New Games:
Postmodernism After Contemporary Art

Pamela M. Lee

New Games

Pamela M. Lee's *New Games* revisits postmodernism in light of art history's more recent embrace of "the contemporary." What can the theories and practices associated with postmodernism tell us about the obsession with the contemporary in both the academy and the art world? In looking at work by Dara Birnbaum, Öyvind Fahlström, and Richard Serra, among others, Lee returns to Jean-François Lyotard's canonical text *The Postmodern Condition* as a means to understand more recent art-critical interests in interactivity, collectivism, and neo-liberalism. She reads Lyotard's well-known treatment of language games relative to the game theory associated with the Cold War and the rise of the information society. *New Games* asks readers to think critically about our recent past and the embattled state of our contemporary preoccupations.

With a critical introduction by Johanna Burton, *New Games* is the fourth volume in Routledge's series of short books on the theories of modernism by leading art historians on twentieth-century art and art criticism.

Pamela M. Lee is Professor of Art History in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University. She is the author of *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (1999) and *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (2004).

Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts
A book series from Routledge

James Elkins
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Vol. 1, James Elkins, *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*

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Vol. 3, Richard Shiff, *Doubt*

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with a foreword by Johanna Burton

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Series Preface

There is a gap in accounts of modern art. Some of the best historical work has been done by scholars who have not wanted to contribute to the large-scale questions of what modernism might be, or how nineteenth-century art might fit in the lineages that lead to postmodernism. That is one side of the gap. On the other is a common pedagogic literature intended to introduce modernism to beginning students; it is generally not written by the scholars whose work is central to the developing discipline, and it is not often cited. Between these two extremes there should be a kind of writing that is at once attentive to the grain of history and responsive to the different and often contentious accounts of modernism as a whole. Such writing is rare, for a variety of reasons—some of which are embedded in the ways modernism itself has been understood. So far there have only been a few exceptions, notably T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* and the multiply-authored *Art Since 1900*. Aside from those two enormous, contentious, and problematic texts there is almost nothing between the sides.

In this series major scholars in the field consider the shape of the twentieth century: its essential and marginal moments, its optimal narratives, the strengths and weaknesses of its self-descriptions. I hope that the series as a whole will be helpful for those who find, as I do, that it can be revealing to put a little pressure on the assumptions that are made in recent scholarship regarding what is or isn't crucial to an understanding of twentieth-century art. There is a growing literature, for example, on surrealism and its afterlife. In what ways does that scholarship imply that a version of surrealism is central to a description of some contemporary art? Or to take another example: How does cubism sit with accounts that rely on modernism's political aspirations? Where is Greenberg, his ghosts or avatars, in current historiography?

Large questions like these are the subject of this series. If we do not try to assemble the best theories, winnow the worst, and prepare a clear collation, then what does it mean to continue to write about art in an age of increasing pluralism? I hope it means more than playing in an era that is happily "after the history of art," in Arthur Danto's phrase.

I have mixed hopes for this series. On the one hand I doubt the ideas these authors set out will comprise a consensus, or even a satisfactory survey. On the other hand I believe that there is not an indefinitely large number of cogent, informed, and committed versions of how the century went: on the contrary,

I think only a handful of separate and simultaneous conversations sustain our sense of what modernism was, or is, and it is possible to gather and compare them.

A parallel might be made to physics here: physics turns on what are called GUTs (grand unified theories) and TOEs (theories of everything), in the sense that physicists work with those possibilities always in mind, so that the smallest theoretical demonstration or technical innovation gains significance by its potential connection to the literally larger questions. In the event, many things may happen before the small-scale result can ever effect its ideal theoretical impetus, but that does not vitiate the fact that in physics it is absolutely crucial that large-scale theories exist to drive local inquiries. Art history is different in many ways, not least in that art historians need not think of large-scale problems at all. Yet in art history reticence regarding larger problems is sometimes taken as a virtue, and that, I think, is questionable. It is as if the most prominent physicists—the Steven Weinbergs or the Stephen Hawkings—were silent about the basic laws of physics. Or as if the most active and creative physicists were committed to looking only at specialized phenomena, leaving the form of the physical world, and the direction of physics, to others as a matter of speculation. What I mean to suggest is that there is a point beyond which attention to the fine structure of historical events is no longer the necessary virtue of good historical work, but rather becomes a strategy

of avoidance that can threaten the coherence of the enterprise as a whole. In that sense "larger" questions are not unhelpfully large or irrelevantly large, as they tend to be taken to be, but crucially large.

The risks of avoiding going on the record about larger questions of twentieth-century art are nicely illustrated by a recent exchange involving the English critic Julian Bell, the American art historian Michael Fried, and the nineteenth-century German realist painter Adolf Menzel. In the London *Times Literary Supplement*, Bell reviewed Fried's book on Menzel, praising Fried's readings of individual works and his rigor, but remarking that it is unfortunate Fried chose not to connect this book, his first on a German artist, with his decades of work on the French tradition. How is Menzel linked, Bell wonders, to the sequences of French painters that Fried has studied in the past? How is modernism affected, if at all, by this alternate genealogy? They are good questions, hastily posed but essentially accurate. Menzel is not, cannot be, an isolated figure somehow beyond the streams of modernism, if only because the critical terms Fried has brought to bear on modernism figure throughout his book on Menzel, driving Fried's inquiries and informing his judgments. It is the aim of this series to provide a space where challenges like Bell's can be taken seriously without becoming either ephemeral polemics or floating generalizations of the sort most useful to first-year students.

The books in this series were originally lectures, each given on two successive evenings, at the University College Cork, Ireland, over a period of 3 years from 2004 to 2006. Each pair of lectures was followed by a seminar discussion, part of which is included in each book. The authors were encouraged to respond to previous efforts: the notion was that the series might grow to resemble a protracted exchange, in which each person has months or years to consider how to respond to what has been said. That speed seems entirely appropriate to a subject as intricate, and as prone to overly quick assertions, as this.

I wrote the first book in order to provide a preliminary survey of the field, although I avoided describing the work of the authors in the series. That absence should not be taken as a lack of interest (the opposite is true): it is meant to provide a fruitful starting place for meditations I hope will follow. Readers may begin the series with any book, but taken as a whole, and read in sequence, the series is intended as perhaps the world's slowest, and I hope best-pondered, conversation on modernism.

—J.E.

Foreword

Johanna Burton

In his preface to the series of books for which Pamela M. Lee's *New Games* serves as the penultimate volume, James Elkins describes a kind of aporia (one that while hardly solvable, must at very least be acknowledged, and even accounted for as structural in its effects). Modern art, Elkins argues, is most usually approached in one of two ways: by rigorous historians who burrow into the particularities of their objects, with little interest in investigating the impact of their findings on the larger, ever-evolving context in which these operate; or by more generalist endeavors (inherently understood as lower-level-pedagogical) that aim to deliver to students or "the public" coherent—and ostensibly objective—broad-stroke contours of the period via received notions of movements and ideas. Between these two poles, Elkins declares, there is urgent work to be done. Indeed, it is only by re-conceiving "master narratives" and "grand theories" that we can displace, paradoxically

enough through new attention to their details, those that have settled into privileged position—that we may place in question, that is to say, the record as it stands.

Dismantling master narratives by way of *other* master narratives is, as post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and feminism have suggested, counter-intuitive at best, and at worst reaffirms the logic and the form—if not the content—of what one aims to lay bare. Yet, as much as I agree with Audre Lorde's pointed, elegant summation of this particular understanding of institutional self-reflection—"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"—it does seem, as Elkins alludes, that the current state of art history at least has entered a period of high competency but strikingly low stakes.[1] While there is no deficit of well-conducted research, archival study is very often advanced without any correspondingly deep analysis—it is very often assumed to stand on its own. More strikingly even, I've lately heard the claim that interpretations do *damage*, securing singular readings for what are in truth multivalent events and objects. In that thinking, "theory" as such is rendered much more insidious than the self-satisfied "indiscriminate appeal" that Yve-Alain Bois warned against in 1993 (and which Lee details in her own introduction to this volume). It enacts the

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1   Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984), 110–113.

very shutting down of meaning, curtailing the very possibility for opening it might claim to facilitate. But whereas Bois was responding to the ways in which exploratory, risk-taking thinking was at that moment in the process of becoming instrumentalized into so much *doxa* (to borrow a word used often by his teacher, Roland Barthes), some 20 years later we must account for the ways in which totalizing appeals to the formal and the material might be less about finding any "object's specific exigency" (to borrow again from Lee's quotation of Bois) than about assuming a defensive crouch: a denial that "theory," this thing of the past, has any mainstay whatsoever.[2]

Without going too far down the path of ruminating on the role and disposition of "theory" today (something Lee herself touches upon nicely throughout the present volume), it does, I think, bear mention here if only because Elkins's prompt is literally—if not overtly—propped on, and works to undo, the false divide between things and their meanings, which is to say that the notion of master narratives may, today, be worth embracing, if only because we have been so disabused, for so

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2   See Lee, this volume, p. 22; Bois's important invective against "theoreticism," as Lee makes clear, acted as a corrective for blind rushes at "theory," what Lee calls a kind of widespread "promiscuous application." Such promiscuity, of course, still exists, and is most plentiful within the university and its extensions. What has changed is that it no longer produces much in the way of tension either inside or outside the institution; for those who use it, it's seen as used badly or well. For those (both in larger culture and even in some academic settings) who do not wish to engage "theory," it's easily enough discounted all together.

long, about their worthiness. If there was a time where students (myself included) learned, wide-eyed, that the hegemony of a Gardner's, the logic of a Museum of Modern Art, could be overturned—that, in fact there *were* women artists, artists of color, non-Western artists—today it's not hyperbolic to argue that the problem is perhaps somewhat turned on its head, with students actively seeking out stable narratives of some kind, trained as they are for deconstruction before even given an object to be destroyed. Perhaps to state that ours is an increasingly conservative, anti-intellectual context is hyperbolic; and in the face of a culture that would on the face of things seem anything but restrained, it's a claim that I'm sure will seem laughable to some as well. But it's worth testing this hypothesis (and within this series, I believe even called for) if only to give polemical contours for what it means to engage openly with questions of methodology. Indeed, to follow this line of thinking just for a moment more, one might argue it's the very absence of clear master narratives that, in fact, demands that we consider their potential current strength and numbers. In other words, when so little feels naturalized or hard-and-fast in art and culture, it's doubly crucial to examine all that has become normalized to the point of invisibility. That is to say, a master narrative that charts the end of master narratives is, perhaps, only the most powerful master narrative one can imagine.

Above, I used the phrase "object to be destroyed," and it's one that readers of Lee's work will immediately recognize. Her first book, published in 1999, takes this as its title, and traces the figure of Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist whose legacy survived via snippets of myth and biography but had not, until Lee's volume appeared, been accounted for in any depth within the art-historical canon. That this was the case was, for Lee, less of an omission based on circumstance but rather on incompatibility. How to give a comprehensive account of a practice with a seemingly inverted—or even fully abstracted—agenda? As Lee herself put it in the introduction for the book, "how does one approach an artist whose principle mode of production is bound up with the work's destruction?"[3] Yet, as she notes in the sentence that follows, such a question is itself already inflected with a logic that Matta-Clark outpaces. It presumes both "production" as a mode and "work" as an outcome, where, according to Lee's reading anyway, neither can or should be upheld as ways of considering this artist's practice. If we take Matta-Clark at his word, and his is a perpetual "unbuilding," as Lee asserts, then there can be no "production," and no "work" as we know it, either. In his best-known endeavors, such as *Splitting* from 1974, with which Lee begins her volume, one must necessarily reassess just where the art *exists*, if at all.

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3   Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), xiii.

If it is neither the derelict two-story house in Englewood, New Jersey, nor Matta-Clark's cutting of that house in two; neither the photographic documentation by which most of us know the piece, nor its hand-me-down existence via narratives such as Lee's, then how do we speak about it, let alone place it within a stable art-historical trajectory, no matter how radically refigured?[4] It is this problem that, in fact, compels Lee's writing of the book in the first place. And rather than try to wrangle Matta-Clark into operating within existing methodologies—even if only to upend them—she argues that the artist enacts and thus provokes a kind of ontological crisis, one that might result in asking us to rethink our own deeply-held paradigms (even, or perhaps especially, avant-garde paradigms).

Lee's argument for how best to read Matta-Clark was to move from notions of artistic "work" to those of "play," a term that not surprisingly ushered into her discussion figures including Henri Lefebvre and Georges Bataille, whose presences allow for considerations of social space and collective expenditure. But "play" also gives space for the ludic and the strategic, as well as for considerations of temporality, a major concern for Lee's work then as now. Notably, her subsequent

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4   One thinks here of Craig Owens's 1979 "Earthwords," an essay that succinctly addresses the "decentering" at the heart of works such as Robert Smithson's (and, differently, I would argue, Matta-Clark's), which cannot be located as or on *sites* but discursively. In Owens, *Beyond Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 40–51.

volume, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, would consider the extent to which the very experience of time was rendered increasingly opaque decades ago through the development of new technologies—prompting phenomenological shifts that would be registered in art-historical and artistic practices as diverse as those of Michael Fried (who sought to disparage temporality in art), Andy Warhol (who regularly distended and compressed it), and Carolee Schneemann (who contemplated its effects on the human body).[5] In retrospect, such willingness to consider art in tandem with writing on art makes it seem natural that the last chapter of *Object to be Destroyed* would itself have ruminated on the very problem of writing "contemporary art history," an account of the present as it becomes historical or, somewhat differently, an account that understands how the present is always already historical— or might yet be.

As you can surmise, I lay out some of Lee's direction in *Object to be Destroyed* in particular—rather than giving much of an overview of its content with regard to Matta-Clark— because while the book is, certainly, an account of the artist, and an attempt to place a practice within the context it informed but was often sidelined within, it is as much an effort in self-reflexively writing recent history. For as many historical

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

trajectories as Lee mapped, she opted to ignore so many others that might be considered "crucial" to another historian's mind.[6] Given her commitment, then, to a notion of "play," one looks back to *Object to be Destroyed* as a double-project, one that tried to historicize an artist whose practice wanted to be seen *otherwise*, while also accounting for the importance not only of attempting such accounts *anyway* but for making that difficulty itself a part of what is ultimately written. To that end, one thinks of *Object to be Destroyed* as enacting a methodological impossibility, and yet, there it is, a book that places Matta-Clark somewhat squarely even as it argues for the importance of remaining off-center.

But this is, in some ways, the best we can do, both as art historians and critics—or perhaps as art historians *and* critics (this distinction marking those in the field who practice in tandem, being of the belief that to write the present one needs ready-at-hand recourse to the past, and vice versa, and that neither are stable, even if they both produce real effects). To write, that is, with the knowledge that what we privilege, argue for, and teach are as much "unbuildings" (to use the term

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6   Kristine Stiles, for instance, in a review for caa.reviews, criticized Lee for, among other things, not attending to Matta-Clark's involvement with and participation in performance of the period; Stiles goes so far as to say that in so doing, Lee tells "only half of the story." See Stiles, "Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*," caa.reviews, August 23, 2000. Accessed at www.caareviews.org/reviews/350, December 22, 2011.

applied to Matta-Clarks) as "productive" discursive construc-
tions; that each "new" history, wittingly or no, reroutes—and
even places under erasure—what came before it. To make this
a conscious aspect of processes and practices of art history as
we evaluate and enact its inscription is, then, to necessarily make
competing and contingent *accounts* of art history part of—
indeed, central to—art history itself. To this end, and with Lee's
work in mind, I cannot help but gesture toward Juliet Mitchell's
invocation that we must view theory itself less as a "tool" than
as an object, and as an object to be stressed, tested, and even
abused. The strength of speculative ideas is not in their secure
status, but instead in their potential and in their precarity.
Appropriating Winnicott's terms, Mitchell argues that rather
than regard theory as something exterior, closed, or fully
commanding, one must *use* it, and in so doing test its limits,
take it to a breaking point. Rather than assuming its authority,
"theory" (presented somewhat monolithically, I think, as a
kind of affectionate—and expedient—caricature, in keeping
with the psychoanalytic assignment of roles), should be
regarded by she who wishes to engage it with the kind of
attention a cat gives a mouse: as deadly serious play, but as play
nonetheless.[7]

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7   See Juliet Mitchell, "Theory as an Object," *October* 113, Summer 2005, 27–38.

I've just conflated methodology with theory, and the two are, of course, hardly the same. But the point, I hope, stands: Lee's "object to be destroyed" describes not only something of Matta-Clark's hard-to-locate practice, but the kind of thinking requisite for making it visible within, and *as*, a historical framework. (To pick up another theoretical thread generated by the notion of play, here one might also recall a Derridean skirting of this Scylla-and-Charybdis of creating and dismantling histories, wherein the philosopher would famously claim that he never "destroyed" his object of scrutiny but rather sought to "situate" it.)[8]

And this is where, perhaps paradoxically seeming at first, Lee's response to Elkins's prompt comes in. The intellectual backdrop for Lee's inquiry—postmodernism—would hardly be fitting, on the face of it, to deliver anything resembling a grand narrative; Lee herself points to the now well-worn clichés that present postmodernism, in all its vicissitudes, as the ball-busting dissembler of not just "grand" narratives, but, even, narratives at all. To say nothing of the fact that Lee's investigation into postmodernism serves mainly as a platform grounding her discussion around a time period that takes even a further step

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8   See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," particularly the discussion following the paper, which was delivered October 21, 1966 at the International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. In Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–293.

away from the "modernism" that Elkins's books would ostensibly constellate. For if *New Games* investigates the discourse and dialogue of the 1970s and early 1980s (as well as bracketing the use value of such investigations of recent art history and theory), its deeper aim hinges on the nebulous phrase "the contemporary." It's a topic that's garnered a great deal of attention as of late, so much so as to already be feeling beleaguered. But for Lee this is something of the point: the exhaustion that accrues around current discussions of "contemporary art history" (Is it art history after all? What is its relationship to larger culture? Does one define contemporaneity as a period, a condition, a function, an ontology, as epistemic category?) can partially be explained by what she sees as a wholesale, and unwarranted, move away from postmodernism's key battles. Arguing that, by-and-large, postmodernism was pronounced obsolete (rendered irrelevant to its context or so fully subsumed by culture as to survive only as "style") too quickly, Lee ushers it back onto the field, positing aspects of its legacy as ur-history for this notion of "the contemporary" with which we grapple today.

As in earlier work, however, this is a reconsideration not necessarily meant to rectify erroneous accounts, that is to say, with an eye towards revision or correction in any strict sense. Lee's red thread—that which runs through *Object to be Destroyed*, *Chronophobia*, and now *New Games*—asks us to consider when certain events *are able* to occur and, further,

when those events can be recorded, registered, or revised. *New Games* divides among tasks: it reassesses postmodernism writ large, in part by considering long-held but not necessarily accurate tropes ascribed to it (i.e. postmodernism announces a shift whereby: temporality is displaced by undifferentiated space; collapses information and communication; and produces excessive connectivity). In re-evaluating these terms, and positing alternative trajectories (turning, again, to "play," Lee motivates an investigation into variations of early game theory read alongside artistic and theoretical practices including those of Dara Birnbaum, Richard Serra, and Öyvind Fahlström; Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Craig Owens), she simultaneously suggests that postmodernism is not only *unfinished* but that its urgency might only be becoming legible as we speak.[9]

To this end, the larger project of *New Games* might be said to be most overt in the blunt incompatibility of the terms it insists are deeply wed. Loathe to equate the then and the now, Lee nonetheless maps a kind of ghosting (Afghanistan is *not* Vietnam, but one does follow the other historically), whereby her account of, say, Serra's lesser-known *Prisoner's Dilemma* (a work modeled on a television game show), cannot help

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9   Legibility itself needing scrutiny, Lee is the recent author of one of the "100 Notes, 100 Thoughts," series of publications produced for Documenta 13, 2012. For her contribution, Lee takes up illegibility—the *unreadable*—as nonetheless constitutive: her assessment of Meyer Shapiro's "indecipherable" notes points to utilities beyond the frontal.

but be eerily, and impossibly, marked by today's climate and exigencies. But perhaps, as I note above, it's less the rhyming between details from the 1970s and today that matters; in fact, the tension produced between them is precisely what demands we pay new attention to a prehistory Lee claims has been too quickly relegated to the dustbin (a claim I confess to feel somewhat at odds with, since "the eighties"—itself a strange construction—is receiving more than its fair share of attention currently, and not only from Lee). As with her examination of Matta-Clark, the author's emphasis pursues the tangles between content and the frameworks that stand to hold them. Lee suggests that at the heart of some strains of postmodernist thought (as well as some strains of art history, some strains of game theory, some strains of artistic practice) one can find models "agonistic" in form, these providing the potential for resistance against what she calls "the terror that is consensus."[10]

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10 "It bears mentioning here that 'agonistics' is credited by Lee to Lyotard, who uses the term to describe the necessary foundation for productive interactions between social, political beings. Yet, as important, I think, is Chantal Mouffe's recent and much cited turn to 'agonism,' which in her construction works actively to unveil the machinations behind any illusion of 'consensus,' while also positing dissensus as a necessary precondition to radical democracy. It is striking to find only cursory mention of Mouffe in Lee's book, especially since there is discussion there of 'relational aesthetics,' that (pseudo?) movement that is nearly always linked to Claire Bishop (also cited only in a footnote), who herself leans heavily on Mouffe's work. I hesitate to include this comment, since Lee's lack of attention is clearly purposeful, but as Bishop's own use of Mouffe is itself incomplete (she fails to mention the philosopher's eventual dissatisfaction with an earlier concept of 'antagonism' and her subsequent shift to 'agonism,' an operation with less immediate recourse to violence), it seems an important enough omission to be marked. See Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

And it is against such terror that the book as a whole is levied. Against consensus that is unknowingly produced, assumed as the desired outcome, or lauded as privileged mode of collectivity. It is also, methodologically, against consensus with regard to the way art history and its attendant narratives are written, which is to say, it's a plea for art history as a battleground and not a bible. Lee's purview, within art history —her domain, so to speak—is typically portrayed via her abilities in tying together technology, temporality, and postminimal practices. Yet she should also be acknowledged as using those tropes as levers with which to pry open the meta-objects and master narratives she simultaneously pursues. The conclusion of *New Games* acts as a kind of salvo, asking that readers recommit to the battles of our not-distant past, re-engage with the prehistory of the contemporary, if only so the creeping "presentism" many of us fear is garnering hold can be held off another day.

Acknowledgments

This book has been some time in the making. My first thanks go to Jim Elkins for his invitation to contribute to the series "Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts" in the first place. Revisiting the subject of postmodernism and its historiography, I began to think more about the Cold War origins of neoliberal thought and their implications for contemporary art history and visual culture. So among other things, I'm grateful to Jim for this relatively circumscribed assignment and what it's occasioned in terms of longer research agendas. I also appreciate the work and efforts of the many editors and assistants at Routledge, Erica C. Wetter above all, and thank them for their patience, advice, criticism and encouragement.

I wish to acknowledge the participants in the online seminar —Jim, Suzanne Hudson, David Getsy and Michael Newman. Their interventions are universally sharp and provocative, and I've learned much from them. Though the online format was proposed in order to sidestep the inevitable contingencies that

arise when organizing such seminars in the "real" world, the exchange took far longer than anticipated so I'm especially grateful for the time and energy they devoted to the text, not to mention the unstinting rigor of their commentary.

When Jim asked me who I would like to write the foreword to *New Games*, the first name that sprang to mind was Johanna Burton, in part because (as a critic) her understanding of contemporary art is without peer; but also because (as an art historian) few scholars of her generation are as conversant in the historiography and theories of postmodernism as she is. I'm honored by Johanna's immensely thoughtful and fine-grained reading of my work and the time that she took from more pressing commitments to write her foreword.

The writing of this book started more than a few years back, during which time I've benefitted from the excellent, meticulous and timely work of three different research assistants, all graduate students in the art history program at Stanford University. Very kind thanks go to Karen Rapp, Jim Thomas and now, John Blakinger, who has seen this project to its conclusion.

Finally, in more ways than I care to admit, *New Games* might well be subtitled "childhood's end." I was myself a student when I first began reading about postmodernism in the 1980s, and seeing art in the galleries variously labeled "postmodernist." In keeping with the paradoxical spirit of

Introduction

Postmodernism: An Incomplete Project

Postmodernism: An Incomplete Project: For those even marginally conversant in the language of postmodernism, the title of this introduction could only read as parodic. More accurately, though, it is parasitic, for it hijacks the name of Jürgen Habermas's famous lecture of 1980, in which the philosopher defended the principles of communicative reason against the postmodern condition. Given this book's ostensible purpose —an argument about theories and histories of art since the 1960s—leading off with one of modernity's most insistent apologias seems an odd gambit indeed. For one thing, my ambition is far from mounting a critique of Habermas, at least not of the usual stripe. Habermas's lecture has been the object of sustained debate for the better part of three decades and I doubt I could do justice to the complexity of those conversations here. Yet to suggest that one could add anything new to these discussions, apart from the most summary analysis, is not merely a matter of hubris or lack thereof. Instead, to advance

a counter-argument to Habermas's thesis, one that calls for a renewed commitment to a rational society against all evidence that modernity is an otherwise "lost cause," would seem to ratify the very tenets postmodernism seeks to dismantle: to produce an anti-narrative of a narrative, an inverted reflection of its object of critique, the speculative grand narrative.

In pointing this out, I mean to flag the "incomplete project" that is postmodernism's relation to art history and theories of contemporary art by extension. At first the notion might seem to go against the grain of the seemingly retrospective character of the Routledge series, "Theories of Modernism and Post-modernism in the Visual Arts." In *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*, the opening salvo in the sequence, James Elkins proposes a "preliminary survey of the field"[1] and asks the most pressing question of our discipline: "If we do not try to assemble the best theories, winnow the worst, and prepare a clear collation, then what does it mean to continue to write art history in an age of increasing pluralism?"[2] By dint of this series's existence, the implicit response to this line of questioning is not only *must* we pursue such lines of inquiry as art historians but (and this assumption is critical) that we *can*. Let me suggest that the structural logic of postmodernism is such that a panoptic

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1   James Elkins, *Master Narratives and Their Discontents* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.
2   Elkins, *Master Narratives*, 2.

view of the field, much less a sense of totality or closure that would enable us to "assemble" a theory of contemporary art in the first place, is challenged by postmodernism's fitful relation to theory, first, and history, by extension. Perhaps these last two terms should be reversed. To borrow the phrasing common to a recent epoch of literary theory, postmodernism might in fact be "always already" unfinished, so that a diagnosis of this condition, however qualified, is but a *fait accompli*.

For his part, Elkins is admittedly sanguine about the prospects for the books such as this, conceding that he has "mixed hopes" for the series. As he sees it, "postmodernism" is one of four models or narratives deployed by art historians to evaluate the spectrum of twentieth-century art. At the beginning of his chapter on postmodernism, he acknowledges that much art historical literature on the topic is "preoccupied with the indefinability of the concept," even as he limits his discussion to two of its most insistent and nameable strains: the kind of "resistant" postmodernism he associates with the founding editors of the journal *October* (Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster) and the body of criticism that understands the concept in terms of a historical rupture, as advanced by thinkers as diverse as Arthur Danto and Leo Steinberg, among others. Both approaches are treated mostly as a larger confrontation with Clement Greenberg's modernism; both approaches, as

such, are seen as rejoinders to the pre-eminence of painting within twentieth-century art. One pole—the *October* pole—works to destabilize the terms of modernism, "a condition of resistance that can arise whenever modernist ideas take place."[3] The other "locates the moment of transition" between modernism and postmodernism within Pop art.[4] In short, Elkins provides a necessarily lean and schematic reading of postmodernism, and seemingly all the more so given the trope of "indefinability" introduced at the chapter's beginning.

Such an account could not be anything but attenuated. Like the other rubrics organizing his text ("modernism," "politics," "importance of skill") postmodernism occupies a plainly schizophrenic relation to the history of art and its criticism: it remains a notion at once so contentious *and* banal that it would be impossible to cover such ground in the context of the series's circumscribed format. The fabled eclecticism of the practices deemed "postmodern" seems to preclude such reduction as well. How to account for a "condition" that by turns accommodates the work of a Sherrie Levine, on the one hand, and a Julian Schnabel, on the other, both coming to represent vastly different positions on the scale of artistic authorship? Or how might one track the "Pictures Aesthetic" associated with Cindy Sherman and the like—artists championed for their

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3   Ibid., 89.
4   Ibid., 86.

critical relation to media—relative to the *retardataire* invest-
ments of Neo-Expressionism, still carrying the (ever-sputtering)
torch for a certain genre of painting? Or, looking to an earlier
moment, often seen by art historians as the historical "begin-
ning" of postmodernism and the arts, how does one treat the
intermedial experiments of a Rauschenberg relative to the pro-
cesses and thematics associated with the art of the 1980s?

For the historian attempting to make sense of it all, the
implications of this eclecticism are critical. The objects Stephen
Bann considers in his reflections on postmodernism—the work
of Jannis Kounellis, for instance—bear little resemblance to the
practices that concern me here; the painting glancingly
acknowledged by Elkins in his chapter on postmodernism
(Damien Hirst and Jonathan Borofsky among others) even less
so. That there is little sense as to what constitutes the proper
object of postmodernism means the historian needs to re-
evaluate the criteria with which one mounts a theory of its wide-
ranging phenomena. That, I take it, is one of the principle
motivations behind this series. Here criteria will be thought less
through conventions of aesthetic judgment than a set of rules
contracted in the service of an ever-shifting and often conflicted
game.

My choice of language is meant to dramatize the notion that
dissension and *dissensus*, rather then pluralism, might be a more
useful category of analysis for the study of postmodernism,

against which one typically posits the virtues of consensus championed by a Habermas. Critics have variously described a "critical" and a "reactionary" postmodernism, while others have clung to the notion of "pluralism" to encompass the range of its artistic and critical experiments. *The Pluralist Era* was the title of a popular sourcebook for undergraduates in the 1980s, and its overriding message was that postmodernism had freed us from the shackles of Greenbergian modernism to enjoy a wealth of heterogeneous new practices. No longer were we in thrall to the dictates of medium-specificity; no longer was formalism the methodological order of the day. (I hasten to add here, of course, that both Greenberg and formalism were grossly caricatured in far too many of these readings.) Pluralism suggested that we had been released from the stranglehold of aesthetic judgment, with its Kantian imprimatur still writ large, liberating a host of once verboten practices (figurative painting, craft-based work, installation art, photography, text, etc.) by an equally diverse body of makers long exiled from conversations about "high" art.

This may have sounded well and good on the face of things but the "pluralist" position raised as many questions as it answered. Hal Foster, among the most important theorists of postmodernism and the visual arts, astutely warned that pluralism was an alibi for the free market; Lyotard argued the "anything goes" approach to art was continuous with the

waning fortunes of critique. Revisiting "Against Pluralism," Foster's essay of 1982, I am taken by its prescience: it is uncanny with regards to what is now effectively called the global art world and all but recommends that we draw a more explicit relation between postmodernism and the processes of neoliberal globalization. Taking an oblique approach to the topic of theories of contemporary art, *New Games* tracks this issue through a surprising route: as a matter of Cold-War gaming, its technics and periodizing debates around the "end" of the Cold War in 1989. No small topic, this. My response to these questions is guided by a very recent phenomenon in the history of art and the art world—namely its preoccupation with the "contemporary" and its theorization. Indeed the collective and institutional fascination with all things contemporary is concomitant with the institutional waning of postmodernism and its assorted theories.

For now we need to acknowledge that such a vast and undifferentiated field—whether for something called "postmodernism" or "globalism"—resists anything resembling a tidy gestalt. Following Elkins, maybe this incoherence relieves us of the task of historiography, the impulse to historicity that he contends stultifies the discipline by effectively fetishizing the construction of the past. "Historiographic studies can decisively rework understandings of the past but do not affect the values that have been placed on art," he writes. "To do that, scholars

need to argue directly with past judgments and, ultimately, provide new ones that are more powerful and convincing."[5] There's something admirably Nietzschean to the exhortation: the notion that we muster the strength to forget the past. It's a fool's task to make claims for an exhaustive tract on the subject of postmodernism in any case, as if the thirty-plus years that separate its florescence from our contemporary moment were "enough" to grant the critical distance such analysis seemingly demands. Even still I hope to demonstrate that postmodernism's peculiar relation to temporality and history paradoxically demands such historiographic efforts, in spite or because of its dogged resistance to historicism. Such gestures necessarily affect the values we ascribe to certain spheres of contemporary art and a culture preoccupied with all things contemporary—one whose values are relentlessly *presentist* and founded on what Jean Baudrillard describes as "rituals of transparency."[6]

No doubt, the rhetorical habits that call for a study such as this one demand to be challenged on many fronts, betraying the metaphysical biases so much of its literature questions in the first instance. Because *New Games* is the penultimate installment in this series, part of my charge is to respond to

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5   Ibid., 152.
6   Jean Baudrillard, "Rituals of Transparency," in *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), 29–44.

observations made by Elkins, Bann and Richard Shiff. The challenge presumes both an exegetical and existential mode of engagement, at once summation, self-reflection and polemic. Since I have referred to postmodernism as an "incomplete" project, even this assignment—which might seem standard operating procedure within academia—must be similarly upheld to critical scrutiny. What would it mean, after all, to produce a reading of postmodernism that effectively trumps the positions that have come before: a reading that tacitly endorses a sense of telos in which postmodernism effectively trails in modernism's wake? What prejudices inhere in the construction of this implicitly triumphant narrative? And what claims to history does such an account likewise model, suggesting that some vestigial historicism still obtains in the qualifier "post"? In sum, wouldn't this version of postmodernism fly in the face of Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous shorthand: that the postmodern condition signals a crisis "in master narratives," whether God, the state, the proletariat or the Subject?

Posing such questions risks inviting the usual batch of caricatures attached to postmodernism, its bad rap as relentlessly playful, irritatingly circular, even decadent. The notion seems confirmed by the objects or "texts" associated with postmodernism as well. An iconic monument such as Michael Grave's Portland Building (1982), with its blue ribbon swags in concrete and its pasted-on pilasters, is regarded as an irreverent pastiche

of historical styles. A gesture of appropriation by Richard Prince or a Robert Longo, poaching from the stock house of mass-media images, can only fail to approximate the political urgency of a Hannah Höch or John Heartfield, the montage practices of the historical avant-garde. A work of art variously described as "simulationist" in the 1980s (think Allan McCollum, Haim Steinbach or Jeff Koons) might well raise problems of the Spectacle and commodity culture, but it is also regarded as spectacularly vulgar, either the triumph of kitsch or an art of cynical reason. As the clichés would have it, postmodernism has come to be equated with sheer meaninglessness: either it reduces to being pluralism in spiraling free fall (in which any position is up for grabs) or a cynicism about the stakes of critique (in which no position is).

In the following, I take seriously the claim, voiced by many seen as "insiders" to the postmodern "camp," that *there is no such thing as postmodernism proper*. Perhaps this sounds like yet another episode of nihilism parading as high theory but I would insist upon the strangely urgent tenor of such protests. Consider Jean Baudrillard's response to an interviewer, who queried the thinker about his status as "the high priest of postmodernism." As the author of among the most canonical texts associated with postmodernism, Baudrillard's vehemence is palpable, but hardly untypical for the gamut of those figures typically identified with such theory. "This reference to priesthood is out of place, I think," he begins . . .

> The first thing to say is that before one can talk about anyone being a high priest, one should ask whether postmodernism, the postmodern, has a meaning. It doesn't as far as I am concerned. It's an expression, a word which people use but which explains nothing. It's not even a concept. It's nothing at all.[7]

It's not easy to wish away the force of Baudrillard's response. The sense that postmodernism is "nothing at all" might well confirm the suspicion that the endgame it plays is an irredeemably nihilistic one. For our immediate purposes, Baudrillard's declaration throws down the gauntlet for those readings that would understand postmodernism as a kind of period style. In this particular interview, he will concede that it is within the realm of architecture that such readings might maintain (as well as a certain line of thinking that sees collage and montage as the formal analogue to the strategies of the *bricoleur*). But from his perspective, such readings seem "completely incorrect," sounding a cautionary note about the uses of postmodernism in theorizing the visual arts.

And this indeed brings us to a matter foundational to the Routledge series. On the one hand, Baudrillard's remarks seem to close around the question of indefinability Elkins raises. This problem is inextricable from the series's interrogative mode,

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7   Jean Baudrillard in Mike Gane, ed., *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews* (London: Routledge, 1993), 22.

specifically the issue of "theory" which serves as its ostensible raison d'être. But if "grand theories are over and done with,"[8] as Baudrillard observes in the same interview (in an explicit nod to Lyotard) it stands to reason that *no* theory will be adequate to Elkins's task: and that the assignment itself is premised on a misrecognition. This stance might seem to answer in advance —however negatively or unsatisfactorily—the call for a theory or theories that justify the existence of this series in the first place.

We need consider Elkins's proposal in greater detail. "Why are there so few theories in art historical literature to account for the history of twentieth century art?" he writes in the preface to *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*. "Much of art writing has precious little to do with anything as formative or ambitious as theories."[9] By theory, Elkins refers not to the virtual marketplace of ideas applied to local art historical investigations but rather something more global, of the order of a Grand Unified Theory, a theory of everything. The reference, of course, is to Einstein and the dream of a unified field. As Elkins writes:

> Physics turns on what are called GUTs (grand unified theories) and
> TOEs (theories of everything), in the sense that physicists work with

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8   *Baudrillard Live*, 23.
9   Elkins, *Master Narratives*, 33.

those possibilities always in mind, so that the smallest theoretical demonstration or technical innovation gains significance by its potential connection to the literally larger questions. In the event, many things may happen to physics before the small-scale result can ever effect its ideal theoretical impetus, but that does not vitiate the fact that in physics, it is absolutely crucial that large-scale theories exist to drive local inquiries. Art history is different in many ways, not least in that art historians need not think of large-scale problems at all. Yet in art history, reticence regarding larger problems is sometimes taken as a virtue, and that, I think, is questionable.[10]

Throughout this book, I want to put pressure on this notion of a "large-scale" theory relative to postmodernism and contemporary art, and not only because of postmodernism's de facto skepticism towards master narratives. In point of fact, it will be at the level of something like a *small-scale* theory—and a local move in a game—that a theory of contemporary art such as postmodernism will be most decisively articulated, one that admits to a peculiar alternation between contingency *and* totality. Lyotard might describe this theory relative to a "local determinism," a notion that captures something of that alternation: an atomistic approach continuous with the uses of knowledge in computerized societies.

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10   Ibid., 3.

Elkin's reference to a model from the sciences has to be levied against the "report on knowledge"—specifically scientific knowledge—elaborated by Lyotard in one of the canonical texts of this epoch: *The Postmodern Condition*. The essay enjoys a strange place within Lyotard's oeuvre—strange because it is considered by his best readers as secondary to works such as *The Differend* or *Libidinal Economy*. All reports suggest Lyotard regarded it in like terms, a bit of a one-off, a paid assignment or even a throwaway.[11] I won't argue otherwise, but for art historians at least it is by far his most widely read contribution. Written on the occasion of a "report" presented to the Conseils des Universités of the provincial government in Québec, it fundamentally concerns itself with the status of knowledge in computerized societies, where "the question of knowledge," as he puts it, "is now more than ever a question of government." This is a crisis of legitimation that is especially of concern in the sciences. "Modern" as Lyotard notes,

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11 In his most important work, *The Differend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and the series of conversations with Jean-Loup Thebaud published as *Just Gaming* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), Lyotard expands upon the fuller implications of the language-game and the "heterogeneous genres of discourse" through the *differend:* the condition in which "phrases in dispute" produce a new philosophy for conceiving of politics. A conversation with Thierry de Duve (February 21, 2009, Getty Research Institute) regarding Lyotard's Kantianism suggests the marginal status Lyotard assigned *The Postmodern Condition* due to its being a commissioned text for the Canadian government. Be that as it may, it does not disqualify the importance of this text within debates on postmodernism and its peculiar reception in art history; arguably, Lyotard has provided the reader with a shorthand for what is later elaborated in *The Differend.*

means any science that legitimates itself with references to a metadiscourse of this kind, making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.[12]

At once borrowing from Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language games and theories of the speech-act elaborated by J. L. Austin and John Searle, Lyotard will further describe the status of contemporary knowledge relative to its *performativity*: the efficiency of knowledge as an "informational commodity."[13] "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold," Lyotard writes, " . . . consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange."[14]

   Nothing about this is an empty abstraction. On a local level, the rationalization of knowledge as information—as so much fodder for the market—has a decisive effect on what we do as art historians and how we proceed in the most seemingly mundane fashion. Those of us who teach see the impact of such conditions daily in the folding of departments; the "extinction" of entire disciplines; and the administrative hand-wringing over course enrollment. Graduate students in the humanities survey

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12   Lyotard, xxiii.
13   Ibid., 5.
14   Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 4.

their diminishing job prospects with inversely proportionate anxiety. Even matters as apparently trivial as the content of this book participate in this logic of exchange and dissemination. A casual reader dipping in and out of its pages might be struck by an imbalance between the art historians and critics surveyed as opposed the work of critical theorists, sociologists and philosophers: the names Jameson, Lyotard and Baudrillard no doubt appear with much greater frequency, or at least greater stress, than many art historians who have taken up the mantle of postmodernism in their own work. While one hardly needs to justify their inclusion in such proceedings, I will say that the tendency to consult thinkers outside art history proper is symptomatic of the very phenomena I analyze. The progressively contested status of knowledge in computerized societies is concomitant with the interdisciplinary impulses of the Cold-War university, which in seeking points of tangency between formerly discrete research areas, proposed a networked model of pedagogy indebted to the Cold War think tank, cybernetics and systems theory.[15] Lyotard himself weighs in on the topic: "The idea of an interdisciplinary approach is specific

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15 See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand and the Whole Earth Network* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 25. Turner leans on Peter Galison's notion of "contact languages" and Geoffrey Bowkers's analysis of "legitimacy exchange" to describe the ways in which the operational research of the Cold War—and cognate methods drawn from systems theory—sponsored such disciplinary crossings, paving the way for what we now wholly accept as "interdisciplinary" approaches to art and visual culture.

to the age of delegitimation and its hurried empiricism," he writes, "the relation to knowledge is not articulated in terms of the realization of the life of the spirit or the emancipation of humanity but in terms of the users of a complex conceptual and material machinery and those who benefit from its performance capabilities."[16]

The question that necessarily follows is: Who benefits from knowledge's "performance capabilities"? If Lyotard argued that governments are more and more treated as factors of "opacity and noise" in the game of information that is postmodernism, he also insinuates that the veritable deregulation of knowledge is wholly consistent with the rise of "post-Keynesianism" after the war. This is to say that some 30 years after the fact of its English-language translation, Lyotard's report proves remarkably durable with respect to the politics of the contemporary university, perhaps no more so than in the debates concerning the continued relevance of the humanities and the virtual liberalizing of disciplines under the sign of interdisciplinarity.

Where art is the principle topic, and where art history and criticism both models its practices and is in its train, that can only suggest a very different approach to theory, a "new game" as I call it. *Just Gaming* is the title of another important work by Lyotard, an extended conversation between himself and Jean-

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16   Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 52.

Loup Thébaud that confronts the problems of ethics and justice
in society when submitted to the terms of contemporary
language games and the end of master narratives. The dynamics
of the game, its theorization and history, are pervasive to the
literature and art of postmodernism, and from corners and
parties both diverse and unexpected (to take just one example,
the exhibition and catalogue "Endgame," with its nod to chess
and Samuel Beckett both, stands as an important touch-
stone[17]). Such parties, we shall see, represent equal but opposite
sides of the ideological coin. Through their peculiar itera-
tion of a theory of games, they will answer to Elkins's call for
such a "large-scale" theoretical model, but one that relentlessly
negotiates the distance between local considerations for art
history and the ever rapacious consumption of knowledge (or
rather, *information*) that seemingly characterizes the postmodern
"epoch."

   Some additional words on the question of "theory" are in
order. It is true that, at this late date, "theory" might appear a
foregone conclusion for what we do as art historians. A précis
on the topic, crude though it is, might read like this: When
something called the "New Art History" emerged in the late
1970s and early 1980s (a moment more or less continuous with

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17   The show was organized by Elizabeth Sussman and David Joselit at the ICA, Boston in
     1986; its catalogue contained essays by Yve-Alain Bois, Thomas Crow, Hal Foster, Bob
     Riley and the two curators.

postmodernism's appearance in the criticism of the visual arts) its "newness" seemed largely a function of theoretical models imported from elsewhere: psychoanalysis, feminism, post-structuralism, new historicism or some combination thereof. The fantasy of some kind of direct transmission, in which a putatively moribund discipline (the "old" art history) is revived by the injection of something outside it, makes any number of assumptions about "theory" as a category unto itself. When students of art history began to read about postmodernism in the 1980s, it was (presumably) par for the course that not only would they encounter the critics, artists and historians advancing its claims for recent art (and here, the list would have to include Krauss, Foster, Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp and the many other authors associated with *October*) but a consortium of French thinkers generically identified as post-structuralist: Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze. Never mind the methodological chasms separating an Althusser, say, from a Derrida; a Lyotard from a Foucault; and never mind the distinct changes in each thinker's own intellectual pursuits and temperaments over the course of their respective careers. Never mind that a Foucault, and, as we have seen, a Baudrillard, chafed at the very notion of postmodernism. The unofficial line on this phenomenon, at least within the professionalized realm of academic art history, is that one would need to "have" theory

(predictably French in its accent) to be truly responsible to the discipline.

There are too many reasons why this account should give pause, not least of which have to do with marked shifts in university culture within the last decade. One should remain skeptical about the notion that theory is a moot point for art history because the recent fortunes of academia (to say little of the culture more generally) would suggest otherwise. You could hardly quantify a resurgent positivist turn within the field, but there seems to me a strange unease about theory that is, in some ways, continuous with both the celebratory and anxious tenor of discussions around contemporary art that have more and more taken place within the university. The death of Jacques Derrida provides a particularly dispiriting case study in this regard. When the philosopher whose name was synonymous with deconstruction passed away in the fall of 2004, a virtual chorus lambasting his work in the mainstream media drowned out the scattered encomiums. An especially hostile obituary in the *New York Times* made plain the deeply anti-intellectual current of this recent moment, with the collective suspicion toward "theory" its indelible signature.[18]

But beyond such anti-intellectualism, one would also want to issue a challenge from the other side: namely, to the notion

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18   Jonathan Kandall, "Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies at 74," Obituaries, *New York Times*, October 10, 2004.

that a *theory* of postmodernism presents its own seemingly insurmountable formal problem. As Fredric Jameson describes it, the oppositional character of much writing on post-modernism only confirms, by a dialectical swerve, the values of modernism it putatively seeks to diagnose. Hence, so these readings might go, postmodernism falls into the Hegelian trap of sublation, a model it would all but seem to have bypassed. Jameson identifies a comparable tendency in Lyotard's reading when he observes that "the disappearance of master narratives itself had to be couched in narrative form."[19]

Significant pedagogical consequences come with this recognition, which I can illustrate with a personal anecdote. Back when I was in graduate school in the early 1990s study-ing *modernism* (*nobody* went to graduate school to study "contemporary art history") my advisor, Yve-Alain Bois, took postmodernism to be a non-starter and the category of "theory" as even less compelling. That might sound strange coming from a former student of Roland Barthes, not to mention the way Elkins represents his work in *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*. (Elkins effectively reads the thesis of *Formless: A User's Guide*, a text Bois co-authored with Rosalind Krauss, as paradigmatic of art history's postmodern turn.)[20] Yet to Bois's way of thinking, that odd word "theory" too often

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19   Jameson, "Foreword", in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, xi.
20   See Elkins, *Master Narratives*, 61–68.

presented a stumbling block for the historian's endeavor;
and the theoretical catch-all of postmodernism (along with
"post-structuralism") was the most potentially distracting or
even damaging to one's intellectual formation. It was not theory
as such that bothered Bois but rather its promiscuous appli-
cation: he cautioned against "the indiscriminate appeal to theory
as a set of ready-made tools to handle a question" that he
regarded as counterproductive to genuine scholarly inquiry.[21]
Calling this tendency "theoreticism"—"the obligation to be
'theoretical,'" he writes

> The relationship of theoreticism to theory is purely instrumental, and
> I would argue that such an instrumentalism cannot be productive. In
> fact, the first lesson to be learned from one of the theoreticians most
> likely to be invoked by the theoreticists, Roland Barthes, is that one
> does not "apply" a theory; that concepts must be forged from the object
> of one's inquiry or imported according to that object's specific exigency;
> and that the main theoretical act is to define this object, and not the
> other way around.[22]

For Bois, students did not simply learn theory as an isolated
topic of art-historical instruction, alienated from the material
and historical phenomena upon which it was imagined to

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21   Yve-Alain Bois, "Resisting Blackmail," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,
     1993), xii.
22   Ibid.

alight. To instrumentalize theory in this fashion was a symptom of intellectual blackmail, a concession to the demands of the university's market.[23]

Perhaps these remarks will not sit easily within certain art-historical circles, who might think that Bois, as one of the figures associated with *October*, stands for a kind of hegemonic front (a "mafia" to its naysayers) *especially* in terms of postmodernism and theory. These detractors might well charge Bois with the same intellectual blackmail against which he mounts his argument. I have commented upon such accusations before and I don't have much to add here to what I see largely as a pseudo-debate.[24] (For the record, let me just say that I find such positions regrettable.) Nonetheless, I raise Bois's point at this juncture to signal one of the methodological assumptions underlying the ambition of this series: that some theory, or set of theories, can indeed serve the work of art-historical totalization; and that such a theory can be applied in a way that it is the equivalent to a "grand unified theory" that might cover all the pedagogical bases, from the textbook industry to the work of the specialist. If this is criteria for mounting a working

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23 Ibid.

24 See my review of Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005) in *Art Bulletin*, College Art Association, vol. 84, no. 2 (June 2002), 392–396. For a reactionary review, see Eric Gibson, "At the Altar of the Obscure: 'Art Since 1900' is a history so skewed as to be nearly useless," *Wall Street Journal,* Friday, March 11, 2005.

theory of postmodernism, Bois's appeal to the "object's specific exigency" might seem, at least to his critics, hopelessly eclectic. Ironically, it might conjure for them a kind of crypto-pluralism, the very condition that Foster long ago diagnosed relative to postmodernism.

At the very least, this methodological tug-of-war forces the question in a crude way: How do you distinguish a theory of everything from a master narrative? A methodology from a theoretical straitjacket? In Richard Shiff's contribution to this series, *Doubt*, C. S. Peirce provides philosophical ballast and pragmatic justification for an approach to art history that Rosie Bennett describes as "experiential." Doubt and belief are not opposed, but, coterminous; doubt is not distrust but a means to challenge foundationally those categories and processes by which art history constructs itself. As Shiff writes in his introduction, "To believe and to doubt with neither more nor less than a beneficial quotient of self-doubt becomes a useful psychological skill, an intuitive self discipline."[25]

"Doubt" will take on other resonances within *New Games*, which approaches Elkins's assignment of seizing on a "grand unified theory" in a deliberately idiosyncratic fashion. It is, most certainly, *not* a history of postmodernism and the visual arts nor a survey of contemporary art theory after 1968 as such, although

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25 Richard Shiff, *Doubt* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 19.

it will address all of these matters obliquely. To the particular subject of "contemporary art history," or histories aligned with postmodernism's appearance in the art worlds of the 1970s and 1980s, there are now many books, exhibitions and dissertations in progress answering the call for a rigorously historical account of the "epoch." My ambition, rather, is to provide a way to think of a "large-scale" theory within postmodernism that is consistent with postmodernism's very rejection of master narratives, something like an economy of scale where theory is concerned.

In Chapter 1, I consider a rubric typically seen as secondary to the postmodern condition—temporality—through a peculiar, even counter-intuitive, demonstration of historiography. In "Postmodernism after 'The Contemporary,'" I restate the problem of time for postmodernism in light of the received wisdom that postmodernism announces an eclipse of temporality, Jameson's famous "waning of historical affect." I do so to complicate the recent rush within art history to the phenomenon generically known as "the contemporary": the institutional embrace of contemporary art by the academy and all that this implies for questions of the contemporary art market and the art world. Somewhere along the way, we have abandoned postmodernism in all its theoretical (and ideological) diversity. The question this prompts me to ask is blunt: How do we account for postmodernism *after* the fact of the

"contemporary," particularly given the anti-historicist interests so much of its criticism addressed?

To privilege the issue of time in postmodernism might not seem a logical point of entry into such debates. In his formative statement on the cultural logic of late capitalism, Jameson considers the incursion of Spectacle as continuous with a crisis in historicity: "The new spatial logic of the simulacrum," he writes, "can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be called historical time."[26] Following on such observations, more often than not, postmodernism is treated with regards to new spatial configurations, a certain depthlessness, flatness or collapse of distance that found its principle correspondence in the architecture of the 1970s and 1980s. To follow Jameson again, this architecture "randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in over-stimulating ensembles."[27] Apart from architecture, this spatial turn has been seen everywhere—and elsewhere—in the global re-imaginings of the former nation-state; the emergence of new critical geographies; the implosion of distance that takes place in cyberspace and virtual worlds; and the colonization by Spectacle of the farthest reaches of everyday life. The

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26 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 18.

27 Ibid., 19.

explanatory power of these linked spatial paradigms has seemingly rendered the other half of the Kantian equation—time—less an object of critical speculation. Modernism, as it might be glossed, equals time—the headlong march and accelerated pace of Ezra Pound's call to "make it new"—whereas postmodernism, with its blank-faced CPUS, labyrinthine networks and winking architectural facades, heralds a new order of space.

But if postmodernism is understood as a "crisis in historicity" at this point we would do well to revisit the processes effecting that crisis and mine the historical residuum for other signs of this fallout nearly three decades after the fact. We need to stress a differential relation to time, one baldly engaging the uneven temporalities that course throughout the art-historical literature on postmodernism. We need to chart the variable tempos of repetition, recursion, speed, slowness and lateness articulated in much of the criticism of postmodernism, models operative in Krauss's treatment of the originality of the avant-garde, Craig Owen's writings on the return or allegory or Foster's considerations of the *Nachträglichkeit* that is the Neo-avant-garde. The point is to seize on what is effectively forgotten in retrospective takes on postmodernism, among them, the techno-cultural and economic dimensions of the literature, which are strikingly relevant to our current situation—and our preoccupations with the *contemporary*. And what these models

tell us about our relation to *modernism* is critical to our present fixation on "the contemporary." The issues are utterly inseparable.

In the process of fixing our temporal bearings, I mean to establish a platform for the more local issues addressed in the following two chapters, "New Games" and "Game Show." Both sections directly and implicitly address one of the dominant tropes of contemporary art: "interactivity." As it is generally understood within the realms of contemporary art making, interactivity has become a cipher for a more open-ended relationship to the work of art, where the old modernist pieties about autonomy have given way to something less hermetic and insular, more democratic and open to external contamination.[28] Interactivity need not, however, mechanistically obey digital protocols, even as the term has a direct historical relation to such media. A work of art that was "interactive," whether literally requiring the input of a spectator, metaphorically enjoining her response as open-ended, or thematizing exchange, admitted to the kind of social noise and influence otherwise seen as the antithesis of Greenberg's formalism. Values of contingency, fragmentation and unfinish

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28   Two recent examples among countless exhibitions devoted to this topic include "The Art of Participation" (November 8, 2008–February 2009) organized by Rudolf Frieling at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and "The Any-Space-Whatever," (October 2008–January 2009) organized by Nancy Spector at the Guggenheim Museum, New York.

were championed; the twinned notions of hybridity and partici-
pation, as both indices of a social relation and formal invention,
likewise announced a rupture with modernism's proscriptive
cast.

Now whether or not such phenomena are specifically
identified as postmodern today, the claim to interactivity
hangs on in so much of what we read about contemporary art.
Of late the model has resurfaced, though nominally repressed
and in attenuated form, in the arguments often made around
the work of "relational aesthetics" and associated notions of
participation and even collectivism in the arts. As championed
by the curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, a certain strain
of work in the 1990s was treated less as an object than an
interface. This work was hailed for its "performativity" if in a
radically different tenor than how Lyotard understood the
term. The new art was seen as a platform to mediate a social
relation between diverse interlocutors; and was interpreted
as a gesture resistant to the service economy in which it was
ostensibly embedded. A ludic spirit characterized much of it,
whether an artist was cooking dinner, offering candy to an
imagined audience, or producing a theatrical production with
the help of local citizens.

Bourriaud refers to such gestures as "micro-utopias," as if
to stress the de-escalation of the utopian ambitions of the many
historical avant-gardes. Departing from this example, I want to

press for something like a genealogy of a concept that offers one of the most insistent challenges to modernist autonomy. In many respects, notions of "interactivity" might seem to amount to a "theory of everything" if with a notable, even critical, caveat. If there is such a thing as a "grand unified theory" of postmodernism, to follow Elkins's cue, perhaps it internalizes the problem of modernity's most enduring conceits—totality and rationalization—without advancing any redemptive or triumphant narrative about them. In this sense, postmodernism clearly falls within the parameters described by Elkins, Bann and Shiff: that postmodernism resists modernism from within, what Shiff calls "meta-modernism."[29]

And so we arrive at a "new game" of sorts—a theory of games—that may well trump the moves we associate with modernism if without recourse to their temporal or totalizing logic. One could identify in such moves a "bad infinity" at work, that Hegelian nightmare of the dialectic in which the relentless switching between thesis/antithesis can only reach a point of endless stalemate. But one might also look towards less philosophical material for such tactics, a means to anchor them in the concrete exigencies of more recent times. In treating these developments as a theory of games, I consider in particular the work of Lyotard with an eye cast to the art of the 1960s and

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29   Shiff, *Doubt*, 28.

1970s and its historiography. In our present state of forgetful-ness about postmodernism, I contend that we have bypassed references in this work that might in fact help us out of our collective impasse around the contemporary and its round-robin of presentist reflections.

In Lyotard's case, the language game of postmodernism bears both a nested and oppositional relation to the *game theory* of the postwar moment. Game theory proves foundational to the question of knowledge in computerized societies: emblem-atizing the interests of the Cold War and the postwar ascend-ance of the Information Society, it continues to impact the social relation in the public policies elaborated around rational choice and public choice theory. Here, works by Öyvind Fahlström provide the occasion through which that story is told, telegraphing the pitfalls of interactivity as bound by the rules of such games as economic in nature.

In the chapter following, "Game Show," I bring these con-cerns to bear on such "local determinisms" in which the rules of such games are inextricable from the players recruited; and the players recruited likewise are formative in the rules of the game. The game show, I argue, reproduces what Baudrillard calls "a demonstration of the operation of culture"—that is, a staging of the stage itself, the mechanics of interactivity and the rationalization and regulation of the subjects involved. This is to localize the dynamics of power intrinsic to Cold-War game

playing to the control of subjects in their everyday mediations. My case studies—Dara Birnbaum's *Kiss the Girls / Make Them Cry* (1979) and Richard Serra's *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1974)—are video. I argue that the recursive temporality of video enables acutely agonistic moves in such games, whether such gestures are feminist in motivation or against the rationalizing conceits of game theory.

In this context, Baudrillard's essay "The Ecstasy of Communication" is critical in its thinking on the *extroversion* of the subject, a certain emptying out of interiority thematized as kind of game: the subject is "played" as an interface in what Baudrillard might call the obscene new world of postwar media. After the fact of the "contemporary," however, Baudrillard's reading acquires a radically different valence than the cyberpunk prosody to which his name was attached in the 1980s. In the spirit of his own deliberations, this chapter effectively games his take on the subject of contemporary communication and puts the conditions he diagnoses in his writing on show.

The feminist critique of art history, on this count, has been especially catalytic in confronting such mediations. There's little doubt that feminism's relation to postmodernism has been both vexed and productive: we must acknowledge postmodernism's occasional blind spots with respect to sexual difference. Not so in Birnbaum's work and the retrospective significance it takes after the emergence of the contemporary.

In *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* (1979) Birnbaum appropriates a popular television game show, *The Hollywood Squares*, to offer a decisive analysis of gendered behaviors and the circulation of their images as "extroverted," no less their reproduction and rationalization through communications media.

For his part, Richard Serra's early video-performance *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1974) is also based on the genre of such televisual competitions. The work reproduces the most infamous game-theoretic scenario of them all, the Prisoner's Dilemma, if staged in the art world of early SoHo. Played by Serra's community of artists, performers and gallerists, *Prisoner's Dilemma* stages social interaction as a question of gaming the other and the ethical dilemmas that inhere in choosing defection over cooperation. In other words, Serra's is a parable of collective decision making in conflict with the rationalizing of self-interest. There are few scenarios, I would argue, that better dramatize the tenor of contemporary politics today, the conditions of which pit the neoliberal subject—the individual arbiter of his own rights, a so-called consumer sovereign—against a larger public, a common good.

In considering works of art mostly from the 1960s and early 1970s, part of my goal is to locate the interests of the contemporary as theorized well in advance by postmodernism. As mentioned earlier, in *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*

Elkins warns against the dangers of relying too much upon historiography, which by his reckoning closes down genuine efforts to theorize new models and evaluations of art history. There is plentiful evidence to support this remark. On the one hand, too many art historians treat their subject as little more than the rote chronicles of objects and events, recalling Nietzsche's complaint that historians are little more than "inquisitive tourists or pedantic micrologists." On the other hand, the tendency to mine the historical reception of things, that is, to construct an edifice around the construction of history itself, belies a thinly veiled impulse to get to the "truth" of history—to get as close as possible to that hidden truth, as if uncovering some treasure buried under the rubble of historical detritus.

Though the scholar dealing with recent material might seem relieved of such historiographic burdens, allegedly freed to do the work of theory Elkins advocates, she paradoxically shoulders a different kind of responsibility where historiography is at issue. Not long ago I heard a graduate student in a pre-modern field suggest that those who studied contemporary material were not really historians, much less interested in things "historical," the larger implication being that what we do could scarcely approximate the hard labor of history. I get where she's coming from. I doubt that few if any of us working on recent art are challenged by the Babel of dead languages nor find ourselves

elbows-deep in parchment nor the fustiness of obscure church archives. By the same token, I think she misses something crucial about the dynamics of history—and the contemporary by extension—and that is the roles that we as historians assume in its *historiographic* production.

It is on account of the seeming "presentness" of our archive—and the mythic transparency of its objects as well—that the scholar of contemporary material must be that much more vigilant about questions of historiography and periodization, much more attuned to the formative influence of the models we enlist and the tone we take in our confrontation with, and analysis of, objects. As *New Games* is wont to demonstrate, these questions, which seem bound up in both the rigors and banalities of academia, implicitly impact our current relation to culture and politics—questions of no small urgency. This is why postmodernism must continue to matter for all of us as art historians, in spite or because of its irrelevance.

1. Postmodernism After "The Contemporary"

The Contemporary Is Premature

Lately we've heard our share about something called "The Contemporary." Its discussion takes place both within and outside academic culture, across seminar tables and lecture halls, to be sure, but also in that larger sphere of influence, at once nebulous and ubiquitous, known as the "art world." Symposia are organized around "the contemporary" and "contemporaneity," with scores of luminaries, both art historians and others, weighing in from all corners of the globe.[1] Books are written about it.[2] Tenure lines and university chairs

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1   A critical example was the symposium convened by professors Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee at the University of Pittsburgh, "Modernity and Contemporaneity: Antinomies of Art and Culture after the Twentieth Century" (November 2004). As the literature on the conference stated: "In the aftermath of modernity, and the passing of the postmodern, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity?" The stated theme of the conference crystallized perfectly the increasingly charged nature of debates on the contemporary, all of which have much to do with the unfinished business of postmodernism.

2   See, Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Smith's extremely useful text is a global and historical account of the institutions and

are dedicated to it. Dissertations on art produced yesterday are churned out with increasing regularity. Provincial towns everywhere (remember Bilbao?) scramble to build regional centers for contemporary art, so as to install themselves on the ever-expanding art world map. Entire nations *seemingly* bypassed in the imperial reach of modern art history (China, India) now enjoy their own contemporary art scenes, marketing their wares in Basel, Miami, London and New York. And "globalism," the official signatory for all that is contemporary, continues its fitful reign as the art-critical paradigm *du jour*.

The fetishism for the contemporary, as crystallized around the article "the," suggests a will to consensus around its consideration. The fact that we consistently bracket the term, put it in scare quotes or ellipses or under erasure, speaks to a certain self-consciousness about the contemporary that registers the necessarily fictive dimension underwriting its analysis.[3] After all, to make claims for the transparency and self-evidence of our present moment: what greater fiction could there possibly be for a historian? No doubt, the scholarly buzz around the "contemporary" seems to rest with a discomfiting kind of

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networks that authorize what counts as contemporary art. Richard Meyer is currently drafting a book called *What Was Contemporary Art?*, attending to the historiography of the concept.

3   I borrow the notion of the "fictions of the contemporary" from the philosopher Peter Osbourne, whose scholarship on the politics of time within modernity now extends to the question of the contemporary and globalization.

tension. Somehow we have made keeping pace with today—both our ambivalence and excitement about it—a quasi-science, an intellectual cottage industry, as if we desired to enshrine the present moment in a permanent holding pattern.

No matter how one chooses to parse this phenomenon, it seems clear that the emergence of the contemporary as a topic of scholarly attention responds in no small part to the twinned demands of both the market and academia. "Buzz," we all know is code for fashion, and academics are hardly immune to fashion's seductions. The professor of contemporary art history is hardly in any position to deny the relation between her scholarly métier and the explosive growth industry that is the contemporary art world. For better or worse, I acknowledge being wholly embedded in this dynamic and concede to the strange position in which I find myself as participant observer.

But perhaps our de facto reliance upon this term—"the contemporary"—has come too early. The contemporary is premature on methodological grounds, throwing down issues around periodization and the wont to historicize phenomena in advance of their imagined historicity.[4] Paradoxically, it's an old story as well. "*Art contemporain*" for instance, was debated by French critics at the turn of *last* century. More recently, in

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4   On the other hand, the notion of "contemporary history" has been more fully theorized within many quarters of the historical establishment, particularly those engaged in worlds-system analyses.

1962, Leo Steinberg could identify this tendency in discussing contemporary art's relation to the "plight of the public," by which he meant the public's bewilderment in the face of the new or outrageous in art. In a statement that now reads as an accurate, if outdated, forecast, he wrote

> this rapid domestication of the outrageous is the most characteristic feature of our artistic life, and the time lapse between shock received and thanks returned gets progressively shorter. At the present rate of taste adaptation, it takes about seven years for a young artist with a streak of wildness in him to turn from enfant terrible to elder statesmen— not so much because he changes but because the challenge he throws to the public is so quickly met.[5]

Steinberg's words register the waning fortunes of shock that are the leitmotif of modernism, signaling the incursions of a postmodern sensibility that he too will address. "Contemporary art," he writes "is constantly inviting us to applaud the destruction of values that we still cherish."[6]

The contemporary, I would argue, is premature for another reason. We have yet to wrestle fully with postmodernism as an ersatz or partial theory of time, that for a while checked all the

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5   Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public," *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 6.
6   Steinberg, "Contemporary Art," 10.

criteria of contemporary art. This is not to endorse a revival of the term "postmodernism" so much as it is to explore its claims well after the fact of its obsolescence. We might pause to reflect on the vogue, even frenzy, for all things postmodern not so very long ago. (As the painter and gallerist Peter Nagy opined in the 1980s, in a statement that succinctly addresses the collusion of fashion and theory in the art world, "These collectors . . . they talk about Baudrillard now."[7]) Perhaps we have too quickly exiled postmodernism to the dustbin of theory's history without treating that relegation in any systematic way, as a function of the very conditions it tracked in the first place. As Jameson reminds us, postmodernism "becomes itself a symptom of the state it seeks to diagnose."[8] The goal is to stress why postmodernism continues to be relevant for art history's obsession with the contemporary, particularly its engagement with globalization and neoliberalism.

Our entrée into this debate is the question of lateness that literature on postmodernism repeatedly invokes. If the contemporary in art history has been regarded as a phenomenon of the 1990s (that is, following on postmodernism's critical

7   Peter Nagy, cited in Thomas Crow, "The Birth and Death of the Viewer: On the Public Function of Art," in Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (New York: DIA Art Foundation, 1987), 1.

8   Jameson, "Foreword," in Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xi.

exhaustion in the 1980s) we might recover the term "lateness" as it informs postmodernism's apparent obsolescence. From this point forward (or is it backward?) we are better positioned to trace the logic of differential temporalities that course throughout postmodernism's formulation and reception, whether recursion or repetition or the fragmentary time of postmodern allegory, along the way discussing the work of some of its most important theorists: Fredric Jameson, Hal Foster, Robert Smithson, Craig Owens and Rosalind Krauss.

Ends: The Late, the Belated, the Fatal

Let us start, if in appropriately inverted fashion, with the obituaries. There is no argument that the death knell of postmodernism has been sounded countless times at this point, both on the right and the left, sometime in the late 1980s. Even at the very moment it was being strenuously debated by among the most important historians and critics of modern and contemporary art, one heard rumors that "the term had lately been losing its luster."[9] For some observers that death couldn't come quickly enough; for others, postmodernism was like any other "ism" in the art world. As one critic remarked in the *New York Times* in 1990:

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9   Crow, "The Birth and Death of the Viewer," 1.

> Ten years after it created a sensation in the art world, the tendentious, media-conscious movement known as post-modernism has lost its momentum. Having gained notoriety by announcing the death of the ideals and practices of modernist art, and having made household words out of such arcane terms as appropriation and deconstruction, post-modernism now shows the very same signs of fatigue that its adherents saw in the art world of the 1970s.[10]

The postmortem goes on to detail postmodernism's "waning dominion." "So many artists have borrowed their images from popular culture," the critic notes, "that appropriation and pastiche seem old hat. The term deconstruction, which once meant something quite specific, has become common coin, used to describe everything from irony to plain propaganda."[11]

With this last observation, the writer calls out the banalization of the term deconstruction in both art criticism on postmodernism and the larger culture. (To wit: consider a popular reality show where chefs routinely describe their culinary creations as "deconstructed" salads, desserts, etc.) When postmodernism was not simply brushed off as trendy or obtuse in the mainstream media, its propensity for rhetorical

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10   See Andy Grundberg, "*Art View*: As It Must to All, Death Comes to Post-Modernism," *New York Times*, September 16, 1990.

11   Grundberg, "As It Must to All . . .".

gamesmanship was pilloried, even purposefully sabotaged, by academics and pundits alike.[12] Yet as is the case with many of these obituaries, there is an odd slippage between the notion that postmodernism is exhausted *as fashion* and the idea that postmodernism theorizes the conditions of historical exhaustion itself. Surely the irony is not lost on many that postmodernism, which purported to announce a certain eclipse of master narratives, now seems to have been bypassed in the academic's rush to "the contemporary." The peculiar form these ends ultimately take is critical to our fixations with contemporary art as well as our longstanding deliberations on modernism.

For many, that end can only be understood as inexorable, final and punctual. That, at least, is the standard refrain within the history of art. As generically told, the most prevalent reading of postmodernism is the one that takes all too literally the qualifier "post." It conceives of this "post" as a decisive historical marker—*rupture* is the term meant to capture this shift—treating postmodernism as following modernism in chronological fashion. By turns it is wont to see "postmodernist art" as a category unto itself; much as we might identify modernist art with the names Picasso, Matisse and Pollock, postmodern

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12 The most notorious saboteur being Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, who in 1996 submitted a sham essay on postmodernism and quantum physics to the journal *Social Text* in order to demonstrate what he saw as postmodernism's "fraudulent" relationship to science.

art is held as synonymous with Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Julian Schnabel, all hardly fellow travelers. What unites the reception of these figures above all other criteria is the break their work is alleged to make with Clement Greenberg's high modernism. The following passage, drawn from an edited volume of collected essays distributed by a publisher of academic textbooks, is typical of this approach within general histories of art:

> The Modernist-versus-Postmodernist debate that ensued over the question of form, aesthetic value, and the autonomy of meaning in art has generally centered on American Late Modern formalist theory and criticism, especially as this theory was articulated in the writings of the American critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's formalism, which was the bulwark of American critical theory in the 1950s and '60s, came under attack because it seems to leave little room for social/political content in art, thereby encouraging a separation between art and everyday human experience.
>
> In attempting to effect a reintegration of art and society, Postmodern critics and artists began to question not only the theoretical structure of art espoused by Greenberg, but also the meaning, purpose and function of art vis-à-vis society. And, as art has come to be considered a form of knowledge and a means of communication with important consequences for the construction of sexuality and the self, Postmodern criticism has taken to scrutinizing art and its critical

apparatuses, "deconstructing" them, as it were, to see how they function.[13]

The passage is predictable in its recitation of the Greenbergian offenses: his formalism is implicitly arid, because hermetic, eschewing any questions of everyday life or the "outside"; its obsession with autonomy and the aesthetic was at the expense of understanding art as an instrument of communication; it left out, along the way, any interest in the construction of identity (class/race/gender). And it sees the formalist project as necessarily hegemonic, against which postmodernism offers tools to "deconstruct" its mechanics and meanings.

Undoubtedly, a generic (read: clichéd) account of Greenberg sponsors such a combative stance. Greenberg's later penchant for bombast, particularly his increasingly hard-nosed take on the topic of medium-specificity, only encourages a bluntly oppositional approach in kind. As it has been treated in the literature, this peculiar reading of formalism could not help be a project of diminishing returns, failing progressively for the narrowness of its scope and the belaboring of aesthetic criteria that was frankly spent. So much of what counts as postmodernist criticism in the visual arts takes on these and

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13 Howard Risatti, "Preface," in Howard Risatti, ed., *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), xiii.

related problematics; and it does so in ways that, as the above passage suggests, are regarded as necessarily progressive.

The controversy that remains is the way in which another model was claimed to *supersede* the Greenbergian line, with all the implications of telos that term carries. The suspicion closes around the "formal problem" specific to this genre of postmodernism: announcing the eclipse of one master narrative (in this case, the Kantian principles upon which Greenberg staked his theses), it steps into the breach to provide yet another. In the process such readings tend both to domesticate and embalm any notion of modernism as monolithic, undifferentiated and historically inert. The problem is in large part due to the sense of finality that comes with the qualifier "post" which in turn opens onto the business of establishing a historiographic "origin."

How fitting, then, that in its more critical formulations, postmodernism was commonly understood as an *endgame* of sorts—a Shklovskian "knight's gambit" in Fredric Jameson's words; a trumping of communicational adversary. The history of art had already internalized such ends, whether chronicled in the death of the fabled author, the demise of the *chef d'oeuvre* or the discipline of art history itself. Yet no matter how much we have taken on board some of these principles as the reigning conceits of that moment, the larger stakes underlying them remain curiously invisible in the harsh light of the

contemporary. This oversight was, and is, a matter of decisive consequence. We inhabit its controversies today.

Indeed, as Hal Foster remarks, for some observers it might appear that the "end of history" (Francis Fukuyama) or the "end of ideology" (Daniel Bell) had won out over the Lyotardian thesis famously detailed in *The Postmodern Condition.* In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama leans on Hegel's master/slave dialectic, if opting for the more polite sounding formulation of "recognition," to posit that "a liberal revolution in economic thinking has sometimes proceeded, sometimes followed, the move towards political freedom around the globe."[14] Fukuyama's is a philosophy of the free market, maybe not the first thing many art historians think when they reflect on postmodernism.[15] For his part, Bell trumpets the advances of the "post-industrial" society as the rise of the professional class over the diminishing claims of the proletariat. In both Fukuyama's and Bell's narratives, the end proclaimed is a triumphant one, implicitly heralding the global march of neoliberalism as a *fait accompli*. Events of the late 1980s and early 1990s might appear to bear this out as incontrovertible fact. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the mass protests in Tiananmen Square: all announce

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14   Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), xiv.

15   Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, xiii.

the end of a very particular kind of history, a genre of master narrative under the sign of Totalitarianism. For certain supporters of Bell and Fukuyama, Marxism might well be synonymous with Stalinism—and this is what effectively ended in 1989.

These events and the conclusions drawn from them lead me to pose a question in egregiously frank, even simplistic, terms: are the debates on the cultural politics of postmodernism effectively vitiated by the events of 1989 (or 1991) to be superseded by a new critical epoch known by a seemingly much more neutral moniker, "the contemporary"? It's an awkward, even brutish formulation, but it exposes our historiographic prejudices for what they are worth and likewise betrays how we may have tacitly contracted with a set of deeply ideological terms with which we might have little or no affinity. For one, if this question is treated as the period style of the late 1970s through 1980s (about which an entrepreneurial curator might include strategies of pastiche or appropriation or a visual engagement with the language of media, advertising or commodity forms), the answer might well be "yes": this would be to confirm the notion that "postmodern art," as continuous with the bubble economy of the 1980s, had worn out its welcome after too many art world seasons only to die in 1990—the date of the *New York Times* obituary (and, plainly put, the beginning of the dissolution of the Soviet Union). Beyond the

accusation that such a reading is premised on fashion, it is an especially problematic position for postmodernism for reasons that will become obvious in due course.

And there is a pragmatic and pedagogical aspect to the way we might respond to this question about 1989, one that might tell us something about our current relation to postmodernism. Those of us teaching undergraduates cannot fail to be impressed by a singular fact: with each new entering class, more students were born after that pivotal year of 1989, long after post-modernism's most important debates. Anecdotal evidence from the classroom suggests that few of those students would describe 1989's associated events (if they can describe them at all) as in any way controversial; fewer could identify the likenesses of some of that moment's most crucial figures (Lech Walesa, Margaret Thatcher). A world without the Cold War and a world spinning dizzyingly around the axis of global capital is the way things are. Reagan is a grandfatherly figure, whose only claim to controversy reduces to his image's appearance on postage stamps. The Gulf War is a permanent war; and fulmin-ations about cyberspace and digital media read as hopelessly geriatric. All conditions, in other words, are the order of things—what Gramsci calls "common sense."

With this notion in hand, those clamoring to celebrate the contemporary as a newly minted category for art, theory, criticism and history might consider how this "line in the sand"

approach to the year 1989 redraws our historiographic consciousness. For the smug triumphalism of Fukuyama's and Bell's narratives has at this point been naturalized as the way things are: the ground upon which any notion of the contemporary is constructed, elaborated and assumed.[16] This is to endorse implicitly, whether we like to admit it or not, what Ernest Mandel called a "neo-fatalist" ideology, a concession to the social order expressed as mechanistic, second nature. As Mandel writes:

> To the captive individual, whose entire life is subordinated to the laws of the market—not only (as in the 19th century) in the sphere of production, but also in the spheres of consumption, recreation, culture, art, education and personal relations, it appears impossible to break out of the social prison. "Every-day experience" reinforces the neo-fatalist ideology of the immutable nature of the late capitalist social order.[17]

Is our rush to the everyday experience of contemporary life a concession to this neo-fatalist ideology? Have we signed on to the terms of the post-industrial society without reading the fine print? And just what is it that we lose in bypassing postmodernism on the way to the contemporary?

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16 Fukuyama does propose something like a "Universal History" if, needless to say, at radical odds with the Marxian claims of dialectical materialism. The rhetoric of modern science is deployed so as to naturalize the inevitability of liberal markets, which are deemed free of the ideological biases of "strong governments." Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 46.

17 Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1972), 502.

To raise the issue of postmodernism now is to challenge the assumptions upon which the contemporary is staked. Against the inexorable pull of neo-fatalist ideology, we need recall those readings of postmodernism that theorize *lateness* as the structural feature against and through which such cultural dominants are both resisted and articulated. And we need to stress the problematic of temporality that is central to the most important accounts, even if only to demonstrate the *negative* fortunes of time that we more or less take for granted as our worldly horizon.

Consider among the most influential statements on the topic, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capital*. In this summa of Marxian postmodernism, Jameson leans on the economic model of long waves proposed by Mandel in part to counter Bell's notion of a "post-industrial" society, a term that has for some become virtually synonymous with postmodernism. Jameson's book and its individually published chapters were required reading in the late 1980s and 1990s but today its version of postmodernism is largely reduced to the seemingly eclectic cultural relics its author surveys: John Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Warhol's glittering stilettos that grace the book's cover. Yet the continued relevance of Jameson's argument must be read—and recovered—in no small measure against Bell's thesis.

In *The Coming Post-Industrial Society* (1973), the Harvard sociologist with a storied past as a New York intellectual, described the advent of a professional economy as a profound rupture from the industrial paradigm, organized around the axis of production and machinery. He spoke to the proliferation of "posts" in contemporaneous social studies ("Post-modern," "Post-capitalist," "Post-Marxist") among which he included the "post-industrial."[18] On this last point, the factory worker and the laborer more generally were regarded as something like an endangered species, whose ineluctable fate was confirmed by the embedded paradox of historical materialism:

> if one takes the industrial worker as the instrument of the future, or more specifically, the factory worker as the symbol of the proletariat, then this vision is warped. For the paradoxical fact is that as one goes along the trajectory of industrialization—the increasing replacement of man by machines—one comes logically to the erosion of the industrial worker himself.[19]

Bell's vehemence is most plainly articulated in his forecast for the turn of the century:

> A post-industrial society is based on services. Hence, it is a game between persons. What counts is not raw muscle power, or energy, but

18 Bell, "From Industrial to Post-Industrial Society," *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 51–53.

19 Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, 125.

information. The central person is the professional, for he is equipped, by this education and training, to provide the kinds of skills which are increasingly demanded in the post-industrial society. If an industrial society is defined by the quantity of goods as marking a standard of living, the post-industrial society is defined by the quality of life as measured by the services and amenities—health, education, entertainment, recreation, and the arts—which are now deemed desirable and possible for everyone.[20]

Looking ahead to the following chapter, I'll flag the rhetoric of *games* Bell deploys to describe the advance of a service economy. Information becomes the material through which a social relation is rationalized and quantified—or better yet, "played."

To be sure, it's this "post" in the post-industrial society that especially recommends Jameson's reading to a temporal analysis, even as the text bears more immediately on the treatment of space, the emergence of "a new depthlessness . . . a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum."[21] Critically, if architecture is the field of cultural production most readily associated with his argument, these bricks-and-mortar conditions find their correspondence in the space of critique. As Jameson writes, "distance in general (including 'critical

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20   Ibid., 127.
21   Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 6.

distance' in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism."

> We are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation; meanwhile, it has already been observed how the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterrestrial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity.[22]

The passage is supremely apt for recent art criticism on globalization and its various thematics of immanence, if largely struck from much writing on contemporary art.[23]

Nevertheless, even if Jameson might stand accused of an account that is "too spatializing," as Foster will put it, you could hardly argue that this new spatial paradigm is uncoupled from considerations of temporality.[24] In contrast to Bell, Jameson's reading of Mandel reveals how time permeates whatever new forms of spatial organization have emerged with

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22 Ibid., 49.
23 A similar point can be made with respect to one of the most important thinkers on globalization, David Harvey, whose book *The Condition of Postmodernity* discussed many of the features we associate with globalization. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).
24 Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax," *October* 63, Winter 1993, 3.

postmodernism, as telegraphed by the phrase "late capitalism."
"Late capitalism" has become a shorthand within the criticism
of contemporary art; Jameson understands it as code of a sort,
a kind of leftist logo. He identifies the phrase as "*something like
a literal translation of postmodernism*" (my emphasis).[25] While
he describes the origins of the phrase with the Frankfurt
School, the "administered society" of Adorno and Horkheimer,
he also points out its differences in degree and kind between
the modern and the postmodern. Premised on a conjunctural
model that reads the evolution of capitalism in three stages,
Mandel's reading is organized around a world capitalist system
fundamentally distinct from the older imperialism around
which notions of monopoly capitalism were in part based.
Instead, Mandel's periodizing hypothesis "turns on this matter
of internationalization"[26] predicated on "the effect of reorgan-
izing international relations, decolonizing the colonies, and
laying the groundwork for the emergence of a new economic
world system."[27]

   As such, the term "late capitalism" is intended "to mark its
continuity *with* [my emphasis] what preceded it rather than the
break, rupture and mutation that concepts like 'postindustrial
society' wished to underscore."[28]

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25   Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xxi.
26   Ibid., xix.
27   Ibid., xx.
28   Ibid., xix.

> Late capitalism, far from representing a post-industrial society, thus appears the period in which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time; to which one could further add the increasing mechanization of the sphere of circulation and the increasing mechanization of the superstructure.[29]

Whereas the "post" in Bell's notion of the "post-industrial" telegraphs something fatal about the status of labor, the "post" in postmodernism means anything but; indeed, it is nearly equivalent to "late":

> Its qualifier in particular rarely means anything so silly as the ultimate senescence, breakdown, and death of the system as such (a temporal version that would rather seem to belong to modernism than postmodernism). What "late" generally conveys is rather the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through the transformation of a life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive.[30]

A permanent and thoroughgoing change, experienced belatedly: this is what lateness offers, "a well-nigh Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*," . . . a "*retroactivity*." "People become aware

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29 Fredric Jameson, "Foreword," in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxi.
30 Jameson, "Foreword," xxi.

of the dynamics of some new system," Jameson writes, "in which they are themselves seized, only later on and gradually."[31] The formulation returns relative to the contemporary: it dramatizes that our presentist preoccupations have their own genealogy, their own historiographic consciousness, so to speak.

Foster has made among the most important statements on this front in an essay that reflects on the *Nachleben* of postmodernism itself. In "Postmodernism in Parallax" he presses for a more complex reading of postmodernism's temporalities, at once recognizing the priority of Jameson's and Lyotard's account and its disputation on the Left.[32] He summons an image of postmodernism otherwise forgotten in the market's pressure to render it obsolete: the sense in which its florescence within art criticism might represent a new politics, a resistant practice. I quote Foster at length to capture the tone of his observations:

> And yet, not so long ago, there was a time of a loose alliance, a sense of a common project, especially in opposition to rightist positions, which ranged from old attacks on modernism in toto (as the source of all evil in our hedonistic society) to new defenses of particular modernisms that had become official, indeed traditional, the modernisms of the museum and academy . . . In part our postmodernism was

31   Ibid., xix.
32   Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax," *October* 63, 3.

a refusal of this reactionary cultural politic and an advocacy of practices both critical of institutional modernism and suggestive of alternative forms, of new ways to practice culture and politics.[33]

The essay casts a backwards glance at the moment in which postmodernism flourished, along the way noting the historical and social phenomena, people and institutions, with which it was entangled: Reagan, AIDS, The New World Order, Thatcherism, the IMF, the rise of multiculturalism, the Culture Wars. But for reasons we will have to consider in some detail, the urgency Foster brings to his belated account—the notion that postmodernism offers "new ways to practice culture and politics"—has been effectively trumped in the acts of forgetting endemic to contemporary culture. As such the verdict he issues on postmodernism's recent status is accordingly less tragic than it is bathetic. "And we did not lose," he argues. "In a sense a worse thing happened: treated as fashion, postmodernism became *démodé*."[34]

The retrospective cast of Foster's opening remarks hardly recommend postmodernism's revival: He plainly acknowledges the troubled politics of postmodernism for the Left. Instead the essay tracks the migrating status of three of postmodernism's most important topoi—the subject, the cultural

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33   Ibid., 3.
34   Ibid., 3.

other, technology—across the pivotal moments of the 1930s, the 1960s and the present. Importantly, his examples all date from the period of the historical avant-garde: Hans Bellmer's dolls, Josef Thorak's fascist body, the anti-colonial (if still primitivizing) investigations of the dissident Surrealists associated with Georges Bataille. Nothing in his reading attends to the exemplary "postmodernist" art of the 1980s, those case studies in critical practice that he himself was so crucial in theorizing during the period, such as work by Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Barbara Kruger.[35]

The fact that Foster does not discuss these artists in "Postmodernism in Parallax" is more than suggestive. Writing on the art of the 1980s is completely besides the point of the essay. On the one hand their inclusion might well invite charges of the kind of period style ("The Eighties") against which Foster has argued so insistently. Discussing such figures might also be misread as a mode of latent historicism: a sealing-off of the "period" of postmodernism that admits to the closure of such cultural moments in the first place. Foster warned against such tendencies in the mid-1980s; a couple of decades following, he could hardly do otherwise. Hence the relevance of parallax as a model for his reading, a notion which captures the alternations his subjects undergo from shifting temporal

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35   Foster, Hal "Subversive Signs," in *Recodings* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 107.

positions, dramatizing the changing aspects through which they are observed. Those shifts further imply the instability of the observations not just from any one such fixed perspective, which hinges on a spatializing metaphor, so much as the uneven temporalities structuring its terrain. The optic it provides is less acute than prismatic, shifting and oblique.

Parallax admits to a model of belatedness acknowledged, if not fully elaborated, in Jameson's reading. Foster's use of this model points to the twinned axes of "deferred action as well as the incessant expansion of capitalist culture."[36] "I borrow the notion of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) from Freud," he writes,

> for whom subjectivity, never set once and for all, is structured in a series of anticipations and reconstructions of events that are often traumatic in nature: we come to be who we are only in deferred action. I believe modernism and postmodernism are comprehended, if not constituted, in any analogous way, in deferred action, as a continual process of anticipation and reconstruction.[37]

The psychoanalytic dimension of Foster's essay sees postmodernism relative to that which has never fully arrived and is hardly expected to. This "never complete transition" to

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36 Foster, "Parallax," 5.
37 Ibid., 5.

postmodernism shores up the fantasy of the "Now" which a fixation on the contemporary will presume.

For this reason, Foster's approach could not be mistaken as *nostalgic*.[38] Jameson famously identifies postmodernism's nostalgic strain not only in the architecture that cannibalizes past historical styles but in the "nostalgia film" of the early 1970s which "set out to recapture . . . the henceforth mesmerizing lost reality of the Eisenhower era." [39] But this kind of nostalgia cannot make claims for historical consciousness or distance in the way that modernist nostalgia might. "Faced with these ultimate objects," he writes, "our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as 'referent'—the incompatibility of a postmodernist 'nostalgia' art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent." For Jameson, "genuine historicity," if not genuine historicism, is the province of the modern. I'm guessing this formulation would read as too neat for Foster. To see something in parallax, after all, means to acknowledge the aspect of moving bodies that perpetually shape and reconfigure such observations.

The last point moves us to another kind of temporality associated with postmodernism: allegorical time. The figure who leads the way is Robert Smithson, whose earthworks, writings, film and sculpture at once mirror and refract the possibilities

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38   Foster, "Subversive Signs," 107.
39   Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

for theorizing postmodernism after the contemporary. Craig Owens was Smithson's most important spokesman: his contribution to the debates on postmodernism was predicated on the cultural politics of representation. What Smithson demonstrated through allegory, especially through the mouthpiece of Owens, is that postmodernism had theorized its ruins well in advance of the fact.

On the Ruins of Postmodernism: Smithson, Owens, and Allegory

If you were to open a contemporary art magazine over the course of the last several years, it's likely you would detect the presence of an elder statesman—an absent hero—surveying the proceedings from the margins with certain bemusement. So too might you glimpse his ghost wending its way through the proliferating and far-reaching surveys of recent art, whether biennials or art fairs, not to mention art schools, dissertations and a burgeoning literature on art and ecology. Robert Smithson (1938–1973) has become that guiding spirit, a kind of shadow mentor for so much of what counts as contemporary in contemporary art.[40] For his formative investigations in earthwork, he is hailed as prophetic: in this age of all things

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40 See my review of the 2004 Whitney Biennial, "Crystal Lite." *Artforum* XLII, no. 9 (2004), 174–175. James Meyer's current research on the "return of the sixties" in contemporary art treats Smithson as a paradigmatic figure in this return.

green, his treatment of the devastated landscape, ranging from the Garden State to the Four Corners, appears a radical and witty eco-criticism *avant la lettre*. For his insights on the strange economy between photograph and site, we see a theory of mediation at work—a treatment on the telescoping of distance —that chimes with debates on globalization within art history. And for his startling take on the crystal, the structure of which admits to a prismatic and non-synchronous optic on the world, he has inspired a generation of erstwhile crystallographers, artists whose work trades on the seductions of a shimmering, if fractured, point of view.

Smithson's impact on contemporary art can be measured in the starkest terms. Take, for instance, his *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (Figure 1.1): A mainstay of undergraduate art history text books, its image graces the covers of innumerable volumes on contemporary art and is often hailed as among the most important sculpture of the postwar era. Constructed from mud, salt crystals, basalt and rock, this 1,500-ft long coil, sited at Rozel Point along Utah's Great Salt Lake, is also a film. It has been at the center of several recent projects, films and installations (among the best-known examples is Tacita Dean's eloquently measured *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty*), not to mention a recent book whose punning title, *Spiral Jetta*, announces that its readership falls on the borderline of the non-art historical publishing trade. Contemporary art's fascination,

even obsession, with the 1960s is due part and parcel to this Smithsonian engagement, although we would be well advised to put some critical pressure on the way his work has been read through the debates on aesthetics and politics.

Smithson has come to stand as a virtual surrogate for this debate, a proxy on all the important lessons that moment now mythically offers. I think it's safe to say that he would have been amused being recruited for this role. Ever the contrarian, Smithson injected a sharp note of uncertainty into such proceedings in the *past*—in other words, at the very moment now upheld as paradigmatic of such struggles within the contemporary art world. And in an analogous and perhaps even more relevant fashion, he also voiced a marked skepticism about the framing of such periods themselves, as historically coherent and transparent phenomenon. Not only was Smithson parodying some of the more fashionable excesses of that decade at the moment of their contemporaneity (think of his video collaboration with Nancy Holt entitled *East Coast/West Coast* a hilarious skewering of that era's hip and regionally over-determined vernaculars) he was also elaborating a thinking about time in his art—a thinking about entropy—premised on the question of information decay within systems theory. In his many writings on the topic, Smithson essentially rejected the claims to historicism many contemporary discussions on the 1960s take as a given. He enlisted a typically
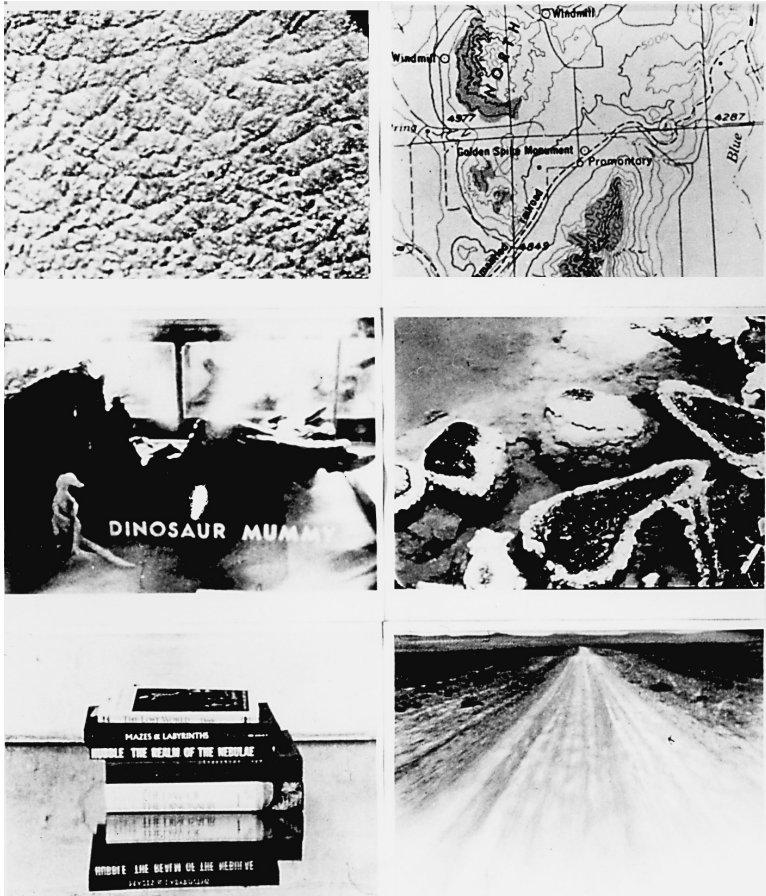
Figure 1.1 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.
Source: © Estate of Robert Smithson / licensed by VAGA, New York. Image courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

motley cast of characters—Norbert Wiener, Victor Nabokov, Claude Lévi-Strauss—in defense of his case, crystallized around the now-famous entropic edict "the future is but the obsolete in reverse."

Entropy will stand opposed to our subsequent theory of games—a theory of interactivity founded on the perfect circulation and exchange of information. Entropy, by contrast, is the noise that signals degraded communication. It's in this

spirit that I consider Smithson's more recent historiographic fortunes, which I take as emblematic of postmodernism's status after the contemporary; for if Smithson is a giant for much contemporary art, so too was he pivotal to the criticism of post-modernism and the visual arts. Yet in both recent art criticism and the spate of scholarly literature published on the artist in the last several years, one notes a willful silence on this earlier perspective. What might that silence tell us about contemporary art history?

For those wedded to a reading of postmodernism as style or as a riposte to Greenbergian modernism, perhaps the issue need not require additional belaboring. Smithson's thematic dalliances with prehistory (a necessary compliment to his futuro-logical inclinations) and his radical approach to media locate him squarely outside high-modernist orthodoxy; his propen-sity for the textual in art is a clear affront to high modernism's mythic resistance to discourse and the literary. To the notion that Smithson's postmodernism is irrelevant given his more contemporary reception, one could also cite Smithson him-self. Smithson's more than passing interest in the problem of time—and the historiographies constructed (or dismantled) through a sympathetic treatment of the subject—punches holes in those readings of postmodernism bypassed by recent art criticism.

Indeed, in an interview with Moira Roth dating from 1973, Smithson gives the lie to what such historiographic assumptions might mean for art; and these, in turn, are tied specifically to a certain account of postmodernism, erroneous by his lights. Asked to comment about the impact of Marcel Duchamp on postwar art, particularly his influence on that generation of so-called Neo-Dada artists that preceded him, Smithson betrays more than a passing annoyance with the master. He vents about what he sees as the false divide that has structured recent histories of art, which presents the modern of the 1920s and 1930s, represented by Picasso and Matisse, as having been surpassed by the postmodern influence of Duchamp after the war. It's hard to know just who Smithson was reading when he trashed this version of postmodernism but the notion that the postmodern somehow "transcends" or trumps the modern is for him, just another spin of the historicizing wheel—one that he repeatedly characterizes as "mechanistic." Or eschatological: in an especially withering aside on postmodernism and a 1960s disease he calls "Duchampitis," Smithson demurs: "This whole notion of trying to form a cult that transcends all this strikes me as a kind of religion-in-drag, you might say . . . and then they try to transcend their own movement and this sort of thing."[41]

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41 Smithson quote in "Interview with Moira Roth," in Cornelia Butler, *Robert Smithson* (exhibition catalogue), (Los Angeles, CA and MOCA, 2004), 85.

Smithson might be taken to task for his rather gruff handling of Duchamp. He is to the point, however, about a strain of postmodern thought that betrays a latent will to transcendence, in spite of its express interests in the readymade signatories of the everyday. This is the first notion of postmodernism we encountered and the first reading called out by more rigorous thinkers with respect to its historiography. Yet what's both remarkable and strange about Smithson's position is how he himself has come to replace Duchamp as the figure to whom a younger generation of artists reactively turns—if in the service of trumping postmodernism. To gloss Smithson's own contemporary reception is to confirm, paradoxically, the circular turn of this historiographic logic. For it is "Smithsonitis" rather than Duchampitis, that has seemingly infected the contemporary art world, a Smithsonian pedigree that authorizes what is contemporary about contemporary art.

The historiographic abyss into which Smithson has been plunged has for some scholars confirmed the need to write about a more "historically" grounded Smithson, a task facilitated by the acquisition of his papers by the Archives for American Art in 1987. As any casual reader of Smithson is aware, the artist's prodigious bibliographic appetites were matched in kind by the deeply idiosyncratic character of his writerly pursuits. The best new literature on the artist makes liberal and important use of such archival discoveries beyond his famous earthworks:

In her book *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, Ann Reynolds writes she "had a second focus, history itself or, more specifically, the problem of how to address contemporary art in terms of history."[42] Jennifer Roberts writes in the introduction to *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History* that a key goal of hers was "to historicize Smithson's work."[43] Both books are exemplary in their rigorous mining of the new Robert Smithson, balancing the depth of their archival research with critical speculation. Still, their relative quiet on the issue of Smithson's postmodernism is telling of our current historiographic moment. Admittedly, both scholars have ample reason to bracket that variant of the Smithson reception that plays fast and loose with postmodern theory. The worst excesses of the literature make an incontrovertible case for the irrelevance of art history's dalliances with postmodernism and theory.[44]

Nevertheless, any recent attempt to recuperate Smithson's work as the work of history is at the same time a reckoning with another art critic who, like Smithson, died far too young. At the heart of this literature is Craig Owens (1950–1990), and

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42 Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), xi.

43 Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 4.

44 For example, Ron Graziana, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

it is toward his larger theory of postmodernism that today's authors gesture with varying degrees of specificity. Owens is remembered as among the most brilliant critics on the cultural politics of postmodernism and the visual arts, specifically the dynamics of power organized around the image and the activist potentiality of representation. As he wrote in "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," "postmodernism is usually treated . . . as a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions."[45] Owens had been publishing for some 15 years when he died from AIDS-related complications at the age of 39; his work had taken on a progressively more activist stance at the end of his too-short life. His earlier writings nonetheless point the way towards his subsequent, more thematically explicit engagement with politics, whether the subject was gay men in feminism or representations of the colonial Other. For at the center of his practice was a thinking about the mechanics of representation and what he called its "legislative frontier": that is to say, what can and cannot be represented by the work; how those representations are mediated; and the politics of representation that would police its borders.[46]

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45 Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 166–190.

46 Owens, "Discourse of Others," in *Beyond Recognition*.

It will turn out that the legislation of these same frontiers finds a parallel in a peculiar sheltering of time: the effort to colonize time under the sign of *historicism*. For Owens, Smithson was the immediate point of reference for that thinking; and it was his reading of allegory that constantly pushed at historicism's borders. When Owens published his seminal essays on Smithson, "Earthwords" (1979) and "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism" (1980), he could hardly have predicted that his would become the most influential discourse on Smithson's practice for some 20 years. In the later essay, Smithson's work was the platform from which Owens mounted a larger theory of postmodernism, considering artists who emerged in the 1980s such as Troy Brauntuch, Sherrie Levine and Robert Longo but also, in turning to earlier accounts of allegory in art history, Manet and Courbet. Owens argued that language erupts from the center of a range of artistic practices (with Smithson's work as exemplary), thus undermining the alleged purity of the modernist work of art, seemingly resistant to discourse. In Owens's "Photography *en abyme*" a critique of the photograph's putative claims to the status of document, the critic closes his discussion with Smithson's text-cum-work-of-art *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan*. All turn on a peculiar relation to postmodern temporality that we are, perhaps, better positioned to assess *after* the fact of the contemporary. Owens's approach to Smithson's

practice, which finds complements in the writings of Rosalind Krauss and the philosopher Gary Shapiro, leans on a cast of French heavyweights—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Derrida among them—to articulate the art-historical shift that Smithson's work announced. Perhaps most important of all, it was Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory and ruins that, as read through Smithson and vice-versa, served as his prime mover.

But just as Owens could not predict the influence his essays would have on Smithson's legacy, so too could he not have foreseen how the opening of Smithson's archive led to something of a backlash against postmodernism. As Roberts writes of many of the efforts that seem to follow Owens's example: "It is one thing to wave away, with a flick of the poststructuralist wrist, a historical meta-narrative; it is quite another to do so to an earth's worth of rocks and ruins."[47] This is an image of the postmodern as historically effete, ill-equipped to shoulder the weightiness of history. Smithson's posthumous reception is, no doubt, largely outside the parameters of these recent archive-driven projects, but one could argue that postmodernism is precisely what compelled some to move back within the archive's strictures, as if to test the "weight" of this history against the critique of historicism Owens's writing insistently mounted.

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47   Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, 5.

This is especially the case for Owens's readings on allegory, in both his review essay of Smithson's collected writings, "Earthwords" and his lengthier treatment of the subject in his two-part essay "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." Both essays first appeared in *October*; and both sought to resuscitate the terms of allegory within both the production of contemporary art and the practice of art criticism itself. Perhaps this might sound counterintuitive at first blush, not only for the art-historical traditions to which allegory is usually linked but also due to allegory's generic implications for historicism. That allegory is a notoriously elastic proposition may explain why it was so prominently accommodated within postmodernism: as Benjamin put it in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924–25) the uses of allegory suggest that "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else."[48] What follows from this description is that processes of signification are neither wholly self-present nor self-contained by any one verbal (or visual) signifier so much as they might be constellated around a chain of linked associations. The operations of allegory, then, are held as deeply contingent, in deferral.

As a figure of rhetoric, typically positioned against the symbol, allegory "occurs whenever one text is doubled by the

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48 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998), 175.

other; the Old Testament, for example, becomes allegorical
when it is read as a prefiguration of the New." Hence allegory's
exegetical or meta-textual claims: to follow Northrop Frye, "the
allegorical work tends to prescribe the direction of its own
commentary."[49] In art history, allegory is conventionally
associated with history painting, in which the visual motifs
associated with antiquity, for instance, were deployed to valorize
more recent events or speak obliquely (and hence politically)
to contemporary phenomena. As Owens will put it, it is thus
"enlisted in the service of historicism to present image upon
image of the present in terms of the classical past."[50]

    A gloss on allegory within the criticism of postmodernism
and the arts would undoubtedly appeal to gestures of
appropriation and pastiche as emblematic of this impulse. In
the recycling of styles for which many of its artistic practices
are known, one hears an echo of former historicisms. Yet it is
by turning this notion on its head—and by acknowledging the
heretical or even ruined status of allegory for modernism in
particular—that Owens sees a critical model for Smithson's
practice. Quoting Benedict Croce and Jorge Luis Borges, Owens
will note that allegory "has been condemned for nearly two
centuries as aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art."[51]

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49   Northrop Frye, cited in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," in *Beyond Recognition*, 53.
50   Ibid., 58.
51   Ibid., 53.

For his part, Smithson will address the topic head-on, seeing in the practices of his peers a resurgent allegorical tendency. "The very word allegory is enough to strike terror into the hearts of the expressive artist;" he notes, "there is perhaps no device as exhausted as allegory,"

> But strangely enough Allan Kaprow has shown interest in that worn-out device. Jorge-Luis Borges begins his *From Allegories to Novels* by saying "For all of us, the allegory is an aesthetic error."[52]

Key for both Smithson and Owens, then, is that it is the *outmoded* or exhausted status of allegory that renders it such an important tool for critical reflection. Smithson's peculiar interest in what he called "the visual aspects of language"[53] recommends him as well to this debased tradition. In considering the textuality of Smithson's practice alongside his earthworks (as in his drawing *A Heap of Language in the Vicinity of Art*) Owens highlights what he calls "the most significant displacement of all—that of the art from the visual to the textual field." It is "the eruption of language into the aesthetic field"—the textuality of the work of art—that stands as one of the key features of contemporary allegory. This is doubtlessly confirmed by Smithson's own appraisal of the subject. "I thought of writing more as material to sort of put together than as a

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52   Robert Smithson, cited in Owens, "Earthwords," in *Beyond Recognition*, 48.
53   Ibid., 42.

kind of analytic searchlight," Smithson notes, "I would con-
struct my articles in the way I would construct a work."[54]

Some might treat the statement as a question of medium-
specificity above all, where the presence of language alone is
enough to violate the terms of high modernism's imagined
formal mandate. The reading is neither easily dismissed nor
are its implications superficial: Smithson would indeed trans-
gress such formal categories as a matter of course. Such practices
are a non-issue within contemporary art partially because
of his example. Yet Owens stresses the *operative* dimensions of
allegory as both process and accumulation underwriting these
border crossings, a kind of "technique" that might be under-
stood as *formative* rather than anti-formalist. In "The Allegorical
Impulse" he reminds us that an embedded theory of time and
historicity is at the foundation of such readings, and this goes
far to explain just why it is that allegory represents an "aesthetic
aberration."

> The genealogy of modernist theory, especially of its assumption that
> each of the arts occupies a specific area of competence, may be traced
> to that moment in the 18th century when it appeared necessary, for
> complex, but always ethical, reasons, to distinguish poetry from painting
> and sculpture. For strategic reasons, that distinction was made according
> to time: in Germany, Lessing, and in France, Diderot, located poetry

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54   Smithson, cited in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 43.

and all the discursive arts along a dynamic access of temporal succession, and painting and sculpture along a static access of simultaneity. Consequently, the visual arts were denied access to discourse, which unfolds in time.[55]

Citing Carl Horst on the topic by way of Benjamin, Owens notes that allegory represents a "crossing of the borders of a different mode . . . an advance of the plastic arts into the territory of the rhetorical arts."[56] Owens sees the partial fallout of this sensibility in the conjoining of sculptural practice and art writing in the 1960s: among the most important minimalist and "post-minimalist" artists of the day—Donald Judd, Yvonne Rainer, Smithson, Robert Morris—were also some of that era's canniest writers.

But the temporal transgressions between the plastic and rhetorical arts also took other forms for Smithson's generation. Michael Fried, Clement Greenberg's most brilliant reader, was among the first to diagnose and assail this shift within minimalist sculpture as "theatrical": an "invasion," as Owens puts it, "of the static art of sculpture by *duration*" (my emphasis).[57] Fried's canonical attack on minimalism "Art and Objecthood" (1967) stands as a signal text against which much postmodernist criticism in the arts strenuously rallied.

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55 Owens, "Earthwords," 45.
56 Ibid., 48.
57 Ibid., 45.

The essay has been dissected on all fronts, from the high moral tone of its quasi-puritanical rhetoric to its vehement claims against the debased sense of time, encapsulated by the Edwardian phrase with which it concludes: "presentness is grace."[58] As Foster and others have noted, Fried's essay was among the most critically prescient in diagnosing a turn within high modernist sculpture to its postmodern fortunes.[59] And Fried's attack on theatricality would paradoxically license new possibilities for the media-inflected work to come. In "Pictures," the groundbreaking exhibition he co-organized with Helene Winer in 1977 at Artists Space in New York, Douglas Crimp considered the work of Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, Philip Smith and others as a "stratigraphic activity . . . grounded in the literal temporality and presence of theater."[60]

In dwelling on postmodernism's allegorical turn, consider the reception of Fried's "Art and Objecthood" on the part of Smithson. After the essay appeared in the June 1967 issue of *Artforum*, Smithson wrote a letter to the editor attacking the critic's treatment of time. "Michael Fried has in his article 'Art and Objecthood,'"

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58   See my "Presentness is Grace," in *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

59   See, Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 35–71.

60   Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," in B. Wallis and M. Tucker, eds., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: David R. Godine, 1992), 177.

declared a "war" on what he quixotically calls "theatricality." In a manner worthy of the most fanatical puritan, he provides the art world with a long-overdue spectacle—a kind of ready-made parody of the war between Renaissance classicism (modernity) versus Manneristic anti-classicism (theater) . . .

What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing—namely, being himself theatrical. He dreads "distance" because that would force him to become aware of the role he is playing. . . . Fried, the orthodox modernist, the keeper of the Gospel of Clement Greenberg, has been "struck by Tony Smith," the agent of endless-ness . . .

This atemporal world threatens Fried's present state of temporal grace—his "presentness." The terrors of infinity are taking over the mind of Michael Fried.[61]

Reviewing Smithson some 30 years later, Fried himself identifies a few "key sentences" in the artist's response, high-lighting the historian's repression of time in the essay.

At any rate, eternity brings about the dissolution of belief in temporal history, empires, revolutions and counter-revolutions—all become ephemeral and in a sense, unreal, even the universe loses its reality. Nature gives way to the incalculable cycles of non-duration. Eternal time is the result of skepticism, not belief. Every refutation is a mirror of the

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61 Robert Smithson, "Letter to the Editor," *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, edited by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 66.

thing it refutes—ad infinitum. *What Michael Fried attacks is what he is. He is a naturalist who attacks naturalist time. Could it be there is a double Michael Fried—the atemporal Fried and the temporal Fried?* Consider a subdivided progression of "Frieds" on millions of stages.[62]

Fried has described Smithson's letter as "characteristically brilliant" undoubtedly for its understanding that theatricality is continuous with the *ad infinitum* temporality of minimalism —the fact that this sculpture might go on and on, like Fried himself, across "millions of stages."[63]

It's typical Smithsonian fare in its vertiginous, near hallucinatory array of cultural references. And one can't ignore the coincidence between Smithson's references to "Manneristic" theater (which he positions against modernist presence) and the reading of baroque theater and allegory elaborated by Benjamin. What interests me here is that while Smithson may not have literally defined his attack on Fried in allegorical terms, the peculiar notion of time Fried lambasts is wholly consistent with that of postmodern allegory.

We know that classical allegory traded on its historicizing claims in order to communicate its message: a painting by David, famously, might appropriate the rhetoric of classicism to validate the politics of the French Revolution. As opposed

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62 Smithson, "Letter to the Editor," 67.
63 Michael Fried, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism," *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 52.

to the sense in which the historical past is accessed to do work for the present, however, Owens reads the uses of allegory in Smithson as a kind of deferral, an actual blockage of narrative (and a resistance to historicism) due to its distended temporality. He treats this in part through Jacques Derrida's reading of the supplement, as elaborated in *Of Grammatology*, exposing the metaphysical biases attached to any phenomenon that would make claims to self-presence or the status of original.[64] "Allegory is traditionally defined, following Quintilian, as a symbol introduced in continuous series, the temporal extension of metaphor," Owens writes,

> It is useful to recast this definition in structuralist terms, for then allegory
> is revealed as the projection of the metaphoric, or static, axis of language
> onto its metonymic, or *temporal* dimension[65] (my emphasis)

The crossing of the metaphoric and metonymic represents allegory's extreme transgressions in the aesthetic field. And the

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64 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

65 In both "Earthwords" and "The Allegorical Impulse," Owens will expand the structuralist dimensions of this reading with respect to Roman Jakobson: "Jakobson defined this projection of metaphor onto metonymy as the 'poetic function' and he went on to associate metaphor with poetry and romanticism and metonymy with prose and realism." Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 57. Here, I also need to cite the work of Stephen Melville, "Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism," *October* 19, Winter 1981, 55–92.

serial dimension of the gesture—its "on and on quality"—
dramatizes how allegory is fundamentally a problem of time.

Smithson's earthwork and the general category of site-
specific art will confirm this. "Smithson's work," Owens
continues, "stands as an investigation into what occurs when
structure is *actualized* in time."[66] In the film the *Spiral Jetty*,
Smithson wryly comments on the myth of a giant whirlpool at
the center of the Great Salt Lake and he "projects this as a
temporal experience" in terms of both the actuality of the work
as encountered by its audience as well as its cinematic and
photographic projection as non-sites. As Owens reminds us,
"the Jetty is not a discrete work, but one link in a chain of
signifiers which summon and refer to one another in a dizzying
spiral."[67]

In other words, *Spiral Jetty* internalizes different modes of
duration across its various media axes, underscoring the notion
of allegory as the "projection of structure as sequence." The
photograph of the earthwork, the principle vehicle through
which most have accessed its remote site, "represents our desire
to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing
image." The photographs, film and non-sites function as
supplement to the experience of "being there."[68]

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66   Owens, "Earthwords," 49.
67   Ibid., 47.
68   Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 56.

The progressively ruined quality of the earthwork recommends it most concretely as allegorical. That such work is literally subjected to the process of disintegration speaks to the notion that *Spiral Jetty* is itself uncontainable. "Smithson consistently acknowledged as part of his works the forces which erode and eventually reclaim them for nature," Owens wrote; and to be sure, in the years since the critic penned these lines, the work has undergone considerable if not seismic shifts, whether on account of the elements or the incursions of industry or some combination thereof. The level of the lake may rise or recede; the presence of salt might assume a more crystalline aspect; the color will change with the tide. The work of art, in short, can make no claims to self-presence or aesthetic integrity, ever shored up by the vast array of its supplements and progressively subjected to literal dissolution.

Spiral Jetty more closely approaches the structure of the ruin, the conditions of which dramatize an inverted historicism. For with the ruin, as Owens notes, "the works of man are reabsorbed into the landscape; ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay, a progressive distancing from origin."[69] These observations reveal Owen's explicit debt to Benjamin, whose words strike an uncanny chord with the logic of the earthwork:

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69   Ibid., 55.

In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, had been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head.[70]

Benjamin's words are continuous with his larger engagement with the untimely, from Surrealism's contract with the outmoded; to the Angel who not only "brushes history against the grain," but sees the catastrophes of the past stockpiled in the dustbin of history; to the eruptive force of the dialectical image, which holds in perpetual tension the past and future, and thus shatters the illusion of a fully transparent present. Each motif draws force from an aesthetics of the fragmentary or ruined, revealing the allegorical dimension of nearly all of Benjamin's writing: the notion that "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else."

Little wonder that Owens found Benjamin such a powerful advocate for his own theorization of postmodernism, with Smithson as the artist satisfying his tenets in the most grossly material terms. In the historiographic triangulation of the three—a philosopher writing during the period of the historical avant-gardes, an artist of the 1960s and the 1970s and a critic working in the 1980s—we glimpse that parallax view Foster described in his retrospective account of postmodernism.

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70 Walter Benjamin, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 55.

Allegory has come full circle to the present. And what allegory did for postmodernism is not unlike what postmodernism might suggest about "the contemporary"—the "capacity," as Owens put it, "to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear."[71]

"Origins"

Having charted a model of lateness and belatedness and the chain of temporal associations that is allegory, we can now confront the hoary problem of origins for and within postmodernism. Allegory presents us with something like a counternarrative: moving against a sense of narrative closure or resolution, it upsets the adjacent issue of a fixed point of origin in the process. How, then, to contend with a question of origins, apart from bracketing the issue as a matter of historiography?

There's no shortage of opinions when it comes to setting the dates for postmodernism, whether its misty beginnings nested within modernism "proper" nor its long-awaited ends circa 1989. Jameson's periodizing account renders postmodernism synonymous with late capitalism, a postwar phenomenon. By the same token, he was equally plainspoken that postmodernism did not signal anything so "silly" as a kind

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71   Ibid., 56.

of decisive historical rupture, implying that such a position is more consistent in historical tenor to modernism. He will have this much to say for the notion of an origin in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*:

> Lyotard is . . . quite unwilling to posit a postmodernist stage radically different from the period of high modernism and involving a fundamental historical and cultural break with this last . . . Postmodernism is that which follows modernism and its particular legitimation crisis but rather as a cyclical moment that returns before the emergence of ever new modernisms in the stricter sense.[72]

Other art historians and literary theorists seem more secure in articulating the baptismal moment of postmodernism, constructing a genealogy around the term. The annals of Anglo-American criticism provide a string of familiar names (Arnold Toynbee, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe); Eliot, Joyce and Pound are the literary equivalent of avant-garde titans such as Picasso. In his contribution to the Routledge series, Richard Shiff notes the occasional allusions to "postmodernism" in his days as a graduate student in the 1960s.[73] And Elkins's introduction to this problem identifies readings by both Arthur Danto and Leo Steinberg as representative of this tendency: the combines

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72 Jameson, "Foreword," in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xvi.
73 Richard Shiff, *Doubt: Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts*, vol. 3 (New York: Routledge, 2008), 39.

of Robert Rauschenberg or the targets of Jasper Johns are emblematic of this break.

Of course, what makes such readings possible is both an acknowledged bracketing and consolidation of what we think of as modernism proper—a matter not only of strict aesthetic criteria (cue Greenberg again) but a certain faith in the historicizing enterprise in the first place. The historian looking back at postmodernism from the vantage point of the contemporary understands this as a principled negotiation around the concept of originality itself, the modernist leitmotif par excellence coextensive with a theory of time.

That critique finds ample visual confirmation in the practices of the 1980s, among which one counts Sherrie Levine's series taken after the photography of Walker Evans (see Figure 1.2). In the best-known image, the grim visage of Ellie May Burroughs, snapped in Alabama in 1936, was re-photographed from an exhibition catalogue nearly 40 years after the fact. Levine's is but one of the more important interventions into the critique of originality associated with postmodernism but, apropos of the problematic the work itself confronts, it is not unique in its critical prerogative nor its investigations into the photographic medium. Any number of other artists (Sarah Charlesworth, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons) poached liberally from the archives of art history and popular culture so as to put pressure on the concept of originality
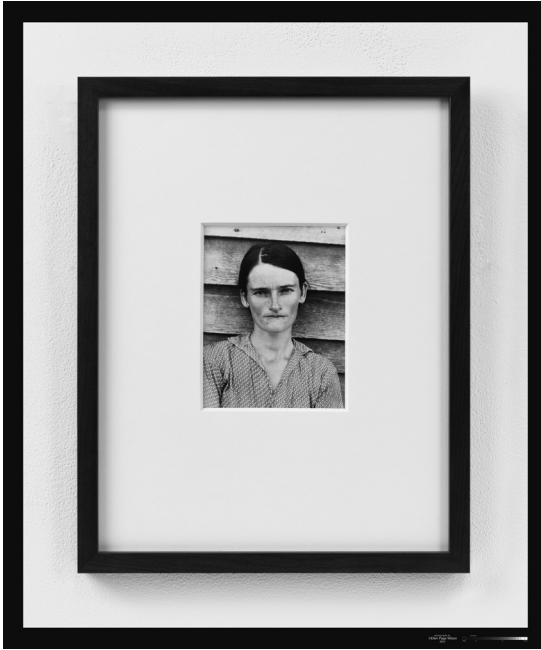
Figure 1.2 Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans*, 1981. Gelatin silver print
              15 × 12 × 3/4 in. (38.1 × 30.5 × 1.9 cm).
Source: Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

relative to media. As this handful of examples suggest (and there
are plenty more) there's no argument that the art of the 1980s
endlessly checked the notion of originality, especially so with
regards to the copy, the photograph and the culture of
reproduction.

But something goes missing, or is at least repressed, in an
exclusive focus on the recentness of such practices, identified
(to follow the textbooks) as the "art of the 1980s." Such an
approach implicitly treats the rubrics of originality as virtually

continuous with modernism; it subscribes, by extension, to an account of postmodernism as "break" or rupture from that previous epoch, as something new in itself. And what it likewise implies is that the terms of originality are upheld within that "prior" moment—were, in fact, somehow transparent and "true" to that moment. But countless examples abound that put the lie to such conceits, not only the paradigmatic figure of Duchamp. Shiff, for instance, notes "elements of parodic postmodern practice" in the work of Willem de Kooning, calling him "an appropriator who claimed no original vision of the world" but adds that the painter's tendency proceeded "without need of a name."[74]

You could argue for the differences in tenor in the ways in which a copy was used by modernist artists as opposed to those described as postmodern, but this only appeals to one part of the dilemma; while suggesting that the problem of "origins" is hardly new to postmodernism it does not address the thematic in historiographic terms *within* modernism. For this reason, the canniest responses to the question look at earlier periods of art history: in the first chapter of his *Ways Around Modernism*, Stephen Bann puts it thus: "the pre-conditions of Postmodernism cannot be understood without reference to the preconditions of Modernism, and that these

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74   Shiff, *Doubt*, 39.

in turn are misunderstood if we are only imperfectly aware of Modernism's structural relation to what went before."[75] His hypothesis is that "it is only through examining the conditions under which Modernism was bracketed out that we can determine what it means for the bracket to be removed, with the advent of Postmodernism."[76] His paramount example is Manet, whose inaugural status for modernism was consolidated by no less an authority than Clement Greenberg.

Bann's investigation into the plurality of modernism's origins is appropriately viewed through a postmodern optic. For my purposes, there is no better place to end this section than with Rosalind Krauss's "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," her groundbreaking essay on the discourse of originality as elaborated within modernism. Krauss draws specifically upon an episode from futurism to define her terms. "By originality, here," she writes, "I mean more than the revolt against tradition that echoes in Ezra Pound's 'Make it New' or sounds in the futurist's promise to destroy the museums that cover Italy as though 'with countless cemeteries.'"

> More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality
> is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth.
> Marinetti, thrown from his automobile one evening in 1909 into a

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75 Bann, "Strange Encounters," in *Ways Around Modernism: Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts*, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 68.

76 Bann, "Strange Encounters," in *Ways Around Modernism*, 78.

factory ditch filled with water, emerges as if from amniotic fluid to be born—without ancestors—a futurist. This parable of absolute self-creation that begins the first Futurist Manifesto functions as a model for what is meant by originality among the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life.[77]

Marinetti's infamous birthing metaphor opens onto the question of *reproducibility* for Krauss: that is, how serial production shadows the mythic claims of originality within the avant-garde. Occasioned by a Rodin exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington D.C., she charts these issues relative to a posthumous casting of *The Gates of Hell* on display, accompanied by an educational film documenting the techniques involved in its fabrication (see Figure 1.3). The production of such work decades after the fact of Rodin's death prompts reflection on the nature of authenticity and originality in the work of art, concepts continuous with modernism's claims to the same as a mode of historical consciousness, as an epoch. The expressive surfaces and wrenching subject matter associated with Rodin's studio renders his example especially charged. "Rodin has been dead since 1918," Krauss writes, "and surely a work of art of his produced after more than sixty years after

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77 Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 157.

his death cannot be the genuine article, cannot, that is, be an original."[78] But to the question (or accusation) that such reproductions are fakes, Krauss responds, "the answer to this is more interesting than one would think: for the answer is neither yes nor no."[79]

The history of *The Gates of Hell* resists the notion of the work's organic singularity from its paradoxical "beginning." It records Rodin's contractual obligations to the state of France, which had commissioned the sculptor to produce *The Gates of Hell* for a building whose construction was later cancelled; the fact that the work was unfinished upon Rodin's death, uncast in bronze during his lifetime; and the notion that the artist had never finalized the composition, organized around clusters of figures which were themselves multiples. Yet it would be incorrect to assume these factors amount only to an aesthetics of the unfinished. Reproducibility, rather, is part and parcel to the work's very production. Krauss documents the extent to which Rodin virtually recycled numerous forms from earlier pieces in line with the technologies of fabrication and reproduction at his disposal. "The issue of authenticity is equally problematic for each of the existing casts," she writes, "it is only more conspicuously so for the most recent."[80]

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78   Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," 151.
79   Ibid., 151.
80   Ibid., 152.

Figure 1.3 Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell*. Bronze, green patina.
Posthumous cast authorized by Musée Rodin, 1981.

Source: Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University;
Gift of the B. Gerald Cantor Collection.

Obliquely confirming Elkins, Bann and Schiff on the matter—that postmodernism describes a resistance from *within* modernism—Krauss speaks to the relative historical awareness surrounding the discourse of originality and its construction. The "ever-present reality of the copy as the underlying condition

of the original was much closer to the surface of consciousness in the early years of the 19th century than it would later be permitted to be."[81] On the other side of the chronological spectrum Krauss will also make a claim for the moment at which this recognition would emerge decisively into historical consciousness—"belatedly" in fact—describing Levine's reproductions of Eliot Porter landscapes as an explicit deconstruction. "In deconstructing the sister notions of origins and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide . . ."

> It is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication.[82]

Strange, indeed—and a perspective that we might well take on board in our musings on the contemporary. Schiff writes: "I wonder why a theoretical or stylistic syndrome acquires its name precisely when it does—not later, not earlier."[83] In the case of the contemporary, whose nominal status I claim arrives too early, postmodernism had long ago theorized its lateness, its irrelevance even, well in advance of the fact.

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81   Ibid., 162.
82   Ibid., 170.
83   Schiff, *Doubt*, 30.

2. New Games[1]

You can't change a game by winning it, goes the formula. Or losing it or refereeing it or spectating it. You change a game by leaving it, going somewhere else, and starting a new game. If it works, it will in time alter or replace the old game.

<div align="right">(Stewart Brand, "Theory of Game Change"[2])</div>

Any event—given the external conditions and the participants in the situation (provided that the latter are acting of their own free will)— may be regarded as a game of strategy if one looks at the effects it has on its participants.

<div align="right">(John von Neumann, "Theory of Parlour Games"[3])</div>

What is needed if we are to understand social relations in this manner, on whatever scale we choose, is not only a theory of communication, but a theory of games which accepts agonistics as its founding principle.

<div align="right">(Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*[4])</div>

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1   A version of this chapter appeared in "The Conference Issue," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 10, 1 (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2010), 35–57.

2   Stewart Brand "Theory of Game Change," in *The New Games Book*, ed. Andrew Fluegleman (San Francisco: New Games Foundation, 1976), 137.

3   John Von Neumann, cited in Sylvia Nassar, *A Beautiful Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 84.

4   Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 16.

In *Relational Aesthetics*, his influential essay of 1998, French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud described the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Carsten Höller and others as a social staging ground of sorts, less object, we might say, than interface. As required reading for the art-school set, Bourriaud's polemic comes as close to a canon text for the art of "the contemporary" as we have, brooking no argument with post-modernism. It is seemingly indifferent to a Baudrillard or a Jameson or Krauss; and makes only passing reference to Lyotard (and not even the Lyotard of *The Postmodern Condition*).[5] Which all seems to the point: *Relational Aesthetics* takes on the art not of the 1980s or 1970s as its subject matter, but the work of the 1990s.

For relational aesthetics, as the received wisdom would have it, mediate a social encounter between diverse parties in ways that are unexpected and impermanent. Here the work of art is both an occasion (because an event) and occasional (because subjected to the contingencies of time and experience). The work is, in short, *performative*. Bourriaud makes pointed allusion to a literal game as this art's animating metaphor:

> Rirkrit Tiravanija organizes a dinner in a collector's home, and leaves
> him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup. Phillipe Parreno

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5   Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: La Presse du Reel, 2002), 27.

invites a few people to pursue their favorite hobbies on May Day, on a factory assembly line . . . Noritoshi Hirakawa puts a small ad in a newspaper to find a girl to take part in his show. . . . One could add many other names and works to such a list. Anyhow, the liveliest factor that is played out on the chessboard of art has to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts.[6]

What are the historical implications of speaking about such work through the rhetoric of games? What extra-aesthetic models might complicate our understanding of such practices, undermining the utopian premises underlying much partici-patory art? What are we to make of the ellipses that obtain between an interactive or relational art that is analogical and incarnate versus its *seeming* opposition in the world of digital media? And finally, how do we treat such claims historio-graphically, particularly as they are presented as the most con-temporary of artistic phenomena, implicitly trumping the (apparently) now-obsolete tenets of postmodernism?

My concerns here neither reduce to board games as such nor the "play element" in the culture that is the traditional prerogative of *Homo ludens*. The history of art is rife with games: it is a topic that has been approached from a number of important positions, whether the perspectival grids of chess, or the work of the Surrealists or the later efforts of a

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6   Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 27.

Guy Debord.[7] In this specific context, however, games will have as much to do with a theory and indeed, practice of *conflict* as a thematic of play, turning on a question of knowledge, its exchange and rationalization. I read "relational" as code for the interactive, if with the caveat that this mode of performative work—"participatory," "perceptual," "experimental" as Bourriaud will describe it—takes a decisively critical position on the rubrics of interactivity conventionally associated with the digital sphere: that of virtual markets, the information society and the drear fortunes of the service economy. And I do so through recourse to postmodernism.

Bourriaud insists upon the break his model announces from the art of the 1960s; his silence on the subject of postmodernism comes as little surprise as a result. We can't begrudge him the gesture as a curator of contemporary art. For all of this, a story premised on social exchange and participation cannot help but resonate with earlier literature on postmodernism, a specific notion of gamesmanship that is no mere game. In the following, I introduce the phenomenon of "New Games" before delving into a reading of Lyotard and the artist Öyvind Fahlström. Lyotard is revisited for cues that bear profound consequence for our current situation: how post-

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7   Hubert Damisch, most notably, charts the origin of the perspectival section relative to the organization of the chess game. Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

modernism, as a particular theory of knowledge, informs the ways in which collective participation, social agency and individual choice are progressively submitted to the logic of rationalization. Perhaps surprisingly, the language game of postmodernism comes up against the game-theoretic discourse of the Cold War, both central to the question of knowledge in computerized societies.

Under the banner of the game, then, we will consider more local, art-historical expressions of interactivity, charting its implications with specific reference to diverse media. Foster names a central problem of postmodernism as necessarily one of mediation—of connection, disconnection and interactivity:

> Is our mediatic world one of increased interaction, as benign as the cyberspace of a telephone call or databank; or is it one of invasive discipline, each of us so many "dividuals" electronically tracked, generically traced, not as a policy of any maleficent Big Brother but as a matter of quotidian course? In so many ways it is both these worlds at once, and it is this new intensity of dis/connection that is postmodern.[8]

In following such questions, I mean to complicate interactivity's utopian claims.[9] Bourriaud argues that the work

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8   Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax," *October* 63, Winter 1993, 4.
9   The art-critical notion of interactivity, which has been banalized to mean any work of art in which an audience might actively "interface" with the object (and hence participate in its perpetual reconstitution) is typically treated in democratizing terms: the "art of

emblematic of relational aesthetics represents a challenge to the service economy: motifs of labor are inescapable in his account, with the solicitation to play described as "micro-utopian." But the tenor of such examples, both democratizing and ludic, recommends comparison with our first example framing post-modernism as a theory of games, seemingly borne of the utopian promise of the 1960s. Coming to florescence in the 1970s, its practices are indebted to the ethos of the Cold War, which pays them ample dividends even as they are set radically apart. Their history dramatizes the contemporary game as one of *conflict*, where the encounter between parties is submitted to the alternating logics of control and self-organization.

Softwar

Consider the following example, which takes us out of the gallery and onto the playing field. It demonstrates the uneasy

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participation" means that the work of art no longer sits at an aesthetic remove from its audience; and that the artist allegedly no longer maintains authority over its meaning. This perspective is forcefully challenged by and chimes with Claire Bishop's critique of the "creative misreading" performed on poststructuralist theories of authorship by contemporary curators of "relational aesthetics." See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, Fall 2004, 51–79. Bishop appeals to the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau to trouble what she sees as Bourriaud's (and others) misreading of poststructuralist theory in the context of curatorial practice: that the notion of interpretation as "open to continual reassessment" is confused with the idea that "the work of art itself is argued to be in perpetual flux." Bishop, 52.

My point here is that a theory of interactivity and the work of art as necessarily democratizing needs to accommodate the more historical implications relative to systems analysis and cybernetics, where various and often competing notions of interactivity are elaborated.

nexus between conflict and cooperation, tension and accommodation, at the heart of the postwar game, and is of peculiar, certainly subterranean, relevance for Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. On the cover of the *New Games Book*, published by the New Games Foundation in 1976, an exultant young woman springs from a groundless ground, long hair flying, arms flung open, as if to embrace the virtual community these novel forms of play were meant to inspire (Figure 2.1). *Play Hard, Play Fair, Nobody Hurt* runs the refrain beneath. Conflict might seem the farthest thing from these stated ambitions: on each page, the book will champion the pacific spirit of a new form of interactivity, in which rules seemed to matter little and community was all. Plentiful black and white photographs show participants—young, old and invariably smiling—engaged in odd communitarian experiments: games of cooperation rather than competition, meant to enable a new democratizing ethos chiming with the social revolutions of the decade before.

Hence a gathering of assorted bohemians hoists a giant canvas and rubber ball in the air, 6 ft in diameter and painted with wobbly lines charting landmasses and seas (Figure 2.2). The game is an allegory of both geopolitics and environmentalism, a collective shouldering of the world in train of the Cold War. It is among the first Earthballs. In another image, a parachute is deflated of its military associations by a group of
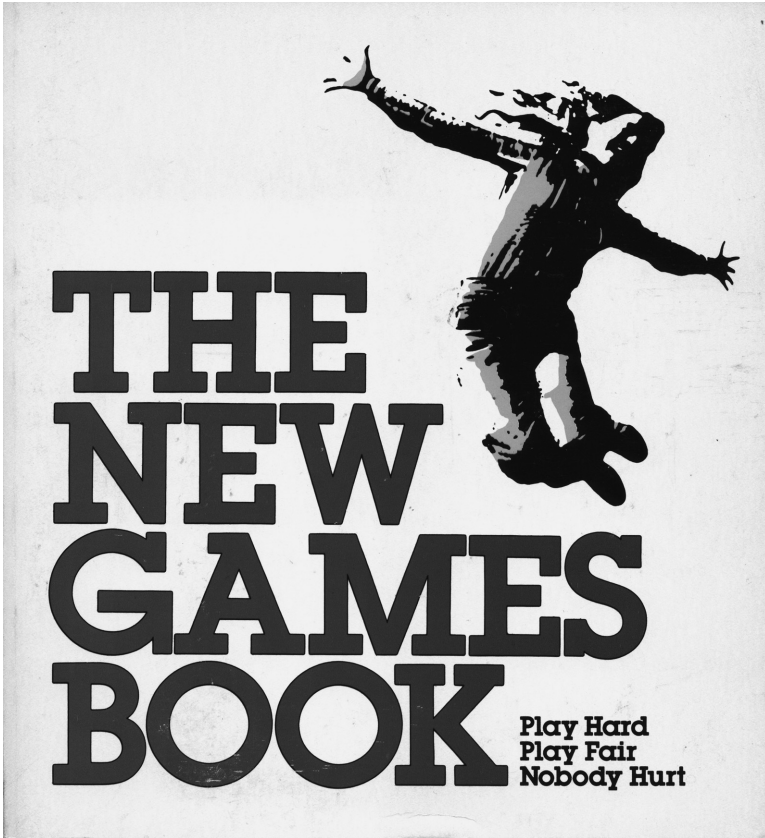
Figure 2.1 Cover, *The New Games Book*, edited by Andrew Fluegelman. *Source*: San Francisco: New Games Foundation, 1976.

players, who in flapping the silken tarp up and down, create a tent-like space under which to frolic and shelter.

For any one growing up in California in the late 1960s or early 1970s, the photographic archive of these games is likely to prompt both nostalgia and a twinge of embarrassment.

Played in grassy fields and shambling farms, such games had nonsense titles like "Hunker Hawser" and "Ooh-Ahhh" and "Dho-Dho-Dho"; they involved quotidian props like frisbees and ropes; and they might call on each player to release his or her inner-animal in simulating the part of a squirrel, caterpillar or snake. Trading on their non-competitive spirit, these games went on to become staples in playgrounds and Sunday schools across the country. Yet when New Games were first played in the mid-1960s, the idea behind these and many other such spectacles seemed a highly localized, no doubt micro-utopian,

Figure 2.2 Illustration (earth ball).
Source: *The New Games Book*, edited by Andrew Fluegelman. San Francisco: New Games Foundation, 1976.

antidote to the military nightmare that was the war in Southeast Asia. The repurposing of a parachute, the clamoring for planetary forms and the coordination of a mass body as a form of play was all in the service of appropriating, even accommodating, the conflicted and violent dynamics of the era and creating a new sense of community in the process. "We are beginning to create a play community—not a forever community with a fixed code," noted Bernie de Koven, a game designer and self-described "play facilitator." This was "a temporary community with a code we make up as we go along . . . a community that we can continue creating anywhere, any time we find the people who want to create with us.[10]

De Koven's language smacks of the self-actualizing rhetoric associated with the New Age. Yet the notion that military and digital associations shadow such game playing is confirmed by the influence of Stewart Brand on the New Games movement. As the founding light of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* and the Co-Evolutionary Movement, Brand has of late enjoyed a newfound reputation within art history and media studies circles, as both doyen of the counterculture *and* digital impresario, two roles that might on the face of things seem oppositional but are in fact continuous. In his definitive account *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole*

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10   *The New Games Book*, New Games Foundation, edited by Andrew Fluegelman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Dolphin, 1976), 42.

Earth Network and the Rise of Digital Utopianism, Fred Turner argues that the liberal utopia stereotypically associated with the counterculture set the terms for the networked society; more specifically, the *corporate* dimensions of the latter required both the mechanisms and philosophy of the former.[11] If *The Whole Earth Catalogue* was imagined to provide "access to tools"—ways of doing and making in a world out of touch with itself—new games seemed an appropriate arena in which one might learn to use such tools or practice their collaborative effects: they were "a useful thing to do, a way to be, a set of meta-strategies to learn."[12] But it was Vietnam, first and foremost, that was the impetus for the game's foundation, with a peculiar nod to its military strategies running throughout.

In 1966, two years before the first issue of *The Whole Earth Catalogue* appeared, the War Resisters League at San Francisco State College contracted Brand to stage an event "that would let them understand war by appreciating and experiencing the source of it within themselves."[13] Brand was a strangely appropriate figure to recruit as the organizer: he had served as a parachutist in the army but his collaborations with many

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11 Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). As in the last chapter, I'm indebted to extensive discussions with Turner about the game-theoretic turn of mid-century visual culture and the question of interdisciplinarity organized around models derived from systems and operational analysis.

12 Brand, quoted in "It Began with World War IV" in *The New Games Handbook*, 8.

13 Ibid., 8.

of the leading lights of the Bay Area counterculture—Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters among them—recommended him to shepherding the event as a kind of dystopian happening. It was called "World War IV" and the first game played bore the infelicitous name "Slaughter." On his thinking behind the event, Brand noted

> I felt that American combat was being pushed as far away as the planet would allow, becoming abstract and remote. It suggested to me that there was something wrong with our conflict forms here . . . Pacifists and war resisters in 1966 were opposed to warfare in any form, including competitive games.[14]

The observation that American combat was becoming "abstract and remote" will haunt later accounts of contemporary warfare and its simulation, particularly in the work of Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio. Critical to note here is that Brand observed that these very same pacifists had internalized the kind of aggression they were alleged to oppose. The purpose of Slaughter was to short-circuit this feedback loop of violence by enabling a cathartic form of play:

> I invented it because all the peaceniks I was dealing with seemed very much out of touch with their bodies in an unhealthy way. Consequently they were starting to project a heaviness on a personal level that was as

14   Ibid., 8.

bad as the heaviness we were projecting in Vietnam. What I wanted was a game which would involve fairly intense physical interaction between players.[15]

Out of these concerns for the perennial "heaviness" of those involved in the anti-war movement, Slaughter was born, in the first instance involving some forty players confronting one another, barefoot and on their knees, across a wrestling mat, with a rock band providing a fittingly noisy soundtrack to the melee. It was an essentially rule-less game but no less concentrated, nor self-organizing, because of it: controlled chaos was its operating metaphor and "intensity" its effect. As Brand recalled "there was no way for every player *not* to get involved. The game was intense, energetic, with much body contact and almost no injury. To the players' surprise, it was also fun."[16]

After Slaughter, Brand introduced his Earthball, which would come to emblematize the utopian ambitions of the New Games movement and then later stand as an icon of Earth Day celebrations in the early 1970s. Brand adapted the form from the pushballs he trained with in boot camp during his stint in the army. The mechanism for play was, not unlike that of Slaughter, an ultimately therapeutic dynamic. As the ball made

15   Ibid., 8.
16   Ibid., 8.

its way to one side, Brand noted that the aggressors relented to the point where they "defected" to the losing side, ensuring a constant state of play and a mutable, indeed, radically contingent, form of cooperation.

For contemporary readers, these experiments in creative play may seem like aggressively feel-good high-jinks, the staunch rituals of hippie communitarianism. Such games might seem to share nothing with relational aesthetics (to say little of postmodernism) apart from superficial appearances: It's worth noting that the images commonly associated with Bourriaud's thesis often feature clusters of contemporary bohemian types sprawled out on cushions in museums or gallery floors. But it is in the rhetoric of conflict and interactivity specifically—and the military/digital implications of such forms of play more generally—that we begin to see a pattern emerge, the forms of which intersect surprisingly with Lyotard's reading of postmodernism. Much of this turns on Brand's concept behind Softwar: "the idea that," as he put it, "people could design their conflict forms to suit everyone's needs."[17] As he noted, Softwar is

> conflict which is regionalized (to prevent injury to the uninterested), refereed (to permit fairness and certainty of a win–lose outcome), and

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17   Ibid., 9.

cushioned (weaponry-regulated for maximum contact and minimum permanent disability).[18]

Softwar, in other words, was a kind of laboratory for conflict, in which any number of variables associated with violence, injury and transgression are submitted to a certain mode of control, rendered a game and thus pacified of ostensible aggression. Softwar is refereed, even made a kind of performance. It is a spectator sport for the New Age. From the perspective of its producers, Softwar meant a certain autonomy in customizing the rules of that game. That one might control something called a "conflict form" is counter-intuitive and strange: it suggests that conflict might be equalized across all interested parties and that cooperation is part of its design. As is appropriate to a game of conflict, if one now defanged of its violent implications, the "soft" in Softwar echoes the New Games mantra that "nobody gets hurt," a *safe* exploration of conflict.

For the question of contemporary art and its theories, Softwar is equally evocative for other reasons, namely an immediate cognate in "software." After all, it was in the software of the immediate postwar era—and the economic, political and social conditions that it modeled and out of which it emerged—that forms of conflict were most plainly elaborated. From here

18   Ibid., 9.

we begin to detect a point of tangency between the relational and postmodernism. It turns on an acute notion of interactivity, at once presaged by postwar military culture and the forms of computerized knowledge that mediated and enabled it.

Theory of Game Change: Spacewar

In an article published in the Summer 1976 issue of the *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, and then reprinted in the *New Games Handbook*, Brand described the evolution of new games relative to a very different kind of game: Spacewar. Spacewar, among the earliest computer games, was a source of inspiration, in spirit and organizing ethos, in the creation of Slaughter. You might flip through the entirety of the *New Games Handbook* and not find a single picture of a computer and its interactive and gaming capacities. Yet Brand's "Theory of Game Change" stems directly from this the new world of computers and their military simulations, not to mention the game-theoretic discourse that ran parallel to their development.

Spacewar was exemplary as a "better game"—a game that will "compel you to play it and refine it"[19]—and thus a model for the New Games that followed it historically. Developed at MIT by Steve Russell in 1962, it was inspired by the arrival of a brand new PDP-1: the earliest "mini-computer" produced

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19   Brand, "Theory of Game Change," 137.

by the Digital Equipment Corporation and remarkably in-expensive for its time. Reflecting on how little use the PDP-1 was getting, Russell recalled:

> It had a console typewriter that worked right, which was rare, and a paper tap reader and a cathode ray tube display (there had been CRT displays before, but primarily in the Air Defense System.) Somebody had built little pattern generating programs which made interesting patterns like a kaleidoscope. Not a very good demonstration. Here was this display that could do all sorts of good things! So we started talking about it, figuring what would be interesting displays. We decided that probably you could make a two-dimensional maneuvering sort of thing, and decided that naturally the obvious thing to do was spaceships.[20]

The description makes explicit the link between simulation and military technology; it treats life on the screen as a kind of aesthetics, of pleasing patterns and interesting displays, all soliciting manipulation on the part of its viewer; and, most generally, it submits all of the above terms to the logic of a game, an interactive experience, one endlessly internalizing (and re-adjusting) its parameters relative to the moves of its players and the decisions predicated on that opponent's rational response.

Spacewar was a model game precisely because of those parameters. At the end of "Theory of Game Change" Brand

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20   Ibid., 138.

calls on Johan Huizanga, one of the great theorists of conventional game playing, to justify such tenets, citing the author's canonical *Homo Ludens*. On games and the arenas in which they are played, Huizinga notes, "All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart":

> Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive, feature of play: it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world, and into the confusion of life, it brings a temporary, a limited, perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from "it" spoils the game, robs it of character and makes it worthless. The profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play, as we noted in passing, seems to lie to such a large extent in the field of aesthetics. Play has the tendency to be beautiful.[21]

The game represents a perfect world, ordered and aesthetic, nested in an imperfect world. Its rituals effectively license playful behavior, if only to control disorder. *Play Hard, Play Fair, Nobody Gets Hurt.* The model Huizinga proposes, then (at least as it is presented by Brand), is a domesticating one, recalling Mikhail Bakhtin's reading of carnival as a kind of social stop-gap measure, where raucous behavior and social excess is officially sanctioned under the terms of religious ritual.

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21   Huizinga, cited in ibid., 140.

Both modes enable a collective blowing-off-steam—indeed, such behavior is virtually mandated—in the larger interests of social equilibrium.

For Brand, such a reading could only signal the human potential of the new digital technology. In an article published in *Rolling Stone* several years before the New Games phenomenon exploded, he writes the following on Spacewar:

> Ready or not, computers are coming to the people . . . That's good news, maybe the best since psychedelics. It's way off the track of the "Computers—Threat or Menace?" school of liberal criticism but surprisingly in line with romantic fantasies of the forefathers of the science such as Norbert Wiener, Warren McCulloch, J. C. R. Licklider, John von Neumann and Vannevar Bush.
>
> The trend owes its health to an odd array of influences: The youthful fervor and firm disestablismentarianiasm of the freaks who design computer science; an astonishingly enlightened research program from the very top of the Defense Department; an expected market-Banking movement by the manufacturers of small calculating machines; an irrepressible midnight phenomenon known as Spacewar.[22]

Spacewar provides the occasion for linking an odd network of radically disparate phenomena, from psychedelics to John von Neumann, from anti-establishment types to the

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22 Stewart Brand, "Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death among the Computer Bums," *Rolling Stone*, December 7, 1972.

Defense Department to a "market-banking movement." If the computer had once been the bane of the technophobic school of postwar criticism, with the dystopia of a robotic menace its recurring nightmare, Brand has now laid claim to the computer as a tool of collective play. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about this constellation of sources is the frankness with which they are presented. There's no explanation as to why denizens of the Pentagon might be rhetorical bedfellows with a cadre of youthful freaks; nor the idea that the game somehow inherits from "the romantic fantasies of the forefathers of the science such as Norbert Wiener, Warren McCulloch, J. C. R. Licklider, John von Neumann and Vannevar Bush."

   Closing in on the generation of Cold War scientists name-checked by Brand, all of whom were variously involved with Los Alamos, the RAD Lab at MIT, the proving grounds of Aberdeen and the postwar think tank, we might speculate as to what those "romantic fantasies" might be. In speaking of interactivity and postmodernism, we might chalk it up to a theory of games or, rather, *game theory*: that pervasive branch of postwar economics that could well be described as *a theory of everything*, universalizing in its application across the disciplines.[23] For given its claims to science, game theory will

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23 Consider the description of game theory on the back of their introduction, Shaun P. Hargreaves Heap and Yanis Varoufakis, *Game Theory: A Critical Text* (London: Routledge, revised edition 2004).

sponsor a view to the social relation predicated on a certain mode of communication, rationalization and control.

Game Theory

"Game Theory" is a discipline of economics, with the mathematical method as its disposal, that takes interaction as its object of study. Games here are neither a function of chance nor merely play: They are a matter of people and things, organisms, institutions and businesses, nations and states, life and death, situations of bargaining, leveraging and bluffing. Game theory charts strategies of, and solutions for, these particular encounters; and it does so not as a matter of probability but as a type of economic behavior that can be rationally mapped.[24] Likewise game theory considers mixed strategies of cooperation and conflict between parties in forging the outcome to a game. It is a means of modeling social interaction—treating it as a science with its own logic, with rules to follow and solutions to describe, military in its origin.

While a family resemblance exists between game theory and the *Kriegspiel* played by Prussian military officers during the

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"Game theory now provides the theoretical underpinning for most areas of economics. Moreover it has spread fast to other disciplines, energized by claims that it represents an opportunity to unify the social sciences, to found a notional theory of society on a common bedrock of methodological individualism."

24 On the reasons why game theory is neither a matter of chance nor probability, see John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*

nineteenth century, game theory is a Cold War phenomenon, finding its formative players within the postwar think tank.[25] It is especially associated with the RAND Corporation, which assumed a critical role in the analysis of the accelerating arms race.[26] A roster of some of RAND's most famous members is a virtual *Who's Who* in the history of late twentieth-century military strategy and economics, including John Forbes Nash, Bernard Brodie, Albert Wohlstetter, Kenneth Arrow, Herman Kahn, Thomas Schelling and Daniel Ellsberg. In addition to its classified research, RAND sponsored popular, even waggish, accounts of game theory, such as J. D. Williams's *The Compleat Strategyst,* a "primer" which "may be read for fun," and complete with as many whimsical illustrations as complex diagrams

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(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 87: "We wish to mention that the extensive literature of 'mathematical games,'" they write,

> which was developed mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries—deals essentially only with an aspect of the matter which we have already left behind. This is the appraisal of the influence of chance . . . Consequently we are no longer interested in these games, where the mathematical problem consists only in evaluating the role of chance—i.e. in computing probabilities and mathematical expectations.

25 In his biography of John von Neumann, William Poundstone is quick to point out the limits of the comparison, even as he offers a useful brief on *Kriegspiel*. See William Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma* (New York: Anchor, 1993), 38.

26 A standard reference is Fred Kaplan*, The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983); also see the more recent Alex Alberra, *Soldiers of Reason: The RAND Corporation and the Rise of the American Empire* (New York: Harcourt, 2008). An exceptionally clear introduction to game theory in general and the Prisoner's Dilemma specifically is Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, 62. Also helpful is Sylvia Nasar's biography on John Forbes Nash, *A Beautiful Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).
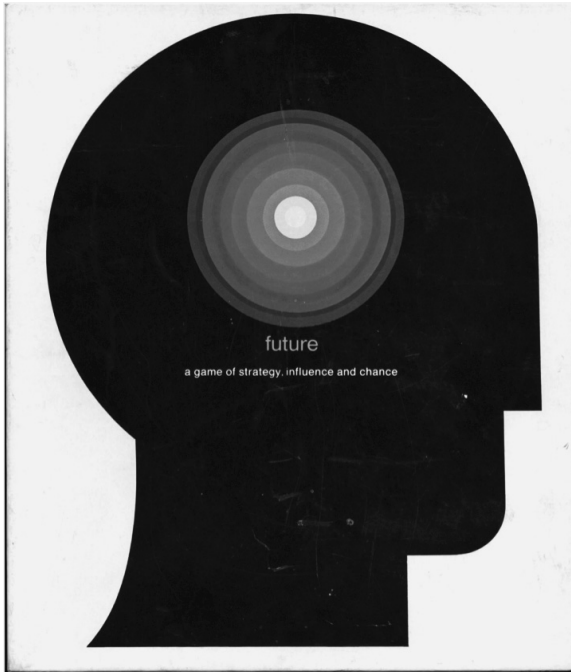
Figure 2.3 *Future: A Game of Strategy, Influence and Change*. Board
game.
Source: Photo Pamela M. Lee.

explaining different (and difficult) strategies.[27] So too could
corporations with ties to RAND—Kaiser Aluminum comes
especially to mind—produce their own board games to be
played by mathematicians, economists, statisticians and other
social scientists.

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27 J. D. Williams, *The Compleat Strategyst: Being a Primer on the Theory of Games of Strategy*
(New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954).

The game "Future" (Figure 2.3) with its frankly modish graphics and crayon-box colors, is a notable example. Designed by Theodore Gordon and Olaf Helmer, it includes fake currency, a forecasting table and score cards, detailing a host of futuristic scenarios from plunging markets to food shortages. Its appearance trades on the modular format of board games popularized in the 1950s and 1960s but its raison d'être was the practice of forecasting, a tangent to game-theoretic modeling concerned with futurological projection.

If game theory took root during the Cold War, and was debated by many at RAND on account of its applicability, it continues to influence the range of social-scientific and political thought. For example, it has been of peculiar interest to the field of evolutionary biology (think Richard Dawkins's "selfish gene"). To the point of the contemporary, game theory has been extensively theorized relative to the social contract, interpersonal psychology, rational choice and public choice theory and hence, the fortunes of neoliberalism: namely, the organizing role of states or collective agencies versus individuals as arbiters of policy, particularly after 1989.[28] What might seem the abstruse formulations of economists or the distantly remembered

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28   This is an insight of an episode ("Fuck You, Buddy") of the BBC-produced documentary, *The Trap*, which in part narrates the rise of neoliberalism in the UK through terms established in game-theoretic discourse around the Cold War. As directed by Adam Curtis and broadcast in 2007, this episode specifically highlights the relationship between Thatcher's neoliberal revolution and the public choice theory of James Buchanan.

protocols of defense intellectuals, in other words, continues to impact the management of social behaviors: of how social interaction is rationalized and what the solutions imply for both ideology, institutions, the fate of the public and on-the-ground policy-making.

What I'm arguing for game-theoretic discourse is the extent to which theories of postmodernism have taken up its most basic tenets—namely those related to calculability of the social relation as staked on information—while challenging its authority on the grounds of the way it rationalizes both conflict and cooperation, a logic of totalization. For game theory will presuppose a kind of feedback loop of assumed communicative transparency, thus bearing an uncomfortable, because negative, relationship to consensus building. Indeed, it literalizes and ironically confirms notions of rational discourse we've come to associate with readings of Jürgen Habermas—namely a rational society based on communicative action.[29]

On game theory and its implications for rational choice theory, see Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis, *Game Theory*; On its import for neoliberalism, see S. M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Amadae's thesis is directed specifically to the work of Kenneth J. Arrow, James M. Buchanan, Gordon Tullock and William H. Riker, describing the evolution of their thought relative to debates on individual versus collective agency

29 It is with his theory of communicative action that Habermas's relationship to game theory has been understood as most proximate. On this relationship, see James Johnson, "Habermas on Strategic and Communicative Action," *Political Theory* 19, 2 (May 1991), 181–201. Johnson's essay attempts to understand the relationship between strategic action and communicative action in Habermas relative to its game theoretic implications, though he notes that the critical theory of Habermas might seem at a radical remove from

For its part, game theory advances its own peculiar model of consensus. In reaching a solution to a game in which one party wins, or all parties cooperate in the determination of the most advantageous outcome for both, there exists what economists call the "common knowledge of rationality" (CKR), enabling the most appropriate course of action in a game and further implying a "consistent alignment of beliefs" between all parties. It is a question of shared knowledge and, as we shall argue, the *legitimation* of knowledge as explored in Lyotard's reading of postmodernism. The examples that served to introduce postmodernism as a theory of games—Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and Stewart Brand's New Games model— touch on this thinking. Here participation presumes a certain degree of transparency and agency, even as the results willfully court contingency and chaos. Both are effectively "laboratories" for conflict, a domestication of the social encounter thematized as a form of communal play.

A compact excursus on two of game theory's major principles—John von Neumann and John Forbes Nash—paves the way for a thinking about its relation to postmodernism and contemporary art. (The proviso here is that mine is an

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game theory, It is worth noting as well that Habermas himself acknowledged the potential utility of game theory "for studying strategic interaction." Johnson, 182. One needs also to acknowledge Habermas's confrontation with Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems in Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (New York: Beacon, 1975).

egregiously non-technical introduction to the topic, which might well be to the point of how deeply we have internalized its conceits.) The Hungarian mathematician John von Neumann, perhaps best known as the "inventor" of the stored-value, binary computer in the 1940s (not to mention as a collaborator in the military experiments of Los Alamos), had played *Kriegspiel* in his native Budapest and was an avid, if not terribly gifted, poker player. One of the generation of pioneering Eastern European Jewish scientists who emigrated to the United States in the 1930s, he was one of the first fellows at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and would later take up residency at the RAND corporation. In 1928 he published "On Parlour Games," a German-language essay that few would read but would subsequently assume the status of canon text for a theory of games. Von Neumann had essentially written the proof for what is called the "minimax theorem." William Poundstone furnishes a clear explanation:

> The minimax theorem says that there is always a rational solution to a precisely defined conflict between two people whose interests are completely opposite. It is a rational solution in that both parties can convince themselves that they cannot expect to do any better given the nature of the conflict.[30]

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30 Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, 62.

The minimax theorem was directed to two-person "zero-sum" games—that is, when the total payoffs are fixed and where the winner takes all. A zero-sum game, in short, is when the sum of the opponent's payoffs for each outcome is zero and the situation is one of pure conflict. This laid the groundwork for more complex, "n-person" games of mixed strategy, particularly in the book he co-authored with Oskar Morgenstern, two decades later.

A telling footnote in von Neumann's 1928 paper points the way to game theory's subsequent economic applications. The matter of gaming, he wrote, was "the principle problem of classical economics: how is the absolutely selfish 'homo economicus' going to act under given, external circumstances."[31] Together with Oskar Morgenstern, an Austrian economist visiting Princeton when the *Anschluss* broke, he elaborated upon these earlier conceits to write *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944), a book variously called "one of the most influential and least-read books of the twentieth century," a thick tome that was alleged to have "taken the field of economics by storm," but had barely sold 4,000 copies 5 years after its appearance.[32]

Games followed a strict definition: a game was "any inter-action between agents that is governed by a set of rules

31 Von Neumann, cited in Nasar, *A Beautiful Mind*, 84.
32 Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, 41.

specifying the possible moves for each participant and a set of outcomes for each possible combination of moves."[33] "We hope to establish satisfactorily," they wrote, " . . . that the typical problems of economic behavior become strictly identical with the mathematical notions of suitable games of strategy."[34] The book was a thoroughgoing attack on the then-current state of economics, which its authors saw as hopelessly eclectic in its methodologies, too often dwelling upon the thematic of individual behavior, psychology and incentive. The novelty of their approach was the exacting application of "mathematical methods which diverge considerably from techniques applied by older or by contemporary mathematical economists."[35]

With this book the broadest foundations of game theory were delineated; namely, that, in revolutionizing the standard claims of economic theory, it attempted to provide "an exact description of the endeavor of the individual to obtain a maximum of utility, or, in the case of the entrepreneur, a maximum of profit."[36] It presumed perfectly logical players (that is, with "perfect information") whose motivations were only to win. (On this point, many have noted that game theory is a cynical science, a not insignificant point for questions of

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33 Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis, *Game Theory*, 3.
34 Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*.
35 Ibid., 1.
36 Ibid., 1.

consensus.) As such, each game required the formalization of a very particular notion of strategy: "Imagine now that each player . . . instead of making each decision as the necessity for it arises, makes up his mind in advance for all possible contingencies."[37] This notion of a pure strategy would be further complicated by the introduction of "mixed" strategies, but the larger point was that nothing was left to chance, to contingency, in the analysis and description of solutions to such games.

In addition to von Neumann, the second towering figure in the history of game theory is John Forbes Nash, the 1994 Nobel Prize winner whose life is richly chronicled in Sylvia Nasar's popular biography *A Beautiful Mind*. In dramatizing Nash's decades-long struggle with schizophrenia, Ron Howard's Hollywood adaptation couldn't possibly take on what is considered "the most important solution concept in game theory":[38] the Nash Equilibrium. Like von Neumann, Nash had been a player as well as inventor of games: independently of Piet Hein, the Danish mathematician who had arrived at his version of the game in 1942, Nash is credited with the invention of Hex, a board game popular with the Princeton math set later marketed by Parker Brothers in the early 1950s.

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37   Ibid., 79.
38   Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis, *Game Theory: A Critical Text*, 41.

Nash had taken one seminar on game theory and had only glancing experience with economics when he began to elaborate upon the discoveries of von Neumann and Morgenstern; for the "bible" that was *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* was not without its limitations. Nash suggested that it restated "problems that economists had already grappled with."[39] More fundamentally, though:

> the best-developed part of the theory—which took up one-third of the book—concerned zero-sum two-person games which, because they are games of total conflict, appeared to have little applicability in social science.[40]

Nash would seek solutions beyond two-person, zero-sum games (in minimax theorem) to include games involving cooperation, not just pure conflict. The distinction is critical in rendering game theory more widely applicable within the social sciences; even in war, as many commentators have argued, some compromises—and hence cooperation—are necessary.[41] In turn, the critical role played by *interdependence* in mounting these strategies is emphasized.[42]

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39   Nasar, *A Beautiful Mind*, 87.

40   Ibid., 87.

41   Nasar provides a useful explanation relative to the larger implications of the Nash equilibrium, beginning with the introduction of cooperative games: "Cooperative games are games in which players can make enforceable agreements with other players. In other words, as a group they can fully commit themselves to specific strategies. In contrast, in a non-cooperative game, such commitment is impossible." (p. 97).

42   On interdependence, see Nasar, 97.

The Nash equilibrium, in short, implicitly argues that each player's *best choice* turns on what the others do. The consequences for one player's relation to another—a model of interdependence continuous with a certain thinking about interactivity—are paramount here. For equilibrium is "a situation in which no player could improve his or her position by choosing an alternative available strategy, without implying that each person's privately held best choice will lead to a collectively optimal result."[43] Nash's contribution turns on the idea that "at least one equilibrium exists" in a broad class of games with any number of players.[44]

The game, in short, might be simultaneous or sequential, it might be played by two or twenty parties, but no matter the variety of situations involved, the "best choice response" assumes a certain thinking about rationality at the foundation of all game theory. The strategy internalizes the common knowledge of rationality (CKR): how one models "a person's potential decision on past acts," and that one "form(s) expectations based on notion that others are like-minded agents."[45] "The common knowledge of rationality is continuous with the consistent alignment of people's beliefs":

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43   Ibid., 97.
44   Ibid., 97.
45   Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis, *Game Theory*, 26.

> This alignment is the hallmark of the most influential solution concept
> in game theory, the Nash equilibrium. Consistent alignment of belief
> means that no instrumentally rational person can expect a similarly
> rational person who has the same information to develop different
> thought processes.[46]

Game theory has most famously justified this notion
through the so-called Harsanyi-Aumann Doctrine, named for
economist John Harsanyi's declaration "that when two rational
individuals have the same information, they must draw the same
inferences and thus come to the same conclusion."[47]

The statement betrays a peculiar confirmation (many would
argue, perversion) of Enlightenment thinking. It submits the
terms of rational discourse to an economic model, where the
goal is exchange and the ambition is to win. And what it
assumes for each party involved has indeed been extensively
theorized relative to the social contract, the terms of which, as
the economist Ken Binmore writes, are necessarily whiggish
in their inflection, a "bourgeois concept of liberal society" in
which "we can go from the old to the new by *mutual consent*."[48]
The assumptions at the heart of this thesis seem to repre-
sent the logical terminus of modernity. "Nash's mutually

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46 Ibid., 28.
47 Ibid., 30.
48 Ken Binmore, *Game Theory and the Social Contract: Playing Fair* (Cambridge, MA: MIT
    Press, 1994), 7; and Binmore, *Game Theory and the Social Contract: Just Playing*
    (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

confirming strategies," Sean Hargreaves Heap and Yanis Varoufakis write,

> almost invoke the Socratic notion that one's views are confirmed only through reflection against another's; or perhaps the Hegelian take on the dialectic where a "self" is well-defined only after an infinite self-reflection in the eyes of the other. To the extent that one has faith in the capacity of human reason to home in on self-reflective "states" one is tempted to celebrate Nash's discovery.[49]

Tempting, perhaps; but is this mode of reflection really a hall of mirrors, an infinite regress that can only beg the question of the individual's access to the knowledge sponsoring it? We need to put pressure on the question of information—the quality and distribution of that information—as the basis for that common knowledge of rationality. For the notion that "one is tempted to celebrate Nash's discovery" rests finally with the faith placed in such knowledge, no less the degree to which its organization is naturalized by the logic of the game itself.

Indeed, an ethical quandary animates this conceit, as suggested by a letter to Norbert Wiener from the anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson. Bateson condemned game theory on the grounds of both its cynicism and the totalization of its subjects. "What applications of the theory of games do," he wrote,

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49   Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis, *Game Theory*, 59.

is to reinforce the player's acceptance of the rules and conceptual premises and therefore make it more difficult for the players to conceive that there might be other ways of meeting and dealing with each other . . . its use propagates changes, and I suspect that the long term changes so propagated are in a paranoidal direction and odious. I am thinking not only of the propagation of the premises of distrust which are built into the von Neumann model *ex hypothesi*, but also of the more abstract premise that human nature is unchangeable . . . Von Neumann's players differ profoundly from people and mammals in that those robots totally lack humor and are totally unable to "play" in the sense in which the word is applied to kittens and puppies.[50]

The order of knowledge represented here is predetermined by the rules of the game. The game itself demands a peculiar temperament on the part of its players, who are by equal parts paranoid (always imagining that the other will "defect") *and* robotic. Virtual automatons in the process of their decision-making, they are not "merely" individuals but "rational actors," conscripted in the exchange of perfect information.

Rules of the (New) Game

All of this, I argue, is a matter of central interest for postmodernism and the contemporary. A historiographic consciousness of this phenomenon leads us to read between the

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50   Gregory Bateson, cited in Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, 168.

lines of texts we thought we already knew. Insofar as game-theoretic discourse comes to full flower during the Cold War and the emergence of digital computing in the postwar moment, the meditation of this knowledge as instrumental (and instrumentalized) is critical, perhaps no more so than in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

So far our discussion of this text has been limited to the sense in which postmodernism signals an incredulity to meta-narratives, whether a waning conviction in God, the Subject or History itself, from the speculative grand narrative of Hegel's dialectic to a story of emancipation borne of the Enlightenment. Thus goes the shorthand by which most art historians are acquainted with the essay, generically mapped onto the rejection of Greenbergian modernism. But even as Lyotard was an erstwhile curator, and turned repeatedly to the example of art throughout his career, his "report on knowledge," does not touch explicitly on any art-related issues.

The Postmodern Condition, after all, is a state-of-the-field document on the contemporary university and its broader implications for questions of power. With the very first sentence, Lyotard draws an equivalence between the "post-industrial" epoch into which societies have contracted and the "post-modern" age emblematic of its contemporary culture. He describes how the past several decades have seen the leading sciences engage a particular interest in languages, nearly all

of which are consonant with models from game-theoretic discourse:

> phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages, problems of translation and the search for areas of compatibility among computer languages, problems of information storage and data banks, telematics and the perfection of intelligent terminals, paradoxology.[51]

Reading the endnotes accompanying this laundry list of the new sciences is to encounter names that have mostly failed to register in art history's treatment of postmodernism. All, however, have had a signal impact on the evolution of game theory just as game theory has likewise inflected the tenor of many of these "languages" in turn. (It is telling that Lyotard acknowledges von Neumann at the outset, as he also does the pioneers of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener and Ross Ashby, also flagged by Brand in his reading of Spacewar.) The name-checking is to the point; Lyotard's reading centers on the nature of knowledge in computerized societies as economic. It is "produced in order to be sold," he writes, "consumed in order to be valorized," its "goal is exchange." [52]

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51 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 3.
52 Ibid., 5.

But who stands to reap the rewards from this exchange and who regulates the distribution of this information? Who possesses this knowledge relative to its mercantilization (The state? Corporations? The university?) and what do the battles waged over this "information commodity" signify relative to the postmodern condition? In a statement countering assumptions upon which the common knowledge of rationality in game theory is founded, Lyotard describes access to this knowledge—its appearance of transparency—as an ideological contrivance. "Reason" itself becomes a symptom of false consciousness. The ideology of communicational transparency which goes hand in hand with the commercialization of knowledge

> will begin to perceive the state as a factor of opacity and noise. It is from this point of view that the problem of the relationship between economic and state powers threatens to arise with a new urgency.[53]

Lyotard's is a question of power as a matter of course and of the ways in which the co-optation of knowledge as economic amounts to a new politics of mediation. "Suffice it to say," he writes

> that the functions of regulation and therefore reproduction are being and will be further withdrawn from administrators and entrusted to

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53   Ibid., 5.

machines. Increasingly the central question is becoming who will have access to the information these machines must have in storage to guarantee that the right decisions are made.[54]

In short, Lyotard takes up how the uses of information and their appearance of legibility are a problem of "legitimation," that Weberian category of social analysis that describes "the process by which a legislator is authorized to promulgate such a law as a norm."[55]

The "legitimation crisis" at the heart of postmodernism turns around the "competition and conflict" between new forms of computerized knowledge and that associated with narrative. Scientific knowledge has always been in tension with narrative but the ascendance of computerized knowledge puts new stress on the question of the "legislator," who sanctions "such a law as norm." Narrative has effectively been delegitimated in the era that concerns us: and this delegitimation is ultimately what Lyotard diagnoses when he describes postmodernism in terms of the "incredulity to meta-narratives."

The decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has

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54   Ibid., 14.
55   Ibid., 8.

shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means; it can also be seen as an effect of the redeployment of advanced liberal capitalism after its retreat under the protectionism of Keynesianism.[56]

Lyotard stresses that this crisis does not mean "a dissolution of social bond and disaggregation of social aggregates into mass of atoms," a notion that suggests some kind of organic totality existed prior to this moment, "haunted" by a traditional view of society. In computerized society, the new stress placed on the "means" rather than "ends" in the coordination of new technologies and techniques translates to a greater emphasis on what he calls "performativity," a term that will carry a double resonance in this context.

> When we examine the current status of scientific knowledge . . . the question of double legitimation, far from receding into the background comes to the fore . . . For it appears in its most complete form, that of reversion, revealing that knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government.[57]

Lyotard draws from Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language-games in the posthumously published *Philosophical*

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56 Ibid., 38.
57 Ibid., 8.

Investigations. Language is identified relative to various categories of utterance (e.g., "Giving orders and obeying them," "Describing the appearance of an object or giving its measurements," "reporting an event," "Making up a story—and reading it," etc.) with each "game" following its own peculiar set of rules and specific properties. "Here the term 'language-*game*,'" Wittgenstein observes, "is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity or a form of life."[58] Wittgenstein discusses the rules of conventional board games—chess in particular—as a counterpoint and model for language games. The rules are themselves determined by a "contract" between players and cannot be imported from one category of utterance to another. Hence he advances a "pragmatics" of language that assesses the value of any statement relative to its use in the game in which it is played, as well as by virtue of its difference with other language games.

The point is not to write a grammar or establish a fixed relationship between sign and signified, nor a prescription for the rules that might govern such a relationship. "Our clear and simple language games are not preparatory studies for a future regularization of language," Wittgenstein writes, "—as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance."

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58 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 11e, no. 23.

> The language-games are rather set up as objects of comparison which
> are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only
> of similarities, but also of dissimilarities.[59]

Following these premises, Lyotard's charge is to compare two
different kinds of discourse—narrative knowledge and scientific
knowledge—via the structure of these games and what he calls
"language moves." "Every utterance should be thought of as a
move in a game," Lyotard writes,

> This last observation brings us to the first principle underlying our
> method as well: to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing and speech
> acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics.[60]

Whether in the realms of business or pleasure, the social bond
is composed of language moves; and each "self" is understood
as a "post"—an atom—through which the messages forming
this bond travel. What comes with this conceit is the implication
of a community of players, who variously struggle over the terms
by which rules are established or broken.

If postmodern language games reveal the social relation to
be agonistic at its heart, they encompass those models of conflict
organizing game theory but are by no means wholly synony-
mous with it. In an explicit reference to the oppositional logic

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59   Ibid., 50e, no. 130.
60   Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 10.

of the language game versus that of computerized societies, Lyotard notes: "The trivial cybernetic version of information theory misses something of decisive importance to which I have already called attention: the agonistic aspect of society."

> The atoms are placed at crossroads of pragmatic relationships but they are also displaced by the messages that traverse them, in perpetual motion. Each language partner, when a move pertaining to him is made, undergoes a displacement, an alteration of some kind that not only affects him as addressee and referent but also as sender.[61]

Language games effect a kind of Brownian motion between its players, of endless displacement and instabilities. Hence the importance of a statement that served as one of this chapter's epigraphs:

> What is needed if we are to understand social relations in this matter on whatever scale we choose is not only a theory of communication but a theory of games which accepts agonistics as a founding principle.[62]

In later speaking to the differences between the language games of institutions and everyday conversation, Lyotard confirms an argument made at the beginning of his report,

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61   Ibid.,16.
62   Ibid., 16.

which takes on the enforced consensus we might associate with game theory:

> consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a take of the authorities; it refines our sensitivities to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.[63]

We are now poised to put it bluntly. Postmodernism sees a contest of meaning between two game-theoretic models, a language game that is agonistic and a theory of games (itself a language game) that totalizes and forces consensus. If the latter is a function of terror, the former might well license play, but play of a specific profile, not so much ludic as confrontational. The relative use-value of information in these games, then, amounts to a theory of a social contract; of the ways in which our interaction as social beings is premised on a new information society, a new game in which knowledge is the ultimate spoils.

And somewhere across this spectrum lie the practices of artists, who might adopt the protocols of the game in order to track and challenge it, if with little naive expectation that they might ultimately subvert it. To do so, after all, would be to play according to the old rules. My point is that if we are to think

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63   Ibid., 2.

critically about relational aesthetics, participation and even collectivism as both theory and practice within contemporary art, we would do well to revisit the terms which structured such play historiographically. This is a competition over the terms of the postmodern condition, a struggle anticipating how we might frame a theory of the contemporary.

Öyvind Fahlström and the Cold War

> Games—Seen either as realistic models (not descriptions) of a life-span, of the Cold War balance, of the double-code mechanism to push the bomb button—or as freely invented rule structures. Thus it becomes important to stress relations (as opposed to "free form" where everything can be related to anything so that nothing in principle is related). The necessity of repetition to show that a new rule functions—thus the value of space-temporal form and of variable form. The thrill of tension and resolution, of having both conflict and non-conflict (as opposed to "free form": where in principle, everything is equal).
>
> (Öyvind Fahlström, "Take Care of the World"[64])

Consider the example of Öyvind Fahlström (1928–1976), an artist whose engagements were in direct confrontation with a theory of games, a game wrought by the military-aesthetic complex of the postwar era, in contrast to the language game

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64 Fahlström, "Take Care of the World," in *Manifestoes. A Great Bear Pamphlet*, ed. Alison Knowles (New York: Great Bear Press, 1966), 9.

proffered by his own brand of what Jean-François Chevrier has aptly deemed his "geopoetics."[65] Born in 1928 in São Paolo to Swedish and Norwegian parents, Fahlström was a poet, playwright and journalist, as well as an artist, whose career was itinerant by nature and whose work was fundamentally intermedial. An ardent student of both Surrealism and Meso-American culture, in the 1950s Fahlström was immersed in the world of concrete poetry; his continuing interest in "non-aphoristic" poetry a decade later recommended him to radical practices in experimental music.[66] In 1961, a grant from the Swedish-American Foundation brought him to New York, where he quickly fell in with the community of artists involved with happenings: a neighbor to Jasper Johns, he lived in the Front Street studio once occupied by Robert Rauschenberg, who in turn wrote about the Swedish artist's work relatively early in his career. These friendships would lead him to participate in some of the era's grand if failed experiments in artistic collaborations. With his production *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* Fahlström was one of the many artists involved in "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering," the infamous series of performances in 1966 staged at the 26th Street Armory.

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65 See Jean-François Chevrier, "Another Space for Painting: Concrete Lyricism and Geopoetics," in *Öyvind Fahlström: Another Space for Painting* (exhibition catalogue, MACBA and Mass MOCA, 2000), 8–32.

66 Öyvind Fahlström, "Breeze," reprinted in *Öyvind Fahsltröm: Another Space for Painting,* 118–121.

The event was organized by Rauschenberg and Fahlström's compatriot, Billy Klüver, under the auspices of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.). In addition to these nominally technological engagements, Fahlström would likewise be associated with New Realism, in part due to his representation by the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York.

My interest in Fahlström is directed to how the form of the game in his work—a mode of gaming explicitly tied to the Cold War—is inseparable from aspects of his literary and semiotic investigations, particularly his invention of what he called "monster dialects" and his theory of "character-signs." In his "game paintings" begun in 1962, Fahlström effectively straddles game-theoretic interests as a function of both language games and military strategy. In the statement leading off this section, "Take Care of the World," he explicitly defines the doubled nature of such a game.

We'll parse Fahlström's words in due course, but for the moment, I note that a first encounter with the artist might conjure visions of the interactive for the contemporary viewer. Much of what one sees suggests a virtual solicitation to its audience to compose and recompose the object on display.

In *The Cold War* (1963–65) (Figure 2.4), the diptych format becomes a ground against which an assortment of figures, composed of tempera on steel and plastic, might be manipulated to produce ever-changing compositions.

Figure 2.4 Öyvind Fahlström, *The Cold War* (*phase 1*), 1963–5. Variable
            diptych, tempera on vinyl, metal, Plexiglas, and magnets. 244
            × 152.5 × 2.5 cm (each panel).

Source: Collection Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou,
Paris. Image courtesy Sharon Avery-Fahlström, The Öyvind Fahlström Foundation
and Archives, Museu d'art contemporani de Barcelona.

The figures themselves (the "variables") are drawn from a welter
of sources—many of them from Fahlström's much-loved comic
books and popular print media.

In works dating from the end of the 1960s, such as *The
Little General* (1968) (Figure 2.5), a shallow pool of water, set
on a plinth, becomes an arena in which a host of contemporary
characters intermingle and converge in a dream-like aquatic
ballet. These "pools" as Fahlström called them, now featured

silhouettes mounted on Plexiglas, the images of which were reproduced from photographs as well as popular illustrations, with each distinctly colored to represent a peculiar geopolitical code. Likening this work to the arcade pleasures offered by a pinball machine, Fahlström set his actors on a watery stage, with the Plexiglas mounts enabling the figures to be seen from both sides, a nod to visual transparency that will prove meaningful for the interests of communicational transparency. Moshe Dayan, LBJ and Bob Hope might be seen relative to an uncomely pornographic figure, as might the head of a tiger in

Figure 2.5 Öyvind Fahlström, *The Little General (Pinball Machine)*, 1967–8. Oil on photopaper on vinyl, Plexiglas, metal, magnets, styrofoam floats with lead keels, in pool, 100 × 280 × 550 cm (pool).

Source: Image courtesy Sharon Avery-Fahlström, The Öyvind Fahlström Foundation and Archives, Museu d'art contemporani de Barcelona.

green, a crippled man, a profile of the moon. Note that some of these characters would recur frequently in Fahlström's work; and it is the fact of their reappearance and reshuffling—the literal fluidity of their constitution as relational—that will support the notion of their peculiar role in a language game. Allusions to free-floating signifiers come easily, because literally.

Even the most superficial glance at Fahlström's work goes far to confirm readings of his practice as "geopoetical" and certainly no more so than with regards to Cold War game playing and its concomitant ordering of the world (First, Second, Third) that was the fallout of its dynamics. To read the works as a kind of rebus, though, is to mistake the nature of his program as staunchly iconographic. Rather, it's through the modeling and manipulation of these variables—their *mobilization* and performative character—that such figures take on their peculiar charge, recommending Fahlström's larger project to the game-theoretic issues we have detailed for postmodernism.

Indeed, in many of his writings, but principally his essay "Manipulating the World," Fahlström would make those terms explicit. Quoting this short text at length, I highlight the thematic of the game brought to bear on his practice; the semiotic aspects of the variables involved; and its references to war gaming and military strategy:

> In my variable pictures the emphasis on the "character" or "type" of an
> element is achieved materially by cutting out a silhouette in plastic and

sheet iron. The type then becomes fixed and tangible, almost "live" as an object but flat as a painting. Equipped with magnets, these cutouts can be juxtaposed, superposed, inserted, suspended. They can slide along grooves, fold laterally through joints, and frontally through hinges. They can also be bent and riveted to permanent three-dimensional forms.

These elements, while materially fixed, achieve their character-identity only when they are put together; their character changes with each new arrangement. The arrangement grows out of a combination of the rules (the chance factor) and my intentions, and is shown in a "score" or "scenario" (in the forms of drawings, photographs or small paintings). The isolated elements are thus not paintings, but machinery to make paintings. Picture-organ.

The finished picture stands somewhere in the intersection of paintings, games (type Monopoly and war games) and puppet theater.

Just as the cut-out materializes the types, the factor of time in painting becomes material through the many, in principle, infinite, phases in which the elements will appear . . .

The role of the spectator as a performer of the picture-game will become meaningful as soon as these works can be multiplied into a large number of replicas, so that anyone interested can have a picture machine in his home and "manipulate the world" according to either his or my choices.[67]

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67 Fahlström, "Manipulating the World," 1964, in *Öyvind Fahlström*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1982), 45.

Written in 1964, "Manipulating the World" ticks off the range of criteria we associate with the end of Greenbergian modernism, instead confirming Leo Steinberg's notion of the "flat bed picture plane." In Steinberg's essay of 1964, Rauschenberg's combines are treated as vast and heterogeneous surfaces of inscription, in which the techniques of the printer's table shore up a palimpsestic field of reading, marking a shift in contemporary painting from the registers of the anthropo-morphic and nature (as correlative to the vertical orientation of the canvas) to the semiotic dimensions of culture. Where Fahlström ups the ante on this front is that the flat-bed printing press is rather more like a calculating table, a field of battle. All those variables might be combined and recombined as if to mime the logic of the think-tank's gaming scenarios.

There is little doubt that Fahlström was engaged by the visual rhetoric of Rauschenberg's combines; the text makes ample and heterogeneous reference to material beyond the medium-specific prerogatives of high modernism's self-reflexive picture plane. And in introducing the dimension of the temporal into these proceedings—the notion that the work might, at least in principle, undergo "an infinite number of phases" in its reception—it counters the will to transcendence, silence and hermeticism that we have come to regard as the benchmark of the high-modernist work of art. To "manipulate the world," after all, is to be a part of it, through gestures that speak to a type of strategic control.

But Fahlström most acutely advances this claim through the logic of the works' gamesmanship (the way it internalizes another party in its very constitution) not to mention the auto-poetic tendencies he ascribes to the practice itself: the notion that the work effectively reproduces itself in its interactive and recombinant strategies. To call the work a "picture-organ" or a machinery is to eschew the singularity of the artwork as a rarefied thing—it is, in fact, to regard painting as so much automated phenomena. Of course the gesture is hardly novel to the history of twentieth-century art. A Marcel Duchamp or any number of his epigones (Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely) would variously lay claim to painting's industrial futures; while certain readings of the monochrome attest to its automated dimensions by virtue of the painting's materialism. To put this practice in terms akin to the manufacturing of a board game is to elevate reproduction to a wholly different level, the associations of which are inescapable for the thematic and iconographic territory so much of Fahlström's work mined.

The idea was not a one-off on Fahlström's part but pervasive throughout his abbreviated career. His fascination with Monopoly, the game he identified as "the game of capitalism" poached on this logic as he in turn would appropriate the protocols of Monopoly (Figure 2.6).

In 1970, Fahlström began his series of "Monopoly game paintings," in which the real estate of the developing world was
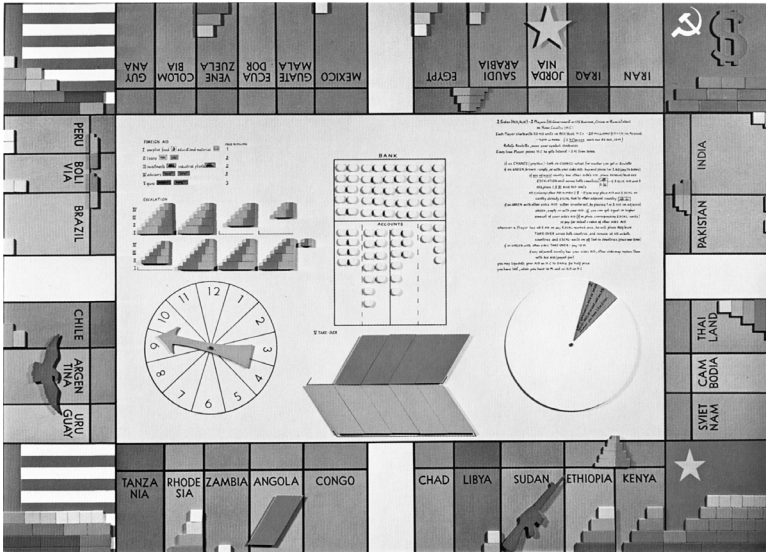
Figure 2.6 Öyvind Fahlström, *World Politics Monopoly*. Variable painting,
92 × 128 cm.

Source: Private Collection, Switzerland. Image courtesy Sharon Avery-Fahlström,
The Öyvind Fahlström Foundation and Archives, Museu d'art contemporani de
Barcelona.

the politically contested territory of the Cold War, a notion
Fahlström addressed in numerous paintings dating from the late
1960s. Each corner of his game painting, structured like a board,
was emblazoned with flag-like forms, two representing the
United States (as suggested by alternating stripes of red and
white, anchored by a strip of blue) and with the remaining
corners explicitly marked by the signatories of the Soviet Union
and the PRC. For Fahlström, Monopoly was a "simplified but
precise presentation of the trading of surplus value for capital

gains." His contemporary rendition swaps the seemingly innocent forms of plastic houses and metallic game pieces— top-hat, thimble, iron, race-car, Scottie dog, shoe—with more militaristic (and updated) icons: the profile of a machine gun and an imperial eagle. Just as he had concluded in his essay of 1964, however, the game painting would not prove entirely successful until it entered mass circulation. "These games paintings," he wrote, "will only be meaningful when they have been made into mass multiple editions."[68]

You could argue for a broad family resemblance between such game paintings and the genre of actual games discussed relative to the Cold War think tank and the associated domains of technological forecasting. For example, the Futures Game produced by Kaiser Aluminum, patented in 1969, made comparable use of bold graphics, quasi-military iconography, bar graphs and tables. Perhaps the artist even had concrete knowledge of this specific game: though a direct causal relation is not ultimately relevant, the possibility that such a connection exists is intriguing. (Indeed, in addition to his work with E.A.T., Fahlström participated in another infamous Art and Technology collaboration in the late 1960s—the much criticized program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art spearheaded by its senior curator, Maurice Tuchman. Though

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68 Fahlström, "On Monopoly Games," 1971, in *Another Space for Painting*, 82.

he did not work with Kaiser Steel in the production of his sculpture, *Meatball Curtain*, he was certainly within the orbit of artists that worked with RAND and Kaiser's subsidiary, Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical.)[69]

Nonetheless, to insist upon such connections on thematic or morphological grounds is to address only one part of Fahlström's engagements and miss the formative aspect of language within his work. In his game-paintings, for instance, he will complicate to the point of rejecting such seamlessly iconographic readings in his implicit recourse to language games and the notion of confrontation (we could read it as "conflict") his works engender:

> The fundamental novelty of the game-paintings, however, is the confrontation between freedom of variation and the "arbitrary" immutability of appearance, substance and construction. Hence my interest in signs, i.e. character signs, and in forms as silhouettes. The crucial point is that I as an "artist" and I and others as "human beings," come up against what we experience as the absolute rigidity of appearances and adjust our possible variations accordingly. Therein lies a fundamental and inexhaustible tension.[70]

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69   On the controversy surrounding the LACMA program, see my "Eros and Technics and Civilization," in *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). Kaiser Steel collaborated with Richard Serra in the production of his famous Skullcracker series; Kaiser Steel is associated with Kaiser Aluminum.

70   Fahlström, "Manipulating the World," 45.

In referring to his works' "fundamental and *inexhaustible tension*" (my emphasis) Fahlström underscores the ways such games are structurally held in suspension, subject to the unique set of rules against which any number of games are played. The Variable Pictures trouble the forced consensus of game theory through relentlessly manipulating signs as their organizational principle—a potentially agonistic relationship that is frankly confirmed when Fahlström voices his difference from, and suspicion of, "the strategy theories of von Neumann or Herman Kahn."[71] He will further this thesis in speaking to his works' "confrontation between freedom of variation and the 'arbitrary' immutability of appearance, substance and construction." By this he opposes what he calls "the absolute rigidity of appearances" with the need to "adjust our possible variations accordingly."

In other words, "the fundamental and inexhaustible tension" Fahlström claims for his art turns around the relational and necessarily iterative character of his "character signs," opposed to the rules of a seemingly restricted game. Consider his conflations of visual and verbal signs and the rules he established for his concrete poetry in the early 1950s. Indeed, several years before the Variable Paintings, Fahlström identified an analogous condition in his writing experiments, in which

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71 Fahlström, in *Another Space for Painting*, 174.
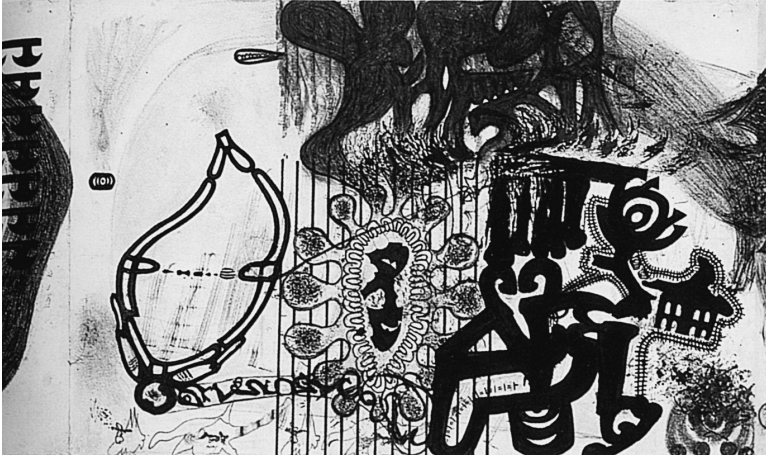
Figure 2.7 Öyvind Fahlström, *Opera* (detail), 1952–3. Felt-tip pen,
           gouache, and ink on paper, 27 × 1185 cm.
Source: Image courtesy Sharon Avery-Fahlström, The Öyvind Fahlström
Foundation and Archives, Museu d'art contemporani de Barcelona.

the repetition of the same motifs in different contexts conferred
new meaning on the sign displayed. The same principle operates
in his visual works of the period, at once indebted to the
automatist gestures of a Surrealist such as Matta as to his
concrete poetry. Fahlström suggested that the "fundamental
rule" was repetition if with difference, exploding the seemingly
private or hermetic dimension of the automatist gesture by
escalating the work to public scale. On the room-sized work
Opera (1952–3) (Figure 2.7), whose scroll-like form and
obsessive inscription cannot help but be read in semiotic terms,
Fahlström noted:

The game concept was my current interest at the same time I was writing a manifesto for concrete literature. There as well I expressed my impatience with the monotony and private nature of pure automatism. One ought to be able to make simple rules for oneself, create frames of reference within the work of art. The simplest fundamental rule in *Opera* was repetition. It felt then like a big discovery; not merely a continuous sequence of constantly changing motifs, but a decision—this one is important, this shall have a role. Recurring in new contexts and recurring altered, but still *recognizable*.

That is how the character-form originated—the abstract form where type was so pronounced that it was recognizable, but which at

the same time was put together so that its many suggested meanings were kept in check, thus preserving the character's ambiguity.[72]

The audience was imagined to move "through" the work in a way that Fahlström would also suggest was akin to playing Monopoly.[73] Its motifs were "recurring in new contexts and recurring altered, but still *recognizable*," he wrote.[74] The description at once recalls the structuralist account of the sign (the sign's differential motivation) as it does the competing meanings of such signs in the friction produced through the language game. Critical here is that such competing meanings are held in perpetual check—*agonistic* meanings which effectively preserve the character's "ambiguity." For when such signs are relentlessly ambiguous in a game, the ideology of communicational transparency necessarily falters.

It's an observation that brings us back to matters contemporary, a thinking of the relational as structurally agonistic. When Bourriaud writes that "the liveliest factor that is played out on the chessboard of art" are the interactive practices of relational aesthetics, he could hardly have found a more urgent model for this idea than that proposed by Fahlström a few decades earlier.

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72 Fahlström, "Opera," in *Another Space for Painting*, 47.
73 Ibid., 40.
74 Ibid., 47.

In this new context—this new game—Fahlström's words demand repetition:

> Games—Seen either as realistic models (not descriptions) of a life-span, of the Cold War balance, of the double-code mechanism to push the bomb button—or as freely invented rule structures. Thus it becomes important to stress relations (as opposed to "free form" where everything can be related to anything so that nothing in principle is related).

As if to anticipate the claims made by Bourriaud decades later, Fahlström will underscore the importance of "relations" in these games. As if to anticipate Lyotard's report on knowledge, Fahlström will dramatize a conflict between Cold War game theory and the language game, between restriction and invention, consensus and agonistics. "Consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games," Lyotard will write, "and invention is always born of dissension." To play a new game is to accept the mutating nature of one's character sign as a function of both the system and its information provided. It is to rewrite the rules of the game by *accepting agonistics as its founding principle*."[75]

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75   Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* 2.

3. Game Show[1]

Agonistics are the heart of language games. They are played against the terror that is consensus, against game theory's generalized assumption of perfect information, what Lyotard might call the "ideology of communicational transparency." Fahlström's achievement was to showcase such games as geopolitical in reach and doubled in their structure. Whether mapping the Cold War land-grab over the developing world in his monopoly games, or recycling images of Mao, Moshe Dayan and Khrushchev as his character signs, his work courts invention as much as dissension; interactivity as much as thwarted communications. If postmodern knowledge reduces to the question of its "perfomativity"—the efficiency of knowledge rendered an "informational commodity"—Fahlström's art challenges the logic of this exchange as thematized through a conflicted model of interactivity. The term "performativity,"

1   A version of this chapter appeared in Matthias Michalka, *Changing Channels: Art and Television 1963–1987* (exhibition catalogue) (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 2010).

as it so happens, will assume a doubled valence within the orbit of games, where "relational aesthetics" might be staged as power plays as much as micro-utopian outings.

Fahlström's work opens onto adjacent questions of mediation for postmodernism and theories of contemporary art. This is not, of course, simply because he worked as a performance artist, film-maker, poet, musician and critic but due to his larger interests in the differential economies of his media and their signification: their ambiguous encoding as language games. Medium-specificity has been treated as the Holy Grail for certain readings of Greenberg's modernism; Media, on the other hand, is a proving ground for postmodernism given its implications for both communication and interactivity. I repeat Foster's words here to spell this out most clearly:

> Is our mediatic world one of increased interaction, as benign as the cyberspace of a telephone call or databank; or is it one of invasive discipline, each of us so many "dividuals" electronically tracked, generically traced, not as a policy of any maleficent Big Brother but as a matter of quotidian course? In so many ways it is both these worlds at once, and it is this new intensity of dis/connection that is postmodern.[2]

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2   Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax," *October* 102, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, 3.

The intensity of this dis/connection is paradoxically registered by the banality of media, its seeming transparency and self-evidence. If Foster could write such words in 1993, consider how naturalized this "intensity" is to our current situation. Dis/connection, you could say, is our phenomeno-logical horizon: an internally conflicted mode of being in the world in which perpetual claims to always being "in touch" are coterminous with our collectively shared alienation. For this reason, acknowledging the co-existence of both an Orwellian attitude to media and its "quotidian course" is an exercise that demands repeating in the age of both Wikileaks and /b/tards, to say little of the Amazon multitudes and the virtual stockyards of digital markets. Perhaps this seems too obvious to warrant commentary, but that obviousness, it also seems to me, is built into the very logic of contemporary media and the "neo-fatalist" ideology that would make such observations redundant. For repetition, specifically in its mediated guise as recursion, might well be the motor of communications, whether at the level of the communications represented and their internal dynamics; or the viral and autopoetic impulse to self-reproduction characteristic of contemporary media.

In the following I discuss how such dynamics are regulated as their own kind of game, reflecting on how the Cold War fallout registered in Fahlström's practice will bear more local determinisms. The works that concern me speak to the iteration

of such games relative to the terms of rationality and irrationality. That both are works of video—taken by some as the "post-modern" medium par excellence—is not incidental. Dara Birnbaum's *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* takes on the actual genre of the game show as a spectacle of gendered dynamics, reproducing the already extroverted behaviors of its female players as the mechanism sponsoring the circulation of their images. In Richard Serra's *Prisoner's Dilemma*, the nested logic of one of game theory's most important conundrums is on show as a theater of bargaining and interaction. To treat both works as new games we first need to consult Jean Baudrillard, the very thinker who would deny his status as "high priest of postmodernism."

Interaction as tautology, the relational as repetition: In his canonical essay "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard makes a claim that the object of contemporary communication is communication itself, not the content of the message delivered but the cyclical relations it engenders. He's updating, in so many words, Marshall McLuhan's well-worn thesis that the medium is the message but in a rhetorical vein outpacing the earlier theorist. The essay is vintage Baudrillard for its hyperbolic leaps and obdurate tenor. Communication is obscene, a pornography of connectivity. "The Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption," he writes, "gives way to the 'proteinic' era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean

era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication."[3] To the extent that this universe has mutated into diverse forms of social networking and perpetual rounds of micro-blogging—Facebook, tweets and the like—Baudrillard's argument remains that much more salient for our presentist interests. Of special note are the twinned rubrics of game playing and extroversion the text ultimately articulates; for together they announce a type of interactivity (one is tempted to call it "relational") founded on the seeming transparency of information.

"The Ecstasy of Communication" ups the ante of the argument Baudrillard advances in his first book *The System of Objects*. Published in 1968, it took on the Marxist orthodoxy concerning production, consumption and exchange with the broadly anti-structuralist ambition to challenge notions of a rational system of objects, always founded in questions of technology. Its goal, rather, was to conceive of that system in terms of its symbolic, affective or irrational way of being. In discussing what he identifies as the "relational" dimensions of interior design, objects are hence liberated from pure functionality (he calls this their "first-order" functionality) to a *second-order* functionality, where function is limitless, an "atmosphere" rather than a use-value. The systems-oriented rhetoric is telling:

3   Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in Hal Foster, *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 146.

throughout the book, Baudrillard makes reference to the language of games and communications to theorize a world in which objects stand as proxies to a heightened interactivity, founded on the proliferation of new messages, new discourses, new relations.[4] He writes, "We shall need to turn our attention to the structures of a cybernetic imaginary mode whose central myth will no longer be that of an absolute organicism, nor that of an absolute functionalism, but that of an absolute interrelatedness of the world."[5] Hence consumption is regarded as a "discourse." It is:

> the organization of all these things into a signifying fabric: consumption is the virtual totality of all objects and all messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse. . . . So what is consummated and consumed is never the object but the relationship itself . . . it is the idea of the relationship that is consumed in the series of objects that displays it.[6]

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4   On the new modularity of interior design, for example, Baudrillard notes:

> The value this relationship takes on is no longer of an instinctive or psychological but rather a tactical kind. What such objects embody is no longer the secret of a unique relationship but rather differences and moves in a game. The former radical closure has disappeared in parallel with a distinct change in social and interpersonal structures . . . The objective game which man the interior designer is invited to play is invariably taken over by the double-dealing of advertising.

Later he will observe: "the game's very logic conveys with it the image of a general strategy of human relations, the image of a human project, of a modus vivendi for the technical age—a genuine change of civilization whose impact may be discerned even in everyday life." Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996), 23, 26.

5   Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 125.

6   Ibid., 218.

Yet in "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard argues that even this system is over: if the object was once a "mirror" of the subject—a projection of that subject's interiority—contemporary communication evacuates any such interiority. Interior design gives way to extroversion and projection, object to screen. Instead of the discrete bibelot crowding the modern home there is now only the interface—"the smooth and functional surface of communication."[7] The language of hyper-reality reigns from here on out; Baudrillard will speak of the "orbital" dimensions of contemporary communication and address recent (postmodern) architecture as "super-objects" of this peculiar communicational economy. Rogers and Piano's Pompidou and Bernard Tschumi's Parc de La Villette are regarded as a "demonstration of the operation of culture";[8] they are "huge screens upon which moving atoms, particles, molecules are refracted . . . a gigantic circulation, ventilation and ephemeral connecting space."[9]

This excessive connectivity is why Baudrillard calls communication a "whole pornography of information and communication." But it's an obscenity of a very particular type, for obscenity, he tells us, is not only about sexuality. It is not the "hot, sexual obscenity" of former times so much as a

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7   Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), 12.
8   Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 20.
9   Ibid., 20.

"cool communicational obscenity."[10] The philosopher is at his most McLuhanesque in this passage—the language of "hot" and "cold" communication signals a clear debt to the guru of prosthetic subjectivity. The reference is meaningful to any genealogy of recent media theory; but what ultimately recommends Baudrillard's essay for the interests of the contemporary are the more sober conclusions drawn about the extroversion of the subject.

In this regard Baudrillard brings to bear his longstanding investment in a certain strain of the French ethnographic tradition—namely, the surrealizing enterprises of Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois. Caillois makes an abrupt appearance at the very end of the chapter. His perspective on games is introduced as a way to account for these new forms of social interaction, now treated by Baudrillard as an obscene new world of communication. Baudrillard:

> If one goes along with Roger Caillois' classification of games—mimicking, *agon*, *alea*, *ilynx*: games of expression, games of competition, games of chance, games of giddiness—then the movement of our entire culture would lead from a disappearance of forms of expression and competition towards an extension of the forms of chance and giddiness.[11]

10   Ibid., 24.
11   Ibid., 25.

Our take-home in this highly impacted statement is an acknowledgment of the radically changed nature of the game under new communications. It is nothing so conventional as a game in which players "express" their desires, which would presume there were actual desiderata to express. "Giddiness" is its affect, as correlative to communication's ecstatic projection, founded on "this forced extroversion of all interiority, this forced injection of all exteriority that is the categorical imperative of communication."[12] The interface culture sponsored by such communication signals yet another postmodern end: the end of interiority and intimacy resulting in "the overexposure to the transparency of the world."[13] Baudrillard writes of this newly extroverted subjectivity in the period language of the 1980s—it is a networked subjectivity, a cyborg, where bodies are monitors and screens—but his larger thesis maintains for the transparent condition of the "contemporary."

This, in other words, is a world where communications are excessively legible, conditions furnishing the alibi for the "ideology of communicational transparency." For artists mining this terrain, working with the stuff of advertisements, television footage, movie clips and the like, the act of exposing this exposure stands in a mimetic relation to such media, a "demonstration" *pace* Baudrillard "of the operation of culture."

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12   Ibid., 26.
13   Ibid., 27.

By calling this a "game *show*" I stress how such artistic operations are a form of critical realism. Theirs is a staging of interactivity founded on the leveraging, reproducing and bargaining of subjectivities. And in playing their prescribed roles within the social relation, they potentially game them.

For those artists linked to the historiographic moment of postmodernism, gestures of this sort are usually classed under the rhetoric of appropriation and the culture of the copy. We've considered facets of this culture relative to Krauss's critique of the originality of the avant-garde; the serial productions of allegory; the belatedness of postmodernism itself. These acts of artistic appropriation seem to poach on among the avant-garde's most venerable traditions in turn: Duchamp's ready-made. (No doubt Duchamp has often been described as the most postmodern, modern artist.) Submitting these terms to the language of games—particularly the interactive dimensions they both register and critique—we arrive at appropriation's more "local determinisms." For games thematize the interests of media relative to strategies of communication; and the subjects who play and are played.

In Chapter 1, we noted that "Pictures," the path-breaking show co-organized in 1977 at Artists Space by Helene Winer and Douglas Crimp, exhibited the work of Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Philip Smith and

Troy Brauntauch as a "stratigraphic activity," reproducing the conventions of such media to trouble the pop-culture representations on offer. Crimp's larger argument spoke to those "strategies . . . grounded in the literal temporality and presence of theater," standing in marked contrast to the injunction against temporality articulated in Fried's "Art and Objecthood."[14] In working with and from pre-existent media, troping its codes, Crimp implicitly addressed the auto-poetic nature of the materials in question; that is, that such acts of appropriation may well be structural to the very media from which they derive:

> these processes of quotation, excerption, framing and staging that constitute the strategies of work I have been describing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of origins but structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture.[15]

Underneath each picture there is always another picture: What if we were to read such operations relative to the game and the tautologies of communication theorized by Baudrillard? What if the emphasis was placed less on the appropriation of images as such and more on the reproduction of behaviors and the mediating platforms such behaviors presuppose? Appropriation

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14 Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," in B. Wallis and M. Tucker, eds., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: David R. Godine, 1992), 177.

15 Ibid., 186.

is an essential category for much of what was considered "postmodernist" art—we can hardly do without it nor would we want to. But if we recode such gestures in terms of games, we arrive at a somewhat different (if by no means incompatible) form of cultural politics

Of the many methodologies transforming the new art history since the late 1960s, feminism has been catalytic in addressing the political, social, psychoanalytic and ideological dimensions underwriting the circulation of such images. In part this is the case because a powerful discourse on "the image of woman" was critical to its early historiographic project, where the cataloguing of such images and the restitution of names repressed by history was continuous with feminism's analysis of patriarchy and its institutions.[16] We need to acknowledge that the relationship between feminist art history and post-modernism has been both extremely productive and deeply vexed; just as it bears acknowledging the diversity of feminist thought and the range of its art historical inquiry. On the

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16 Linda Nochlin's multi-layered approach to such marginalized histories is paradigmatic, represented, on the one hand, by the exhibition she co-organized with Ann Sutherland Harris in 1977 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Women Artists: 1550–1950"; her early courses on "The Image of Woman" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art history (taught at Vassar College); and ultimately, her formative essay on the institutional politics determining the course of women's roles in art history, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971). On Nochlin's recollections of this historiographic moment, see her "Starting from Scratch: The Beginnings of Feminist Art History," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 70s* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 130–140.

one hand, postmodernism's disavowal of meta-narratives is consistent with feminism's critique of art history and visual culture. In particular, feminist analyses of cinema, media and technology—decisively heterogeneous in their range of positions, we need remind ourselves—assume a constitutive role in postmodernism's critique of the subject at the center of Lyotard's *grand recits*.

Indeed where theories of contemporary media and technology are concerned, feminism offers an important corrective to some of the more hyperbolic (and genderless) pronouncements associated with Baudrillard. If Baudrillard described the "cold" new obscenity emblematized by the cyborg in "The Ecstasy of Communication," Donna Haraway spoke of the radically political work the cyborg performed, feminist in motivation. Consider "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) as one such text encapsulating much of what counts as postmodernist thought:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism: in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics . . . In the traditions of "Western" science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominated capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as the resource for the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of self from the

reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.[17]

As an avatar of internal differentiation, the cyborg all but exposes the humanist subject as an integrated fiction. The cyborg quite literally disintegrates the borders conferring identity on that subject as rational and self-evident, as organic and whole. The cyborg, then, is a liberatory figure, if hardly what Lyotard might call the "hero of liberty" in another context.

In spite or because of the centrality of such arguments, particularly for questions of new media, postmodernism has likewise stood accused of the charge that it renders the subject of "woman" invisible and is thus complicit with a troublesome politics, where pronouncements regarding the "death of the author" seemingly bypass the claims to social and cultural equality that feminism stakes. Reductively put, the coalitional politics organized around identity ("strategic essentialism" is the banner under which such debates have been waged) have warred with postmodernism's theorization of difference and its "deconstruction" of the subject. Craig Owens, in fact, reminds us of postmodernism's blind spots relative to gender and sexuality, citing his own work on allegory (Figure 3.1).

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17   Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Cyborgs, Simians and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.

Figure 3.1 Laurie Anderson, *Americans on the Move*, 1979. Preview performance, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, February 11, 1979.

Source: Photograph by Marcia Resnick. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

He concedes he passed over questions of sexual difference in Laurie Anderson's *Americans on the Move*, an inter-media performance on the peregrinations of media, which early on in a relatively aniconic presentation, projected two images emblazoned on the Pioneer spacecraft. Two schematics of a nude man and woman, the man with his arm raised in a sign of greeting, the woman with her arms down in a passive pose, dramatize the gendered dimensions of communication in both proprietary and naturalized terms. The male figure both

possesses and embodies the power to signify; the comportment of the female figure registers muteness.[18]

The vagaries of contemporary communication are central to Anderson's work: its inclusion of the Pioneer images allegorize that dynamic as both extraterrestrial encounter and gendered encoding. To think such dynamics as a game is to acknowledge that the links media forges are inextricable from the players recruited. If the "cultural other" is one of the organizing rubrics of postmodernism, as Foster argues, then feminism's cultural other has a pivotal role to play within such games. Dara Birnbaum's work is exemplary here, implicitly trumping Baudrillard's concerns to feminist ends; and reproducing her subject's behaviors to showcase a particularly insidious form of communication—and its naturalization through repetition.

Birnbaum is best known for the video, *Technology/ Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79) (Figure 3.2) in which footage from the popular 1970s television show is edited as a stuttering montage of its eponymous super-heroine character. Wonder Woman running over and over through the fields; Wonder Woman spinning incessantly in a dizzying process of self-transformation; Wonder Woman trapped in a

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18 Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism," in Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 166–191.

hall of mirrors, her endlessly reflected image miming the recursive loops of the video itself. Wonder Woman spouting the same dismal platitudes, the video concluding with the lyrics to a cheesy disco song scrolling by on a vivid blue monitor. As played by Linda Carter, the televisual incarnation of the comic-book persona gets to have it both ways. While on the one hand she ostensibly caters to an image of woman's power, a mainstreaming of second wave feminism of the 1970s as so much entertainment, in actuality (and unsurprisingly) she is little more than an object of male fantasy—again as so much entertainment.[19] "Exposure" or "extroversion" in this regard cannot be thought outside sexual difference. *Wonder Woman* is the excessively visible screen on which visual pleasure is synonymous with masculine privilege.

The relevance of Laura Mulvey's famous thesis in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is unimpeachable here. In this canonical text addressing the work of Alfred Hitchcock among others, Mulvey speaks to a patently imbalanced visual economy: "the split between active/male and passive/female," with the female "said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."[20] Mulvey's reading is to the point for Birnbaum, all the more so as it is cited within the artist's critical reception. To the contrary,

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19 An excellent recent monograph of the work is T. J. Demos, *Dara Birnbaum. Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (London: After All, 2010).

20 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Wallis and Tucker, *Art after Modernism*, 366.

Figure 3.2 Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*,
            1979.
Source: Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

few would immediately associate Baudrillard's name with
feminist methodologies and art history: his arguments regarding
"seduction" and sacrifice are the object of sustained criticism
by feminist theorists.[21] But Birnbaum virtually games the phil-
osopher. Revisited in light of her work's recursive temporality,
his take on the obscenity of communications media acquires
a radically different valence. This is not because of the idea

21   See, for example, Victoria Grace, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (London:
     Routledge, 2002).

that Wonder Woman (or Carter playing her) displays all the attributes of your average television sex symbol but rather because Birnbaum exposes the mechanisms of her exposure, reproduces the logic of her reproduction. What makes such media "obscene" is not content in and of itself but the promiscuous extroversion of its images and the retrojection of an interior selfhood: Woman.

Owens highlights Birnbaum's investigation into "mass-cultural images of women" "absorbed in the display of their own physical perfection" and presses for a Lacanian reading of such femininity as "contained spectacle."[22] A spectacle that is "contained" is a spectacle that is reproducible, its codes of behavior subject to routinization, rationalization and analysis. Consider *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* (Figure 3.3), a work that plays to the interactive dimensions of contemporary media through its appropriation of footage from *Hollywood Squares*, a sure contender for among the more banal examples of the game show genre. In *Hollywood Squares*, B-list celebrities are stationed in a tic-tac-toe-like architecture and respond to questions posed by a genial host; they are in turn responded to by eager contestants who agree or disagree with whatever trivial claim they're making. Each celebrity is literally contained in his or her own square; and each actor's role is effectively trained to the grid. In Birnbaum's

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22 Owens, "The Discourse of Others", 83.

work, the extroverted behaviors of female celebrities are made the object of a peculiar scrutiny, at once highly regulated (that is rationalized) but revealed, in their repetition, to be extremely irrational. A disco soundtrack plays over a scene devoid of narration while the behaviors of three female actors are intercut in rapid, and repetitive, succession. Each actor plays her own role in assuming the guise of knowing brunette, flirty blonde, sassy child. Together they display the imagined spectrum of "feminine" behavior. They variously grimace, wink, smile, laugh, pout, roll their eyes, cast coy glances.

Yet because the video is without diegesis (we'll take up its soundtrack in a moment), those behaviors remain unmotivated on semiotic grounds. We have no idea as to what prompts the toss of hair or the raising of a brow—the causal nexus licensing such gestures. David Ross notes:

> The work focuses almost exclusively on the body gestures of a Hollywood celebrity whose feminine giggle and throw of the head is set against a fast zoom . . . In this work, the repeated body gesture and unspoken language, which work into the rhythmic nature of the song, giving it (the music) the leading role, also allow us to focus on the exquisite qualities of the gesture, emptying it of its original intent[23]

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23 David Ross, "Truth or Consequences: American Television and Video Art," in John J. Hanhardt, ed., *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), 177.

Figure 3.3 Dara Birnbaum, *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, 1979. Video, 6:50 min., color, sound.

Source: Courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

For reasons that will become clear all too shortly, I remain skeptical about phrasing such as "the exquisite qualities of the gesture." Ross is nevertheless on cue in noting the "emptying out" of the signs of such "feminine" behaviors, even if, I would argue, that emptiness might well be the precondition of the image's distribution. Such behaviors have been sundered from their cause, agency and interiority.

If these images of women do have any raison d'être*,* Birnbaum's work seems to suggest it's a function of their place within a peculiar economy of signs, whose power stems from the circulation and repetition of the images themselves:

> In *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, I used female stereotypes from the TV game show *Hollywood Squares*—actresses whose careers had mostly faded. The tic-tac-toe grid of the stage-set is almost like a disco floor in its patterning and use of highly visual and manipulated lighting. That's why I mixed and mashed this top game show, *Hollywood Squares*, to the top disco songs at that time. They just completely go together. I chose three strong female character types, each with different identities, from *Hollywood Squares*—a blonde, a brunette, and a child. Each has a very regulated and affected way of presenting themselves. Taken out of context, the gestures are so unreal, and yet they are gestures they've chosen to act out in order to reach an audience of millions.[24]

Birnbaum speaks to the stark contrast between the highly regulated presentation of the three female character types and the unreality of their behaviors in and of themselves. Which is to say that it is the *regulation* of their image within the game show that endows such gestures with any signifying capacity; "taken out of context" they are irrational, without reason. Let me note that the term "irrationality" might seem to re-inscribe

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24 "Dara Birnbaum" by Karen Kelley and Barbara Schroeder, *Bomb* 104, Summer 2008. Accessed online: http://bombsite.com/issues/104/articles/3141.

those insidiously gendered oppositions between mind/body, masculine/feminine, reason/sense that feminism has worked so insistently to deconstruct. My use of the term here, however, is meant to connote processes of *rationalization*—the quantification of such behaviors as rule-bound—continuous with their reproduction and control. That such behaviors have been chosen by the female celebrities to "act out" for an audience of millions speaks ultimately to the regulatory power of their mediating platform.

Formally, thematically and intermedially, Birnbaum deploys repetition on multiple and intersecting levels to press the point. The ecstasy of communication is tautological insofar as its ambition is to reproduce itself, and the female subject represents an acute point of contact within this media economy, especially because of her "to-be-looked-at-ness." The tic-tac-toe format—a gridded field—plays to this reproducibility by dint of its geometry; each unit could well be swapped out with another unit, presumably containing another female actor, presumably playing another character type. The squares themselves rhyme with the TV screen, which in turn rhymes with the video monitor. The serialization of such behaviors congeals into the appearance of identity, an observation that ramifies to neighboring pop-cultural associations. As Birnbaum sees it, the stage-set recalls the floor of a disco "in its patterning and use of highly visual and manipulated lighting"; the connection is supported further through the

video's soundtrack, a limp, funk-inflected number by 1980s stalwarts, Toto. The song is memorable if only for negative reasons (a pop-culture geek would call it an *earworm*) and indeed, it's the kind of grating number that, heard only once, plays like a feedback loop in the head. Its seemingly interminable chorus ("Georgy Porgy pudding and pie/Kiss the girls and make them cry") does "completely go together" with the visuals, themselves repeatedly looped. The music seems to propel or animate those female behaviors as if providing the rhythm for their subjects' embodiment, their choreography of irrational gestures.

Repetition, as discussed in Chapter 1, is a motor of post-modern temporality; recursion is its mode within contemporary media and communication. Birnbaum's work demonstrates repetition as immanent to this game of social behaviors and the nested worlds of mass media in which such images circulate. In her inestimably influential *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity describes the matter thus: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body," she writes, "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce *the appearance of substance*, of a natural sort of being."[25] In stressing modes of repetition within this "regulatory frame" Butler is unequivocal that these "practices of repetitive signifying" are not anything so simple

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25 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.

as a matter of choice, a presumption of individual agency behind the putting on of a dress or the application of make-up. Such a notion would only shore up the belief, founded in a metaphysics of substance, that gender were a mere "effect" or expression of some irreducible category such as "sex" or "woman"—the *appearance* of an abiding substance that lies behind, or is interior to, such extroverted forms of expression. Nor is gender performativity merely a function of "context" in the way in which the term is generically described within art history. The frame, rather, both installs and produces these performative gestures over time; but those behaviors are likewise constitutive of the frame itself. This is a game which renders the seemingly irrational behaviors of that subject "natural," but a game that depends upon those appearances in order to animate its cyclical (and circular) logic.

In reading Butler through Birnbaum's work—through a kind of game in which her character-types perform—it's worth highlighting the strange if productive coincidence between Butler's theory of performativity and the term as nominally linked to theories of postmodernism. Both uses are addressed to power, namely, around forms of regulation and legitimation, whether at the level of identity or knowledge or, more to the point, their continuity. For Butler, gender "proves to be performative" in the sense that it occasions or constitutes the identity thought to pre-exist or presuppose it. "There is no

gender identity behind the expressions of gender;" Butler observes, "that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[26] For Lyotard, performativity refers to the expediency of knowledge as such an informational commodity—that is, how the transformation of knowledge into information only substantiates information's current status within the postmodern condition, whereby "the goal is exchange" or its mercantilization.[27] One is reasonably hard-pressed to imagine how the gestures of female TV personalities on a game show might constitute "knowledge" in light of the master narratives Lyotard litanizes and describes. But their repeated appearance in Birnbaum's work—their stylization as gendered—most certainly amounts to information as mercantilized, and a means rather than an ends, the very stuff of the game show. It's by the *efficiency* with which such images cycle within media consciousness that they gain traction as forms of cultural information, the results of which are far from virtual or abstract but bear concretely on the identity of the female subject and the reigning fictions that naturalize this identity as a game of behavior.

For this reason, I want to say that Birnbaum's game show cannot strictly be called an "intervention," the notion of which is boilerplate to contemporary art criticism. "Intervention"

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26   Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.
27   Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 5.

suggests a hermeneutic or depth model of analysis—something lying beneath or within the realm of appearances that the artist excavates or uncovers—into which she therefore intervenes. Contemporary communication lives and dies on the principles of extroversion and recursion, however; and Birnbaum's move is to trump both through their reproduction. She plays the game already given her, enters into its regulatory contract, but does so in the service of its invalidation. Lyotard reminds us that you cannot import one language game into the sphere of another without performing a certain epistemic violence. Birnbaum and many other artists working with time-based media seem to have taken on this logic as a matter of course in work largely (by no means erroneously) deemed "appropriation."

The next section follows this model and returns us to an earlier game show, one that puts additional pressure on the intermedial relations between video and television and brings us back, in cyclical fashion, to the game-theoretic protocols confronted in the last chapter. As played by Richard Serra and the community of artists and performers associated with early SoHo, it is, like Birnbaum's, a competition over the terms of rationality and irrationality. In the process it demonstrates the stakes over the interests of the individual subject versus a common or collective good.

Television Delivers People. In 1973, Richard Serra and Carlotta Schoolman made the now-canonical video bearing this title

and thus established the terms for an especially durable genre of media critique. Incongruously set to the insipid strains of muzak, the soundtrack of the profit-driven life, the video is a scroll of blue upon which a string of aphorisms call out television's corporate imperatives, each statement more implacable than the next. "The product of television, commercial television, is the audience," the tape begins, ". . . television delivers people to an advertiser." Some seven minutes later, Serra's tape concludes with a withering aperçu: "Television is the prime instrument for the management of consumer demands." Under the influence of *Vladimir-and-Rosa*-era Godard, the artist channels his message through a stripped-down presentation miming the very medium it attacks.[28] *Television Delivers People* hence affirms the logic of video as bearing an antagonistic relation to the apparatus which effectively birthed it. The genealogical metaphor is to the point: according to David Antin's influential essay on this relationship, television is but video's "frightful parent." "To a great extent the significance of all types of video art derives from its stance with respect to some aspect of television,"[29] Antin wrote, a statement that confirms the reproductive logic of contemporary media. The degree to

28 "Prisoner's Dilemma" first published in *Avalanche* newspaper, May 1974, reprinted in Clara Weyegraf, *Richard Serra: Interviews, etc. 1970–1980* (New York: The Hudson River Museum, Archer Fields Press, 1980), 40.

29 David Antin, "Television: Video's Frightful Parent, Part 1," *Artforum International*, December 1975, 43.

which the artist explored, or more to the point, exploited, this structurally parasitic dynamic amounted to the work's politics. "An artist may exploit the relation very knowingly," to follow Antin's logic, "and may choose any aspect of the relation for attack."[30]

So prevalent is this conceit within histories of video art that it has assumed the status of a given. Video's capacity for self-criticism is structured around the operative logic of commercial television; it is "political" insofar as it appropriates the medium that gave rise to it.[31] We have seen how this notion might apply to Birnbaum's works: bluntly put, you could say that the content of both *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* and *Technology Transformation* is television. The point is confirmed by Serra in discussing *Television Delivers People* but leaves ample room for greater elaboration with his video of a year after, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, a work that on first viewing seemingly bears none of the earlier piece's critical ambitions.[32]

Yet this lesser-known video introduces a method that deepens our previous treatment of the game show as simultaneous mediation and extroversion of social behavior and

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30 Antin, "Television," 44.
31 The most important recent elaboration of this thesis is David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
32 "My concern in making tapes right now," Serra remarked in an interview with Liza Bear in the pages of the SoHo newspaper *Avalanche*, "is to attempt to expose the structure of commercial television." Serra, "Prisoner's Dilemma," in Weyegraf, *Richard Serra*, 40.

interaction. For in *Prisoner's Dilemma*, the artist presents an incisive way to conceive the to-and-fro between media through the work's convoluted structure, its strangely fitful ambience and the interaction of the performers involved. Birnbaum's work stressed the ways in which irrational behaviors are regulated through their mediation as a game; Serra'a work showcases an adjacent methodology in the form of game theory. As summed up in a RAND document, "game theory attempts to provide a guide to rational behavior in situations that involve conflict or cooperation or both—whether the situation is blackjack or economic competition or thermonuclear war."[33] Serra trades on the appearance of game-theoretic methods in *Prisoner's Dilemma* to suggest the ways in which the most questionable features of television are continuous with the Nixonian politics of the times, presented as a comedy of contemporary strategy.

Serra made *Prisoner's Dilemma* with Robert Bell, in January 1974. Starring Leo Castelli, and a host of figures associated with 112 Greene Street, the legendary alternative space of early SoHo, the first part is a pre-recorded video (made on January 20) screened for the audience of that gallery on the evening of January 22; it features the scene of a criminal interrogation

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33   "Game Theory," RAND memorandum, C-5 11/71 (author unnamed), Brownlee Haydon Papers, RAND Corporation Archive, Santa Monica, CA.

that runs about 20 minutes, loosely parroting a television police show (think *Dragnet*) (Figure 3.4). The second part documents a live skit following the viewing of the tape based on the format of a game show. The whole thing clocks in at some 40 minutes. Its black and white grain and rudimentary title sequence signal an economical production. With the exception of the elegantly turned-out Castelli, the denizens and friends of 112 Greene Street (including Bruce Boice, Richard Schechner, Spalding Gray, Gerry Hovagimyan, Jeffrey Lew, Joel Shapiro and Suzanne Harris) all sport the shambling uniforms of the era—jeans and t-shirts or long hair or both. The industrial cast-iron loft recruited as a progressive art space has yet to acquire the gloss of the present-day neighborhood while the audience filling the space, sitting rapt on squeaking folding chairs, are all participants in the vast communal experiment that was early 1970s SoHo. In other words, the work communicates bonhomie, not biting media critique.

More to the point of the work's inscrutability is that neither the narrative—such as it is—nor its format parse so easily; and its lighthearted tone jars with the methods and issues it internalizes and explores. The video, in other words, might *appear* to equivocate in its ambitions, as though it can neither commit to full-blown parody nor engage the grim reflections on media characterizing *Television Delivers People*. Yet however seemingly casual its presentation, the combination of

Figure 3.4 Richard Serra, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 1974. 3/4 in. video transferred to DVD, 40:15 min., black and white, sound.

pre-recorded video, live performance and documentation in *Prisoner's Dilemma* makes for a complex work on the complicated mediations of social interaction itself. I quote a description of it at length, taken from Robyn Brentano's book chronicling the events at 112 Greene Street, in order to convey the work's convoluted structure and its dogged resistance to paraphrase:

> A documentary audiotape prepared by Richard Serra's brother, dealing with methods used in criminal investigations, was played as the audience entered the space. Then the audience viewed a videotape made at 112 on January 20, 1974. This videotape began with Suzanne Harris singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" and then continued with a dramatic situation involving a District Attorney (Richard Schechner) who tries to get suspects to turn state's evidence by confessing to a murder. Interviewed separately, both suspects (Getty Hovagymian and Spalding Gray) are given the opportunity to sign. They are informed that if they both sign, they get ten years in prison; if one signs and the other doesn't the one who signs gets off free while the other is imprisoned for fifty years; in the event that neither sign, they both serve two years in jail . . . The second part of the evening consisted of a performance which the audience could only view on monitors, since a cardboard wall had been built down the center of the space preventing the audience from viewing the performers directly. In this section, modeled after a TV quiz show, the Master of Ceremonies (Robert Bell) offered another "non-zero sum game" similar to the one presented in the first part. The contestants (Bruce Boice and Leo Castelli)

were offered bribes; given the choice of situation A or B, the least desirable
outcome was to spend six hours alone in the basement of 112.[34]

The doubling and recursive structure of this work figures
importantly in what follows. Understanding these dynamics,
however, requires that we first consider the video as it unfolds.
Opening the tape, Suzanne Harris, a beloved figure on the
scene, warbles her way through "The Star-Spangled Banner."
She's channeling Eleanor Roosevelt in a fur stole and upswept
hair as an image of Old Glory flits in the background. The scene
then turns to a police station where Richard Schechner, in a
star turn as a district attorney, talks up his female assistant as
he prepares for an interrogation. A young Spalding Gray (play-
ing the part of the Rhode-Island naïf) and the artist Gerry
Hovagimyan (in his role as a petty criminal with a gift for
a blue streak) are alternately pressed upon by the bellicose
Schechner chomping on a cigar, attempting to extract a
confession for the murder of one Mr. Angelo Badista on January
20, 1974. It is a riotous harangue of swearing and ham-fisted
acting. (Schechner: "What do you do?" Hovagimyan: "I get
around, man.") The two thieves are offered separate deals by
Schechner, contingent upon how one individual effectively
"rats" on the other by signing a confession; three unpalatable

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34 Robyn Brentano and Mark Savitt, eds., *112 Workshop Greene Street: History, Artists and
    Artworks* (New York: New York University Press, 1981), 56.

options are available. If one betrays the other while the other says nothing, the former goes free while the latter gets 50 years. If both prisoners remain silent both will receive the *minimum* sentence of 2 years. If both talk—that is, if both betray the other—then they both receive a sentence of 10 years. The section concludes when Hovagimyan betrays Gray, preoccupied with apparently more important issues than the length of his sentence, such as the quality of food at Sing Sing or whether the infamous prison hosts Zen meditation sessions.

Absent these humorous asides, a game theorist would call this proceeding a two-person, two-strategy game premised on uncertainty and culminating in a particularly insidious result. What Serra has given us, more or less, is the Prisoner's Dilemma, if, as we shall see, with a notable departure from its canonical formulation.

Some 20 minutes later, the second half begins. Robert Bell, also with a cigar, plays the role of congenial game-show host. "Tonight we're going to play the game you've just seen in the video tape," he announces before asking Castelli and Boice, "Have either of you been in a video performance before?" He then presents to them and the audience a sign board detailing the Prisoner's Dilemma:

1   If both choose A both spend 4 hours together downstairs.
2   If both persons choose B both spend 2 hours together downstairs.

3   If one chooses A and the other chooses B, the person choosing A is free to leave, the other person who chooses B spends 6 hours downstairs.

The ambience is festive and self-knowing. Filmmakers, artists, actors, dancers and other performers are in league with a famous art dealer (a "celebrity" in Serra's words) in the production of a performance-cum-documentary video. The audience itself gets in on the action by laughing at all the right moments: the most famous joke involves the punishment of spending six hours alone in the basement . . . "about the length of your average boring artist's video." And the basement of 112 Greene Street—a popular site for a host of artistic interventions in the early 1970s—features prominently in serving as a holding pen for all of the prisoners involved, Boice and Castelli in the second half; Grey and Hovagimyan in the first. The game ends when the players, in a display of mutual respect, both choose the second option, effectively consigning themselves downstairs for the duration of four hours.

Ultimately the second half of the work is more user-friendly, for the interactions between its participants are less scripted (even as they are mediated by monitors for the audience present) and the game-show format is more readily grasped and dismissed by the contemporary viewer. Given Serra's video critique of television of just a year earlier, it's not hard to see

why a game show might serve as its model: Stressing that the second half was "modeled after a TV quiz show" the chronicle from the 112 Greene Street volume highlights a programming format at the nadir of an already much despised medium, a sentiment hardly restricted to the radical artist milieu. In his famous speech of 1961, Newton Minow, the controversial chairman of the Federal Communications Committee under JFK, decried television as "a vast wasteland." What lends Minow's well-known comment special urgency here is that the game show was the first example he gave to describe this blighted scenario; indeed his announcement followed the quiz show controversies of just a couple of years earlier, when contest-rigging was the subject of hearings before the House Sub-committee on Legislative Oversight in 1959.[35] The format's reputation for mendacity was certainly not lost on Serra, but in 1974, he would weigh in on its proceedings with especially affective vehemence. "In programs like *Let's Make a Deal*, or any of those quiz-format programs," he opined, "what the audience participates in is a sort of sado-masochistic contempt for materialism. Like 'Win your new Pontiac or you have to suck on a piece of ice.' The audience develops a contempt for the participants in relation to the game—and gets off on it."[36]

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35 On this history see, Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s TV Quiz Scandal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

36 Serra, "Prisoner's Dilemma," 42.

The dynamic described by Serra—between a player all too eager to debase himself for material gain and an audience indulging in these spectacles of self-mortification—will bear strange ramifications for the logic of the game show.

In the early 1970s, the very rules structuring a game show called *Prisoner's Dilemma* would assume meanings in excess of the television genre. For the Prisoner's Dilemma is the most notorious scenario of all in game theory; and in 1974, making use of its paradox as a work of video amounted to a different order of media engagement, at once entangled in the machinations of Nixon's White House and a peculiar brand of formalism advanced by the RAND Corporation. In his interview with Bear, Serra was plainspoken about his work's confrontation with Nixon, notably how the 37th president engineered his own television profile just a couple years earlier. "When the '72 election was being rigged, Nixon had the young Republicans hand-picked to clap on cue with that Sammy Davis handshake—good TV."[37] From his sweating and stammering debate with JFK in 1960; to the Watergate hearings of over a decade later; to the final humiliation in his interviews with David Frost, Nixon's relationship to his public image and television was perhaps the most vexed of any president's since the medium's invention: as Jonathan Schell has written, "In his first eight

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37   Ibid., 40.

months, President Nixon . . . had established what amounted to an almost new form of rule, in which images were given precedence over substance in every phase of government."[38]

But Serra would also refer more cryptically to Nixon's tactical maneuvers relative to the game-theoretic scenario after which the artist named his performance. The morality of the Prisoner's Dilemma, the idea of "to confess or not to confess" —right, wrong, justice, injustice—paralleled on the one hand the politics of TV programming and on the other hand, the specific dilemma of politicians like Agnew and Nixon:

> The game does not allow for Agnew to confess, but the other people did—plea bargaining. That's why Nixon's so popular now. He can't confess and people love him for it. The Schechner–Spalding tape is a straight parallel, very obviously so.[39]

Later on in the same interview, he would make another specific reference to game theory:

> I made an earlier videotape, *Surprise Attack*, which used a game theory that went: If you hear a burglar downstairs, should you pick up a gun or not pick up a gun. It was taken from Schilling's [sic] book *The Strategy of Conflict*. About a year and a half ago Robert Bell and I had talked about the possibility of making a film on a train going to Las Vegas which would deal with game theory. And then when I saw him

38   Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 51.
39   Serra, "Prisoner's Dilemma," 43.

in New York recently he'd just finished a paper on Deterrents which mentioned this specific prisoner's dilemma.[40]

Two months before Serra made his work in January 1974, Nixon appeared in a televised press conference in which he infamously proclaimed "I'm not a crook" in response to charges of Watergate's illegal activities. For his part, Agnew had already resigned in October 1973 due to accusations of tax evasion and, more seriously, bribery. His extensive plea bargaining—copping to the lesser charge of failing to pay his taxes—kept him out of jail, reduced his punishment to a proverbial slap on the wrist and relieved him of having to make a confession.

The facts are well known and are implied by Serra's statement. For a contemporary reader, the connection between Serra's references to game theory and his desire to "expose the structure of television" is neither transparent nor especially obvious. By the time Serra made *Prisoner's Dilemma*, RAND's reputation was virtually synonymous with the crisis in Southeast Asia: In 1965, for example, artists and art critics would protest what countless other Americans saw as the think tank's morbid influence in Vietnam.[41] Still, this phenomenon does not wholly explain the place of the Prisoner's Dilemma in Serra's work

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40 Ibid. Note that "Surprise Attack" is the title of the fourth chapter in Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

41 See Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 33–38. Frascina's striking account of

on television. As I've suggested earlier, my contention is that there's a strange kind of formalism to much game theory—and, in a manner of speaking, an aesthetics by extension—that can illuminate the structure of this work and Serra's thematic engagement with game shows as displays of strategy.

The Strategy of Conflict, Schelling's highly influential book on deterrence of 1960, does indeed take on a formal logic foundational to game theory generally, if acknowledging both the abstractions and limitations of game-theoretic discourse when applied to international strategy. As described in Chapter 2, the first wave of game theory—most famously elaborated by von Neumann and then Nash—made fundamental assumptions about these interactions. It prescribed that "rational agents will draw the same inferences on how a game is to be played," often referred to as the "common knowledge of rationality"; and that one's "best-choice strategy" is founded upon what the other person does; and that both parties are rational parties, acting in their own best interests.[42] Yet of the 78 two-person games

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this protest is drawn mostly from the Leon Golub archives at the Archive of American Art; one notes that the RAND archives do not seem to possess any material related to the Artists' Protest Committee. Serra, for his part, would be tangentially implicated in these controversies for his participation in the Art and Technology program organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Though he worked with Kaiser Steel in the production of his famous "Skullcracker" series—and though his opposition to the war was radical and staunch—the partnership of the RAND Corporation with artists (first Larry Bell, then John Chamberlain) was the source of no small amount of vitriol on the part of many of the era's most visible critics.

42 See Shaun P. Hargreaves Heap and Yanis Varoufakis, *Game Theory: A Critical Text* (London: Routledge, revised edition 2004), 6–40.

derived from its methods, none has captured the popular imagination as much as the Prisoner's Dilemma, the name the Princeton mathematician Albert Tucker bestowed upon a well-known paradox formalized by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher at RAND in 1950.

In 1952, Flood published "Some Experimental Games," among the most influential tracts published by RAND, articulating in its third section this classic paradox of rationality, irrationality and strategy explored by Serra two decades later. As a challenge to earlier models of game theory—notably, the eponymous "equilibrium" model formulated by Nash—the conclusions drawn by analysis of the Prisoner's Dilemma were both striking and disturbing: first, that it is in the best interest of each player to "defect" from the other—that is, *not* to cooperate in making one's choice—and that second, people's choices were essentially, *irrational*. The Prisoner's Dilemma, in short, defies common sense reasoning. As the economists Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis write, the "game has fascinated social scientists because it seems to be ubiquitous and because of its paradoxical conclusion that rational people, when acting apparently in their best interest, actually produce a collectively *inferior* outcome to what is available."[43] The Prisoner's Dilemma thus puts the irrationality of interaction itself on

43   Ibid., 172.

show, where anticipating the other person's actions does not always result in the best outcome for those involved. It dramatizes the problem of reason itself within game theory, how expectations of the other's "best choice" strategy might devolve into the most absurd of exercises.

Indeed, even as much of it is premised on rationality, "rationality" will become a progressively vexed notion within the discourses of game theory. In an early paper for RAND, for example, Schelling questioned the application of "rational strategies" to non-zero sum games, that is games involving cooperation and mutual dependence, the basis for his subsequent work on international relations.[44] Schelling's thinking signals the increasingly precarious status of reason within game theory; and perhaps no one was in a better position to understand this dynamic where Nixon was concerned. A debate has raged over the president's notorious "madman strategy" and its relation to Schelling's game theory, in which the "performance" or *appearance* of the president's irrationality within matters of foreign policy served as the White House's unofficial deterrence platform. Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* has long been linked, if controversially, to this most perverse Nixonian gambit. But more fundamental than the question of influence here is how Schelling flags a problem of interaction, reason and

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44 T. C. Schelling, "Prospectus for a Reorientation of Game Theory," P-1491, September 17, 1951, RAND Corporation, 1–2.

unreason as expressed between players within the game—a problem with a peculiar visual component as it so happens.

On the one hand, while possessing the "common knowledge of rationality" might in theory culminate in consensus—the triumph of the dialectic, enlightened cooperation—we've noted how it could result in a bad infinity of sorts, where, as the outcome of the Prisoner's Dilemma suggests, there *is* no solution. The structure underwriting this exchange might instead produce an infinite regress, as articulated by commentators on game theory in the following terms:

> The complication arises because with common knowledge of rationality I know that you are instrumentally rational and since you are rational and know that I am rational you will also know that I know that you are rational and since I know that you are rational and you know that I am rational I will also know that you know that I know that you are rational and so on . . . This is what common knowledge of rationality means.[45]

In this surprisingly Beckett-like reckoning, one glimpses something of the *mise en abîme* to the formalization of game-theoretic discourse, an endless alteration between players in which the effort to second-guess the other results in an interminable feedback loop. To the extent that Serra was

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45   Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis, *Game Theory*, 27.

engaged with Schelling's terms it is uncanny that Hargreaves Heap and Varoufakis draw on a metaphor from the visual realm to characterize the mode of this exchange:

> The idea reminds one of what happens when a camera is pointing to a television screen that conveys the image recorded by the very same camera: an infinite self-reflection. Put in this way, what seemed like a promising assumption suddenly looks capable of leading you anywhere.[46]

One needn't be so literal-minded as to imagine that these economists were thinking of video art when advancing their critique of reason in game theory. Resemblance is less the point here so much as the structure of interaction, no less the odd resonance such a reading might have with Baudrillard's ecstatic communications. The recursive architecture the metaphor suggests does indeed find an echo in Serra's video, where a kind of internal redoubling occurs not only relative to its tone and character, and not only within each section of the work, but across the pre-recorded video of the criminal interrogation and the documented performance of the game show. It is the incessantly circular logic of television—and the tautological character of contemporary communication—that results in Serra's hall of mirrors, where television is endlessly refracted to

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46   Ibid., 27.

the point of implosion even while his video plays cheerfully to its conventions.

In this sense the apparent breaks within *Prisoner's Dilemma* acquire a new significance relative to the question of media and postmodernism. Consider the overall arc of the work, which pits the mass appeal of the game show with the military associations of game theory, crossed ultimately with a moral dilemma involving cooperation or defection. The first part of the work—Schechner's interrogation of Gray and Hovagimyan —reflects such fissures. As Schechner applies pressure to Gray within the pre-recorded video, he makes a not-so-veiled threat about the mediation of the process itself. "See those cameras over there?" he mutters to Gray "We are prepared to send this tape to your family in Rhode Island . . . This is documentation, this is proof." He then adds in a more conciliatory tone, "there are advantages to going to jail." Of course this is neither proof nor documentation of anything so much as the ersatz recording of a recording of a process designed to ensnare the hapless Gray in a most confused interaction: the prisoner will go to Ossining facility for 50 years for refusing to sign. This tape-within-a-tape plays to the mediated interaction between television and video as it does the dynamic of rationality and irrationality within game theory.

And yet crucially, Serra's take on the Prisoner's Dilemma here is not entirely consistent with the actual game since vital

information is provided to both Hovagimyan and Gray—namely, how the other party involved might act. In the canonical scenario, neither prisoner is given any information as to what the other one is going to do, preserving the abstract or theoretical dimension of the interaction. Serra, as such, has "defected" from the dilemma in two ways: first, he has broken the rules of the game and second, he has had one of his personas (Gray) acting in a manner outside the usual range of behaviors accorded the game-theoretic subject. In the second half of the performance, these interactions will find their double in the taped documentation of a live performance.

Indeed, as if both to mirror and contain the tape-within-a-tape conceit in the first half of the work, the documented video performance is premised on a live audience watching a video recorded at 112 Greene Street *within* 112 Greene Street. Reviewing the terms of the game, the players are provided the options by Bell and happily deliberate on the choices for punishment, the worst being 6 hours spent in the basement or, as the punch-line would have it "about the length of your average boring artist's video." Even this witty aside takes on connotations of some seriousness in light of its presentation. The entire scenario—and the relegation of Castelli and Boice to the basement of 112 Greene Street as each awaits his turn to be questioned by Bell—can only be glimpsed through monitors by the live audience, meaning that the "liveness" of

the performance is itself split and mediated, another tape-within-a-tape scenario departing from the viewing of yet another tape-within-a-tape. That this bears some relation to the "average boring artist's video" is to the point not only with respect to the punishment's extended and taxing duration but the ways in which Serra and his generation of video makers in the early 1970s were enthralled by the logic of the feedback loop. And like the first half of the work *Prisoner's Dilemma*, the contestants, too, will stray from the conventional script. In a gesture of good faith, both Castelli and Boyce ultimately choose *not* to betray the other so that both players of the game are sentenced to spend 4 hours together in the basement of 112 Greene Street.

This final strategic decision on the part of the two players—continuous with the community-minded spirit of early 1970s SoHo—confirms Serra's simultaneous reproduction and inversion of both the game-theoretic and televisual scenario: through an act of cooperation, the artist and his players paradoxically *defect* from the expected protocols of defection just as they reverse the lighthearted romp expected of the game show. They reproduce the impulse to defection that is the hallmark of the Prisoner's Dilemma while overturning its claims.

The game being played, then, is one in which the rules are followed but effectively trumped. The players have contracted with its recursive logic, assumed the fundamental terms of the game's dynamic. But just as Birnbaum's work reproduced the

images circulated through the game show, if to show up the ways in which the behaviors of its subjects are reproduced and regulated as information, so too is Serra's "a demonstration of the operation of culture," where rationality and irrationality are exposed as opposite sides of the same coin. If at first Serra's work seems little more than a television parody, his appropriation of game theory's forms betrays an altogether different approach. In this iteration, as the game itself is put on show, media puts the lie to itself and the community wins.

Conclusion

Mixed Hopes, Mixed Strategies

I close on a seemingly nostalgic note, a strange way to end a discussion on the incomplete project of postmodernism and contemporary art. While the following might read as a memoir of sorts, its spirit is closer to a cautionary tale: a decidedly unromantic view of the decade in which the discourses of postmodernism flourished. I end at the beginning: in the introduction to each volume in this series on theories of modernism and postmodernism in the visual arts, James Elkins admits to the "mixed hopes" he has for the project as a whole, voicing his skepticism as to whether something like a grand unified theory exists for art history and criticism. Through concluding with my own experiences during the historiographic epoch of postmodernism in the 1980s, I take a different perspective on the notion of mixed hopes: that is, what can we learn from the unfinished business of postmodernism's cultural politics? What *mixed strategies* can we glean from its history when framed as a theory of games?

In 1988 I was a senior art history major at Yale, which was still very much in thrall to deconstruction and the so-called Yale Critics: Paul de Man, most prominently, but also Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom. Back then, undergraduates in the humanities cut their eye teeth on Derrida; all the comparative literature and English majors I knew played in bands and spoke fluent Kathy Acker, William Burroughs and Philip K. Dick; students routinely satisfied their foreign language requirements with intro Russian ("*dobry dyen*" was the greeting heard everywhere in the dining halls); and one might eavesdrop on exchanges involving a Hartman, a Denis Hollier or other luminaries at Naples or the Anchor or other local watering holes. At Street Hall, the former offices of the art history department, Professor Ann Gibson would introduce many of the junior majors to the range of poststructuralist thinkers in her required methodology seminar, an essential class that exposed students to art history's critical possibilities. For her leave in 1988, Gibson had the foresight to hire Craig Owens as a replacement teacher, an institutionally controversial gesture as Owens did not have a Ph.D.

Still, Owens's arrival on campus was anticipated as something of an event. Although he was already sick with HIV-related illnesses and was forced to miss class on more than a few occasions, the capacious room in Street Hall in which he lectured nearly overflowed with students from across the university, not

just art and art history majors. (As a pointed comparison, the only other time I experienced such intensity in a lecture hall as an undergraduate was at a talk given by Clement Greenberg at the School of Art; needless to say, it was of an entirely different tenor, the mood bordering on vehemence.) Owens was a scintillating lecturer, subtle, witty and impassioned, the perfect guide to lead us through the thornier passes of the Culture Wars. He was especially inspiring when he discussed feminism and queer artists and activism. We learned about Barbara Kruger, Mary Kelly, Jenny Holzer, Dara Birnbaum, Cindy Sherman, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Silvia Kolbowski, Martha Rosler. We learned about Marlon Riggs, Robert Mapplethorpe and Derek Jarman and ACT-UP; and we debated the question of representation and AIDS in paintings by Ross Bleckner, photographs by Nicholas Nixon. These lectures were equal parts exhortation and searing critical analysis, yet Owens was never too self-serious to impart a note of levity, even humor, into his discussions.

It was a transformative classroom experience, the best way to cap off an undergraduate major in art history. Not long after commencement, I took a job at the Metro Pictures gallery, then on Greene Street in SoHo, which represents among the most pivotal artists of the last few decades. My time there was as important as the time spent in Owens's classroom, if for seemingly different reasons. The gallery's directors, Janelle Reiring and Helene Winer, inspired as formidable businesswomen with

an unerring sense of what mattered in contemporary art. And the realpolitik of the art world mitigated strenuously against all the footnotes and philosophy I had imbibed as an under-graduate. The rituals of SoHo had little to do with the (mostly) polite speech and protocols of the Ivory Tower. What an incredible privilege it was to get to know some of the artists and critics I had learned about and so admired in Owens's class! Still, the things that I did on a day-to-day basis—and the events that transpired in SoHo and elsewhere during that time—had, at least on the surface of things, virtually nothing to do with all the theorizing in the classroom.

Or so I thought.

To begin, the AIDS crisis was in catastrophic swing and the art world was suffering devastating losses, as checked by a grim bureaucratic task made all the more terrible for its routinization: Each month, just as the announcement cards for the gallery openings were about to go out, we removed dozens of names from our mailing list—artists, critics, curators, dealers and collectors whose lives were cut violently short. Discussed by the Center for Disease Control in 1981, AIDS was only addressed by Reagan in 1987, at which point over 20,000 Americans had died due to his inaction, sanctioned by the Religious Right. Such connections would bear a fatal influence on the art world: In 1989, the year that he would succumb to AIDS, Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition "The Perfect Moment" would be at

the center of a national firestorm over censorship and public funding of the arts, led by Jesse Helms. In 1990, Owens would die just months before his 40th birthday. Increasingly alienated from his editorial tenure at *October* (he would officially break with the journal in 1990), Douglas Crimp took on the mantle of AIDS activist to become among the most important cultural theorists of the epidemic. Among the best critics associated with postmodernism, Crimp was unequivocal about the politics of representation and its very material, indeed, mortal stakes.

The end of the 1980s witnessed other ends. Following the "Black Monday" market crash in 1987, 1990 was the year the tumbling Nikkei Index put an abrupt halt to the excesses of the go-go decade. The requisite belt-tightening across the board was the inevitable fallout of both the Bubble Economy and Reaganomics—and all this in tandem with the president's declaration that the Cold War was over and won. I needn't belabor the inextricability of the connection; an implicit claim of this book concerns the Cold War hangover we continue to suffer in the contemporary throes of neoliberalism. Of course the privations were of a different magnitude as glimpsed through the privileged, no doubt myopic, lens of the art world. Where the social whirl was concerned, the once-spectacular openings enjoyed by many, complete with lavish spreads from Dean & Deluca, were swapped out for wine in plastic cups in the director's office.

As the decade's conclusion saw the art world responding to the realities of a limping economy (to say little of the conflicts that would lead to the "first" Gulf War at the start of the 1990s) postmodernism's critical fortunes were equally precipitous. It was then that postmodernism's obituaries began to appear with increasing regularity. 1993 was the year that Hal Foster published "Postmodernism in Parallax," an essay I considered at the start of this book and return to at the end. I continue to be struck by one sentence in particular for reasons that are alternately depressing and salutary. Reflecting on post-modernism at the moment of its waning, Foster wrote, "And we did not lose . . . In a sense a worse thing happened: treated as fashion, postmodernism became *démodé*."

This is, I think, an appropriately ambivalent note on which to conclude, if one that does not completely sound a death knell to the positions that critical postmodernism advanced in those days. I've come full circle to Foster's statement for the way it captures the mixed hopes I have in treating postmodernism after the fact of the "contemporary"; and this, I hasten to add, is a strategic position as well. The wars that postmodernism waged as cultural politics were not so much lost (with all its valences of embattled avant-gardism) as their positions were tabled, appropriated and outflanked as both theoretical fashion and neoliberal alibi. To follow the language of this book, they were *gamed* in light of the operative logic of the postmodern

condition; trumped as a matter of information; re-presented in wholly naturalized terms as the "post-industrial society." They succumbed, as Ernest Mandel would put it, to a collective "neo-fatalist ideology."

There is a lesson to be taken from this sense of historiographic (and historical) declension; that if the oppositional character of postmodernism was effectively defanged by the 1990s, not as a battle lost but according to a different set of rules, then our strategies for the contemporary moment need to respond in kind as necessarily mixed strategies. To do so is only consistent with the postmodern condition itself. The monolithic narratives we've come to associate with an earlier epoch—the master narratives Lyotard confronts with the introduction of New Games—no longer motivate our cultural politics in the same way as they once did, nor our interactions as social and political beings. Consider, for example, the subject as "the hero of liberty" as the most pressing figure within such narratives. Once totalized as the humanist subject, now atomized *and* networked around communications media, the profile of this subject speaks to new forms of distributed agency—and a new micro-politics by extension. Time was that we called such subjects "cyborgs" or "perfomative"; today we might take recourse to the debates around global politics to characterize further that subject's perpetual mutation: collective agency and itinerancy.

And while the rules are indeed different now than they were in 1993 (to argue otherwise is to fall prey to another kind of historical amnesia) one thing remains the same. *Pace* Lyotard, agonistics are its organizing principle, its motor and beating heart. If this is a grand unified theory of a sort, what it requires of us when dealing with matters contemporary is to be ever-vigilant in tracking the changing rules of the game, along with their changing positions, from now to then and back again. To speak is to fight; and to speak on behalf of those positions recently banished to history's dustbin as fashion is the critical work of both historiography *and* contemporary history. It is to battle the ideology of communicational transparency and its handmaiden in the insidious kind of presentism that characterizes our contemporary moment.

To speak is to fight is to game the rules with which we've ostensibly contracted. The move is ours.

Seminar

This text was assembled in fall 2011. We couldn't arrange a "real world" seminar, as in the other volumes of this series, so we worked online, creating this collaborative document. The participants are: Pamela Lee; Michael Newman (School of the Art Institute of Chicago / Goldsmiths); David Getsy (School of the Art Institute of Chicago); James Elkins (School of the Art Institute of Chicago); and Suzanne Hudson (University of Southern California).

JE: I'd like to start with some questions that have to do with the book series as a whole. I very much appreciate the fact that you've engaged with the series premise—the idea that it might be useful to think about large-scale theories—and I also like the way you position forms of skepticism around that. It might be useful for readers of the series if we tease that out a bit.

　　There are, perhaps, two extreme versions of the interest I have in thinking about large-scale historical structures. On the one hand, there is a negative claim: for me it can be troubling

to see so many art historical essays that concentrate on very narrowly bracketed subjects, because for me a monograph's raison d'être is that it is, ultimately, a contribution to the large ongoing conversation of art history. In other words, I think the large number of very narrowly defined monographs that comprise so much of art history should worry us when, or if, they don't make some gesture, no matter how brief or circumspect, to the reasons why their subject matter is of larger interest. I'm guessing I might worry about this more than some people, but I'm also supposing that there wouldn't be much disagreement about the general notion that there are reasons why art historians choose different subjects at different times, and that those reasons should be part of the conversation.

On the other hand, there's a positive claim: that it might be of interest to spend some time pondering the largest-scale theories, the ones that string together Victorian revivals with modernist architecture, or tell the even larger story of Western post-Renaissance architecture. I can entirely understand how that claim needs to be qualified and sometimes resisted, and I thought maybe we could explore those qualifications and resistances. But I first wanted to note that the positive claim exists because of the negative claim.

PL: I see the value in making the case for both; but the positive claim, as you make very clear in *Master Narratives and Their*

Discontents, is obviously the more difficult proposition. I can think of very few books to have advanced such a theory in the last decade. But it seems to me that the relative absence of such literature may well be a function (at least in part) of the conditions I outline in *New Games*. In other words, the question of information, its status and exchange, becomes critical in mounting any large-scale theory . . .

For the scholar of contemporary art, already accustomed to charges that her field is little more than fashion or empty speculation, an additional worry about those large-scale theories is that they might be irredeemably trans-historical. Contemporary art occasions what might seem like a counter-intuitive approach to the interest of the series. In seizing upon the doubled nature of game theory to account for the split between postmodernism and contemporary art, my ambition was to take on questions of "large-scale" theory relative to what Lyotard calls information's "local determinisms." The large-scale, in this case, is utterly continuous with the small-scale. There's a perpetual shifting between totality and contingency . . .

JE: Yes, exactly. So I don't want to identify my interests, or the series's interests (if there is such a thing) with large-scale trans-historical theories. And this leads to what I think is the complex part of this issue. Here are a couple more options, short of the genuinely world-historical, Hegelian-flavored,

megaperiod-scaled, potentially trans- or even a-historical theor-
izing that once seemed necessary in art history.

First, there is a claim about the structure of history that
holds that there is no helpful, useful, or sufficiently pertinent
theory of the structure of history. In your book, one example
is the kind of unhelpful declaration of postmodernism's
pluralism, which was, as you note, well critiqued by Hal Foster
and others.

Second, there is a claim regarding the structure of history
that says there is no sense in history without the local, the
individual, and the atemporal. In an earlier generation, this
corresponds to Panofsky's debate with Franz Boas, who held
that history has no structure because it is comprised of indi-
vidual instances.

Again I'm trying to get at this subject by naming extreme
positions, which might help by way of contrast with the
moderated position you take in this book.

Alongside those kinds of claims, then there is also the
idea that no adequate or coherent theory of the historical struc-
ture of modernisms or postmodernisms can be made without
involving accounts of the local, the evanescent, the particular,
the unrepeatable. A mixture of "large-scale" and other theories,
or a dialogic relation between "large" and "local" (under their
many names) is what is at stake here. What's of interest to me,
then, is exactly how that relation might work. It could be the

case, for example—and I don't mean this is your position—that the individual events, works, and contexts of modernism and postmodernism continuously undermine the large-scale accounts of their coherence. In that model, "large-scale" theories would exist as foils: they would pre-exist local determinations, and serve historical accounts by always appearing hobbled or incomplete.

PL: The book comes down somewhere in the middle of the last option you describe, although I'm not entirely sure it's what I would call a "moderated" position as much as it is a historical (or even historiographic) one. The peculiarity of my thesis is that game theory (in its guise as economic "behavior") announces itself as a "theory of everything"—a way of ranging across disciplines and a way of modeling the totality of social, economic, political and even biological interaction—but what this assumes is a transparent relationship with, or access to, the contingencies of information. Which raises the second, nested model of game theory, the Lyotardian variant more typically assigned to postmodernism, with its agonistic valences.

JE: Right, sorry: "moderated" not in the sense of "managed" but of "made moderate," "balanced." It's this balancing of claims of large and small, transparence and mediation. Conversations and projects like these are very interesting because

they raise the issue of their own position in unusual forms. Where are we when we are able to weigh the putatively "large" against the apparently "small"?

DG: Before moving to the contributions of the book, it would be worth putting pressure on the metaphors underwriting the idea of historical narratives' "large scale," since this characterization has been put in motion as the way to frame the questions of the series. It seems to me that there are two registers that are often confused or fused when we voice opinions about large-scale theories (no matter if we talk about them with doubt, nostalgia, hope, or despair). First, and most apparent, is the spatializing metaphor of scale itself. In discussions of theories of historical structuring, the extensiveness through which methods are justified or refuted becomes the key criterion. It is how wide or narrow, how broad or particular, or—to be blunt—how global or local that becomes the measure of a theory. This extensiveness, however, is often conflated with extensibility—and here I am drawing on the usage of the term "extensibility" in software design to indicate the potential for future growth and adaptability. The metaphor of extensibility operates in a temporal register, casting a theory's applicability not just to the (spatial) horizons of what is known but, also, to the as-yet-unforeseen future terms which it will encompass (even if those "future" terms are just new historical data learned

about past events). To put it another way, we could ask what (or, rather where or when) we mean when we say that a theory "travels," which is a common way of praising its effectiveness and potential for future uses. "Travels" implies a movement in time as a condition for the movement across space, again mixing up spatial and temporal metaphors in our evaluative criteria for theories of historical structure.

MN: I think the idea of theory as temporally extensible is intriguing, but I wonder, David, whether there is not a problem when the temporal modality is that of a future. A theory extensible into the future would, surely, evacuate that future of any potential, that is to say the possibility to throw up something—an event, an experience, or for that matter an object, that is not-yet-theorizable. It would therefore, in effect, make art impossible. Or else the theory, in order to be extensible, would have to be empty. I appreciate that I am moving away from the discourse of information in Pam's book to a discourse of the event. However, as in Lyotard, they do overlap. So the question once the future is introduced into the discussion of information may concern the relation of information, and gaming, to the new. Following Benjamin on the reduction of revolution to fashion, we could see the game as a form of the new (each instance of the game may be different within an extremely large number of possible permutations) to its eternal

recurrence. Postmodernism could be understood as the acknow-ledgement of this condition (the revolutions of modernism become the eternal recurrence of the new, as the structure of the market). In response, the possible strategies for art become either a defensive and possibly critical mimicry (as in the administrative modes of conceptual art, and various forms of appropriation in the 1970s and 1980s), or an attempt to sustain the work (in a broad sense including performance, participa-tory, and relational art as well as installation and object) as the interruption of a specific situation. Thus the "large-scale" aspect of this lies not in the historical determination of the situation, but rather that which cannot be encompassed by it. What we also hit here is the question of whether postmodernism is art after and still in relation to modernism, or a phase in the longer history of modernity, a question rather nicely finessed by Pam by taking as her focus information and gaming, where these two questions precisely intersect. Which may be why the works she discusses by Birnbaum and Serra are both appropriations and events; specifically, they are events in relation to media, which would take us back to what is at stake in what Rosalind Krauss calls "the invention of a medium."

DG: Michael, my proposing extensiveness and extensibility as the implicit metaphors through which large-scale theories are evaluated, deployed, and critiqued was descriptive, not

prescriptive. Precisely, *unlimited* (spatial) extensiveness or (future) extensibility are inconceivable, and no theory could fully account for or predict the "not-yet," as you say. However, implying such limitlessness has been a powerful and recurring rhetorical tactic for refuting the idea of large-scale theories, and I was pointing to the ways in which metaphoric language around a theory's applicability (again, its extensiveness or its extensibility) has been carried over into the narratives of modernism and postmodernism. In particular, the spatial metaphor has been leaned on as a means of caricaturing the extensiveness of modernism as bound to fail: simply put, we cannot adequately visualize a thing that covers everything else—the Holy Grail that is the Theory of Everything (TOE). Even though modernism was often defined by its advocates through its conjoined historical rupture (its break with the past) and its utopian futurity (the creation in the present of the classic-to-be), the clichéd account of modernism's failings relies on casting its aspirations in spatial, not temporal, terms.

The stereotypical "suspicion of meta-narratives" account of postmodernism performs this operation of spatial caricature on modernism's narratives in order to establish itself as having—in its skepticism—a more knowing, and far greater, extensibility (infinite repeatability and adaptability). That is, the endgame of postmodernism is to argue that it has a future precisely because it is smart enough not to predict one. (Here's one of

the valences of "post-" that Pam succeeds in making clear in the introduction and first chapter.) This extensibility (what the book later depicts as a sort of gaming of games) carries through even as the "post-" gave way to the "now" of the "contemporary."

I've presented this in such stark terms not as a means of hamstringing the question of the large-scale versus the particular versus the middle ground, but rather of trying to get at the *how* in addition to the *what* of the discipline's debates about interpretative scope and its appropriateness.

SH: Extensibility is often confused or conflated with another term, forward compatibility. The difference is instructive: the former names an entity that moves into its future with modifiable parts (but without the allowance for fundamental changes to its basic organization), where the latter assimilates previously unanticipated inputs and reorganizes itself on their basis. I was poised to question the local as the unapologetically personal in the sections that bracket the text, and the conclusion especially, in relation to the abstractions inherent in the large-scale, as well as to suggest that we might want to account for the implications of the material, ideological, or even semiotic specificity of the particular artworks to which you have recourse, as a way to move into talking about the text more directly. (Hopefully we can return to these queries in due course;

meantime, Michael has given us a start.) But this issue of extensibility makes me wonder instead about the proleptic nature of futurity and its relation to the "post" in its fundamental, structural admission of inevitable obsolescence . . . not necessarily triumphal futurity. This nonetheless implies a predictive telos, if of another sort.

MN: Obsolescence is the condition of modernity and so a way that the "post-" precedes what is it supposed to follow.

SH: Indeed. What then of the contemporary?

DG: I also feel that it is necessary to interject that any notion of futurity will be, itself, a problematic figuration riddled with value judgments. Not the least of these are the procreative model of generativity and the prescriptive normativity inherent in projecting future conditions (as Lee Edelman has discussed). Casting Pam's "gaming of the game" through the temporal metaphor of the extensible, for me, reaffirms and expands her unpacking of the value judgments underlying accounts of the postmodern and the contemporary's futures.

PL: I appreciate David's nod to "extensibility" because, as befitting its digital implications, it does get at the temporal prerogatives critical to the book—namely, complicating the

received wisdom that modernism's domain is time, post-modernism's is space. To think of postmodernism after the contemporary, on the other hand (we could call it post-modernism, post-contemporary!) is to confront and thematize the "flexible" temporality assumed by contemporary media, economics, work and production seemingly on its own terms. (At the risk of introducing too many more metaphors, "flexibility" does capture many of the problems I raise relative to contemporary art and its persistent truck with neoliberalism.)

Still, I think notions of large-scale and small-scale theory maintain: they can be helpfully updated under pressure of more contemporary rubrics such as extensibility. For example, we can talk about time scales at the level of local narratives: they are, for all purposes, language games. Which leads to Suzanne's question of the "unapologetically personal" in the book. The "personal" voice was recruited as a kind of language game, not because my experiences were in any way exceptional. The motivation, rather, was both theoretical and pedagogical.

JE: Each of the observations we've been making here—including mine—imply a place from which these issues can be at least provisionally assessed. In another context, such a place could be provided by some sufficiently confident systematic account of historical structure. (I am thinking, in different con-texts, of systematic writers including Luhmann and Rancière.)

Pam, your book is different in kind in relation to the place of narration—the place from which the account of game theories can be articulated—because it proposes to negotiate between two models. The second, which you call for short the "Lyotardian variant," can be imagined as "nested" inside the other, or as having other sorts of relationships with the first. In David's terms, would "nesting," for example, be a temporal or spatial relation? It might be temporal, or "extensible," in the sense that it became a possibility after certain globalizing claims were made on behalf of first-generation game theory. Or it might be spatial in the sense that the logics of game theory imply, permit, or even require such a "Lyotardian" variation, in the way that "deviant" logics have been said to be nested in Aristotelian logic.

PL: It seems to the point that the approach is both temporal and spatial. As I mentioned earlier, one of my aims was to recover the question of time that has otherwise gone missing in general accounts of postmodernism but has resurfaced with a vengeance in art-historical deliberations on contemporaneity. I'm struck and bothered by the relative silence on this shift within the field: why, for instance, has the year 1989 become such a shibboleth in discussions of contemporary art when not too long ago, we all seem to have succumbed, pace Jameson, to the "waning of historical affect"? Why has this date become

so punctual at the very moment of postmodernism's (art-critical) obsolescence? Why are we all so quick to say post-modernism is "dead," overtaken by something called "the contemporary"?

But to forego the spatializing models consistent with the discourses of globalization and contemporary art would be just as irresponsible. When we talk about the "eclipse of distance" as the phenomenon subtending the relationship between globalization and recent art, for example, we suffer a different kind of historiographic amnesia: that such discussions of time/space compression find their bearings in the earlier work of someone like a David Harvey, who was so critical in addressing "the condition of postmodernity," conditions that are as urgent today as when he first wrote on the topic over 20 years ago.

In the end, the approach is in line with the very logic of game theory. It's not pluralism for the sake of pluralism or a fantasy about critical balance. The book attempts to negotiate/bridge those models as a way to address game theory as a "theory of everything."

MN: It's interesting how the interiority "evacuated" in Baudrillard's "Ecstasy of Communication" that Pam discussed returns as an autobiographical, authorial voice. What in the course of this has happened to the split subject of psychoanalysis

that was so important in the postmodernist art that came out of film theory in journals like *Screen*, including Dara Birnbaum's video work? How is the psychoanalytic strand to be articulated in relation to the supposed transparency involved in information? And here we might recall that Jacques Lacan has a discussion from 1945—therefore precisely coinciding with mid-century postwar modernist concerns—of the "prisoner's dilemma" in which he uses it to elaborate what he calls "logical time" as opposed to chronological time. This logical time is "the intersubjective time that structures human action": this "logical" time is Lacan's substitution for phenomenological time, where retention, protention and the now are rethought in intersubjective terms with respect to the other. What do I know of the other and what does the other know—and want—of me? These questions determine different paces of time, waiting, anticipation, and haste. Time conceived in relation to the split subject and the other could provide a rather different approach to both game theory as well as interactive and time-based art.

PL: Michael, I hope it's clear that this writerly voice is as much, if not more, performative and dialogical as it is autobiographical. And it is nothing if not a deeply ambivalent or hedged voice. Again, the experience described is not exceptional, nor is there an exceptional interiority motivating the narrative. (Really,

I have to think that very few readers would be interested in my undergraduate and employment history in the 1980s!) But I do want to press for the pedagogical dimension of that personal "I": to showcase to readers born after 1989 the stakes around which much of the writing on postmodernism turned.

DG: Perhaps now would be the time to remark on the particularities of the story the book tells. It (convincingly) connects central components of textbook postmodernism (suspicion of meta-narratives, focus on information's circulation, appropriation, etc.) in relation to the immediate and pressing context of the cultural politics that preceded and coincided with it. For instance, the final chapter makes an excellent case for demonstrating the currency of the vocabulary of game theory within the art world, just as earlier chapters drew other connections between its tenets and key terms for postmodernism's "fantasy of the 'Now' which a fixation on the contemporary will presume." In this regard, we might remember that the prejudice against history and narrative in preference for the rush of all things current is nothing less than an analog to one of the central taxonomic features of games: that they are repeatable. All of this allowed for a different reading of postmodernism, one that (to use Caillois's taxonomy) recast it as a game of *agôn* (competition) rather than, as we customarily have it, *ilinix* (vertigo). The new story it offered,

however, reaffirmed the account of postmodernism as being fundamentally about the dangerous potential of the rapid acceleration of circulation as an end in itself, devoid of the certainties of ethics, meaning, consensus, or accountability. This is how I read the book's claims that established rule systems (in the final example, the medium of television) were "gamed" through the strategic mimicry of forms and structures without a modification of (or, in the end, really a full engagement with) content. This formalism of postmodernism was given a vivid account in the last chapter, and ultimately I found the picture of postmodernism as a game of mimicry (again, Caillois) of formal structures offered an illuminating confirmation of the paranoid—to invoke Eve Sedgwick's critique of large-scale theories—underpinnings of both its advocates and critics.

To return to the idea of postmodernism's relation to large-scale, grand theories, one could argue that it, in eschewing content for circulation, won. It did this by establishing a mode of practice that could allow for any rule-breaking, innovation, critique, etc., by simply absorbing it as one more confirmation that, in the end, it was really about the infinite repeatability of *agôn*. This agrees with Jim's final suggestion in his last comment. I would say again that postmodernism, in this account and others, positioned itself (almost virally) as infinitely (but ahistorically) extensible as and into the "contemporary."

PL: Your reading of Caillois is helpful for a number of reasons, not least of which is how it reveals that Baudrillard's vertiginous theory of communication—ecstatic, pornographic, etc.—is likewise agonistic. And perhaps mimicry, as much as the more obvious art-critical term "appropriation," would explain the range of behaviors discussed in the chapter on the "game show." But your comment also points to the fact that there's a tendency to side-step the economic aspects of the early Baudrillard, and by extension the question of gaming and interactivity. Baudrillard's interest in a certain genre of surrealist ethnography—Caillois and Mauss most importantly—flag a decisive engagement with economic behavior that will have significant repercussions for the exchange of information.

SH: Along a somewhat different line, I wonder how this position of "postmodernism, post-contemporary" (pomopoco?!) handles the returns to modernism so ubiquitous of late. I take your point that your argument is "about theories and histories of art since the 1960s," not its art per se, at least in any synthetic way. Still, or perhaps precisely because of this orientation, I wonder how you might accommodate the impulse to return to something in the contemporary, if not postmodernism. Is this another valence of a belated postmodernism? And how does this complex of modernist returns—mostly though not exclusively evident in painting—inflect the media-based arguments in the last chapter and elsewhere?

JE: Suzanne, I'd like to just add an echo to that, remembering the previous volumes in this series. I've lost track of the number of "metamodernism" movements in the art world. Some are posed as responses to relational aesthetics; others seem to be more openly nostalgic. I don't mean there's a common movement here, but I suspect that your text has put us in a better position to assess the structural necessity of metamodernisms and other such gestures that are both outside and inside, before and after, the structures of modernism.

PL: Suzanne, you're right to sense that this has as much to do with modernism as it does the contemporary. To be blunt about it, I see that return as a certain fatigue with the contemporary. On a research level, for example, my recent interests have shifted to mid-century modernism to account for the recent obsessions with all things contemporary—as itself a historiographic phenomenon. The ways in which Serra and Birnbaum deploy new media in the late 1960s and 1970s are in line with a certain thinking around gaming that takes genealogical root at mid-century.

And as for the "meta" in all of this: the peculiar return to modernism (via postmodernism) has a very pragmatic aspect. It takes its partial motivation from the classroom and university culture in general, where the demand for all things contemporary comes at the expense of the fundamental study of

modernism. For my purposes, this is why Lyotard's account, which many of his best readers consider a one-off, reads as especially prophetic now.

DG: I agree with Pam about the pragmatic factors in this, and I would point to the proximity of the art market to the desire for the "now." Such a vision of contemporary art flooded graduate programs with a tranche of applicants wanting to be the new taste-makers and discoverers of the not-yet-famous. The market (and its extensions the biennial, the art fair, the art magazine) became the proving ground for success. Art history has always been tied up with the market and its institutions, but that connection seems balder than ever before to some. With this set of conditions in mind, the peculiar return to modernism could be viewed as a resistance to the lock-step of "contemporary art history" and the market's fads. Beyond the direct re-engagement with interwar and mid-century modernisms by many established scholars, the study of post-1945 art more broadly has also recently evidenced a similar resistance in its resurgence of archivally-based studies, in the collaborative examinations of major exhibitions from multiple perspectives, in scholarly interpretations at cross-purposes with the artist's intentions or identity, and in the renewed attention to complex and contradictory reception histories. This work continues to be theoretically engaged and urgent, and the best examples

circumvent a false notion of the "end" of (all) theory (another market-driven prediction). Such work is a kind of slow writing that offers resistance and reaction to the market-driven desire for rapid, accessible, and easily transmissible reportage. This book offers just such a kind of grounded, slow reading.

SH: Though I also agree with the myriad pragmatic factors motivating the wholesale romance with the contemporary in and out of the classroom, I'm not sure that the market—that abstract and diffuse bad object that nonetheless exerts quite real effects—is to blame (why do we inevitably seem to displace such concerns there?), nor am I convinced that a return to modernism represents a resistance to the contemporary. I doubt it even resists so much as constitutes "fashion" as it is precisely what is selling, post-market crash (to be very literal). But there are separate issues here. I think the academic contemporary's allure for a good many years had much to do with a feeling that there was no running room left in the crowded spaces of modernism, where so many artists have already spawned cottage industries of dissertations and the like. And if one believes that a move closer to the present need not obviate more traditional methods of research or analysis, why not work on topics heretofore untouched—and worthy on other grounds, besides. (If nowhere a panacea for the prior generation's ills, the con-temporary is not its obverse to me, either.) Cannot the work

of history happen there, too? And, David, if you are drawing a distinction between short-form and long-form writing, which implies a more sustained engagement with a topic, is this really an issue of criticism as opposed to contemporary art history? Is the question one of the extent to which the former masquerades as the latter?

DG: Again, the art market has always been a factor in the discipline of art history, but there is a big difference in the current situation. This is what Pam's book sets up so clearly. The curator-as-artist model, the "new institutionalism," and the parade of biennials and art fairs all attest to this. We should also point out that the market is no longer just manifested in the auction house (where modernism does, you're right, still sell, well). Anti-commercial practices, performance art, institutional critique, installation, public practices, activist engagements have all been absorbed, and the commercial and institutional making of art stars out of these resistant formations often involves very different projections of the art market and its relation to other forms of stardom. I agree with the caution about making the art market the easy target, but it does seem that the desire to be networked into this new, more linked and more global marketplace of events, situations, sites (web and geographic), and memes is a major factor driving the romance of the contemporary. This is not, however, to argue that writing

about historically proximate artistic practices has no place in art history. Quite the contrary, it is crucial and important to do so but the current situation has led many, as Pam initially remarked, to seek alternatives. In some cases, art historians associated with the contemporary have been re-viewing it through modernism and, more generally, there has been a resurgence of the kind of slow writing I described above (which, I would point out, could be highly theoretical and/or archival).

But your last point, Suzanne, hits it right on the head. Art criticism—which held such an independent, vital, and catalytic role in previous decades—seems dangerously close to being absorbed into journalism on the one hand or, newly expunged of both theory's and history's complexities for their slownesses, claimed as a palatable and interchangeable stand-in for (or, as you say, masquerades as) art history for the sped-up, networked global marketplace on the other. This isn't to deny the potential of art criticism but rather to question the ways in which too many of its current examples dissimulate arts journalism as art history. Of course, there are some important, but too few, exceptions in both short-form or long-form art criticism to this—for instance, what's going on in *The Brooklyn Rail*. Perhaps one of the most promising developments in art criticism has been the kind of engaged artwriting that increasingly finds a home in largely non-commercial blogs. The genre of the blog has expanded beyond the diaristic and "breaking news" models

that characterized its initial uses. It is emerging as a vehicle for unorthodox yet serious, complex, theoretical, affectual, and often collaborative art-critical writing—short-form but "slow" as I'm using it above.

MN: Obviously I must intervene here and question David's characterization of art criticism, which needs to be distinguished from both theory and art history. Certain theories may help us to analyze individual works of art, but there can be no theory of art as such. Perhaps judgment has shifted from the work to the relation between work and theory in a given situation, closer to phronesis than to aesthetic judgment. If the "contemporary" has any meaning, it is that in relation to which we cannot have recourse to context or history in order to establish a position from which to decide how the work of art is to be approached— a Lyotardian groundlessness of judgment. These judgments may be agonistic, so long as this idea of the "agon" does not slip into the kind of 1960s-type Nietscheanism that in retro-spective was another affirmation of the ideology of capitalist competition and prepared the way for the 1980s reaction. Which brings us back to gaming, specifically to how we might understand Birnbaum and Serra's art appropriations of "gaming" through what the game is now. In the book, Pam mentions the nineteenth-century Prussian *Kriegspiel*, based on the idea of tactical maneuvers. In 1977 the situationist Guy Debord was

a founder of the company Strategic and Historical Games, to market his A Game of War, obviously influenced by the Prussian model, yet also involving a reflection on the very turn to gaming in the context of post-68 revolutionary failure.

In September 2011 at IMMA, Dublin, the British artist Liam Gillick presented a newly designed version of Debord's game, now called A Game of War Strategy. Two elegantly designed tables were available in the courtyard, and one in the foyer of the museum. Members of the public could check out a set of pieces and a rulebook, although time-slots could not be predicted, given the indeterminate length of the games. For the opening gamers were invited to "demonstrate" Debord/Gillick's game, which they did with enthusiasm, and well aware, it became evident in the pub afterwards, of the applicability of the game to politics. Gillick's title implies a shift from the "tactics" of the Prussian version, via Debord, to more strategic, and therefore reflexive, considerations. What does it mean for a revolutionary to turn to the design of a military board game? Is this a form of training for future revolutionaries? Or an indication of disillusionment and resignation: the reduction of telos to an endless cycle of repetition and difference? This reflexive turn, which renders problematic any "contextual-ization" or "historicization," marks the distinction between game-as-game and game-as-art (rather than art-as-game). This would make it very difficult for game theory, or the history of

game theory, or game theory in history, to function as either historical explanation or theory of art.

In effect, Gillick's A Game of War Strategy becomes what Paul de Man calls a "metafigural" allegory, an allegorical figure that deconstructs itself. It is worth remembering here that Craig Owens's notion of allegory, of which Pam emphasizes the importance in the formulation of postmodernism in the USA, leans very strongly on de Man's *Allegories of Reading*. Which in turn should serve as a warning of the complicated and slippery—indeed fraught—relation between criticism (which I tend to understand as a visual art equivalent of what "reading" might be in literary "criticism") and history, where neither is able to trump the other.

PL: I doubt we're in any position to resolve the question of modernism and the contemporary in this context, nor criticism and theory as such. But to the extent that the "market" is significant for the more local or narrower interests of the book, its impact is twofold: (1) as mentioned before, as a matter of economic behavior and the models of gaming that inform histories of new media and interactivity, and (2) as it relates to the marketplace of the contemporary university and its cultures. In this second regard, Suzanne's acknowledgment of the limited "running room" in the crowded spaces of modernism makes complete sense. Crudely put, there are interests of

professionalization at play that need to be brought out in the open (although of course, this is not the only motivation). The need to mine new material for the humanities, to seize upon the contemporary as an expedient resource, is continuous with the problem of information postmodernism raised decades ago.

As for Michael's recourse to Debord and Gillick and his ultimate pronouncement that it "is very difficult for game theory, or the history of game theory, or game theory in history, to function as either historical explanation or theory of art": Indeed! My point is not that game theory "explained" the history of recent art—or contemporaneity—nor did I suggest it was a theory of art as such. This book does not provide the iconographic code to unpack the range of contemporary art practice (although there are obviously works here that make direct reference to game theory—and we could add Buckminster Fuller to the list along with Debord). Instead it means to trouble the neat historiographic divide between postmodernism and the contemporary and explodes one of the favorite rubrics of contemporary art criticism—"neoliberalism" —through something like a Cold War genealogy.

In the doubled forms of the game I've addressed, game theory describes an ethos, or a behavior, that licences certain contemporary accounts of interactivity glaringly absent in art history, let alone art criticism's discourse of the relational. It is

a recursive gambit—of trumping, economizing and bargaining, but also of agon—that does indeed render problematic conventional notions of "contextualization" and "historicization" because founded on a reflexive and agonistic turn.

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