁶² The quote is from Brecht's musings on film ("Über Film," written in 1932–33), cited in Victor Burgin, "Photographic Practice and Art Theory" (1974), reprinted in *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan Education, 1982), 39. The cover photograph of Burgin's book shows a camera lying on a pile of books including Victor Shklovsky's *La Marche de Cheval*, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, and Walter Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht*. It is framed by, to the left, Robert Frank's *The Americans* and, to the right, a copy of the *New Left Review*.

²⁶³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1973 and published in 1975 in *Screen*), reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 15, 26.

lack a sense of visual pleasure, an accessibility via empathy, beauty or humor.²⁶⁴ Yet, despite or because of its provision of a space for the Brechtian analysis of the complexities of representation and identification, it articulates what Rosler calls “the germ of another documentary,” committed to the exposure of social as well as cultural abuses, dedicated to representation and to being an embodiment of social struggle—“a radical documentary.”²⁶⁵ *The Bowery* denies pleasure in favor of analysis, in favor of what Sekula termed “the critical anti-naturalism of Brecht” in Rosler’s work, which through its “attention to language cuts against the pornography of the ‘direct’ representation of misery.” This denial (which might result in what some writers on Brecht have called “pleasure through knowledge”) has kept and continues to keep Rosler’s photographic documentaries out of the art-historical company of Larry Clark and Nan Goldin, William Eggleston and Philip-Lorca Dicorcia.²⁶⁶

Rejecting the subjectivist strand of the history of documentary photography in the U.S., Rosler found herself instead in the company of artists such as Sekula and Fred Lonidier, Philip Steinmetz and Eleanor Antin, Jeff Wall and John Baldessari.²⁶⁷ For many

²⁶⁴ The artist herself referred to the project as intending a “structural critique.” Rosler in Buchloh, “A Conversation with Martha Rosler,” 42. The influence of structuralism as a scientific approach to artistic production on American art in the late 1960s and early ’70s will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.

²⁶⁵ Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 196.

²⁶⁶ It is, for example, telling that Rosler’s work is not included or mentioned in Peter Galassi’s MoMA exhibition and catalogue *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry Abrams, 1991). I assume that Rosler’s work is either part of what Galassi describes as the postmodernist dismissal of photography’s prior achievements that “tended to poison the interpretation of contemporary photography, . . . narrowing it to an illustration of theory,” or part of the direct, politically outward directed legacy of FSA photography—a type of photographic practice which the artists chosen by Gallasi have transformed from a social study to a personal and more philosophical observation. (Ibid., 15) The curator writes, “The pictures collected here are full of delight and dilemma for the eye and for the mind, full of wit and felling, full of experience. But it would defeat them to claim that they make sense of life. Photography isn’t perfect, but then life isn’t either.” Ibid., 23. Once again, the avant-garde is released, as if by historical necessity, from critical and analytical commitment.

²⁶⁷ Regarding the influence of Robert Frank’s 1958 *The Americans*, Rosler writes, “With its beat preference for peripatetic individualism, Frank’s work ushered in the overwhelming subjectivization of street

artists during the 1960s, photography evolved from a pictorial support for painting (as in Baldessari's work) and the documentation of conceptual practices that turned ephemeral, non-site practices into subjects of art critical discourse (as in Vito Acconci's performances and Lawrence Weiner's deconstruction of sculpture) to an exploration of the photographic medium as a tool for the production of social and cultural meaning and as a means of dismantling the hegemony of modernist-formalist art.

Sekula's work mirrors this development from photography as documentation to 'photographic documentation as critical investigation': while the camera served as a recording device for the 1972 anti-consumerist theft-and-destruction action like *Meat Mass*—later labeled as “artistic self-aggrandizement” by means of “petty criminal, transient and romantic disguises”—it became a self-reflective and narrative tool for the 1973 series *Aerospace Folktales* (figs. 51–55).²⁶⁸ The complexity of the labor conditions in the aerospace industry, its effects on the domestic sphere, as well as the problems depicting these complexities artistically, are embodied in the work's very form.²⁶⁹

photography that still covers its spectrum of tendencies and that marks most other types of photography as well.” Rosler, “Wars and Metaphors,” 252.

²⁶⁸ Sekula in Debra Risberg, “Imaginary Economies. An Interview with Allan Sekula”, *Dismal Science. Photo Works 1972–1996* (Normal: University Galleries, Illinois State University, 1999), 240.

²⁶⁹ First shown in 1973 as an installation at the University of California in San Diego (and subsequently as a photocopied version in book form as well as slide lectures), *Aerospace Folktales*, like Rosler's *Bowery*, consists of several levels and layers of representation. More than fifty photographs are hung in narrative sequence along the wall, accompanied by sometimes descriptive, sometimes referential text, as well as three recorded voices speaking simultaneously and continuously in the background. The voices turn out to be those of Sekula's mother, complementing the pictures and texts with anecdotes about the family's domestic concerns at the time the photographs were taken, his father (an unemployed Lockheed engineer), who in the voice of a political analyst talks about pertinent economic and political issues, and the artist himself, didactically adding to the viewer's understanding of the work of art in relation to other forms of production. Sekula's commentary begins, “This art here is about other people's art. That is the art I grew up with. Generally speaking it's white-collar art. It's lower-level technocrat art. It's Southern California aerospace engineer art.” Allan Sekula, “A Commentary,” spoken text accompanying *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), reprinted in Sabina Breitwieser (ed.), *Allan Sekula—Performance Under Working Conditions*, (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2003), 157. The fusion and deliberate confusion of several narrative levels bespeaks the artist's attempt to shed light on the operations of the public and the private, the political and the personal, labor and art. Sekula writes, “As Max Horkheimer has noted, unemployment blurs the boundaries between the private and the social. Private life becomes a mere waiting for work, just, I might

Combining documentary and fictional elements, a personal experience expanded to achieve a degree of typicality, *Aerospace Folktales*, like Rosler's work, is, in Sekula's words, "a failure of petit-bourgeois optimism."²⁷⁰ Whether embodied by cultural gratification in the face of real-life crises or by the certainties offered through class identifications, here "ideology fails to provide a 'rational' and consoling interpretation of the world."²⁷¹

Much of the Brechtian distancing in *The Bowery* and *Aerospace Folktales* resides with the foiled expectations of what is and is not appropriate to aesthetic consideration and how it is rendered visually. The simultaneous use of text and photographs in art as an exercise in seeing is a typically Brechtian device.²⁷² The viewer has to "labor," make his way through the work rather than consume it passively. The act of reading implies an activation of the perceptual relation between viewer and work, extending the actual "reading" of the text or caption to the images—understanding and

add, as work is increasingly a mode of waiting for life, for a delayed gratification." "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Photography," 251. This attests to the conditions of labor as much as it does to the conditions of art. Working, or, as in this case, not working, has its domestic and public repercussions, fulfilling private needs and social expectations. *Aerospace Folktales* is as much a work of refusal as the *Bowery*, resisting to supply what Marcuse calls the "affirmative character of culture." (Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," essay [1937], reprinted in Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, translated by Jeremy Shapiro [Boston: Beacon Press, 1968], 88–133) And when Sekula refers to his father's vocation as art, he is not so much elevating the artist's work to a somewhat glorified version of proletarian labor, even though this comparison provides a demystifying look at artistic production, but makes the generally accepted division of work and art, social and cultural productivity, the expectations residing with notions of craft and creation subject to inquiry. (On the subject of art as labor, art as work, see Helen Molesworth [ed.], *Work Ethic* [University Park P.A.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003].)

²⁷⁰ Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Photography," 249.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² In "The Literalization of the Theater" Brecht writes about the method of juxtaposing acting and text on stage: "The screens on which the titles of each scene are projected are a primitive attempt at literalizing the theater. This literalization of the theater needs to be developed to the utmost degree, as in general does the literalizing of all public occasions. Literalizing entails punctuating 'representation' with 'formulation'; gives the theater the possibility of making contact with other institutions for intellectual activities... Some exercise in complex seeing is needed—though it is perhaps more important to think above the stream than to think in the stream." Bertolt Brecht, "The Literalization of the Theater" (1931), reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 43–44.

combining them as symbols and referrals.²⁷³ Rosler's colleagues and friends Philip Steinmetz and Fred Lonidier rely on the same strategy of text-image distancing and complementation. Steinmetz's 1976 *Somebody's Making a Mistake* consists of six photo albums containing family photographs (fig. 59). Arranged by themes such as "Occasions" and "Celebrations," the images are juxtaposed with titles and quotes from commentaries by members of Steinmetz's family upon being presented with the pictures of themselves. The photos range from the posed to the accidental to the deliberately invasive, while the texts supplement, reiterate or contradict the presented visual information. This somewhat objectifies the act of viewing, as the work's audience is relegated to observe not only the pictures but their naming and qualification by the very subjects of the photographs themselves. Here, as in Brecht's plays, the actors report on their acting.

Sekula presents Fred Lonidier's *Health and Safety Game* (1976) (fig. 60) alongside Rosler's *Bowery* and Steinmetz' *Somebody's Making a Mistake* as examples of works by artists who "openly bracket their photographs with language, using texts to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves."²⁷⁴ Lonidier's compilation of photographs of injuries inflicted by unsafe or strenuous labor conditions (oil burns, broken backs, etc.) are shown alongside workers' testimonies and histories (in video and written transcript) and, in some cases, additional research and commentary on the artist's part. When Sekula describes the work as being "about the 'handling' of industrial injury and disease by

²⁷³ At the end of his essay on "Photographic Practice and Art Theory," Burgin returns to Brecht via Walter Benjamin. The latter agrees with Brecht's remark about the imputed intrinsic inadequacy of photography and adds, "At this point, the caption must step in, thereby creating a photography which literalizes the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate." Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" (1931), reprinted in *Screen* (Spring 1972): 5–26, cited in Burgin, "Photographic Practice and Art Theory," 51.

²⁷⁴ Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Photography," 238.

corporate capitalism,” here, again, the “handling” refers as much to the subject matter as it does to their public and artistic representation.²⁷⁵

Whether to critique the institution from the inside and thereby broaden the norms of acceptable artistic media, contents, and formats, or whether to make the work “public,” distribute it among a larger viewership (often without acknowledging the multiple nature of a plurality of publics as well as the structural transformation of the public sphere as a potential site for inclusive critical discourse and social change), artists like Rosler produced and exhibited their projects in a variety of formats and varying venues. While *Bringing the War Home* and *Beauty Knows No Pain* were not shown as independent artworks until decades after their original publication and distribution in underground print media, *The Bowery* was exhibited as an installation and published as part of a book. The book with the title *3 Works* further includes the project “The Restoration of High Culture in Chile” (which, also consisting of photographs and texts, was shown as a gallery installation with handouts in 1977 and subsequently published as a text-only version in *The Minnesota Review*), and the artist’s essay “In, Around, and Afterthoughts:

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 245. On the occasion of the work’s exhibition at the Long Beach Museum in 1976 along with Steinmetz’ *Somebody’s Making a Mistake*, Peter Frank in his review for *Art in America* points to *The Health and Safety Game*’s documentary dimension as the potential subversion of art-institutional conventions while acknowledging the format’s self-imposed limits: “Such content, in an art museum, can still jar people. But unfortunately, people’s attention can be lost through boredom, impatience and the physical discomfort of eyestrain and sore feet. In print, *The Health and Safety Game* would be permanently available, have a wider audience, and be easier to read.” Peter Frank, “Fred Lonidier, Philip Steinmetz at the Long Beach Museum,” *Art in America* (July–August 1976): 113. Even though Frank gives very little credit to the viewer’s physical and intellectual stamina and to the work’s ability to capture its audience’s prolonged attention, while at the same time reinscribing the documentary’s appropriate place in print publication rather than in an art setting, these observations refer to some very important considerations considering audience and site that occupied many artists at the time. In this respect one could mention the various attempts made by artists working in what came to be called Earthworks and Land Art, Institutional Critique and Conceptual Art, and the beginnings of “site-specific” and Public Art, all of which literally and/or in form and content, medium and audience sought to expand and transcend the boundaries of the art institution.

On Documentary Photography.”²⁷⁶ Rosler’s *McTowersMaid* and *Tijuana Maid* regarding issues of labor, immigration, and gender stereotypes, the projects closest in content to those of Sekula and Lonidier, appeared first as “postcard novels” in 1975 and were then published in book form as *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization* in 1978.²⁷⁷

McTowersMaid is written from the perspective of a hamburger unwrapper at a fast food chain (“My job was to unwrap the frozen patties in the morning and let them thaw just enough to be pulled apart.”) (fig. 61).²⁷⁸ Each postcard presents a short, typed text recalling a day or event in the life of a female worker in the fast food industry.

McTowersMaid addresses the conditions of labor and the possibility of socio-economic advancement by one’s own means and power (through work and imagination). It also looks at the fast food restaurant as the site of culinary democratization and availability of quality cooking. As an investigation into the demands placed on a female worker, *McTowersMaid* is based on the testimony of actual restaurant employees. The novel’s seriality and use of text recall related practices at the time like Margaret Harrison, Kay

²⁷⁶ Martha Rosler, “The Restoration of High Culture in Chile” *Minnesota Review* (Spring 1979): n.p.. This work, consisting of photographs of record covers and exotic fish and an accompanying story of a visit to Tijuana, addresses the cultural consequences and effects of the 1973 fascist coup in Chile. Unfortunately neither the artist, nor her gallery, nor any other sources I consulted has any record of where this work was first exhibited.

²⁷⁷ Martha Rosler, *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization* (New York: Printed Matter, 1978). The terms “postcard novel” and “food novel” are Rosler’s. The first part of this trilogy, *A Budding Gourmet*, 1973, was Rosler’s second postcard work (turned into a black-and-white video the following year). The piece is entirely text-based and written from the perspective of a woman wishing to become a gourmet cook and connoisseur of foreign foods in an attempt to elevate her family’s social standing. *A Budding Gourmet* consists of the durational juxtaposition of oddly disparate, yet complementary perspectives, ranging from culinary appreciations and a seemingly genuine interest in foreign cultures to an overt primitivism and racist classification of ethnic traditions. The last postcard ends with a note on cultural neo-colonization that expands beyond the scope of food preparation. With regard to the “breeding” that she hopes will be visible in her children’s behavior, the budding gourmet is thankful for the advantages of living in America and the chance of allowing her family to be exposed to “the fine things of other cultures”: “We can take the best of all times and all places and make them our own.” Without the above-cited “sense of the social,” the gourmet’s quest for her own social advancement turns into a simplified occupation and colonization in the name of opportunity and equality. Rosler, “A Budding Gourmet,” postcard #12, in *ibid.*

²⁷⁸ Martha Rosler, “McTowersMaid,” postcard #1, reprinted in *ibid.*

Hunt, and Mary Kelly's 1973–75 *Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labor in Industry* (fig. 62, 63). Conceived and shown as an installation rooted in (British) working-class experience, *Women & Work* juxtaposes photographs of women at work, schedules of their daily activities, including domestic work such as cleaning the house, shopping, and looking after the children, and excerpts of labor laws and statistical information about employment in the factory to create a complex portrait of the demands and inequities of female labor. By comparison, *McTowersMaid* dispenses with images altogether, fuses real-life testimonies into a composite narrative, and expands the work's duration afforded by the serial form over the frame of several weeks, with the 14 postcards being sent out every few days.²⁷⁹ The complete absence of images increases the effect of distancing, as does the mail format.²⁸⁰

Like the work of Sekula, Lonidier, and the collaboration of Harrison, Hunt, and Kelly, *McTowersMaid* reports on the conditions of modern day labor and reflects on the possibilities and pitfalls of its representation, aiming to avoid nostalgia, social

²⁷⁹ For a discussion of Rosler's later video pieces concerning the art of labor and the labor of art in comparison to performances by Mierle Laderman Ukeles and other women artists, see Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* (Spring 2000): 71–97 and Molesworth (ed.), *Work Ethic*, catalogue accompanying the exhibition of the same title presented at The Baltimore Museum of Art from October 12, 2003, to January 11, 2004, and at the Des Moines Center for the Arts from May 15 to August 1, 2004.

²⁸⁰ In "A Note on One Aspect of Form," Rosler explains her decision to use the serial postcard. The reader would receive one card every few days, leaving him or her with an interval of time in between each: "There was a lot of time—and mental space—around each installment of these novels, time in which the communication could unfold and reverberate." "A Note on One Aspect of Form," *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization*. The absence of images and the duration of the project made it difficult for the work to be easily consumed and put aside; it is persistent and demands attention and energy. And it holds at least the possibility of an exchange between artist and audience as in all cases the cards are stamped with a return address. The audience for these postcard works was limited (the series consisted of 14 cards, one sent out every few days to approximately 325 people), maybe even somewhat random, yet transcending the limits of an assumed art world demographic. It seems as if the artist meant to find a ground between the institutional confines of the photo-text installation of *The Bowery* and the broader dissemination of *Bringing the War Home* and *Beauty Knows No Pain*: "The mailing list for each work was somewhat different. Friends, acquaintances, people whose names I knew and to whom I wanted to send the cards—some in art circles, some not. I added names given to me... The lists were very limited. The postcards were certainly not a work of mass address." Rosler in Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October* 17 [Summer 1981]: 77.

melodrama, and the aestheticization of politics. In addition, Rosler's piece also involves a reflection on the notion of change: of political change through action and its reduction to a fantastic gesture of rebellion, which relates as much to the unfolding story of *McTowersMaid* as it does to the artist's skepticism concerning the revolutionary potential of art. In this food novel, the *maid* contemplates the origins and artificiality of the food served while she climbs her way up the corporate ladder (from hamburger unwrapper to patty cook). The routine is as redundant and physically harmful as the menu, the staff as lonely and gullible as their guests. Apart from the *maid*, nobody asks about the contents of the food or is interested in the harmful chemicals used to preserve and prepare it. As a woman, the protagonist is expected to be creative as a domestic cook, as a wife and mother, but McTowers wants her to stick to the routine. All the food is the same, as is the pay, the uniforms, the social interactions. But the *maid* turns into a renegade and adds spices, sauces, and finally drugs ("Would you like to take a trip with your dinner?") making "cooksburgers" and "flyburgers" instead of regular McTowersburgers.²⁸¹ The changes accumulate as other cooks and unwrappers join in and a revolution is underway, exchanging frozen ingredients for fresh ones, asking the customers what they'd like to eat, abolishing differences in rank and pay among the restaurant workers, and finally kidnapping the manager in preparation to fight corporate powers. The novel's emphasis on the gendered expectations placed upon the female protagonist is slight, yet within the context of feminist art and the Women's Liberation Movement the question arises whether the corporate repression of the assumed, gender-determined culinary expertise leads to the worker's alienation and eventually a (mini-) revolution? Or is it the very

²⁸¹ Rosler, "McTowers Maid," postcard #8, reprinted in *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization*.

difference between the creative, feminine abilities and the sterile, repetitive assignments of corporate labor that is the origin of the *maid*'s subversive powers?

This serial “novel” addresses the ambiguities of change as it occurs (or is possible) on various levels. The story of McTowers’ liberation is a Brechtian parable about the impending revolution of the late 1960s. It links notions of class and gender, industry and institution, individual and social change, and confronts the reader with the gaining momentum of this change until the revolutionary project has mutated and seems to have reached its limits. It has transformed practical, yet small and seemingly insignificant actions into an omnipotent dream of winning an impossible fight. The reader as well as the customer are simultaneously swept along in the wake of the change’s euphoria and alienated by the increasingly fantastical dimension of the struggle and the plausibility of its outcome. Part of the final postcard reads: “The manager was obdurate, of course. We are now trying to re-educate him. Meanwhile we have taken over his other McTowers franchises and his Freez-Frap. We raided his files and finally found out the name of the company that owns McTowers: the giant agrglomerate Corporate Foods. We are preparing to fight. Workers’ power!”²⁸² As the gestures become grander and address the true sources of power and its abuse, the sweeping mission is necessarily depersonalized and further unwilling to differentiate internally, among members of the staff as well as between individual customers.

The fragmented form and duration of *McTowersMaid* echoes as well as resists the work’s content: the labor and initial changes seem slow and exhausting, while the surge toward revolutionary transformation is rapid and energizing. The documentation of the

²⁸² Rosler, “McTowersMaid,” postcard #14, reprinted in *ibid.*

maid's experiences in the form of a serial, reproduced text not only expands the notion of artistic production beyond traditional boundaries of medium and exhibition, address and audience, but endows the work with an aesthetic distance and documentary self-referentiality based on the abstracting function of the written word.

The portrayal of “workers’ power” and especially that of foreign or immigrant workers, is the subject of Rosler’s *Tijuana Maid* (fig. 64). Unlike the utopian notion of a proletarian revolution as articulated in *McTowersMaid*, this postcard and food novel is concerned with the power exerted *over* its protagonist rather than with the possibility of any emancipatory action.²⁸³ The distancing effect of *Tijuana Maid* is even greater, since it is in Spanish (*Service* contains an English translation). Its recipients, if not fluent in Spanish, were therefore forced to either ignore the text (and accept their ignorance) or attempt to adopt and understand a foreign language and, by extension, culture, which happens to be the novel’s subject matter. *Tijuana Maid* is based on texts and recipes found in cookbooks and magazines and/or on stories as told to the artist by various women. The protagonist is a Mexican mother of two who illegally crosses the border in order to work as a cook and housekeeper for various Southern California families. She endures low and unreliable pay, ruthless traffickers at the border, the separation from her family, as well as several cases of sexual harassment by the families’ fathers. Her English is poor and the Spanish of her employers even worse but most of the households own the *Home Maid Spanish Cook Book*. This book is written in English and Spanish in order to “not teach the Mexican or Spanish maid how to make her own native dishes. She can do that to perfection and without your help. We want her to help YOU in the kitchen. To do

²⁸³ *Tijuana Maid* consists of 11 cards at a print run of approximately 350, sent out over the course of several weeks. Regarding audience, scope, and form, see note 157.

things YOUR way.”²⁸⁴ The book contains drawings of the American kitchen and its utensils accompanied by a description in Spanish as well as recipes for typical American foods such as meatloaf and apple pie. The postcards confront the viewer with his or her own curiosities about what happens next, with an interest in the exotic transformation of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich recipe when translated into Spanish, and with a feeling of empathy for the nameless maid’s hardship.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Quoted in “Tijuana Maid,” postcard #3, in *ibid.*

²⁸⁵ This curiosity in and empathy with the subjects of labor recalls the work of Lewis Hine and, more recently and contemporary with Rosler’s, the photography of Sebastião Salgado. Hine’s photographic depictions of “women at work” (fig. 65) and of labor in general function, as has been argued, on two levels: on a documentary and on a mystical expressionist one. (See Jonathan L. Doherty [ed.], *Women at Work—153 Photographs by Lewis W. Hine* [New York: Dover Publications, 1981] and Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” *Artforum* [January 1975]: 36–45.) The former turns the photograph into what Allan Sekula, with regard to Hine’s work, calls “an explicit political utterance.” Determined by the context and place of its publication in “liberal-reformist social work journals” and “illustrated pamphlets,” the image is “embedded in a complex political argument about the influx of aliens, cheap labor, ghetto housing and sanitation, the teaching of English, and so on.” “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” 43–44. The mystical and spiritual dimension of Hine’s pictures, the one that makes them vulnerable to appropriation by “bourgeois aesthetic discourse,” is the rhetoric of the dignity and the humanity of the oppressed. *Ibid.*, 45. They share with Salgado’s images of a modernized global working class (figs. 66–68) a reference to Catholic iconography, or what, in a critical review of Salgado’s 1993 photo book *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age*, has been referred to as “a theology of work; a Christology of the suffering body—a propensity, that is, toward what Barthes has called the ‘eternal aesthetics of laborious gestures.’” Michael Watts and Iain Boal, “Working-Class Heroes,” *Transition* (1995): 107. Review of Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age* (New York: Aperture, 1993). Some of the images collected in *Workers* as well as Salgado’s other photo books, including *Other Americas* (about the dispossessed of the Americas) and *Sahel: Man in Distress* (about the casualties of African famine) have appeared in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, and have therefore, like Hine’s, been published within the context of world affairs. Sebastião Salgado, *Other Americas* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) and Salgado, *Sahel: Man in Distress* (New York: Aperture, 1986). Yet, it remains questionable how complex (not complex enough, or maybe even too complex due to the quantity and distance of geo-political events?) the political argument of these publications really is, enabling Salgado’s images to be the abovementioned explicit political utterance. The photographs of toiling railroad men and coal dust encrusted miners gain their greatest visibility and attention through their publication and exhibition as a collected body of work.

Workers comprises almost 400 pages of photographs taken over several years (Salgado started working as a photographer in the early 1970s), some in the shipyards and construction sites of the Western hemisphere, most in the mines and factories of the Third World. But even when the places and the workers’ appearances look familiar, they are not. The proletariat and manual hard labor has, to the Western viewer, become an unknown, just as Rosler’s *Tijuana Maid* is wholly other to her employers despite their social and geographical proximity. While Salgado certainly gives a visual presence to his otherwise invisible subjects, his publication lacks a historical, political, and self-referential frame to contextualize his beautiful and moving pictures. As his reviewers observe, Salgado is radical in his deployment of photographic content but conventional in form. Where Salgado’s work is Catholic in iconography, Rosler’s verges on the protestant, the iconoclast. As works of art, the postcard novels seem austere and run the danger of losing a (visually) alluring component that supplies the foundation for an effective distancing—a problem

Rosler's work does not only position itself in relation to a liberalist appropriation of documentary photography but also maneuvers in relation to a Leftist romanticization of the Third World. Many of the issues grouped under the New Left's umbrella evolved into abbreviated slogans: not untrue but hardly complete or insightful. As many women critiqued the appropriation and misrepresentation of their agenda within the Movement, the same could be said for the New Left's "third-worldism" as the search for revolutionary examples and a proletarian potential transgressed national boundaries. Fredric Jameson calls this the emergence of a crisis in "the classical conception of social class."²⁸⁶ This led to the search for a new revolutionary agent since the first world proletariat is either de facto defunct, as much labor is outsourced to other countries, or interested in unionized reform rather than the radical transformation of all social structures. Within this crisis, those seeking new alliances made the mistake of a "mythical simplification" that portrayed the third world in the '60s as a global phenomenon of liberation, while in fact the process of decolonization went hand in hand with an economic neo-colonialism.²⁸⁷ Some Western revolutionaries who "slid into romance with the other side" neglected the circumstances of new and complex

somewhat curbed by the fact that these documentaries are presented in a fictionalized narrative. Yet the dramatic curiosity and tension established within the story and through its mailed distribution over the course of several weeks leads to a related problem. As Hine's and Salgado's images are said to lose their potential for political and intellectual intervention when taken out of the original context of their publication in journals and magazines, the question is how the function of Rosler's work changes when published in the form of a book or shown as an art exhibition. Does it retain its complexity due to its juxtaposition with other works and essays (as in *3 Works and Service*)? Do these re-presentations of collages, montages, and postcard novels document the works' initial task, while at the same time mourning its limits? Are the works themselves complex enough in form and content to maintain their critical potential?

²⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," in Sohnya Sayres, et al. (eds.), *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 181.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

dependencies and in turn could be accused of a related kind of neo-colonialism—the occupation of various marginalized groups (national and international) and the exploitation and simplification of their struggle for one’s own political purposes, if unintentionally so.²⁸⁸ A common enemy, the United States as a political and cultural power, seemed to unite the New Left with women and blacks, the Vietnamese and the Cubans. But this “too-uncomplicated endorsement of Third World revolutions” came at a high cost: it further alienated the American public from the goals of progressive politics and it alienated the allies.²⁸⁹

The *Tijuana Maid* contemplates her situation and comes to the realization that while she is being exploited and objectified, never allowed to integrate either as an American or a Mexican, she is in a position that is financially far better than that of many Mexicans working in Mexico. This, as a collage of various angles and positions on behalf of the maid as well as the reader, carries the work into a broader political sphere: not only does it widen the public sphere of cultural discourse to include the concerns of a usually neglected demographic but furthermore addresses an ethical ambiguity. Yes, the novel indicates, the maid is able to help herself, has an opportunity to escape the poverty of her homeland, might even end up with a family that will treat her well and let her bring her children. But on the other hand, as the personal becomes the political and extends beyond our compassion for the individual situation, this scenario is merely a way to temporarily heal the symptoms but not the causes of a larger inequality between two economic, political, and national systems, which are defined by this dependency. In addition, as the last postcard tells us, the chances of a happy ending for our maid are slim at best. Both as

²⁸⁸ Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, 261.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

an account of a personal story and as a parable, *Tijuana Maid* denies its audience's demand for closure. The work of art and the politics portrayed therein point to their own traditionally cathartic function by frustrating it. In both form and content, the collage as document denies resolution through distance, violates our social and aesthetic expectations, and records the way in which we colonize representations in order to adjust them to fit our view of the world.

Social(-ist) Realism

In a recent exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York, examples of *Bringing the War Home* were exhibited alongside the work of Nancy Spero and a number of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American artists.²⁹⁰ Though shown in separate but adjacent buildings, the exhibition juxtaposed Rosler's photomontages with drawings made by Vietnamese soldiers during the war and reportage drawings produced by professional artists sent by the Vietnamese government to cover life on the front.²⁹¹ Though the work of the Vietnamese artists is quite obviously Socialist Realist in the conventional sense, the curators' argument regarding the proximity of the American and the Vietnamese perspectives and practices is curiously empathetic, claiming that they inhabit a "shared

²⁹⁰ *Persistent Vestiges—Drawing from the American Vietnam War* was on exhibit at the Drawing Center from November 5, 2005–February 11, 2006. A catalog edited by the then-director of the Drawing Center Catherine de Zegher was published by the institution in the spring of 2006. De Zegher left her job over the controversy of the Drawing Center's relocation to the former World Trade Center site as part of a new cultural complex amid accusations made by conservative groups that the art institution had exhibited works critical of the war in Iraq.

²⁹¹ The works by artists such as Vu Giang Huong (fig. 69) and Quang Tho (fig. 70) rarely depict scenes of battle or violence but focus on themes of camaraderie and congeniality, on everyday events such as the writing of letters and the crossing of a river, portraits of individual soldiers and of soldiers in nature. Some have a more overtly propagandistic content such as Truong Hieu's *The Front Is Waiting for You* (1965) (fig. 71) or his Futurist-dynamic *Entering Enemy Base* (1972) (fig. 72). Others claim a more seemingly neutral or incidental position such as Nguyen Van Da's *Ferrying the Army to the South* (1970) (fig. 73) or Nguyen Thu's *Working Together* (1964) (fig. 74). The sketchiness of many of these depictions produce a somewhat anti-illusionist effect, yet, at least to the Western eye, renders the works spectacular in its association with the rush and uncertainty of the rebel soldier and the primitiveness of means.

space of relation and compassion.”²⁹² While the combat artists, constantly confronted with struggle and death, seek to express and communicate “what they estimated most important,” Rosler’s work “convey[s] a frustration at being unable to act in the face of a flood of bloody and violent media images of human suffering... invoking a full cycle of empathy: internalizing the pain of others and expressing a reaction—political or aesthetic—back out into the world.”²⁹³ The catalogue argues further that the American artists’ response is an “inspired empathetic affirmation of a common human bond,” while the reaction of the Vietnamese has produced “works based on the response of sympathy, a communal sense that is culturally based.”²⁹⁴ All this may be true. However, as in the case of the *Peace Tower* and the *Collage of Indignation*, it has to be acknowledged that these efforts at representing the various facets of war and exploitation, of a reality of conflict and repression, anger and frustration, dignity and the human condition depend on their realism—their ability (or inability) to articulate their relation to the reality of events and experiences which they depict.

The question is how Rosler’s montages relate to the Vietnamese drawings, how they are both defined as realist and what kind of reality they correspond to. This comparison provides a chance to investigate the limits and possibilities of art as an analytical-political device. What the essays in the catalogue and the reviews of the exhibition fail to mention is that, while an artist like Rosler aims to display the function of culture in relation to a socio-political reality, to investigate how we see ourselves and others, how we understand or fail to comprehend even the most general motivations for

²⁹² Catherine de Zegher and Katherine Carl, “Drawing Like Singing Drowns Out the Sound of the Bombs,” in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Persistent Vestiges—Drawing from the American-Vietnam War* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2006), 12.

²⁹³ Ibid., 14, 25.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 25–26.

conducting a war, the work of the Vietnamese war artists does not provide such insight.²⁹⁵ It doesn't aim to: whether prescribed via official policy or internalized as the artists' belief, Socialist Realism depicts reality in a naturalist manner, shows things "as they are" rather than as they ought to be seen. It is an art beyond the dialectics of the real and the ideal since a Communist or Socialist regime regards the ideal to have been realized.²⁹⁶ The images are familiar and evoke familiar experiences, sites, people, values. There is little room for ambiguity, for perceptual or intellectual uncertainty. By contrast, Rosler's montages, like Brecht's work, rely on contradiction. They are realist in their depiction of warfare and in their challenge to the viewer as a consumer of images and culturally determined (and therefore contingent) expectations about the nature of combat, the distance of warfare, and the safety provided by the physical and visual boundaries of domestic life. I would argue that Rosler's work discussed here is realist as much as it is socialist (rather than Socialist Realist), according to a Brechtian definition and use of the terms.

²⁹⁵ For reviews of the exhibition, see, for example, Holland Cotter, "Two Sides' Viewpoints on the War in Vietnam," *The New York Times* (December 9, 2005): E35 and Leslie Camhi, "After the Fall: Artists Recall the Immediacy and Aftershocks of War," *Village Voice* December 9, 2005): 50.

²⁹⁶ See Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958). Therefore the Vietnamese art of the 1960s and '70s does emerge from a related yet different set of circumstances and assumptions than *Bringing the War Home*, providing the chance for a comparative analysis rather than assigning a universal artistic desire for humanism. Certainly, as de Zegher, one of the show's curators, argues, the omnipresence of physical destruction forced the Vietnamese artists to contemplate the values and behaviors threatened by the inhuman devastation of battle. But besides issues of censorship, of artistic or at least ideological guidelines of how to portray the people's struggle against the Capitalist enemy, it has to be pointed out that the practice of these artists and the work of Rosler are opposed in their definitions of realism. And while the former have many good reasons to depict Vietnamese life during the war the way they did, they lack the dimension of the very reality of making art, of addressing the tools and mechanisms of visual language. Their work is Socialist Realist in that it portrays not struggle but certainty, strength rather than weakness, community rather than individuality. The artists use a figurative language in order to intelligibly communicate Socialist *ideals*. The serenity and beauty of the pictures is Realist in its use of naturalist colors and forms, and lack of abstraction, and in its place within a tradition of an anti-academic renderings of everyday life. Yet it is an embellishment of the reality depicted—when Nguyen Thu would create "on-the-spot exhibitions of what [he] had just drawn" for the soldiers and villagers, they would tell him "in real life not so beautiful." Nguyen Thu, quoted in Moira Roth, "Remnants and Reverberations: Drawing(s) in Time and Space," *Persistent Vestiges*, 113.

In a lecture given at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1969, Herbert Marcuse called for a reconsideration of art, reality, and realism, locating the future of an engaged aesthetic practice in “Art as a Form of Reality.”²⁹⁷ Whereas Marcuse had originally located modern art’s position and function in its separation from life, he now called for an aesthetic that would become part of reality. As part of the established culture, art, to Marcuse, had become affirmative. It had lost its critical distance and turned into a “holiday”: “the elevation, the break in the terrible routine of life—to present something ‘higher,’ ‘deeper,’ perhaps ‘truer’ and better, satisfying needs not satisfied in daily work and fun, and therefore pleasurable.”²⁹⁸ In order to retain its function as art, art would have to become a form of reality, “not the beautification of the given, but the construction of an entirely different and opposed reality.”²⁹⁹ Within the tradition of artistic alienation (the presentation of difference and distance in art from a given reality) it would have to develop a *higher level* of alienation: art’s consciousness of its own fictional status. If art as alternative to life had been appropriated by the culture industry in order to sustain itself in a timeless vacuum, art would have to provide an awareness of the collapse of fiction and reality. Art is to be a *Form* of reality, which in precisely its awareness, in its actual function within that system, would offer an alternative to the status quo.

In that sense, Rosler’s work seems to fulfill Marcuse’s criteria: her art is “real” in that it addresses its own mechanisms: it is a meta-critical discourse that articulates art’s

²⁹⁷ Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality,” 123–134. Marcuse’s 1969 lecture at the Guggenheim Museum was part of a series; the other contributors were Arnold Toynbee, Louis Kahn, Annette Michelson, B.F. Skinner, James Seawright, and J.W. Burnham. The latter’s presentation, “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems” will be discussed in Chapter Three.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 126.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 133.

function within an image-based culture. The distance provided by the technique of montage and collage (including the postcard novels, the *Bowery* project, etc.), the defamiliarization caused by the juxtaposition of unexpected perceptual elements, and the rejection of traditional means of aesthetic production bespeaks the appropriation of the avant-garde's presumed radicality and autonomy. At the same time, the active creation of a composite photographic image comments on the increasingly fictional, decontextualized function of documentary images.

Yet, in his attempt to save art from the constant hunger of the "technocratic-cultural machines" for the different and the particular, Marcuse seeks a "transhistorical" quality in art: "Transhistorical means transcending every and any *particular* stage of the historical process, but not transcending the historical process a whole."³⁰⁰ Only by relying on form rather than the historically specific, and therefore contingent, quality of content can art be revolutionary rather than merely reformist. In his claim for art's transhistoricity, Marcuse sees the potential for social change not *within* but *beyond* the structures of the given reality.³⁰¹ As Stanley Aronowitz has argued, Marcuse postulates

³⁰⁰ Marcuse in Larry Hartwick, "On 'The Aesthetic Dimension': A Conversation with Herbert Marcuse" *Contemporary Literature* (Autumn 1981): 417.

³⁰¹ Having praised Brecht for his refusal in *One-Dimensional Man*, for his work's reliance on the negation of foiled aesthetic expectations through estrangement, in the mid-1970s Marcuse takes the German playwright to task for his attempts to convey specific social structures in art: "The demand made by Brecht... that art should represent the totality of production relations in a given society is in my view contradictory to the potentiality of art." (Ibid., 419.) He continues elsewhere, "Brecht's plays... are revolutionary by virtue of the form given to the content. Indeed the content (the established reality) appears in these works only as estranged and mediated. The truth of art lies in this: that the world really is as it appears in the work of art." *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), xii. Hence, it is the fact of mediation and estrangement that constitutes reality and art's realism. This is how art is revolutionary: it contributes via "the change of consciousness and, especially, the change of perception." "On 'The Aesthetic Dimension,'" 418. Marcuse does not give examples of contemporary artistic practices to illustrate his argument; he refers to Brecht and Beckett, Zola and Mann, to "the great Russian 'Formalists.'" Marcuse, "Art in the One-Dimensional Society," 29. This article is illustrated with various examples of contemporary art, ranging from Jackson Pollock and Jo Bear to Edward Kienholz and Mathias Klarwein. It seems unlikely that Marcuse chose these examples himself. Two photographs, one of a 1967 Central Park "Be-In," the other of *Habitat '67*, a model for experimental housing by Moshe Safdie, carry the caption

“the disappearance of the political dialectic, if not systemic contradictions in advanced capitalist societies.”³⁰² Sure, in that regard Rosler’s work is not revolutionary as it does not completely transcend historical specificity and continues to find ambiguities in reality and its depiction. But her pragmatic aesthetics as a Brechtian exercise in seeing constitute a politically productive action that finds change beyond the limits of reform on one hand and of revolution as utopia on the other.³⁰³ It is also a practice that relates directly to the New Left’s doubt about the very possibility of oppositional politics after 1968. At this moment, in politics as much as in art, when some of the greater goals and narratives collapsed, it became questionable whether or not the contradictions and complexities of capitalist culture, its own image, and the resistance to it would enable or disable practices

“‘New realities’?” He never mentions montage or collage but clearly finds historical precedents for his artistic demands in the original avant-garde.

³⁰² Stanley Aronowitz, “The Unknown Herbert Marcuse,” *Social Text* (Spring 1999): 136.

³⁰³ In a 1978 interview, Marcuse refers to Rosler’s *Monumental Garage Sale*, the artist’s 1973 graduate thesis show at the gallery of the University of California, San Diego. This garage sale of clothes, letters, papers, art works and other items, advertised in the local papers, lacked, so Marcuse argued, avant-garde art’s distanciation—not from art’s traditional function as life’s fictionalized and corrective opposite but from non-art: “There was an exhibit that simply reproduced a garage sale. That wouldn’t do because it just isn’t art; it’s a repetition of a given reality. It does not have the transcendence and dissociation which in my view are essential for art.” Marcuse in Hartwick, “On ‘The Aesthetic Dimension,’” 421. This postulates the limits of Marcuse’s aesthetics and his position as different from Rosler’s. Even though Rosler’s *Garage Sale* is not her most Brechtian work (it relies more on the surprising effect of anti-aesthetic intrusion rather than a dialectical meditation on art, the domestic, and commerce), Marcuse misses its analytical particularities and possibilities. Or maybe he doesn’t care to; after all, these possibilities lie with the piece’s paradoxes and contradictions about the placement of art, its value, its usefulness and uselessness, etc. Arthur Danto, who, in 1973, was Marcuse’s colleague at UCSD, recalls visiting *Garage Sale* with Marcuse and the German philosopher’s change of perspective concerning matters of revolutionary change and art’s role within it: “Like all Frankfurt Marxists, Herbert was a severely conservative person, most especially in matters of art. At this point in his life, he had reverted to a state of extreme pessimism. Marcuse’s personality was an unstable compound of utopianism and misanthropy, but for a brief moment in the late 1960s, the pessimism in regard to the human material lifted and he believed that in the youth of America an age of political and erotic sublimity was at hand... Herbert hated *Garage Sale*. For him it celebrated the values of the bourgeoisie, when it ought instead, as he saw it, to be the mission of art to criticize these values.” *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Noonday Press—Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), 140–141.

of progressive change. Or, as Aronowitz put it, “what passes for oppositional politics is merely so many forms of ‘artificial’ negativity?”³⁰⁴

To some, like Marcuse, the open work of art, of destabilized and multiple meanings, is caught within and reproduces the exhausted contradictions of a capitalist culture, unable to transcend its limits. To others, the open work constitutes an adequate display of modernism’s futility, a testimony to the bankruptcy of progress and enlightenment that in its negative critique might lead to an ideological awareness but is, by definition, unable to produce effective change. To yet others, the open work therefore amounts to a “dance of ideology” and a “harmless play of the signifier”, resulting in nothing but a “minor act of disobedience.”³⁰⁵ The latter are remarks made by T.J. Clark regarding Manet’s *Olympia*, published in *Screen* magazine in 1980 and subsequently critically responded to by Peter Wollen.³⁰⁶

Though a discussion of *Olympia* seems far removed from Rosler’s work, the disagreement between Clark and Wollen revolves around the issues at the heart of, for example, *Bringing the War Home*. Clark would presumably find the same inconsistencies in meaning, the same inconsistencies and incoherence in an image like *Red Stripe—Kitchen* (fig. 1) as he finds in *Olympia*. Favoring the Realism of Courbet over the work of Manet, Clark seeks clarity in the representation of class struggle and class division—clarity in content (the actual social and political circumstances of class relations) and in form (intelligibility as visual and intellectual access). Wollen, on the other hand, finds no

³⁰⁴ Aronowitz, “The Unknown Herbert Marcuse.” Aronowitz is paraphrasing Paul Piccone, “the long-time editor of the quarterly *Telos*, [who] first used this phrase as an evaluation of the demise of the New Left in the early 1970s.” 154n6.

³⁰⁵ T.J. Clark, cited in Peter Wollen, “Manet: Modernism and Avant-Garde. Timothy Clark’s Article on Manet’s *Olympia*, *Screen*, Spring 1980,” *Screen* (Summer 1980): 15.

³⁰⁶ T.J. Clark, “Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of *Olympia* in 1865,” *Screen* (Spring 1980): 18–51.

such clarity in reality (“Does he [Clark] really think that class identity is something necessarily clearly and definitely fixed?”).³⁰⁷ By extension, art, if it is to be avant-garde rather than reactionary, cannot provide such clarity without producing a false image and consciousness. For Wollen, a complex and ambiguous reality demands an adequately open art. He cites Brecht as a realist alternative to Clark’s Realism, a practitioner of “complex seeing, [which] in this sense simply involves a multiplicity of semiotic practices, formal devices, and points-of-view, distinguishing, for example, the representation of plot from the representation of commentary, or narration of past events from hypothesis about future events, documentary from fiction, and so on.”³⁰⁸ While Wollen certainly does not advocate a ‘dance of the signifier,’ there are problems with regard to artistic strategies involving what he calls “perceptual inconsistencies” as they may lead (and have lead) to relativist and/or dystopian forms of postmodernism.³⁰⁹

I would argue that a work like *Red Stripe—Kitchen* is the complex depiction (in the way it functions visually) of a not-so-inconsistent or incoherent reality: the ambiguities reside within the work’s positioning of itself and the spectator’s expectations of a simple demarcation of identity and its place of perception. Yet the work also addresses the corresponding reality of the viewer’s position vis-à-vis the image and images in general, as well as the political reality of the relation between domestic well-being and war on foreign soil. The challenge to the viewer’s visual and intellectual assumptions results in a re-triangulation of the viewer, the image, and the viewed reality, anchored in a coherent, but historical and therefore contingent, comprehensible, and

³⁰⁷ Wollen, “Manet: Modernism and Avant-Garde,” 16.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 24.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 21.

changeable set of circumstances. Reality for Rosler (and for Brecht), especially political and social reality, is not all that random or inconsistent. Nonetheless it is often hard to understand because it is hard to see. (One is reminded of Rosler's statement, presented at the very beginning of this chapter: "I want to make art about complicated things yet that helps bring them into focus.")

Due to its complexity and its refusal to adhere to preconceived notions of fiction and prose, creation and documentation, fusion and demarcation, art and discourse, Rosler's work has, in the wake of the renewed revolutionary disillusionment of the 1970s, been appropriated by what Aronowitz critically observed to be artificial negativity in the guise of oppositional politics. Since the mid-1980s, Benjamin Buchloh has repeatedly tried to make Rosler into an Adorno-Althusserian affirmation of the omnipresent and persistent powers of the culture industry and state apparatuses to appropriate all those energies used against them. In his 1984 essay "Since Realism There Was...(On the Current Conditions of Factographic Art)," Buchloh claims that the work of the neo-avant-garde allows for critical insight into the mechanisms of all-encompassing consummation but cannot lead beyond it; change and utopia are notions from within the system, reduced to ideas, illustrated and beautified by art, but contained. They are, he argues, false notions, empty signs that lack the very basis for their realization; a critical and committed art therefore articulates only its own impotence. With regard to the historical specificity of the politically activating practice of the historical avant-garde (he mentions Brecht and Benjamin) and of the work of the American neo-avant-garde (he refers to Rosler, Sekula, and Lonidier), Buchloh writes about the tradition of Realism:

Obviously the situation is entirely different in the present moment, where mass audiences are not only locked up firmly in the terminal grip of the media, but where the access that artists have to the actual apparatus of ideological production is at very best that of a parasite that mimics and excels in the strategies of the consciousness industry and who is furbishing new stylistic gadgets to the producers who need avant-garde creativity to renovate their rapidly worn out strategies and styles.³¹⁰

One alternative is the artists' attempt to find an audience and practice outside of the apparatus of art, enabling self-representation of multiple audiences "for the production of cultural interference."³¹¹ Yet, despite the artists' "factographic" approaches, demystifying artistic practice in favor of an articulation of art as signification and communication of historical events and circumstances, these hopes appear slim, even contradictory to the claims made by Buchloh at the outset of his essay:

On the other hand, artists who position themselves in relation to analysis and criticism with respect to the monolithic institutions become quickly aware that marginalization seems to be the alternative option to becoming a parasitical beneficiary of the consciousness industry. They have to take into consideration that the claim for a position and practice of criticism of ideology that might be made in the work itself is ultimately falsified by the fact that the work remains passively confined to the position of

³¹⁰ Buchloh, "Since Realism There Was," 6.

³¹¹ Ibid., 11.

powerlessness to which it is relegated by the centralized institutions of the ideological apparatus.”³¹²

Here, the realism of the neo-avant-garde is damned to reflect the complexity of ideological reality (or rather, the reality of ideology).

But to resign Rosler’s work on war, women, and labor, on art and reception, producing insight and demanding active seeing, to such an affirmative criticality would mean ridding it of its Brechtian dimension and of what Brecht called “interventive thinking.”³¹³ Brecht defines realism and socialist realism on two occasions, selections of which were quoted at the beginning of this chapter but shall be given here at length:

Our concept of *realism* needs to be broad and political, free from aesthetic restrictions and independent of convention. *Realist* means: laying bare society’s causal network/showing up the dominant viewpoint as the view of the dominators/writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society/emphasizing the dynamics of development/concrete and so as to encourage abstraction. It is a tall order, and it can be made taller. And

³¹² Ibid., 6. The term “factographic” was coined and defined by Buchloh in this essay as the work of art’s “insistence on the necessity to explore and clarify the construction and operation of representation within present day reality and to make that reality transparent rather than mythify it.” Ibid., 10. The same year, the journal *October* published Buchloh’s “Form Faktura to Factography” (Autumn 1984): 82–119. In this text, the term is used in a more differentiated sense as Buchloh describes the Russian avant-garde’s transition from Constructivism to Productivism, from modernist self-referentiality to a utilitarian art: “Thus *factura*, an essential feature of the modernist paradigm that underlay the production of the Soviet avant-garde until 1923, was replaced by a new concern for the *factographic* capacity of the photograph, supposedly rendering aspects of reality visible without interference or mediation.” (Ibid., 103). While the former definition retains the artwork’s dimension of self-referentiality, the latter abandons it for the objectivity of reality’s mechanical reproduction through the photographic image. According to Buchloh, for the Productivists, this abandonment of the modernist mission paved the way for art’s contribution to the apparatus of Stalinist propaganda. To Sekula et al. the factographic revelation of the mechanisms of production inevitably led to the acknowledgement of the ideological apparatus’ inescapable omnipresence.

³¹³ Bertolt Brecht, “Das Denken als ein Verhalten” (1929–41), in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 20, 166.

we shall let the artist apply all his imagination, all his originality, his sense of humor and power of invention to its fulfillment.³¹⁴

A Socialist Realist work of art lays bare the dialectical laws of movement of the social mechanism, whose revelation makes the mastering of man's fate easier. It provokes pleasure in their recognition and observation. A Socialist Realist work of art shows characters and events as historical and alterable, and as contradictory. This entails a great change; a serious effort has to be made to find new means of representation.³¹⁵

These words recall those of Rosler's 1979 statement cited at the outset of this chapter.

The artist's works discussed here are examples of the socialist realism defined by Brecht in that they seek to "illuminate social life," "promote critical consciousness," and provide "an understanding of... historical currents."³¹⁶ Rather than merely mirror the conditions of artistic and intellectual production, the fragmentation of Rosler's collages and montages enable a complexity of understanding as much as various recombinations of visual and ideological elements. The practice of the historical avant-garde finds its critical legacy in a stance of refusal that denies simplistic forms of protest and oppositionality, rejects the anachronistic dichotomy between fact and fiction, documentary and art, and abjures the postmodernist ban of utopian purpose in favor of a historically specific, revolutionary commitment to socio-political and cultural change.

When Brecht discusses the pleasures that the Epic Theater ought to provide, he calls for a

³¹⁴ Bertolt Brecht, "The Popular and the Realistic" (1938), reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 109.

³¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, untitled note, dated September 1954, reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 269.

³¹⁶ Rosler, "I'm thinking about making art about life..." 35.

method of collage: “There are weak (simple) and strong (put together) pleasures which the theatre can create.”³¹⁷ The latter, “which we are dealing with in great drama,” attain realism and social(-ist) fervor through their analytic and consolidating complexity. Like Rosler’s collages and montages, “they are more intricate, richer in communication, more contradictory and more productive of results.”³¹⁸

³¹⁷ Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum For the Theatre”, 181. The translation by Willett reads “There are weak (simple) and strong (*complex*) pleasures the theatre can create.” I replaced “complex” with “put together” since the original text defines the strong theater as “*zusammengesetzt*” (literally “put together”), which more accurately describes the epic arts as open, non-organic, and historical (as well as complex).

³¹⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE.

Hans Haacke: Myths, Systems, and the Politics of Science

In 1970, two works by Hans Haacke were included in the exhibition *Software*.

Information Technology: It's New Meaning for Art at the Jewish Museum in New York.

The show was organized by Jack Burnham, a friend of the artist and author of *Beyond*

Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of this

Century (1968).³¹⁹ Haacke's *Visitors' Profile* (1970) and *News; UPI-WGNS Wire* (1969)

(fig. 75) featured in *Software* resonated with the curator's aim to present an important trend in contemporary American art and culture: "In the past few years, the movement away from art objects has been precipitated by concerns within natural and man-made systems, processes, ecological relationships, and the philosophical-linguistic involvement of Conceptual Art."³²⁰

As a work of art, *Visitors' Profile*, a computerized, interactive compilation of the exhibition audience's data, did not rely on the spectator's experience of material form. Instead, it gathered factual information such as the viewers' gender and age as well as opinions on a number of social and political matters, constantly updating the results and presenting them as part of the exhibition. *Visitors' Profile* provided an exchange of information, presenting what Burnham referred to as an "underlying structure of communication and energy exchange instead of abstract appearances."³²¹

³¹⁹ Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (New York: G. Braziller, 1968).

³²⁰ Jack Burnham, *Software. Information Technology: It's New Meaning for Art* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1970), 100.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

News also functioned as a critical engagement with the “art object,” which, at the time, was typified by the recently institutionalized works of Minimalism.³²² The teletype machines printing domestic and international news turned the industrially manufactured box into a relative, mediating element in a pragmatic, rational system of exchange.

Haacke’s participation in the *Software* exhibition presents an important moment in the artist’s development. It represents what is called here his ‘Brechtian’ project of demystification and de-naturalization. *Visitors’ Profile* and *News*, examples of what Haacke since the mid-1960s has referred to as Real Time Systems, were a critical extension of Minimalism’s static anthropomorphism, of the phenomenological assertion of the autarchic, bourgeois individual. But the works also investigated the limits of systems, structures, and science— notions that during the 1960s had been introduced (and championed by writers and critics like Burnham) to replace subjective overtones of artistic production and reception with a more rational and autonomous experience.

If Haacke’s project, as argued here, is the continuing inquiry into naturalized ideas concerning art’s relation to its environment, *Software* bore testimony to that continuity. Ranging from plastic containers to be turned and pushed to self-contained biological microcosms to revelatory inquiries into structures of institutional power, Haacke’s work is an ever-expanding exploration and articulation of socio-aesthetic myths, setting out to challenge assumptions about art and audience. These assumptions include the integrity of the cultural object as transcending everyday dimensions of site

³²² James Meyer, for example, locates the “canonization” of Minimalist art in 1968, the year of Donald Judd’s solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the publication of Gregory Battcock’s *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton). *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 247.

and time and the confirmation of the spectator's position in the world vis-à-vis the art object.

If one looks for Haacke in recent accounts of 1960s and '70s art, the focus lies usually with his later, so-called political or activist work.³²³ Thomas Crow, for example, in his 1996 *The Rise of the Sixties*, very briefly discusses the artist's 1971 *Shapolsky et al.* (fig. 76) on the last page of the book.³²⁴ Crow presents the work, an investigation of the relation between real estate, ownership, and power, as a timely politicization of Minimalism's serial logic. The book makes no mention of Haacke's prior work.

In *New Art in the '60s and '70s: Redefining Reality* (2001), Ann Rorimer discusses Haacke's later "political" pieces like *Shapolsky et al.* as a logical extension of the artist's interest in physical and biological systems, as an exchange of one quantity of relations for another.³²⁵ The problem of such a reading, as I argue at greater length below, is that it turns Haacke's analysis of social, political, and ideological structures into an experiment in scientific objectivity. At the same time, it disregards the political dimension of the artist's earlier works.

The most interesting, albeit brief, mention of Haacke's work is made by Pamela Lee in her 2004 book *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*.³²⁶ Lee uses Haacke's *Grass Cube* (1967) (fig. 77) as a case study for the "metalogical" dimension of

³²³ Meyer's book makes no mention of Haacke's work whatsoever, even though the last chapter of *Minimalism* addresses the movement's "Canonization/Critique." Ibid., 245–270.

³²⁴ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

³²⁵ Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the '60s and '70s: Redefining Reality* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 268–272.

³²⁶ Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004).

modernist sculpture of the late '60s.³²⁷ To Lee, the Plexiglas box with the sod of grass on top literalizes the modernist critic's (in Lee's case, Michael Fried's) greatest point of discontent with contemporary sculpture—the object's extrusion into the space (and time) of the beholder. *Grass Cube* establishes, Lee argues, a dialogue between the Minimalist box's relation to its environment and Burnham's notion of systemic sculpture. This, I would contend, is precisely the point: Haacke's project, his work's development from interactive objects to biological projects to Real Time Social Systems, is a “‘metalogue’—a dialogue on a dialogue.”³²⁸ It is a critically progressing dialogue regarding various sets of operations, various systems of situating artist, object, and viewer and the experience provided in each. To look at Haacke's work of the 1960s and '70s from a Brechtian perspective means to articulate the artist's project as a constant reassessment of the quality of relations.

Haacke's work does not merely evolve from replacing one set of relations with another. Instead, it is an ongoing investigation into the politics of science. (The word “science” will be used in a Brechtian sense throughout this chapter, referring to Brecht's notion of *Wissenschaft* as a critical historical and empirical model of knowledge applied to cultural production in dialectical opposition to the bourgeois' assumption of culture's irrationality, defined exclusively by intuition, subjectivity, aura, beauty, the sublime, and an aesthetic spirituality.³²⁹) Here lies its Brechtian dimension. But here also is the necessity to look at the proximity between Haacke's and Fried's critique of Minimalism,

³²⁷ Ibid., 77.

³²⁸ Ibid., 80.

³²⁹ Brecht discusses his concept of science in, for example, “A Dialogue about Acting” (1920), reprinted in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 26–29. Willett adds the following remark at the end of the text: “It should perhaps be pointed out that ‘Wissenschaft’ in German is a broader term than the English ‘science’ and that Brecht certainly regarded it as embracing the Marxist view of history as well as the natural sciences.” Ibid., 29.

since, according to Lee, the latter's notion of Minimalist theatricality finds its logical extension in Burnham's "systematicity."³³⁰ This investigation further warrants a comparison between Haacke's utilization of scientific systems and Roland Barthes' turn from Brechtian mythology to Structuralism as both ran the risk of assigning to systemic operations an actively ahistorical autonomy and self-referentiality. Finally, Haacke's work will be read in relation to the 1966 American publication, and 1967 New York production, of Brecht's *Galileo* (1938). Brecht had rewritten his theatrical treatment of Galileo Galilei to bestow on the scientist as well as the play's author a social and ideological responsibility. Similarly, Haacke's politicization of science, his *Real Time Social Systems*, completed his project demystification. Just as Haacke criticized the stasis of Minimalism, the artwork's lack of involvement with the processes and temporalities outside of aesthetic considerations, the *Real Time Social Systems* politicized not merely the institutions of ideological production (museums, galleries, etc.) but the idealist logic of authenticity and objectivity they depend on.

Nature versus nature

Asked about the difference between his own work and Minimalism, Haacke replied, "A very important difference between the work of minimal sculptors and my work is that they were interested in inertness, whereas I was concerned with change. From the beginning the concept of change has been the ideological basis of my work. All the way down there's absolutely nothing static... nothing that does not change, or instigate real change. Most minimal work disregards change. Things claim to be inert, static,

³³⁰ Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, 77.

immovably beyond time. But the status quo is an illusion, a dangerous illusion politically.”³³¹ In short, the difference between Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* (1963–65) (fig. 3) and the Minimalist box is a matter of *experience*: the latter affirms the relation between subject and object; the former dismantles it. The *Condensation Cube*, a clear, plastic container filled with a small amount of water, reacts to the viewer and the quantity of viewers in the room as the water evaporates according to changes in the microclimate of the exhibition venue (changes in temperature, light, air-flow). It is thus what Walter Grasskamp described as “context-related in the physical sense.”³³² While Haacke’s work is *about* the experience, the contingency and dependency of the aesthetic encounter and the potential of change implied therein, he considers Minimalism to revolve around *experience* in an ontological sense, securely asserting the consciousness of the spectator as the center of the (his) universe.

The *Condensation Cube* and Haacke’s other interactive objects of the 1960s rely on a scientific, “natural” approach to the work of art. The 1962 *Raintower* (fig. 78) is a clear, tall box made of acrylic plastic measuring almost three feet in height. The structure is divided into ten chambers, separated by perforated floors. When turned upside down like an hourglass, the water inside the tower drips from one level to the next, giving the impression and sound of rain. Jack Burnham, in his 1967 article “Hans Haacke, Wind and Water Sculpture,” describes the encounter with Haacke’s *Raintower* as follows: “Most saw the water box as essentially frivolous, lacking the mystery, restraint, impact, technical bravura, cruelty, wit and optical salience that went into the games of other currently successful artists. Here was an art of essential phenomenism where the

³³¹ Jeanne Siegel, “An Interview with Hans Haacke,” *Arts Magazine* (May 1971): 18.

³³² Walter Grasskamp, “Real Time: The Work of Hans Haacke,” in *Hans Haacke* (New York and London: Phaidon, 2004), 38.

obligation to *see* was passed on to the spectator.”³³³ Haacke asks the viewer to “...articulate something Natural.”³³⁴ The viewer is invited to refuse the work of art as artifice and auratic object, to overcome the mythical distance (be it spiritual, existential, intellectual) that keeps the viewer at bay and the object seemingly autonomous or at least in safe detachment from vulgar everyday concerns: to touch the object, to turn it, to reintroduce an active, reciprocal relationship between art and the viewing subject. As the artist remarks in a 1971 interview, “That [‘articulate something natural’] has a double meaning. It refers to ‘nature,’ and it means something self-understood, ordinary, uncontrived, normal, of an everyday quality.”³³⁵ This implies that the *Raintower*’s inquiry does not merely consist of employing gravity and water to encourage an ordinary, everyday handling of the art object but articulates the naturalized, the “self-understood” relation between art object and spectator as a cultural institution. Therefore Haacke’s concept of “nature” has to be understood in an interrelated, threefold manner, triangulated as follows: 1. “nature” stands for physical, chemical, and biological systems as studied and defined by scientific methods and laws, therefore, by definition, beyond matters of taste, interpretation, and truth; 2. “the natural” as something uncontrived, something non-artificial in the sense of modernity’s dialectic of authentic and simulated, copied,

³³³ Jack Burnham, “Hans Haacke, Wind and Water Sculpture,” originally published in *Tri-Quarterly Supplement* (Spring 1967): 1–24, reprinted in Alan Sonfist (ed.), *Art in the Land—A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art* (New York: Dutton, 1983), 110. Burnham recalls the experience of the personnel at the Museum of Modern Art, where, in the rental collection of the institution, Haacke’s work “caused more joyful curiosity than any number of ‘sculptures’.” *Ibid.*, 109.

³³⁴ Hans Haacke, “Untitled Statement,” Exhibition announcement, Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf, 1965. Reprinted in English in *Hans Haacke*, 100.

³³⁵ Siegel, “An Interview with Hans Haacke,” 18.

imitated; 3. the “naturalized” as myth, as what Barthes called “giving a historical intention a natural justification.”³³⁶

Haacke’s *Raintower* employs a simple, natural experiment to challenge naturalized assumptions. Brecht’s *Galileo* uses a similarly playful rationalism as he explains the earth’s positioning within the universe to his pupil, Andrea, son of Galileo’s housekeeper.³³⁷ In the play’s opening scene, Galileo moves a chair with Andrea on it through the room in order to illustrate that it need not be the sun that changes position for its light to shine from different angles throughout the day. He uses an apple with a stick inserted into it to explain that gravity is what keeps the boy securely in bed at night. Like Haacke, Galileo uses simple experiments as tools, devices that create an understanding of one’s position in the world through rational experience. Relegating mankind (in *Galileo*) or the viewer (in Haacke) to a relative position within a system of dependencies opens up the possibility for an analysis of that very structure. In Brecht’s attack on what Terry Eagleton calls theater’s “liberal humanism”—the assumption that “it is all about individuals: warm, credible, all-rounded, psychologically complex individuals, with

³³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 142.

Despite the obvious similarities, it is on the ground of this analytic triangulation that Haacke’s work is different from most of his American contemporaries’ approaches to nature, be it that of Robert Smithson, Robert Morris or Christo (not to mention the naturist-mysticism of Haacke’s fellow national Joseph Beuys). Haacke’s experimentalist scientism may seem overtly calculating and rational, even banal at times, but it keeps romantically biomorphic/organic, psychologically essentializing, and dramatically sublime experiences of his work at a minimum. The artist’s “anti-humanism” is a skepticism toward the centralized, possessive position of the modern and bourgeois subject, not its romantic, even if apocalyptic, re- or disintegration into a pre-technological, pre-industrial natural environment—an ideologically and aesthetically reproductive trap which much of Land Art and Earthworks falls into. For a critical look at the romanticized, picturesque, and sublime function of “nature” in Earthworks and Land Art, specifically in the work of Robert Smithson, see, for example, Harold Rosenberg, “De-aestheticization,” *De-definition of Art: Action Art to Pop to Earthworks* (New York: Horizon Press, 1972), 28–29, 32, and, more recently, Ron Graziani, “Robert Smithson’s Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s,” *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1994): 419–451.

³³⁷ Using the character of the housekeeper’s son, Brecht tells a tale of class struggle as the proletarian boy is able to learn and think dialectically while all the learned men of the academy and the royal court are trapped within the ideological confines of religious myth.

society as a sort of backdrop to them”—contradictions and uncertainties provided by the deconstruction of that very humanism are the main mode of attack.³³⁸

Wave, from 1964, is a long, narrow, transparent plastic box, suspended from the ceiling, about half full of water. When pushed, the piece swings like a pendulum, creating a wave-like motion in the water. It is the rational, scientific nature of the interaction that is of most pedagogical importance. As Brecht wrote with regard to a “theater for the scientific age” (the text is written in the form of a dialogue):

–Just now you used the expression ‘scientific.’ You mean that when one observes an amoeba it does nothing to offer itself to the human observer. He can’t get inside its skin by empathy. Yet the scientific observer does try to understand it. Do you think that in the end he succeeds?

–I don’t know. He tries to bring it into some relationship with the other things that he has seen.³³⁹

Haacke makes “something which cannot perform without the assistance of its environment.”³⁴⁰ His art, like Brecht’s, offers its audience knowledge, not about rain or waves, but about the fact that common assumptions regarding art’s space, position, and time are learned. The viewer is asked to relate his experience to other experiences with art, compare them, question them and thereby question his own position inscribed within these assumptions. And while there is a poetic dimension to Haacke’s interactive objects, to the sound of dripping water and the rhythmic flow of the wave, these works function

³³⁸ Terry Eagleton, “A Note on Brecht,” *Pretexts: literary and cultural studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1999): 90. For a critique of the socio-political implications of humanist liberalism in “our advanced industrial society,” see Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in Robert Paul Wolff et al., *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 81–117.

³³⁹ Brecht, “A Dialogue about Acting,” 27.

³⁴⁰ Haacke, “Untitled Statement,” 100.

primarily as *tools* that have no meaning within or by themselves but define, and are defined by, the relation to their environment. Haacke writes in 1967, “In thinking about nature, we most often think only in terms of trees, mountains, the blue sky, etc., and not of the underlying forces and patterns of organization. . . . We seem to be so accustomed to looking at the ‘gestalt’ of natural phenomena and to interpret it in a heart-warming, romantic manner that we neglect perceiving the physical laws forming the ‘gestalt’.”³⁴¹ The effect of estrangement lies with the works’ self-reference as *objects in relation, as demonstration*, subject to laws (physical and, by extension, social and cultural), as ordinary but not non-aesthetic objects, simple but not spiritual in their simplicity, interactive but not spectacular, performing in real time but repeatable. As in Brecht, the estrangement leads to knowledge about the way we know: Jameson writes that, “The opening scene of *Galileo* is less a mimesis of scientific knowledge—its models and complexities, its value as a unique solution to a particularly knotty problem—than it is the representation of how you go about transmitting and conveying such knowledge: ‘the stool is the earth’.”³⁴² For Haacke, the Plexiglas container is Art.

Haacke’s early work originates within the context of the French *Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuelle* (GRAV) and the Kinetic projects of the German *Zero* group. The work partook in what Burnham in 1975 described as “a budding counter-movement to the prevailing mannerisms of painterliness and decorative expressionism.”³⁴³ But

³⁴¹ Hans Haacke, quoted in Bitite Vinklers, “Hans Haacke,” *Art International* (September 1969): 44.

³⁴² Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York, Verso, 1998), 91.

³⁴³ Jack Burnham, “Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art,” in Kasper Koenig (ed.), *Hans Haacke: Framing and Being Framed* (New York and Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1975), 127. For further discussion of Haacke’s work in relation to *GRAV* and *Zero* see also George Rickey, “Kinesis Continued,” *Art In America* (December 1965–January 1966): 45–55; and Georg Jappe, “Kinetic Art in Germany,” *Studio International* (October 1970): 123–129.

Haacke's rationalism and relationism is best understood as Brechtian alongside the anti-humanist arguments of Fried's assessment of Minimalism, Robbe-Grillet's new novel, and Barthes' *nouvelle critique*. His attack on Minimalism as static and inert can be compared to Michael Fried's critique of Minimalist sculpture in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood."³⁴⁴ Lumping all of Minimalist sculpture together into an undifferentiated whole, Fried accused its practitioners of "literalism," which in turn leads to an existentialist affirmation of the modern subject via the works' phenomenological encounter. To Fried, the problem with Minimalism's inertness, with its literalism, is that the object as an anthropomorphic *gestalt* lends itself to all sorts of projections and encounters, all taking place *between* the subject and the object. And this experience is "theatrical" in its phenomenological existentialism: "The presence of literalist art ... is basically a theatrical effect or quality—a kind of stage presence."³⁴⁵ Fried's problem with Minimalism's theatricality is its humanist affirmation of the subject vis-à-vis the art object rather than "the disquieting effect it had on the spectator."³⁴⁶

The popularity of Merleau-Ponty's 1962 English publication *The Phenomenology of Perception* among Minimalists and critics such as Robert Morris, Barbara Rose, and Susan Sontag, was arguably rooted in the fact that it provided a model of experience negotiating between the reality of the everyday (object, encounter) and its transcendence

³⁴⁴ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (Summer 1967): 12–23.

³⁴⁵ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 16.

³⁴⁶ Meyer, *Minimalism*, 233. Contrary to my reading, Meyer locates Fried's discontent in Minimalism's further alienation of the subject rather than its assertion. Meyer argues that: "The problem with the literalist work was the phenomenological effect of its wholeness... The minimal work theatricalized the viewer to himself... It made the viewer feel isolated and distant from himself." *Ibid.*

(experience, being).³⁴⁷ If a 1967 *Art in America* questionnaire regarding the “Sensibility of the Sixties” is any indication, this validation of the artist as what Kaprow called “man in the world,” working with and in the world without being confined by its triviality, phenomenology’s affirmation of human consciousness at the center of the world, gave the Minimalist artist and his work (and, by extension, the viewer) a secure, meaningful place, philosophically speaking.³⁴⁸

This uncritical claim to the centrality of the human being, its privileged position in space (as Merleau-Ponty put it, “Our body is to the world as the heart is to the organism”) and in time (which transpires “in *my* relation to things”) is precisely what makes Fried accuse Minimalism of theatricality.³⁴⁹ It also recalls Haacke’s critique of Minimalism as resistant to change. Emphasizing “presentness” (located within the modernist object) over “presence” (located outside it, the spectacle of the subject’s self-recognition and confirmation), Fried turns to Brecht: “It may have been something like presentness, at least to some extent, that led Brecht to advocate a non-illusionistic theater,

³⁴⁷ For Robert Morris’ dialogue with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy see “Notes on Sculpture,” especially Part II, *Artforum* (October 1966): 20–23. On the reception of Merleau-Ponty’s writings among Minimalist artists and critics see Meyer, *Minimalism*, 146–147, 160–166, 234–243.

³⁴⁸ The questionnaire “Sensibility of the Sixties” (edited and with an introduction by Barbara Rose and Irving Sandler, *Art in America* [January–February 1967]: 44–57) displayed, as its editors summed up, a general disorientation among artists: neither did the majority of those who participated think that there was such a thing as an “academy,” nor an “avant-garde”; generally art was seen as having lost its potential shock-value and the art object an increasingly welcomed commodity. Despite art’s new economic and ideological acceptance, the artists were unsure of who their public was, feeling “consumed rather than understood.” The mood could best be described as existentialist: “There emerges a collective portrait of the artist in the sixties as an individual enjoying relative physical comfort but subject to continued emotional uneasiness... Despite the fantastic amount of activity generated in and around the art world, despite the fact that artists are (often literally) pursued by an over-eager public and sought after as never before, as Paul Brach summed it up succinctly, ‘It’s still lonely in the studio.’” *Ibid.*, 44. Among those who participated in the questionnaire were Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Bladen, Robert Mangold, Allan Kaprow, Roy Lichtenstein, Ad Reinhardt, and Leon Golub.

³⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 203 and 304.

in which the actors would not identify with the characters they play but rather would show them forth, and in which temporality itself would be presented in a new light.”³⁵⁰

Here, as for Greenberg, Brecht is (“at least to some extent”) a formalist, despite his Marxism and his concern for factors beyond the presentness of the staged play as work of art.³⁵¹ Not the audience, not man, but art is the focus of modernism: “For theater *has* an audience—it *exists* for one—in a way that the other arts do not; in fact, this more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theater generally. Here it should be remarked that literalist art, too, possesses an audience, though a somewhat special one: that the beholder is confronted by literalist work within a situation which he experiences as *his* means that there is an important sense in which the work in question exists for him *alone*, even if he is not actually alone with the work at the time.”³⁵² Like Brecht, Fried detests theater’s (and Minimalism’s) liberal humanism; unlike Brecht, he is not interested in its origin, structure, and mechanisms.

And herein lies the similarity and the difference between Fried’s and Haacke’s account of Brechtian modernism. For Fried, Minimalism’s humanism can only be defeated by severing the relation between subject and object, between viewer and work. For Haacke the quality, the nature of the experience of the work of art and of the beholder as beholding subject, has to be rearticulated.³⁵³

³⁵⁰ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 23, n.19.

³⁵¹ With regard to Brecht’s political orientation Fried writes: “The need to achieve a new relation to the spectator which Brecht felt and which he discussed time and again in his writings on theater was not simply the result of his Marxism. On the contrary, his discovery of Marx seems to have been in part the discovery of what this relation might be like, of what it might mean.” *Ibid.*, 23, n.15.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵³ Jack Burnham has suggested an anthropomorphic reading of Haacke’s “water boxes”: “Through the anonymity of Plexiglas with liquid passing from level to level, he is trying perhaps to get at the clockwork of the human body’s own chemistry.” Burnham, “Hans Haacke, Wind and Water Sculpture,” 112. But even this analogy is concerned more with the exploration of scientific processes rather than a phenomenological-existentialist affirmation of subjective consciousness.

A similar rejection of subjectivity, psychological inwardness, and humanist essence can be found in the writings of Robbe-Grillet and Barthes. In the early sixties, Haacke had produced *La Bataille de Reichenfels* (*The Battle of Reichenfels*) (1961) (fig. 79) and *Les Couloirs de Marienbad* (*The Corridors of Marienbad*) (1962) (fig. 80) in reference to Robbe-Grillet's 1959 novel *Dans le Labyrinthe* (*In the Labyrinth*) and his 1961 film *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*). The cool materials and geometric rigidity mirror Robbe-Grillet's demands for a literature that would be real rather than realistic, descriptive rather than metaphorical, and therefore less prone to distract and mislead its readers from the conditions that determine their lives.³⁵⁴ The *nouveau roman* was to trade fiction and depth for prose and surface. In the future novel, Robbe-Grillet writes, "objects will gradually lose their instability and their secrets, will renounce their pseudo-mystery, that suspect interiority which Roland Barthes has called 'the romantic heart of things'."³⁵⁵ The stainless steel rods protruding from the mirrored surface of *La Bataille de Reichenfels* render the work impenetrable to the touch and to the beholder's reflection without being overtly aggressive. The work frustrates rather than attacks. It is external as it refers not to something within, something interior—it is not a metaphor, symbol, or story—but relates to its function (or non-function) as a work of art.

But why then does Haacke move on to produce interactive objects rather than these static ones? Is not the rejection of reference and metaphor sufficient to combat what Robbe-Grillet calls a "superficial critique of society," the search for "an outmoded depth"? The writer himself finds Minimalism to be an example of anti-humanism in art.

³⁵⁴ On the rejection of realism on behalf of reality see, for example, Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Realism to Reality" (1953), reprinted in *Evergreen Review* vol. 10, no. 38 (1966): 50–53.

³⁵⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, "A Future for the Novel" (1956), reprinted in *For a New Novel Essays on Fiction*, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 21.

Asked in a 1968 interview published in *Studio International* whether Minimalism provides “an art without references,” Robbe-Grillet replies, “Yes... Metaphors are always humanistic. So that to reject metaphor is in the last analysis to fight against this completely *dépassé* humanism, this transcendent humanism, if you will.”³⁵⁶ Yet, Minimalism and, to an extent, Haacke’s abovementioned works, carry just such a “transcendent humanism,” emanating from the presence or aura residing in their spatial and temporal totality. They imbue the aesthetic encounter with a certain psychological and philosophical depth, providing what Robbe-Grillet calls a “new sense of metaphor.” The interview continues:

–I think one will discover subsequently a new sense of metaphor. And at that moment something will have been discovered.

–Which implies an enormous shift in vision.

–It does, in fact.

–Almost biological.

–Almost biological. Yes.³⁵⁷

This realization, that even without direct reference the work can still be metaphorical (as it addresses the “condition of man”), necessitates a shift in perspective from “the world is man” to the socialization of the subject—an understanding and articulation of the elements, their position and function within a given relationship (aesthetic, for example, including the viewer, the object, the site and time of production, of reception, etc.). It is an “almost biological” shift as the body has to be redefined as no

³⁵⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Anti-Humanism in Art,” interview with Paul Schwartz, *Studio International* (April 1968): 169. Writers such as Barbara Rose and James Meyer have drawn parallels between Robbe-Grillet’s “aesthetic of surfaces” and Minimalism’s resistance to interpretation. See Rose, “ABC Art,” *Art in America* (October–November 1965): 57–69 and Meyer, *Minimalism*, esp. 144–150.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

longer the central, universal vessel of consciousness but (merely) an entity in reciprocal (and contingent) relationship with its environment. The following passage by Barthes on Robbe-Grillet's writing could easily be translated to the visual arts. The traditional, bourgeois novel is, to Barthes, "an experiment in depth": "The novelist's task has been, correspondingly, a labor of locating, quarrying, and excavating in the dark. This endoscopic function has been sustained by a concomitant myth of a human essence *at the bottom of things*... Robbe-Grillet's purpose... is to establish the novel on the surface... The novel becomes man's direct experience of what surrounds him without his being able to shield himself with a psychology, a metaphysic, or a psychoanalytic method in his combat with the objective world he discovers."³⁵⁸

In that sense, as the viewer encounters the *Condensation Cube*, he finds himself in a position where he aims to assign meaning, to signify, to feel, but encounters only an operation, a relation, an action. This discovery of the world as an operation and the potential of change implied therein is, to Barthes, the crux of what he calls the "Brechtian Revolution."³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ Roland Barthes, "Alain Robbe-Grillet," *Evergreen Review* (Summer 1958): 126.

³⁵⁹ Roland Barthes, "The Brechtian Revolution" (1955), reprinted in *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1972), 37–39.

The reception and belated popularity of Barthes' writings in the U.S. somewhat eclipses the importance of his earlier essays as they are integrated into the author's phase of formalist structuralism. The majority of Barthes' most Brechtian texts, written during the mid-1950s through the early 1960s and collected in *Critical Essays* and *Mythologies*, were not available to the American public until 1972, by which point Barthes was known first and foremost for his "Death of the Author" and the semiotic scientism of his *nouvelle critique*. While Barthes' Brechtian mythology does develop into his more formalist interest in structures per se, it is important to differentiate between the two approaches and their reception as they have consequences for American art making and writing. The turn from the analysis of everyday myths to the somewhat ahistorical textualization of the universe and especially the popularity of the latter methodology resonates with the political events of the late 1960s and early '70s, with the growing politicization of the everyday, an interest in semiotic, socio-political, and ideological structures, and with a related feeling of impotence regarding the increasing abstraction, complexity, and seemingly transhistorical stability of these structures. It seems that the more American avant-garde art and New Left politics turned toward "the system," the less intelligible and therefore practical its actions became. I would argue that Haacke's interactive objects are therefore more dynamically Brechtian in the sense of the early Barthes,

The objects of Barthes' *Mythologies* such as "Steak and Chips," "The World of Wrestling," and "Romans in Film" are subject to the same practical inspection as Haacke's containers. They are made palpable, or what Barthes calls, "terrestrial," to be touched and turned, stripped of extra-objective significance.³⁶⁰ Barthes has acknowledged his intellectual and methodological debt to Brecht on several occasions; he has written various essays on Brecht (many of them for the French drama review *Théâtre Populaire*), and most of his early texts discussing "Workers and Pastors," "The Structuralist Activity," or "The Poor and the Proletariat" make reference to Brecht's didactic anti-illusionism.³⁶¹ At the core of Barthes' early Brechtianism is his demythologization—the de-naturalization of the common object, its *Umfunktionierung*, its "autonomization."³⁶² The object is taken out of context, out of the innocent continuity of the familiar, in order to be recontextualized. Recalling the origins of his own analytic method, Barthes writes, "Brecht questions concatenation, questions successive discourse; all the pseudo-logic of

while his Real Time Systems somewhat parallel the French critics' abstract, and more static structuralist phase, before Haacke then returns to an expanded anti-mythological Brecht with his Real Time *Social Systems* while Barthes finds solace in a literary hedonism. For a discussion of Barthes' critical position as a development from his earlier, Brechtian anti-humanism to a more formalist structuralism see, for example, Hugh M. Davidson, "The Critical Position of Roland Barthes," *Contemporary Literature* (Summer 1968): 367–376; David Funt, "Roland Barthes and the Nouvelle Critique," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Spring 1968): 329–340; Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., "Roland Barthes," *Contemporary Literature* (Winter 1969): 136–146; and François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). For a review of Barthes' earlier texts upon their American publication that discusses them not as mere precursors along the route to structuralist analysis, see Edward Said, "Critical Essays, Mythologies," *The New York Times* (July 30, 1972): BR5.

³⁶⁰ Barthes, "Objective Literature" (1954), reprinted in *Critical Essays*, 24.

³⁶¹ Barthes, "Workers and Pastors" (1960), reprinted in *Critical Essays*, 125–131; "The Structuralist Activity" (1963), reprinted in *ibid.*, 213–220; "The Poor and the Proletariat" (n.d.), reprinted in *Mythologies*, 39–40.

For Barthes' acknowledgement of Brecht's influence on his work see, for example, "Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity" (1975), reprinted in *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 212–222 and "Literature and Signification: Answers to a Questionnaire in *Tel Quel*" (1963), reprinted in *Critical Essays*, 261–279; Barthes' essays on Brecht include "Mother Courage Blind" (1955), "The Brechtian Revolution" (1955), "The Diseases of Costume" (1955), "The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism" (1956), and "On Brecht's *Mother*" (1960), all reprinted in *Critical Essays*. For the impact of Brecht's plays on French theater and criticism see Harold Waters, "The Heroic Years of French Social Theater 1945–1956," *Modern Language Studies* (Spring 1975): 34–44.

³⁶² The term is Jameson's. See *Brecht and Method*, 43–50.

the discourse... releases a kind of force, engenders an illusion of assurance: concatenated discourse is indestructible, triumphant. The first attack is to make it discontinuous, to discontinue it: literally to dismember the erroneous text is a polemical act.”³⁶³ Barthes isolates ingrained forms of cultural recognition such as “Steak and Chips” or “Toys” in order to expose the reproduction of bourgeois ideology as a consequence of the apathetic and careless familiarity with such objects.³⁶⁴

Haacke’s *Raintower* is subject to a comparable isolation from familiar and culturally specific structures of signification, in which rain evokes a selective symbolic meaning: rain in bourgeois myth commonly signifies melancholy and loneliness, the power and spectacle of nature, the state before a new beginning.³⁶⁵ It is invoked in painting and film, song and literature, to connote essentially humanist conditions, reflections and affirmations of liberalist individualism. In art, rain is never social or socialist, never presented as a factor within a network of economic or political consequences. Rather, it acts as a foil for individual fate, perseverance, experience. In order to dismantle these naturalized expectations, Haacke presents rain simply as dripping water, transforming nature to non-nature. In the words of Barthes: “Art for [the bourgeois] is a false Nature, a *pseudo-Physis*. For Brecht, on the contrary, art today... must be an *anti-Physis*. Brecht’s formalism is a radical protest against the confusions of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois false Nature: in a still-alienated society, art must be critical, it must cut off all illusions, even that of “Nature”: the sign must be partially

³⁶³ Barthes, “Brecht and Discourse,” 216.

³⁶⁴ “The fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times recreated soldiers, postmen and Vespas. Toys here reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc.” Barthes, *Mythologies*, 53.

³⁶⁵ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 115.

arbitrary, otherwise we fall back on an art of expression, an art of essentialist illusionism.”³⁶⁶ In that sense, too, Haacke’s *Raintower* “...articulate[s] something Natural”: it exposes the “false Nature” of “rain” and of “art.” Via Brecht, as much as Haacke develops a science of art, Barthes practices a “science of literature,” of language.³⁶⁷ This science shows that myth in real life is language, is speech; art in real life is object, is image.

But Haacke’s work socializes “art,” not “rain.” And here lies the difference between Barthes’ analysis and Haacke’s: while Barthes’ “mythologies” employ defamiliarization and autonomization in order to articulate an analysis of *what* is communicated in language as much as of *how* language communicates, Haacke’s primary concern lies with the analytical manifestation of art as language. The functionality of Haacke’s interactive work is the realization of the actively applied function of the aesthetic object. The rain of the *Raintower* is scientific, terrestrial, but the way in which it is “handled” socially and culturally remains, in comparison to Barthes’ mythological analyses, general.

Systemic Science and the Place of the Object

While producing what I have been calling “interactive objects,” Haacke began creating works that did not require the presence of the viewer, but rather depended on various inter-systemic biological and physical forces. Barthes developed from mythology to structuralism, from inquiries into specific examples of cultural, social, and ideological signification to the laws and mechanisms of language itself. Haacke similarly turned from

³⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, “The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism” (1956), reprinted in *Critical Essays*, 75.

³⁶⁷ Davidson, “The Critical Position of Roland Barthes”: 373.

an analytic interest in the position of the viewer vis-à-vis the art object to a more general study of natural and scientific systems as observable entities of interrelating elements. In a 1967 untitled statement, Haacke first expressed his interest in systems: “A system is generally defined as a grouping of elements subject to a common plan or purpose. These elements or components interact so as to arrive at a joint goal. To separate the elements would be to destroy the system. Outside the context of the whole, the elements serve no function.”³⁶⁸ As with the interactive objects, all of the independent systems retain their Galileian simplicity—“The simpler the better,” remarks the artist, “like the egg of Columbus. It is best to get along with unmechanical sources of energy.”³⁶⁹ The 1964 *Sphere in Oblique Air Jet* (first shown at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York in 1966) (fig. 81) is precisely that: a round white balloon suspended a few feet above a fan. The fan is housed in a triangular box on the gallery floor. The work is minimal in its means and in its effect—it evokes curiosity in its structure and mechanics, yet keeps an illusionist or aesthetic displacement of the viewer’s interrogative awareness at a minimum.

Blue Sail (1964–65) (fig. 82) is somewhat more poetic: a piece of chiffon measuring approximately ten feet square is suspended from fishing line over an oscillating fan. Haacke’s own notes accompanying the work are as associative-lyrical as they are technical: “If wind blows into a light piece of material, it flutters like a flag or it swells like a sail, depending on the way in which it is suspended. The direction of the

³⁶⁸ Haacke, “Untitled Statement,” 102.

³⁶⁹ Haacke, quoted in Burnham, “Hans Haacke, Wind and Water Sculpture,” 117.

The “egg of Columbus” refers to the famous story of Christopher Columbus using an egg in order to illustrate with simplest means a solution to a seemingly impossible proposition. At a dinner, Columbus asks the attending guests to make an egg stand on its head. All try and fail, concluding that it is impossible. Columbus takes an egg, slightly cracks the shell, standing the egg upright. He declares that everybody is able to do as he did, after having been shown how.

stream of air, as well as its intensity, determines the movements. None of these movements is without an influence from all the others. A common pulse goes through the membrane.”³⁷⁰ But even if the piece has an affective or picturesque effect, to Haacke, the new, active positioning of the elements within the aesthetic system (including the viewer) remains overt: “Naturally, also a system releases a gulf of subjective projections in the viewer. These projections, however, can be measured relative to the system’s actual programme. Compared to traditional sculpture, it has become a partner of the viewer rather than being subjected to his whims.”³⁷¹ Haacke’s faith in a systemic and scientific reorganization of artistic and, by logical extension, social and political life—that is, the repositioning of the artist and the viewer as actively interrelating elements, as a dismantling of the apathetic and solipsist politics of liberal individualism—is met by a more general ambivalence toward technology and scientific thinking during the late 1960s. As for Brecht’s Galileo, technological progress and rational thought provide man with the tools for liberation from social and ideological forms of predetermined belonging while at the same time marginalizing him in an increasingly abstract and quantifying structure of interchangeable variables.

Thinking of the 1960s in this context, the first thing that comes to mind is a general distrust of science and systems among the New Left.³⁷² Looming large was the Frankfurt School’s critical account of the Enlightenment project, the dialectic of technological progress and the systematic destruction of lives through a gigantic military-

³⁷⁰ Burnham, “Hans Haacke, Wind and Water Sculpture,” 115.

³⁷¹ Haacke, “Untitled Statement,” 103.

³⁷² For a general account of 1960s distrust of science and technology see Theodore Roszak, “The Myth of Objective Consciousness,” in *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 205–238.

industrial machine.³⁷³ To sociologist David Riesman, writing in 1967, technological progress meant the destruction of interpersonal relations and social values through the mass production of cultural and consumer goods.³⁷⁴ The all-pervasive media was seen as increasing the alienation of the individual from the production of discourse and opinion (the public sphere), while the growing automation of the workplace and specialization of labor further distanced the worker from the participatory and communal creation of his life-world. According to Marcuse, “the prevailing technological rationality” at the basis of mass production reproduces consensus rather than providing liberatory and democratic access to a variety of goods (nutritional, intellectual, and otherwise): “The productive apparatus and the goods and services it produces ‘sell’ or impose the social system as a whole.”³⁷⁵

Technology appeared to be the beast that destroyed all irrational qualities: “How long,” wrote historian Lewis Mumford, “... how long can the physical structure of an advanced technology hold together when all its human foundations are crumbling away?”

³⁷³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was not available to the American public until its publication in 1972 (New York: Herder and Herder; translated by John Cummings); other related works on the topic were accessible earlier, such as *Eclipse of Reason*, published in 1947 (New York: Oxford University Press). For a discussion of the Institute’s critique of humanism and the enlightenment, its publication in earlier essays and articles, and its U.S. reception see Martin Jay, “Toward a Philosophy of History: The Critique of the Enlightenment,” in *The Dialectical Imagination* (originally published in 1973) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 253–280.

³⁷⁴ See, for example, David Riesman, “Some Questions about the Study of American Character in the Twentieth Century,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (March 1967): 36–47.

³⁷⁵ Marcuse continues: “The means of transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness, which is immune to its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life—much better than before—and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension.” *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 11–12.

Mumford concludes that “for its effective salvation mankind will need to undergo something like a spontaneous religious conversion... to overthrow the megamachine” and “the terms imposed by the technocratic society.”³⁷⁶ This megamachine was ultimately referred to as “the system” at a point where the differentiation and location of sources of power and manipulation seemed to have taken on an unprecedented complexity as private, state, and public interests molded into an abstract, anonymous, amorphous whole.

It became increasingly obvious, for example, that the war in Vietnam was not merely a military or federal affair but stood in reciprocal relation with various economic and industrial entities, a pervasive information and communication industry, racist and patriarchal social and educational institutions, and a deeply ingrained, mythical set of values and truths concerning the American way of life. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) president Paul Potter asked, “What kind of system is it that justifies the United States or any other country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for its own purpose? What kind of system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, leaves millions upon millions of people throughout the country impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of American society, that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work, that consistently puts material values before human values—and still persists in calling itself free and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world? ...We must name that system. We must name it, describe it, analyze it, understand it, change it.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 432, 435.

³⁷⁷ Paul Potter, “Speech to the April 17, 1965 March on Washington,” reprinted in Judith Albert and Stewart Albert (eds.), *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 222–223.

At stake then was the necessity to recognize the system as system, as a structure containing elements and parts, interrelating and interdependent. This recognition would lead to a rejection of the myths of liberalist humanism, with its emphasis on the autonomy of parts and free will of the individual. In his diatribe against liberalist ideology, “Repressive Tolerance,” Marcuse emphasizes the necessity to regard the functional totality of what he calls “a civilization”: “According to a dialectical proposition it is the whole which determines the truth—not in the sense that the whole is prior or superior to its parts, but in the sense that its structure and function determine every particular condition and relation.”³⁷⁸ Scientific thinking promised empirical objectivity, the chance to observe the mechanisms of life and its representation. It seemed to provide an almost paradoxical autonomy, at once historically implicated in and dependent upon the very structure to be analyzed, yet free from a false notion of subjectivity. According to Max Weber, science is, after all, in both a negative and positive sense, the *Entzauberung* of Western life.³⁷⁹

Via this notion of possibility, the 1960s also experienced an optimistic, sometimes utopian appreciation of technology and scientific thought that made itself felt in the visual arts of the time. A more rational view of the world could help overcome Cold War politics based on fear and paranoia. Travel into outer space might open up future habitats and new perspectives. Marshall McLuhan’s popular studies of the history of media promised to overcome the “fragmentation of man” through the greater participation and

³⁷⁸ Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 83.

³⁷⁹ “Entzauberung” translates roughly as “disenchantment” or “de-magicification.” Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der Verstehenden Soziologie* (1892), republished by Johannes Winckelmann (ed.) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980).

joy inherent in communication's new "cool media" such as television.³⁸⁰ The electronically shaped environment, so McLuhan argued, would unify people and ideas hitherto separated by physical and temporal distance, creating the now skeptically viewed concept of the "global village." Structuralism not only challenged the sinister isolationism of existentialist philosophy but brought with it a de-hierarchization of authoritarian formations, literary as well as political, social, and ideological. The "absence of the Author," Barthes wrote in the Fall-Winter 1967 issue of *Aspen*, "(with Brecht, we might speak here of a real 'alienation')" would be "properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law."³⁸¹ Some influential thinkers, like Jacob Bronowski in his influential *Science and Human Values*, republished in 1965, equated scientific progress with human, ethical progress,³⁸² Others, such as Robert Boguslaw in *The New Utopians: A Study of System Design and Social Change* (1965), went so far as to consider the design of new social configurations—consisting of "human operating units"—based on the analysis of computer-based command and control systems.³⁸³

The American arts encountered a similar scientific and technological turn: artists read about scientific revolutions in the writings of Thomas Kuhn and learned of cybernetics from Norbert Wiener. In 1967, *Experiments in Art and Technology* (E.A.T.)

³⁸⁰ See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962) and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964). For a critical reception of McLuhan's ideas see Harold Rosenberg, "Philosophy in a Pop Key," *The New Yorker* (February 27, 1965): 129–136 and Amy Goldin, "McLuhan's Message: Participate, Enjoy!" *Arts Magazine* (May 1966): 27–31.

³⁸¹ Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," *Aspen* no. 5+6 (Fall-Winter 1967): n.pag..

³⁸² Jacob Bronowski, *Science and Human Values* (originally published in 1956; republished New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

³⁸³ Robert Boguslaw, *The New Utopians: A Study of System Design and Social Change* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 112.

declared that it had “assumed the responsibility of developing an effective collaborative relationship between artists and engineers”³⁸⁴ and Gyorgy Kepes founded the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at M.I.T., whose objectives include the “absorption of the new technology as an artistic medium; ...media geared to all sensory modalities; ...incorporation of natural processes.”³⁸⁵ Further, reaching the American shores in full force in the late 1960s, the structuralism of Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss sought, so one critic explained, the “construction of deliberately abstract models by the artificial breaking down of the object under study and its subsequent reconstitution in terms of essentially relational properties, ...showing that myths can only be explained in terms of their position within ‘the total myth structure of the culture concerned’.”³⁸⁶ *Studio International* started a monthly column “devoted to the relationship between science and art”;³⁸⁷ museums sponsored programs like the LACMA’s *Art and Technology* that sought productive collaborations between artists and industry;³⁸⁸ exhibitions carried titles such as *Cybernetic Serendipity* (London, 1968);³⁸⁹ and a number of books, including Jonathan Benthall’s *Science and Technology Today* and Douglas Davis’ *Art and the Future: A*

³⁸⁴ *E.A.T. News* (June 1, 1967): 1.

³⁸⁵ Gyorgy Kepes, quoted in Jonathan Benthall, “Kepes’ Center at M.I.T.,” *Art International* (January 1974): 30.

³⁸⁶ W.G. Runciman, “What Is Structuralism,” *The British Journal of Sociology* (September 1969): 257–258.

Throughout the 1960s, parts of the following works were available to the American public as separately published and reviewed articles in journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Evergreen Review*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *The Drama Review*, *Diacritics*, *Yale French Studies*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Atlantic Monthly*: Claude Levi Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963) and *Totemism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) and *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

³⁸⁷ Jonathan Benthall, “Technology and Art,” *Studio International* (March 1969): 112.

³⁸⁸ See Maurice Tuchman (ed.), *Art and Technology: a Report on the Art & Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (Los Angeles and New York: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Viking Press, 1971).

³⁸⁹ The exhibition, curated by Jasia Reichardt, was held at the ICA, London, August 2–October 20, 1968; the catalog and a volume of related texts were published and distributed in the U.S.: Jasia Reichardt (ed.), *Cybernetic Serendipity* (New York: Praeger, 1968) and Jasia Reichardt (ed.), *Cybernetics, Art and Ideas* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971).

History/Prophecy of the Collaboration between Science, Technology, and Art surveyed recent developments and tried to predict future ones.³⁹⁰

At the end of the decade, Haacke's work was included in three major exhibitions that all dealt with technological progress, science, and art: the Museum of Modern Art's *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968) and *Information* (1970), as well as *Software*, shown at the Jewish Museum (1970).³⁹¹ The tone set by these exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues was, if not outright optimistic, then at least confident that a pragmatic union of art and new scientific concepts and technologies was necessary.

In the introduction to MoMA's *Machine* show, curator K.G. Pontus Hultén concludes a very general survey of art and technology with the observation that, while historically machines have been regarded from a variety of perspectives and evoked various sentiments (to some they are "agents of magic, marvel, and fantasy," some looked to them "to bring about progress toward utopia," yet other "have feared them as the enemies of human values, leading only to destruction"), contemporary artists would have to face "the products and the consequences of technology and mass production."³⁹² This was so, not only in order to control the hypothetical evolution of technology independent of human will, but because the arts, if they wanted to keep pace with the

³⁹⁰ Jonathan Benthall, *Science and Technology Today* (New York: Praeger, 1972); Douglas Davis, *Art and the Future: A History/Prophecy of the Collaboration between Science, Technology, and Art* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

³⁹¹ Haacke's work was also featured in other important shows at the time, which fall outside the scope of this project. These include Willoughby Sharp's *Earth Art* exhibition, held at the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, New York, February 11–March 16, 1969 and Harald Szeemann's *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information*, which originated at the Kunsthalle in Bern, March 22–April 27, 1969.

³⁹² K.G. Pontus Hultén, "Introduction," in Hultén (ed.), *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (New York and Greenwich, CT: Museum of Modern Art and New York Graphic Society, 1968), 6, 13. The *Machine* show was further accompanied by a prize contest sponsored by Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT).

developments around them, would have to find the appropriate means to negotiate the increasing quantification and differentiation of human experience while maintaining certain aesthetic qualities: “The amount of data involved in managing society at all levels is increasing at terrific speed, as is the quantity of justifications for decisions. The decisions that will shape our society in the future will have to be arrived at, developed, and carried out through technology. But they must be based on the same criteria of respect and appreciation for human capacities, freedom, and responsibility that prevail in art.”³⁹³ Hultén thus affirms the humanist function of aesthetic production and sweepingly assigns to the vast variety of artworks assembled in the exhibition a similarly reductive purpose—the aestheticization of technological progress.³⁹⁴

The *Machine* exhibition also featured Hans Haacke’s 1966 *Ice Stick* (fig. 83). Measuring about four-and-a-half feet tall, the frozen water sculpture stands on a square, metal refrigeration unit, which provides the temperature necessary to erect the ice stick by condensation of moisture in the air. Here, in the context of the *Machine* exhibition, Haacke’s work illustrated the meditative function between man and nature, the aesthetic appropriation of technology. As Hultén put it, “Technology, exemplified in the refrigeration unit, artificially produces a natural phenomenon, cold; but instead of exploiting it for some practical reason, such as the preservation of food, the artist has produced it to create an image of itself.”³⁹⁵ But *Ice Stick* is neither anything “of itself” (be it art or nature, process, or technology) nor the spectacular marriage of aesthetics and

³⁹³ Ibid., 13.

³⁹⁴ The exhibition featured drawings of flying apparatuses by Leonardo da Vinci and Winslow Homer, anthropomorphic and eroticized meditations on the machine by Max Ernst and Francis Picabia, photomontages by El Lissitzky and Hannah Höch, a cubed car by César and a soft engine by Claes Oldenburg.

³⁹⁵ Pontus Hultén (ed.), *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, 195.

machine offered by much of the art contemporary to Haacke's.³⁹⁶ Instead, Haacke created a Real Time System.

Over the course of the 1960s, Haacke's work developed from the interactive object's participatory relationship with the viewer to the art object as a study of and exercise in relationality itself. *Wave* still relied on the spectator to make the work function as a work. As systems in and of themselves, however, the *Ice Stick* gained independence. As Haacke put it,

The physical self-sufficiency of such systems has a decisive effect on the viewer's relationship to the work, due to its hitherto unknown independence from his mental involvement. His role might be reduced to being the source of physical energy in works conceived for the viewer's participation. In these, his actions—pulling, pushing, turning, etc.—are

³⁹⁶ Collaborative works by contemporary artists and engineers were featured in *Some More Beginnings: An Exhibition of Submitted Works Involving Technical Materials and Processes Organized by Staff and Members of Experiments of Art and Technology in Collaboration with the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, New York*, held in conjunction with the *Machine* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. The show featured works such as *Black Box* (1968) by artist John Benedict and electrical engineering student John Newton Jr. *Black Box* consists of three connected black boxes, each with a light inside, and a radio transmitter. The accompanying catalogue explains, "The amplitude of the light in the central box is controlled through an SCR system activated by a transistor radio inside the box. The lights in the side boxes remain constant." *Some More Beginnings...*, exhibition catalogue (New York, E.A.T. Inc., 1968), n. pag.. Another example is *Moon Tree* (1968) by artist Ingeborg Richter and George Quittner, Research Director, API Instruments Company. The description in the catalogue is to the point: "3 limbs extend from a vertical piece of tubing. A narrow light-gauge stainless steel strip is wound between and around the limbs, forming a generally spherical semi-open mass. The base contains a motor, which rotates the sculpture. It is illuminated by a collimated projection lamp with mask and lens system, which is placed to one side." *Ibid.*, n.pag. Reviewing *Some More Beginnings*, critic John Chandler referred to an "uncaged McLuhanesque mosaic in which the spectator is bombarded with a chaos and cacophony of unrelated images of sight and sound haphazardly and accidentally juxtaposed." "Art in the Electrical Age," *Art International* (February 1969): 19.

Most other reviews of the *Machine* exhibition are almost banal in their descriptivity, some marveling at the works' visual stimulation, other at the uncovered technological interests of certain artists. See, for example, Nan R. Piene, "New York Exhibition Notes," *Art in America* (January–February 1969): 102–104 and James Mellow, "New York Letter," *Art International* (September 1970): 44–45. A slightly more critical tact is taken by Dore Ashton who contemplates the state of "the machine imitating art" as well as the questionable sponsorship of the international cash prize competition in relation with the exhibition (the result of which was *Some More Beginnings*). "New York Commentary," *Studio International* (January 1969): 44–45.

part of the program. Or his mere presence might be sufficient. However, there are systems, which function properly even when the viewer is not present at all, i.e., their program operates absolutely independently of any contribution on the part of the viewer.³⁹⁷

The viewer as the traditional subject of artistic address—passive, contemplative, yet central—is further marginalized. “I use the word ‘systems’ exclusively for things that are not systems in terms of perception, but are physical, biological, or social entities, which, I believe, are more real than perceptual titillation.”³⁹⁸ The work’s anti-illusionism and estrangement lies with the further repositioning of the viewer into the role of observer: “What can be said is only descriptive. There are no mysteries and psychological investigations would not reveal my secrets.”³⁹⁹

Yet this repositioning of the viewer is no mere modernist retreat; the system observed is part of a larger system, its autonomy relative to the forces outside. *Chickens Hatching* (1969), consisting of fertilized eggs, incubators, lamps, and thermostats, focuses less on the birds themselves than on the process of interaction in real time—the inter-sufficiency of all involved elements. The work yielded no surprise (since the artist had declared the piece’s intent), provided little or no drama, and had a sober functionality that aimed to result in an exchange of information—not about chickens but about the time, space, and meaning of art as a communicative device. The Real Time Systems were not intended to demonstrate a complete autonomy, the mythical and magical purity and disinterestedness of modernist formalism—quite the contrary. Haacke felt that not only

³⁹⁷ Haacke, “Untitled Statement,” 102–103.

³⁹⁸ Siegel, “An Interview with Hans Haacke,” 18.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: 20.

was the world around him in constant motion but that art *as a system* and *as part of a system* was susceptible to a variety of forces (natural, economic, intellectual, etc.): “One of my essential premises is the strong belief that the world is something dynamic, something that constantly changes.”⁴⁰⁰ According to Haacke, permanence in art, as the attempt to “arrest things, create a haven of still waters”—and permanence in general—was a myth.⁴⁰¹

Haacke’s interest in systems stems from his reading of Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s *General Systems Theory*, Norbert Wiener’s “cybernetics,” and his friendship with Jack Burnham, whose 1968 book *Beyond Modern Sculpture* divides modern sculpture into “system” and “object.” The first part of the book, “Sculpture as Object,” examines the trajectory from Brancusi to “phenomenalism”; the second, “Sculpture as System,” discusses the development of Kinetic Art, light sculpture, and robotics.⁴⁰² *Beyond Sculpture* positions Haacke’s *Ice Stick* and *Grass Cube* in the section “Robot and Cyborg Art.” Burnham explains, “It would be misleading to classify Haacke as an artist primarily devoted to applying cybernetic principles to mechanical artifacts; rather his interests are those cyclical processes which manifest evidences of natural feedback and equilibrium. One might call this *an environmental systems philosophy*.”⁴⁰³

In two related articles, “Systems Esthetics” and “Real Time Systems” published in *Artforum* shortly after the publication of *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, Burnham

⁴⁰⁰ Haacke, quoted in Vinklers, “Hans Haacke,” 44.

⁴⁰¹ Haacke, quoted in John Chandler, “Hans Haacke: The Continuity of Change,” *ArtsCanada* (June 1969): 8.

⁴⁰² Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture*. For a detailed account of Haacke’s debt to Bertalanffy’s systems theory, developed in the 1920s, summarized in *General Systems Theory* (New York: G. Braziller, 1968), see Burnham, “Steps in the Formulation of a Real-Time Political Art.”

⁴⁰³ Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, 349.

prominently features Haacke's sculpture as he elaborates on his notion of systemic art.⁴⁰⁴ To Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," and Haacke's work as an example thereof, promised a paradigm shift, a "radical evolution," in the arts: by adopting a system's viewpoint, art objects morphed into "unobjects" and artists became "a symptom of the schism between art and technology."⁴⁰⁵ Hence, aesthetics would finally catch up to the technological and intellectual standards of the time: "We are now in transition from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented culture*. Here change emanates, not from *things*, but from *the way things are done*."⁴⁰⁶ Rather than "beautify," art's primary role would be didactic: "The specific function of modern didactic art has been to show that art does not reside in material entities, but in relations between people and between people and the components of their environment."⁴⁰⁷ In addition to the dissolution of the art object, systemic art would be the continued depersonalization of artistic production, located by Burnham in Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Robert Morris: "In an advanced technological culture the most important artist best succeeds by liquidating his position as artist vis-à-vis society."⁴⁰⁸

Haacke's art—Burnham names, among others, *Sky Line* and *Chickens Hatching*—serves to demystify the role of the artist and the art object. "A major illusion of the art system is that art resides in specific objects," bestowing upon it an aura of immanence that transcends the limits of historical space and time.⁴⁰⁹ This in turn affects the reception of the object-as-art: "Only Art Appreciation," Burnham insists, "happens in ideal,

⁴⁰⁴ Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* (September 1968): 30–35; Jack Burnham, "Real Time Systems," *Artforum* (September 1969): 49–55.

⁴⁰⁵ Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," 31.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Burnham, "Real Time Systems," 50.

nonexistential time.”⁴¹⁰ Haacke, in evaluating systems, is “a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system.”⁴¹¹ Bourgeois, humanist art, or what Burnham refers to as the “self-metaprogram” (ideology) of art since the Renaissance, “has been predicated upon nostalgia. Recapturing a real or imagined classical past has been its goal... What a few artists [including Haacke] are beginning to give the public is real time information, information with no hardware value, but with software significance for effecting awareness of events in the present.”⁴¹² *Live Airborne System* (1968) (fig. 84) and *Ten Turtles Set Free* (1970) (fig. 85) replace inanimate objects with living entities, auratic permanence with contingency, projected time with operational time, the artist-as-creator with the artist-as-facilitator, meaning with information, signs with the act of signification. The scattered bread crumbs in the water before Coney Island, New York and the seagulls who descend, break the surface of the water, flap their wings as they struggle for a place, pick up a bite, then fly away with the bounty—all this, in its limited, temporal presence, visual and physical chaos and randomness, its unpredictability within a known set of variables, the rational placement of artist and viewer, all this gives the event a distancingly descriptive rather than metaphorical or illusionist quality. The turtles, set free, scattering about in predictable, yet random directions until they disappear somewhere in the landscape, even their probability of survival can be calculated without being able to precisely foresee any single fate—the viewer is a witness to the laws of nature and of the variability within. Meaning is articulated vis-à-vis the viewer, in

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” 32.

⁴¹² Burnham, “Real Time Systems,” 51–52.

relation to him or her, and about that relation to him or her as observing rather than empathetic subject. Haacke states, “The system’s program is not affected by the viewer’s knowledge, past experience, the mechanics of perceptual psychology, or his emotions... In the past, a sculpture or painting had meaning only at the grace of the viewer... Without his emotional and intellectual involvement, the material remained meaningless. A system’s program, on the other hand, is independent of the viewer’s participation.”⁴¹³

This depersonalization, or de-individualization, of aesthetic experience and the knowledge gained (or reproduced) through it, lies at the heart of Brecht’s Galileo and the playwright’s general concern with science. Scientific knowledge is, after all, based on laws and their general validity rather than on individual interpretation and empathetical understanding. And Brecht saw, as Burnham did after him, that the schism between art and science was too great, that art was stuck in an inadequate vacuum of timeless tastes and ahistorical values, while technology and scientific knowledge progressed rapidly: “In the old days there was no more need for the artist to bother about science than for science to concern itself with him. But now he has to, for science has progressed much further. Look at an aeroplane, then look at a theatrical performance.”⁴¹⁴

But to Brecht, for the arts to acquaint themselves with the workings of systems and structures is no mere matter of keeping up. It is a class issue, since rational thought and technology have aided the bourgeoisie in establishing their power. Meanwhile the arts have covered up exploitation and domination with the humanist illusion of brotherhood, citizenship, and equal access to the individual pursuit of happiness. A “scientification” of the arts would forge a powerful weapon: “The bourgeois class, which

⁴¹³ Haacke, quoted in Vinklers, “Hans Haacke,” 45.

⁴¹⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “Interview with an Exile” (1934), reprinted in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 67.

owes to science an advancement that it was able, by ensuring that it alone enjoyed the fruits, to convert into domination, knows very well that its rule would come to an end if the scientific eye were turned on its own undertakings.”⁴¹⁵

It is apparent, given Brecht’s ideas on the revolutionary power of a scientific art, that the examples of Haacke’s works discussed here so far are Brechtian only to a certain extent—not merely because of every single action’s limited effect (Brecht himself was not so naïve as to believe in an *individual* work of art’s instantaneously global, transformative political power) but because in their total *Umfunktionierung* of aesthetic experience, Haacke’s scientific inquiries focus less on the causes of “bourgeois undertakings” than on causality as such. Yet Haacke’s works are part of a development within a project undertaken by a number of artists and intellectuals, one logical conclusion of a systemic demystification through anti-illusionism and estrangement.

In 1969, the Guggenheim Museum organized a series of lectures with the title “On the Future of Art.”⁴¹⁶ Its participants, including Burnham and Herbert Marcuse, film critic Annette Michelson and the sculptor James Seawright, raised the issue of scientific, systemic, and structuralist depersonalization as a strategy of modernism’s attempt to defy the bourgeois, empathetic space of academic art. For some, it remained a valid avant-garde strategy, for others, it presented a new doctrine. Seawright, affiliated with the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, advocated the production and use of “automatic or self-regulating mechanisms,” minimizing the spectator’s role as much as the artist’s:

⁴¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (1949), reprinted in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 185.

⁴¹⁶ *On the Future of Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1970).

I want you, however, to eliminate from consideration works that produce phenomena which are the result of some change in relationship between the work and the viewer: changes of perspectives, visual illusions, that sort of thing. What I want to talk about are sculptures or objects or systems—whatever you want to call them—that undergo changes of their own, active changes, in time, changes that are inherent in them, that they were constructed to produce physically... When you produce a piece of electronic music, you no longer have the performer's experience and skill to help in interpreting the real meaning of the symbolic instructions.⁴¹⁷

Referring to one of his own works, *Watcher* (1965) (fig. 86), a complicated-looking, yet visually accessible arrangement of wires and sensors, speakers and lamps (“the mechanisms are all fully visible”) that transforms various sets of information (i.e., light) into other forms of information (i.e., sound), Seawright emphasizes that “the concern is primarily with the phenomena themselves.”⁴¹⁸ But what, then, is the point? To Seawright, the fusion of art and technology, the de-individualization of the aesthetic experience bears a democratic, accessible potential, echoing Brecht's and Benjamin's optimistic belief in the liberatory potential of science and technology: “The point is that the problem of making the piece work, of making it function in some active way, necessarily involves you in an area of concepts that I think is central to our times, and that is technology. There is a difference between the understanding of a technological process and the understanding of everything else, I think. Perhaps it's just that technology

⁴¹⁷ James Seawright, “Phenomenal Art: Form, Idea, and Technique,” in *On the Future of Art*, 77, 79.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

can be understood.”⁴¹⁹ Like Haacke’s Real Time Systems, *Watcher* employs a scientific rationality in order to de-auratize the art object. Unlike Haacke’s, the work affirms the viewer at the locus of the aesthetic-technological experience since its goal is to provide intellectual empowerment, while the former aims to relativize the spectator’s position.

Burnham’s Guggenheim lecture, “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems,” is a further advocacy of the conscious repositioning of the subject within his environment through “information-processing systems.”⁴²⁰ These are, like Brecht’s ideal “radio apparatus,” dialogic rather than monologic.⁴²¹ As communicative devices, works of art can throw off the burdens of academic, classical aesthetics:

But we must look beyond replication or illusionism to discover the basis of anthropomorphism. All art, whether abstract or representational, is in fact anthropomorphic if one considers art not in terms of appearances but in terms of its function and relation to human activity. Tools, from the simplest hand implements to the most sophisticated computers, are extensions of man’s attempt to shape his environment. And in the same sense, symbols are human extensions too... If we look at all earlier art as a form of communication... we find that communication is a contemplative, one-way process. We have already seen in happenings, kinetic art, and

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁴²⁰ Jack Burnham, “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems,” in *On the Future of Art*, 96.

⁴²¹ Ibid. In what is maybe his most famous and often-cited essay, “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication” (1932), Brecht writes, “[R]adio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it know how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him.” Reprinted in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 52.

luminous art some premature attempts to expand the art experience into a two-way communication loop.⁴²²

Although Burnham doesn't explicitly refer to Haacke's interactive objects, they function, as I have argued above, in this very way. Burnham's descriptions of the integrative function of intelligent systems may as well be in direct reference to Haacke's Real Time Systems:

This shift [from monologic to dialogic communication] represents what could be called a figure-ground reversal in human perception of the environment. Until now Western thought has relied upon a fixed viewer-object (or subject-stimulus) relationship, where concentration is merely a matter of shifting objectives. A great deal of technological rationalization has derived from this attitude, which has led us to think in terms of human domination and environmental passivity. The change that I perceive, however, encourages the recognition of man as integral to his environment. The biological sciences are already beginning to realize the mistake of separating organisms from their habitat or subjects from their settings.⁴²³

Annette Michelson's contribution, "Art and the Structuralist Perspective," takes a cautious stance toward the increasing rationalization of artistic production and reception, "that intensive reflexiveness and unsentimental interrogation of our felt experience."⁴²⁴

Using the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss as her example, Michelson shows the

⁴²² Ibid., 97, 99.

⁴²³ Ibid., 100.

⁴²⁴ Annette Michelson, "Art and the Structuralist Perspective," in *On the Future of Art*, 58.

increasing “dissolution of the subject in the interest of style and structure” in modern art in general and in postwar American art in particular.⁴²⁵ Instead of illusionist representation, artists such as Pollock and Franz Kline are concerned with indexes, Jasper Johns and the early Robert Morris with indexes as icons. Following this development, the artists of the late 1960s further abstract and rationalize the aesthetic experience. Within Michelson’s trajectory of modernism, structuralist inquiry, as in Haacke’s *Real Time Systems*, seeks to substitute any residual “felt experience” permitted by Greenbergian formalism and Minimalist phenomenology with the objectivity of the scientific, structuralist encounter: “The Utopian ideal of this century is, indeed, as Lévi-Strauss has suggested, the construction of a sign system on a single level of articulation. It is the dream of absolute immediacy pervading our culture and our art, which replaces, in a secular age, a theology of absolute presence.”⁴²⁶

Yet, once again, the most insightful development of scientific, systemic thought in relation to Haacke’s artistic development is that of Barthes, whose structuralist approach to the world originates, like Haacke’s, in a Brechtian mythology of culture. The increasing abstraction and depersonalization of structuralist thought lead, however, to different results: while Barthes’ post-structuralist work took a somewhat reactionary turn to a hedonistic “pleasure of the text,” Haacke’s systems expanded to consider the economic, political, and ideological dimensions of author- and readership.⁴²⁷ A comparison between Haacke and Barthes is of great importance: to present the political

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁴²⁷ François Dosse describes Barthes’ turn as a consequence of the “death of the author”: “The author had no other function than as a mere plaything, a simple receptacle, a degree zero like the dummy in a bridge game... The pleasure of the text opened onto the infinite, incessant intertwining of a creative opening in which the subject undoes itself by revealing itself.” Dosse, *The History of Structuralism*, vol. 2, 213.

turn in Haacke's work as a continuation rather than a consequence of the structuralist project has effectively paved the way for a postmodernist-relativist reading of his art and for the popularity of Marxism as a negative (rather than productively utopian or revolutionary) critique.

Though Barthes's transition from *nouvelle critique* to structuralism to textual delights has been well documented, it needs to be looked at here, briefly, with regard to Barthes' Brechtian intentions.⁴²⁸ As Jameson points out, "no satisfactory study of the career of Roland Barthes can afford to omit his Brechtian... origins: his classic *Mythologies* have paved the way for the triumphant entry of the estrangement-effect into French theory."⁴²⁹ With regard to Haacke's work, as well as postmodernist discourse as it developed in the U.S. after 1968, Barthes' appropriation of Brechtian dialectics for his structuralist enterprise was crucial. Barthes' early Brechtian texts, such as "Structuralist Activity" (1963), "Myth Today" (1957), and "Literature and Signification" (1963), define the then-emerging structuralist method as an active and activist revolutionary critique of socio-cultural myths, a critique of ideology, of the presumed transparency of language.

After attending a Berliner Ensemble production of *Mother Courage* at the Théâtre des Nations, "Barthes saw Brecht as the person who did in theater what he wanted to do with literature or with contemporary myths."⁴³⁰ Answering a questionnaire from *Tel Quel* regarding the justification of the attention given to theater when it comes to "problems of signification," Barthes explains the *political* significance of Brecht for the systematic interrogation of the production and exchange of information:

⁴²⁸ For Barthes' intellectual and methodological development within the context of French literary and social sciences, see Dosse, *History of Structuralism* and Denis Hollier (ed.), *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴²⁹ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 38.

⁴³⁰ Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. 1, 77.

What is theater? A kind of cybernetic machine. When it is not working, this machine is hidden behind a curtain. But as soon as it is revealed, it begins emitting a certain number of messages... But above all, precisely when he was linking this theater of signification to political thought, Brecht *affirmed* meaning but did not *fulfill* it... [the goal of Brecht's method being] *consciousness of unconsciousness*, consciousness the audience must have of the unconsciousness prevailing on the stage.⁴³¹

Here, structuralism is first and foremost an activity. As Barthes argues in “The Structuralist Activity,” first published in the U.S. in the Winter 1967 issue of the *Partisan Review*, the autonomization of the parts does not stop at their isolation; rather, it is a twofold operation: “dissection and articulation.”⁴³² The procedure of the “structuralist activity” is important: “the units of the structure are *not at all anarchic*... Once the units are posited, structural man must discover in them or establish for them certain *rules of association*.”⁴³³ And it is ultimately political, since the structuralist activity denotes not only the critic's endeavor but every act of actively assigning meaning: “Ultimately one might say that the object of structuralism is not man endowed with meanings but *man fabricating meanings*.”⁴³⁴

Signifying, assigning meaning, means authorship—to speak, to write, to paint, to wield power. And to the early Barthes it is, as it was to Brecht, a matter of class: “Our

⁴³¹ Barthes, “Literature and Signification,” 261–263.

⁴³² Barthes, “The Structuralist Activity,” 216. First translation published in the U.S. in the Winter 1967 issue of the *Partisan Review*, together with “Diseases of Costume” (1955) (Barthes' reflections on the social *gestus* and the costume as theatrical technique in Brecht and other playwrights) and a review of Brecht's *Hauspostille*.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 217. Emphasis added.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 218. Emphasis added.

society is still a bourgeois society.”⁴³⁵ Inactivity—and this is where Haacke’s early work comes closest to Barthes’—means to slow down, not the processes of signification, but their appearance and therefore one’s consciousness of these processes. Myth is the stagnation of awareness, the disappearance of historical time: “Statistically, myth is on the right. There, it is essential; well-fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly.”⁴³⁶ Bourgeois politics transform nature, while “bourgeois ideology yields in return an unchangeable nature.”⁴³⁷ An avant-garde art, a political language, must therefore be active as much as uncover veiled activity: “There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible.”⁴³⁸

The first Barthian text in an American art publication struck a different tone: published in the Fall-Winter 1967 issue of *Aspen*, “Death of the Author” introduced its readers to what Jameson has called Barthes’ “passage,” the “flight here towards the nameless, towards some ultimately uncoded Deleuzian flux that might underlie all things.”⁴³⁹ The quotes above point out Barthes’ early political commitment—a commitment not only to language but to who speaks it, from where and why. They indicate his concern for how it functions as an ideological tool, and how revolutionary language is always tied to the speakers’ position and to the relation of language to the

⁴³⁵ Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies*, 137.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴³⁹ Barthes, “Death of the Author,” n.pag.. Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 50.

meta-language, which is in turn tied to the structure of myth, as erected by the owners of economic and intellectual property: the bourgeoisie. Now, as the author is killed off, “diminished like a tiny figure at the far end of the stage,” language is set free.⁴⁴⁰ It seems that what Barthes has in mind is to destroy the myth of the author, to expose authorship as yet another humanist façade, an endowment of language with a fictitiously rooted source, safely anchored in “the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the ‘human person’.”⁴⁴¹ Barthes does away, not only with the bourgeois notion of “the author,” but with “authorship” in general.⁴⁴²

This complete refusal of author-ity is, like Marcuse’s, more of a utopian-revolutionary program than an activist-revolutionary one. It exposes the fictitiousness of ideology and myth rather than reappropriating the act of speaking and writing as directed and self-referential speech. Barthes’ death of the author is the declaration of a future, post-revolutionary condition, an ideal consciousness, but the relativity of the structure prohibits the assignment of how to get there. As in Haacke’s Real Time Systems, the reader/viewer is acknowledged as the space of inscription, a partner within the cybernetic system rather than a producer who himself transforms. It is the lack of signifying coherence that renders the reader so powerless, a fragmentation that Barthes takes to its logical conclusion.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ Barthes, “Death of the Author,” n.pag.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² The text, Barthes writes, “is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.” Ibid. While there is certainly some truth to this disparity of sources, Barthes liberates the modern author, “the sriptor,” from the historical consequence of signification as “his hand, detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin.” Ibid.

⁴⁴³ In 1971, looking back at the genesis of his structuralist thought, Barthes advocates, via Brecht, a “socialist future of art” brought about by the liberation of the sign. “Brecht and Discourse,” lecture originally held in 1971, reprinted in *The Rustle of Language*, 222. But at this point in Barthes’ career, this

Like Haacke's Real Time Systems, Barthes' structuralism liberates the elements from immanent meaning, substituting process for stasis, change for the myth of permanence. The changes occurring within the system are observed, not directed; the system is defined by its properties, not its quality. Haacke's Real Time Systems free art from the permanence of humanist values and beauty inscribed therein. Yet his work has traded one ideal for another, as his art serves to witness, to describe, "Change" rather than express "Permanence." The myth of immanent meaning has given way to the myth of scientific objectivity and autonomy. Haacke wants to present change as a natural concept, not as a matter of historically specific manipulation, a guided transformation with a purpose; the purpose of his art at this time is not to interfere (interference being, as remains to be seen, one of the Brechtian qualities Haacke does eventually turn to), but to reveal the flux occurring within the boundaries of the system. As in Barthes, the estrangement as such has attained avant-garde value.

Truth-telling and the Politics of Science

Published in *Studio International* in 1970, French art historian and critic Jean Clay's essay "Aspects of Bourgeois Art: The World as It Is" condemns Haacke's Real Time Systems as devices that passively record and therefore reproduce rather than challenge the world at hand: "In most of his work Haacke chose to see natural phenomena as so

liberation in and of itself is the source of art as pleasure: "aesthetics is absorbed into an art of living." Ibid. While pleasure to Brecht is the pleasure of knowledge, the pleasure of thinking, which due to its assignment to the rational, calculating parts of human activity is usually exempt from the attribution of any delightful connotations, Barthes restores a sensual dimension of "eating-well" to Brechtian pleasure. In a final act of liberation, Barthes rids Brechtian estrangement from class struggle, relativizing the parts of the system, their origin and their purpose, within historical context for an absolute immediacy. The "task of a critical age," according to Barthes, is not to analyze the sign in order to get to the source of its signification, its function in and as language, but to "pluralize the object, to separate pleasure from the sign; we must de-semanticize the object ... let the sign fall, like a shed skin." Ibid.

many ‘systems’ whose mere existence was fascinating... These works are alive but only in parenthesis. They are impotent and have no repercussion on reality.”⁴⁴⁴ By comparison, Clay argues, Haacke’s more recent pieces, such as the infamous *MoMA-Poll* (1970) (fig. 87), wherein the artist implicated members of the museum’s board of trustees in the war in Vietnam, no longer followed “the principle of non-intervention” but aimed to attack bourgeois art’s assumed autonomy and objectivity: “[The *MoMA-Poll*] was an attempt not to reproduce an ecological or social ‘system’ but to disturb it strongly.”⁴⁴⁵ According to Clay, Haacke’s political turn is located at the point where he chose to challenge not only the aesthetic, formal, and material conventions of art but its political myths. The system-as-art is expanded to include an investigative approach to art-as-system.

To Lucy Lippard, however, looking back in 1990, Haacke, “later to become one of the most honored and effective political artists in the ‘high art’ context,” even in the MoMA piece remained “oblique and neutral.”⁴⁴⁶ Different writers locate Haacke’s “politicization” at different moments and works, and for different reasons. Indeed, I would argue, this development is gradual and complex and it is the combination of three factors that make Haacke the political artist he is today. They are 1) Haacke’s extension of “systems” into the social realm and the resulting questioning of the myth of the (cultural, political, public) institutions’ autonomy and disinterestedness; 2) certain

⁴⁴⁴ Jean Clay, “Aspects of Bourgeois Art: The World as It Is,” *Studio International* (December 1970): 254–255.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Lucy Lippard, *A Different War—Vietnam in Art* (Bellingham, WA and Seattle: Whatcom Museum of History and Art and The Real Comet Press, 1990), 31. Lippard included Haacke in her 1973 *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...* (New York: Praeger), presenting examples of his work in the timely factual, encyclopedic manner of this “cross reference book of information.” (Ibid., cover) In *A Different War* Lippard discusses Haacke’s work for the first time.

historical and political “real” events such as the assassination of Martin Luther King and the massacres of the Vietnam War, the general boycott by artists of the 10th Sao Paulo Biennial in 1969 and the problems surrounding the 1970 *Software* exhibition at the Jewish Museum, all of which challenged the alleged objectivity and self-sufficiency of systems and structures, science and technology, turning this presumed neutrality into what Haacke called, after Marcuse, “repressive tolerance”; and 3), and most importantly, Haacke’s redefinition of the role of the artist according to Brecht’s “Five Difficulties When Writing the Truth” from “assistant” and “chronicler” to “truth-teller.”⁴⁴⁷

This last point is crucial because it shows Haacke’s conscious decision to reposition himself as an artist of political engagement. This is contrary to what Burnham and other art historians would like us to believe. They portray the artist’s political turn as merely a logical extension from physical and biological systems into social ones pointing to Haacke’s aloof and somewhat disengaged position as socio-aesthetic empiricist.⁴⁴⁸

Haacke’s extension of his Real Time Systems into the social realm was implicit in his earliest statements about sculptures as systemic processes. In 1967, Haacke spoke about the exchange of energies between elements and structures: “Therefore I believe

⁴⁴⁷ In allusion to Marcuse’s famous 1965 essay of the same title, Haacke makes reference to the notion of “repressive tolerance” in a letter to Burnham, quoted in Burnham, “Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art,” 131.

⁴⁴⁸ Looking back at the development of Haacke’s work, Burnham rightly identifies the real-time investigations of biological and physical systems as a step leading Haacke’s work toward the analysis of political and ideological organization of art and culture. Yet his positioning of Haacke’s interest in systems analysis as part of a late 1960s trend of “unobjects” and the claim that “...the most important artist best succeeds by liquidating his position as artist vis-à-vis society” leads to a depoliticized appropriation of Haacke’s work. “Systems Esthetics,” 31. I, on the other hand, would argue that Haacke’s work remains Brechtian, hence, revolutionary modernist, precisely because his Real Time Social Systems do not dissolve the position of the artist/author but show the production of *meaning* in art to be a “real time event,” subject to stagnation and mythification, to transformation and change as Art (and the conception thereof) is understood as a sum of different parts rather than an organic, undifferentiated whole. Haacke’s work is only Brechtian when his de-mystification progresses, adjusting in its analysis from exploring one state of organization (art as subjective, humanist, beautiful) to the next (art as objective, interactive, didactic). Respectively, art’s scientific-objective approach had to come under scrutiny in order to avoid a renewed, contemporary illusion of avant-gardism’s general validity.

there are sound reasons for reserving the term ‘systems’ for certain non-static ‘sculptures,’ since only in this category does a transfer of energy, material or information occur.”⁴⁴⁹ As the art discourse of the 1970s increasingly defined systems in terms of cybernetics, hence, the science of communication and control theory, Haacke’s work too focused on the transmission of data, the relation between systems of information.⁴⁵⁰ The matter exchanged, it turned out, may have been, as Haacke had claimed in 1967, “autonomous—aloof from the viewer,” at least if the viewer was merely regarded in his real-time presence as experiencing (or, to put it in less humanist terms, “witnessing”) subject.⁴⁵¹ However it was certainly not autonomous with regard to the viewer or the art institution as political and social elements.

The *Visitors’ Profile*, Haacke’s contribution to the 1970 *Software* exhibition at the Jewish Museum, was a computerized, more complex version of the *Manhattan Gallery Goer’s Residence Profile* originally exhibited at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1969 (fig. 88). It presented the spectator as a structural factor determined by gender and age, class and education. Viewers were asked to use a keyboard in order to answer two types of questions: factual information about themselves as well as opinions on a variety of subjects. The results were instantly compiled into charts and statistics, projected onto a large screen and therefore accessible to the audience. The elements of the system carried

⁴⁴⁹ Haacke, “Untitled Statement” (1967), 102.

⁴⁵⁰ This discourse defined systems as the “set of problems centered around communication, control, and statistical mechanics, whether in the machine or the living tissue”, differentiated between software and hardware while designating “operating systems,” and made it a scientific art’s aim to “[intensify] the infra-individual world and at the same time [develop] networks of communication between individuals, and between the individual and the environment.” Norbert Wiener, cited by Jack Burnham in “Notes on Art and Information Processing,” *Software. Information Technology: It’s New Meaning for Art* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1970), 11; Jonathan Benthall, “Technology and Art,” *Studio International* (March 1969): 112; Gyorgy Kepes, cited in Benthall, “Kepes Center at M.I.T.” *Art International* (January 1974): 30, respectively.

⁴⁵¹ Haacke, “Untitled Statement” (1967), 103.

political and social connotations; artist, viewer, and the exhibiting institution were implicated in a structure that was neither neutral nor natural, but actively constructed. Its composition and function was determined by a number of relative, changing, and changeable factors. The *Visitors' Profile* was precisely what Jack Burnham, the curator of *Software*, wanted this show to address: “[T]he goal of *Software* is to focus our sensibilities on the fastest growing area in this culture: information processing systems and their devices.”⁴⁵²

Yet, as critic Bitite Vinklers remarked in her review of the show, the question is “what kind of information is produced, in what ways is it processed, and most important, what is the underlying idea of the system?”⁴⁵³ Haacke’s work went beyond the use of technology as a conventional artistic device for relating information, beyond a computerized painting or sculpture. This, as Vinklers points out, is the case with the included, autobiographical work of Donald Burgy (fig. 89) or John Baldesarri’s commemoration of the burning of his own paintings (fig. 90).⁴⁵⁴ In contrast, *Visitors' Profile* is about art-as-information-processing-systems. To answer Vinklers’ questions: the information produced is social and political in its evocation of visitors’ relations to art, culture, and institutions; it is processed in a real-time, participatory and self-referential fashion; and the underlying idea of the system is to expose the social and ideological “forces and patterns of organization” and to create an exchange of

⁴⁵² Burnham, “Notes on Art and Information Processing,” 10.

⁴⁵³ Bitite Vinklers, “Art and Information—‘Software’ at the Jewish Museum,” *Arts Magazine* (September–October 1970): 46.

⁴⁵⁴ Burgy’s *Self-Portrait* consisted of the documentation of mental and physical characteristics of the artist with the aim to show that identity consists of “dry statistical information,” a point so obvious that to repeat it results in what Vinklers calls “triteness.” Baldesarri’s work in turn is described by the critic as “a rather naïve and melodramatic enactment of the phoenix myth.” *Ibid.*, 47–48.

information (Haacke calls this the “energy on which social relations evolve”).⁴⁵⁵

Haacke’s second contribution to the show, *News; UPI-WGNS Wire* (conceived in 1969) (fig. 91), consists of several teletype machines that print out local, national and international news received from U.S. and foreign news services. The work creates an awareness of the difference between art-time (or art historical time) and “real time” in two ways. One, the constant influx of non-art events stands in stark contrast with the institutional time of the art museum or gallery, more often than not severing the production and experience of art from its historical context. Two, the streams of copy collect on the floor behind the printer. Thus the news take on an increasingly sculptural form. In his review of *Software*, Kenneth Baker argued, in what seems to be a continuation of Haacke’s earlier critique of the humanist-sculptural experience, that the real time history of the news events is replaced with the temporarily vacuous anthropomorphic experience of sculptural time.⁴⁵⁶

The exchange of information and the presentation of the underlying forces of organizing information—of what is presented, how, and where—have consequences for the traditional positions of the artist and institution. Extending his systemic approach into affairs considered private rather than public (i.e., invested with economic and political interest rather than the universal and therefore transpolitical concern of the individual as citizen), Haacke embraced a scientific neutrality with regard to physical, biological, and

⁴⁵⁵ Haacke, quoted in Vinklers, “Hans Haacke,” 44; Haacke, cited in Jack Burnham, “Hans Haacke’s Cancelled Show at the Guggenheim,” *Artforum* (June 1971): 70, respectively.

⁴⁵⁶ “The idea is also suggested that the sense that the work has a temporality of its own is connected with the temptation to see things anthropomorphically and that this connection may have something to do with the consideration that we extend to works of art; the news, however, has minimal snob value.” Kenneth Baker, “Software, The Jewish Museum,” *Artforum* (December 1970): 80.

social structures. As much as anything, it was this strategy that caused the much-publicized cancellation of his 1971 one-person retrospective at the Guggenheim.⁴⁵⁷

The incident has been well rehearsed. However, what needs to be briefly emphasized here is how Haacke's Real Time Social Systems further enhance his overall project of de-mystification.⁴⁵⁸ The Guggenheim retrospective, scheduled to open on April 30, 1971, was to contain three exhibits of different type systems, chosen to illuminate the artist's development throughout the 1960s: from physical to biological to social.⁴⁵⁹ The latter section was to include two works concerning real estate, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* and *Sol Goldman & Alex DiLorenzo, Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (fig. 77), both of which trace the ownership of a large parcel of slum properties and of a group of commercial properties. These works were to be accompanied by a visitors' poll that charted the museum's visitors according to such factors as income, ethnic background, political and economic opinions. While Haacke

⁴⁵⁷ For a definition and history of the public sphere and its institutions as guarantors of autonomous and inclusive debate among individuals as citizens, as opposed to the economic, personal, and political interests of the private individual, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) and Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁴⁵⁸ On the Guggenheim affair, see, in addition to any of the aforementioned texts, Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation* (August 2, 1971): 93–94; Gregory Battcock, "Hans Haacke Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum," *Art & Artists* (July 1971): 58; "Editorial: Artists versus Museums," *ArtNews* (May 1971): 25; Grace Glück, "The Guggenheim Cancels Haacke's Show," *The New York Times* (April 7, 1971): 51; Robert D. McFadden, "Guggenheim Aide Ousted in Dispute: Edward Fry Set Up a Show by Haacke on Slums," *The New York Times* (April 27, 1971): 48; Grace Glück, "Ousted Curator Assails Guggenheim," *The New York Times* (May 1, 1971): 22; Doris Herzig, "Art Show Scrubbed as Politically Dirty," *Newsday* (April 9, 1971): 15A; "Gurgles Around the Guggenheim: Statements by Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Thomas Messer, and Diane Waldman," *Studio International* (June 1971): 246–250; Barbara Reise, "A Tail of Two Exhibitions: The Aborted Haacke and Robert Morris Shows," *Studio International* (July 1971): 30–33; "Which Is in Fact What Happened": Thomas M. Messer in an Interview with Barbara Reise, 25 April, 1971," *Studio International* (July 1971): 34–37.

⁴⁵⁹ Curator Edward Fry's first proposal identifies the stages of this development as "*Inorganic systems, Organic systems, and Interactions between human organisms.*" Cited in Reise, "A Tale of Two Exhibitions," 31.

insisted that the real estate works were simply an extension of his system analysis to a different set of conditions, Thomas Messer, the museum's director, called the piece "effectively a slum-lord exposé." Which, of course, it was.⁴⁶⁰

The ultimate irony of this posturing was the fact that both the artist and the institution claimed intentions of neutrality and objectivity; the former on the grounds of his scientific, structuralist-systematic approach, the latter due to its mission as an art institution with a public obligation. In a letter to Haacke, Messer pointed out that the museum's charter directed the Guggenheim toward "esthetic and educational objectives that are self-sufficient and without ulterior motive."⁴⁶¹ Even though Messer's language resembles that of a scientific approach to the world as system(s), acknowledging a relationship between art and non-art, aesthetic and socio-political reality and time, the question remains that of the *quality* of this relationship. Messer and his institution advocated a symbolic, metaphorical relation, "larger than particular issues."⁴⁶² It had been exactly this kind of de-politicized speech Haacke and Barthes had worked to dismantle in favor of a more active, operational language.

⁴⁶⁰ "Which Is in Fact What Happened," 35. Haacke contended that the social systems works planned for the Guggenheim exhibition contained "no evaluative comment." Following the cancellation of the show and the publication of a statement by Messer explaining the institution's decision as based on its policies, the artist maintained that the director erred in "his assumption that my pieces advocate any political cause. They do not." Haacke cited it Glück, "The Guggenheim Cancels Haacke's Show," 52.

⁴⁶¹ Messer further writes that "Art may have social and political consequences but these, we believe, are furthered by indirection and by generalized, exemplary force that works of art may exert upon the environment, not, as you propose, by using political means to achieve political ends, no matter how desirable these may appear to be in themselves." Letter to the artist, dated March 19, cited in *ibid*.

⁴⁶² In an interview on April 25, 1971, Messer reflects on the mission of an artistic tradition that "had the capacity to summarize and sharpen reality through metaphoric means, through a symbolic language which was larger than particular issues." As examples he mentions the "famous war paintings by Goya, even Picasso's *Guernica*—which of course did have a very special application if only through the title—dealt with the question of violence and human misery and aggression, on the level of symbols." "Which Is in Fact What Happened," 35.

Looking back at the Guggenheim incident in a 1976 *Studio International* interview with critic Margaret Sheffield, Haacke commented upon the quality of the relation between art and reality, the art institution and history: “For decades now it [the formalist doctrine of Greenberg et al] has managed to have us believe that art floats ten feet above the ground and has nothing to do with the historical situation out of which it grew. It is presumed to be an entity all to itself. The only acknowledged *link with history is a stylistic one*” (emphasis added).⁴⁶³ In Haacke’s Real Time Systems, this link is scientific and theoretical; in his Real Time Social Systems, it is political and social, economic and ideological. The presumed autonomy of the art system is compromised. In relation to one another, the historical dimension of the elements of the respective systems (art, real estate) is revealed: “[T]here just is no structural element absolutely immune to signification and history.”⁴⁶⁴ In Haacke’s early Real Time Social Systems, as in what Barthes calls revolutionary speech or “speech on the left,” the system as such is presented as an active rather than passive device: “The liberal myth has it that beauty is ideologically neutral.”⁴⁶⁵ The artist’s extension of his systems-model to the social realm turns the art institution from “system” into “frame,” actively changing the historical significance, specificity, and understanding of a work of art and, by extension, challenging Haacke’s own notion of the artist-as-assistant and the presumed autonomy of science and technology.

As for many other artists at the end of the 1960s, Haacke’s encounter with certain real-time events cast further doubt upon the faith in art’s marriage to technological

⁴⁶³ Haacke in Margaret Sheffield, “Hans Haacke. Interview,” *Studio International* (March–April 1976): 117. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶⁴ Haacke in *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ Haacke in *ibid.*

progress and in the democratic and objective nature of scientific models. In France, the structuralists' increasingly abstract and theoretical ruminations came under attack during the political upheavals that shook the universities. This led to a revision of structuralist thought. American academics declared the end of modernism and, in the publication (and titles) of popular anthologies such as *The Discontinuous Universe* (1972) is any indication, announced the "Destruction of Conventions" and the "New Search for Coherency."⁴⁶⁶ In these texts, in search or defiance of a significant and signifying consistency, the structuralist writings of Barthes are found next to texts by McLuhan and Bertolt Brecht, John Cage and Susan Sontag, Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Godard. Barthes' earlier, Brechtian writings were published in the U.S. during the same year, somewhat historicizing but mostly relativizing and discrediting Barthes' structuralism. And, as Burnham has documented, Haacke's encounter with certain non-art realities led to a reconsideration of the new conventions of art and technology that had manifested themselves during the past few years as a response to the introspective, humanist formalism of American modernism.⁴⁶⁷

In the light of war and social upheaval, and the increasingly obvious implementation of presumably neutral technologies and institutions in acts and politics of destruction and exploitation, the presumed objectivity and autonomy of science, systems, and structures seemed as false and mythical as the endowment of art with humanist qualities. The assassination of Martin Luther King enhanced Haacke's awareness of the parallel and interrelated realities of the systems of artistic production and political

⁴⁶⁶ Sallie Sears and Georgianna Lord (eds.), *The Discontinuous Universe: Selected Writings in Contemporary Consciousness* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1972), vii, ix. The "Destruction of Conventions" and the "New Search for Coherency" are the titles of two of the book's subsections.

⁴⁶⁷ Burnham, "Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art."

conduct.⁴⁶⁸ Even though the artist conceded in 1968 that he never believed in art as an effective and direct political tool, some sense of innocence seemed lost: “As I’ve said, I’ve known that [art was unsuitable as political tool] for a number of years and I was never bothered by it. All of a sudden it bugs me... I am no longer comfortable.”⁴⁶⁹

In 1969, this discomfort extended to the complicity of art and science in acts of what Marcuse called “repressive tolerance”—a passive or non-critical attitude toward “policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated.”⁴⁷⁰ Haacke had been invited to participate in the 10th Sao Paulo Bieñal in Brazil, as part of the American entry organized by Gyorgy Kepes and the Fellows at M.I.T.’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies. The event was subsequently boycotted by several nations and individual artists in protest against Brazil’s violent and repressive military dictatorship. Kepes, however, stayed the course. “He had no intention of abandoning the Bieñal,” Burnham writes, “instead he... regarded it as an opportunity to communicate ‘vital progressive ideas’ to a country ridden with ‘inhuman political processes’.”⁴⁷¹ Haacke resigned his participation in the show, declaring, “Unfortunately we are not living in a time when art (whatever that is) can be seen or shown simply as what it is. Repressive tolerance diverts the information and makes it into a U.S.I.A. stunt. It is just obscene to play innocent, particularly in a show organized for a country whose regime lives by the grace of the C.I.A.”⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁸ Haacke in a letter to Burnham, cited in *ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁰ Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 82.

⁴⁷¹ Burnham, “Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art,” 131.

⁴⁷² Haacke in a letter to Burnham, cited in *ibid.*, 131.

Like Marcuse, Haacke acknowledged that by declaring its separation from everyday politics and concerns, art preserves the status quo. Marcuse writes, “I call this non-partisan tolerance ‘abstract’ or ‘pure’ inasmuch as it refrains from taking sides—but in doing so it actually protects the already established machinery of discrimination.”⁴⁷³ This critique of passive tolerance extends to science and technology, specifically as they relate to art and the wave in art sponsorship by national and multinational corporations. Some of these sponsorships belonged to the military-industrial complex involved in the war in Vietnam.⁴⁷⁴ At the Art Workers’ Coalition “Open Hearing,” held in New York on April 10, 1969, Gregory Battcock, looking at those sitting on the boards of museums and other cultural institutions throughout New York, concluded, “Do you realize that it is those art loving, culturally committed trustees of the Metropolitan and Modern museums who are waging the war in Vietnam?”⁴⁷⁵ Haacke, a founding member of the AWC and a spokesperson for the *My Lai* poster protest at MoMA, was forced to realize that art, technology, and politics did mix privately (out of economic interest) but not publicly (out of humanist interest).⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷³ Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 85.

⁴⁷⁴ *Software* was, for example, sponsored by the American Motors Corporation, Maurice Tuchman’s *Art and Technology* program’s sponsor’s included IBM; the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, and The Rand Corporation (the latter’s “role in the escalation of United States action in Southeast Asia led artists to picket the Corporation’s building in 1965”). Jean Clay called the passive, status-quo affirming dependency of art on the technology and information industry “the EAT [Experiments in Art and Technology] solution.” Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press and St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 3; Clay, “Aspects of Bourgeois Art,” 254, respectively.

⁴⁷⁵ Gregory Battcock in Art Workers’ Coalition, *Open Hearing* (New York, Art Workers’ Coalition, 1969), 9.

⁴⁷⁶ For an in-depth look at the *My Lai* poster incident, when the president of the board of trustees vetoed the staff decision to distribute the AWC Poster Committee’s print of the massacre under the auspices of the museum, see Francis Frascina, “Meyer Shapiro’s Choice: My Lai, Guernica, MoMA and the Art Left, 1969–70—Part 2,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (October 1995): 705–728; Lippard, *A Different War—Vietnam in Art*; and the exchange between Hilton Kramer and the AWC (represented by Frazer Dougherty, Hans Haacke, and Lucy Lippard) in the *The New York Times* (Hilton Kramer, “Do You Believe In the Principle Of Museums?” *The New York Times* (January 18, 1970): 105; Dougherty, Haacke, and

Haacke's own contribution to the Open Hearing focused on the mythification of historical works of art by institutions, such as MoMA. The MoMA, for example, had made it its goal to continuously de- and re-accession modern works of art to keep their collections contemporary. The institution then reversed, what the artist called an "enlightened policy" in order to establish a permanent collection of so-called "masterworks": "The 'masterwork' approach has resulted in timidity, conservatism, arrogance and a systematic mythologization of modern art."⁴⁷⁷ Haacke calls for a new, "highly flexible system, able to adjust to the changing needs and not another plan for further petrification and the greater glory of the Museum's priesthood."⁴⁷⁸ This critique is easily extended to Haacke's own scientific-systematic approach to art, which in its rigidity and presumed objectivity acts as an immobilizing and sanctifying device in its own right. The aestheticization of science was, after all, never Haacke's intention: "It is not the artist's job to make the science classroom's demonstrations more stylish."⁴⁷⁹

Brecht's own reassessment of the interrelating elements and systems of art, science, and politics, sheds light on Haacke's turn to the playwright as a model of artistic conduct. *Galileo* includes several instances of criticality. There is the general theme of replacing the anthropocentric view of the universe with modern notions of science and relativity. "The play," writes Harold Clurman in his review of the 1967 production at Lincoln Center, is "a dramatic paradigm of an idea and the trials it encounters in piercing the inertia and resistance of habit, tradition and interests of established institutions."⁴⁸⁰

Lippard, "Why MoMA Is Their Target," *The New York Times* (February 8, 1970): 23–24; Hilton Kramer, "About MoMA, the AWC And Their Political Causes," *The New York Times* (February 8, 1970): 107.

⁴⁷⁷ Hans Haacke in Art Workers' Coalition, *Open Hearing*, 46.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁷⁹ Haacke cited in Chandler, "Hans Haacke: The Continuity of Change" 9.

⁴⁸⁰ Harold Clurman, "Theatre," *The Nation* (May 8, 1967): 603.

There is, as Walter Kerr points out, Brecht's association of science with industry; the latter's henchmen signal their support of Galileo's ideas as he is about to face the Inquisition.⁴⁸¹ And, lastly, there is Brecht's condemnation of Galileo as a coward for publicly recanting the Copernican model under the threat of torture. To Brecht, the relationship of art to science and politics is that art is to expose the politics of truth-telling—the formation of beliefs and norms and their declared validity over other, competing sets of values—in order to promote the autonomy and objectivity of scientific thought. In the play, Galileo declares, “For science demands that facts not be subordinated to opinions but that opinions be subordinated to facts.”⁴⁸²

But after Hiroshima, Brecht revised the play. What, as in 1938, had been a pedagogical exercise in free expression or, as Walter Benjamin said of the play, “propaganda for thinking,” was turned into a call for scientific responsibility.⁴⁸³ With regard to the changes implemented in the play, Brecht remarks, “The atomic age made its debut at Hiroshima in the middle of our work. Overnight the biography of the founder of the new system of physics read differently.”⁴⁸⁴ The dialectic of the enlightenment project emerges as technology is applied for non-humanist purposes: “At once a technical and a social phenomenon, the atom bomb is the classic final product of its scientific achievement and its social failure.”⁴⁸⁵ One of the passages added to the play has Galileo utter the following:

⁴⁸¹ Walter Kerr, “Theater: Lincoln Repertory’s ‘Galileo,’” *The New York Times* (April 14, 1967): 31.

⁴⁸² Cited in Eric Bentley, “The Science Fiction of Bertolt Brecht,” *Evergreen Review* (June 1966): 32.

⁴⁸³ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 93.

⁴⁸⁴ Cited in Bentley, “The Science Fiction of Bertolt Brecht,” 32.

⁴⁸⁵ Bertolt Brecht, “Preis oder Verdammung des Galilei” (1947), reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 17 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 1109. My translation.

I take it that the intent of science is to ease human existence. If you give way to coercion science can be crippled, and your new machines may simply suggest new drudgeries. Should you, then, in time, discover all there is to be discovered, your progress must become a progress away from the bulk of humanity. The gulf might even grow so wide that the sound of your cheering at some new achievement would be echoed by a universal howl of horror.⁴⁸⁶

But, what changes within the system is that not only is science politicized but also art, resulting in the rewriting of the play. In both Brecht's and Haacke's case, this is of great importance. Not only is the subject matter science itself, but the method of artistic production is "scientific." In its rejection of subjective creation and individualist reception, it seeks rationality and clarity, empiricism and enlightenment. With the politicization of science, the artist has a responsibility not only to discover the truth—the invisible, underlying forces that determine the shape and experience of the world—but to *handle* that truth. All truth, structures, and systems are, after all, subject to presentation and manipulation. Not only need something be discovered, but one must also ask why it has actively been hidden.

As Eric Bentley writes, "In this respect, *Galileo I* is a 'liberal' defense of freedom against tyranny, while *Galileo II* is a Marxist defense of a social conception of science against the 'liberal' view that truth is an end in itself."⁴⁸⁷ The artist, scientist, and playwright are implicated actively or passively in this social act of telling the truth. Galileo is condemned in Brecht's revision, not merely for his cowardice in not standing

⁴⁸⁶ Cited in Clurman, "Theatre," 603.

⁴⁸⁷ Bentley, "The Science Fiction of Bertolt Brecht," 71.

up for his beliefs, but for his repressive tolerance, the political implications of handling knowledge. Galileo shouts at his assistant, “Welcome to the gutter, dear colleague in science and brother in treason: I sold out and you are a buyer... Blessed be our bargaining, whitewashing, deathfearing community.”⁴⁸⁸ The moral of the story is that one system of belief had simply been exchanged for another, but without acknowledging the ideological implications, the social reality, of the replacement structure or of such a transfer. The scientist, like the artist, by proclaiming his merely relative position within the system, assumes the role of assistant, of facilitator, killing the author and its myth in favor of the work’s autonomy and objectivity. Thus, he is a “whitewasher,” an accomplice of the powers-that-be. Brecht urges the protagonist and—given the concept of Epic theater—the audience to be disobedient, to disrupt, to interfere. “Accursed be the land that needs a hero,” Galileo famously proclaims.⁴⁸⁹ But the land or, as in Haacke’s case, the art world as social and political system and as part of a socio-political system, is accursed. It may need, perhaps not a hero or a resurrected author, but at least a truth-teller. Haacke’s early, seemingly harmless, deterministic-scientific observation had, by being merely an element among others within a system among systems, shown that “[t]he artist’s business requires his involvement in practically everything.”⁴⁹⁰ By the early 1970s, this takes the form of an increasingly tendentious interrogation. Rather than merely presenting structures, the artist investigates their function, their use: “The only thing I could suggest (in certain ways I am doing that in my own work now) is to create a critical rather than devotional atmosphere, an attitude that questions the premises of the

⁴⁸⁸ Cited in *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁹ Cited in Eric Bentley, “Galileo: What Kind of Hero?” *The New York Times* (April 30, 1967): 113.

⁴⁹⁰ Chandler, “Hans Haacke: The Continuity of Change,” 8.

whole art phenomenon in all its aspects. Why is art made, what kind of art is produced, by whom, under what circumstances, for what audience, who in fact uses it, for what ends and in what context?”⁴⁹¹

Haacke’s definition of his own role as artist shifts in the early-to-mid 1970s. While his tone in 1968 was largely defeatist (“Nothing, but really absolutely nothing is changed by whatever type of painting or sculpture or happening you produce on the level where it counts, the political level.”), in 1971 Haacke considered the implications of aesthetic production in a given social situation: “As in dealing with the ‘real stuff’ in physical and biological systems, perhaps more so, one therefore has to weigh carefully the prospective outcome of undertakings in the social field. One’s responsibilities increase...”⁴⁹² In a text written in 1974, Haacke describes the artist’s dialectical position with regard to the social field and its institutions, referring to Brecht as a model of possible engagement:

Artists as much as their supporters and their enemies, no matter of what ideological coloration, are unwitting partners in the art-syndrome and relate to each other dialectically. They participate jointly in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of society. They work within that frame, set the frame and are being framed... Bertolt Brecht’s 1934 appraisal of the “Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties” is still valid today. They are the need for “the *courage* to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the *keenness* to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the *skill* to manipulate it as a weapon; the

⁴⁹¹ Hans Haacke, et al., “The Role of the Artist in Today’s Society,” *Art Journal* (Summer 1975): 328.

⁴⁹² Haacke cited in Burnham, “Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art,” 130; Haacke cited in Burnham, “Hans Haacke’s Cancelled Show at the Guggenheim,” 70, respectively.

judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the *cunning* to spread the truth among such persons (Haacke's emphasis).⁴⁹³

As has been argued throughout this chapter, Haacke's work since the early 1960s had been involved in a project of truth-telling, of exchanging an active, historical language for the static, eternalizing repetitions of myth. The differences between the interactive objects and Real Time Systems and the interfering Real Time Social Systems are the definition of "truth" and the way the artist handles it. The earlier works challenged the private experience of artistic production and reception in order to create more public pieces. These are accessible and open to the fact that art is the product of historical processes and related to its context on experiential levels other than solely the psychological-phenomenological connection between artist, work, and viewer. The "truth" was that the conception of art as an element within a larger system is an active one, while the notion of it as a private experience is a decontextualizing myth.

Newer works, like the *MoMA-Poll* and *Shapolsky et al.*, had to expand their project of truth-telling to include the observation that the objectivity of scientific methods and the neutrality of technology as medium when applied to art would automatically increase the public or participatory potential of art. With regard to the realization that the private interest in art exceeded a personal experience to include political and economic concerns, the faith in the objectivity of science and its promised democratic potential seemed naïve. Art's active engagement with the elements surrounding it had to go beyond playful physical and biological interactions to include the production of an awareness of the historical-political relation between art, the viewer, and its institutions.

⁴⁹³ Hans Haacke, "All the 'Art' That's Fit to Show" (1974), reprinted in *Hans Haacke*, 105.

Without that awareness, McLuhan's "joyful participation," Haacke's "viewer as partner," and Barthes' "birth of the reader" seemed ideologically reproductive. The rediscovery of Constructivism in the 1960s and early '70s put into perspective what was at stake: the ideological framework of artistic production.⁴⁹⁴

Reflecting on his visit to the 1968 opening of the exhibition *Plus by Minus: Today's Half Century* in Buffalo, New York, a show that coupled works by El Lissitzky and Kasimir Medunetsky with postwar art, Haacke couldn't quite put his finger on the difference between the Russian avant-garde and contemporary works:

What was so strange was the juxtaposition with contemporary, related (?) works. The contemporary look both frivolous as well as more at ease, less dusty, less contrived, less like coming out of a study. There was obviously a tremendous gap, and all factors taken into consideration it was hard to take sides for either of the two (?) generations. Contemporary work also seemed to be less sectarian, so much that it becomes questionable if one

⁴⁹⁴ For a discussion of Russian avant-garde art in general and Constructivism in particular during those years see, for example, K.A. Jelenski, "Russian Art: Evolution and Revolution," *Arts Magazine* (November 1962): 58–59, 62; Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962); Fracine du Plessix, "Russian Art 50 Years Ago," *Art in America* (February 1963): 120–122; Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, "The Realistic Manifesto" (1920), reprinted in *Studio International* (April 1966): 126; Cleve Gray, "Naum Gabo Talks About Constructivism," *Art in America* (November–December 1966): 48–55; Ronald Hunt, "The Constructivist Ethos: Russia 1913–1932," part 1 and part 2, *Artforum* (September 1967 and October 1967): 23–29 and 26–32, respectively; El Lissitzky, "New Russian Art—A Lecture Given in 1922," reprinted in *Studio International* (October 1968): 146–151; Terry Fenton, "Two Contributions to the Art and Science Muddle—1. Constructivism and Its Confusions," *Artforum* (January 1969): 22–27; John Elderfield, "Constructivism and the Objective World: An Essay on Production Art and Proletarian Culture," *Studio International* (September 1970): 73–79; Peter Wollen, "Art in Revolution: Russian Art in the Twenties," *Studio International* (April 1971): 149–154; John Bowlt, "The Failed Utopia: Russian Art 1917–32," *Art in America* (July 1971): 40–51; I. Matsa, "Constructivism: A Historical and Artistic Appraisal," *Studio International* (April 1972): 142–144; Peter Pinchbeck, "Structures of Reality in Image and Word," *Arts Magazine* (April 1972): 54–55; John Bowlt, "The Virtues of Soviet Realism," *Art in America* (November–December 1972): 100–107.

can construe something like a direct line from “constructivism” to minimal and related works.⁴⁹⁵

I would argue that the difference between the two is that, to use Galileo’s words again, post-1917 Russia was declared to be no longer an “accursed” land. From the perspective of 1968, Constructivism must have appeared more serious and dedicated, more utopian as well as self-assured since its display of objective structures was there to teach the Communist viewers about the new state, not to change the state. The political revolution had preceded the visual one. As a political tool, art was to assert the truth of the system, not expose its falseness. As Constructivist art adopted a method of technological and scientific materialism, it was (at least theoretically and officially) able to rely on a notion of objectivity not abused by private interests. Avant-garde art did not have to be politicized. Rather it attempted to objectively present the new order, the end of class struggle, and with it the death of the public sphere, its authors, its myths.⁴⁹⁶ What Peter Wollen called Rodchenko’s “suicide of himself as an artist” mirrors Barthes’ deconstruction of authorship and Haacke’s repositioning of the artist as assistant.⁴⁹⁷ In the end, this subsumption of the artist leads, in both cases, to the depoliticization of art. While for the Russians, this was a goal to be implemented, for Haacke it turned out to be an achievement that not only ignored political realities, but was counterproductive as an avant-garde art. Combined with a new demand for the spectacular visual experience of

⁴⁹⁵ Haacke cited in Burnham, “Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art,” 128.

⁴⁹⁶ This is of course not to say that the work of the Constructivists wasn’t subject to a whole new set of myths, which in turn eternalized, deactivated, and decontextualized the language and objectives of Russian Revolutionary culture, and to real-time historical factors such as the New Economic Policy. Yet the task of the Constructivists as an avant-garde was to deconstruct the myths of bourgeois art in order to build a proletarian culture, which already possessed an institutional foundation. In comparison to other historical and neo-avant-gardes, the artists were supposed to work in reverse: not to change the minds of the people in order to change the institutions but to change the minds in order to catch up to an institution already changed. In that sense, one could argue, Constructivism was ideologically revolutionary but not politically.

⁴⁹⁷ Wollen, “Art in Revolution: Russian Art in the Twenties,” 151.

techno-art, this depoliticization made Haacke realize the enduring schism between art and life and its ideologically stabilizing function: “There remains a great demand for court jesters.”⁴⁹⁸ The task then was to articulate that function and thereby disrupt and interfere with its normality.

As part of Kynaston McShine’s 1970 *Information* exhibition, Haacke’s *MoMA Poll* sought to politicize the art institution as a forum for public debate and exchange of opinion, while implicating the museum’s governing body in its direct involvement with the war in Vietnam. The curator described the art chosen as “relevant” and “meaningful,” as timely and involved (“The art cannot afford to be provincial, or to exist only within its own history, or to continue to be, perhaps, only a commentary on art”), as an “exchange of ideas” and a “reevalua[tion of] the nature of art.”⁴⁹⁹ Posing the question, “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?,” Haacke asked viewers to cast ballots into one of two transparent acrylic boxes. 299,057 visitors participated, with 68.7 percent voting ‘Yes.’ Governor Nelson Rockefeller had been president and Chairman of the Board at the MoMA, and until his death in 1979, was a member of its board of trustees. His brother David served as Chairman during the time of *Information*. The transparent poll containers literally politicized the Minimal box, as well as Haacke’s own early works, challenging modern art’s concept of autonomy through transparency and self-referentiality. Telling the truth meant using art as a tool that would actively debunk the myth of the museum as an institution with a disinterested, cultural agenda. It also turned

⁴⁹⁸ Haacke cited in Burnham, “Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art,” 129.

⁴⁹⁹ Kynaston McShine in McShine (ed.), *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 138–141.

truth into a weapon able to attack those who hid their repressive politics behind a façade of philanthropy, humanism, and benevolence.

This exchange of information was not meant as a goal in and of itself, an adjustment of artistic production to political and ideological reality. Rather, it was intended to transform that reality, or, as Haacke put it, to provide the momentum on which social relations evolve. This idea of facilitating change, of providing the opportunity to rethink and re-form social, political, and cultural relations, is precisely the difference between Haacke as a revolutionary modernist and Haacke as a relativist, defensive postmodernist. It makes Burnham's exclusion of Brecht's third truth in his discussion of Haacke's political turn a decisive and important event.

After the cancellation of his Guggenheim show, Haacke produced a piece that somewhat resembled the *MoMA Poll*, this time exposing the ties between art and industry. *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* (1974) (fig. 92) consists of seven panels under glass, framed in brass and thereby resembling letters of achievement or commendation often found in offices and museums. Yet, rather than commemorating laudable deeds, the panels detail the museum's trustees' corporate affiliations with industries such as diamond, oil, and copper extractions in Africa and South America. The work points out that two members of the Guggenheim's board also sat on the board of this mining company. As *Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* documents, the Kennecott Corporation was condemned by the Chilean President Salvador Allende in an address before the United Nations in 1972 for having "dug their claws into my country," attempting "to manage our political life."⁵⁰⁰ Haacke's panel goes on to quote Allende:

⁵⁰⁰ The texts of the panels are reprinted in *Framing and Being Framed*, 59–67.

“He [Allende] said that ‘transnational’ companies were waging war against sovereign states but they were ‘not accountable to or representing the collective interest.’”⁵⁰¹ The company’s mine was nationalized and excess profit made in past years deducted from compensation. After a coup in 1973, the military junta “committed itself to compensate Kennecott for nationalized property.”⁵⁰²

Even though the work does not formulate any direct accusation (retaining the appearance of scientific neutrality), the implications are obvious: the discrepancy between public and private interest, the schism between the board members’ economic and cultural politics, and the different sorts of governments willing to support particular kinds of enterprise. While to those involved, Haacke’s works were a direct attack on the individual’s and institution’s integrity, exposing the hypocrisy of their civic mandates, some of those in the art world couldn’t have cared less about the political gains of truth-telling. It seems that the obviousness of the implications made in the work of Haacke and others signaled a lack of mediation, of aesthetic sincerity.

In his review of the *Information* exhibition, Hilton Kramer, for example, spends the first two paragraphs describing Haacke’s *MoMA Poll*, only to observe the work’s insufficiency due to its reductivist simplicity: “The poll of the museum visitors on Mr. Rockefeller’s political popularity is part of, no, come to think of it, it’s the whole of—the contribution of Hans Haacke...”⁵⁰³ He concludes that the visible difference between ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ ballots, that “the ‘Yes’ votes were slightly more numerous than the ‘No’ pile,” was all the artist meant to achieve: “This, presumably, is the bit of information Mr.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Hilton Kramer, “Show at the Modern Raises Questions,” *The New York Times* (July 2, 1970): 26.

Haacke wishes to convey to us.”⁵⁰⁴ Kramer laments the lack of complexity (aesthetic as well as political) in the exhibition, but in turn he doesn’t seem to look very closely. And when he (rightly) complains about the “estheticization of political clichés,” it appears that he does so, not because of the potential dangers of increasing gullibility, but because of the trivialization of art, even though he claims otherwise. After all, the lack of entertainment is the critic’s final verdict: “It [esthetic escapism] would be lamentable even if it were not so egregiously boring but in the end it is the sheer weight of its boredom that is most repellent.”⁵⁰⁵

In his review of the same exhibition, Carter Ratcliff, writing in *Art International*, criticizes the artists for giving in to the suffocating bureaucratic and technocratic conditions of Western culture, abandoning an individual, progressive response in favor of “esthetic mirroring” and “accepting personal inconsequence.”⁵⁰⁶ Ratcliff singles out the work of Stig Broegger (fig. 93) and Douglas Huebler (fig. 94), whose series of photographs documenting passing pedestrians (Broegger) and people passing in cars at various speeds (Huebler) represent, to Ratcliff, the artists’ defensive and relativist dissociation from form and content as meditative, responsible forms of communication. Thus, he argues, these artists document the failure of their works as art and of their position as artists: “[The] presentation is unexceptional, i.e., true by virtue of its banality... One yawn after another.”⁵⁰⁷ He adds, “The failure of individuals here is presented as *going beyond individuality* as it developed in Europe and America—the Western world. This demented approach to the future is justified by priorities—social,

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ Carter Ratcliff, “Information,” *Art International* (September 1970): 95.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

technological, political: new conditions, especially new media, make it ‘imperative’ that we abandon the old notion of the individual who produces art.”⁵⁰⁸

Gregory Battcock strikes a similar tone with regard to *Information*, accusing the artists of a lack of radicalism as they rely on “systemic processes” which are themselves part of the ruling ideology, “the tyranny of positive thought and behavior.”⁵⁰⁹ Taking into account these responses, as well as Lucy Lippard’s remarks about Haacke’s early Real Time Social Systems as not yet being political, it seems that what is at issue is a matter of degree of separation between art and reality, aesthetics and politics, individual authorship and ideological superstructure. Whereas the bases and reasons for their arguments differ, Kramer, Ratcliff, and Battcock all claim that to be embedded too far in the system means to lose the (if relative) autonomy of the artist’s position. For Lippard, this distance yields political impotence. Too much “politicization” means defeat; too much “aestheticization,” escape.

If truth is to be a weapon, it must acknowledge the dialectics of aesthetic production. This, as Terry Eagleton and others have pointed out, lies at the core of Brecht’s method.⁵¹⁰ Asked about the “opposition between art and politics,” the “confusion and/or resistance on part of the public,” Haacke replied, “I cannot see an intrinsic conflict between these two social areas.”⁵¹¹ Describing as an example his *Rhinewater Purification Plant* (1972) (fig. 95), Haacke aimed to refute the exclusivity of beauty and a technological, political usefulness: “Yes, I find [it] beautiful. I believe that it

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Gregory Battcock, “Informative Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art,” *Arts Magazine* (Summer 1970): 25–26.

⁵¹⁰ “Brecht himself did something quite different: he took a formidably abstract philosophical doctrine—dialectics—and carried it to the very heart of an art-form, fleshed it out as a movement, dialogue, stage technique, how to tell a story.” Eagleton, “A Note on Brecht,” 92.

⁵¹¹ Sheffield, “Hans Haacke. Interview,” 117.

was a piece that functioned well on the physical and biological level, it had a sensuous appeal, and it had a strong socio-political dimension.”⁵¹² The piece, installed in the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, Germany, a city on the banks of the Rhine, pumped polluted water from the river through a system of chemical agents and filters, the clean water filling a large acrylic basin, which thus became a fit habitat for a number of goldfish.

The *Rhinewater Purification Plant* was certainly beautiful to look at, instilling a romanticized notion of nature and its purity within an otherwise modernist environment (the Haus Lange had been designed by Mies van der Rohe). However it also (with the aid of an adjacent wall text) exposed the waste politics of the City of Krefeld, which annually discharged 42 million cubic meters of untreated household and industrial waste into the river. And herein lie the Brechtian dialectics of the piece. In Battcock’s words, “a vital interaction between art work and frame of reference would result in healthy provocation concerning the identification of each.”⁵¹³

As in the *MoMA Poll*, the *Rhinewater Purification Plant* pointed to the proclaimed neutrality of minimal sculpture and formalist self-reference by filling its transparency with the environment modernist art aims to exclude. It implies the “cleaning” and “naturalizing” function of the art institution with regard to the content and context of the work exhibited therein. As the overflow of the basin was carried by a hose into the garden of the museum, seeping into the ground, the work sent an ambivalent message concerning its own result. On the one hand, it disappeared with no or little effect on its environment. On the other, it had a transformative effect on the substance under

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Battcock, “Informative Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art,” 27.

scrutiny, transcending the confines of the institution to interact in an enriching manner with the non-art world. Discussing the dialectics of art and politics, mediation and factography, with regard to his work in general and to the *Rhinewater Purification Plant* in particular, Haacke referred explicitly to Brecht: “I have learned a lot from Brecht. In a speech about radio as means of communication in 1932, he said: ‘It is a problem of form, for the radio, to give these educational undertakings an interesting character, *i.e.* to make the interests interesting.’ What Brecht said about the broadcasting medium in my view applies equally to any other medium if an impact on the audience is desired.”⁵¹⁴

In 1975, Haacke thus made the dialectics between art and politics the explicit content of his work while maintaining an aesthetic-investigative method. *Social Grease* (fig. 96) consists of six photo-engraved magnesium plates, mounted on aluminum, of approximately two-by-two feet in size. Resembling the polished sincerity and noble austerity of commemorative plaques, each panel features a quote by a leading business figure who at some point in their career had held political posts as well as influential positions in major American cultural institutions (the MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lincoln Center, etc.). Haacke recalls, “In short, my aim was to produce commemorative plaques as they might have emanated from the public relations department of a company that wants to project an image of modernity, optimism, efficiency, and reliability.”⁵¹⁵

Defamiliarizing and reappropriating an established visual language, the artist turned the mechanisms of mythification back onto what Barthes had called “the Right”—those who take an active interest in disguising the historical reality of their own actions.

⁵¹⁴ Sheffield, “Hans Haacke. Interview,” 119.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

Rather than commemorating and thereby literally etching into a timeless, deactivated space the grand deeds of political leaders and philanthropists, the plaques made public, as I mentioned earlier, what should have been kept private: the direct and acknowledged use of art and culture for private enterprise and purely economic incentives. The comments range from cynicism to the obvious abuse of commonly held ideals, such as aesthetic value and artistic freedom, to veil or distract from a company's image, work conditions, environmental records, etc. David Rockefeller is quoted as saying: "... [Art] can provide a company with extensive publicity and advertising, a brighter public reputation, and an improved corporate image. It can build better customer relations, a readier acceptance of company products, and a superior appraisal of their quality..."⁵¹⁶ C. Douglas Dillon, at one time or another investment banker, U.S. & Foreign Securities Corp. Chairman, and President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among other duties, states, "...These projects [art] can be tailored to a company's specific business goals and can return dividends far out of proportion to the actual investment required."⁵¹⁷ The most famous quote is from Robert Kingsley, then Exxon's Manager of Urban Affairs and founder and chairman of the Arts and Business Council, New York: "Exxon's support of the arts serves the arts as a social lubricant. And if business is to continue in big cities, it needs a more lubricated environment."⁵¹⁸

Haacke uses a visual language that is at once minimal and corporate, a liberal and naturalized notion of "beauty" to articulate its use and abuse. When inscribed on a glistening surface and hung upon a wall, not only art's content but art itself is divested of

⁵¹⁶ All texts and their sources can be found in *Hans Haacke*, 60.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

its context, the temporal and special relations to almost all other elements in its system of production and reception.⁵¹⁹ For Haacke, as for Brecht, there is nothing wrong with beauty or a visually stimulating and enticing art. But it is a matter of how beauty and aesthetics are used and to what ends. Drained of mythic notions of visual pleasure, they become weapons—to activate and eventually liberate art from the interest of a few over the many.

This Brechtian reading of Haacke's work as a form of enablement, of providing insight into various systems of production as a means to find a point of entry, to discover a possibility to manipulate and change these structures, is meant to present an alternative to some of the canonical texts written on Haacke during the 1980s. Many critics and historians have located a decisive break in Haacke's oeuvre between the physical, biological, and ecological Real Time Systems and the ideological dimension of Real Time *Social* Systems.⁵²⁰ Yet in the wake of the 1968 movement and what to many signaled the final failure of the modernist project, this break has led a number of influential critics and historians to inscribe Haacke's work within a largely negative narrative of postmodernism.

In 1986, writing in the catalogue of Haacke's one-person exhibition *Unfinished Business* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, Leo Steinberg turns the artist's most overtly political pieces into a resuscitation of the mutual exclusivity of artistic production and political activism: "In short, nothing practical can or will come of it," Steinberg writes, because Haacke's work, no matter how political in content, is

⁵¹⁹ Anna Chave will years later fervently discuss the relation between Minimalism and (corporate) power. See "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* (January 1990): 44–63.

⁵²⁰ For one of the earliest and most insightful of these locations see Burnham, "Hans Haacke's Cancelled Show at the Guggenheim."

“wholly addressed to the mind and eye; to imagination and feeling.”⁵²¹ Regarding *MetroMobiltan* (1985) (fig. 97), Haacke’s installation exposing the partnership between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Mobil Corporation that turned the former into a silent partner of the latter’s apartheid politics, Steinberg concludes that the piece is a work of art “by virtue of its certain futility in *Realpolitik*... One might almost call the piece apolitical, since it is hard to conceive any action resulting from it.”⁵²²

In the same catalogue, Fredric Jameson reads Haacke’s work of the early ’70s from within the framework of the “cultural logic of postmodernism,” wherein the modernist stability of real and referent has been replaced by the “spectacle or simulacrum”: “In this context, Haacke poses the political dilemma of a new cultural politics: how to struggle within the world of the simulacrum by using the arms and weapons specific to that world which are themselves very precisely simulacra?”⁵²³ Using the exploratory installation *Manet-PROJEKT ’74* (1974) (fig. 98) as an example of how Haacke blatantly dissolves the art object’s integrity in favor of the economic and institutional “reality” surrounding it, Jameson calls the artist’s strategy of relative opposition “homeopathic”—a sort of affirmative overload that will cause the logic of the simulacrum to dialectically transform itself at some point.⁵²⁴ To Jameson, there is a decisive break between the modernist avant-garde—“the vigorous self-confidence and affirmation of older political and even proto-political aesthetics, which aimed at opening and developing some radically new and distinct revolutionary cultural space within the

⁵²¹ Leo Steinberg, “Some of Hans Haacke’s Works Considered as Fine Art,” in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* (New York and Cambridge, MA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1986), 18.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Fredric Jameson, “Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism,” in Wallis (ed.), *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, 42–43.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 43.

fallen space of capitalism”—and Haacke’s work, which, “as modest and frustrating as it may sometimes seem,” in its homeopathic approach, “seems to be all we can currently think or imagine.”⁵²⁵

For Benjamin Buchloh, writing in 1988, Haacke’s work signifies a similar acknowledgement of the shortcomings of the original avant-garde and the bankruptcy of modernist paradigms, the recognition of the “historical failure of the modernist concepts of autonomy and visual pleasure.”⁵²⁶ It is Haacke’s overt anti-aestheticism and rationalist analysis, his artistic “marginalization” and “factographic” approach, as exemplified by his use of empirical data and statistics in works such as the *MoMA Poll* (1970) or his various *Visitor Profiles* and *Polls* (1969–1973) (fig. 99), that enable the artist to shed the naiveté of utopian critical strategies of the historical avant-gardes.⁵²⁷ Their strategies, according to Buchloh, have been invalidated by the barbarisms of the 20th century. When applied to the cultural and ideological structures of late capitalism, these strategies are not merely defunct but, Buchloh claims, in their reactionary nostalgia, reinforce those very structures.

Buchloh’s discursive configuration is made up, not of Brecht, but of Adorno, Baudrillard, and a selective reading of Gramsci, in 1986. In anticipation of the artist’s New Museum exhibition later that year, Yve-Alain Bois offers a reading of Haacke’s social systems work through Brecht via Barthes. In the process he identifies the

⁵²⁵ Ibid. Interestingly, Jameson’s own work is subject to a Brechtian revision: after his subscription to postmodernist politics during the 1980s and early ’90s, Jameson wrote *Brecht and Method*, published in 1998, wherein he champions the German playwright as a dialectical performer of historical transformation and modernist thinker of contemporary relevance. This book, due to its fascinating analysis of Brecht’s use of nature and science, will be referred to throughout this chapter.

⁵²⁶ Benjamin Buchloh, “Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason,” *Art in America* (February 1988): 104. For a discussion of the term “factography” and its origin in Buchloh’s writing, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, footnote 186.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 101.

Brechtian roots of French structuralism and, accordingly, offers a textual analysis.⁵²⁸ He constructs a Barthian Brecht rather than a Brechtian Barthes and, accordingly, devises a semiotic rather than political reading of Haacke. Perhaps most disappointing is Bois' own doubt about the actual potential of Haacke's work at the time. Its specificity with regard to historical context is presented as a "molecular" strategy, chosen in order to avoid the mistakes of a unified but misleadingly utopian Left: "Against a 'generous' but more and more pointless emphasis on broad issues (a pointlessness due to the always increasing capacity of multinational capitalism—Haacke's current target—to coopt and absorb all deviation and protest), against the naiveté of certain sectors of the Left, which eventually leads to political discouragement and demobilization, Haacke's strategy is pointed and 'molecular.'"⁵²⁹

Here, the Brechtian notion of class struggle is taken out of the work and replaced by the Left's renewed fragmentation and separatism in the wake of 1968. At the end of his text, Bois reminds the reader that Haacke's piece is, of course, of limited effect: "about the ineluctability of recuperation."⁵³⁰ Citing Brecht's famous remark that "Capitalism has the power instantly and continuously to transform into a drug the very venom that is spit in its face, and to revel in it," Bois ends his analysis on a somber note.⁵³¹ Instead of presenting this cautionary note as an acknowledgement of what he assumes to be a cultural and ideological reality, Bois, in light of the fact that Barthes

⁵²⁸ Yve-Alain Bois, "The Antidote," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 130, 134. While this Brechtian reading of Haacke is probably the most interesting of those mentioned here—emphasizing the art's production of "counter-texts," their Brechtian "restoration of the truth," the offering of a "riddle" to the viewer to encourage intellectual participation rather than just another set of answers to be passively consumed—the semiotic lens makes Haacke (and Brecht) look as dry as they could possibly be.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵³¹ Cited in *ibid.*

himself turned to Brecht's writings "On the Restoration of Truth," could have chosen the following demand Brecht made to all revolutionary artists: "The skill to manipulate the truth as a weapon. The truth must be spoken with a view to the results it will produce in the sphere of action..."⁵³² But that may have been too "generous" an invitation.

In the end, and despite these analyses of his work, Haacke's early investigations of systems, the interrelation between elements within a system and the exchange between different systems, find their revolutionary modernist fulfillment in this empowering and active model of Brechtian dialectics. Rather than a defensive, disabling postmodernism, Haacke discovers opportunity in his systemic approach. The active complexity of relations enables spaces and moments for interaction, manipulation, and change. In the above-quoted 1976 interview, Haacke describes the function of his work in light of institutional and non-art politics as follows:

[I]n spite of all the dilutions and distortions that come with it, the established channels of communication, museums, galleries, the press, schools, etc., seem to me still the most powerful tools for getting a message out, with the hope of a marginal effect on the consciousness of a group larger than one's personal acquaintances. I am afraid that to forgo

⁵³² As Bois points out, Barthes presents his debt to Brecht in "Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity," in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 211–222. As an example, Barthes uses Brecht's 1934 text "Über die Wiederherstellung der Wahrheit (*On the Restoration of Truth*)."⁵³² Haacke himself chose the related 1934/35 "Fünf Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben der Wahrheit (*Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties*)" to be included as the "Artist's Choice" in *Hans Haacke*, 94–97. The third difficulty is "Die Kunst, die Wahrheit handhabbar zu machen al seine Waffe" ("The Skill to Manipulate the Truth as a Weapon"). The word "handhabbar" does not carry the somewhat negative connotation of "manipulate"—it might better be translated as "use" or "make useful" in the sense that the truth is to be made "palpable" or "handle-able," to achieve an active practicality, to be wielded with one's hands. "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties," was first translated and published in *Twice a Year*, New York, Tenth Anniversary Issue (1948) and subsequently in Bentley's 1966 publication of Brecht's *Galileo*, Appendix A, 133–150.

the use of these amplifying transmitters for the sake of purity would force me, embittered, into a sectarian corner and in the end would leave me totally impotent.⁵³³

Haacke goes on to address the fourth and fifth “difficulties when telling the truth”—“The judgment to select those in whose hands the truth will be effective” and “The cunning to spread the truth among the many”—by questioning the specialized art world audience and its relation to the general public as limiting art’s function to an esoteric discourse, thus reproducing art’s separatist (non-public) character: “It is debatable if the art public is a group that is worth spending one’s energies on. ...I have realized that the art scene is not an isolated entity. Not only is it a microcosm of society at large, it interacts with it all the time, economically, politically, and, of course, ideologically.”⁵³⁴ The process of demystification demands the acknowledgment of dialectical mechanism and the use of a dialectical method. As with Brecht, revolution is not achieved through fanatic oppositionality, but the *Umfunktionierung* of the mechanisms that hold myths firmly in place: “In order to *contribute to the gradual decomposition of the belief structure* of today’s fantastically resilient capitalism, one cannot but mimic and play along with some of its ways.”⁵³⁵

In Marxist terms (which seem appropriate since Haacke’s Real Time Social Systems are “systems” and “structures” politicized through notions of class, property, and commerce), the artist chooses to neither give in to a vulgar concept of a deterministic superstructure, nor liberate the material (base, signifiers, mediums) from ideological

⁵³³ Sheffield, “Hans Haacke. Interview,” 123.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

concerns. Instead, he places himself and his art in relation to such objectives, within a reciprocal connection to them. This makes Haacke's work more than just a defense mechanism, an "antidote," a chronicler of the ultimately inescapable power of the consciousness industry. It makes it a contingent and, to many, uncomfortably utopian quest for an original, *social* humanism of political and aesthetic enlightenment.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Yvonne Rainer: Film as Counter-Public Art

The experience of watching Yvonne Rainer's two-hour film *Journey's From Berlin/1971* (1980) is best described as highly challenging. Combining a vast array of cinematic techniques (shots of exhausting duration, reverse motion bordering on the slapstick, investigative pans across objects arranged as still lifes, the curious asynchronicity of picture and sound, the layering of visual, audio, and written narrative and storytelling), *Journeys* addresses suicide as a personal and social phenomenon, the role of women in politics, terrorism as a response to seemingly omnipotent monopolies of power, and psychoanalysis as part of a culture which relies on the (albeit aesthetic) repetition of individual and social experience as a mechanism of appeasement and stability, to name just a few of its themes. With its effective strategies of estrangement and its complex and topical content, the film opens up a participatory space for the critical assessment and discussion of political and aesthetic conduct in the late 1970s. It is about or, one could argue, it *is* the facilitation a "counter-" or "proletarian public sphere": of social experience in an actively political sense.⁵³⁶

Rainer spent 1976/77 in Berlin on a DAAD fellowship. There, the artist encountered two important phenomena that would greatly impact her filmmaking. The first was the so-called German Autumn, the culmination of the stand-off between the

⁵³⁶ The notion of a "proletarian public sphere" or "counter-public sphere" is first raised by Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt in response to Jürgen Habermas' influential 1962 book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (translated and published as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989]). As will be explained in further detail below, the "proletarian public sphere" presents an alternative space of discursive and artistic practice to what the authors consider to be bankrupt ideals of the private and the (bourgeois) public sphere. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Proletarian Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (orig. published in German in 1972), (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

terrorist acts of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (*Red Army Faction* or *RAF*) and an increasingly oppressive police-tactics of the German State. The result of this confrontation were the kidnapping and murder of industrialist Hans-Martin Schleyer, the Mogadishu hijacking of a Lufthansa jet by German terrorists, and the alleged suicides of imprisoned RAF members in September and October 1977. Rainer felt not only compelled to put her own life, her visions of existence and resistance, of private acts and social action, into perspective. The violence of the German Autumn also confronted the artist as well as many other writers, intellectuals, and activists with what appeared to be the ultimate failure and perverse result of an originally peaceful, international movement toward social and cultural change.⁵³⁷

The second influence on Rainer's making of *Journeys* was the artist's exposure to German film, both historical (the artist recalls having seen Brecht's 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe* in Berlin) and contemporary, in form of what is known as the New German Cinema. The latter was undergoing its own revision at the time, led by writer and director Alexander Kluge. Not only were the filmmakers of the New German Cinema (including, besides Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Edgar Reitz, and Volker Schlöndorff, among others), like large parts of the German population, sympathetic toward the terrorists demands. Even though almost nobody endorsed the RAF's violent means, the confrontation between the oppressive state and the young, embittered utopians struck a deeply critical and emotional core among the younger population.⁵³⁸ The German film

⁵³⁷ See, for example, Oskar Negt, "Terrorism and the German State's Absorption of Conflict," *New German Critique* (Fall 1977): 15–27 and Margit Mayer in "The German October of 1977," *New German Critique* (Winter 1978): 155–163.

⁵³⁸ Many intellectuals and other professionals spoke out against the German state's attempts to monitor, censor, and repress any form of so-called "anti-constitutional" and "anti-democratic" activity. Prominent writers like Heinrich Böll strongly criticized the terrorists' treatment in prison who were kept under

was furthermore revising its own mission, transforming the *Autorenkino* of the 1960s into a more collaborative and spectator-oriented mode of production. Rather than creating idiosyncratic, independently controlled films in an effort to escape an increasingly powerful movie industry, the filmmakers sought to make more works that were truly public: intellectually accessible and socially inclusive, challenging what was officially deemed to be “public,” hence, relevant to all members of society.⁵³⁹ Film, so Kluge, rather than merely the author’s authentic expression, had to be socially involved, “to grasp everything.”⁵⁴⁰ The viewer had to be assigned an active role, to participate in the creation of socially pertinent experiences.⁵⁴¹ As argued here, this transformation from film as private expression to a critically revised public experience is closely mirrored in the development of Rainer’s own work.

Among other things, *Journeys* is an analytical articulation of what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge call the “social horizon of experience” and an experience of that horizon’s latent potential for being transcended and renewed. It demonstrates the

constant supervision and in isolation; Otto Schilly, later Interior Minister under Gerhard Schröder, acted as public defender for some RAF members. The topic has led to a recent reexamination of the 1960s and their aftermath, partially because one still-incarcerated RAF terrorist has been up for parole in the beginning of 2007 (the request for parole was denied). For a detailed assessment of development of leftist politics in Germany and the 1960s and ’70s as a time of hope and terror, see the ongoing series of related articles in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, especially the recent issue with the focus on “1968—Wie alles anfang” (“1968—How It All Began”), no. 1/2007.

⁵³⁹ For a discussion of the New German Cinema and Kluge’s turn toward “spectator film” as well as its problems of commodification see Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), especially 281–284. See also Stuart Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge,” *October* (Fall 1988): 23–59.

⁵⁴⁰ Kluge in Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere,” 27. Kluge states that, “In 1977, the Left in Germany was in a process of self-destruction. We had to understand this. We had to understand, for example, the Baader-Meinhof group. We were not judges; we were not politicians; we were not responsible for the whole of society. But we felt responsible for drawing society’s attention to things. Precisely because we are not powerful, we must grasp everything.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁴¹ To film historian Stuart Liebman’s question, “The thinking you require of the spectator creates the ‘film in the spectator’s head’ you often speak about?”, Kluge replies, “To bring the thoughts of others into the world spontaneously, that is Socrates method. This is what I like, too.” *Ibid.*, 55.

possibility of socio-political engagement when the horizon's defining boundaries are comprehended as constructed through both an active, exclusive economic interest and the mainstream media's (in this case, film's) perpetual reproduction of an increasingly impotent and complicit bourgeois public sphere⁵⁴².

Despite the consistent influence of Brecht's methods and strategies on Rainer's art during the 1960s and '70s, *Journeys* is the artist's only truly Brechtian work of that period. Informed by Rainer's stay in Germany 1976/77 and the context of the New German Cinema, this film resonates most closely with Brecht's own writing on film and his attempts to make movies.⁵⁴³ Brecht's brief turn to film was predicated on the "necessary removal of revolutionary art practice from the bourgeois art business," with its reliance on the image of the bourgeois public sphere as an autonomous arena of critical contemplation and exchange. Rainer's film similarly challenges the artistically

⁵⁴² Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Proletarian Experience*, 2. The "social horizon of experience" is defined as the space where "everything that is actually or ostensibly relevant for all members of society is integrated." Ibid.

The notion of "experience" as used here follows that of Negt and Kluge, most poignantly described by Miriam Hansen: "It is important to note that this concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) is explicitly opposed to an empiricist notion of subject-object relations (perception, cognition) and its instrumental use in science and technology. Rather, Negt and Kluge assume a dialectical conception of experience in the tradition of Adorno and Benjamin: experience as that which mediates individual perception with social contingency and collectivity, conscious with unconscious processes; experience as the capacity to see connections and relations (*Zusammenhang*); experience as the matrix of conflicting temporalities, of memory and hope, including the historical loss of these dimensions." "Reinventing the Nickelodeon: Notes on Kluge and Early Cinema," *October* (Fall 1988): 184.

The terms "private sphere," "public sphere," "production public sphere," and "counter-public sphere" as discussed and applied by Negt and Kluge, whose work provides the theoretical frame for this chapter, will be defined and explained more thoroughly at the appropriate places within the text and with reference to Rainer's work and that of her peers.

⁵⁴³ The relation between Kluge's films and writing, the New German Cinema, and Rainer's work has been pointed out by B. Ruby Rich, "Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction," in Yvonne Rainer, *The Films of Yvonne Rainer* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 1–23. Generally considered to be an outstanding example of a post-war Brechtian practice, Kluge's work provides a productive comparison to Rainer's *Journeys of Berlin/1971*, addressing similar concerns and employing comparable means, while articulating the limits of Rainer's filmic work as "counter-public art."

and politically crippling conventions of what are traditionally defined as private and public experience.⁵⁴⁴

It has become commonplace to invoke Brecht with regard to Rainer's work, especially her films. A number of art historians and critics as well as the artist herself have made reference to Brechtian strategies and forms of estrangement as either a direct or mediated influence (through the plays of the *Living Theater* or films by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Marie Straub).⁵⁴⁵ Her dance performances employ distancing devices such as improvisation and repetition, asynchronous action and music scores, and the projection of texts and images. Rainer's films rely on estrangement through disjunctive use of montage and intertitles, jump cuts and slow motion, long takes and direct camera address.

Yet the histories of art and film (and on occasion the artist herself) have often reduced these strategies to a repertoire of formalist tools, applied to produce a rather un-Brechtian outcome. Rainer's 1960s dance performances and her early films have in fact been read within two complementary discourses. Her work is regarded either as an affirmation of private experience without resorting to empathetic-cathartic illusionism, or as a structuralist-material form of cultural critique.⁵⁴⁶ This critique relies less on the materialist politics of production than on the material politics of the medium, on what

⁵⁴⁴ Wolfgang Gersch, *Film bei Brecht* (Berlin: Herschelverlag, 1975), 101. My translation.

⁵⁴⁵ See, for example, Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961–73* (Halifax and New York: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1974) and *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) for scattered references throughout; Noël Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who..." *Millennium Film Journal* (Fall 1980–Winter 1981): 37–68; Sally Banes, "An Open Field: Yvonne Rainer as Dance Theorist," in Sid Sachs (ed.), *Yvonne Rainer: Radical Juxtapositions 1961–2002* (Philadelphia, PA: The University of the Arts, 2003), 20–39; Carrie Lambert, "On Being Moved: Rainer and the Aesthetics of Empathy," in *ibid.*, 40–63; Noël Carroll, "Moving and Moving," *Millennium Film Journal* (Fall 2000): 81–88.

⁵⁴⁶ See, for example, Lambert, "On Being Moved: Rainer and the Aesthetics of Empathy" and Annette Michelson, "Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: 'Lives of Performers,'" *Artforum* (February 1974): 30–35, respectively.

Annette Michelson has called its “consumingly autoanalytical character.”⁵⁴⁷ Both approaches align Rainer’s art with a trajectory of avant-garde film and theater (Brecht, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Vertov). Some go so far as to proclaim that her work “could be considered a 1960s correlate of... the work of Bertolt Brecht.”⁵⁴⁸

Challenging such accounts and the undifferentiating radicality inscribed through them, this chapter views examples of Rainer’s films of the 1970s through the lenses of three notions: 1) “private,” 2) “public,” and 3) “counter-public” or “proletarian” experience. The first assesses the political limits of Brechtian devices like distancing when applied to create an art that destroys cinema’s visual illusionism in favor of a more authentic, almost corporeal intersubjective experience. Then, to consider Rainer’s filmmaking, as Michelson does, as a traditionally public, hence, autonomous, universally valid, and decidedly non-political endeavor, means to critically cast a light on the formalist appropriation of avant-garde strategies in 1970s filmmaking. Finally, borrowing Kluge’s concept of the counter-public sphere enables an understanding of *Journeys* as a Brechtian work of art—one that tells stories and shows how they are being told, that makes available to the viewer not only experiences of immediate social and political

⁵⁴⁷ Michelson, “Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: ‘Lives of Performers,’” 32.

Michelson’s observations, her writings on film during the 1960s and ’70s, will play a pertinent role in this chapter since not only was she a close observer and supporter of Rainer’s filmic work but an influential American film critic. She was also one of the most dominant (if not *the* dominant) advocate of film as an artistic medium, presenting avant-garde film to the readers of *Artforum* (see, for example, her special issues on film for the magazine published in September 1971 and January 1973), the *Performing Arts Journal*, and *October*. The distinction Michelson made during the early 1970s between a “visionary” and an “intellectual” independent American cinema is especially insightful for the discussion of Rainer’s films. It should be noted also that Michelson is one of the protagonists in *Journeys from Berlin/1971*. Whether intended or not, to feature a critic as prominent as Michelson in the film, must have, to those viewers able to recognize her, functioned as an effect of estrangement in its own right, creating out of that recognition a juxtaposition of the traditionally fictional dimension of film and the reality of the performer performing.

⁵⁴⁸ Carrie Lambert, *Yvonne Rainer’s Media: Performance and the Image* (Dissertation, Stanford University, 2002), 29. Lambert refers primarily to Rainer’s performance work but argues that the artist’s turn to film was ultimately determined by Rainer’s desire to overcome the limits of live performance, therefore presenting her films as a logical extension of her work in dance.

relevance but an understanding of how such experiences are facilitated. Borrowed from a discourse at the very heart of 1960s and '70s art activism, these categories allow for a differentiation among Rainer's films and an assessment of their contribution to avant-garde art and cinema.⁵⁴⁹ They make possible an articulation and transcendence of the limits of methodological dichotomies such as body and ideology, feminist essentialism and psychoanalytic structuralism, the expressionist and the theoretical, the subjective and the objective.

Private: Estrangement and Emotional Immediacy

Rainer's first feature-length film, *Lives of Performers* (1972), employs a supposedly public medium to enable private experience. In this 90-minute, black-and-white production, subtitled *A Melodrama*, Rainer uses a number of cinematic tools to dismantle commonplace representations of romantic relationships in order to present to the viewer a more direct experience of erotic and emotional complexities. The film follows the lives of the dancers involved in Rainer's 1971 project *Grand Union Dreams* (fig. 100): the performers perform, watch themselves perform, and reminisce about off-stage relationships between one another, often accompanied by Rainer's monotonous voice-over explaining what is being seen on-screen.⁵⁵⁰ And while at first this visual and aural puzzle appears to affirm a Brechtian estrangement of canonical narrative patterns and

⁵⁴⁹ Film historian David James makes an insightful distinction between "film" and "cinema" (which I will roughly follow in this chapter): while the former connotes the filmic medium as the apparatus and mechanisms of production and dissemination of images, the latter is "the site of manifold relationships among people and classes": "Cinema is, in the terms of Guy Debord's elaboration of Marx, 'not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.'" David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 5.

⁵⁵⁰ *Lives of Performers* features still photographs and verbal descriptions of *Grand Union Dreams*, performed in 1971 in the gymnasium of the Emmanuel Midtown YMHA, New York.

For a detailed account of Rainer's work and the media and strategies employed therein up to her first feature-length film project, see Rainer, *Work 1961–73*.

their presentation, the distance created by *Lives of Performers* is not one of political analysis but rather of anti-illusionist abstraction in the expressionist sense. The film is, then, part of a historical trajectory in avant-garde cinema as written during the late '60s and early '70s. This trajectory locates the medium's emancipatory potential no longer in what Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin referred to as the revolutionary function of "collective distraction" but in Stan Brakhage's organic, material cinema of "inner vision" and Jonas Mekas's "home movies" that would return man to himself, "so personal, so unambiguous."⁵⁵¹ After all, American avant-garde cinema, according to film historian Murray Smith, sought to produce films opposed to their mainstream, industrial, commercial counterparts: "The avant-garde is an 'artisanal' or 'personal' mode."⁵⁵² Given the cultural and socio-political context of the 1960s, such cinema employed alienating devices as an *antidote* to psychosocial alienation.

This somewhat defensive attitude toward mainstream cultural production can be partially explained through the steady erosion of two of modernity's key constituents: the public and the private sphere. The phenomenon, as Jürgen Habermas explains, is twofold: while the increasingly monopolized ownership of communication media severely limits the free exchange of opinion (*Räsonnement*) and therefore the unrestricted formation of social and individual identity, these media also expand into and thereby compromise the

⁵⁵¹ Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces" (1926), reprinted in *New German Critique* (Winter 1987): 91–96. Stan Brakhage, cited in David James, "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson," *Film Quarterly* (Spring 1982): 40. Jonas Mekas, "Where Are We—The Underground" (1966), reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *The New American Cinema—A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1967), 20.

⁵⁵² Murray Smith, "Modernism and the Avant-Gardes," in J. Hill and P. Church Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 395.

autonomy of the private sphere.⁵⁵³ The private sphere is defined as an arena of “intimacy” where the individual experiences “complete and free inwardness” (*gesättigte und freie Innerlichkeit*), where he or she is “human” (*Mensch*) rather than citizen.⁵⁵⁴ Historically, newspapers, journals, radio, and television make up the public media; the arts play a somewhat more ambiguous role, ranging from sanctuaries of private expression to regulatory institutions. As Peter Bürger has argued, the individual production and reception of art, of what was once a collective, shared experience, is part of the institutionalization of the public sphere.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was and remains the leading text in German as well as American debates concerning the history and theory of the public sphere. While these debates in the U.S. certainly predate the American publication of Habermas’ work, essays such as “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article” (1964), *New German Critique* (Autumn 1974): 49–55 focused the discussion at the height of its popularity. For earlier discussions of Habermas’ work and the public sphere see, for example, Reinhard Bendix, “Review: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* by Jürgen Habermas,” *American Sociological Review* (February 1964): 128; Jürgen Habermas, “Knowledge and Interest,” *Inquiry* (Winter 1966): 288–300; and Kurt L. Shell, “Extraparliamentary Opposition in Postwar Germany,” *Comparative Politics* (July 1970): 653–680.

Habermas defines the public sphere as follows: “By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest.” “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” 49.

⁵⁵⁴ Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchung zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), 87–90. My translation.

⁵⁵⁵ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 48. Like Habermas, Bürger views the separation of bourgeois life into independent spheres (which were intended to function in reciprocal control as to avoid the unimpeded rule of aristocratic or clerical absolutism) compromised as soon as they remain or become ideals or institutions, hence, divorced from “the life praxis of bourgeois society.” He continues, “Not only production but reception also are now individual acts. The solitary absorption in the work is the adequate appropriation of creations removed from the life praxis of the bourgeois, even though they still claim to interpret that praxis.” *Ibid.* Art as ideal can only function as a regulatory mechanism when everyday life is continuously adjusted toward achieving that ideal, not when it serves the surrogate purpose that Habermas describes as the “virtual satisfaction of those needs which become quasi illegal in the material life process of bourgeois society.” (Among these needs he counts a “mimetic relation to nature,” “solidary living with other,” and the “fortune of a communicative experience” unencumbered by the imperatives of a calculative, means-ends rationality.) “Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik: Die Aktualität Walter Benjamins” (1972), reprinted in *Politik, Kunst, Religion* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1978), 63. As will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter, the question regarding the positioning and relation between art and life praxis is also at the heart of the 1938 Brecht-Lukás *Expressionismusdebatte*, published in part in the *New Left Review* during the mid-’70s and

From the very beginning, Rainer's work in dance and performance sought to create an experiential reality that would defy the artifice of bourgeois culture's illusionism. It aimed to deny ideals of true emotion and psychosocial coherence projected into ephemeral time and absent space. As dance historian Sally Banes put it, Rainer and her peers at the Judson Dance Group "stressed the performative aspect—embodiment—over the literary aspect of their forms, aspiring to greater and greater immediacy, 'presentness,' concreteness of experience."⁵⁵⁶ To achieve this immediacy, this "transgressi[on of] artistic convention by means of utter simplicity," the dancers used different strategies.⁵⁵⁷ Simone Fortie, for example, created dances around movements derived from children's play and games, while Lucinda Child's 1964 *Street Dance* took place on a New York City street with the performers pointing to the surrounding architecture and blending into pedestrian traffic while the audience was watching from a window.⁵⁵⁸ Even more radical in their attempts to rid performance of its theatrical artificiality were Deborah Hay's Dance Circle, founded in the late 1960s, and Steve Paxton's Contact Improvisation movement, created in the early '70s. Hay, for example, brought aspects of dance to everyday life, rather than the other way around. Relying not on traditionally choreographed dance but on movements stemming from folk dance and meditative principles such as Tai Chi, Hay instructed her dancers/audience to, "Bring the

its influence on feminist art, theory, and cinema. (For an account of this influence see Laura Mulvey, "British Feminist Film Theory's Female Spectators: Presence and Absence," *Camera Obscura, A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory* [May–September 1989]: 68–81.)

⁵⁵⁶ Sally Banes, "Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre and Its Legacy," *Performing Arts Journal* (1981): 101.

⁵⁵⁷ Sally Banes, "Gulliver's Hamburger," in *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything Was Possible* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 9.

⁵⁵⁸ For a more detailed description of this and other dance performances of the time see Sally Banes, *Trepsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

dances with you to the lab and the A&P. / Bring them on the bus, into the garden, and upstairs. / Take them out walking and take them to bed.”⁵⁵⁹

As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, Minimalist phenomenology aimed to provide a physical, psychological, humanist assertion of the subject’s presence and of its coherence, and this, Banes argues, was part of the artistic zeitgeist: “The phenomenological exhortation ‘Zu den Sachen!’ (‘To the Things!’) was echoed in the manifestoes by artists in every field.”⁵⁶⁰ The instructions for Rainer’s 1963 *Terrain* (fig. 101) read in part: “... walk, run, crawl—straight legs, horizontal torso run with hands at ears... straight-leg waddle—arms high doing small windmill... movie death run (*Breathless*)....”⁵⁶¹ Liberating dance from the theatrical, the staged, the affected, and introducing ordinary movement became an ontological affirmation: “My first intense feeling of being alive was in performance... Partly it was adrenaline, I am sure, but also a cathartic kind of love, an intense feeling of being in the moment. It was the first time I had experienced myself as a whole person. There was no part of my consciousness that was anywhere else....”⁵⁶²

In what has been claimed to be the “theoretical groundwork” of her dance and performance pieces, Rainer mimics a famous chart drawn up by Brecht wherein the

⁵⁵⁹ Cited in Banes, “Gulliver’s Hamburger,” 17.

⁵⁶⁰ Banes, “Democracy’s Body,” 101. Not only does Rainer’s work develop within the context and in direct contact with Minimalism, it also shares some of its theoretical influences: Rainer recalls, “The concerns of 1960s minimalist sculptors were bolstered by the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Roland Barthes, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. The latter’s *For a New Novel* was especially important to me.” Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 396. See the previous chapter for a discussion of these writings in relation to minimalist aesthetics.

⁵⁶¹ Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 28. “Movie death run” refers to Rainer’s appropriation of a sequence of Godard’s 1959 film *Breathless*, consisting of physical maneuvers constructed to deny any emotional projection onto a scene of flight, death, and true love left unfulfilled. As with Rainer’s early appropriation of Brechtian strategies, at this point her relation to Godard is purely formal and technical, divorcing the quoted sequence from its content and context.

⁵⁶² Rainer in Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, “The Performer as Persona: An Interview with Yvonne Rainer,” *Avalanche* (Summer 1972): 57–58.

playwright juxtaposes the conventions of “Dramatic Theater” with the innovations of his “Epic Theater.”⁵⁶³ In a similar fashion, Rainer’s 1966 “A Quasi Survey of Some ‘Minimalist’ Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*” presents a list of traditional dance’s characteristics to be “eliminate[d] or minimize[d]” contrasted with those to be substituted for them.⁵⁶⁴ Accordingly, *Trio A* (1966) (fig. 102), a four-and-a-half minute performance consisting of three simultaneous solos, exchanged “character” for “neutral performance,” “performance” for “task or tasklike activity,” and “development and climax” for an “equality of parts.”⁵⁶⁵ The “virtuosic movement feat and the fully-extended body” made way for the “human scale.” In the text accompanying the “Quasi Survey” the reader searches in vain for a reason for these substitutions but finds only rejections: the artist states that the “artifice of performance has been reevaluated,” that “action is more interesting and important than the exhibition of character and attitude,” that “the display of technical virtuosity and the display of the dancers’ specialized body no longer make any sense.” “Like a romantic, overblown plot,” Rainer observes, “this particular kind of display... has finally in this decade exhausted itself.”⁵⁶⁶ Banes, who calls Rainer’s work in dance “the aesthetics of denial,” sees *Trio A* as an attack on dance’s transient, artificial

⁵⁶³ Banes, *Trepsichore in Sneakers*, 44. Brecht’s chart is part of his essay “The Modern Theater Is the Epic Theater” (1930), reprinted in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 37. Willett’s 1964 publication appears to be the first translated version of the text available to an American public.

⁵⁶⁴ First published in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art, A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968; reprinted Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 263.

⁵⁶⁵ *Trio A* was first performed at the Judson Church, New York on January 10, 1966. It was then called *The Mind Is a Muscle, Part 1*.

⁵⁶⁶ Yvonne Rainer, “A Quasi Survey of Some ‘Minimalist’ Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*,” in Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, 267–269.

quality: according to Banes, Rainer is “concerned with surmounting the ultimate difficulty [of] the ephemeral nature of dance.”⁵⁶⁷

But rather than merely being innovation for innovation’s sake, Banes argues that Rainer’s work, informed by Brechtian strategies of estrangement, yields a “popular or folk art form.”⁵⁶⁸ This form is democratic in its accessibility, not because of its simplicity (the performances were in fact complex and strenuous) but because of the movements’ factuality. The dance historian goes so far as to call the “actions such as walking” presented by the Judson Dance Theater “symbolically charged, revolutionary acts, ... models and dreams that... joined with radical political forces to help mobilize a mass countercultural movement by the end of the decade.”⁵⁶⁹

Yet there are a few decisive methodological differences between Brecht’s and Rainer’s innovations. Rainer explains, “My *Trio A* dealt with the ‘seeing’ difficulty by dint of its continual and unremitting revelation of gestural detail.”⁵⁷⁰ Brecht, in drawing up his chart of substitutions, was also interested in gesture. But he expanded its definition from that of a movement expressing or communicating a certain meaning based on a commonly accepted framework of communication to include the gesture’s ideological dimension in order to question and lay bare the very framework the meaning of a gesture is based upon. The “*Gestus*,” as Brecht calls it, therefore defines the communicative act as a sociopolitical one and its subjects as sociopolitical entities.⁵⁷¹ The *gestus* is a gesture (physical, spoken, written) that is tendentious and at the same time reveals its tendency;

⁵⁶⁷ Banes, *Trepsichore in Sneakers*, 45.

⁵⁶⁸ Banes, “Gulliver’s Hamburger,” 15.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

⁵⁷⁰ Rainer, “A Quasi Survey of Some ‘Minimalist’ Tendencies,” 272.

⁵⁷¹ Brecht, “The Modern Theater Is the Epic Theater,” 42.

the epic theater “gives the attitude” rather than “paints a psychological situation.”⁵⁷² To Brecht, revolutionary art creates a shared experience, one that reveals the ordinary not as ordinary but as extraordinary. The basis for solidarity is not the commonplace but the realization that the factual, the normal, the non-artificial is as determined and as historically contingent as the commercial products of capitalist culture.

But Rainer never did intend her performances to be of revolutionary quality. Quite the opposite: in light of the modern subject’s increasing alienation from itself, the artist consciously fell back onto an assertive corporeality.⁵⁷³ In 1968, as part of a written statement handed out at performances of *The Mind Is a Muscle* at the Anderson Theater in New York, the artist famously declared:

Just as ideological issues have no bearing on the nature of the work, neither does the tenor of current political and social conditions have any bearing on its execution. The world disintegrates around me. My connection to the world-in-crisis remains tenuous and remote... [This statement] is a reflection of a state of mind that reacts with horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV—not at the sight of

⁵⁷² Ibid., 38. For a discussion of the *Gestus* as a method at the very core of Brecht’s aesthetics, see Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York, Verso, 1998), 99–118.

⁵⁷³ Rainer did participate in several political activities at the time but when she did, she often either inserted her work into the context of protest (as part of the Angry Arts Week in 1967, for example, Rainer danced *Trio A* under the title *Convalescent Dance*, referring to her recovery from a recent operation) or would alter her work accordingly, to fit a political purpose and function (invited to participate in the Judson Flag Show in 1970, a protest of the arrests of people charged with desecrating the American flag, Rainer contributed a version of *Trio A*, performed by dancers in the nude, wearing only an American flag tied like a bib around their necks). Rainer’s most ambitious political work at the time was *WAR* (1970), a dance performance during which the narrator read descriptions of military maneuvers from news reports and literary classics like *The Peloponnesian War*.

death, however, but at the fact that the TV can be shut off afterwards as after a bad Western. *My body remains the enduring reality.*⁵⁷⁴

While some embraced the televised, projected image as the creation of an ultimately unifying social experience, others feared its aggressively invasive, monologous (one-directional) reconstruction of visual experience.⁵⁷⁵ Rainer, like many others at the time, felt that the private sphere and an authentically private experience of self as a physically and psychologically coherent entity were under attack from a variety of factors, ranging from the surrogate projections of televised images invading the living room in ever greater quantity to government surveillance sanctioned by Cold War paranoia.⁵⁷⁶ In light of this alienation, Rainer created a corporeal and chrono-real experience as an affirmation of subjectivity.⁵⁷⁷ The “enduring reality” of the body was to be communicated via “kinetic empathy:” the artist tried to communicate the “*actual time*” and “*actual weight of the body,*” overcome the gap between what the dancer feels and what the viewer sees, translate a subjective, unmediated experience from one private individual to another.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁴ Yvonne Rainer, “Statement” (1968), reprinted in Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 71.

⁵⁷⁵ The previous chapter briefly discusses the technophile optimism regarding the growing quantity and sophistication of the televisual medium, specifically in the writings of Marshall McLuhan and their euphoric reception. See also Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970).

⁵⁷⁶ On the urgent debate regarding privacy and the invasion of the private sphere in the 1960s and ’70s, see, for example, Alan F. Westin, *Privacy and Freedom* (London, Sydney, Toronto: The Bodley Head, 1970); Herbert Schiller, *Mass Communication and American Empire* (New York: August M. Kelley, 1969); Alan F. Westin, “Science, Privacy, and Freedom: Issues and Proposals for the 1970s. Part 1—The Current Impact of Surveillance on Privacy,” *Columbia Law Review* (June 1966): 1003–1050; H.J. McCloskey, “The Political Ideal of Privacy,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* (October 1971): 303–314; and James Rachels, “Why Privacy Is Important,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Summer 1975): 323–333. See also Philippa Strum, *Privacy: The Debate in the United States Since 1945* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1998). Strum examines the government’s role in protecting and violating its citizens’ right to privacy, a right, as she argues, guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

⁵⁷⁷ A similar argument about the relation between Rainer’s assertion of the body as *personal* experience in light of the “historical condition of a televisual, media-saturated culture” is made by Lambert, *Yvonne Rainer’s Media: Performance and the Image*, 164.

⁵⁷⁸ Lambert, “On Being Moved,” 46 and Rainer, “A Quasi Survey of Some ‘Minimalist’ Tendencies,” 270, respectively. Lambert uses *Trio A* as an example, writing that here Rainer sought to “close the experiential gap between the body of the performer and the body of the viewer.” Lambert, “On Being Moved,” 46.

By the beginning of the 1970s, Rainer, frustrated by the “incommunicability of bodily experience,” turned to a related area of private experience, one that the artist felt would provide a better basis for communication and interpersonal connection:

emotion.⁵⁷⁹ In 1973, a year after the production of *Lives of Performers*, Rainer wrote:

Dance is ipso facto about *me* (the so-called kinesthetic response of the spectator notwithstanding, it only rarely transcends that narcissistic-voyeuristic duality of doer and looker); whereas the area of the emotions must necessarily directly concern the both of us... the more I get into it the more I see how such things as rage, terror, desire, conflict, et al., are not unique to my experience the way my body and its functioning are. I now—as a consequence—feel much more connection to my audience, and that gives me great comfort.⁵⁸⁰

As Rainer found that she had reached the limits of communicating physicality, she turned to film. Most articles written about Rainer’s work locate this transition from dance to film in the exhaustion of her attempts to create a private, intersubjective experience rooted in the assertive affirmation of corporeal materiality.⁵⁸¹ Yet, the majority of historians fail to

⁵⁷⁹ Apparently there had been a few recorded successes in communicating the reality of the body. In a letter dated January 14, 1968, John Bernard Meyers, then director of the Tibor DeNagy Gallery, New York, wrote to Rainer after seeing *The Mind Is a Muscle*: “For me what I saw yesterday was the most extreme Realism I had ever seen in dance... ‘This is what the body is all about.’ The body is cool, or it sweats; it can’t ignore gravity, best give in to it. The body leaps; it falls down... The question your art proposes are hard to face. Should the public be asked to face them? The answer is a resounding ‘Yes!’... Once again let me congratulate you on your total devotion to truth in *The Body*.” Cited in Rainer, *Feelings are Facts*, 301–303.

⁵⁸⁰ Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 238. Lambert gives an in-depth account of Rainer’s interest in kinetic empathy and her frustrations with it. See “On Being Moved,” especially pages 45–51.

⁵⁸¹ Text addressing Rainer’s transition from dance to film include Noël Carroll, “Moving and Moving”; Peggy Phelan, “Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film,” in Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who... Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3–17; Jonathan Walley, “From Objecthood to Subject Matter: Yvonne Rainer’s Transition from Dance to Film,” *Senses of Cinema*, n. 18, January–February 2002, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/18/rainer.html>; Annette Michelson, “Yvonne Rainer, Part One: The Dancer and the Dance,” *Artforum* (January 1974): 57–

address why she chose film as her new medium.⁵⁸² The most substantial account comes from art historian Carrie Lambert, who claims that Rainer's films (*Lives of Performers* in particular) create a "new filmic empathy," one that is ultimately *not* activist or activating in a political sense but "representational": "the film as a whole does not *produce opposition* so much as *depict realities* as Rainer found them—spectacular, mediated, compromised, remembered."⁵⁸³ Lambert presents Rainer's apolitical representationalism as a radical, avant-garde form of artistic production within its time, even as a historically specific reinvention of Brechtian strategies at a moment when to many artists the schism between art and politics seemed so big that the production of political art seemed vulgar, simplistic, and forced. I would argue that Rainer's early films, given her resistance to film's public potential and her emphasis on emotional connection, reproduce the public and the private as exclusive arenas, affirming rather than challenging subjectivities and consciousness. Discussing the state of performance in 1972, Rainer puts it this way, "For me, the body is no longer the main focus. I am interested in private experience and the problems of projecting it."⁵⁸⁴ And it was film that the artist found to be the perfect medium to articulate this private experience. Within this context, the anti-illusionism in *Lives of Performers* is an extension of the assertive physicality of Rainer's dance, providing its audience not with analytic distance but with intimacy and immediacy grounded in the real-time experience of a projected (on-screen) and inter-subjective

63 and "Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: *Lives of Performers*"; Chuck Kleinhans, "Lives of Performers," *Women and Film* (1974): 52–54; Lucy Lippard, "Talking Pictures, Silent Words: Yvonne Rainer's Recent Movies," *Art in America* (May–June 1977): 86–90; and Lambert, *Yvonne Rainer's Media: Performance and the Image*.

⁵⁸² Lambert points this out in "On Being Moved," 51.

⁵⁸³ Lambert, *Yvonne Rainer's Media: Performance and the Image*, 156, 197. Emphasis original.

Regarding Rainer's "empathetic *no*" in response to the question whether or not she saw her work as "making any kind of contribution to sociopolitical change," see Yvonne Rainer, "Interview by the Camera Obscura Collective" (1976), reprinted in Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, 141.

⁵⁸⁴ Stephen Koch, "Performance, A Conversation," *Artforum* (December 1972): 58

(between viewers and protagonists) romantic relationship. Indeed it was, as drama and dance historian Peggy Phelan argues, Rainer's goal to "achieve an emotional intimacy with the spectator."⁵⁸⁵

Since Rainer chose to make feature-length films to be shown in a cinematic setting (rather than producing videos or film installations to be seen in galleries), it is appropriate to discuss her work within the framework of U.S. avant-garde film after 1945. This context, in all its complexity and breadth, was shaped primarily through so-called underground or "lyrical" film. As film historian David James attests, "Despite a continuing abstract, plastic tradition, the postwar American avant-garde film was commonly understood in the fifties and early sixties through analogies with poetry."⁵⁸⁶

"Poetic" or "lyrical" may not be the adjectives that come to mind on first encountering *Lives of Performers*. One reviewer noted, "There was little dance interest in the film. The personal entanglements were considerably less compelling, unless one has a taste for ambiguous chaos."⁵⁸⁷ The ambiguity was, of course, intended, serving as the mechanism that would deny the "personal entanglements" to be experienced in a traditionally "compelling" manner. From the first sequence on, Rainer uses the relation between camera and sound, movement and story to reconfigure the rules of cinematic narrative. When we see the performers rehearse (fig. 103), the camera follows their

⁵⁸⁵ Phelan, "Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film," 10.

⁵⁸⁶ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 29.

It is important to note at this point that by the time *Lives of Performers* was made and screened, Rainer and many of her peers such as Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Vito Acconci had already produced short films that in the discourses of the 1970s would—as examples of so-called structuralist, minimalist or formalist cinema—come to present an alternative to the lyrical films of the 1950s and '60s. At the time, though, through their emphasis on process and operational time, they shared an interest in creating an immediate rather than illusionist, absent, and projected artistic experience. The relation between Rainer's and what here will be called "discursive" or "public film" will be discussed in the "public" section of this chapter.

⁵⁸⁷ Don McDonagh, "Dance: Yvonne Rainer," *The New York Times* March 21, 1973): 55.

movements and gestures in a seemingly random pattern, as if dictated by chance rather than plot or effect. The dancers are conversing, talking about the coordination of steps and turns but what the viewer hears is out of sync with what he observes on the screen. The words do not fit the speakers' mouths, the instructions do not correspond to the dance. *Lives of Performers* creates a distance in order to destroy one: it sabotages the "organic" harmony of parts that so seamlessly guides a spectator through a commercial movie, so as to create a more direct and intimate emotional connection between viewer and performer. When the performers refer to themselves as human beings, slip out of their roles and become *those who perform*, who discuss their feelings and their recollections of the performance—complete with laughter at what went wrong during the show (fig. 104) or how they got hurt when backstage feelings were not returned—all this makes them appear closer to the viewer, more real, creating a "compassionate," "well-toned empathy" rather than the false, ephemeral empathy of illusionism.⁵⁸⁸

As the artifice of traditional visual narratives is dismantled, as Rainer and the performers not only comment on their past performance but on the very making of *Lives of Performers* itself ("Wait, Yvonne, were you reading that?" "What?" "Those questions." "Yes. Why'd you want to know?" "I just wondered."), as they pre-empt suspense or anticipation ("Here they're waiting for her to come back, and she doesn't come back"), they accomplish on an experiential level what they at one point literally perform in the film: they fill the Minimalist box with people (fig. 105). The box—a metaphor for abstract art, the television, the movie screen—is a site no longer of projection but of a confused, crammed, tangible assortment of personal and interpersonal

⁵⁸⁸ Phelan, "Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film," 11, 16.

experiences. Herein lies the work's proximity to the films of Brakhage and Robert Breer and to the criticism of Mekas: in its attempt to overcome what Michelson has called film's "central, ineradicable trauma of dissociation."⁵⁸⁹ The negation of this dissociation, of producing rather than trying to erase the alienation created by a specialized, depersonalized commercial culture, was the core concern of "underground" cinema. In contrast to Hollywood's lack of "imagination and spontaneity," to movies that "like, Sara Lee cakes, are delicious and stuffed with good ingredients but always automated beyond the expectation of variation," critic Gregory Battcock pitted the "intensely personal and idiosyncratic statements" of the New American Cinema: "The entire, and only, purpose of every production is to express the artistic intention of its maker."⁵⁹⁰ Mekas also advocated a more private version of filmmaking and film viewing:

Man has wasted himself outside himself; man has disappeared in his projections. We want to bring him down, into his small room, to bring him home. We want to remind him that there is such a thing as home, where he can be, once in a while, alone and with himself and with a few that he loves close to him, and be with himself and his soul—that's the meaning of the home movie, the private visions of our movies.⁵⁹¹

This creation of a more immediate, intimate experience in the light of social, personal, and ideological dissociation was thought to be the adequate aesthetic response at the time, specific to its national and historical context. Equally seeking radicality and subversion, the New American Cinema sought to differ from its avant-garde predecessors

⁵⁸⁹ Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration" (1966), reprinted in Battcock (ed.), *The New American Cinema*, 84.

⁵⁹⁰ Gregory Battcock, "Introduction," *The New American Cinema*, 12.

⁵⁹¹ Mekas, "Where Are We—The Underground," 20.

and contemporary European counterparts. The basic “dissimilarities of commitment” between postwar American and French film, writes Michelson, resided in the fact that the French New Wave was supported by state subsidies, hence, by the structure of the very “middle class society which supported Hollywood, its aesthetic, industry, and art and which continues to sustain the activity of most European directors” that American avant-garde film sought to negate.⁵⁹²

The artisanal New American film was therefore also a rejection of the bourgeois public sphere and its ideals, which had been so obviously compromised. With regard to the historical avant-garde, many filmmakers and critics at the time saw the New American film as the legacy of the historical avant-garde. At a Cinema 16 symposium with the title “Poetry and the Film” in 1953, film critic Parker Tyler noted that the variations of the filmic practice of “poetical expression” included “Eisenstein’s severe formalism.”⁵⁹³ And according Michelson, after Eisenstein’s “defeat,” his “aspirations toward a revolutionary art... assumed the aspect of subversion” in American film of the “‘independent’ persuasion.”⁵⁹⁴ In an article about Eisenstein and Brakhage as part of a 1973 special film issue of *Artforum*, she writes, “The fundamental seriousness and wholeness of concern and the will to define his function in the culture of his time, to speak as artists for the necessity to assume or overcome the conditions of alienation, are common to both men... For both men are, more specifically and intimately, part of the

⁵⁹² Michelson, “Film and the Radical Aspiration,” 96. For other voices supporting the claim that the French New Wave made too many concessions to commercial cinema see, for example, Malcolm LeGrice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1976) and Peter Gidal, *Abstract Film* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁵⁹³ “Poetry and the Film: A Symposium” (1953), reprinted in P. Adams Sitney (ed.), *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 172. Cinema 16 was a New York-based film society, founded in 1947 by Amos Vogel, committed to showing independent and experimental film until it closed in 1963. See Scott McDonald (ed.), *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

⁵⁹⁴ Michelson, “Film and the Radical Aspiration,” 95.

culture of modernism and of the modernist art of their time.”⁵⁹⁵ As the option of producing “dialectical consciousness” (or, as Eisenstein put it, to “teach the worker to think dialectically”) had seemed to have run its course, Brakhage’s films, with their emphasis on the cinematic materials, their rapid cuts and scratched film stock, superimpositions and extreme close-ups, employed abstraction to dissolve narrative conventions and produce subjective visions bordering on the hypnotic.⁵⁹⁶

Brakhage writes, “Imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.” He continues, “I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word.”⁵⁹⁷ Here, the image does not signify but *is*.⁵⁹⁸ Perception is not mediated but immediate. The experience of the filmmaker is directly communicated to the viewer.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁵ Annette Michelson, “Camera Lucida—Camera Obscura,” *Artforum* (January 1973): 31–32.

⁵⁹⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, “Notes for a Film of *Capital*” (1927), reprinted in *October* 2 (Summer 1976): 10.

Citing Sartre, Michelson calls the product of Brakhage’s films “hypnagogic consciousness” (as opposed to the “dialectical consciousness” Eisenstein sought to convey in his movies). Michelson, “Camera Lucida—Camera Obscura,” 37.

⁵⁹⁷ Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), excerpts reprinted in P. Adams Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press, 1978), 120.

⁵⁹⁸ The images’ presence is exchanged for the absence of the world’s mediation through representational, naturalistic depictions. A film like *Pasht* (1965) embodies Brakhage’s attempt to unlearn the narrow definition of sight as defined by Renaissance perspective, of calculating and rational, categorizing and dissociated seeing. For five minutes, the viewer is exposed to a silent, surreal, and mesmerizing vision consisting of warm, reddish colors that conjure up images hovering between flesh and tissue and the materiality of the film itself, twisting, turning, blurring, pulsing, fading slowly, then rapidly into black. According to Brakhage, *Pasht* exemplifies the artist’s experience of direct, unmediated vision, consisting of active vision (eyes open, constantly refocusing, searching), memory (the “mind’s eye”), and “closed-eye vision.” For a discussion of Brakhage’s notion of “vision” and its components, see David James, “Stan Brakhage: The Filmmaker as Poet,” in *Allegories of Cinema*, 29–57. For the development of Brakhage’s approach and style in the late 1950s, from “psychodrama” to “lyric” film, see A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 67–68 and P. Adams Sitney, to whom

Similarly, Rainer's films of the early 1970s are not just private in the sense of subjective expression (the artist insists on several occasions that her works are autobiographical) but in the forms of their address, their intersubjective, personal communication, from one private individual to another.⁶⁰⁰ The difference between the "lyrical" film of the New American Cinema and *Lives of Performers* is that in Rainer's case subjective experience is not mediated *through* the experience of the filmmaker but established between the protagonists and the viewer as empathetic individuals. They are therefore social but not necessarily political in an analytic, activating sense. In *Lives of Performers* one of the protagonists turns, looks directly into the camera and at the viewer and asks "Which woman is the director most sympathetic to?" then turns away again to receive the answer from another character within the film (fig. 106). The viewer is not so much asked to question the political dimension of narrative and cinematic clichés but is invited into the conversation, the story, to participate as an equal in what could be called a "socialism of emotions."⁶⁰¹

Brakhage's formation of "lyric" film lies with the "distillation of an intense and complex interior crisis into an orchestration of sights and associations which cohere in a new formal rhetoric of camera movement and montage." *The Essential Cinema* (New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press, 1974), 143–144.

⁵⁹⁹ Sitney writes that lyrical film "postulates the filmmaker behind the camera as first-person protagonist of the film... the images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision." P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–1978* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 142. In many instances the camera presents an extension of the filmmaker's body, creating a literally subjectivist vision: "We see what the filmmaker sees." *Ibid.*, 370.

⁶⁰⁰ With regard to the autobiographical dimension of Rainer's early films, Rainer remarks in her interview with Noël Carroll that "I've always brought my own life into my work, at least before *Journeys*, I was central." Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who...", 176. See also Rainer, "Interview by the Camera Obscura Collective."

⁶⁰¹ The notion of "cliché" is an underlying theme in *Lives of Performers*. The film opens with the following quote by Leo Bersani: "Cliché is, in a sense, the purest art of intelligibility; it tempts us with the possibility of enclosing life within beautifully inalterable formulas, of obscuring the arbitrary nature of imagination with an appearance of necessity." While *Lives of Performers* does question and dismantle many clichés regarding the projection of emotion and affection, their intelligibility based on a familiar

Although there are sequences in *Lives of Performers* where the movement of the camera might be equated with the subjectivist perspective, the seeing of the filmmaker, for the most part the viewer is asked to see along with rather than through the eyes of the protagonists. Rainer's private communication further reverberates with Brakhage's as both employ the film form as a social but not political device: "It is a tragedy of our time..." as Michelson put it, "that Brakhage should see his social function as defensive in the Self's last-ditch stand against the mass, against the claims of any possible class, political process, or structure, assuming its inevitable assault upon the sovereignty of the Self, positioning the imaginative consciousness as inherently apolitical."⁶⁰²

While Brakhage's aesthetic reverberated with the artistic culture of his time, with Abstract Expressionist painting and the work of Blue Mountain poets like Charles Olson, Rainer's approach was informed by the context of hers.⁶⁰³ In an extension of the "lyrical" cinema of the 1950s and early '60s, *Lives of Performers* replaced an existentialist-mythical expressionism with an emotive but sober abstraction of physical and temporal proximity, without depending on the materiality of the object. Together with her peers, Rainer attended screenings put on by Mekas' Film Makers Cooperative and Film Makers Cinematheque, which in 1970, with the help of Brakhage, Sitney, and Peter Kubelka, turned into the Anthology Film Archives.⁶⁰⁴ Here, during the 1960s and early '70s,

illusionist format, it could be said that the film falls into another cliché: that of an communicable authentic, private experience.

⁶⁰² Michelson, "Camera Lucida—Camera Obscura," 31.

⁶⁰³ On Brakhage's relation to Charles Olson, see James, "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson." Olson sought to eliminate imagination and representation in favor of direct perception ("Art does not seek to describe but to enact.") in order to overcome the alienation of man from nature, "the lyrical interference of the individual as ego... by which Western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects." Cited in *ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁰⁴ For a history of the Film Makers Cooperative, Film Makers Cinematheque, and Anthology Film Archives, see, for example, Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, 62–69 and David E. James

Rainer saw “Maya Deren, Andy Warhol, and Hollis Frampton... Against this multifarious backdrop of Vigo, Renoir, Cocteau, Dreyer, Pabst, ‘women’s weepies,’ and the formal strategies of the avant-garde, I intuited that I was venturing into a mother lode of possibilities.”⁶⁰⁵ At the time, and specifically for *Lives of Performers*, in addition to her professed Brechtian influence, Rainer was appropriating formal devices from New American Cinema, structuralist film, Godard, and Eisenstein in order to create an authenticity of private experience. Rainer’s use of an Eisenstein quote as an intertitle for *Lives of Performers* is revealing in this matter (fig. 107). The text reads:

The face of this character is a fixed mask. We shall have her wear an eye shade to reveal her inner and outer appearance. The eyeshade hides the movement of the upper half of her face, but the lower half, where the tongue works, stays visible. She must function with a face of stone and at the same time reveal her characteristic dissembling.⁶⁰⁶

Rainer comments on her use of the quote: “If the unmoving facial exterior gave up neither interpretation nor meaning, thus belying human interiority... then the ‘inner and outer appearance’ of a performer could be nudged toward a *semblance* of coherence and sense by very minimal means indeed.”⁶⁰⁷ Hence, dramatic illusionism is replaced by a reality once removed: the reality of the performer who in *Lives of Performers* is a human being—feeling, doubting, moving.

(ed.), *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). According to Rees, Rainer’s peers, those artists who frequented the Cinematheque and Anthology Film Archives, included Merce Cunningham and Robert Morris, Robert Rauschenberg and Carolee Schneeman, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra.

⁶⁰⁵ Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 383.

⁶⁰⁶ The text is taken from a description of a film workshop conducted by Eisenstein. See *ibid.*, 406.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 406–407.

That the integrity of the private sphere, as an ideal space of autonomy and authenticity, had been compromised under bourgeois capitalism, became apparent during Brecht's *Dreigroschenprozeß* (the "Threepenny Trial"), the lawsuit over the rights to a filmic version of the *Threepenny Opera*. Brecht used this trial over private property, over artistic versus economic ownership, to "confront some of the ideals that are characteristic for today's state of bourgeois ideology."⁶⁰⁸ Brecht's writings on the trial discuss a list of these ideals including "The right of the individual has to be protected"; "The work of art is an expression of a personality"; and "The 'human' has be part of every film."⁶⁰⁹ The ideals concerning the private sphere have determined much of modern cultural production, including what Michelson in 1966 celebrated as New American Cinema's commitment "to an aesthetic of autonomy."⁶¹⁰

In 1930, Brecht and his publisher sold the rights for a filmic version of the highly successful play to Nero Film, a Berlin-based production-company. It was agreed that Brecht would supply the script. Given the increasingly tense political and economic situation of late Weimar Germany and the fact that over its two-year run the *Threepenny Opera* had become an acclaimed and accepted work of art, the result, titled *Die Beule* ("The Bump" or "Bruise"), had accordingly been adjusted by Brecht in form and content. Nero Film rejected the script. Expecting to cash in on the *Threepenny Opera*'s huge success but not looking for an agitative tale of class struggle and revolution, the producers hired Béla Balázs to write and G.W. Pabst to direct a more direct adaptation of

⁶⁰⁸ Bertolt Brecht, "Der Dreigroschenprozeß" (1931), reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 139–209; translated and reprinted in excerpts in Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, 43–51. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

⁶⁰⁹ Brecht, "Der Dreigroschenprozeß," 169–186.

⁶¹⁰ Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," 96.

the original play.⁶¹¹ When Brecht went to court, not in order to sue Nero Film over neglecting to adapt a more political work, but under the guise of protesting a violation of the artist's right to personal expression and creative ownership, he lost the case.

The playwright presented this much-publicized battle as a “sociological experiment.”⁶¹² He took the opportunity to shed light on the schism between an ideal and a real version of “private interest.” In a market-driven socio-economic system the law rules in favor of economic interest and defines property in terms of its exchange value rather than on the basis of intellectual or creative ownership. Hence, “subjectivist” works of art expressing private, individual experiences and their protection as personal creation are *publicly* and officially defended and supported by the art and film industry as long as they do not challenge the praxis of private, economic interests.⁶¹³ Brecht questions the autonomy traditionally ascribed to the spheres of the public and the private by introducing the notion of what Negt and Kluge call *Produktionsöffentlichkeiten* or “production public spheres.” These renew the external illusion of authentic social experience as guaranteed by the mutually exclusive arenas of the private and the public. However, their structure and content is “determined by specific political and economic profit-maximizing interests... The central moment of these public spheres is previously private sensuality.”⁶¹⁴

⁶¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the *Dreigroschenprozeß* and its profound influence on Brecht's work, see Gersch, *Film bei Brecht*. 39–139.

⁶¹² Brecht, “Der Dreigroschenprozeß,” 139.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶¹⁴ Eberhard Knodler-Bunte, et al., “The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization: An Analysis of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience*,” *New German Critique* (Winter 1975): 59–60.

Public: Film as Autonomous Discourse

Less intimate in its mode of participatory, emotive communication, Rainer's 1974 *Film About a Woman Who...* became a critical and art historical opportunity to situate the artist's filmic work within another, related debate: that around post-minimalist, formalist-objective film and its definition of art and especially film as inherently public media. As the various Leftist movements of the late 1960s and early '70s demanded access to the institutions and their mechanisms of production and distribution of experiences, opinions, and identities, film was hailed as an essentially democratic medium.⁶¹⁵ But it is not merely the fact that the projected image held the promise of material accessibility, that it could be made by many and be seen by even more. In its attempt to circumvent the utopian political naiveté of historical avant-garde film and the artificial catharsis of commercial cinema's drama and kitsch, the new filmic avant-garde relied heavily on the ideal of discourse and discursivity, of theory and textuality as an accessible and autotelic form of participatory communication, inclusive and open.

Whereas *Lives of Performers* is as much a meditation on interpersonal relations as it is an attempt to create them, *Film About a Woman Who* appears much more rational in its analysis of the structures of emotional commitment and its representation. The overall mood is one of melancholy as Rainer's protagonists roam sparsely furnished rooms and gray ocean beaches (fig. 108), attempting to re-create images and poses of physical and emotional harmony. The family at the beach arranges and rearranges itself in front of the camera, unconvincingly mimicking the expression of family-style photographs. At home, the father watches TV as the child plays on the floor next to him. The private sphere is

⁶¹⁵ For studies concerning this claim at the time, see, for example, Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1976) and Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975).

somewhat disturbed or emptied by the personal disconnection. However, because neither of the two seems overtly sad or lonely, the scene provides a template against which the viewer and the protagonists, at times viewing themselves, are asked to check their expectations and projections of domestic harmony, maybe even question the artificiality of their memories with regard to familial ideals.

The only seemingly authentic emotions in this film are those of rage and frustration—at unmet projections, foiled expectations, and restrictions laid upon a woman’s behavior and role within intimate relationships by herself and others due to her gender and sexuality. *Film About a Woman Who* might best be described as a collage, juxtaposing levels of viewing and presenting relationships as psychosocial structures. Experiences and expectations are presented as frames, as text—to be read from a distance and to be deciphered for the purpose of exposing the mechanics behind behavioral clichés. The film could easily lend itself to an extension of the discourse surrounding the personal, private experience of Rainer’s work in light of the New American Cinema. But as the frustration of interpersonal relations leads to authentic emotions of anger and rage, to many, including the artist herself, it facilitates a reading of the artist’s films as “public” in a conservative and limiting sense, shaped by the emerging critical debate around what Michelson called discursive or “intellectual cinema.”⁶¹⁶

Organized by Michelson in 1972, the *New Forms in Film* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum was considered crucial for this emerging discourse, for this break in the history of film. Here, works by Brakhage and Breer, Hollis Frampton and Ken Jacobs, Michael Snow and Rainer, were displayed as, according to one reviewer, a “re-

⁶¹⁶ Annette Michelson, “Intellectual Cinema: A Reconsideration,” in *Options and Alternatives: Some Directions in Recent Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1973), 11.

consideration of the ‘development’ of cinema, and a distinct sharpening of critical tools.”⁶¹⁷ Raising “the status of an ‘underground’ to an ‘avant-garde’” meant to acknowledge a cinema that was no longer lyrical and personal but rational and analytical in its experience, that emphasized intellectual accessibility and conscious understanding over the renegade autonomy of private visions.⁶¹⁸ What I will call for the purposes of my argument the “discursive film” of the 1970s includes several related categories: Sitney’s “structural film,” Peter Gidal’s “structural/materialist film,” Michelson’s “intellectual” or “epistemological cinema,” Carroll’s “New Talkies,” and the so-called post-minimalist film.⁶¹⁹

What all of these categories share is a de-emphasis on content and narrative in favor of an expository analysis of the medium (the material apparatus as well as the film’s space and duration) and the autonomy and accessibility resulting therefrom.

Discursive film, in its concern with form and structure, transcends differences of political opinion, class, or religious background, while in its self-referentiality it is accessible and

⁶¹⁷ Simon Field, “New Film Forms,” *Art and Artist* (November 1974): 24. This review is of a later installment of *New Forms in Film*, exhibited in Montreux in 1973. In both venues, Rainer’s contribution to the exhibition was *Lives of Performers*.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ See P. Adams Sitney, “Structural Film,” *Film Culture* (Summer 1969):1–10; Peter Gidal, “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film,” *Studio International* (November–December 1975): 189–196; Annette Michelson, “Intellectual Cinema: A Reconsideration” and “‘The Man with the Movie Camera’: From Magician to Epistemologist,” *Artforum* (March 1972): 60–73; Noël Carroll, “Interview with a Woman who...,” *Millennium Film Journal* (Fall–Winter 1980–1981): 37–68; and Eric de Bruyn, *The Filmic Anomaly: Moments in Post-Minimalism (1966–1970)* (Dissertation, Graduate Center, CUNY, 2002), respectively. “Structural/Materialist Film” could roughly be called the British variant of structural film but the surrounding debates, published in journals like *Studio International*, were available to interested American readers. “Structural film in Europe generally showed more concern for film’s ‘material substrate’—its physical qualities—than for the image or the shot, the province of the North Americans.” Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, 78.

To group these or at least some of these categories under one umbrella for purposes of argument is not uncommon: Peter Wollen made the distinction between a formalist and a politically engaged post-war avant-garde in film as early as 1975, the former including the work of “Kren and LeGrice,... Gidal and Wyborny,” with Sitney and Michelson as “the leading critics and tastemakers.” Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” *Studio International* (November–December 1975): 171. David James uses the category “Pure Film” to discern the similarities between a number of filmic-formalist enterprises during the late 1960s and early ’70s. James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 237–279.

removed from matters of taste and economic interest. In its rationalism it aims to be a meta-dialogue, or, as James calls it, a “metacommentary” about film and what film projects.⁶²⁰

As discursive cinema, Rainer’s films exhibit, according to Carroll, a “preoccupation with theory,” securing “a space for reflection, to distantiate the audience from emotive engulfment.”⁶²¹ The films deal with emotions and intimacy but are not emotional or intimate. Rather, they “provide the opportunity to reflect on the emotions dispassionately.”⁶²² In 1974, Michelson identified Rainer’s work in dance and film as part of an avant-garde trajectory that includes “Meyerhold and Brecht, Eisenstein and Snow, Cunningham and Rainer”: “Unassimilable to commodity value,” it is “consistently secular in its commitment to objectification... an art of critical discourse, consumingly autoanalytical, at every point explicative of the problems attendant upon the constant revision of the grammar and the syntax of that discourse.”⁶²³ In *Film About a Woman Who*, the disjunction between image and sound, the discrepancies between intertitles and shots, the juxtaposition of still photography and moving pictures sought to produce a cognitive presence, leave the viewer “puzzling” in real time and space over the individual elements of stories and their mediation through tools of information and entertainment.⁶²⁴

As discursive cinema, the film employs Brechtian devices of distancing in order to

⁶²⁰ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 267. Other critics and historians concur: Sitney argues, “It [structural cinema] is a cinema of the mind rather than the eye”; for Hollis Frampton, cinema is “probably the last art that will reach the mind through the senses.” According to Gidal, “Structuralist/materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist. The process of the film’s making deals with devices that result in the demystification or attempted demystification of the film process.” Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 370; Hollis Frampton, “For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses,” *Artforum* (September 1971): 35; Gidal, “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film,” 186.

⁶²¹ Carroll, “Moving and Moving,” 84, 86.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶²³ Michelson, “Yvonne Rainer, Part One: The Dancer and the Dance,” 57–58.

⁶²⁴ Carroll, “Interview with a Woman Who...,” 44. Rainer attests with regard to *Film About a Woman Who*, “The formal distinctions took precedence over the content.” *Ibid.*

involve the viewer intellectually. These devices cause what Gidal, with regard to Structural/Materialist Film, called “the mental activation of the viewer.”⁶²⁵

Gidal’s description of the involvement of the viewer might as well have been written expressly about *Film About a Woman Who*: “Through the usage of specific devices such as repetition within duration one is forced to attempt to decipher the precise transformations that each co/incide/nce of cinematic techniques produces.”⁶²⁶ Elsewhere he writes, “We are forced, through the quickening pans, to actively work mentally to recapture the specifics of the defined space as we originally saw it... We are totally aware of the relativism forced upon our senses through the specifically clearly defined (filmmaker’s) actions with the camera.”⁶²⁷ Rainer’s foregrounding of form and structure make “film” subject to discussion; and as in *Lives of Performers*, the viewer is invited in—this time not as a private, empathetic individual, but as a participant in a critical debate regarding the mechanisms that shape the social horizon of experience, the “organization of human needs and interests.”⁶²⁸

The 1960s and ’70s witnessed an increased interest in participating in the shaping of that horizon as it became obvious that the institutions organizing public opinion and values, interests and identities were exclusive and inaccessible. Students demanded access to the governing bodies of their schools, artists to the museums and publications that wrote the canons of taste and quality in an antiquatedly aristocratic fashion. Anti-war protesters wanted their time and presence in the news and debates regarding foreign policy and conduct while the labor movement sought to voice the interests of the

⁶²⁵ Gidal, “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film”: 189.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Peter Gidal, “Back and Forth,” in Peter Gidal (ed.), *Structural Film Anthology*, (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 46.

⁶²⁸ Knodler-Bunte, et al., “The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization”: 51.

workers. The Women's and Civil Rights Movements demanded participation in the American Dream, access to education and representation, to history, to the tools of shaping and communicating their experience.⁶²⁹

In the mid-1970s American publications of and about Habermas' theory of the public sphere and Richard Sennett's book *The Fall of Public Man* initiated a debate concerning the public sphere as a historical and socio-political phenomenon that would continue heatedly during the following two decades.⁶³⁰ The pragmatic as well as theoretical engagements with the public sphere as a "constitutive category for the experience and consciousness of thoroughly socialized individuals" integrated prior notions of individual protest into collective forms of resistance.⁶³¹ The public sphere was increasingly understood to be not so much a physical place as an arena that produced and traded images of individual and social identity, of values and beliefs, behavior and opinion. Film was recognized as an inherently public medium: not only was it potentially available to a mass audience who, unlike television viewers, would view it in groups in a public place, but film was defined by its accessibility and potential participation. A movie theater is less intimidating and exclusive than a museum or an art gallery; movie language is more easily comprehensible than that of most books. In addition, film

⁶²⁹ For contemporary articles and essays concerning the debate surrounding the accessibility of the public sphere, see, for example, R. Allan Horning, "The First Amendment Right to a Public Forum," *Duke Law Journal*, Vol. 1969, No. 5 (Oct., 1969), pp. 931-957; Paul Harris, "Black Power Advocacy: Criminal Anarchy or Free Speech," *California Law Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (May, 1968), pp. 702-755; Diane K. Lewis, "A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism," *Signs*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1977), pp. 339-361; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman and the New History," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1/2 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 185-198; Ann R. Markusen, "The Economics of the Women's Movement," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 42-52; Silvia Bovenschen and Beth Weckmueller, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?" *New German Critique*, No. 10 (Winter, 1977), pp. 111-137.

⁶³⁰ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

⁶³¹ Oskar Negt, "Mass Media: Tool of Domination or Instruments of Liberation? Aspects of the Frankfurt School's Communications Analysis," *New German Critique* (Spring 1978): 66.

production (in comparison to television, books, or magazines) was a relatively simple and cheap enterprise.⁶³²

Even esoteric critics like Michelson were caught up in the excitement of the moment. At the Fourth New York Film Festival in 1966, Michelson remarked, “Within the structure of our culture, ten-year-olds are now filming eight millimeter serials—mostly science-fiction, I am told—in their backyards. This, perhaps is the *single most interesting fact* about cinema in our time, and the real hope for ‘independent’ cinema. Given this new accessibility of the medium, anything can happen.”⁶³³ Film collectives and cooperatives were founded in great numbers during the late 1960s and 1970s, their screening rooms open to all forms of experimental and subversive films, their printing and processing facilities helping to cut costs and providing freedom from official or commercial pressures.⁶³⁴ The production and distribution organizations of the New Left were committed to non-commercial, anti-Hollywood filmmaking. Some, such as Anthony Reveaux’s *Peace March* (1967) (fig. 109) and Saul Levine’s *New Left Note* (1969–75) (fig. 110) documented civil protests in order to increase their visibility. The Newsreel Film Collective and the Winterfilm Collective sought to expand the American public’s social horizon of experience through portrayals of corporate domination and war crimes in Vietnam (fig. 111).⁶³⁵ The cinema of “Black Liberation” (fig. 112) was as much an

⁶³² Kodak introduced the Super-8 camera to a mass market in 1965.

⁶³³ Michelson, “Film and the Radical Aspiration,” 101.

⁶³⁴ Regarding the importance of such collectives and cooperatives in the post-war history of American (and European) film, see James, *Allegories of Cinema*; Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* and Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: D.A.P., 2005).

⁶³⁵ The films referred to here are the Newsreel Film Collective’s *Delaware* (1968-69), a carefully constructed depiction of the company Dupont’s complete economic, political, and social control over the State of Delaware and the Winterfilm Collective’s *Wintersoldier* (1972) consisting of testimony of over two hundred ex-GIs at the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit, 1971 concerning American atrocities in Vietnam. For an account of the work of these and other political filmmakers within the history of film, see Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*.

attempt to negotiate and define African-American identity as it was an effort to expose the public to the concerns and experiences of the black minority.⁶³⁶ Yet, even though some critics like Mekas claimed that there was “no difference between the avant-garde film and the avant-garde newsreel,” most artists chose to forgo the agitational, political cinema of radical-left film organizations.⁶³⁷

Both types of film, political and discursive, sought to resist the commercialization of culture and to open the production of images to analytic scrutiny. Both attempted to make film a public rather than a private enterprise. While the political cinema of the New Left infused everyday visual experience with images traditionally barred from it, discursive film aimed to articulate filmic visuality itself, purposefully excluding specific political, social, or ideological interests. As a public art, discursive film relies on the traditional definition of the bourgeois public sphere as an autonomous realm of rational, critical debate, excluding all private and state interests. The bourgeois public sphere is, according to Habermas, a place for political discussion without being political; hence, opinions and agendas have to be left at the door.⁶³⁸ In that sense, Rainer’s *Film About a Woman Who* is about emotions without being emotional, about drama in film without being dramatic.

The radical, in this sense, “public” nature of American discursive film at the time is the product of its historical context. The vehement emphasis on autonomy was the result not only of American art’s specific reading and writing of the history of modernism

⁶³⁶ See James, “Cinema and Black Liberation,” *Allegories of Cinema*, 177–195.

⁶³⁷ Jonas Mekas, “Movie Journal,” *The Village Voice* (February 29, 1968): 40.

⁶³⁸ Besides the economic or personal interest of private individuals, Habermas also excludes from the bourgeois public sphere what he calls “mere opinions” (as opposed to “public opinion”): “Cultural assumptions, normative attitudes, collective prejudices and values....” “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article”: 50.

but of the related loss of faith in the working class as an agent of socio-political change. The slowly crumbling utopias of 1968 seemed to reaffirm the idea of revolution through class struggle as outmoded.⁶³⁹ Rather than aiming to create an artistic culture of political commitment parallel to the struggles that animated the late 1960s, many artists and filmmakers maintained a defensive posture through their adherence to a modernist formalism.⁶⁴⁰

Accounts of the development of discursive film rarely discuss its causes. As James remarks, “The problem of structural film’s political significance is exacerbated by the fact that the turn toward pure formalism occurred at exactly the height of domestic politicization.”⁶⁴¹ Why would so many American artists and filmmakers at precisely this point in history turn away from everyday political concerns in favor of meta-analyses, from historical materialism to physical materiality? Why was form yet again separated so strictly from content, production from ideology, technique from tendency, visual politics from the politics of seeing? Why was a critic like Michelson so determined to reconsider Eisenstein and Vertov as discursive filmmakers rather than revolutionary artists in the political sense?

Part of the answer, I believe, lay with the possibility of articulating a different kind of politics, the safe politics of discourse. Habermas, when charting the “structural

⁶³⁹ As part of a debate regarding the “New American Cinema” published in 1967 in the *Evergreen Review*, Michelson describes the historical situation marking the difference between European and American avant-garde filmmakers as follows: “American filmmakers have evolved for the most part in a climate of abdication from the radicalism of the political and aesthetic commitment of the pre-war period. The Cold War atmosphere and the philistinism, which characterized the ‘integrated’ intellectual of the late forties and fifties, were interrelated. The work of Godard, Bresson, and Resnais presupposes a culture animated by some sort of radical political commitment, not abrogated in the name of ‘adjustment,’ ‘authenticity,’ or ‘integration,’ but rigorously maintained and renewed.” Annette Michelson, “The Camera as Fountain Pen,” *Evergreen Review* (August 1967): 102.

⁶⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis of “pure film” as a development parallel to that of Greenbergian modernism and its inversion in conceptual art, see James, “Pure Film,” *Allegories of Cinema*, 237–279.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

transformation of the public sphere,” resulting in the failure to guarantee disinterested, inclusive discourse during late capitalism, does not seriously consider the elimination or deconstruction of the very ideological structure that supports the ideal of the bourgeois public sphere. Rather, as Peter Hohendahl has pointed out, Habermas, in his later work, argues for the necessity to maintain “the citizens’ rational discussions of problems of public welfare in an atmosphere free of restrictions.”⁶⁴² Habermas remains skeptical of any model that, as Negt and Kluge would articulate as a result of Habermas’ account, envisions a revolutionary transformation of the public sphere as an arena of social experience and identity. Despite the timely, if limited, hope of revolutionary change during the late 1960s, Habermas, like many artists and intellectuals, was unconvinced by the possibility of constructing a “counter-” or “proletarian public sphere,” where experiences are multiple and heterogeneous, that is, by definition, impure and constantly embattled, and therefore highly and primarily political.⁶⁴³

For Habermas as well as for Rainer and her peers, the distrust in a “revolution from below” put immediate political action on hold and carved out an arena for experience that was neither private nor political, but *social*, communicative in an intellectual sense—hence, public. Rainer’s resistance to her work’s becoming an example of feminist-political film recalls Habermas’ assumption that the “possibility of a politically organizable class struggle is no longer immediately realizable.”⁶⁴⁴ Discussing the Brechtian dimension of her films with Noël Carroll in 1980, Rainer states, “[U]sing the terms ‘Brechtian’ and ‘distanciation’ to describe [my practices] is really using

⁶⁴² Peter Hohendahl, “Jürgen Habermas: ‘The Public Sphere’ (1964),” *New German Critique* (Autumn 1974): 47.

⁶⁴³ See Negt and Kluge, “Commentaries on the Concept of Proletarian Public Sphere,” *Public Sphere and Proletarian Experience*, 187–298.

⁶⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Kultur und Kritik* (1973), cited in *ibid*, 48.

Brecht's name in vain insofar as it suggests, at least at this particular moment in history when artists are getting high on Marxist theory, that the revolution may be nearly here. It's *not* here. It's nowhere near."⁶⁴⁵ This statement implies not only the artist's doubt concerning the productive relation between aesthetic production and social change but, especially since Rainer at this point had acknowledged Brecht's influence on her work, that this influence was entirely formal in its nature.

The "two avant-gardes," as Peter Wollen called them—the formalist, discursive film and the politically engaged film "of the Godard type"—both claimed descent from radical precursors including Brecht, Eisenstein, and Vertov.⁶⁴⁶ Film historian Thomas Elsaesser points out the shared interest in Brechtian aesthetics among filmmakers of the "modernist-formalist project" (he names Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, Peter Gidal, and Malcolm LeGrice) and "political film-makers who followed the lead of Godard and Straub": "In so far as Brechtian theory was also concerned with demonstrating the processes of production rather than disguising the 'work' of scenic or theatrical representation, an area of convergence seemed to occur between the political avant-garde on one side and aesthetic modernism on the other."⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁵ Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who....," 52–53.

⁶⁴⁶ Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," 171. Wollen goes so far as to claim that in the U.S. (as compared to Europe) the politically engaged avant-garde in film is completely absent. In a different text, first published in 1969, Wollen points out the similarities between Brecht's and Eisenstein's aesthetic strategies. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (3rd edition) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), 65–70. In 1981, Wollen revises the somewhat simplistic opposition of the "two avant-gardes," yet, even though he chose much more careful terms in his acknowledgement of the avant-gardes' complexity being much greater than initially portrayed by him, it remains clear that Wollen prefers a political practice over an actively depoliticizing one. He presents the difference between the two main tendencies as follows: "One tendency reflects a preoccupation with the specificity of the signifier, holding the signified in suspense or striving to eliminate it. The other has tried to develop new types of relation between signifier and signified through the montage of heterogeneous elements." Peter Wollen, "The Avant-gardes: Europe and America," *Framework* (Spring 1981): 10.

⁶⁴⁷ Thomas Elsaesser, "Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film," in Pia Kleber and Colin Visser (eds.), *Reinterpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 172–174.

Richard Serra's films, for example, as both the artist himself and critics like Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh have pointed out, were made under the influence of the American rediscovery of Russian avant-garde film in the late 1960s and early '70s.⁶⁴⁸ A work like *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) (fig. 113), resembling Rainer's earliest filmic efforts such as *Hand Movie* (1966) (fig. 114) or *Volleyball* (1967) (fig. 115), reflect Serra's exposure to "Soviet films... the films of the immediately post-revolutionary period, that is to say, 1924 to 1929, early Eisenstein and Vertov."⁶⁴⁹ Described by Buchloh as a "sculptural" film, *Hand Catching Lead* is an exercise in temporal presence, where over the course of three minutes a disembodied hand repeatedly tries to catch a piece of lead dropped from above outside the frame. The film ends when the physical exhaustion of the catcher makes additional catches impossible. *Hand Catching Lead* presents a post-Minimalist extension of sculptural qualities (presentness) into what Louis Althusser, with regard to Brecht's theater, has called "stationary time."⁶⁵⁰ Continuous with the early Minimalist dictum "what you see is what

⁶⁴⁸ According to Rosalind Krauss: "The films of the Russian avant-garde—Eisenstein, Vertov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Aleksandr Dovshenko—were recycled regularly in the programming of the Anthology Film Archives, which had been opened in New York in 1970 by Jonas Mekas and was devoted to both the historical, and the contemporary cinematic avant-garde. There, in a bizarrely designed visual solitude, one could view, over and over, the deft precision of Russian 'film form.' And there, several nights of every week, sat Richard Serra, often accompanied by Robert Smithson or Joan Jonas, building on his already formidable film education begun at Yale, extended in the Cinémathèque in Paris, and refined in New York in the late 1960s. There he sat, intently becoming the master of this syntax." In "Richard Serra: Sculpture," in Hal Foster (ed.), *Richard Serra* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000), 117–118. Eisenstein's writings, translated and edited by Jay Leyda, had been available to American audiences since the early 1940s. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Sense* and *Film Form* (New York: Harvest Books, 1942 and 1949, respectively).

⁶⁴⁹ Annette Michelson, "The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview" (1979), reprinted in Foster (ed.), *Richard Serra*, 26.

For Eisenstein's influence on post-war film, see Peter Wollen, "Perhaps....," *October* (Spring 1999): 43–50.

⁶⁵⁰ "Stationary time" (or, as Serra calls it, "live time" or "procedural time" [see below]) is a temporal experience that manifests itself in opposition to projected and narrative, consuming and capitalist time: it is the "time of their [the viewers'] situation itself." Louis Althusser, "The *Piccolo Teatro*: Bertolazzi and Brecht," *For Marx* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 136.

you see,” Serra’s film is a material confrontation, yet one that aims to avoid the pitfalls of “objecthood” (its appropriation through commodity culture). The artist states:

The potential of the camera as an active device is being considered not only for its perceptual possibilities, but as an element in the structure. Means and ends are being made explicit. . . . A shift in recent films is from subject matter, qua literature which utilizes a narrative time, to that of those films in which time can be equated with “live time” or with procedural time: the time of the film in its making. This refocus of time is not merely a subject matter allusion; i.e., the viewer does not simply become a subject in relation to the object (the form of most ongoing theater) but instead experiences the time and place of subject and object simultaneously.⁶⁵¹

Here, as a precursor, Constructivism is, at best, a “truth to materials,” a spatial and temporal presence, that excludes other content or narrative for the sake of purity. “Means and ends” are restricted to the physical devices of the filmic apparatus and the space of its projection, “experience” to the phenomenological dimension of perception, while “time” is “live” or “present,” yet ahistorical. Like Rainer, Serra distinguished formal concerns from political content: discussing some of his later, more directly politically and socially engaged films, Serra observes, “I [was not] worried about the self-reflexive quality, the material as such. I decided that there was something worthwhile to say directly to people, and I just chose devices for presenting the material that I thought could reach a large audience. . . . I have used that form when I’ve felt there was something politically valid to

⁶⁵¹ Richard Serra, “Play it Again Sam,” *Arts Magazine* (February 1970), 27.

say.”⁶⁵² The communication of social and political issues and the awareness of the medium as communicative tool had little to do with one another.

Rainer’s early short films, including *Trio Film* (1968) and *Hand Movie* (the latter serving as inspiration for Serra’s *Hand Catching Lead*) similarly exclude political intent. “My movies were an extension of my concern with the body and the body in motion,” Rainer recalled in 1972.⁶⁵³ To some, the playful, five-minute film of the artist’s hand, rubbing fingers, moving and turning, complicated Minimalism’s “cool, objectivizing aesthetic” by infusing it with a human, organic dimension. But for others, the distinctly private dimension of these “exercises” was precisely what kept them from being public works of art.⁶⁵⁴ When screened at the Billy Rose Theater, New York, in 1969 as part of Rainer’s performance *Rose Fractions*, the work caused a public outcry.⁶⁵⁵ This time, the reviewers and viewers took offense not at a possibly political interference but with a different dimension of private interest that was said to offend the public’s sensibility—the artist’s ego and the display of explicit sexuality. *Rose Fractions* consisted of various, often improvised dance segments and readings on the center of the stage, framed by two screens that showed various short films, including Rainer’s. Frances Herridge in the *New York Post* lamented the fact that Rainer “makes no attempt to communicate, and seems

⁶⁵² Michelson, “The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview,” 35. *Television Delivers People* addresses the relation between television, advertisement, and audience in form of a text that scrolls across the screen, accompanied by Muzak (“You are delivered to the advertiser, who is the customer. He consumes you.” From the beginning of the text of *Television Delivers People*, cited in *ibid.*). *Steelmill/Stahlwerk* is a silent film that depicts the working conditions in a German steel mill, juxtaposing the enormous power of the machines with the hard physical labor of the workers.

⁶⁵³ Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 209.

⁶⁵⁴ Carrie Lambert, “Other Solutions,” *Art Journal* (Fall 2004): 61.

⁶⁵⁵ “Rose Fractions” was part of a series of performances from different artists held at the Billy Rose Theater over several nights in February of 1969. The series was sponsored by the Ford Foundation.

quite happy in her private rebellion.”⁶⁵⁶ The critic further took issue with the performance’s limited appeal: “Miss Rainer apparently has fans in her work at the Judson Dance Center, but one suspects part of their admiration is for her nerve in taking the audience’s money and then ignoring them.”⁶⁵⁷

In *The New York Times*, Clive Barnes criticized the fact that Rainer’s *Trio Film* was projected opposite a movie depicting sexual intercourse or, as Barnes called it, “stag or blue movies.”⁶⁵⁸ *Trio Film* features a woman and a man, both nude, and a large white balloon in a white-on-white, minimally furnished living room (fig. 116). The performers pass the balloon back and forth, chat inaudibly, walk with the balloon pressed between their bodies, sit on the white couch, and finally jump up and down, laughing, all body parts bouncing. The juxtaposition with the pornographic film led Carl Andre to remark, “The combination blue movie left, trio stage and balloon movie right was perfect: making love looks like the blue movie but feels like the balloon movie.”⁶⁵⁹ Barnes ignored this potentially productive confrontation and instead focused on arguing that the display and viewing of sexuality and sexual acts is a private matter that offended public expectations and misappropriated public support, here in form of the non-profit Ford Foundation’s sponsorship.⁶⁶⁰ Most importantly, Barnes argued that Rainer’s work gave the avant-garde

⁶⁵⁶ Frances Herridge, “The Avant-Garde Is At It Again,” *New York Post* (February 7, 1969): 70, reprinted in Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 155.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ Clive Barnes, “Blue Movies? Ho Hum,” *The New York Times* (February 16, 1969): n.pag., reprinted in reprinted in Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 155.

⁶⁵⁹ Carl Andre, letter to Yvonne Rainer (February 13, 1969), reprinted in *ibid.*, 158.

⁶⁶⁰ Barnes writes, “I am not in favor of any form of censorship and believe that if people want to see hard-core pornographic films, they should be allowed to. However, I do not think it fair to show such a film—even as a dirty joke—to an audience that did not wish to see it.” Barnes, “Blue Movies? Ho Hum,” 156. Elsewhere he states, “But the fact is that public money for the arts cannot be doled out to all and sundry, if only the subsidy of mediocrity would reduce the sums available to all serious artists.” Clive Barnes, “Critic’s Concern—And Ford’s,” *The New York Times* (March 2, 1969): n.pag., reprinted in Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 156. His reaction was seconded by many viewers who bemoaned “La Rainer’s display of ego”

in general and American avant-garde dance in particular a bad name—a further implication that avant-garde art was expected, by conservative as well as many progressive artists and critics, to be free of private constraints, even though the definition and range of these constraints were not necessarily always identical.⁶⁶¹

What was important for discursive film was that private experience could provide the basis for the work as long as it addressed universal concerns. In this regard, again, it paralleled the structure of the bourgeois public sphere in its provision of generality and universality. In her attempt to entrench Rainer's filmic enterprise further within the above-cited avant-garde trajectory of "secular, modernist consciousness," Michelson turned the personal, not into the political, but into the universal.⁶⁶² Faced with the artist's claim that her work, compared to Snow's or Frampton's, has a veiled autobiographical and personal dimension and does follow a narrative, however obscure, Michelson turned private experience into the material basis for an abstract meditation on structure. It provided, she said, "the point of departure for a series of formal investigations upon disjunction (between sounds and image, between past and present, between character and voice, between reading and speaking)."⁶⁶³

As described above with regard to *Film About a Woman Who*, where the characters' attempts to fit a template of conventional domestic appearance and behavior ideally leads to a theoretical, critical investigation of the dialectics of frame and fit,

and the misuse of "public funds." "Some Like Yvonne Rainer—And Some Don't," letters to *The New York Times* (March 2, 1968): n.pag., reprinted in Rainer, *Work 1961–73*, 157.

⁶⁶¹ This type of reaction and the argument over the adequate content, form, and function of a publicly funded and/or displayed art foreshadows the infamous debates of the 1980s and '90s, including the feud over Richard Serra's *Titled Arc* (1981), the Andres Serrano/Robert Mapplethorpe-NEA controversy, and, most recently, the attempt by New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani to remove Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) from the 1999 *Sensation* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

⁶⁶² Michelson, "Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: 'Lives of Performers,'" 31.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

Michelson discerns the artist's strategy as follows: "Falling back, as it were, to the terrain of the private, personal experience in the feeling that one's own life is as viable as any other material" and "the location of one's fictional resources through the recognition that the forms and rhetoric of those psychological situations which compose the repertory of domestic drama, constitute a material which has at least the authenticity of one's own somewhat desperate investment of emotional energy."⁶⁶⁴ Here, the private is the material for a non-materialist (in the Marxist sense) structural investigation: with regard to *Lives of Performers*, Michelson claims that "filled with allusions to private and not-so-private problems and agonies... the film's structure proposes, far more interestingly, the *uses* of such material, how they can be distanced, the extraction of the formal potential of these constraints and ambiguities."⁶⁶⁵ This is how, as a discursive work, Rainer's films continue the legacy of Vertov and Eisenstein: as public, intellectual film; film that, no matter how personal or political, is defined by its autonomy and objectivity through formal analysis and self-reference.

Writing in the late 1980s, from a perspective assessing both the democratic potential and promise of alternative film in the '60s and its subsequent turn to a discursive-formalist practice, James has criticized both Michelson and Rainer for their active depoliticization of filmmaking and film history. And, echoing Habermas' description of the ideally autonomous status of the public sphere, he has specifically emphasized the "bourgeois" nature of this depoliticization: "The repression of social conditions of production is intrinsic to idealist aesthetics."⁶⁶⁶ He uses Michelson's 1972

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁶⁶ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 331–332.

article on Vertov, “‘The Man with the Movie Camera’: From Magician to Epistemologist,” as an example of how the Russian filmmaker was “hailed as the progenitor of the phenomenological project of structuralism.”⁶⁶⁷ James writes:

By emphasizing the phenomenological and aesthetically ‘materialist’ component in Vertov’s work, structural film theorists were able to appropriate it, but they could do so only by suppressing its preconditions. For as well as being the documentarist of the film strip, Vertov was the documentarist of Lenin, the poet of a political as well as an aesthetic revolution. How ever much you wanted Vertov, he could never come without socialism.⁶⁶⁸

Discussing *Film About a Woman Who*, James argues that while it is not a structuralist film proper, Rainer extends formalist interrogation to “the structuralist analysis of narrative.”⁶⁶⁹ To Lucy Lippard, who noted that the film “foils the would-be plotter by switching rhythms, time/spaces, even characters,” the disjunctions and fragmentations of female experience, whether Rainer’s own or her characters’, create a consciousness of alienation. This, Lippard claims, is a political act, “even if the art itself is not directly

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 265.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid. Michelson’s article appeared in *Artforum* (March 1972): 59–72. According to Michelson, the epistemological dimension in Vertov’s film finds its historical continuity in Michael Snow’s work, which the critic describes as a “reflection upon the condition of knowledge.” “Toward Snow,” *Artforum* (June 1971): 30.

James furthermore argues that structural film’s presumed autonomy resembles the Frankfurt School’s, and specifically Adorno’s, demand for an art of “determinate negation,” which, in turn, echoes both Habermas’ and Rainer’s articulation of achieving a sphere of critical, analytic debate, a public art, by removing the personal dimension from aesthetic production. According to James, Adorno had argued, with regard to Schoenberg’s music, that “[L]iberating the intra-subjective elements of expressionism... made available the ‘elements of aesthetic objectivity’”—an observation that, according to some critics, would adequately describe Rainer’s transition from an art of kinesthetic and emotional empathy to an art of rational, structural analysis. James, citing Adorno in *Allegories of Cinema*, 267.

On the proximity between Vertov’s cinema and Brecht’s theater, see Martin Walsh, “The Complex Seer: Brecht and the Film,” *Sight and Sound* (Autumn 1974): 222–227.

⁶⁶⁹ James argues that the film is not a structuralist film proper because it “refus[es] structural film’s self-restriction to the material of the signifier” and “introdu[es] narrative.” Ibid., 329 and 331.

political in subject matter.”⁶⁷⁰ James, on the other hand, finds precisely this to be the problem: alluding to Brecht’s strategy of constantly reminding the audience of the difference between the actor’s role and his job, James makes, not subject matter, but the political and ideological elements freed from the constraints of organic, illusionist totality the pivotal factor of the work’s politics—or lack thereof: “As in the structuralist analysis of narrative then, the characters do not represent themselves so much as they are *actants*, that is, figurations of various positions in an abstract model of narrative possibilities.”⁶⁷¹ Hence, politics lie not so much with the act of merely liberating the role from the actor or the actor from his role, the director from her control, sexuality from its preconceived meaning, but their articulation as factors subject to political control, hence, private interest.⁶⁷²

To Brecht, the separation of actor and representation meant not just to provide the spectator with an awareness of the relation between the two, to destroy the illusion of an organic whole, but to place both within a context of political struggle. Commenting on the prevalent labeling of Rainer’s work as discursive, James continues, “Such a reading of *Film About a Woman Who*, that is, as a structuralist meta-text, must conclude that it can finally propose nothing specifically about sexuality, or indeed about anything except narrative itself. Unable to do more than mobilize the forms of discourse, it is ambiguous in its sexual politics and elusive in its attitude to its heroine’s sexual obsession.”⁶⁷³ This inability and vagueness is most obvious in one of the film’s central scenes, in which one

⁶⁷⁰ Lucy Lippard, “Yvonne Rainer on Feminism and her Film” (1975), reprinted in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 267 and 269.

⁶⁷¹ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 331.

⁶⁷² Rainer and Michelson have both, on several occasions, emphasized the role of the actor and the director as ideally being that of a “neutral doer.” Rainer cited in Michelson, “Yvonne Rainer, Part One: The Dance and the Dance,” 59.

⁶⁷³ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 331.

of the female characters is being stripped by one of the men, while two other women sit and look on. The viewer's experience of the undressing and subsequent redressing, which is filmed in one long, fixed, uninterrupted shot, is painfully slow, cruel, exploitative.⁶⁷⁴

At the end of the scene, the camera zooms in on the face of one of the women sitting on the couch (Rainer), who, in an allusion to Brecht's use of projected text as a distancing tool, has pieces of text on paper stuck to her face (fig. 117) (reading, for example, "I'm totally intoxicated, overflowing with you and wanting you more than ever before")—fragments of quotes from a letter written by activist Angela Davis to George Jackson. Critic Robert Storr has identified this scene as the film's sole political intimation: "Though feminist in its implication, *Film About a Woman Who* antedated Rainer's active involvement in feminist politics, and, with the exception of the Angela Davis letters quoted, contains no allusions to the social struggles of the 1960s and '70s in progress in the world outside the domestic contents of the film's events."⁶⁷⁵ James, on the other hand, finds this allusion to be an instance of the very problem with the film as meta-text:

Because these protestations are quoted as instances of discourse, their actual discursiveness is framed and their implications vague; but equally indeterminate is the further register opened up by the fact that they are all

⁶⁷⁴ It should be noted that the "spatial-temporal continuity" achieved through cinematic devices like the long-take, at the time most famously employed in Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), was presented by critics like Michelson as an alternative to the "subjective" politics of montage. Discussing André Bazin's work on film in comparison to Eisenstein's "montage of attractions," she writes, "Not subjected to the subjective emphases of the more assertively edited footage and the metaphorical thrust of the montage style, the material is not in any way subject to hierarchization (or 'distortion'), and the spectator retains his 'democratic' right as it were, to the constitution of meaning from within that cinematic manifold, that 'reality,' those 'facts,' the naked and modest revelation of which, the director in his loving respect for 'things' themselves, contents himself with." "Screen/Surface: The Politics of Illusionism," *Artforum* (September 1972): 61.

⁶⁷⁵ Robert Storr, "The Theoretical Come-On," *Art in America* (April 1986): 160.

quotations from the letters of Angela Davis to George Jackson. This spurious recruitment of the politics of class and race into the bourgeois psychodrama of the rest of the film only unsettles its political pretensions. The refusal of political commitment elsewhere, and especially the refusal to attempt an articulation of sexual and class politics, reduces the political realities the quotations signify to terms within a formalist exercise.⁶⁷⁶

Despite Rainer's initial reluctance, *Film About a Woman Who* was inaugurated into feminist theory and cinema, and the competing assessments of Rainer's work as being private or discursive/public discussed in this chapter mirror the feminist discourse at the time. The dilemma of the exclusively public and private spheres and the experiences facilitated therein was at the core of 1970s debates surrounding feminist film. The camps were, as Laura Mulvey has identified, split between personal, "essentialist" filmmaking and the introduction of "French structuralist and psychoanalytic theory to film criticism."⁶⁷⁷ According to Griselda Pollock, both of these directions were (rightly) accused of being largely apolitical, and feminist practice needed a "political baseline."⁶⁷⁸ The need for a method that could provide a "bridge between political engagement and a commitment to develop artistic strategies which could have a political effectivity within the sphere of culture" is part of the reason that, in the mid-'70s, Brecht was again introduced to the discussion and production of film in general and feminist film in

⁶⁷⁶ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 331.

⁶⁷⁷ Laura Mulvey, "British Feminist Film Theory's Female Spectators: Presence and Absence," *Camera Obscura, A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory* (May–September 1989): 69.

⁶⁷⁸ Griselda Pollock, "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—a Brechtian Perspective," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 163.

particular.⁶⁷⁹ This renewed interest in Brechtian approaches to art and politics was fueled by a number of new publications of texts by and about Brecht, such as the *Expressionismusdebatte* between the German playwright and Georg Lukács in the *New Left Review* and the British film magazine *Screen*'s two special issues devoted to Brecht and cinema.⁶⁸⁰

This rediscovery of Brecht, together with the New German Cinema and the Brechtian re-reading of Habermas' history of the public sphere by Habermas' former assistant Oskar Negt and filmmaker Alexander Kluge, provide the context for Rainer's 1980 film *Journeys from Berlin/1971*.

Proletarian or Counter-Public Film: Rainer, Kluge, and Politics at the End of the 1970s

Journeys from Berlin/1971 begins with a blank, dark screen. The viewer hears sounds that suggest a domestic scene, someone getting out of a bath, someone else entering through a front door, a kiss hello. An "It's good to see you" is followed by "Close your eyes and open your mouth": an intimate feeding of strawberries. After he has announced that he's tired and she agrees to cook, titles crawl onto the black screen: a text about the 1950 "draft for a political criminal law in the Federal Republic of Germany" ending in "The danger to the community comes from organized people." What at the start of the film has the effect of a puzzling contrast of seemingly arbitrary elements sets the tone for the journeys depicted thereafter: The juxtaposition of privacy (intimate confessions,

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 162.

⁶⁸⁰ The central text of the Brecht-Lukács debate, Brecht's "Against Georg Lukács" (1938) was published in the March–April 1974 issue of the *New Left Review*. *Screen*'s special issues are *Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema* (Summer 1974) and *Brecht and the Cinema/Film and Politics. Transcript of the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival Brecht Event* (Winter 1975/76).

personal motivations, and individual relations) and the public sphere (as embattled arena of social conduct) determines the film's structure. Visually as well as in content, Rainer juxtaposes insides and outsides—social and psychological, physical and artistic. A conversation about revolutionary action between the bohemian New York couple (“She” and “He,” spoken by Amy Taubin and Vito Acconci, always off-screen) is juxtaposed with the written presentation of facts regarding the violent battle over Germany's media apparatus and the conscious attention of its citizens. Long and confusing monologues by a patient (played by Annette Michelson) in a psychoanalytic session are juxtaposed with scenes of activities performed by a number of people in the background behind her (such as entering and leaving a building, climbing stairs, carrying and climbing into a row boat). We see aerial footage of Stonehenge and the Berlin Wall; out-of-window shots taken in Berlin, Hamburg, London, and New York, with pans across a mantelpiece featuring a still life of an ever-changing assortment of objects; the reading of excerpts from memoirs of 19th-century Russian and American anarchists with a black-and-white, slow-motion sequence of a man and a woman walking up and down in front of an ornate, indiscernible piece of architecture, sometimes bordering on the comical or slapstick—all of these parts and others recur within the film several times, in various lengths and combinations. Like a collage, the arrangement of these elements, their proximity within the film and their apparent distance in association, serves to complement and complicate individual scenes and characters, images and spaces.

Rainer started working on *Journeys from Berlin/1971* during her 1976–77 stay in West Berlin. The “1971” in the title refers to the year Rainer attempted to commit suicide

in her New York loft.⁶⁸¹ But it was also the year the artist returned from a trip to India, decided to reintroduce “narrative” into her work, and contemplated working exclusively in film.⁶⁸² Like much of the structure of the film itself and, as will be shown, the kind of thinking, of experience it seeks to advocate, the title invokes a dialectical relation between two ends, negotiates the perspectives of 1971 and of 1976–77, looking back and forth in order to construct a dialogue about the place and function of an individual within a given socio-political order. In Berlin, Rainer found herself confronted with questions of political violence and possibilities of resistance, embodied by the Red Army Faction (RAF) and, in particular, Ulrike Meinhof. The notion of terrorism as a last resort against what was perceived as a police state in democratic guise in the wake of the 1968 student movement held the attention of the German nation and its media. Shortly before Rainer arrived in Berlin, on May 9, 1976, Ulrike Meinhof was found hanged in her prison cell; shortly after the artist’s return to the U.S., in October 1977, other members of the RAF, including Andreas Baader, were found dead in their cells, where they spent life sentences for various cases of murder and attempted murder.

The film presents its viewers with a complex and often contradictory meditation on the extremes of suicide, as personal escape on the one hand and as political action on the other. Between these two poles, *Journeys* takes a number of associative, related routes that articulate the private and public functions of the role of psychoanalysis and art, of

⁶⁸¹ Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 453.

⁶⁸² The artist herself and some of her critics have pointed out the impact Rainer’s journey to India has made on her subsequent work. Michelson, for example, describes Rainer’s exposure to Kathakali dance as part of the motivation to reintroduce narrative into her work without merely reproducing its conventions: “The problem now at hand was that of locating new terms for the composition of fictional structures consistent with that secular, modernist consciousness. How, indeed, was one to compose a narrative work without succumbing to the temptations of fictional illusionism and mythical reference?” “Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: ‘Lives of Performers,’” 30–31.

past and present political radicalism, on the masses or the proletariat as a revolutionary body, of individual and social action. Confronted with the political dimension of Meinhof's and Baader's "suicides," Rainer had to rethink her own actions, personal and, by extension, artistic, as well as their repercussions within a culture that had compromised the autonomy and authenticity of private and public experience while maintaining their ideals as ideological tools.⁶⁸³ *Journeys* is, in a sense, about the same things that Rainer's other films dealt with: relationships, personal decisions and options, the role of women. But these issues and the way of portraying them had now taken on a decidedly political dimension. As Rainer put it, "What I am suggesting is that a subtext of this film is that women constitute an oppressed class, to whom—as such and under proper conditions—certain options present themselves more readily than others as a response to those conditions of oppression. Suicide in the personal sphere, assassination in the political."⁶⁸⁴

This sense of oppression is subtle, yet pervasive. *Journeys* displays and plays with clichés of women as dutiful domestic partners and faithful daughters, heroines and amazons. The film continuously reminds the viewer that these clichés are hard to transcend as, for example, the off-camera reading of a dramatic account of Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich's 1877 attempt to assassinate Governor Trepov is juxtaposed with exhaustive takes of the countryside from a speeding train, a young man walking his dog, and shots of traffic on New York City's Bowery filmed from a second or third floor window (figs. 118–120). These mundane images not only undermine the suspense

⁶⁸³ I have put the term "suicides" into quotes since there was and is still much openly expressed doubt about the question whether or not the members of the RAF killed themselves or were, in fact, murdered by the German state.

⁶⁸⁴ Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who..." 49–51.

created by the story of the assassination. They juxtapose the dramatic historical account of the extraordinary as a space of female empowerment with the ordinary where such empowerment is largely, and unspectacularly, absent. Rainer's understanding and complex articulation of women as an oppressed class is what makes *Journeys* a counter-public or proletarian work of art. It introduces to Rainer's oeuvre the notion of struggle over meaning and identity, of access to the tools and institutions that produce and mediate experience. It comprehends the autonomy promised by traditional notions of private and public experience as ideals that mask the reality of ideological production, that are themselves "social facts."⁶⁸⁵ It is what aligns Rainer's work with the feminist discourse of the mid-1970s and what makes this film her most Brechtian.⁶⁸⁶

It is important to understand the terms "class" and "proletariat" in a sense that does not merely reproduce antiquated, nostalgic notions of working-class struggle. Defined by Negt and Kluge as "what enables experience or, on the other hand, what limits and cripples it," the public sphere is a matter of access to the production and distribution of experience: to history books and newspapers, to music and radio stations, to education, memory, art, television, and film. In *The Public Sphere and Experience* as

⁶⁸⁵ Fredric Jameson explains the very active function of the ideal or myth of the public sphere as follows: "[The structure of the public sphere] also determines that fundamental modern pathology whereby 'experience' itself is sundered, its unevenly divided halves assigned to stereotypically public expressions, on the one hand, and, on the other, to that zone of the personal and the private which seems to offer shelter from the public and the political at the same time that it is itself a social fact produced by the public and political." "On Negt and Kluge," *October* (Autumn 1988): 157.

⁶⁸⁶ *Journeys* has also been read as a continuation of Rainer's work as "textual" and "structural" in the public, objective sense. For example, in a 1980–81 interview with Sally Banes, Michelson is persistent about presenting *Journeys*' discursivity as the film's sole political dimension, thereby reinscribing the very "problem" of modernist art she identifies as being a determining factor for the aesthetic production of the U.S. neo-avant-garde: "I do think that we must finally acknowledge the fact that in *Journeys* we have a film which is not political, but rather pre-political. The place from which Yvonne continues to speak is not that of political analysis or action. The film's uneasiness and humor, both, are contingent on one's sense of the subject's dilemma, a stasis of anguish, an inability to invent or adopt the terms of another praxis. But this is the problem of the modernist artist in America." "Lives of Performers: Annette Michelson Discusses Acting in *Journeys From Berlin*," *Millennium Film Journal* (Fall 1980–Winter 1981): 84.

well as *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981), Negt and Kluge characterize “proletarian” in the most general sense: “Proletarian, i.e., separated from the means of production, designates not merely the labor characteristics of the industrial proletariat, but similarly all restrictive productive capacities (production of experience, values, identities, etc.).”⁶⁸⁷

In *Journeys*, a crawling title informs the viewer about the 1969 student demonstrations at the printing plants of Axel Springer, “publisher of some fifteen right-wing newspapers and magazines,” followed by a girl’s voice reading from her diary about yesterday’s world history class and contemplating who and what separates the “toiling masses all over the world.” Here, the recognition of the power of information, published under the guise of “objectivity” and “autonomy,” is juxtaposed with the bankruptcy of struggle in the traditional Marxist sense.⁶⁸⁸ Alienation itself does not automatically lead to revolution. As private individuals and organization hold an increasingly monopolized power over the social horizon of experience (and produce what Negt and Kluge designate “production public spheres”), the ideal of the bourgeois public sphere, its promise of inclusion and of the general validity of experiences, values, and identities produced, clashes with the factual experience of the proletariat’s exclusion. For example, the culturally mediated role of women is in many cases different from the complex, actual experience of female individuals and groups. The proletarian public sphere, then, “assumes the active function of mediating between social being and consciousness.”⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, 156. *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1981) has not been translated into English. Jameson discusses the 3-volume work in the abovementioned article.

⁶⁸⁸ To this day, almost all German newspapers remind their readers about the medium’s origins as a central part of the bourgeois public sphere: on the first page, under the paper’s name, one can find the words “unabhängig” (autonomous) und “überparteilich” (non-partisan).

⁶⁸⁹ Knodler-Bunte, et al., “The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization,” 56.

Journeys provides such a mediation, presenting various female perspectives, each reflecting on their own behavior and identity: the young girl's diary, the patient's psychoanalytic session, the anarchists' memoirs and the terrorists' letters, the New York bohemian's contemplation of past and present heroines while fending off her male companion's attempts to rehearse commonplace assumptions about the personal motivation of female behavior ("Ugh, what's the matter with me. Your argument is sneaky. It's not a question of what one grows out of, but what we do when we're grown"). These perspectives, the fantasies and realities negotiated therein, as often competing yet complementary types of experience, form the "central theoretical nucleus" of Negt and Kluge's argument: they constitute a "block of real life" consisting of "a complex of contradictory tendencies in the internal organization of human psychic experience."⁶⁹⁰ The proletarian public sphere is the organization of proletarian experience into this block of real life, which, unsubsumed by "profit-maximizing, "private interests, holds the potential for social and political change.⁶⁹¹

Writing a long piece about *Journeys* for *The Drama Review's* 1980 "Women and Performance Issue," Ann Sargent-Wooster closes her insightful analysis of the film's complex and often-contradictory negotiation of perspectives, politics, and personalities

⁶⁹⁰ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Proletarian Experience*, 107; Knodler-Bunte, et al., "The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization," 65, respectively.

⁶⁹¹ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Proletarian Experience*, 107. Citing Negt and Kluge, Knodler-Bunte, et al. explain in greater detail the relation between the "block of life" and the "proletarian public sphere": "The block does not represent an anthropomorphically invariable structure of human nature. Instead it is determined materialistically as the residual potential for experience and action which cannot be integrated into the system of profit maximization, but which nevertheless develops necessarily in conjunction with the expansion of capitalist profit maximization and the changing composition of capital. This construction assumes that those human needs anchored in the psychic structure and characterized by qualitative relationships within the socialization process cannot be diverted from their goal. Rather, these human needs preserve within themselves a realistic and unified tendency towards their satisfaction. 'It is unlikely that in the long run they will be content with substitute satisfactions and allow themselves to be distracted from their own realism by any kind of reality principle in their search for satisfying relationships.'" "The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization," 65–66.

with the surprising observation that “the film’s concluding attitude is one of confidence in the future for the individual.”⁶⁹² Rather than finding at the core of the film the potential for superseding the dichotomy of private (the film’s characters and the viewers as individuals) and public (psychoanalytic discourse, politics, the film itself as abstract mediation of reality), the critic reassembles the fragments of the filmic collage and the viewers’ experience of it into an affirmation of a bourgeois reality. Instead, I would argue, *Journeys* should be understood as the production of a proletarian public sphere. Its “block of real life” is constituted by the experience of alienation of women as an oppressed class and the surplus fantasies of violence (as suicide and assassination), wherein the notions of individual identity as constituted by public discourse have to be rethought. Seen as such, *Journeys* presents an example of artistic practice that transcends a dilemma several critics have identified at the core of feminist thought during the mid-1970s. Writers such as Helen Molesworth, Laura Mulvey, and Griselda Pollock have argued that the “essentialist/theory” debate, when presented as a matter of choice between two exclusive positions, did and continues to trivialize advances of and contributions to feminist practice in particular, and art in general.

In her 2000 article “House Work and Art Work,” Molesworth observes, “Despite the breadth and complexity of issues—the diversity of practices within each, somewhat loosely defined, ‘camp’—a certain reduction has taken place in the current reception of

⁶⁹² Ann Sargent-Wooster, “Yvonne Rainer’s ‘Journeys from Berlin/1971,’” *The Drama Review* (June 1980): 118.

Noël Carroll, in the introduction to his “Interview with a Woman Who...” strikes a similarly vague note regarding *Journeys*’ agenda, presenting the film in terms traditionally reserved for the bourgeois public sphere as they mediate between the individual and life as a philosophical (Hegelian) rather than political or ideological (Marxist) relation: “*Journeys* can be viewed as an inner dialogue... The bristling debates and the lacunae between different perspectives open onto deeper chasms. For at the heart of *Journeys* is the intimation that some of the debates are irresolvable, that certain fundamental perspectives about human life are irretrievably disjunct.” Carroll, “Interview with a Woman Who...,” 39.

1970s feminist work, an intellectual fault line broadly described in generational terms.”⁶⁹³

The separation of woman as an essentially private, domestic individual on the one hand, and, on the other as an anonymous element within an abstract theoretical structure reinscribes traditionally bourgeois expectations with regard to the appropriate places of emotions and fantasies, of rational thought, debate, and politics. It also subsumes historical developments in artistic and intellectual production that hold the potential of changing these expectations, of exchanging Habermas’ interpretive model of private and public for that of Negt and Kluge’s. Citing political philosopher Moira Gatens, Molesworth presents the problem of the “essentialism/theory” debate as one of private versus public. The inclusion of issues like labor (again, in a general sense, as the alienated production of value[s], whether domestic or industrial), in feminist art leads, according to Molesworth, “to a consideration between public and private, which emerges as a defining issue in the discussion of 1970s art and the legacy of feminism’s intervention in it.”⁶⁹⁴ For Molesworth, works such as Martha Rosler’s video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) (fig. 121) and Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ *Maintenance Art Performances* (1973–74) (fig. 122) are concerned with an analysis of the creation of “ideologically appropriate subjects... through the naturalizing of unpaid or underpaid domestic labor.”⁶⁹⁵ In each case, the relation between traditionally private experiences (of woman as housewife or cleaning woman) and their presentation (through video or as art) is exposed as the active construction of meaning, of the production of the role of women within the social horizon of experience.

⁶⁹³ Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* (Spring 2000): 73.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Both Mulvey and Pollock identify the 1970s rediscovery of Brecht in general, and in *Screen* magazine in particular, as a neglected yet important part of feminist art and discourse. In her 1989 article “British Feminist Film Theory’s Female Spectators: Presence and Absence,” Mulvey recalls a mid-1970s “crisis over theory” and the split of *Screen* magazine’s editorial board over “the journal’s growing commitment to introducing French structuralist and psychoanalytic theory to film criticism.”⁶⁹⁶ The assumed neutrality of a general or “public” discourse like psychoanalysis, which, as a traditionally bourgeois institution, is blind to differences in class, social, and ethnic background, encountered “resistance in the name of the empirically identifiable, real woman in the audience and their conscious identification with empirically identifiable reality on the screen.”⁶⁹⁷ A “revival of interest in the way that radical art and radical politics had intertwined to create an avant-garde in the twenties” and an interest in Brechtian forms of distancing in particular promised the possibility of creating a new “active, participatory spectatorship.”⁶⁹⁸ The experience provided was to be one of political, of “conscious identification.”⁶⁹⁹ This identification had to take into account the deadlocked binary separation between an individual “intuitive and unquestioning emotional response” of shared personal experience and a transhistorical, abstract structural analysis that feigned objectivity and autonomy and was therefore criticized as having little or no repercussion in socio-political reality.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁶ Mulvey, “British Feminist Film Theory’s Female Spectators,” 69.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 69–71.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

Griselda Pollock, in her 1988 essay “Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—a Brechtian Perspective,” identifies a similar problem: the apolitical appropriation of private experience and public institutions (culture and psychoanalysis in particular) in feminist art. Like Mulvey, Pollock calls *Screen* “a major resource for critical cultural practices... far beyond the confines of film-making and film studies.”⁷⁰¹ While the magazine, according to Pollock, is mostly known for its dissemination of Saussurian semiotics and Althusserian notions of ideology, the “strong interest in Brecht is often overlooked.”⁷⁰² And it is precisely this interest that allowed for a more nuanced, more complicated articulation of a formerly strictly private experience made public—as Stephen Heath, a member of *Screen*’s editorial board, stated in his 1975/76 article “From Brecht to Film—Theses. Problems”: “The problem, the political problem, for artistic practice in its ideological intervention, could be precisely the transformation of *relations of subjectivity in ideology*.”⁷⁰³ In that sense, *Journeys* is an analysis of multiple private perspectives as politically motivated discourse.

To introduce Brecht into feminist art and theory was ultimately to enable a negotiation between formerly separate elements. As Mary Kelly, herself an avid reader of Brecht, had determined, this negotiation was between sexuality, sociality, and materiality.⁷⁰⁴ As the debates had made obvious, it had become necessary to carefully

⁷⁰¹ Pollock, “Screening the Seventies,” 162.

⁷⁰² Ibid.

⁷⁰³ Stephen Heath, “From Brecht to Film—Theses. Problems,” *Screen—Brecht and the Cinema/Film and Politics*. (Winter 1975/76): 39. Emphasis added.

⁷⁰⁴ Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” *Screen* (1981): 45. For a discussion of Kelly’s categories, of a “dialectical view of those potentials” provided by what Kelly called the neo-avant-garde’s exploration of the “paradoxical logic of Modernism’s demands for objective purposes and transcendental truths” within the context of the 1960s and ’70s rediscovery of the work and strategies of revolutionary or political modernism, especially Brecht’s, see Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds.), “Introduction,” *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970–85* (London and New York: Pandora, 1987), 101–119 and Pollock, “Screening the Seventies.”

dissociate sexuality from its reductivist inscription as distinctly domestic affair, sociality from the connotation of pure, apolitical intersubjectivity, and materiality from its autonomous, objective status. Rainer had made her way through all these elements and associations, explored their limits, and often reaffirmed them. For Rainer and many feminist artists, to triangulate sexuality, sociality, and materiality meant to politicize the very structure that continuously reproduced conventional ways of seeing and thinking female experience.

Rainer's film was produced in the midst of these debates: *Screen* magazine and the debates published therein were of international and especially American influence; Rainer knew Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, and several scenes in *Journeys*, partially funded by the British Film Institute, were shot in the U.K., in London's Whitechapel Art Gallery as well as in Mulvey and Wollen's house. Like *Journeys*, these debates present a problematization of the bourgeois public sphere and the notions of "private" and "public" manifested therein.

To consider the film's "block of real life"—mainly the motives of suicide and violence as options of an oppressed class in the context of psychoanalysis, relationships, and politics—from the interrelating perspectives of sexuality, sociality, and materiality provides insight into how (and how far) *Journeys* is a proletarian work of art in the Brechtian sense.

Sexuality

As stated above, to Rainer *Journeys* presents violence in the forms of suicide and assassination as a female response to oppressive social and political structures. The

notion of “woman” or “femininity” is defined neither through a singular set of essentially feminine traits nor through a generalizing theoretical perspective. Instead, Rainer confronts her viewers with a multiplicity of experiences found within and among the individual characters. “Woman” is not inscribed merely through her sexuality but as a political and social entity of complementary and competing experiences—as a daughter, partner, wife, intellectual, anarchist, terrorist, patient, citizen—comprising several public and private personas. There are not one, but several female points of view, some reinscribing, others challenging and complicating stereotypically female sentiments and fantasies.

The young girl reading from her diary reminisces about her overtly emotional reactions to melodrama and the rational, intellectual struggle to suspend what she perceives as being a typically girlish naiveté. The patient in dialogue with an ever-changing cast of analysts seamlessly weaves in and out of considerations of suicide as a personal option and last resort, her casual remarks contrasting surprisingly with the notion of giving one’s life for a political cause or sacrificing it for one’s husband and family: “You know I’ve never threatened you with... I’ve never held the threat of [suicide] over your head an average of five or six blacks executed by hanging every Monday morning for political terrorism at Pretoria’s central prison, according to reliable reports rejection and disappointment are two things I’ve always found impossible to take... And you know something else? There appears to be no instance in 19th century Russia in which a man followed his wife into exile in Siberia. So what about feelings?”⁷⁰⁵

⁷⁰⁵ In the film, as a way of simultaneously emphasizing and de-emphasizing it, the word “suicide” is cut from the audio track, leaving the viewer to read the lips of the patient, actively reconstructing the term within the context of the preceding presentations of political violence in Germany, the young girl’s recollection of the near-fatal personal tragedy of a U.S. soldier and his girlfriend, and the New York

“She” (the New York bohemian) tries to situate violence historically, contemplating the stories and autobiographies of past and present anarchists and terrorists such as Vera Figner and Ulrike Meinhof, considering whether or not political violence is primarily motivated by an individual’s past.⁷⁰⁶

These and other views and voices leave the viewers to establish Heath’s aforementioned “relations of subjectivity.” As relations, the various perspectives and experiences negotiate between the private female (where, according to Pollock, sexuality is a “quality or attribute, innate, essential and liberating; in Foucault’s phrase, ‘the truth of our being’”) and the public, theoretical woman, which is also singular rather than multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory (as sexuality is seen as an effect of discourses and institutions).⁷⁰⁷ The film’s form complements this negotiation as the camera is neither an extension of the filmmaker’s hand, a transmission of subjective vision, nor, as in *Lives of Performers*, the viewer’s sensory gateway into a participatory, emotional proximity.

At the same time, *Journeys* does not take the presumably objective perspective of documentary practice, turning the camera into an autonomous, metahistorical recording device. The film’s visual, audible, and textual angles are as multifaceted as the experiences expressed through them. Rainer employs what Noël Carroll has called a

bohemian’s (“She”) contemplation of her potential position as a juror in a rape case: “That was the first time I realized that someone’s life might be in my hands.”

⁷⁰⁶ For example, “She” assigns a political motivation for violent acts to Figner while presenting Meinhof’s as rooted in a history of personal vengeance. “She” reads from Figner’s autobiography: “But as you know, we didn’t have a free press in this country, and so ideas could not be spread by the written word... nor was literature producing changes in our social life. And so I concluded that violence was the only solution.” Looking at Meinhof’s past, “She” concludes, “It’s interesting:” one of the first violent things Meinhof did was to lead a bunch of people in tearing up that house in Hamburg where she had lived with her husband and two children. He had been unfaithful to her... It would be so easy to make a connection... Because it shows a muddled vindictive streak in her nature that got into the way of her social thinking. A lot of their acts were carried out in a spirit of personal revenge rather than social justice.”

⁷⁰⁷ Pollock, “Screening the Seventies,” 161.

“basic method of radical juxtaposition,” which, without being relativist or arbitrary in its combination of various formal devices and elements of content, enables the viewers to recreate a “block of real life” in all of its incompleteness, contradictions, and coherence.⁷⁰⁸

The off-screen conversation between “He” and “She” concerning the motivation for political violence among women is juxtaposed at different points with texts about German politics with regard to terrorist or “radical” activity. This is contrasted with a tracking shot of seemingly random objects arranged along a mantelpiece (a stack of books, a photo of Vera Figner, a sandwich, a box of frozen fish, a photo of Meinhof, a paving stone, a tin can, a gun, a photo of an elegant staircase, a photo of concentration camp corpses), with a view of a London intersection through an open window, and a woman and a man walking in slow motion up and down in front of an unspecifiable, ornate building (figs. 123–125).

Many associations between the audible and the visible are possible here, some more obvious than others. Most are exposingly analytical, concerning the relation between the discussion among the bohemian couple and the tangible or pragmatic reality of its content. Their somewhat geographically, socially, and historically removed contemplation of violent revolutionary acts is grounded through the presentation of the German state’s monopoly and drastic use of force, the stone’s physical embodiment of resistance, and the depiction of the epitome of organized violence in the concentration camp photo. It is grounded through the film’s articulation of the relation between the domestic and the public, inside and outside, the private political conversation over a dinner and the everyday as represented by the shot through the open window. The

⁷⁰⁸ Carroll, “Interview with a Woman Who...,” 60.

discussion between “She” and “He” is as “real” as the physical, historical, and social reality it is juxtaposed with—in fact, Rainer succeeds in articulating all of the facets presented as part of a single reality. No perspective presented is strictly female, neither in an essentialist nor a theoretical sense of the word. The perspectives are complicated through the notion of femininity and politicized by the ambiguous relation to their social, political, and ideological context.⁷⁰⁹

Mary Kelly herself participated in a film project that articulated a similarly complex notion of femininity. More specifically, *Nightcleaners* (1975) (figs. 126–128) comprised a number of experiences of women involved in the struggle over labor rights and its representation. Kelly joined the Berwick Street Film Collective for what Pollock calls a “Brechtian film partly made in support of the unionizing of low-paid women workers in contract office cleaning and partly made as a critique of the campaign and of documentary.”⁷¹⁰ *Nightcleaners* was initially conceived to be what critic Claire Johnston calls a typical “political documentary”: “Here the viewer, through camera style, use of commentary and editing is made to feel that what is being presented to him/her is objective and impartial... present[ing] the correct position without opening up the contradictions within the situation or encouraging the viewer to think for him/herself.”⁷¹¹ Taking over four years to complete, the film developed into a much more complex portrayal of female labor struggle at the editing stage. The film was eventually presented by Johnston and Paul Willemen at *Screen’s* 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival Brecht Event

⁷⁰⁹ In order not to provide too many and seemingly random relations between the film’s various elements of form and subject matter as the artist tries to avoid merely guiding her viewers through preconceived associative patterns, Rainer has said that she uses repetition, “bringing things back in another form,” and certain leitmotifs (violence and psychotherapy, for example) as not to “lose things in the clutter.” *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷¹⁰ Pollock, “Screening the Seventies,” 168.

⁷¹¹ Claire Johnston, “*The Nightcleaners (Part One)*: Rethinking Political Cinema,” *Jump Cut* (1976): 55.

as an example of avant-garde cinema that not only enables the viewer to participate but *requires* him or her to do so: “to make his/her own contribution, as the filmmakers have done, to the meaning-production which is the film.”⁷¹²

Johnston and Willemen argued that *Nightcleaners* functioned on two levels of Brechtian “dialecticization.”⁷¹³ The first articulates the “representation of struggle,” combining images of self-reference (“the fact of cinematic production”) with images of “the socio-political situation of the nightcleaners.”⁷¹⁴ The second level of dialecticization presents not one but several complementary and competing “discourses.” Similar to *Journeys’* corresponding and contrasting female experiences, in the Berwick Collective’s film “the real object... becomes the charting of the shifting relations between these discourses, each representing a political/ideological position within the social formation and caught up within its dynamic.”⁷¹⁵ The discourses include the heterogeneous perspectives of the nightcleaners, of the employer, of the nightcleaners’ spokeswoman, of the unions, of various political figures, and of the filmmakers themselves continuously challenging and revising their own and their work’s position.

Another important parallel to Rainer’s film is the presence of what Johnston and Willemen call the “discourse of women’s liberation”—*Nightcleaners* forges a conscious link between issues of class and femininity, juxtaposing seemingly separate statements and images of exploitation and objectification that frame women’s activities within

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, “Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *The Nightcleaners*),” *Screen—Brecht and the Cinema/Film and Politics*. (Winter 1975/6): 105.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

conventional definitions of female attributes and behavior.⁷¹⁶ Here, according to the filmmakers and the discussion following the screening of *Nightcleaners* at the Edinburgh Brecht Event, the relevance of Brecht's work lies with the production of a specific kind of knowledge: the knowledge of the relation between experiences, struggles, and their representation. The film examines, "most importantly, the relationship between sexual oppression and class exploitation."⁷¹⁷ Sexuality—as a conventionally private experience reproduced by a public discourse, as a proletarian experience separated from the means of psychological, social, and economic production—is part of the block of real life articulated in *Nightcleaners*.

Sociality

Journeys' articulation of femininity as a complex, heterogeneous array of experiences and perspectives simultaneously complicates the idea of female violence and its representation in art and film. The social dimension of terrorist acts and of assassinations carried out under the auspices of revolutionary change are, on first glance, rather obvious (this type of violence, of physical acts against another, will be discussed below). Less apparent are the social and political motivations and consequences of suicide, commonly seen to be a personal tragedy, a private decision resulting from an individual's inability to cope. When a suicide does receive public attention, it is usually dealt with on an empathetic, emotional level, arousing feelings of compassion or anger (condemning the act as cowardly in light of the responsibility the deceased may have as a parent or

⁷¹⁶ "The discourse [of women's liberation] undergoes a linear development, from a position totally divorced from the struggle to a position where it assumes the position of the union... From isolated voice-off, this discourse gradually draws nearer to the focus of the struggle until finally, after a period of practical involvement, it emerges as the main organizational force." *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

spouse). Defining the “sociality of art,” Kelly calls for an investigation of “the institutions, which determine the reading of artistic texts and the strategies which would be appropriate for interventions.”⁷¹⁸

In this case then, how does Rainer articulate suicide within the canonical reading of personal escape or asocial behavior? What are the institutions that handle suicide in *Journeys*, and how does the film, as a medium within an institutional framework providing expectations regarding production and reception, handle it?

The majority of the film’s characters who discuss, contemplate, and actually take their own lives, are women. While women are traditionally inscribed as being domestic per se, Rainer, in presenting female experience as determined by multiple roles and identities, both private and public, undermines the canonical understanding of suicide as a domestic act. Also, suicide itself is shown as a response to various situations, ranging from the flight from the prospect of years of incarceration to the martyrdom of revolutionary struggle.⁷¹⁹ Furthermore, within this variety, many public, canonical expectations regarding suicidal motivations are questioned as the aforementioned martyrdom is not (as *Journeys* reminds its viewers, the scrolling text citing an example of German “counter-revolutionary” violence in 1968) reserved for Leftist fighters but equally applies to Right-wing radicals. In the case of 19th century Russian Socialist Sofia

⁷¹⁸ Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” 46.

⁷¹⁹ The former is presented in *Journeys* in form of a scrolling text informing the viewer about the suicide of Erwin Bachmann, who in 1968, as a consequence of his attempt to kill the leader of the German SDS, Rudi Dutschke, was sentenced to seven years hard labor in prison. The latter refers to the account of 19th century Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich and her attempt to assassinate Governor Trepov. Read out loud by “She,” Zasulich describes how she was captured after she fired a shot at the Governor and, despite being beaten, imprisoned, and facing certain death as a consequence of her action, felt invulnerable and elated: “Nothing at all could confuse me, annoy me, or tire me. Whatever was being thought up by those men, at that time conversing animatedly in another corner of the room, I would regard them calmly, from a distance they could not cross.”

Bardina, the decision to take her own life was caused not by her political fervor but, as the patient recalls in one of her sessions, due to her physical deterioration and loneliness.

Portraying suicide as an extreme form of asocial behavior, Rainer contextualizes it within the institution of psychoanalysis. Throughout the film, the patient (fig. 129), speaking in a monotonous, removed voice, appears to mimic the personal recollection of subjective emotional experience as the driving force for any and all behavioral motives. But she also contradicts the validity of the psychoanalytic sessions by preempting her therapists' responses. Turning her intimate, individual confessions into platitudes, she questions the authenticity of her own limited experience as well as the institution that seeks to resolve or even cure that experience's contradictions. Toward the end of the film, the session is intercut with shots of various "Apotheken" (pharmacies) in Berlin (fig. 130), conjuring associations of psychoanalysis with an industry of remedies that fight not the causes of an illness but its symptoms. *Journeys* ends with a letter from Meinhof to a friend wherein the terrorist contemplates psychoanalysis and "psychatrifcation," calling the latter "a device of psychological warfare" that seeks to reintegrate any deviation from the norms of bourgeois thinking back into a state of normality. Here, the institution of psychoanalysis seeks to cure any asocial behavior, including its extreme, suicide, by rerouting any individual digression back into a preconceived set of shared experiences. The patient resists such normalization, mocking psychoanalytic discourse and its very foundations—or at least the simplistic manner in which they are applied to produce experiential hegemony (fig. 131). At one point she exclaims, "My cunt is not a castrated cock!"

Rainer expands this critique of the public, institutionalized understanding of abnormal behavior to the institution of culture. The critique of psychoanalysis implies, by extension, a critique of structuralist, theoretical film and art. Discursive cinema is similarly presented as an abstract objectification of any block of real life that neglects to question the relation between personal, social, and political experience. *Journeys* explicitly addresses the bourgeois function of art, its ability to provide escape and harmony, a substitute experience of organic totality: scenes of the psychoanalytic session and Meinhof's condemnation of "psychiatrification" are juxtaposed with flute lessons (fig. 132). These lessons are set within an old-fashioned, very bourgeois apartment: stuffy, dark, and serene, a stoic place of etiquette and education, unwritten laws of individual behavior and perfected social conduct. Here, the great questions of the human condition are pondered while political opinionneering is best left at the door. Meinhof's contemplation of the limits of the Geneva Conventions is contrasted with the faint sounds of a woman trying to produce some sort of musical coherence from the wooden instrument. So when the terrorist reminds the recipient of her letter that, "if you're only reasoning on the level of bourgeois morality you'll soon run short of ammunition," the same can be said for the restrictions imposed by bourgeois art. Not harmony but disharmony or contradiction is what *Journeys* produces, its sociality consisting of presenting the varied ways by which suicide is caused and of enabling the viewers to participate in seeing in this disharmony a complex and incomplete, yet complementary social and historical, understanding of certain forms of female violence.⁷²⁰

⁷²⁰ Consistent with his reading of Rainer's work as art in the traditional sense, as a bourgeois, realist, autonomous form of contemplating reality, Noël Carroll in his 1980/81 interview with Rainer interprets the recorder lesson scene not in relation to the texts, images, and voice-overs it is juxtaposed with but by itself: "Ending with the recorder lesson suggested to me the idea that art could reconcile all the turmoil and

Suicide as a social and political phenomenon plays a prominent role in Brecht's only film *Kuhle Wampe or Who Does the World Belong To* (1932), a work Rainer saw when she lived in Berlin.⁷²¹ A comparison between *Journeys* and Brecht's film sheds light on the question to what degree Rainer's work is a Brechtian film. *Kuhle Wampe*, a complex and participatory presentation of working-class struggle in Germany at the beginning of the 1930s, is a good example of what an epic cinema could look like at the time.⁷²² Informed by the recently published excerpts of the "Expressionismusdebatte" between Brecht and Lukacs in the *New Left Review*, Stephen Heath makes the following argument for an epic cinema in an article published in *Screen* magazine in 1974:

confusion explored by the rest of the film. And this didn't just have to do with the fact that the scene was about learning a musical instrument but with the way that the scene was shot. It was very symmetrical, classic and the colors had an aura of serenity, peacefulness and friendliness. It seemed like a coda reassuring us that despite all the turbulence in the narrative (or narratives) there was still a realm of peace—Art." Yet, as if to say that there is no such easy reconciliation made available to the film's viewers, the artist reminds him that the recorder lesson is not how it ends: "Remember, however, that it is not the final shot; it is the penultimate shot. The last shot returns to a more sinister inequality with the quote from the head of the Federal Criminal Investigation Bureau in West Germany ['The aim of all enemies of the State is the deliberate creation of an opposing power over and against this State, or the denial of *the State's monopoly of force.*' Emphasis added by Rainer]." "Interview with a Woman Who..." 65–66.

⁷²¹ Conversation with the artist, February 20, 2007.

Kuhle Wampe was what Brecht called a "Collective Presentation," written by Brecht and the writer and member of the German Communist Party Ernst Ottwald and directed by Slatan Dudow, a Bulgarian-German director, a longtime collaborator of Brecht and playwright Erwin Piscator. The essay "Collective Presentation," originally written in 1932 and signed by Brecht, Ottwald, Dudow, the producers Georg Höllering and Robert Scharfenberg, and a lawyer by the name of Kaspar, is reprinted in *Screen—Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema* (Summer 1974): 43–44.

⁷²² Regarding the making of the film Brecht remarks, "The film *Kuhle Wampe* was made... under great material difficulties. Most of the visual material had to be shot under utmost speed, a quarter of the whole film in two days, for example." "A Fragment Written Around 1932," *Screen—Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema*, 45. Though most film historians and critics, writing in *Screen* and elsewhere, do not see *Kuhle Wampe* as Brecht's main contribution to a revolutionary cinema, they agree that given the limited time and budget for the film it provides an interesting study of the potential format of "Epic Film." For additional discussions and analysis regarding *Kuhle Wampe*, Brecht's work in film, his work in theater and prose as well as his theoretical and political writings, see Walsh, "The Complex Seer: Brecht and the Film" and Gersch, *Film bei Brecht* (the latter is considered to be, to this day, the most thorough analysis on the subject). Especially insightful here is James Pettifer's comparison between *Kuhle Wampe* and Phil Jutzi's 1929 film *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (*Mother Krausens' Journey to Happiness*. Even though *Mutter Krause* "can be said to show the misery of the people and that a political force exists, the KPD [German Communist Party], that is struggling to unite the people to overthrow the degraded world in which they live," Pettifer finds the film to be, in comparison to Brecht's, "ultimately reactionary, despite moving representations of the misery of the workers' lives, because the text is blocked at the point of a precise naturalism, of static reproduction of the given reality." "The Limits of Naturalism (on *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* and *Kuhle Wampe*)," *Screen—Brecht and the Cinema/Film and Politics*, 5–6.

What conventionally is now called realism... is in fact the reverse of a realism insofar as it denies any knowledge of production (and thus avoids any production of knowledge) via the tautology of reflection (denies itself outside of any relation other than that of a kind of imminent immediacy: “realism is the representation or reflection of reality”): appearance becomes the truth of a reality cleared—the work of the mirror—of all relations, of all process of production.⁷²³

In *Kuhle Wampe*, the suicide of a young worker is portrayed as the truth of a reality not cleared of but immersed in relations: the death of Bönike is shown in a montage of newspaper headlines announcing the drastic rise of unemployment, a number of young men racing their bicycles through the city in an attempt to outpedal one another in search of a day’s work (fig. 133), and the young worker in his family’s petty-bourgeois apartment (fig. 134), with his parents who desire to live a middle-class lifestyle but have

⁷²³ Stephen Heath, “From Brecht to Film: Thesis, Problems,” *Screen—Brecht and the Cinema/Film and Politics*, 35. *Kuhle Wampe* was widely discussed in *Screen*, especially in its two special issues on Brecht and Brechtian cinema: *Screen—Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema* (Summer 1974) and *Screen—Brecht and the Cinema/Film and Politics. Transcript of the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival Brecht Event* (Winter 1975/76). For the editors of *Screen*, Brecht’s dialectical approach to reality and realism informed the making of *Kuhle Wampe* but was applied much more thoroughly and successfully in his theater and his prose. See, for example, Colin MacCabe, “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Thesis,” *Screen—Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema*, 7–27 and James Pettifer, “Against the Stream: *Kuhle Wampe*,” *ibid.*, 49–64.

Texts central to the “Expressionismusdebatte,” which lasted from the mid-1930s until the ’50s, include the aforementioned Bertolt Brecht, “Against George Lukács,” *New Left Review* (March–April 1974): 39–53; Theodor Adorno, “Letters to Walter Benjamin,” *New Left Review* (September–October 1973): 55–80; and Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” *New Left Review* (November–December 1974): 75–89. Related text include Walter Benjamin, “Author as Producer,” *New Left Review* (July–August 1970): 83–96; Walter Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht,” *New Left Review* (January–February 1973): 51–57; Georg Lukács, “Thomas Mann,” *New Left Review* (July–August 1962): 76–87 and Georg Lukács, “Lukács On His Life and Work,” *New Left Review* (July–August 1971): 49–58. In this “Expressionismusdebatte,” Lukács argued for a realism that would “mirror objective reality.” He felt that capitalist reality was unitary, total, and continuous and that aesthetic forms such as collage and montage only mimicked the psychological and social effects of capitalism (alienation) rather than presenting the working class with a coherent and comprehensible understanding of reality as a whole. Lukács, “Realism in the Balance” (1938), reprinted in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate Within German Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), 43.

long since given themselves over to the dire times.⁷²⁴ Young Bönike carefully takes off his watch, then throws himself out the window (fig. 135).⁷²⁵ The suicide is, as in *Journeys*, portrayed as being not merely a personal, private event but a social and political one.⁷²⁶

In relating suicide to its context, and thus showing young Bönike's death in an epic, estranging rather than an empathetic manner, *Kuhle Wampe* speaks to the choice of living and thinking outside the bourgeois horizon of experience, its norms and values, pressures and expectations, which trap the young worker in the despairing race for social, economic, and psychological validation bestowed through the competition among individuals. As the patient in *Journeys* informs her analyst, "Suicide, then, can be seen as a failure of imagination, a failure to imagine what may lie outside one's own experience, a failure to imagine a world where conscious choice and effort might produce mutual respect between you and me." *Kuhle Wampe* continues by negotiating between different attitudes toward reality and between different spheres of social experience: It contrasts

⁷²⁴ The film's title is borrowed from the famous working-class commune located outside Berlin, a "utopia in miniature" founded in 1913. The second reel of the film takes the remaining members of the Bönike family to Kuhle Wampe after they have been evicted from their apartment. Pettifer, "Against the Stream: *Kuhle Wampe*," 59. Pettifer translates "Kuhle Wampe" as "a slang in German meaning, roughly, 'blown out,' or having had a stomach full of beer." Yet, "kuhle" also means "hole" or "pit," "wampe" being slang for "gut" or "belly." In light of Brecht's depiction of the working-class commune as an ideal that leaves much to be desired, a translation as "hollow gut" seems most interesting.

⁷²⁵ For a detailed description of the film and its historical context see Pettifer, "Against the Stream: *Kuhle Wampe*."

⁷²⁶ This is attested to by the censor's comments in a meeting between the filmmakers, their lawyer, and the government's representative prior to the original release of the film in 1932. The censor, whom Brecht describes as a "clever man," someone who "had penetrated far deeper into the substance of our artistic aims than our most well-wishing critics," said that in the "interest of the public" it was his obligation to point out that the representation of the suicide "does not seem to me *human* enough." He goes on, "The consequences [of the suicide] are of a *political* nature... Your film has the tendency to present suicide as typical, as a matter of not this or that (morbidly inclined) individual, but as the fate of a whole class!... The spectator hardly wants to stop him, so to speak, as it should happen in an artistic, human, warm-hearted presentation. Good God, the actor behaves just as if he was showing how to peel cucumbers!" Bertolt Brecht, "A Small Contribution to the Theme of Realism" (written sometime in the 1930s), *Screen—Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema*, 46–47.

the son's suicide with the passive and apathetic (ultimately represented by Brecht as bourgeois) manner of his parents and with the euphorically socialist mind-set of his sister and her Communist boyfriend. It juxtaposes two different public spheres and their institutions: the bourgeois public sphere as a seemingly neutral, yet compromised arena of experience wherein newspapers continuously reproduce a life of liberalism and competition.

In the filmmakers' depiction, the Kuhle Wampe commune provides an experience altogether different from the complexity of the "block of real life" as defined above. This rarefied sphere of official working-class culture—the music and the communal sports events and the notions of solidarity, optimism, and collectivism they seek to instill—reproduces the idealism, homogeneity, and false autonomy of the bourgeois public sphere. Life at Kuhle Wampe fails to live up to the party's model: the relationship between the daughter and her Communist boyfriend is, ultimately, directed by romantic middle-class clichés, and the spectacles presented at the workers' sports festival are contrasted with the comrades' asocial, drunk behavior at the couple's betrothal. Within the commune and its doctrines there is little room for the surplus fantasies and experiences that ought to supply the energy for true revolutionary change.

An alternative, a proletarian public sphere, is ultimately created by the film itself, contrasting the specific experiences of the Bönike family with the official spheres of prescriptive conduct, both bourgeois and proletarian. It allows the viewer to measure collective expectations against individual action, finding within the contradictions and ambiguities of this contrast a sense of reality that constantly negotiates between models and their possible application. It performs an intervention, then, between the ahistorical

stasis of timeless norms and values inscribed in bourgeois art and its reception and the operational time of the struggle of proletarian experience against the idealism posited by the bourgeois public sphere.⁷²⁷ Like *Journeys*, the film's form is defined by the juxtapositions of both the protagonists' and the viewer's expectations and experiences, thereby enabling a critical dialogue. This dialogue is public because it is not limited to private life but is rather engaged in matters of social concern. It is, according to Negt and Kluge's definition, proletarian because it transcends the bourgeois separation of private and public and because it has as its very subject the critical navigation of the dialectics of the ideal and the real.

Unlike *Journeys*, *Kuhle Wampe* actually portrays the kind of critical discourse it seeks to evoke. The last reel concludes with a discussion among workers and members of the lower middle class on the subway (fig. 136). Sparked by a newspaper article on the burning of large quantities of coffee in Brazil as a result of capitalist overproduction during the world economic crisis, the discussion not only establishes a truly critical exchange beyond exclusive definitions of public arenas but articulates the limits of experience as defined through the traditional bourgeois public sphere. The latter (embodied by the newspaper) presents a highly politically charged subject in an apparently autonomous and objective manner, leaving its constituency (exemplified by the middle-class men involved in the subway dialogue) with a consideration of the problems of overproduction on what film critic James Pettifer describes as "vague moral

⁷²⁷ Writing in *Screen*, film critic James Pettifer argues, "*Kuhle Wampe* is a demonstrative narrative and hence analytical." He continues, "*Kuhle Wampe* postulates an audience as a twice separated element, not merely distanced from empathetic affects in the orthodox way, but itself becoming separated by discussion within itself about questions raised in the film." Pettifer, "The Limits of Naturalism," 10.

grounds.”⁷²⁸ Brecht presents the severance of experience and politics even among the lower bourgeoisie as an incomplete block of real life, endorsed and perpetually reproduced by the bourgeois public sphere. The workers, on the other hand, understand the coffee burning as a problem and contradiction within the idealized structure of capitalism and its representation in the media. They also find and forge the direct causal relations between so-called private experience and public matters as in, for example, the darkly ironic coexistence of a worker’s suicide and the production of abundance, both part of the same economic and social crisis.

But, as has been pointed out on several occasions, *Kuhle Wampe* was made with a proletarian audience in mind.⁷²⁹ It aims to create a proletarian awareness beyond the confines of traditional class struggle and the identities inscribed therein. Brecht understands the proletarian public sphere not as a duplication of the bourgeois public sphere’s generalizing equality and idealism as adopted by a simplistic official workers’ culture, but as a critical, political exchange *within* the reality of competing experiences and opinions. And while *Journeys* seeks to establish a similar departure from preconceived notions of struggle and violence, identity and inequality, its audience is not the revolutionary masses, raising questions of historic specificity and historical awareness, materiality and materialism.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁷²⁹ See Pettifer, “The Limits of Naturalism”; Bernard Eisenschlitz, “Who Does the World Belong to? The Place of a Film,” *Screen—Special Number: Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema*, 65–73; and Gersch, *Film bei Brecht*.

Materiality

In *New German Critique* in 1977, Oskar Negt discusses the link between the steep rise of the suicide rate among young Germans caused by unemployment and the public understanding of terrorism.⁷³⁰ Negt argues that the Right and the conservative media, in an attempt to regain cultural hegemony after the political upheavals of the 1960s, portray terrorism as anarchic, destabilizing acts that aim to destroy the general social and economic order and thereby the individual citizen's pursuit of and right to happiness. "Happiness" is defined as the social and psychological validation of having a job. According to Negt, the media actively severs the historical ties between terrorism and the student movement, between the terrorists and their broad base of sympathizers among the German population. These sympathies result from the understanding of acts of terror as the ultimate failure of the traditional public sphere to provide an active, inclusive platform for critical dialogue and potential change, as a phenomenon that includes but is not confined to murder, individual frustration, and delusions of omnipotence. Instead the media reduces terrorism to being a cause of social and political dysfunction rather than its symptom.⁷³¹

Negt argues that this reduction directly undermined the ongoing efforts of the German student movement to unify workers and intellectuals, the need to ask "questions about meaning concerning work and alternative life-styles," to explore further notions of social and political change: "In order to exclude the possibility of unification between workers and intellectuals once and for all, there is no more opportune time than now to manufacture a clear connecting line of causality and sympathy between *terrorism* and

⁷³⁰ Negt, "Terrorism and the German State's Absorption of Conflict," 15–27.

⁷³¹ A similar argument has been made by Mayer, "The German October of 1977," 155–163.

areas of intellectual work, i.e., the work of lawyers, writers, clerics, social workers, artists, and university teachers.”⁷³² It is therefore of the utmost importance how terrorism is portrayed, historicized, and contextualized if we are to subvert the reactionary equation of progressive thought and social activism with violent attacks on individual rights and liberties.

Alexander Kluge and a number of other directors of the so-called New German Cinema take on this task in the collaborative film *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*) (1978)—a Brechtian *Lehrstück* about personal fears and social hopes, fairy tales and eyewitness news, the state of terror and the terror of the state. A brief discussion of this film in relation to Rainer’s provides further insight into the question of how *Journeys* is a Brechtian film and how it differs from the artist’s earlier work. *Deutschland im Herbst* is framed by the RAF’s murder of industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer and the deaths of the terrorists held at Stammheim prison in the fall of 1977.⁷³³ Rainer struggles with the representation of terrorism and violence as well, albeit from a self-consciously removed perspective: *Journeys* is not a contribution to the discourse about the place of terrorism in the German consciousness. It is rather a historical evaluation of political violence in a media-saturated society. The film shares her hopes and frustrations regarding the possibility for advances in raised social consciousness and activism in a

⁷³² Negt, “Terrorism and the German State’s Absorption of Conflict,” 18.

⁷³³ About his own exposure to Brecht, Kluge says, “Bert Brecht wrote two volumes of film scripts. We studied them and liked them very much. The interest in Brecht was very intensive in the early ’60s. Now people talk about him as if he were a classic poet, out of date. I don’t believe that. But his rationalism, this one part of his mind was then very popular. Not any more.” Kluge in Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere,” 51. For further discussion regarding Kluge’s proximity to Brecht and to the “project of modernity” in general see Peter Lutze, “Alexander Kluge und das Projekt der Moderne,” in Christian Schulte and Winfried Siebers (eds.), *Kluges Fernsehen: Alexander Kluges Kulturmagazine* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 11–38.

climate of renewed political and ideological fragmentation among the organized Left.⁷³⁴ *Journeys* the critical production of a proletarian public sphere caused by, and having as its subject, the failure of the traditional, bourgeois public sphere to provide and maintain a forum for the adequate and inclusive articulation of a certain historical moment and its multifaceted experience. The potential audience for Rainer's film is not, like Brecht's, the toiling masses as a revolutionary body. It is a proletarian audience in that it is, according to Negt and Kluge's aforementioned definition, separated from the means of production, from all restrictive productive capacities, including that of experience and history, values and identity. Like *Deutschland im Herbst* and Kluge's work in general, *Journeys* seeks to provide access to such production, to the material and materiality of historical representation. At the same time, a comparison to Kluge's contribution to filmmaking as a public endeavor shows the limits of Rainer's project of accessibility.⁷³⁵

According to Mary Kelly's definition, materiality concerns both the material of the artistic medium, in this case, film and its form, and the material conditions of social

⁷³⁴ By choosing a decidedly American perspective (embodied by the bohemian couple, the patient, and the girl reading from her diary, among others) on these German events, Rainer also avoids the problematic reception of the New German Cinema in the U.S. as either an exercise in filmic formalism or an entertainingly exotic glimpse into German life and soul, both draining the works of social and political impact. For an analysis of the reception of the New German Cinema in the U.S. see Eric Rentschler, "American Friends and the New German Cinema: Patterns of Reception," *New German Critique* (Fall 1981–Winter 1982): 7–35.

⁷³⁵ The reason for choosing *Deutschland im Herbst* as an example of New German Cinema to compare to *Journeys* is not only because it addresses similar subject matters (terrorism, suicide, post-1960s politics, and the politics of representation) but because, as film historian Miriam Hansen has shown, the film "served the function of a catalyzer." It challenged the young German directors' concept of "Autorenfilm" (the efforts to create an independent German film providing the director with absolute artistic and financial control rather than being dependent on state subsidies or the formulaic entertainment of commercial cinema) through a revision of the "Produktionspolitik" in favor of a politics of collaboration—collaboration between several directors and between filmmakers and audience. See Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*," *New German Critique* (Fall 1981–Winter 1982): 43.

experience.⁷³⁶ According to Negt and Kluge, to create a proletarian public sphere means to make both available to the audience: the materials and tools that shape experience and an understanding of how experience enables or limits the use of such tools. Recalling Brecht's famous demand to turn the radio apparatus into a device of communication rather than a monologous distribution of information, a 1973 study co-authored by Kluge goes so far as to rearticulate the potential relation between film and public as follows: "The concept of production not only includes the manufacturing of the film but also its exhibition and appropriation by the imagination of the spectator. One might even reverse this argument: it is the spectator who actually produces the film, as the film on screen sets in motion the film in the mind of the spectator."⁷³⁷

In order to create an arena for such filmic production on the part of the audience in *Journeys*, Rainer goes to great lengths not only to avoid visual and emotional clichés of suicide and terrorism but to put the production and operation of such clichés on view. The scrolling text that reappears on the screen at various points throughout the film questions the order of historical events as commonly rehearsed by the officially public German media: did the German state impose drastic measures of surveillance and suspensions of constitutionally guaranteed freedoms in response to terrorist organizations and their activities? Or was terrorism a misguided response to the monopolization of power in an economic and political system that appeared to support private enterprise under the guise of general, public access to its institutions? And while Rainer, like Negt, challenges the media's reductivist representation of violence and counter-violence, the

⁷³⁶ For a more detailed analysis of "materiality" in Kelly's art and writing, see Parker and Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism*, 107–108.

⁷³⁷ Michael Dost, Florian Hopf, and Alexander Kluge, *Filmwirtschaft in der BRD und in Europa: Götterdämmerung in Raten* (München: Hanser Verlag, 1973), cited in Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere," 39.

filmmaker is equally careful to avoid a complementary sentimentalization and romanticization of terrorism and its history.

In fact, *Journeys* articulates at various points an awareness of the production of idealized images of struggle. For example, the New York bohemian couple deliberates about the motivations and justifications of past and present acts of political violence, comparing Ulrike Meinhof to 19th century female Russian anarchists such as Vera Figner and Sofia Bardina. While the couple strains to grant the romantic authenticity of past revolutionary struggle to modern-day terrorists, the camera pans across the aforementioned mantelpiece (fig. 123). A token of bourgeois comfort, the mantel features among other things, black-and-white photographs of what the couple calls “Russian amazons” next to those of American movie stars like Rita Hayworth next to an image of Meinhof. The viewer is reminded of the pitfalls of nostalgia, of depoliticizing and dehistoricizing people and their actions, thereby rendering them impotent as historical models against which to critically measure potential contemporary political and artistic practice.

This historical distancing also implies Rainer’s awareness of the often-mythologized status of the historical avant-garde. As quoted above from the interview with Noël Carroll, the filmmaker seeks a critical dialogue with, rather than the mere appropriation of, Brechtian efforts of “ask[ing] the audience to be more mentally active”: there is no built-in revolution, no fixed utopia as often ascribed to pre-war art-activist momentum and dedication.⁷³⁸ Yet, Rainer admits to a revised political program: “But whether or not social change, i.e., revolution, is possible, *we must work as though it is*.

⁷³⁸ Carroll, “Interview with a Woman Who...,” 52.

And making things a little tough for you in my art is one small part of the work that must be done.”⁷³⁹ Like Brecht and like Kluge, Rainer aims to activate the viewer to put the pieces together, to connect one’s own desire for the comforts of nostalgic projection with the protagonists’ attempts to find psychological and political security in the authenticity of past heroic struggle, social and personal. She wants to have at least part of the film be produced inside the viewer’s head.

Another device employed by Rainer (and by Kluge in *Deutschland im Herbst*) is the direct juxtaposition of past and present film: toward the end of *Journeys* she stresses the relative historical and geographical distance of her own perspective on the German events. Rainer herself is seen on the screen reading an emotional letter to her mother about a movie she had just seen: Werner Hochbaum’s *Morgen Beginnt das Leben* (*Life Begins Tomorrow*) (1935). She describes it as a film directed in Berlin about Berlin, about a man recently released from prison and a woman looking for one another, running through the streets of the great German metropolis, filled with memories and past joys. The film provokes in Rainer a longing for the simplicity of pre-war life in Berlin, “a city ‘that is no more.’” This “tearful monologue” is contrasted with parts of the aforementioned letter by Ulrike Meinhof, condemning the state’s efforts at forcibly “psychiatrifying” its inmates.⁷⁴⁰ This juxtaposition draws an obvious connection between the empathetic effect of Hochbaum’s drama and *Journeys*’ own attempts to avoid presenting a somewhat dramatically exotic meditation on female suicide and violence: it draws attention to culture’s potentially “psychiatrifying” function and to Meinhof’s very real and unromantic experience of life behind bars. Rainer describes this juxtaposition as

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁴⁰ Script for *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, reprinted in Rich, et. al., *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, 168.

follows: “A contrast—and consequent separation—is made between Meinhof and me, between my emotionalism over a vicarious experience and Meinhof’s over the harsh reality of her own. Again the distance of the American ‘voyeur’ from the German events is stressed.”⁷⁴¹

It has long been Kluge’s project to provide an experience in cinema—the block of real life consisting of the relations between expectations as formulated in the public sphere and its media and the actual navigation of everyday circumstances. They are the kind of relations one finds articulated in *Journeys*, for example, between the image of Berlin as the ultimately modern pre-war metropolis and (as an intertitle reminds the viewer) as the city with the highest suicide rate in the world. Or between terrorism as an act of liberation, a gesture of defeat, a nostalgic idea of true struggle, as the bankruptcy of discourse, as murder, as threat to democracy or as its logical conclusion. In a 1986–87 interview, Kluge remarks, “*Öffentlichkeit* [a public sphere] without *Erfahrung* [experience]. That is the cinema today.”⁷⁴² In order to enable public experience in cinema, Kluge sought to change modes of production and distribution.⁷⁴³

One of those endeavors is *Deutschland im Herbst*, which the German press described as the most important film of its time.⁷⁴⁴ The film is a collaborative project of a

⁷⁴¹ Carroll, “Interview with a Woman Who...” 51.

⁷⁴² Kluge in Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere,” 29.

⁷⁴³ Kluge was one of the authors of the 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto, signed by 26 young German filmmakers and calling for an independent, non-commercial cinema that would give complete financial and artistic control and responsibility to the directors. While the Oberhausen group originally focused on changing the modes of production, it soon became apparent that cinematic distribution had to be altered as well. One of the “infantile disorders,” as Kluge calls them, of the New German Cinema had been its films’ isolation: “They were cut off from exchange with the rest of society.” *Ibid.*, 27. Kluge’s later work in television is partially a result of the attempt to address such initial shortcomings. For a history of the Oberhausen group as part of the New German Cinema see Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*.

⁷⁴⁴ Hans C. Blumenberg, “Deutschland im Herbst,” *Die Zeit* (11/1978): n.pag. My translation. A number of other films were made in response to the political crisis of the German Autumn, which was seen as being part of a greater problem: the inability of Germany to come to terms with its Nazi past. For many activists

number of German directors including, other than Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Katja Rupé, Edgar Reitz, and Volker Schlöndorff. Its subject is the infamous German Autumn of 1977: the assassination of Schleyer, the German anti-terror unit's successful recapturing of a hijacked Lufthansa plane in Mogadishu, and the mysterious deaths of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Esslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe. The events that threw the German nation into a chaotic mix of violence, fear, and hysteria are presented in terms of personal reactions of confusion and distrust, an interview with an imprisoned lawyer of the student movement, a Hollywood-esque drama about a suspicious young woman and a wounded, mysterious man, black-and-white footage of socialist rallies in 1920s Germany, and so on (figs. 137–140). As film historian Miriam Hansen has argued, “In close consultation with Kluge, Mainka-Jellinghaus [the editor] created an overall yet open structure, interweaving documentary and fictional passages, personal and impersonal points of view, historical perspectives and unresolved bewilderment in the present tense.”⁷⁴⁵ Much of the film bears Kluge's Brechtian signature: voice-over readings traditionally reserved for documentary filmmaking, non-synchronous soundtrack, intertitles—all of which do not merely complement but challenge and expand the images seen on the screen.

Deutschland im Herbst and Kluge's contribution to it form an arena that leaves space for intellectual work and imagination, space for the viewer to make references and

and intellectuals, the German state's authoritarianism and disregard of democratic freedoms during this time of social and ideological instability conjured up images and memories of a totalitarian regime that had never been adequately dealt with. The crisis of the German Autumn could therefore only be understood historically. One response to this need for historicity was Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *BRD-Triologie*, consisting of the films *Die Ehe der Maria Braun/The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), *Lola* (1981), and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss/Veronika Voss* (1982). For a discussion of *The Marriage of Maria Braun* in the context of the events of 1977 see Anton Kaes, “History, Fiction, Memory: Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*,” *Persistence of Vision* (1985): 52–60. See also Margarethe von Trotta's 1980 film *Die bleiernde Zeit/Marianne and Juliane*, discussed in E. Ann Kaplan, “Discourses of Terrorism, Feminism, and the Family in von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*,” *ibid*, 61–68.

⁷⁴⁵ Hansen, “Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*,” 46.

open up perspectives on the matters under scrutiny. Rather than streamlining personal fears and desires according to official public sentiments, the film encourages the viewer to actively think, to associate and dissociate the elements presented rather than consume representations. It provides a multidimensional way in which to comprehend and understand the block of real life and what kind of consequences to draw from such understanding. Kluge has referred to his work in film as a “Rätselkino”—“a cinema of riddles” that is neither arbitrary nor, when it comes to how the riddle is solved and what kind of conclusions can be drawn from it, demagogic.⁷⁴⁶ For Kluge, as for Brecht, the riddle (and with it, strategies of estrangement) is historically specific: “What I call a riddle in art is not really a riddle. It is a hidden reality... Something that is hidden for the moment should be respected. If I look at something and say that I understand what it is, then I should distrust this impression and look further. I will see something I did not see. If I were to see this thing again in five years, it will have a different appearance. This appearance was a riddle within what I saw before.”⁷⁴⁷

Similarly, *Journeys* presents a number of experiences and perspectives on a variety of forms of oppression—historical, social, and personal—and it also considers various ways of confronting such oppression. Yet Rainer does not solve the puzzle, does not arrange the elements to add up to a cohesive, plausible whole. The viewer is asked to participate in a critical debate concerning the possibilities and limits of political engagement. And by enabling such a discussion, *Journeys* avoids the problems of a postmodernist relativism: even though the parts may not add up, even though contradiction and ambiguities persist, the film does not merely mirror a sense of socio-

⁷⁴⁶ Kluge in Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere,” 49.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

psychological fragmentation. On the contrary, it shows that ideas and expectations, perspectives and actions are historically determined, have causes, that they develop according to the circumstances of their context, and, most importantly, that they in turn shape that context. To know the mechanisms of cultural and political production is an enablement: it is the creation of a possibility for change. For Kluge, the perspectives and experiences that constitute the riddle present the proletarian or “counter public sphere.”

But—and this is where I believe that Rainer’s film and her practice as a filmmaker falls short in comparison to Kluge’s—to establish a proletarian public sphere means not only to create the space for an intellectual production of experience. It also means to provide access to its distribution. Hansen calls *Deutschland im Herbst* a “catalyst for new directions in German cinema,” a “revision of the *Autorenkino* through a collective politics of production.”⁷⁴⁸ This collective production not only served as a model to younger filmmakers but further validated existing cooperative efforts and inspired alternative systems of distribution: as part of the Oberhausen revision of German cinema, Kluge and others had founded the *Ulm Institut für Filmgestaltung* in 1962, an independent institution for development and research in film and television based on what Kluge calls a model of “apprenticeship.”⁷⁴⁹ Hansen also points to “the building of an organizational substructure” in the German media landscape including various successful efforts at grassroots production such as the *Verband Deutscher Filmarbeiterinnen (Association of German Women Filmworkers)* (founded in 1979) and the parallel development of a distribution system for women’s film.⁷⁵⁰ Kluge furthermore

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁴⁹ Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere,” 34.

⁷⁵⁰ Hansen, “Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere,” 42.

expanded his practice into television and managed to secure primetime slots for shows produced by the company DCTP (*Development Company for Television Program*), founded by him and others in 1988.⁷⁵¹ Functioning as an independent agent between the German state television system and privately owned satellite channels, DCTP offers programs developed in cooperation with opera houses and book publishers, selected news print media and the BBC *within* the space of regular TV channels. Experimental forms of reportage and storytelling occupy spaces among the most generic sit-coms, sensationalist news magazines, and game shows. DCTP expands the proletarian public sphere by distributing participatory programming from within the confines of the production public sphere.

Rainer's audience and therefore her provision of a proletarian public sphere is limited. But within these limits, *Journeys* achieves an expansion of the social horizon of experience of those who see movies in an art or alternative setting. It puts on view, as it presents and analyzes, general notions of sexuality, sociality, and materiality. With *Journeys* Rainer manages to pry alternative filmmaking away from a private communication among individuals and from an overtly theoretical and structuralist exercise in self-perpetuating discursivity. In the process, she renegotiates the extremes of the role of women in political activism within a representational structure that still abides by the strict differentiation between the private and the public as distinct realms of action, meaning, and experience. Like Brecht, the artist uses familiar forms, images, and ideas in order to juxtapose and confront them, opening up a participatory space wherein an

⁷⁵¹ For a detailed discussion of this rather complicated insertion of independent television production into a strictly governed federal system that only recently (in the 1980s) permitted the existence of private media companies, as well as Kluge's role in shaping the legislature that mediates between the state TV system and private enterprise see Liebman, "On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere" and Schulte and Siebers (eds.), *Kluges Fernsehen*.

imagination to see, think, and act outside prescribed confines of experience is made possible.

CONCLUSION.

A Few Remarks on Brecht After 1980

The Brecht-effect of the 1960s and '70s reflects an evolving politicization of the American visual arts. As I have shown in the preceding chapters, this politicization was complex and often contradictory. Examining the work of Rosler, Haacke, and Rainer in the context of other forms of political and artistic commitment demonstrates the range of the quality of such commitment and presents important nuances in the production and function of works of protest and resistance, inclusion and participation. Though Brecht's work and strategies were implemented in different ways, the works discussed here all came out of the desire to create a Brechtian aesthetic: a truly political art, an active and pragmatically engaged way of seeing and forming the world.

If the 1960s were the years during which Brecht was rediscovered as a figure of resistance and an emblem of a political counter-culture, the '70s were the time when, in the visual arts, Brecht's strategies found their most nuanced application. It was during that period that Brecht's work was implemented as a method, a constant and critical reevaluation of artistic production. But the '70s were also a decade of political fragmentation among the Left, caused by what many perceived as the failure of the so-called 1968 Revolution and infighting within the movement.⁷⁵² In a sense, then, the 1980s were the true aftermath of the '60s, as the later decade lacked a universal Leftist program and transferred any utopian notions of broad social and political change to more

⁷⁵² See Todd Gitlin, "The Left, Lost in the Politics of Identity," *Harper's Magazine* (September 1993): 16–19.

specialized activist endeavors.⁷⁵³ During the '80s, Brecht's work was far less popular with artists and intellectuals. His name still appeared here and there but was rarely invoked as a model of how to reappropriate, and turn into weapons, the means of cultural production. Brecht became a relic of more radically promising times.⁷⁵⁴ After all, this decade is remembered for its conservative politics and for a conformist appetite for grandiose painting. The fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of the decade would provide the dramatic stage for Capitalism's victory over the crippled experience of Socialist reality.

But the '80s were also a period during which a Leftist intelligentsia formulated new types of cultural analyses and Public Art continued the legacy of 1960s art activism. The former took their cues from Theodor Adorno's "negative aesthetics" and Louis Althusser's dystopian tract on the "ideological state apparatuses."⁷⁵⁵ Artists and critics read Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson's account of the postmodern condition.⁷⁵⁶ But not many of them read Brecht. The journal *October*, founded in 1976 and without a doubt the most influential publication in "Art, Theory, Criticism, and Politics" throughout the

⁷⁵³ Art historian Martha Buskirk makes the following remark regarding the "micropolitics of the 1980s": "a division into people fighting not just for environmental issues, for example, but one specific environmental issue, because that's the way they felt they could make any actual dent—*there being no possibility for a broader, utopian gesture.*" Rosalind Krauss, et al., "The Reception of the Sixties," *October* (Summer 1994): 18. Emphasis added. It is important to point out that while Gitlin holds the Left itself accountable for abandoning a greater political agenda, Buskirk declares that there was no possibility for imagining and imaging social and cultural change. It is this defeatist attitude that characterizes most accounts of the '80s; such an attitude may be one of the reasons the reception of political postwar art has been, for the most part, marked by a formalist, negative critique.

⁷⁵⁴ See, for example, Brecht's scattered appearance in the essays collected by Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York and Boston: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and David R. Godine, 1984). Here, Brecht appears most prominently not in the writings of contemporary critics but in a reprint of Walter Benjamin's "The Author as Producer."

⁷⁵⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London and Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1984); Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1969), reprinted in *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

⁷⁵⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981) and *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983); Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* (July–August 1984): 59–92.

1980s and '90s, rarely made mention of Brecht.⁷⁵⁷ The Brecht-effect during those years could best be described as one of marginalization and, as addressed throughout this dissertation in examples of the writings of Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, formalization. In some cases, Brecht is evoked as a last glimmer of a utopian and proletarian aesthetic, a melancholic and sympathetic glance at the good old days.⁷⁵⁸ The much anticipated and discussed textbook *Art Since 1900*, recently published by the *October* editors, mentions Brecht a few times in passing, as a formative influence on Barthes or as one of the figures looked to by the New Left.⁷⁵⁹ But unlike Ludwig Wittgenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, Brecht is not assigned one of the special text boxes scattered throughout this survey, which highlight the important theoretical and intellectual influences on artistic production from “1945 to the present.” This omission is very telling and highly problematic.⁷⁶⁰

Brecht is also seldom mentioned in the writings of and around Public Artists such as Krzysztof Wodiczko and Judy Baca, Group Material and Gran Fury. Though many of

⁷⁵⁷ Not only is Brecht largely absent, but so are the more Brechtian artists (or, in Haacke’s case, his Brechtian dimension) of the 1960s and ’70s. For example, in a roundtable discussion on the reception of the 1960s, Haacke and Rainer are mentioned in passing and the art activist side of the decade is not even peripherally discussed. Instead, the conversation focuses on Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the influence of Duchamp. Krauss, et al., “The Reception of the Sixties,” 3–21.

⁷⁵⁸ Buchloh’s frequent references to Brecht in his essays from the 1980s and ’90s allude to Brecht as a historical figure of cunning insights and bygone political aspirations. See, for example, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000).

⁷⁵⁹ Hal Foster, et al. (eds.), *Art Since 1900. Volume 2: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004). This book elicited a number of critical responses, most prominently in the June 2006 issue of *Art Bulletin*, including reviews by Amelia Jones, Romy Golan, Pamela Lee, Geoffrey Batchen, and Robert Storr.

⁷⁶⁰ One of the problems is that this text presents the work of the artists discussed here as examples of an ascetic and defensive cultural resistance rather than a revolutionary modernism. Haacke’s work, for example, is cast as a reflection, rather than a transcendence, of the institutional boundaries of the so-called culture industry as his art “mimetically internalize[s] the order of the administrative world.” (Ibid., 557.) Rosler’s montages and documentary practice are said to be discursive meditations on the modernist either-or of “an activist, interventionist, agitprop approach” versus art’s containment within the “conventions and... frameworks that prevent them from ultimately attaining political efficacy.” (Ibid., 594.)

the works and manifestos produced by these artists have a decidedly political and activist bent, sharing Brecht's ideas of art as change and social action, avant-garde legacies were absorbed into Public Art practices and thinking rather than programmatically declared.⁷⁶¹ A generation of artists taught by Rosler, Haacke, and Rainer moved outside the art world's institutions, both literally and politically.⁷⁶² Maybe for these artists who created collaborative projects on homelessness and the diversity of ethnic foods, founded community galleries and public school art programs, Brecht appeared to be too much of a doctrinaire activist of the old guard. After all, Brecht never intended to take his theater out into the street, and he never ceased to see himself as a teacher. His work was intended not to integrate the few but to rouse the many. Brecht kept a small wooden donkey on his desk with a sign around its neck reading, "Even I must understand it." This general desire to educate was what made Brecht suspect to art world intellectuals and grass-root activists alike. Despite a more nuanced reception of Brechtian strategies in the '70s, Brecht was, yet again, sidelined as an old-fashioned modernist.

This simplified image of Brecht persists to this day. Recently featured prominently in *Artforum* as today's aesthetic-theoretical role model, French philosopher Jacques Rancière presents Brecht's Epic Theater as an antiquated tool of cultural enlightenment.⁷⁶³ He accuses Brechtian aesthetics of relying on an essentially binary ideological structure that posits the spectator against the actor, looking against knowing,

⁷⁶¹ For texts on and by Public Artists see, for example, Arlene Raven (ed.), *Art in the Public Interest: New Public Art in the 1980s* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989) and Nina Felshin (ed.), *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art in Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

⁷⁶² Doug Ashford of Group Material, for example, studied with both Haacke and Rosler at Cooper Union in New York. For an interesting discussion, including the inspirations and sources for Public Art during the 1980s and '90s, see Doug Ashford, et al., "A Conversation on Social Collaboration," *Art Journal* (Summer 2006): 58–83.

⁷⁶³ Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* (March 2007): 271–280.

passive consumption against active production. According to Rancière, Brecht wants the artist to be the “schoolmaster” while the viewer is the “ignorant pupil.”⁷⁶⁴ The problem, Rancière argues, is that “this equal transmission is predicated on a relation of inequality.” The result is “stultification” rather than emancipation.⁷⁶⁵

As I hope to have demonstrated in my look at the Brecht-effect of the 1960s and '70s, Brecht's dialectics must not be reduced to a simplistic model of pedagogics or a static idealist philosophy. In the art practices examined here, it is obvious that Brecht's work yields a method relying on a culture of dichotomies: of art versus life, self versus other, rational versus irrational, and many others. These opposites are taken merely as points of departure, as a reality that is not fixed but is nevertheless true in the sense that this structure has a social and psychological, political and ideological validity—it did, and still does, dominate our thinking and guide our everyday behavior. Therefore, as Brechtian works, Rosler's montages juxtapose domestic tranquility with a war abroad to expose that very structure and its mechanisms of exclusivity, of convenient categorization. Haacke's *Real Time Social Systems* confront the idealist autonomy of art and scientific thought with elements of economic power, articulating a system of dependencies formerly accepted as mutually exclusive. Rainer's later films interweave private and public experience, analyzing spheres of conduct and knowledge traditionally defined as separate. In all cases, they take into account and critically examine, not merely the so-called mainstream, but also the alternatives to it. The Brecht-effect develops in the application of its strategies, of what is familiar and what is no longer, of where estrangement has to take hold in order to produce the desired effect of re-cognition.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid., 274–275.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid., 275.

Neither in Brecht, nor in the artists presented here, are the dialectical relations between these opposites reconciled, since the aim of this art is not to provide a classically bourgeois idealizing function or infantilize its audience. The educational dimension lies with the works' contradictions and complexity: the viewer's participation resides within the demand to think and see the world differently and in the demand to check that which is presented against what one already knows.

We continue to live in a culture of binary thinking, and the "deconstruction" of this cognitive system needs to be an ongoing project. In that sense, we still live in a modern time, and a Brechtian, revolutionary modernism still provides a much-needed model for artistic analysis and production. As many artists today look to the 1960s and '70s for models of political engagement, the question remains whether or not the models they look to are still valid. The 2006 Whitney Biennial, for instance, featured an obvious example of artists looking back to the 1960s for an inspiration of how to create a politically engaged aesthetic, an art deeply involved with the pressing matters of our time. The *Peace Tower* (2006) (figs. 15, 16) was a direct descendent of the 1966 *Artists' Tower of Protest* (fig. 13), similarly creating a sign of communal expression, of solidarity with an international peace movement, and of resistance to the current politics of war. Or was this reincarnation an empty, nostalgic gesture toward a more euphoric and idealist time of protest? Constituted by similarly generalizing gestures of protest and as an expression of its organizers' hopes for peace, the new tower does seem more entertaining than productive. Nothing has changed. Decades of debates about the relation between art and politics, technique and tendency have seemingly been forgotten. For artists other than those whose work has long been involved with the continuous attempt to find an adequate

language of critical engagement (Rosler and Haacke did both contribute panels), the tower presents an opportunity for precisely what Susan Sontag called an artistic and political “reluctance for inconvenience” and a “devotion to personal safety.”⁷⁶⁶ It is a convenient possibility for political expression to the artist who does not want to mix his everyday work with politics and it is safe as one’s contribution is carried by one’s company and a cause that nobody could ever take issue with. While most reviewers’ applauded the artists’ political efforts precisely because they were political, *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight, without dismissing the artists’ intentions, addresses yet another safety feature of the new tower: “Rebuilt in the sculpture garden at the Whitney, where it pokes its head up to greet shoppers along Madison Avenue, the once-anarchic public sculpture is tamed like a goat in a petting zoo.”⁷⁶⁷

The binaries persist and a Brechtian art now, a practice that seeks true political engagement, needs to consider the following questions: What is the visual environment that art competes with now? What is the public sphere and what is art’s contribution to social experience? If art is to “jolt the complacent spectator,” where does one find the shockingly unexpected? If Brechtian works seek to estrange, what is the potentially familiar waiting to be defamiliarized?

⁷⁶⁶ As discussed in Chapter Two, Susan Sontag was among the original defenders of the 1966 tower (see footnote 47). Almost thirty years later, Sontag, in light of the war in Bosnia, looked at the legacy of intellectual and artistic protests. She writes, “If the intellectuals of the 1930s and the 1960s often showed themselves too gullible, too prone to appeals to idealism to take in what was really happening in certain beleaguered, newly radicalized society that they may or may not have visited (briefly), the morosely depoliticized intellectuals of today, with their cynicism always at the ready, their addiction to entertainment, their reluctance to inconvenience themselves for any cause, their devotion to personal safety, seem at least equally deplorable... All that makes sense is private life.” “‘There’ and ‘Here’: A Lament for Bosnia,” *The Nation* (December 15, 1995): 820.

⁷⁶⁷ Christopher Knight, “Biennial? Who Needs It? The Whitney’s National Survey Is Dull and Insignificant. Maybe It’s Time to Retire the Concept,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 22, 2006): E1. For other reviews see, for example, Michael Kimmelman, “Biennial 2006: Short on Pretty, Long on Collaboration,” *The New York Times* (March 3, 2006): 34 and Jerry Salz, “Biennial in Babylon,” *Village Voice* (March 1, 2006): 27. See also Jeffrey Kastner, “1000 Words—Peace Tower: Irving Petlin, Mark Di Suvero, and Rirkrit Tiravanija Revisit *The Artists’ Tower of Protest*, 1966,” *Artforum* (March 2006): 252–257.

In the end, Brechtian aesthetics continue to provide a roadmap for making an art that is dialectically situated within its environment—that articulates the ways in which we are imagining and imaging the world that we live in. The usefulness of these dialectics, the ability to situate the self historically in a process of reference and self-reference, of reflection and self-reflection, and to create from that historical positioning a basis for analysis, judgment, and action might just be a productive continuation of a necessary political project. If there is to be a return to the 1960s, then it is to this challenge that an art for and about the present should now address itself.

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