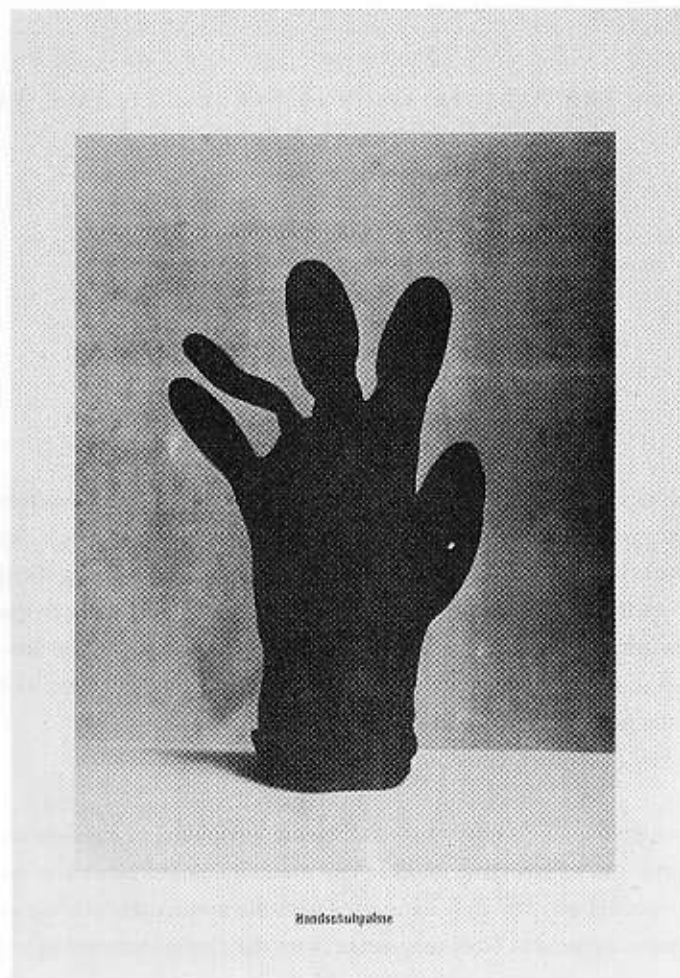

PARODY AND APPROPRIATION IN FRANCIS PICABIA, POP,
AND SIGMAR POLKE

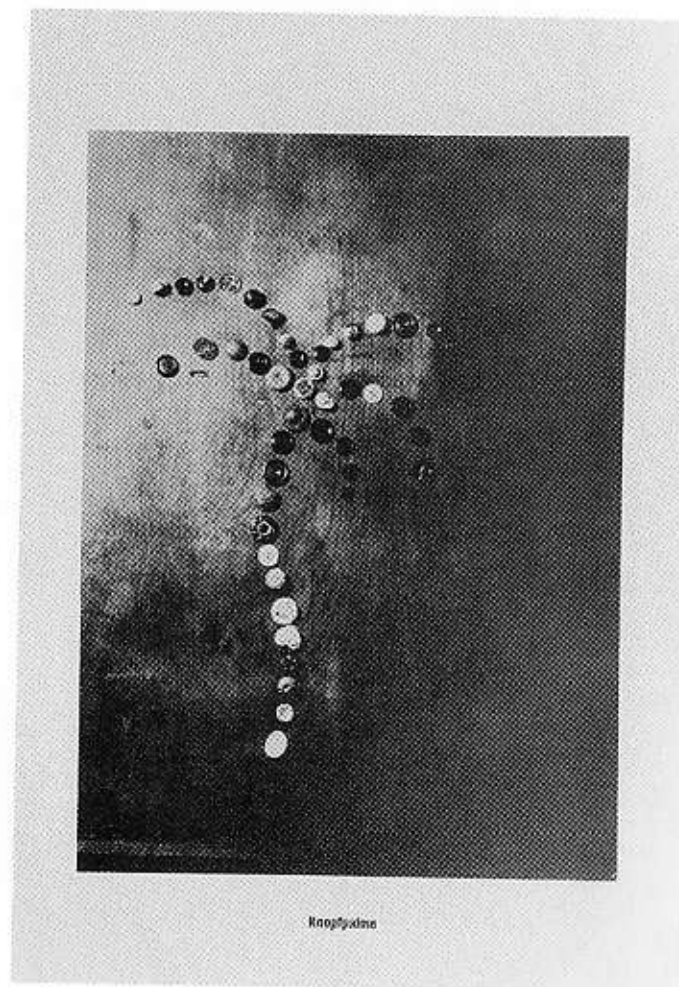
It is not the passion (whether of objects or subjects) for substances that speaks in fetishism, it is the passion for the code, which, by governing both objects and subjects, and by subordinating them to itself, delivers them up to abstract manipulation. This is the fundamental articulation of the ideological process: not in the projection of alienated consciousness into various superstructures, but in the generalization at all levels of a structural code.

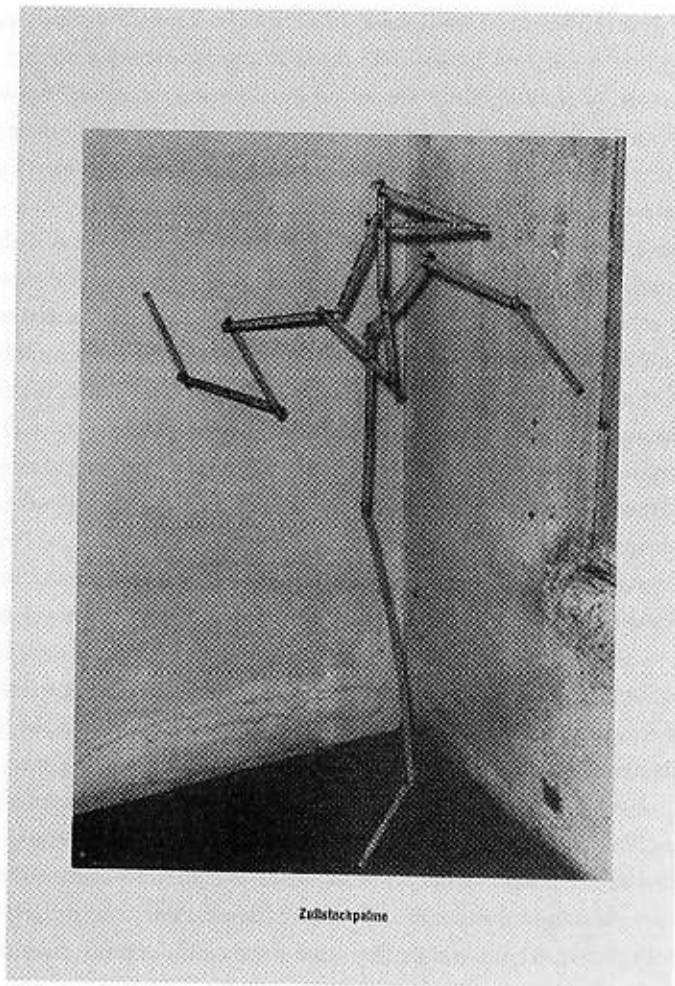
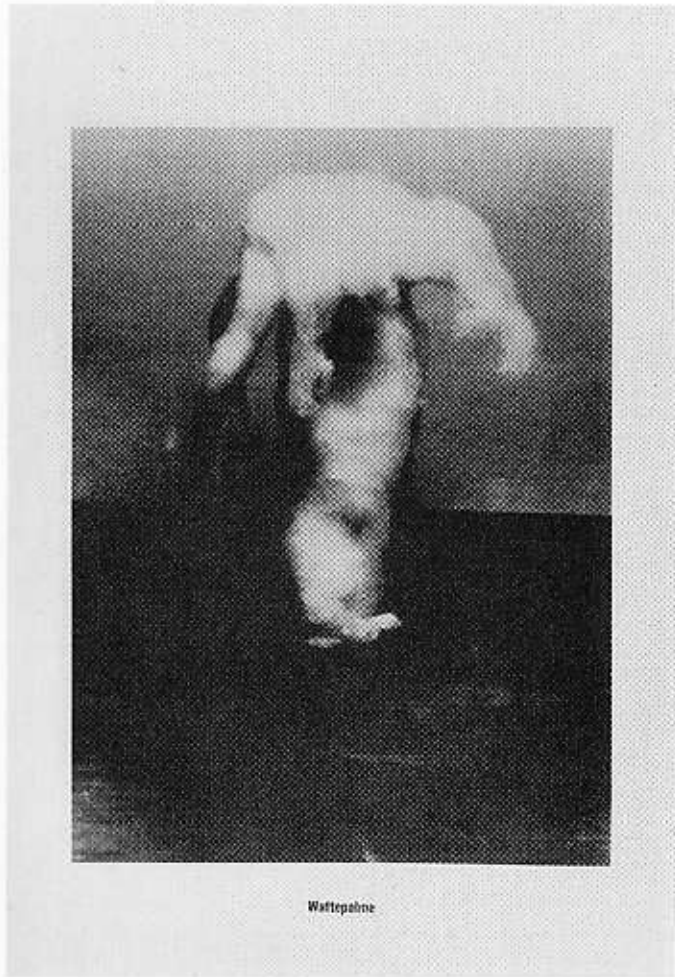
—*Jean Baudrillard, Fetishism and Ideology, 1981*

All cultural practice appropriates alien or exotic, peripheral or obsolete elements of discourse into its changing idioms. The motivations and criteria of selection for appropriation are intricately connected with the momentary driving forces of each culture's dynamics. They may range from the crudest motives of imperialist appropriation of foreign (cultural) wealth to the subtle procedures of historic and scientific exploration. In aesthetic practice, appropriation may result from an



Sigmar Polke, "... Höhere Wesen befehlen," 4 of a series of 14 prints after photographs of Polke and Chris Kohlhöfer, 1968. *Edition 10*, Galerie René Block, Berlin. Edition of 50 boxes.





authentic desire to question the historical validity of a local, contemporary code by linking it to a different set of codes, such as previous styles, heterogeneous iconic sources, or to different modes of production and reception. Appropriation of historical models may be motivated by a desire to establish continuity and tradition and a fiction of identity, as well as originating from a wish to attain universal mastery of all codification systems.

In its most fickle but most powerful version—the discourse of fashion—appropriation as a strategy of commodity innovation reveals its quintessential function: to grant a semblance of historical identity through ritualized consumption. Each act of appropriation is a promise of transformation: each act of acquisition anticipates the supposed transubstantiation. But instead, it generates and perpetuates reification, the malaise appropriation promises to cure. The social behavior of the contemporary individual, defining itself in the gridlock of depoliticized consumption and consumerized politics, finds its mirror in the model of the contemporary neo-avantgarde artist.

Restricted by postwar Modernism to an artistic practice cut off from socio-political perspectives and the production of use value, the artist was condemned to produce pure exchange value. A contemporary work's capacity to generate exchange value has become the ultimate gauge of its aesthetic validity. The question of style, in much emerging contemporary painting, involves a kind of secret pact, between the producers and their audience, to accept the historical limitations imposed upon them and to abide by them in a futile repetition of symbolic liberation. This pact of style implies the tacit understanding that, for a period of time, a very limited and precisely defined set of operations on the pictorial signifier is accessible and permitted. All other activities, different or deviant, are temporarily excluded from public perception and suffer defeat before they can acquire cultural standing.

The Modernist artist's isolation from socio-political practice has been framed and legitimized in such ideological concepts as aesthetic autonomy and formalism. It has been continually assaulted from within aesthetic practice itself, by artists who have appropriated production procedures and materials, iconic

references, and modes of reception from the domain of so-called "low" culture or "mass" culture, introducing them into the discourse of "high" culture. The range of historical and geographical provinces—from which the elements required for the generation of a particular cultural coding system are extracted—changes as rapidly as the avant-garde's need for innovative appropriation. A case in point is the shift from the late nineteenth-century interest in *japonisme* to the Cubists' discovery of *art nègre* only to be followed by the Surrealists' subsequent uncovering of yet another terrain of authentic primitivism on the way to children's art and *art brut*. From *faux bois* to *faux naïf*, one discovers in each historical instance of appropriation as much disguise as revelation. High art poses as low art; sophisticated academic erudition poses as primary, unmediated expression; exchange value poses as use value; contemporaneity (and exposure to very specific current ideological pressure) appears in the guise of a concern for universality and timelessness. 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 production 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 within the context of high art. Each act of cultural appropriation, therefore, constructs a simulacrum of a double negation, denying the validity of individual and original production, yet denying equally the relevance of the specific context and function of the work's own practice.

When Marcel Duchamp appropriated an industrially produced, quotidian object, in order to redefine the cognitive and epistemological status of the aesthetic object, the prophetic voice of Guillaume Apollinaire rightfully hailed him as the one artist who might possibly reconcile art and the people in the twentieth century.

However, this original productivist dimension in Duchamp's work—the symbolic substitution of use value objects for exhibition/exchange value—was ultimately lost in the work's acculturation process. The readymade was reduced to a philosophical speculation on the epistemological status of objects that func-

tion as semiotic elements within an aesthetic structure. Almost fifty years later, at the origin of American Pop art, similar questions were addressed and the same contradictions became apparent. When Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol introduced mechanically produced, "found" imagery into the high art discourse of painting (by technological procedures of reproduction, such as the dye transfer process and silkscreen printing), gestural identity and originality of expression were repudiated. The very procedures that had concretized notions of creative invention and individual productivity in the preceding decade 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.

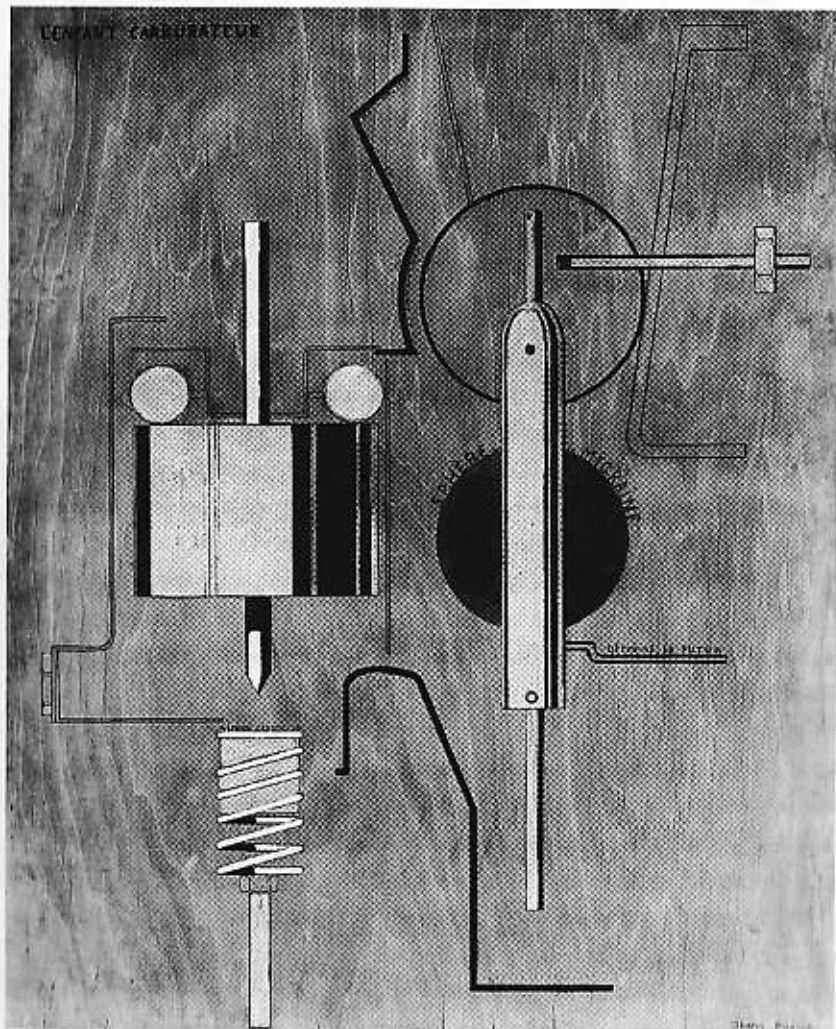
Each act of appropriation, therefore, inevitably constructs a simulacrum of a double position, distinguishing high from low culture, exchange value from use value, the individual from the social. It perpetuates the separation of various cultural practices, and reaffirms the isolation of individual producers from the collective interests of the society within which they operate. It widens the gap it set out to bridge; it creates the commodity it set out to abolish. By becoming the property of the "cultural," it prevents the political from becoming real. Politically committed producers become singularized and classified as "political" artists, in opposition to "formally" oriented artists or "self" and "expression" oriented artists.

Thus, each act of appropriation seems to reaffirm precisely those contradictions it set out to eliminate. Parodistic appropriation reveals the divided situation of the individual in contemporary artistic practice. The individual must claim the constitution of the self in original primary utterances, while being painfully aware of the degree of determination necessary to inscribe the utterance into dominant conventions and rules of codification; reigning signifying practice must be subverted and its deconstruction must be placed in a distribution system

(the market), a circulation form (the commodity), and a cultural legitimation system (the institutions of art). All these double binds cancel out the effect of avant-garde interference within the signifying practice, and turn it into a renewed legitimation of existing power structures. Parodistic appropriation anticipates the failure of any attempt to subvert the ruling codification and allies itself, in advance, with the powers that will ultimately turn its deconstructive efforts into a cultural success. Its seemingly radical denial of authorship, in fact, proposes a voluntary submission to, and passive acceptance of, the hierarchical ordering systems of the code, the division of labor, and the alienation resulting from the work's reification as a commodity. It remains open whether those who pursue strategies of parodistic appropriation know, in advance, that they will emerge victorious from the game of self-denial, once they have been processed through the rules of cultural industry. Or whether their apparent negation of subjectivity and authorship is ultimately only a device to encourage passive acceptance of the limitations that the ideological molds of society hold for its subjects.

The diversity and range of modes of appropriation were already evident in the first decade of this century, when the original avant-garde confronted the implications of the mass-produced object and its impact on the auratic, singular work of art. If we compare Duchamp's introduction of use value objects into the sphere of exhibition/exchange value with the drawings and paintings of Francis Picabia's mechanical period, the former seems, at first glance, to be far more radical and consequential. Picabia's parodistic appropriation of the drawing style of engineering plans and diagrams makes the linear, individual drawing gesture appear like the blueprint of an alien conception that cancels out the presence of the artistic author; yet this parody remains entirely on the surface of the pictorial construct and within the confines of Modernist avant-garde practice. From its very inception, Picabia's ultimately conservative work limited itself to the dialectical juxtaposition of parodistic mimicry and libidinal reification, which operates within the signifying system alone.

On the other hand, it is Duchamp's radicality that seemingly breached the confines of Modernist aesthetic practice, by actually exchanging the individually crafted or painted simulacrum for the real mass-produced object in actual space.



Francis Picabia, *The Child Carburetor*, 1919. Oil, enamel, metallic paint, gold leaf, pencil, and crayon on stained plywood, 49% × 39% in. Collection: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: Robert E. Mates.

Paradoxically, it is the radicality of this solution—a petit bourgeois radicality, as Daniel Buren once called it—that obliterates the ideological framework (the institution of the museum and the discursive formations of avant-garde production) determining the manipulation of the code. Inevitably, Picabia's position, which remains within the conventions and delimitations of the discourse (while manipulating the codes in a parodistic fashion), is now, once again, the more successful and comfortable position for artists to assume.

Parody, as a mode of ultimate complicity and secret reconciliation (a mode in which the victim identifies itself voluntarily with its defeat, in spite of its seemingly demolishing victory over the oppressor's codes by laughter), not only generates a higher degree of analytical precision in limiting itself to operations upon the signifying system, but also generates a higher degree of historical authenticity, in taking sides with the ruling order (it bathes in ideology, as Louis Althusser once described the condition of art in general). Its opposite denies the exclusive validity of the system and its codification and insists upon the necessity of transgressing the historical limitations in order to establish a dialectical relationship with realities existing outside of high art practice (such as Duchamp's readymade concept, Productivist art, the theory of factography, and recent contemporary strategies focusing on the introduction of political and critical practice into aesthetic discussion). Despite the apparent radicality and actual critical negation that this work provides, it most often fails to enter the circuit of distribution, the modes of viewing and reading established and maintained by institutions and audiences alike. Ultimately, inasmuch as these aspects are all integral parts of artistic production, such work thereby paradoxically fails to change the practice of art.

What does it mean, therefore, when a cultural center that for thirty years has almost programmatically ignored and rejected contemporary art on the European continent, suddenly "discovers" the "indigenous" cultural products of its satellites and recycles them into its present-day cultural life? Is it historical justice that the current American interest in European (specifically, Italian and German) painting marks a rediscovery of the cultural autonomy of the overseas provinces? Or does the expertise in traditional modes of meaning production, generally attributed to Europe as a purveyor of traditionally produced luxury goods,

revalidate and authenticate the "discovery" of local representational painting? If a warranty is needed for the authenticity of historically obsolete practices within an advanced context (cultural or socio-political), one may be found in "exoticism," the structure by which one language appropriates elements from a foreign or ancient language to recognize and rationalize its own contemporary atavisms. It is symptomatic of these situations that the proper criteria of evaluation, belonging to the cultural standards of the appropriator as well as those inherent in the language of the colonized culture, are not even recognized. The primary function of this model is not to document the existence of alien rituals, rules, or practices, but to cast the local atavism into a historical or alien form, to authenticate and valorize the local product. It is not surprising that in the present "discovery" of German painting by the American market, neither the criteria of quality that have been developed within the North American context itself are applied, nor are the "discovered" artists those who actually played a significant role in artistic production in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s.

Therefore, it is necessary to introduce into the current (re)discovery of early 1960s German neo-Expressionist painters of minor interest (if we can call the vigor of momentary needs of taste and fashion "minor") a figure whose body of work from the 1960s and early 1970s is far more consequential for actual pictorial thinking and production, and demonstrates a far more complex understanding of Modernist European and German art of those two decades. Sigmar Polke is an artist from the historical and geographical provinces of picture production. His work emerged in a situation marked by a lack of understanding and neglect of its proper historical sources, and one that had to open itself all the more to the dominance of American art. The impact of Dada and Duchamp, the positions of the Constructivists and Productivists, were not recognized and reinterpreted, in the German context, until the advent of Fluxus activities, embodied in such figures as George Maciunas. For example, in a letter to the German Fluxus artist Tomas Schmit, Maciunas wrote:

The goals of Fluxus are social (not aesthetic). Ideologically, they relate to those of the LEF group in 1929 in the Soviet Union, and they

aim at the gradual elimination of the fine arts. Therefore, Fluxus is strictly against the art object as a dysfunctional commodity, whose only purpose is to be sold and to support the artist. At best, it can have a temporary pedagogical function and clarify how superfluous art is and how superfluous ultimately it is itself. . . . Secondly, Fluxus is against art as a medium and vehicle for the artist's ego; the applied arts must express objective problems which have to be solved, not the artist's individuality or ego. Therefore, Fluxus has a tendency toward the spirit of the collective, toward anonymity and anti-individualism.

In contrast, the present situation is marked by disillusionment and skepticism toward that progressive legacy of the Modernist tradition. If the first situation was one of naïveté, then the second is one of cynicism. The early beginnings of the neo-avantgarde's practices and the current conclusions (which "[stir] in the thickets of long ago," in Walter Benjamin's phrase) seem to have congruent features but they have different origins. Still, both situations—the amazement that originally accompanied the discovery of the avant-garde and now, twenty years later, the cynical rejection and disbelief—use parody as a rhetorical mode for denouncing the claims of a dominant Modernist ideology lacking validity today.

In the early 1960s, when Polke (born in 1941) studied at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts (after leaving East Germany in 1953), West Germany was a cultural wasteland. The viable indigenous activities of the Weimar Republic had yet to be unearthed from the rubble of the various local mimics of post-Surrealist automatist painting. German variations of Tachism and Informel painting dominated the academies, and the market's attention was split between imports from the old avant-garde center, Paris, and the newly emerging domination of the New York School. Avant-garde culture was a foreign language, whose speakers had French, Italian, or American names. This country that had recently abandoned its own Modernist traditions had become an ideal province for the importation of neo-avantgarde art, and now generated visual strategies of parody and appropriation, gazing at the legacy of Modernism from the outside while adapting to its linguistic standards through quotation. The first exhibition

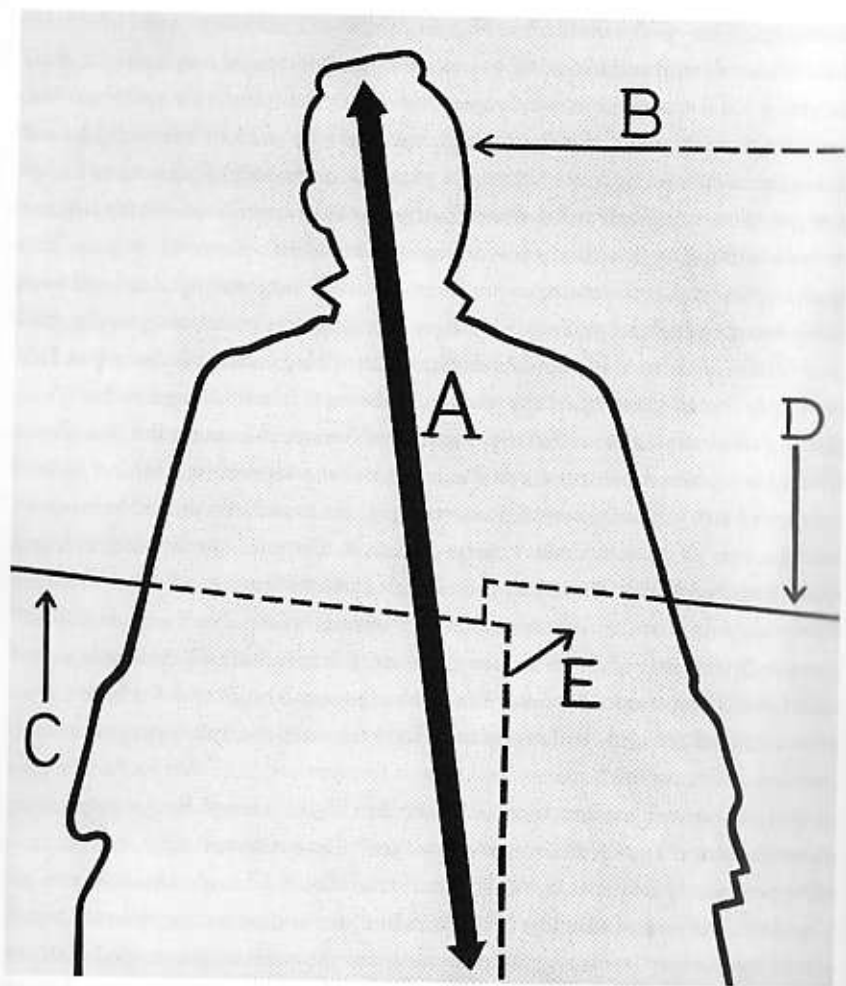
which Polke participated took place in a rented butcher shop in Düsseldorf in 1963, and grouped him with three other artists. One of them (then a close friend of Polke's) was Gerhard Richter, who has since become known as a key figure in the ironic deconstruction of painting by painting itself. From the very beginning Polke and Richter systematically opposed the inauthentic attempts of neo-Expressionist painters such as Georg Baselitz (who also began working and exhibiting in the early 1960s) to reestablish a local or national continuity of painting, but one that ignored those major developments in twentieth-century German art production after Expressionism that were just about to be rediscovered in the second decade of the postwar period.

Polke and Richter, representing the second generation of the neo-avantgarde in Europe (if we consider Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, and Piero Manzoni to be the first), adopted strategies of appropriation, quotation, and parody in a manner similar to that of the generation of American artists that had rediscovered these strategies as part of a more general understanding of the implications of the works of the Dadaists. Labeled "Pop artists," Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and their generation faced the same historical dilemma as the European neo-avantgarde. The set of problems was not entirely different from the questions posed by the original avant-garde of the period between 1915 and 1925: the blatant contradictions between mass culture and high culture; the extraordinary impact of technical processes of reproduction on the notion of the unique, auratic work; and the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the isolated, elitist practices of high art production and its ultimate powerlessness in attaining readability for mass audiences. In addition, the neo-avantgarde had to contend with the extraordinary increase in visual manipulation brought about by the rise of advertising, photography, cinema, and television. The utopian, naive hopes for a possible reconciliation of the two spheres—which had inspired the writings of the Russian Productivists and the Surrealists, as well as the theoretical reflections of Walter Benjamin (who was indebted to both)—could no longer be maintained after the war.

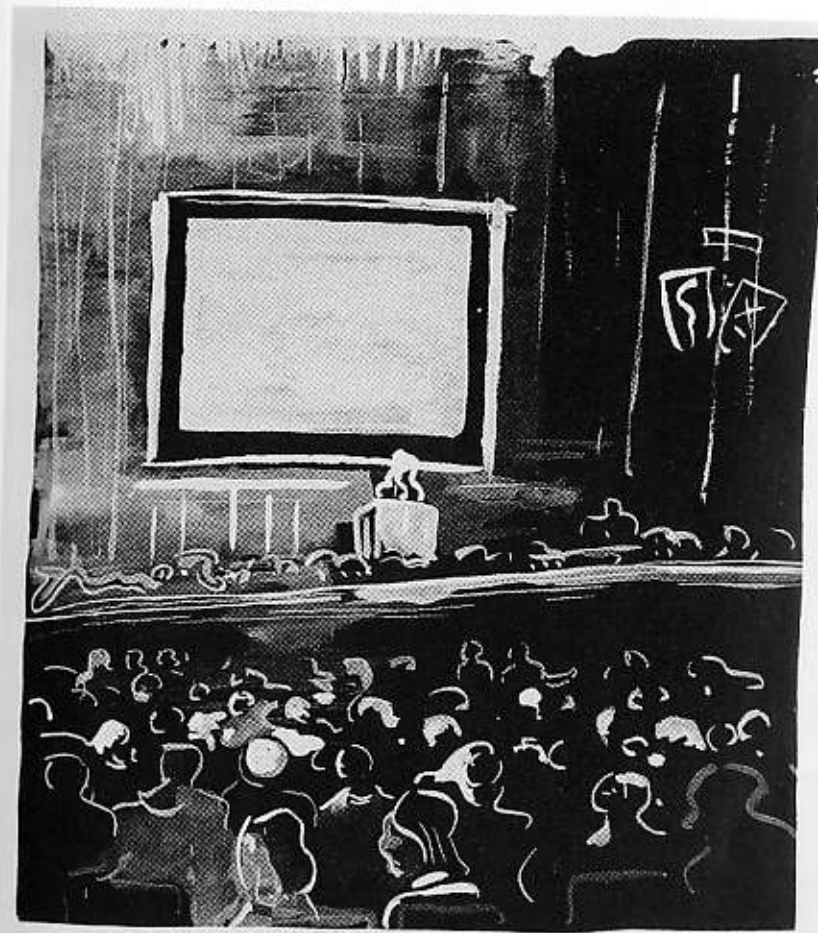
It was no surprise, then, that within such a seemingly hermetically secured system of product propaganda and ideological stratification the manipulation of

visual signifiers—if they related to objects of reality at all—was performed with an attitude of camp and melancholy, parody and indifference, resignation and indulgence. At the same time, a deeply rooted skepticism toward the validity of the continued production of isolated, high art activities marked the attitude and statements of this generation. When, for example, Lichtenstein talks about his interest in the iconography of the comic strip and Richter talks about his interest in the iconography of amateur photography, both artists refer to the sources that seem to protect their own artistic production from being instantly identified with being merely a high art practice. Criticism of such strategies as being purely affirmative of mass cultural manipulations, and glamorizing collective alienation, fails to ask the crucial questions these strategies raise, and fails to recognize the actual place of these strategies within the tradition of twentieth-century art. Such criticism also fails to take into account the context of the Modernist tradition as contemporary art's proper historical framework, which must be evaluated before art's transgression of its own codes can be discussed. Therefore, it is not accidental that, in the early to mid-1960s, artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol interchangeably used iconic representations of objects from advertising and "low" commodity culture as much as they did the fetish images from the catalogue of mechanically reproduced works of high art. The same holds true for such European artists of the mid- to late 1960s as Richter, and, in a more programmatic, parodistic fashion, for Polke.

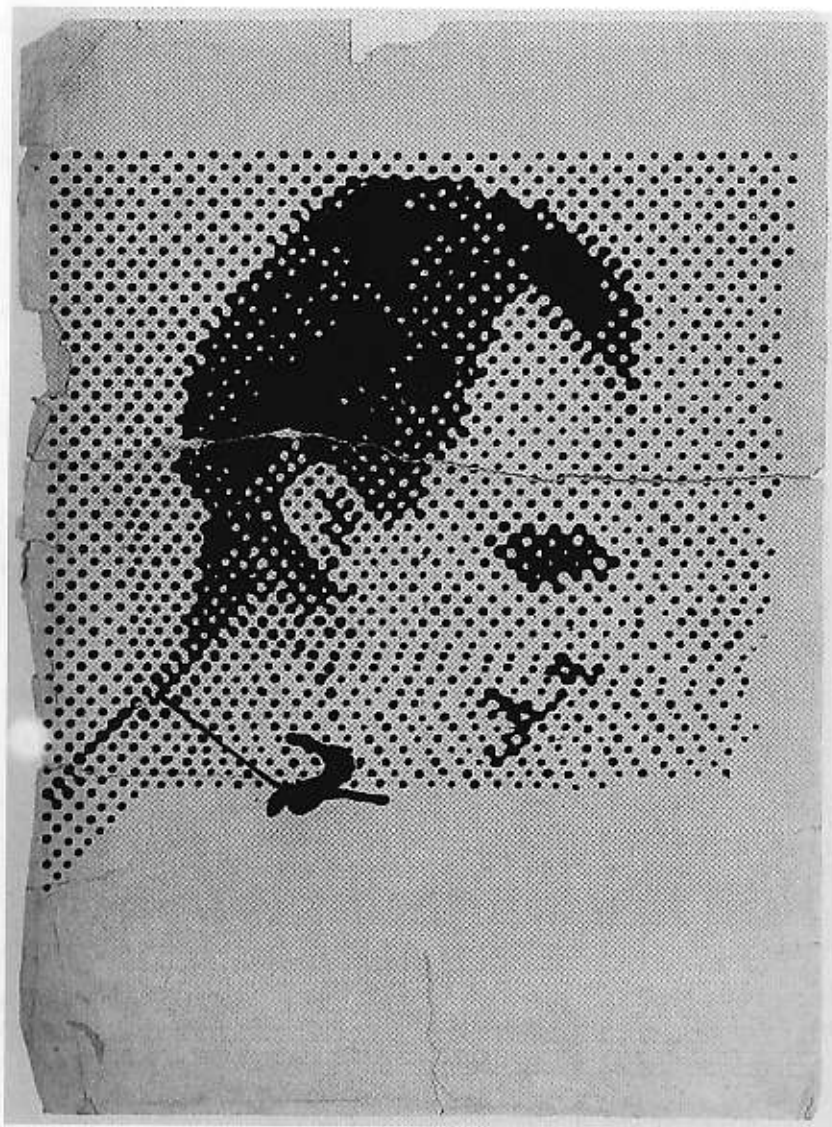
In Germany at that time, Richter and Polke chose the programmatic stance of what they called "Capitalist Realism." The profile of this stance became most poignantly evident during Richter's and Konrad Lueg's *Demonstration for Capitalist Realism* in Düsseldorf (1963), when, for several hours, the two artists placed themselves—as living sculptures—in comfortable chairs on pedestals, in the furniture showroom of a department store. The artists on display epitomized this historical dilemma between high art practice and mass culture, which started with Duchamp and continues right into the present. In Polke's work of that period, this dialectic is concretized in the constant juxtaposition of iconic appropriations from low culture and stylistic appropriations from the signifying practices of high culture. In his large group of "dot" paintings, produced



Roy Lichtenstein, *Portrait of Madame Cézanne*, 1962. Magna on canvas, 68 × 56 in. Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt.



Sigmar Polke, *Untitled (Kino)*, c. 1968. Gouache, white and black, on cardboard on paper, 29.5 × 27.5 cm. Collection: Städtisches Kunstmuseum, Bonn.



Sigmar Polke, *Portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald*, 1963. Drawing with ben-day-dot screen. Gouache, pencil, rubber stamp, and brush on paper, 94.8 × 69.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

between 1963 and 1969, Polke introduced mechanically generated iconic schemes (found photographs representing stereotypes of perception). These were imposed on his iconic, chromatic, and compositional ordering principles of a rigid, predetermined nature, and enabled him to refrain from almost all “creative” decisions. Yet, this apparently total determination of iconic representation was negated by its actual construction and manual execution in the painting procedure itself. As in Jasper Johns’s flag paintings and Lichtenstein’s and Richter’s paintings of the early 1960s (and in stark contrast to Warhol’s production), each pictorial unit is meticulously executed; critical balance is maintained between the mechanically mass-produced icons and the individually crafted brushstroke, juxtaposing reified code and subversive recodification. In much of this work, from Rauschenberg to Polke, the very nature of the procedure of manufacturing individual visual signs denies its own validity as a process of individuation, by limiting itself to a tightly controlled painterly exercise.

On the other hand, in a group of cloth paintings Polke produced during the same period, all of these principles are inverted. Whereas in the “dot” paintings, the particularization of the constituent elements of the visual signifier decomposed the found figure into a molecular field, the “cloth” paintings introduce found materials (black velvet, fake leopard skin, bed sheets, cheap *chinoiserie* silk) as supports. Superimposed on grounds of deliriously bad taste, as in *Polke as Astronaut* for example, we then find gestures of Modernist painting emptied, made futile by parodistic repetition. In these paintings, expressive and constructive gestures (as well as the self-referential brushstroke and the belabored denotative contours of iconic representation) are often arbitrarily placed side by side, becoming abbreviations of historical obsolescence and ostentatious stylistic incompetence. They are reminiscent of the involuntary parodistic accumulation of pictorial styles in late Kandinsky or in early Abstract Expressionist work such as Hans Hofmann’s, in which automatism, biomorphism, and geometric abstraction were juggled.

At this point, it might be worthwhile to remember that these were strategies Picabia had fully developed by the 1920s. We see succeeding sets of parodistic appropriations in the various phases of his oeuvre: the carbon copy icons of his mechanical period, and the contour fixations of art historical references in



Sigmar Polke, *Polke als Astronaut*, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 90 × 75 cm.

his “transparency” series of the mid-1920s (when he traced and trailed the authoritarian tendencies of *retour à l’ordre* Neoclassicism), followed by his mimetic rendition of pornographic imagery from cinematic or product propaganda sources all through the 1930s and into the early 1940s. By that point, Picabia’s production had been overtaken by a compulsive return to representation, the reduction of the visual construct and of perceptual apprehension to isolated scopic acts of identifying and repeating outlined prefigurations. This regressive process corresponded to the fascist violation of political life, in which Picabia participated as an artist (and ultimately as a political subject).

Nowadays, the aesthetic neutralization of the political conflict between high culture and mass culture generates the demeaning pleasures of camp appropriations. Bad taste and black velvet are used as supposedly subversive antidotes to the elitist isolation of bourgeois easel painting and its infralinguistic disputes. Yet it seems that camp always ultimately sides with the paternal law, as do all discursive practices that attempt to resolve the conflict of domination by disguising their actual oppositional, historical identity in mockery of the ruling order. As in fashion, defined by Walter Benjamin as the “tiger’s leap into the past that happens in an arena which is commanded by the ruling class,” the manipulation of a code in stylistic terms alone never leads to the transgression of the code.

Successfully entering the symbolic order of aesthetic language and its conventions, a given style is instantly recognized, commodified, and imitated. But the highly overdetermined language conventions of Modernist art practice allow only for a limited number of meaning operations within Modernism’s framework; among them are appropriation and quotation, parody and mimicry. Appropriation of style functions as an arbitrary, but strictly delineated, gesture of symbolic subversion of the original code of the style. To remain recognizable, or to be deciphered as parody, the simulacrum has to follow the outline of the code and must ultimately remain within its limits. However, the relationship between the two structures of codification juxtaposed in a parody can vary from tautological to dialectical, and the mode of quotation established with the object, which quotes from them, can range from undulating, ornamental paraphrase to negation of the validity of the coding convention itself.

As previously noted, a given style is the tacit ideological handshake between an author and the institutions that control the definition and distribution of cultural meaning. Thus style, as the very model of individual identity, ends up being a tool for producing instant cultural alienation. The rigor with which a culture has to protect its hierarchical order and privileges determines the degree to which its art will be stylized and the range of stylistic options that will be admissible. The cynical quotation of the historical limitations of a particular stylistic practice today functions as a reassurance for the validity of that practice. Much parodistic appropriation of style denies the speaker's presence and his or her role in attempting to reveal the obsolescence of the discourse. This parodistic speech borders on style only to negate style's validity. Parody of style, however, is not a reliable position. Its ambiguity and balance can be tilted at any moment, and it can easily turn from subversive mimicry to obedience. The mode of parody denies the notion of individuality as private property, which the practice of style in much other contemporary art production seems to suggest. In fact, parodistic appropriation might ultimately deny the validity of art practice as individuation altogether.

Therefore, the historical place of Polke's work is at a juncture (as was that of late Picabia) and emerges from a moment when the credibility of Modernism is in shambles, and its failure and obsolescence have become all too obvious. But this failure is dictated by the violence of political and economic conditions, not by individual or aesthetic circumstances. If we look at parody from the outside, from a perspective that has left behind the field of petty Modernist jokes, which are duplicated by each generation that spirals along the cul-de-sac of Modernism, then its work looks clownish, enslaved, and despondent; it appears to be lost in desuetude. If we look at parody from the inside, however, it seems to perform liberation with subversive vigor; it seems to battle successfully against the haunting spirits of false consciousness that the socio-cultural practice of visual meaning production—once rightfully called "Modernist art"—nowadays releases. What it fails to claim is the historical option of a perspective that looks at Modernism from the outside, one that insists on reconciling both the individual's constitution in language and ideology, and a foundation in material production and political consciousness.

READYMADE, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND PAINTING IN THE
PAINTING OF GERHARD RICHTER

One sees here that solipsism, carried to extremes, coincides with realism.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

In the field of painting, there is hardly anyone today who would not say that painting is merely about painting, nothing else. Talk about painting only refers back to the speaker, who does not use the language of the painter, who has painted and then remained silent. That painting is painting, and that talk about painting has no meaning outside of itself, might be an admissible viewpoint if it did not imply that painting can have nothing to say, but can only be "painting."

Here, as in other disciplines, such empirico-critical positivism overlooks a conspicuous fact: namely, that its acquiescence to such a viewpoint runs counter to its own interests. The painting of Gerhard Richter actually provokes this

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