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High/Low and the Discourse of "Anti"

Ralph Shain

— But Dieter, why did you send your pet monkey Klaus into outer space?

— Because art is dead.

Sprockets, Saturday Night Live

1

In their dispute over the demands of 'the politics of art,' whereas Benjamin argued that the key determinant is technological change, Adorno saw the key issue as the split between high art and low. "Both [the highest and the lowest] are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however, they do not add up."¹ This idea is repeated in, and guides, Adorno's published response to Benjamin.²

2

Without following Adorno's theory, I intend to use this idea—that the key to understanding critical discourse about art involves the high/low distinction as central, but also as *halves which do not add up*—to establish a framework for thinking about discourse about art. To the extent that this discourse helps us think about art, this reflection on this framework will help us to do so as well. But my key theme will be the elaboration of one reason why such discourse fails to help us to think about art.

3

Perhaps Benjamin was right, that technological change has killed art's aura, but if so it is doing so over quite an extended historical period, indeed

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "Letter to Benjamin" in *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 123.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 34-5.

over that long run of which Keynes spoke. If already dead, the aura has certainly been and remains an extraordinarily vigorous and animated cadaver. While waiting for it to quiet down, let's take our cue from Adorno's thought.

4 We can, however, note those concepts which Benjamin names at the beginning of his essay as outmoded, since these give us a start in terms of thinking the high: creativity, genius, eternal value, mystery.³ These concepts are part of the model of art according to what I will call the traditional aesthetic. Elaborating this list, we might come up with the following: beauty, expression, creativity, genius, individual, mastery, form, harmony, contemplation, eternal, useless.

5 According to this model, art and its producer, the artist, are placed above the receiver. The artist is conceived of as a creative genius, working alone, whose work is an expression of genius and a product of mastery of materials. The work of art creates transcendent experience in the receiver: a contemplation of eternal beauty.

6 The basic ideas behind this model are clear, although some footnotes are in order. 'Sublime' and 'interesting' have been added to beauty as the highest standard of the work. The former does nothing to shake the basic model, since it is an exalted state, and the term 'beauty' was so elastic as to be a mere placeholder for 'highest aesthetic value.'

7 Lutz Koepnick assigns a division of labor to the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime. According to Koepnick, "In contrast to the totalizing thrust of the beautiful, sublime art interrupts the false totality of art. Sublimity derives as principles of discontinuity, rupture, and surprise, and remind us of the limitation of representation and instrumental rationality."⁴ This distinction, although analytically neat, fails to treat with any specificity the history of twentieth century art. Once such specificity is examined, I think it will be clear that the main achievement of this view is to make the term 'sublime' as elastic as 'beauty.' A different interpretation of the contemporary discourse of negation—interruption, discontinuity, rupture—will be provided below. (75 et seq.)

3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1978), p. 218.

4. Lutz Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 77.

8 The concept of 'the interesting' is not exalted enough to sustain the traditional model on its own. It is a sign of trouble for the traditional model, but it is safe as long as it is supplemented by 'beauty' and/or 'sublimity.' The periodic returns of 'beauty' are such scamperings to safety.

9 We may wish to be a bit more up-to-date in our metaphysics and substitute 'enduring' for 'eternal.' Similarly, 'transcendent' may be moderated to 'profound' or 'qualitatively superior.' This changes nothing of significance.

10 Philosophical arguments which arise within the field of aesthetics generally turn on whether one or more of these concepts is fundamental, how they are related to each other, whether they can be defined, and what accounts for the exalted state. I am not here going to involve myself in these sorts of disputes.

11 In noting that the artwork, as an expression of creative genius is always placed above the receiver, we note that hierarchy is built into the model. And the model, with its corresponding hierarchical aspects, is so pervasive that the words 'art' and 'aesthetic' carry this hierarchical aspect within them. The term 'high art' is a pleonasm; 'low art' is more than a little paradoxical. Thus the contrast to 'high art' is more readily expressed by the phrases 'low culture,' 'mass culture,' 'popular culture.'

12 That 'art' is a term of valorization can be readily seen in the question "is it art?", the sorts of things about which it is asked, and the kinds of arguments to which it gives rise.

13 It is easy to forget that low art—or rather, popular culture, if you prefer—has its theory as well. It is easy to forget because low culture's exclusion from the meaning of the word 'art' leads to its seeming irrelevance in theoretical explorations which start off from the question 'what is art' or 'what is aesthetic experience.' In addition, art critics are almost exclusively those inspired by exalted artworks, they are temperamentally incapable of doing so. Furthermore, those who judge according to the low culture model are reluctant to admit it because of the hegemony of the dominant model—what Bourdieu calls "cultural goodwill."⁵

5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1984), p. 318.

14 When will art theorists come to terms with "Sprockets" (that's pronounced *Sprockets*) and "Bob the Young Artist"?

15 One needs to look at a sociological theory, like Bourdieu's, to find a theorist giving the popular aesthetic serious consideration.⁶

16 The low culture view judges cultural productions according to entirely different standards from the 'high art' model, and provides an alternative model. This model consists of a thoroughgoing rejection of everything about the traditional aesthetic, including the terms it uses (and common usage accepts) for labeling the views at issue. It objects to being denigrated as 'low culture,' as well as to having the words 'art' and 'aesthetic' carry meanings which exclude it. These exclusions are pure snobbery, according to this model, and it would label the traditional view, the 'snob' or 'elitist' view.

17 To speak of the high/low distinction is already to have chosen sides because the very existence of the distinction is contested.

18 There are no value-neutral terms for labeling or discussing these models. Nor is there a neutral position—we are all implicated in this conflict. As Bourdieu says, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier."⁷

19 The 'popular aesthetic'—I use this term precisely because of its paradoxical element—places the judgment of the receiver higher than that of the artist/producer. Its highest value is entertainment, which it recognizes is produced by talent (not genius). Against creativity, it values consumption; against form, content; against the eternal, the recognizable; against contemplation, enjoyment.

20 According to the popular aesthetic, the snob theory (as it might like to call it) is a sham. Its claims that its preferred products provide transcendent experiences are entirely fraudulent. These experiences are either nonexistent, the product of either self-delusion or an elaborate joke at the expense of regular folk, or they are merely pleasures of the same sort

which might be experienced in the enjoyment of any cultural product, such as "Survivor" or "anime" or "General Hospital," only here experienced by over-educated, pretentious masochists. To each their own pleasure.

21 The best that the traditional aesthetic can do is point out that aesthetic experience is more complex, profound, deep, and sophisticated than the experience of popular entertainment. What it cannot do, assuming that one accepts this claim, is establish the superiority of complex pleasures over simple ones, or deep over superficial. Nor can it erase the connotation of class pretension from the word 'sophistication,' which embarrasses the argument.

22 No advances have been made in this argument since John Stuart Mill argued that higher culture is qualitatively superior to lower. It's about time that we admit that, just as there is no value-neutral way of labeling these two models of cultural judgment, we have as yet no question-begging way of demonstrating the correctness of one or the other.

23 The popular aesthetic is also unable to establish the correctness of its position because it cannot prove that people have not had transcendent or qualitatively superior experiences from reading Beckett or looking at Pollock.

24 Here is how this problem arises in Bourdieu's work. Bourdieu aims to demystify traditional aesthetic claims by showing how cultural producers play a role in strategies of distinction whereby symbolic power is garnered and symbolic violence is perpetrated on the dominated segments of society. He claims, in line with this project of demystification, that there is no aesthetic value to a work underlying the struggles in the cultural field which surround the work. The value of the work is a fiction produced by the social magic generated in the struggles in the field of cultural production.⁸

25 Certain aspects of Bourdieu's demystification strike home. He clearly shows, in extensive detail, that art is a stake in social hierarchy. In addition, he adequately shows that the claims of the traditional aesthetic to be founded in an individual's nature, e.g., that aesthetic taste or genius is

6. The key works on art are *Distinction, The Field of Cultural Production, The Rules of Art*. Of the works which provide Bourdieu's general theory of society, I prefer *The Logic of Practice*.

7. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, op. cit., p. 6.

8. Remarkably, Bourdieu denied as "reductive" this seemingly straightforward reading of his work. He claimed that he was explaining, but not explaining away, aesthetic value. See the "Preface" to *The Rules of Art* and the interview "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart" in *In Other Words* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) pp. 142-3. Dealing with these ambivalences is outside the scope of this paper.

natural, are false. But these two points, important as they are, are not sufficient to disprove the existence of aesthetic value.

26

Showing that artwork is a stake in social hierarchy cannot establish that it is nothing more than such a stake. And Bourdieu overestimates the significance of the claim that aesthetic judgment is natural. Claims to natural distinction of course work better for elites, but they can get by as well with other claims to distinction, such as effort or education. What Bourdieu shows is that aesthetic taste depends on long familiarity with works of art, usually going back to early childhood. Intimate familiarity, depending as it does on family wealth (ownership) and/or education (museum visits), can also work as an explicit basis for taste in the traditional model. It can do so because this intimate familiarity is not easily or readily obtainable. A 'second nature' works just as well as a first, when there is no first to diminish it.

27

What Bourdieu does not show is that, through this long training, one does not acquire a genuine skill.

28

According to Bourdieu, understanding works of art is not a function of nature, but rather requires large investments of time available only to those who are moneyed:

As this restricted language [literary language] is produced and reproduced in accordance with social relations dominated by the quest for distinction, its use obeys what one might term 'the gratuitousness principle.' Its manipulation demands the almost reflexive knowledge of schemes of expression which are transmitted by an education explicitly aimed at inculcating the allegedly appropriate categories.⁹

Artworks are 'esoteric' among other reasons,

because their complex structure continually implies tacit reference to the entire history of previous structures, and is accessible only to those who possess practical or theoretical mastery of a refined code, of successive codes, and of the code of these codes.¹⁰

Advantages of family money—above all, the time which comes from having family money—continues beyond education to the aspiring artist's entry into the field:

9. Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, *op. cit.*, p. 119
10. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Those who do manage to stay in the risky positions long enough to receive the symbolic profit they can bring are indeed mainly drawn from the most privileged categories, who have also had the advantage of not having to devote time and energy to secondary, 'bread-and-butter' activities.¹¹

These passages, which work so well to demystify claims to 'natural' distinction and 'innate' ability, suggest that aesthetic taste is a genuine ability and opens the possibility that the aesthetic experience of which it is the judge is something qualitatively superior: a genuine luxury good. Certainly it is true that there can be institutions whose training teaches nothing whatsoever, but it would be quite difficult—if possible at all—to show that art education is one of these, since it only purports to enable certain experiences.¹²

29

In spite of Bourdieu's best effort, the advocate of the popular aesthetic is always open to that bruising bit of symbolic violence: "Philitine!" The allegation that works have no aesthetic value is all too easily taken to be an admission of inadequacy. Bourdieu's theory invites such a reading because he, better than anyone, has explained how such attempted reversals of values can be dismissed as attempts to make a virtue of necessity.

30

In addition to their inabilities to demonstrate the correctness of their model, the high and popular aesthetics face other difficulties. Many find the high art view unsatisfying for political reasons. Not only is it elitist, but it isolates the artist from politics. Because the work of art must be complex or esoteric, it cannot be didactic, it cannot be direct or control the receiver's response. The state of aesthetic contemplation, induced in the receiver, is not in any overt way political.

31

The popular aesthetic falls prey to political worries as well. Popular culture all too often embraces hierarchies and injustice. "To each their own," seemingly egalitarian, can reinforce hierarchies by sliding into moral relativism and undermining any critique of injustice.

32

Many find themselves unable to accept the popular aesthetic on account of what I'll call the "schlock problem." Is there really no basis for the claim that Morton Feldman is superior to Yanni?

11. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

12. In tightening this tension in Bourdieu's discussion, my aim is to make this part of his work consistent with his more general claim: that there is no neutral position for adjudicating these issues.

33 These two views or models of cultural production judge cultural products according to completely different and mutually exclusive standards. Must one choose between them?

34 For those who say that there is no need to choose (and there seem to be a lot these days¹³), it is important to ask precisely what they mean by this.

35 Do they mean (a) that the art institution will continue to use aesthetic categories, but that these categories won't confer any symbolic capital or inflict any symbolic violence? This abstract suggestion has the makings of a Seinfeld joke: "Your work/taste shows not the slightest inkling of originality, individuality, or genius. Not that there's anything wrong with that."

36 What Robert Hughes says is not so different from this. After doing his best to debunk the "myth" of high and low, Hughes concludes:

The task is to distinguish, without snobbery or condescension, between the good stuff, the absolute crap, and everything that lies between within each of the myriad forms that make up our cultural mosaic.¹⁴

Hughes thinks that we can keep our aesthetic standards but eliminate the snobbery. If this does not mean (a), then perhaps it means (b): that aesthetic categories can be used within art contexts but not outside it to distinguish high from low. The idea seems to be that there are entirely different concepts which recognize distinction within the aesthetic from those which distinguish art from mass culture. The problem would then be solved by eliminating the latter but keeping the former.

37 This is clearly not so—the same concepts are used to judge within the high as to elevate it above the low. The concepts of high culture bring with them the elitest break with popular culture.

38 This fact is generally hidden because histories and critical discussions

13. The three that I have come across most recently are Ornel Marcus, "Real Life Rocker," *Artforum* (Dec. 2003), p. 17; Hugh Kenner, *The Elsewhere Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 104, 153; Robert Hughes, "The Myths of High and Low," keynote address at the International Society for the Performing Arts (Dec. 15, 1996) (www.ispa.org/ideas/hughes.html).

14. Hughes, "The Myths of High and Low," *op. cit.*, p. 11

of art almost always take candidates for discussion as given without the need to justify exclusions. This is just as true for *The Shock of the New* as for any other history, but we can glimpse late in the book how the same categories which are used to mark value within the field are used to elevate the entire field. Hughes praises Claes Oldenburg's "seriousness" in contrast to other artists, who are characterized as "dozens of handwaggers" (p. 359), and uses the term "serious" to distinguish two works by the same artist—Walter de la Mare (p. 398). He also uses the epithet "serious" to refer to the elevated status of art in general, distinguishing it from its other, business and mass media: "Art is a small thing, though an expensive one compared to the media. . . . But once it gives up its claim to seriousness, it is shot, and its essential role as an arena for free thought and unregimented feeling is lost." (p. 364)

39 There remains the possibility that we do away with the aesthetic categories; then (c) that we conceive of all cultural products as an array of offerings entirely subject to personal like or dislike. But this is precisely how the popular viewpoint views things—as entertainment or amusement. The popular aesthetic says that there is no need to choose between high and low because the distinction refers to nothing more than snobbery of the pretentious. Thus one who denies any such division as high/low would be surreptitiously siding with the popular aesthetic. They have actually made a choice, if not between high and low, then between aesthetic categories and popular categories; however, this choice is hidden by the terms of the discussion. (It does of course appear as a choice between high and low to the believers in aesthetic categories.)

40 Is there a possibility (d) where we can keep both high and low, as Hughes seems to suggest at the end of his lecture on high/low? "There's no contradiction attached to liking both Trepolo and *Doonesbury*; both country-and-western and Mozart." (p. 11) Aside from problems in the formulation (whether contradictions arise at the level of "likings") and the obvious re-education contained within the utterance (*Doonesbury* is supposed to legitimate the low!¹⁵), the both/and position simply reproduces the hierarchy. As Bourdieu would note, the abstract nature of the claim is shown by the assumption that "both/and" is an option for everyone, and legitimizes the low. Hughes conveniently ignores the fact that we are talking about people who have no liking for anything high and can't apply aesthetic concepts. Whereas they interpret the situation in terms of fraud and snobbery, their claim can always be seen as making a virtue of necessity. Hughes is really arguing about two

different versions of high, but believes that he's speaking for the low.

41

It is important to remember that the aesthetic model agrees that people need both high and low cultural products. Enjoying low culture is necessary for moments—or lifetimes—of weakness and incapacity, unavoidable when one lacks the energy for engaging serious art. If these critics only mean (e) that people need high and low cultural products, they aren't denying the traditional categories.

42

Hughes fails to avoid this schema, in which the low is treated as a means and the high is granted the status as an end. He attempts to legitimize the low by showing that a large number of artists have made great art by incorporating popular materials (Apollinaire, Picasso, Dubuffet, etc.). However, "I value you as raw material to be transformed" hardly seems a promising avenue for equal respect.

43

Given mutually exclusive concepts of judging and action, one can ask according to what principle one is to decide which concepts to apply on which occasions. If one leaves it up to caprice, one has decided in favor of the popular. If one looks to an ethical or political viewpoint to resolve conflicts (e.g., 'respect' or 'justice'), then one cannot avoid the question of the legitimacy of aesthetic hierarchy. And if one, as is often done, invokes an aesthetic attitude to personality (e.g., 'unity,' 'harmony,' or 'style'), all of the same problems must be faced anew.

44

(f) Some would point to artworks which satisfy both sets of standards as a practical reconciliation of the two. Shakespeare's plays, so it is said, were enjoyed by the groundlings every bit as much as they were appreciated by those of sophisticated tastes. And some place Chaplin's films in this category.

45

One problem with this resolution is that such artists are so exceedingly rare and diverse that it is impossible to take their works as models. This category of artwork is incapable of founding a tradition.

46

It is also not clear that these works can reconcile the two models. Because of their extreme rarity, they reinforce the cult of aesthetic genius, since only the greatest geniuses, it would seem, can produce work which satisfies both sets of standards.

47

The overwhelming number of attempts to create works which mix terms from both codes fail to meet the standards of either. Think: "Tales of Topographic Oceans," or the epithet "middlebrow."

48

The situation may be even worse for this sort of attempt to bridge the gap between the two models than these considerations suggest if Adorno's analysis of consumer society is correct. According to Adorno, the artwork must now be ascetic, since any attempts to provide pleasure—necessary for mass appeal—reinforces the consumption system which the artwork is supposed to challenge.

49

If is these political problems, more than the problems of justification, which have led many artists and theorists since the 19th century to try to articulate a new model. This approach, which one might call avant-garde, oppositional, or alternative—all meaningless terms—tries to develop a model which is politically progressive without producing schlock. Rather than reconciling the traditional and popular models, it replaces them. If thus attempts to resolve the problems facing the old models by superceding them.

50

Every serious book on surrealism begins by pointing out that the surrealists did not set out to be an art movement. They set out to change society and consciousness, and were actively opposed to having their works judged according to aesthetic standards. The significance of this point cannot be underestimated. To describe or judge surrealism according to aesthetic standards is to take sides against it.

51

Every serious book on surrealism begins by pointing out that the surrealists did not set out to be an art movement. These repetitions show how little known or accepted this point is.

52

A brief survey of surrealism will show that it developed an entirely different model of cultural production. Point for point, the concepts which articulate the surrealist endeavor differ from the traditional aesthetic and the popular aesthetic: collaboration, revelation, chance, marvelous, investigation, unconscious, juxtaposition, turmoil, anachrony, revolution.

53

Surrealism aimed to avoid hierarchy within cultural production by developing or inventing techniques which can be used by anyone, such as automatic writing, collage, frottage, decalcomania.

54

As a theoretical movement, surrealism has parallels with the Frankfurt School in that both attempted to synthesize Freud with a Hegelianized Marx.

55

We can sum up the three discourses in a chart:

aesthetic : surrealism : popular
 beauty : marvelous : entertainment
 individual : collaboration : popularity
 creation : investigation : consumption
 original : unconscious : recognizable
 form(al unity) : juxtaposition : content
 harmony : turmoil : ease
 genius/mastery : chance : talent
 enduring : anachrony : ephemeral
 contemplation : revolution : enjoyment

It is important to think of these as three discourses or models. As soon as we say that there are three categories, kinds, or types of cultural products, we take sides against the popular view, which denies the high/low distinction.

56

A few notes to this chart are in order. The aesthetic view privileges the individual both with regard to the producer and the receiver of art. The "unconscious" of the surrealists must be interpreted in a broad sense to include the results of "exquisite corpses" or decalomania, which were not the product of conscious intention. "Anachrony" includes both the outmoded, which has received the most attention under this heading, and the appearance of prophecy, which fascinated many of the surrealists.

57

This chart is not supposed to be definitive. One could add more concepts or go into greater detail with regard to the concepts noted. In addition, there are a number of issues not easily summarized in chart form. But it does a good job of summarizing and contrasting the three models, and thus is helpful in thinking about art discourse. Read across, one can readily see which surrealist and popular concepts oppose and replace the aesthetic concept.

58

The chart is also not definitive in that surrealism is not the only possible model which could fit the middle position. Other possible candidates which have academic advocates include a Bakhtinian 'carnival' model, Bataille's 'alternative surrealism,' a Brechtian activist/pedagogical model,

or a Cagan/Eastern 'total acceptance' model.¹⁵ But surrealism was the most influential and most fully articulated model, and also the one for which it could most plausibly be expected that it would solve the political problems posed by the traditional aesthetic and popular models.

59

Nor do I think that the list of possible candidates for an alternative model is closed. If you think you can articulate a better one—go for it.

60

The chart illustrates that the problem of high/low is not a problem of genres or media, as is often thought. Theorists thus let themselves off the hook all too easily, thinking that they solve the problem by showing that a photograph or TV show can achieve the standards associated with high art. The problem of high/low is the problem of which concepts or discourse should be used in cultural assessment.

61

The surrealist model has its own problems—most notably the fact that it failed. The 'failure' of surrealism poses a lot of questions, even though these questions have been largely unasked or discussed. To the extent that they have been posed, their meaning or answers are highly contested. But what is meant here is merely that surrealism has been relegated to art history. Its works are judged by aesthetic or popular concepts; Rembrandt and Titian are not judged according to surrealist concepts.

62

To sum up, there are three ways of thinking about culture—aesthetic, alternative, popular. Each judges according to different modalities, and each is mutually exclusive of the others. A choice must be made, yet there seems to be no way to justify a choice.

63

No doubt this chart will make me appear to be one of "those who prefer their categories static..." as Varmedoe and Gopnick put it in their book *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*¹⁶ (p. 61). In this work, they aim to "unsettle" (p. 409) the traditional positions of high and low. They hope to do so by avoiding theory, and by focusing instead on particulars. But they

15. The most prominent advocate of Bataille's alternative surrealism is Rosalind Krauss. See especially "Photography in the Service of Surrealism" and "Corpus Delicti" in *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, ed. by Krauss and Livingstone (Abbeyville Press/Corcoran Gallery, 1985).

16. Kirk Varmedoe and Adam Gopnick, *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: MOMA and Abrams, 1991). For a run-through of the torrent of abuse received by the exhibit, see Graham Bader, "High and Low," *Artforum* (Oct. 2004), pp. 109–110, 283.

fail in this aim; they reproduce the standard discourse of high and low in spite of their intention. With one possible exception, the categories are just as static in their work as in any other. Varmedoe/Gopnick's book falls squarely in the high art tradition.

64

Varmedoe/Gopnick note that the basic positions "persist with monotonous regularity..." (p. 18) I agree that these positions are at an impasse, but it seems more productive to take this impasse as the starting point for theory rather than trying, as they do, to do without theory.

65

Varmedoe/Gopnick's strategy is to show how there has been widespread exchange and interchange between high art and popular culture. They can only think that this challenges the high art position, because they narrow this position to a specific conception of modernism, which they say is "usually associated with a notion of uncontaminated aesthetic elevation..." (p. 408) They attribute the stalemate in theory to a shared allegiance by the various positions to "unconscious allegiance to what some philosophers would call 'essentialism.'" (p. 408)

66

But neither Adorno nor Benjamin nor Bourdieu have essentialist, ahistorical views of art, and Varmedoe/Gopnick's work simply fails to come to grips with their arguments. In short, Varmedoe/Gopnick's argument challenges only the theory of Clement Greenberg.

67

The one point where Varmedoe/Gopnick's text suggests something different occurs in their treatment of comics. They open this section by citing Goethe's hopes that Topffer's picture novels—comic strips—might "become a new mode of cultural reconciliation—a popular form that could make a big anonymous society feel like a family." (p. 153) They claim that "[t]he comic strip's connection to a Romantic dream of a universal language may remind us that the comic strip is in many ways not a precursor of modern art but another kind of modern art, and shares many of the same motives, forms, and dreams." (p. 153)

68

But Varmedoe/Gopnick lack the courage of their conviction, and immediately withdraw their claim that the comic strip is "another kind of modern art" by explaining it away. They elucidate the claim in two ways: first, by saying that "a handful of remarkable artists" (p. 153) have chosen comics as their medium, glossed as "a few outstanding figures who bridge

both worlds." This exceptionalism and dualism subverts their claim. Second, they note that artists (now presumably real artists, since Ruscha is their example) who share the optimist's dream which Goethe found in comics draw on comics "for jokes, puns, and inspiration" (p. 154).

69

That artists draw on popular culture for material, content, or inspiration in no way challenges the distinction between high and low as long as it doesn't challenge the idea that the artist transforms the materials or content in producing the art. (This argument applies to Varmedoe/Gopnick's project as a whole.) If the artist is able to produce an artwork out of material which was formerly thought inappropriate for art, this merely serves as evidence of the greatness of the artist's mastery of the material, thereby confirming the genius of the artist. It extends the range of art.

70

The most insistent thread of Varmedoe/Gopnick's discourse is all too familiar. They repeatedly characterize art as difficult, complex, lofty, intense, serious. They characterize popular culture as ephemeral and pleasure-oriented. For example, in their praise of cubist painting, they say that it "has a level of complexity of pleasurable depth and difficulty, that makes its cultural achievement worthy of consideration beside that of Bach's richly contrapuntal music." (p. 46) If they wished to avoid the traditional 'static' categories, why didn't they praise cubism by comparing it to pro wrestling?

71

Varmedoe/Gopnick's work is even more retrograde than the above suggests. They use the term "imagination" (sometimes qualified as "modern imagination") only with regard to high art (which includes the 'few outstanding figures' who transcend their low media). Although they do not discuss this particular case, one is completely safe in saying that in their use of the term, "Dogs Playing Poker" does not partake of the "imagination."

72

This high art discourse runs up against popular culture discourse in the book's "Coda," where the question of theory is explicitly addressed. Their desire to avoid the stalemates of theory does not derive, they say, from a "facile subjectivism", which they rightly point out allows only power as a means of resolving disagreement. (p. 408) Citing Baudelaire, Varmedoe/Gopnick appeal to a "higher [!] critical tradition."¹⁷ Baudelaire's contribution, according to Varmedoe/Gopnick, was to show that "this new world of reproduced things... charged the individual's habits of looking with a burden

17. It strikes me as curious that Varmedoe/Gopnick reproduce the discourse of high/low at the level of theory, while ostensibly denying it any significance at the level of art.

of decision more complex than any ever experienced by a member of the academy." (p. 409) But on the key question—can this higher critical tradition tell us anything about the high/low hierarchy—Varmedoe/Gopnick puns:

We live in a world where...modern art in all its intensity and popular culture in all its pleasures sustain us nearly simultaneously, and each of us has to decide for ourselves what weight or measure to give to each of these things.

We each must decide for ourselves (sc. "unaided by theory"?). To my ear, notwithstanding the complexities of "higher" criticism, this sounds like facile subjectivism, incompatible with the belief that the decision carries a heavy (and complex) burden. Varmedoe/Gopnick not only reproduce the high/low hierarchy, they also reproduce the theoretical stalemates they hoped to avoid.

73

Notice the division of labor Varmedoe/Gopnick set up between art and popular culture. Popular culture is placed on the side of pleasure, while art is allotted the character of intensity. But which is more intense—looking at a Rothko, or moshing at a Black Flag concert?

74

Which sent your faculties into a whirl of free play—"Cremaster" or "Celebrity Boxing"?

75

In her response to their book, Rosalind Krauss is too generous in finding in Varmedoe/Gopnick the view of popular culture as "sites of resistance."¹⁸ The word 'resistance' is hers, and doesn't appear in Varmedoe/Gopnick's book.¹⁹ But her conclusion is perfectly sound: "...the very idea of high or museum culture is bracketed off from the charge of elitism by being just another one among a whole diverse group of subcultures" (p. 115). By trying to place questions of high/low on the ground of individual decision, all questions of hierarchy and symbolic violence are avoided.

76

Krauss also notes how significant it is that Varmedoe/Gopnick give short shrift to surrealism in their account while at the same time relying on the key surrealist concept of anachrony. The significance is intensified by the fact that this concept was the one which most impressed Benjamin and Adorno,

18. Rosalind Krauss, "Nostalgie de la Boue," *October* (Spring 1991), p. 115.

19. Krauss relies on a passage where Varmedoe/Gopnick say that the consumer is active, not passive. This is consistent with the stronger claim of resistance, but doesn't entail it. Consumers may actively embrace dominant culture.

whom Varmedoe/Gopnick relegate to the dustbin of theoretical stalemate.

77

The critical discourse of our time is negative. Art works are said to question, critique, challenge, subvert, unmask, undo, transgress, overturn, dismantle, resist, exceed, negate, problematize, disrupt some concept or pair of opposed concepts in traditional art discourse. Sometimes the terms are a bit gentler: a tension is presented or displayed. Occasionally the rhetoric is ratcheted up: a concept or opposition is demolished or destroyed. But usually art is said to question, critique, challenge, negate, subvert, undermine, unmask, undo, transgress, interrupt, overturn, dismantle, problematize, resist, exceed, or disrupt. This is the way art critics, art historians, and artists talk about art. The astute reader will have noticed that none of these terms appear on the above chart.

78

These are the terms which are taken to solve problems, and carry an extra emotional charge. Art historians are jazzed to tell you how some work questions or subverts something or other. Artists are stoked to let you know that their work challenges or critiques some old thing. Art theorists are psyched to explain how art resists, disrupts, or negates.

79

These terms are not categories. Is there a difference between a questioning and a challenge? Between a subversion and an unmasking? Between a dismantling and a critique? The terms, as simply negative, lack enough content for there to be any answers to these sorts of questions.

80

These terms are systematically ambiguous as to the three types of art discourse identified above. This discourse of "anti" tells us nothing about a work because there is a questioning (critique, challenge, subversion, unmasking, problematization, undermining, undoing, transgression, overturning, dismantling, resistance, negation, exceeding, disruption) specific to each of the kinds of art discourse. (This holds whether one prefers surrealism or some other model for the middle—"alternative"—position.)

81

The critical discourse of popular culture or "distinction" is obviously anti-art, since it denies the hierarchical and judgmental categories of traditional aesthetic discourse in favor of entertainment. Thus any work of popular culture with a good conscience poses a challenge (critique, etc.) to high art. This qualification is not trivial since a work's bad conscience (what Bourdieu calls "cultural good will") can find its way into the work. Consider the

TV program "Quantum Leap," in which the main character was called "Sam Beckett." Or the trumpeting by the show's creators of the fact that the reverse sequencing used in the last episode of "Seinfeld" was taken from Pinter.

82

Surrealist works also obviously question, challenge, etc. as they pose, in an explicitly political endeavor, an entirely different set of categories as cultural standards.

83

There is also a kind of critique (challenge, etc.) specific to the traditional aesthetic, although this is more difficult to see. Artists are forced to be anti—simply by the need for originality. The questioning (critique, etc.) may target one or more of the traditional concepts, such as mastery or beauty, in order to achieve others, such as contemplation or harmony, without the former. Or the questioning, transgression, etc. may simply achieve one or more of the traditional concepts in a new way, perhaps by using one of the concepts taken from one of the other types of discourse.

84

Consider in this context the following comment of Clement Greenberg:

The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.²⁰

We first should note that "subversion" has lost some of its edge since Greenberg's day. But the key point is that an artwork can be critical in order to be a better artwork. This point seems to be understood better by literary critics than critics of the visual arts, as T.S. Eliot ("Tradition and the Individual Talent") and Harold Bloom (*The Anxiety of Influence*) make clear the agonistic relation between a writer and the tradition. Need I point out that there is no oppositional politics behind their claims?

85

Peter Bürger makes this point in *Theory of the Avant-garde*. The distinction in that work which has drawn the most fire is between the historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. Here I wish to consider the distinction behind that distinction, the distinction between two different kinds of critique: self-criticism vs. system-immanent criticism. These are poor choices for names, since both mean exactly the same thing: immanent

critique. Nevertheless, Bürger's characterization is clear. "System-immanent critique" criticizes some ideas of an institution by drawing on other ideas of the same institution. Thus it wishes to remain within but improve the institution. Self-criticism wishes to do away with the institution entirely. (It's self-criticism since the motivation comes from within the institution, but this is not essential to the critique.)

86

The former sort of critique, then, may question, critique, challenge, etc. and yet not threaten the institution at all. Critique is built into the traditional aesthetic model in two ways. First, originality is necessary to aesthetic success. Second, new approaches are necessary to induce aesthetic effects in an audience which constantly changes with rapid social and technological change.²¹

87

Questioning, critique, transgression, etc. is also necessary for an artist to create a market for his or her work and thus build a career. (This latter claim might arise in any of the three discourses, although its scope and shading will differ depending on which one generates it.)

88

There are three kinds of anti-art, undifferentiated by "anti" discourse, one of which is consonant with the traditional art institution and discourse. One function of this systematic ambiguity is that it allows artists, critics (and anyone else in the institution) to continue producing without clarifying their intentions/projects. As long as they intend to question, critique, etc., they don't need to pay too much attention as to what end. The discourse allows everyone to maintain a self-conception which purports to be oppositional, and yet the institution continues chugging along. The lack of precision is productive.

89

In his "Lecture on Dada," Tristan Tzara remarked in 1922: "What are the Beautiful, the Good, Art, Freedom? Words that have a different meaning for every individual. Words with the pretension of creating agreement among all, and that is why they are written with capital letters. Words which have not the moral value and objective force that people have grown accustomed to finding in them."²² I have attempted to establish

21. This would hold whether one conceives of aesthetic effects as a reinvigoration of the senses, an intensification of perception, a state of contemplation, keeling of the emotions across the intellect, vice versa, a free play of the faculties, or in some other way.

22. Tristan Tzara, "Lecture on Dada," in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. by Robert Motherwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 248.

20. Quoted by Robert Storr, "No Joy in Mudville" in Varnedoe and Gopnick, eds., *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High and Low* (Abrams and MOMA, 1990), p. 169.

that we need to add "critique," "subversion," "questioning" and the rest of the discourse of "anti" to the list.

90

I am not saying that the oppositional self-conception of those in the artworld is hypocritical. That would require that we could say definitively that their self-conception is oppositional but that their work is not. But the ambiguity-effect means that their self-conception may or may not be oppositional. The discourse alone does not allow one to know. Even they themselves may not know.

91

Of course, hypocrisy exists in the artworld as elsewhere. But here one finds a state of mind which differs from hypocrisy in that it does not require outright dishonesty. It is rather a kind of bad faith. Like bad faith it is a refusal, although it is a refusal to face up to an ambiguity rather than a falsehood. Like bad faith, it is a refusal which allows one to avoid a decision.

92

Nor can one tell from the work alone. The traditional problem that besets attempts at political art—that art cannot be didactic—reasserts itself at the theoretical level. The artwork cannot state its own model at the risk of no longer being art.

93

This wouldn't bother someone with a definite oppositional model, such as the surrealists. Here is where unavowed investments in art as an institution surface.

94

Let us consider Molly Nesbit's article "The Rat's Ass."²³ As the lead essay in *October's* high/low issue, it has a certain iconic status for any analysis of the issues probed here. It is also significant as an excellent piece of historical scholarship which is theoretically sophisticated. Last but not least, Nesbit's essay is significant because the punch-line of her story is that "L.H.O.O.Q." is a "critique." (p. 20)

95

Nesbit begins by noting that at least two, best to call them patterns, have in their different ways governed the circulation of modern images in public. The first contained the remnants of modern state culture, which had for a long time been presented through the genre of history painting, a painting that depended upon the play between civic virtue and classical

23. Molly Nesbit, "The Rat's Ass," *October*, Spring 1991, pp. 7-20.

beauty—what were thought to be antique ideals. By the twentieth century, state cultures put those ideals forward to serve both a fixed idea of the nation and a fixed ideal relation between classes; increasingly state cultures streamlined themselves, coalescing around a vertical ideal based on race. The other pattern, the pattern of capital, did not develop a rhetoric around ideals. Rather it replaced the ideal with desire spread out horizontally. Its business was done restlessly in a dynamic of bluster; it sought to produce new desires as often as possible, desires for physical comfort mainly—in a word for pleasure: for anything from a cool breeze to perfect love. (p. 8)

It would be premature to try to relate Nesbit's two patterns of discourse to the discursive codes I have outlined above, since she does not say what the terms of the two patterns are. Still, it would appear that her "state" discourse is related to what I have called the aesthetic, and her "capitalist" to what I have called the "popular." However this may be, I will limit myself to discussing the remainder of her account.

96

It is worth noting that Nesbit's strategy is to take the Marxist account of art and double it. Instead of positing art as a function of one power relation (capital), here it is the function of two, each of which is given some independence: capital and state. This is extremely thought-provoking, but it is unclear why Nesbit refuses to grant any autonomy to the aesthetic field, as Bourdieu does.

97

I wish to point out two gaps in Nesbit's story. On her account, the Mona Lisa passed from the "state" code to the "capitalist" code in the aftermath of its theft from the Louvre in 1911 as the image was used by advertisements in the popular press. These ads then provide the context for Nesbit's reading of Duchamp's "L.H.O.O.Q.," which according to her takes the brassiness, playfulness, and disrespect for borders expressed in the ads but subtracts the commercial aspect since there is no product for sale. Nesbit reads this absence of the commercial as a political action:

The advertisement intended to cure the very affliction it provoked. L.H.O.O.Q. named the affliction and denied the cure. Duchamp was no Rat Man. Nor was he a Freud. The cure was replaced by a critique. His copy would not let capital flow merrily through it. Capital was clogged, stalled by a competing, raw desire radiating from the cul. No product rushed in to relieve the sensation; nothing removed the unwanted hair. The commodity called art was equally powerless. All economies were arrested by the dada. (p. 20) (emphasis added)

The first gap is this: in reading Duchamp's dada image as a critique of capitalism, Nesbit has left out any mention of her "stare" pattern of discourse. In other words, I want to pursue the issue of the relation of the image to traditional aesthetic concepts.

98 Duchamp's brashness, playfulness, and disrespect can be interpreted as aesthetic ambition. The artist has to measure him or her self against the old masters and overcome influence anxiety. Also, it can be interpreted as an exercise of the *play drive*, which Schiller identifies with the aesthetic faculty.²⁴

99 Furthermore, in the struggle for symbolic power between cultural producers and those with economic capital, as Bourdieu points out, cultural producers will show more disrespect to the "classics" as a sign that they can always produce more. They thus establish that they are producers, not merely consumers, and distinguish themselves from those whose symbolic power derives from economic capital, who tend to have stodgier taste.²⁵ (Of course, from the point of view of the wealthy, this strategy is only an attempt by upstarts to make a virtue of necessity, since the cultural producers need to promote themselves to advance their careers, and also are unable to afford the classics.)

100 In addition, the critique of capitalism and the arresting of economies has always been part of the aesthetic code. Art must be a function of genius not commerce. According to Schiller, the work of art must lift us out of the realm of necessity, providing a momentary emancipation from power and means-ends rationality. Nesbit's claim that Dada is powerless to change things, but provides a momentary stasis which provides the space for change, reproduces Schiller's claims about art made long before Dada in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

101 My point is not that this interpretation is correct and that Nesbit's is not. My point is that Nesbit fails to consider the possibility that Duchamp's 'critique' may fall within aesthetic categories. Given the necessary ambiguity of the aesthetic object, one must accept that both interpretations

24. Schiller, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," *Essays*, ed. by Hinders and Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 86-178.

25. This is a special case of the conflict between two groups within the dominant segment of society, those who have primarily economic capital and those who have primarily cultural capital.

are possible. More context is needed to decide.

102 As such additional context, Nesbit brings in the manifesto which Picabia published next to a simulacrum of L.H.O.O.Q. in 391. Picabia reads Duchamp's image as anti-commercial and as sabotage of the art market. As noted above, this alone is not determinative, since the aesthetic code is always anti-commercial. But let us accept for the moment Nesbit's interpretation and see Duchamp's image as truly oppositional—that is, as occupying the middle position on my chart. Here we can ask: what sort of opposition is it?²⁶

103 Here is the second gap in Nesbit's account. Nesbit provides precious little with which to answer this question, and what she does provide is inconsistent. According to Picabia, "dadas want nothing, nothing, nothing" but on Nesbit's interpretation of L.H.O.O.Q., "Capital was clogged, stalled by a competing, raw desire radiating from the *cul*." (p. 20) Desire vs. non-desire—this looks straightforwardly contradictory.

104 These two readings of dada's opposition, non-desire vs. desire, point in two different directions. Picabia's interpretation points towards a Cagan oppositional model, whereas the stress on desire points toward a surrealist interpretation, and hence towards a Duchampian surrealism.²⁷

105 Nesbit's view that aesthetic critique derives from the leveling energies of capitalism contrasts nicely with Bürger's view that aesthetic critique emerges out of the anti-capitalism of aestheticism. Aestheticism, according to Bürger, is the point in the 19th century when

Apartness from the praxis of life, which had always been the condition that characterized the way art functioned in bourgeois society, now becomes its content. (p. 48)

This contrast supports my claim that the aesthetic and the popular models each have their own anti-

106 The ambiguity-effect hypothesized here requires modification of our

26. The question of whether Duchamp's work is "political," as Nesbit says, is too complex to deal with here. The standard arguments are nicely summarized in Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin, *Why Duchamp* (New Paltz: McPherson and Co., 1985).

27. A Duchampian surrealism has been sketched by David Joselit in *Infinite Regress—Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

account of how so much questioning, critique, transgression, undermining, subversion, challenge, unmasking, undoing, overturning, dismantling, resistance, exceeding, negating, problematizing, disruption has failed to significantly affect the artworld. We find one version of this account, in which the institution is able to appropriate and domesticate all challenges, in the following passages from Buchloh:

Every time the avant-garde appropriates elements from the discourses of low, folk, or mass culture, it publicly denounces its own elitist isolation and the obsolescence of its inherited procedures. Ultimately each such instance of 'bridging the gap between art and life' as Robert Rauschenberg famously put it, only reaffirms the stability of the division because it remains with the context of high art.²⁸

The very procedures that had concretized notions of creative invention and individual productivity in the preceding decade [Buchloh is here talking of Rauschenberg and Warhol's reaction to abstraction and abstract expressionism] were now negated in the mechanical construction of the painting. Yet within the subsequent acculturation process, these works acquired a historical 'meaning' that entirely inverted their original intentions. They became the artistic masterpieces and icons of a decade that established a new viability for the procedures of painting. This occurred despite their radical assault on the isolation of high art, their critique of the rarefied, auratic status imposed on objects in acquiring exchange value, and their denunciation of the obsolescence of artistic constructs originating from the conditions of this isolated social practice. (p. 350) (emphases added)

Buchloh's description of the double-bind imposed on artistic practice is appealing, but it is too simplistic in its conception of artistic intention. The sides in the struggle are not always, or perhaps ever, as clear-cut as in Buchloh's account: artist vs. institution, radical intentions vs. later re-appropriation. The ambiguity-effect adds additional complexity, showing how artists can maintain an ostensibly oppositional consciousness which does not preclude their complicity with the institution.

107
Buchloh's account suffers from his reliance on the discourse of 'anti'.

28. Buchloh, *Neo-Avant-garde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 349. Here I wish to note that, as discussed above, the appropriation of low elements also demonstrates the mastery/genius of the artist in being capable of elevating them.

Notice the appearance of the terms "negation", "assault", and "denunciation" which I have emphasized in the quote from Buchloh just above. This example shows how the discourse of 'anti' lends itself to a romanticism of the heroic artist struggling against the impersonal institution.

108
Bürger's distinction between historic and neo-avant-gardes needs revision, as does Buchloh's criticism of Bürger. Buchloh charges Bürger with nostalgia, since Bürger allows the historic avant-gardes (Dada, surrealism, constructivism) a heroic role challenging the social order, including the status of art in that order, and striving for liberation. Artists can no longer play this role in the neo-avant-gardes: "Since now the protest of this historical avant-garde against art as an institution is accepted as *art*, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic." (p. 53)

109
Although Buchloh does grant that artistic practice must change in response to the process of "acculturation," Buchloh rejects Bürger's conclusion, wishing to retain a liberatory function for certain practices in contemporary art:

This kind of hypertropic reading of the art of the present testifies only to the traditional contempt of the academic critic for artists who continue to produce after criticism has declared either the climax or the death of the art it favors.²⁹

These sorts of charges are easy to make. One can just as easily say that Buchloh's advocacy of contemporary art testifies "only" to the myopia of the critic who is too highly invested in 'art' as an ongoing practice.³⁰

110
Charges of nostalgia or investment are out of place here, where the dispute is over whether historical change has vitiated any subversive effect of artworks. One could even conclude that it has from Buchloh's own account of the double bind quoted above.³¹ Certainly it is possible that it has: consider how historical change has swept away the world that conservatives of the 18th century wished to conserve, so that now the word

29. *Art in America*, November 1984, p. 19.

30. Cf. his paeon to the specialized expertise of the critic at the tail end of the introduction to *Neo-Avant-garde and Culture Industry*, *op. cit.*

31. It is highly suggestive that Buchloh concludes his book with his essay on Weiner, who comments that the work of art need not made at all. Buchloh says that he doesn't follow Weiner here, but the placement of the essay at the end of the book does make one think

"conservative" means something completely different—actually two things, each completely different from the other—from what it did then. Consider also the bad faith involved in ignoring these facts, as well as the advantages of avoiding them reaped by those who claim to be "conservatives."

111

Yet Buchloh is right in chastising Bürger for trying to reduce the practices of the historic avant-gardes to one concern. The historical avant-gardes contained strands of all three of the codes identified here. Futurism, which Bürger tentatively included in his list of historic avant-gardes, wished to destroy old art only to make way for a new beauty, aiming to achieve traditional aesthetic ideals with radically new means. And it is hard to avoid Hans Richter's view that Dada was split between (to use his categories) those who wanted to make art and those who didn't.³²

112

The judgment of history on surrealism has been clear and unequivocal: "It has been rightly pointed out, for example, that Parisian surrealism, contrary to its own program and to Benjamin's emphatic assumption, clearly remained within the bounds of autonomous art."³³ Koeppnick feels confident enough to make this claim without any supporting argument or analysis. It may be premature to file an appeal from this judgment, but is it too much to ask to see the indictment?

113

Breton himself notes the ambiguity under discussion here. In the lecture "Political Position of Today's Art" from 1935, Breton points out the "most regrettable ambiguity" which allows the adjective "revolutionary" to be applied to works which are innovative formally as well as to those "which tends to define a systematic action aiming at the transformation of the world and implying the necessity of concretely attacking its real bases."³⁴

114

What should count as a failure (or success) of surrealism is a complex question and outside the scope of these remarks. I am suggesting that, as

32. Hans Richter, *Dada—Art and Anti-art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965). These same sort of splits occurred in Fluxus, and came out into the open when MacInnis retraced one of his manifestos when other major Fluxus figures objected on the grounds that they liked art!

33. Lutz Koeppnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*, op. cit., p. 18.

34. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 213. To the extent that Breton here grants the good faith "nonconformist will" of the innovator, whose work is assimilated by tradition, my comments about Buchloh apply equally to Breton, due allowance being made for the decline in credibility of this good faith with the lapse of time, as well as to Breton's citation of Paul Claudel as an example—an example for which it is reasonable to assume that Breton records no such good faith.

surrealism went farthest in articulating an alternative—and oppositional—model of culture, its fate (this would include, since I am persuaded by Krauss and Joselit, Batailllean and Duchampian variants³⁵) is of complex and cardinal importance for anyone with an interest in art, and has been woefully undertheorized.

115

To those variants can be added a "Benjaminian surrealism". It should not be forgotten that he described his arcades project, in a letter to Gerstman Scholern, as "the philosophical application of surrealism."³⁶

116

The discourse of "anti", although it appears to align itself with theory, is really a way of avoiding the aporias which beset art discourse as well as the theoretical work which needs to be undertaken to deal with them.

117

The goal of this paper has been to lay out the aporias faced by art and art discourse, scrupulously avoided by artists, theorists, and fans. I see no reason to think that these aporias are intrinsically or eternally unsolvable. My aim is to provoke responses and try to answer these problems. I don't like this situation any more than anyone else.

118

One objection that I foresee is that my view takes as central the high/low distinction. But the art (and theory) which they advocate questions, critiques, challenges, subverts, undermines, unmasks, undoes, transgresses, overturns, dismantles, resists, exceeds, disrupts the high/low distinction. I would send the reader back to Buchloh's account of how such attempts fail, as well as to my revision of Buchloh's account. In addition, I would note that this objection flagrantly begs the question, since according to my argument it is this "anti" discourse which is systematically ambiguous and can have any of three meanings. My question to those who wish to pursue this objection: Where is your manifesto?

119

I envisage another objection as well. The well-adjusted might contend that the purpose of "anti" discourse is not to provide insight into art, any more than the description of artworks, reproduced on facing pages, which

35. I am persuaded by Joselit that it is theoretically fruitful to explore a "Duchampian surrealism," even if our considered judgment is that Duchamp himself and his works are not ultimately surrealist.

36. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Gershom Scholern and Theodor W. Adorno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 505.

fills catalogue essays. Rather, the purpose of all such discourse is to help us to experience art by slowing us down and allowing us to linger with artworks. To this objection I have no reply except to repeat everything again. Linger why?³⁷

37. Many, many thanks to Joanne Waugh for arranging for me to teach a class on Surrealism, for which many of the ideas in this paper were hatched; and likewise to Tom Wren for my class on Art & Politics, which allowed me to tie up some loose ends. I'm also very grateful to Jim Wilkinson, Craig Howe, David Ingram, and the two reviewers for this journal for very helpful comments on earlier drafts.