

ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 1982

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Subscriptions: Orders, inquiries and address changes should be sent to ARTFORUM, P.O. Box 980, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737. Enclose mailing label with address change. Missed issues must be claimed within three months of date of publication. Single copies and back issues available prepaid from Artforum, 205 Mulberry St., N.Y., N.Y., 10012. Complete volumes, index (1962-68), Laurence McGilvery, P.O. Box 852, La Jolla, Calif. 92038.

Distribution: U.S. and Canada, Eastern News Distributors, 111 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011, International, Boarts, 1633 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10019, Belgium, Post-Scriptum, rue des Eperonniers 37, 1000 Brussels.

Microfilm: Xerox University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. Microfiche: Bell & Howell, Micro-Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, Calif. 44691.

ARTFORUM is indexed in the Art Index, ARTbibliographies MODERN and RILA.

Artforum (ISSN-0004-3532) is published monthly except July and August for \$36.00 per year (\$50.00 outside the U.S.) by ARTFORUM, 205 Mulberry Street, New York, N.Y. 10012. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: send address changes to ARTFORUM, P.O. Box 980, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

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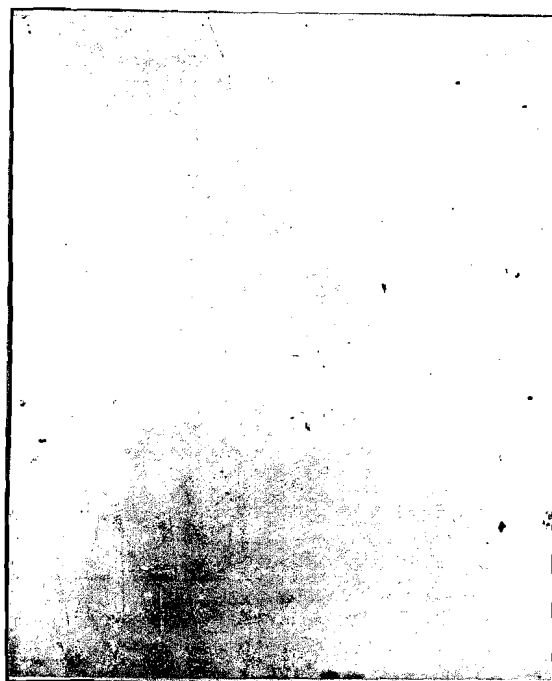
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ALLEGORICAL PROCEDURES: APPROPRIATION AND MONTAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART



ERASED de KOONING DRAWING
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG
1963

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

From the very moment of its inception, it seems that the inventors of the strategy of montage¹ were aware of its inherently allegorical nature: "to speak publicly with hidden meaning," in response to the prohibition of public speech. George Grosz reminisces as follows:

"In 1916, when Johnny Heartfield and I invented photomontage. . . we had no idea of the immense possibilities or of the thorny but successful career that awaited the new invention. On a piece of cardboard, we pasted a mishmash of advertisements for hernia belts, student songbooks, and dogfood, labels from Schnaps and wine bottles and photographs from picture papers, cut up at will, in such a way as to say in pictures, what would have been banned by the censors if we had said it in words."²

In a highly condensed form, Grosz charts the terrain of montage as well as its allegorical methods of confiscation, superimposition, and fragmentation. He outlines its materials as much as he points to the dialectic of montage esthetics: to range from a meditative contemplation of reification to a powerful propaganda tool for mass agitation. Historically, this can be seen as being embodied in, for example, the opposition between the collage work of Kurt Schwitters and the montage work of John Heartfield.

The inventors of collage/montage techniques understood that they performed operations on the pictorial or poetical signifying practice that ranged from the most subtle and minute interference in linguistic and representational functions, to the most explicitly and powerfully programmatic propaganda activities. This is apparent, for example, in Raoul Hausmann's recollections of 1931 of the development from phonetic Dada poems to the political polemics of the Berlin Dada group:

"In the conflict of opinions people often argue that photo-montage is only possible in two ways: one being the political, the other being the commercial. . . . The Dadaists, after having "invented" the static, the simultaneous and the purely phonetic poem, now applied the same principles with consequence to pictorial representation. In the medium of photography they were the first to create from structural elements of often very heterogeneous material or locales a new unity that tore a visually and cognitively new mirror image from the period of chaos in war and revolution; and they knew that their method had an inherent propagandistic power that contemporary life was not courageous enough to absorb and to develop."³

The dialectical potential of the montage technique that Hausmann refers to found its historical fulfillment in the contradiction that is exemplified on the one hand by the increasing psychological interiorization and estheticization of collage and montage techniques in Surrealism (and their subsequent, still continuing exploitation in advertising and product propaganda), and on the other hand by the historically simultaneous development of revolutionary montage and agitprop practices in the work of El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, and Heartfield, and the almost

complete disappearance of these practices' public social function from history, except for the isolated pursuits of the contemporary avant-garde.

Parallel with the emergence of montage techniques in literature, film, and the visual arts, we witness the development of a theory of montage in the writings of numerous authors since the late 1910s: Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, and Sergei Tretyakov in the Soviet Union; Bertolt Brecht, Heartfield, and Walter Benjamin in Weimar Germany; and later, Louis Aragon in France. It is the theory of montage as it is developed in the later writings of Walter Benjamin, in close association with his theories on allegorical procedures in Modernist art, that is of significance if one wants to arrive at a more adequate reading of the importance of certain aspects of contemporary montage, its historical models, and the meaning of their transformations in contemporary art.

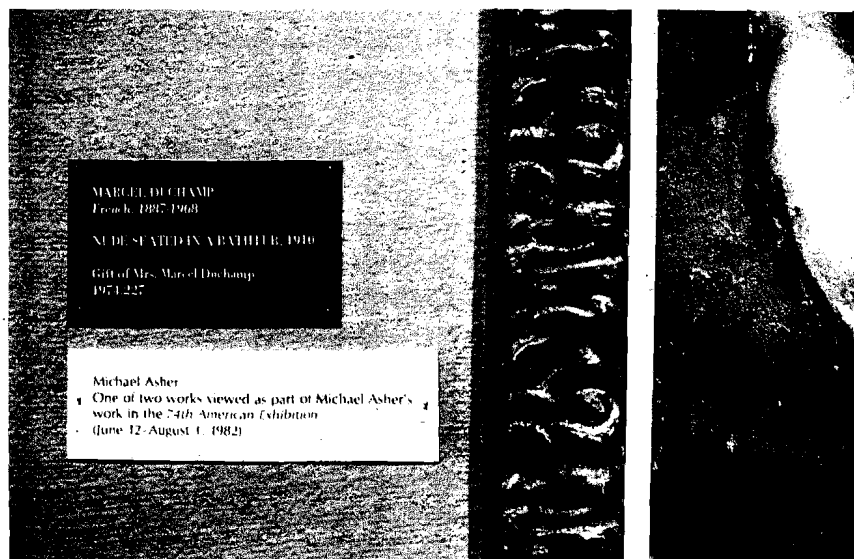
In his analysis of the historical conditions that generated allegorical practices in European Baroque literature, Benjamin suggests that the rigid immanence of the Baroque—its worldly orientation—leads to the loss of an anticipatory, utopian sense of historical time and results in a static, almost spatially conceivable experience of time. The desire to act and produce, and the idea of political practice, recede behind a generally dominant attitude of melancholic contemplation. Similar to the general perception of the world's perishable nature during the Baroque, the world of material objects is perceived as being invalid with the transformation of objects into commodities: a transformation which occurred with the general introduction of the capitalist mode of production. This devaluation of objects, their split into use value and exchange value and the fact that they ultimately function exclusively as producers of exchange value, profoundly affects the experience of the individual.

It is in his later writings, especially in the "fragments" on Baudelaire, that Benjamin developed a theory of allegory and montage based on the structure of the commodity fetish as Marx discussed it. Benjamin planned to write a chapter in the Baudelaire study entitled "The Commodity as Poetical Object," and in one of the fragments there is an almost programmatic description of collage/montage esthetics: "The devaluation of objects in allegory is surpassed in the world of objects itself by the commodity. The emblems return as commodities."⁴ By the time this was written the perception of commodities as emblems had already occurred in Marcel Duchamp's Ready-mades and in the main body of Schwitters' collage work, where language and image, taken into the service of the commodity by advertising, were allegorized by the montage techniques of juxtaposing and fragmenting depleted signifiers.⁵

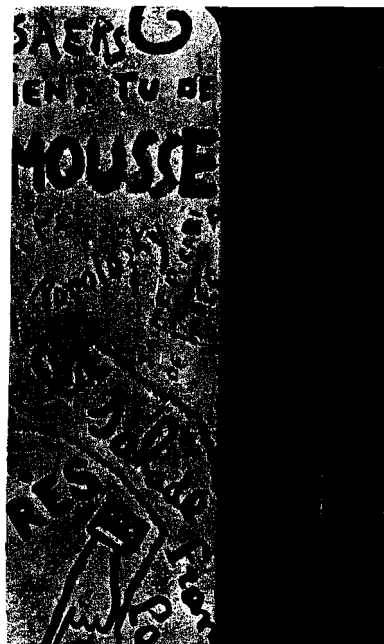
The allegorical mind sides with the object and protests against its devaluation to the status of a commodity by devaluating it a second time in allegorical practice. In the splintering of signifier and signified, the allegorist subjects the sign to the same division of functions that the object has undergone in its transformation into a commodity. The repetition of the original act of depletion and the new attribution of meaning redeems the object. In the scriptural element of writing, where language is simultaneously incorporated into a spatial configuration, the allegorist perceives the essential site of his or her procedure: the Dadaist poet depletes words, syllables, and sounds of all traditional semantic functions and references until they become visual and concrete. Their dialectical complement is the liberated phonetic dimension of language in the Dada sound poem, where expression is freed from the spatial image of language, and the usages of imposed meaning. The procedure of montage is one in which all allegorical principles are executed: appropriation and depletion of meaning, fragmentation and dialectical juxtaposition of fragments, and separation of signifier and signified. In fact, the following



Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, rectified Ready-made, pencil on reproduction, 7 3/4 x 4 7/8. Private Collection, Paris. Courtesy, the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Michael Asher: untitled installation, 1982, one of three elements of Asher's contribution to the "74th American Exhibition" at the Art Institute of

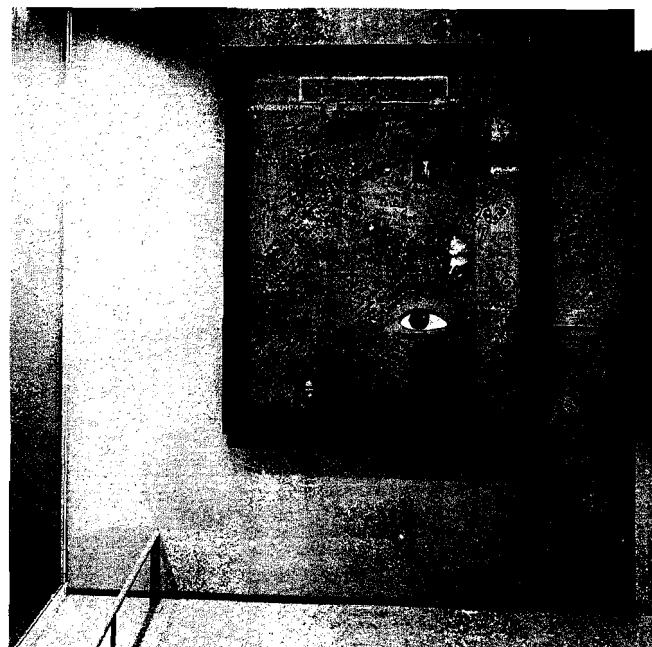


Francis Picabia
Paris 1879 - Paris 1953
L'œil cacodylate, 1921

Acetat de l'Elat, 1967
AM 4408 P

Daniel Buren
Bruxelles pour Centre 1978
Les Formes: peinture, 1977

Acetat de l'Elat, 1967
AM 4408 P
Acetat de l'Elat, 1967
AM 4408 P



Daniel Buren, detail and installation view, *Les Formes: peinture* (Forms: painting), 1977, black and white striped canvas installed underneath Francis Picabia's *L'œil cacodylate*, 65 x 52 1/2". Collection, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.



Chicago, 1982, three views.

statement from Benjamin's Baudelaire fragments reads like an exact description of the montage/collage procedures: "The allegorical mind arbitrarily selects from the vast and disordered material that its knowledge has to offer. It tries to match one piece with another to figure out whether they can be combined. This meaning with that image, or that image with this meaning. The result is never predictable since there is no organic mediation between the two."⁶

Benjamin's theory of montage ultimately outlines a historical critique of perception. The beginning of the Modernist avant-garde comes at the historical turning point where, under the impact of the rising participation of the masses in collective production, the traditional models that had served in the character formation of the bourgeois individual were rejected in favor of models that acknowledged the social facts of a historical situation where the sense of equality had increased to such a degree that equality was gained even from the unique, by means of reproduction. This perceptual change denied unique qualification and it dismantled by implication the hierarchical ordering system of the bourgeois character structure. This transformation of the individual psyche as well as that of larger social structures was anticipated in the new techniques and strategies of montage, in which a new tactility established a new physiology of perception.

The transformation of the commodity to emblem—a phenomenon Benjamin observed in the poetry of Baudelaire—came full circle in the Ready-mades of Duchamp, where the willful declaration of the unaltered object as meaningful and the act of its appropriation allegorized creation by bracketing it with the anonymous mass-produced object. With Duchamp's Ready-mades it seems that the traditional separation of the pictorial or sculptural construct into procedures and materials of construction, a pictorial signifier, and a signified does not occur—rather, all three coalesce in the allegorical gesture of appropriating the object and of negating the actual construction of the sign. At the same time, this emphasis on the manufactured signifier and its mute existence makes apparent the hidden factors determining the work and the conditions under which it is perceived. These range from presentational devices and the institutional framework to the conventions of meaning-assignment within art itself. It seems that what Yve-Alain Bois recently observed in regard to Robert Ryman's paintings is only half the truth in Duchamp's work: "... the narrative of process establishes a primary meaning, an ultimate originating referent that cuts off the interpretive chain."⁷

Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, must be recalled in order to discuss another dimension of the Dadaists' montage operations: the principle of appropriation. In his appropriation of a mass-reproduced icon of cultural history, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Duchamp subjected the printed image to the essentially allegorical procedures of confiscation and inscribed it in a textual configuration that came alive as text only in its phonetic performance. The mechanically reproduced image of the once-unique auratic work functions as the ideological complement to the manufactured commodity that the Ready-made frames in its allegorical schema.

As is well known, beginning in the late '50s and throughout the development of Pop art, commodity images and objects were juxtaposed or run parallel with mechanically reproduced high-cultural icons in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein. Duchamp's inverted Ready-made, *Rembrandt as Ironing Board*, 1919, which proposed the transformation of an actual cultural icon into an object of use value, found less of a following since it went beyond the culturally accepted limits of iconoclasm. Not since the '20s has the desire for use value in art resurfaced, most likely because it was submerged under pictorial exchange value.

In 1953 Rauschenberg obtained a drawing from Willem de Kooning after informing him of his intention to erase the drawing and make it the subject of a work of his own. After the careful execution of the erasure, which left vestiges of pencil and the imprint of the drawn lines visible as clues of visual recognizability, the drawing was framed in a gold frame. An engraved metal label attached to the frame identified the drawing as a work by Robert Rauschenberg entitled *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and dated 1953. At the climax of the Abstract Expressionist idiom and its reign in the art world this may have been perceived as a sublimated patricidal assault by the new generation's most advanced artist, but it now appears to have been one of the first examples of allegorization in post-New York School art. It can be recognized as such in its procedures of appropriation, the depletion of the confiscated image, the superimposition or doubling of a visual text by a second text, and the shift of attention and reading to the framing device. Rauschenberg's appropriation confronts two paradigms of drawing: that of de Kooning's denotative lines, and that of the indexical functions of the erasure. Production procedure (gesture), expression, and sign (representation) seem to have become materially and semantically congruent. Where perceptual data are withheld or removed from the traditional surface of display, the gesture of erasure shifts the focus of attention to the appropriated historical construct on the one hand, and to the devices of framing and presentation, on the other.

A second, equally conspicuous example, Jasper Johns' *Flag*, 1955, not only indicated the beginning of Duchamp's reception in American art, and thus the beginning of Pop art, but more precisely the painting constituted the introduction of a pictorial method that had previously been unknown to New York School painting: the appropriation of an object/image whose structural, compositional, and chromatic aspects determined the decision-making process of the painter during the execution of the painting. The rigid iconic structure functions like a template or framing device which brackets two apparently exclusive discourses, high art and mass culture, yet the junction paradoxically reveals the gap between them all the more. In Duchamp's Ready-mades, the choice of the everyday object remains random and arbitrary. It could almost be argued that to the degree that the Ready-mades and the work emerging from them in American Pop art address mass culture and mechanically reproduced imagery as abstract universal conditions, to the same degree does this work fail to clarify the specific conditions of its own framing and the conditions of its reification as art within the institutional framework of the museum, the ideology of Modernism, and the distribution form of the commodity.

Well-balanced and well-tempered modes of appropriation, and the successful synthesis of relative radicality and relative conventionality, from the mid-'50s on, demarcate the position of American Pop art. This program has always been one of liberal reconciliation and successful mastery of the conflict between individual practice and collective production, between the mass-produced imagery of low culture and the icon of individuation that each painting constitutes.

Here lies the source of Pop art's social success, and the secret behind the present rediscovery and glorified institutionalization of painting under the auspices of a rediscovered and redefined Pop art legacy. If read against the historical moment which was dominated by Abstract Expressionist esthetics and ideology, Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and *Factum II*, both 1957, and Johns' first *Flag*, might appear to be scandalous representations of rigidity in their denial of the validity of individual expression and creative authorship. They are, however, delicate constructs of compromise, refining gestural definition and juxtaposing individualized painterly craftsmanship with seemingly anonymous

MARCEL BROODTHAERS

UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD

IMAGE

GALLERIE WHITE WHITE JEFFERSON
GALLERIE MICHAEL WEINER SOUL

White Broodthaers: 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025



White Broodthaers: 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025

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Hans Haacke: On Sale at the Maeght Foundation, 1970. Excerpt of a manuscript for the performance "In the avant-garde" at the Maeght Foundation in St. Paul de Vence, France.

mechanicity, compared to the radical epistemological crudity and seemingly inexhaustible shock of the three-dimensional, unaltered Ready-made.

It could easily turn out to be one of the great ironies of history that a moment of radical truth was contained in Clement Greenberg's conservative formalism after all. He refrained from acknowledging the impact of Duchamp's work—and of the work of the Pop artists, for that matter—because it lacked, as he perceived it, the specific self-referentiality that could purify and verify itself in regard to all conditions of its making and position. This empirical/critical position at least did not fall for the premature delusion of an immediate reconciliation between high art and mass culture, as was implicit in the work of Duchamp's followers. It is not until two generations later, in the mid-'60s, that work emerges that, while taking both minimal and Pop strategies into account, integrates the historical ramifications of the Ready-made model and the consequences of a self-referential analysis of the pictorial construction itself. With this work we see these conflicts develop a new level of historical significance. It is in the work of artists such as Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, and Lawrence Weiner that we see both the beginning of an examination of the framework that determines the pictorial sign and an analysis of the structuring principles of the sign itself.

A work such as Graham's 1966 "Homes for America,"¹⁸ conceived as an art-magazine article, becomes now fully readable as an early example of allegorical deconstruction where the framework of distribution, materiality, and place of the work's ultimate existence determine the structure of the work from its very inception. Graham's "Homes for America" focused on the contemporary framework of esthetic information, the printed magazine page, and the photo reproduction, a sort of "disposable Ready-made." The work inscribed itself into the historical context of minimal sculpture's self-referentiality, and simultaneously denied it by introducing the "content" of serialized, standardized suburban prefabricated architecture.

Independently of each other Graham and Broodthaers had both become aware of the historical consequences of the works of Stéphane Mallarmé. The linguistic and semiotic interests of the early conceptual artists led to a renewed interest in Mallarmé's investigations of the spatialization of the linear, temporal dimension of reading and writing. In his essay "The Book as Object," written and published in 1967,¹⁹ Graham discussed Mallarmé's 1866 project for "The Book," in which the poet conceived a book whose multidimensional geometry implied a complete restructuring of reading and writing as they had been known since the invention of the printed letter. In 1969 Broodthaers published his version of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*²⁰ which exercised literally all the principles of allegorical appropriation and montage as Benjamin developed them.

Broodthaers' *Coup de dés* appropriated the presentational details, format, design, and typography of the cover of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés* as it was published by Editions Gallimard in Paris in 1914. Mallarmé's name, however, was replaced by Broodthaers'. In a manner reminiscent of Rauschenberg's erasure of de Kooning's drawing, Broodthaers operated on the scriptural configurations of Mallarmé's poem: the actual text of the poem was substituted for the original preface. The visual and spatial dimension of the poem's configuration on the page was maintained, but depleted of its semantic and lexical information. Typographical modifications disappeared in favor of pure graphic/linear demarcations that correspond exactly to the position, placement, size, weight, and direction of Mallarmé's spatialized scripture. Since Broodthaers' book was printed on semi-transparent tracing paper, the pages could be

"read" not only in the traditional linear, horizontal pattern that is structured on a vertical plane, but on an axis of superimposed planes as well as in verso.

Broodthaers' allegorical deconstruction of the prison-house of Modernism alternated between its institutionalized language and its objects: from his foundation of a fictitious museum in Brussels in 1968 where the icons of Modernism were presented as postcard images, to his large-scale installation *The Museum of Eagles*, presented in Düsseldorf in 1972, where 260 artifacts were once again submitted to the process of abstraction from history in the construction of a secondary mythical fiction.¹¹

In 1972 Daniel Buren employed appropriation to transfer the viewer's attention from exhibited objects to the underlying framework which determines the conditions of their presentation. In *Exhibition of an Exhibition*, his installation that year for Documenta 5 in Kassel,¹² Buren divided the previously determined sections of the exhibition (painting, sculpture, advertising, propaganda posters, *art brut*, etc.) with elements (white stripes on white paper) that served to demarcate the framing institution and, in one case, actually constituted an autonomous painting. The most spectacular collision occurred when by coincidence Johns' *Flag*, 1955, was placed on one of the demarcated wall areas, revealing the historical distance between the two works and the specificity with which Buren had overcome the randomness of Johns' attempt to fuse high art and mass culture.

One of the first works that actually incorporated the commodity structure directly into the elements of presentation was Hans Haacke's contribution to the summer festival "L'art vivant américain" at the Maeght Foundation, St. Paul de Vence, France, in 1970. Haacke complied with the organizer's request to contribute to a "nonprofit avant-garde festival" by linking his contribution to the concealed promotion of salable objects at the nonprofit foundation. Haacke's "performance" consisted of a tape-recorded litany of prices and descriptions of Maeght Gallery prints on sale in the bookstore of the foundation. The recording was interrupted only by news agency teletype reports read over the phone from the office of the newspaper *Nice-Matin*.

It seems that only fear of audience protest deterred the organizers from banning Haacke's work. The history of attempts by museum authorities and exhibition organizers to censor Haacke's endeavors to reintroduce repressed elements in cultural production into the official face and functioning of cultural institutions proves the truly allegorical qualities of Haacke's art. In a number of works Haacke has chosen to write art history as commodity history—most prominently in the chronology of owners of the *Asparagus Still Life* by Manet (banned from an exhibition in Cologne in 1974), and of Seurat's *Les Poseuses*. More recently he has investigated the economic practices and maneuvers of Peter Ludwig, a major cultural benefactor and collector, uncovering the actual benefits and privileges that the apparently selfless generosity of the Maecenas implies (*Der Pralinenmeister [The Master Chocolate Maker]*, 1981).¹³

In an American context, two works from the late '70s must also be mentioned as prefiguring contemporary allegorical investigations: Louise Lawler's untitled 1978 installation at Artists Space in New York,¹⁴ which included a painting from 1824 by Henry Stullmann representing a racehorse (loaned by the New York Racing Association), and Michael Asher's contribution to the 73rd American Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979, which appropriated a bronze replica of Jean-Antoine Houdon's life-size marble sculpture of George Washington. Due to their enigmatic procedures these works have received little critical attention,¹⁵ yet they both functioned as reverse historical mirrors, critically anticipating the antirational tendencies in esthetic production that are presently dominating us. Lawler's installation made the elements of an exhibition the subject of her production. As

her contribution to the catalogue for the exhibition she designed a logo for Artists Space, and a poster with that logo was distributed outside of the exhibition. The actual exhibition consisted of the appropriated painting which, displaced and totally out of context, functioned as an allegorical shell, the negation of a historical tendency. Two stage lights illuminated the arrangement. One confronted the viewer's eyes from above the painting (interfering with perception of the painting itself) and the other was directed through the exhibition space, out the window and onto the street, connecting the isolated exhibition space with its outside environment and bringing the exhibition to the attention of the immediate neighborhood.

It was with the work of this group of artists that questions of material definition, site (physical, social, and linguistic), and ultimately questions of mode of address and audience became essential. Anyone taking the implications of the situational esthetics developed in the late '60s and '70s into account as an irreversible change in the cognitive conditions of art production would have to realize that any return to an unconditioned autonomy of art production would be mere pretense, lacking historical logic and consequence, just as any attempt to reinstitute the conventions of representation after Cubism is absurd. This does not imply that, for example, Lawrence Weiner's reduction of esthetic practice to its linguistic definition, Buren's and Asher's analysis of the historical place and function of esthetic constructs within institutions, or Haacke's and Broodthaers' operations revealing the material conditions of those institutions as ideological would embody positions that could not be logically continued and developed further. (The dialectical reply to these positions, of course, is not, as might currently be thought, a return to the obscurity of historically nonfunctional conventions and the commodity camouflage that they provide.)

The precision with which these artists analyzed the place and function of esthetic practice within the institutions of Modernism had to be inverted and attention paid to the ideological discourses outside of that framework, which conditioned daily reality. This paradigmatic shift occurs in the late '70s in the work of such artists as Dara Birnbaum, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Martha Rosler, where the languages of television, advertising, and photography, and the ideology of "everyday" life, were subjected to formal and linguistic operations that essentially followed Roland Barthes' model of a secondary mythification that deconstructs ideology. Barthes' strategy of secondary mythification repeats the semiotic and linguistic devaluation of primary language by myth and structurally follows Benjamin's ideas on the allegorical procedure that reiterates the devaluation of the object by commodification. It seems justifiable therefore to transfer the notion of montage and allegory, as discussed above in the context of avant-garde practice of the first half of the century, and to extend its ramifications into a reading of recent and contemporary work.

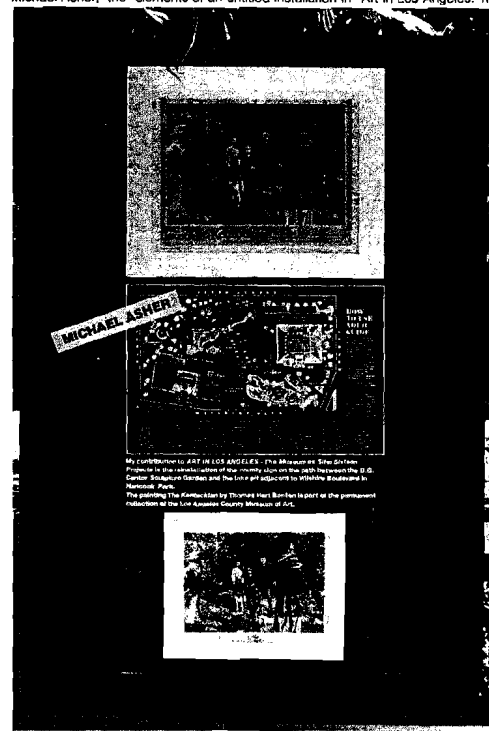
The political spectrum within which these artists operate—inasmuch as it can be read in the work itself and inasmuch as it can be at all isolated from the current climate of desperation and cynicism—encompasses a variety of positions. They range from the apparently outright denial of productivity and dialectical construction in the work of Levine, to the agiltrop position of Rosler's work. Holzer's anarcho-situationist position trusts the strategy of an unmediated street activity in which anonymous posters generate a confrontation between language and its daily ideological performances, while Birnbaum's videotapes rely entirely upon and aim at mediation within both a high-art framework and corporate media production.

The risk of Levine's position is that it might function ultimately in secret alliance with the static conditions of

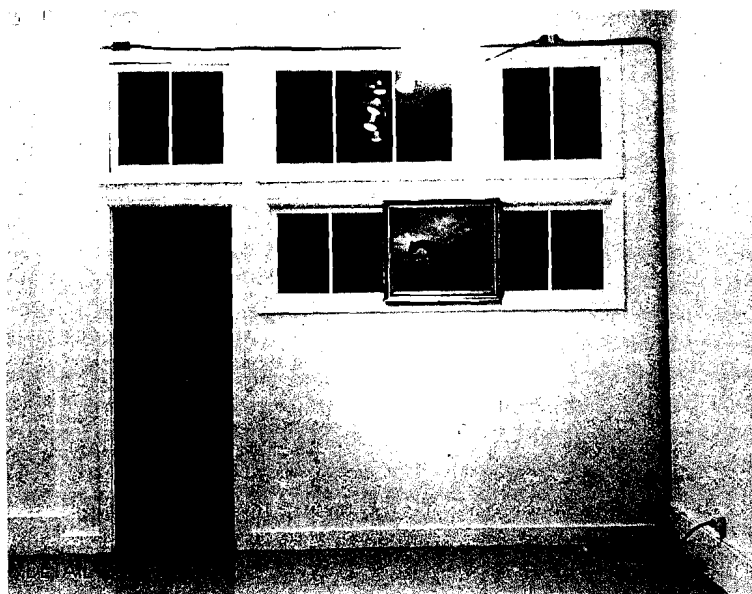


Louise Lawler, catalogue cover with logo - Artists Space exhibition contribution, 1978, 9 x 6".

Michael Asher, the elements of an untitled installation in "Art in Los Angeles: The



Stanchion poster at main entrance to museum, 42 1/2 x 29 1/4".



Louise Lawler, interior installation view (detail) of untitled installation at Artists Space in New York, 1978.



Louise Lawler, exterior installation view (detail) of Artists Space windows during exhibition.

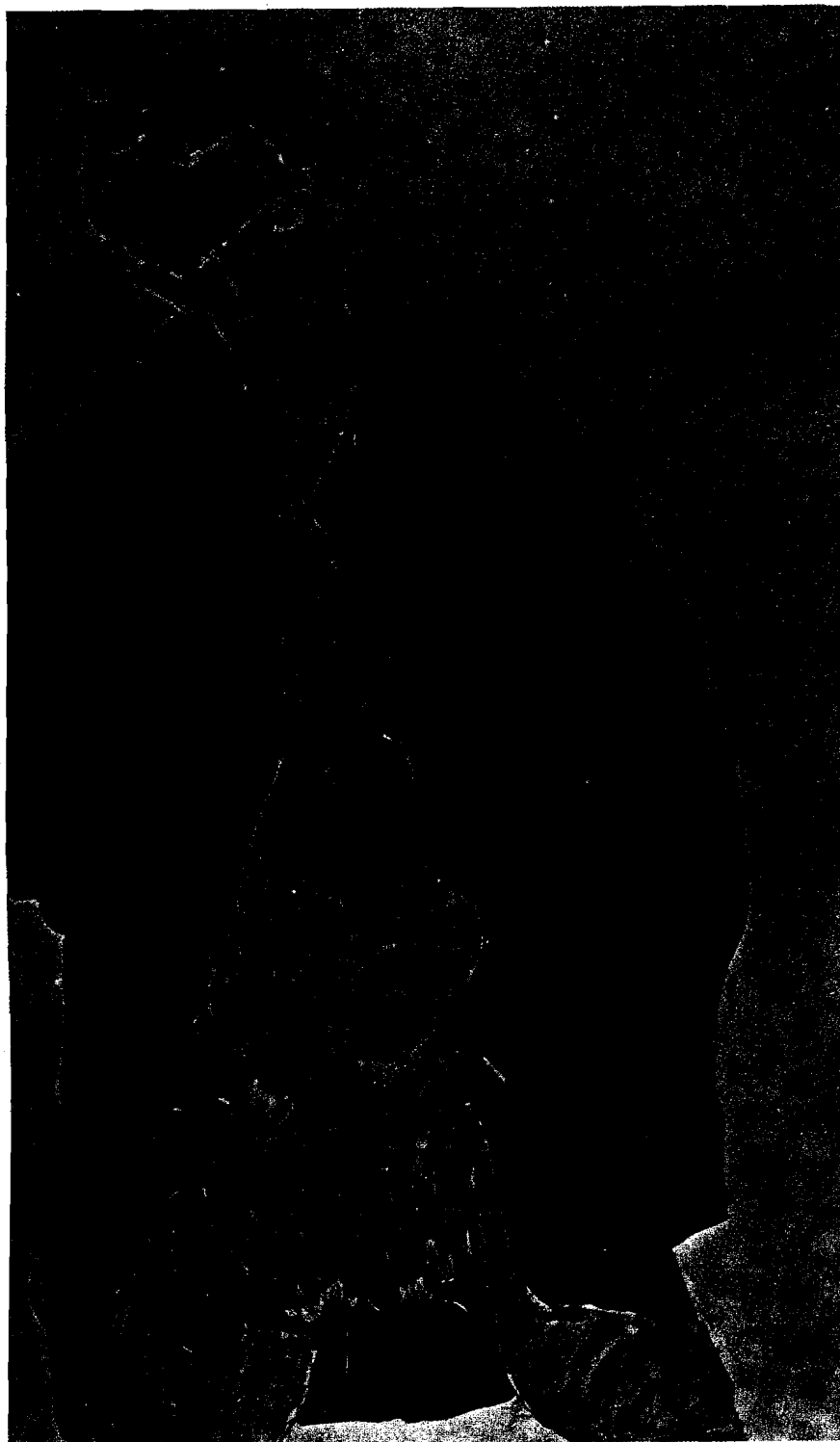
Museum as Site: Sixteen Projects," at the Los Angeles County Museum, 1981. Photos: Robert Flick.



Thomas Hart Benton, *The Kentuckian*, 1954, in the "early to mid-20th century context" room.



Reconstructed county sign in Hancock Park adjacent to the museum, 113 1/8 x 41 3/4 x 3/4".



Sherrie Levine, *Self-Portrait After Egon Schiele*, 1982, color photograph, 7 7/8 x 13 1/2".

social life as they are reflected in an art practice that is concerned only with the work's commodity structure and the innovation of its product language. Rosler's position runs the risk of ignoring the structural specificities of the work's circulation form and distribution system, and of failing to integrate her work efficiently into the reception of current art practice, when the work's actual claim is in fact radical political awareness and change. The dilemma underlying Holzer's work is that for the sake of direct action within language, it ignores the mediating framework of the institutions within which ideology is historically placed and has to support the radicality and apparent independence of that position with an increasing number of compromises to the framework that was originally dismissed. Finally, the risk for Birnbaum's work is that it could integrate itself so successfully into the advanced technology and linguistic perfection of governing television ideology that its original impulse of critical deconstruction could disappear in a perfect blending of a technocratic estheticization of art practice and the media's need to rejuvenate its looks and products by drawing from the esthetics of the avant-garde.

The inability of current art criticism to recognize the necessity and relevance of artists working within these parameters results partially from art history's almost total failure to develop an adequate reading of Dada and Productivist theory and practice, particularly of the activities of "factography" and documentary work and the range of agitprop production that emerged from it—for example, in the work of Osip Brik, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Liubov Popova, and Tretiakov, as much as the still essentially ignored key figure of montage practice, John Heartfield. Once these activities are admitted to the framework of legitimization that art history provides, their consequences for contemporary practice will become more readable.

It is furthermore not surprising that the impact of the work of the artists of the '60s and '70s on a contemporary understanding of art production and reception had hardly occurred before the need to revitalize the art market brought about a reinstitution of obsolete production procedures in the guise of a new avant-garde of painting. Simultaneously, however, a different range of esthetic positions has been developed by this new generation of artists which continues and expands one of the essential features of Modernism—its impulse to criticize itself from within, to question its institutionalization, its reception, and its audience.

At a moment when the analysis of the institutional framework had become an issue that could safely be absorbed and integrated into the codex of institutional exhibition topics—a moment when the lasting supremacy of the functions of the museum had been widely reaffirmed and reinstituted by a general return to traditional artistic production procedures—Michael Asher abandoned the liberally delegated option to adorn the institution's repressive tolerance, by expanding the focus of the deconstruction. An untitled decentralized installation was his contribution to the exhibition "The Museum as Site" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Asher's work integrated three fragments from heterogeneous discourses: 1) a wooden sign carrying the inscription "Dogs Must Be Kept On Leash Ord. 10309" was replaced in the park surrounding the museum at precisely the same spot from which it had been previously lifted by vandals. The sign was produced by the park authorities to match the rustic, handcrafted look of the other signs existing in the park. 2) A poster with a color reproduction and a black and white still photograph showing the same scene from the movie *The Kentuckian* was placed in the main entrance court of the museum on a brass placard where the museum normally announces its special events and lectures. Along with those two images (which show Burt Lancaster as "The Kentuckian" stepping out of a forest with

a child, a woman, and a dog, facing two men with rifles) a map of the museum's park indicated the location of the replaced sign and identified it as Asher's contribution to the exhibition. 3) The viewer was furthermore informed that the museum's permanent collection housed a painting by Thomas Hart Benton entitled *The Kentuckian*, 1954, which had been commissioned on the occasion of the film's release. The painting, depicting Lancaster and a little boy, a dog, and a blossoming plant on the top of a mountain, was originally in Lancaster's collection, and was donated by him to the museum.

Inside the museum, the visitor could in fact find Benton's painting in its usual place in the permanent collection, without any additional information referring to Asher's temporary appropriation. Asher provided fewer clues or instructions here than in his previous works to enable the viewer to assemble and synthesize the various elements of his installation. The work's ephemeral existence and the dispersion of its elements made it likely that parts (or all) of the installation remained unseen by viewers who have recently become readapted to the traditional highly condensed and centralized esthetic constructions of visual regulation.

Benton's stridently anti-Modernist painting, inasmuch as it reveals his overtly sexist, racist, and chauvinist position dating from the McCarthy era, provided in the context of Asher's installation a discomforting historical example of the political implications of those moments when a breakdown of Modernist thinking and a return to traditional models of representation occurs. Asher's work seemed to perceive itself as being in a historically comparable situation, and it responded to the cultural symptoms of authoritarianism with a request to the viewer for an active commitment to reading and seeing an ephemeral, allegorical analysis. Appropriation functioned in Asher's work primarily in a designatory manner to establish a context and generate an awareness of the layers of ideological determination that condition the conception and construction of a work of art.

Ephemeral existence and marginal productivity in Asher's work do not imply a position of self-effacing complacency or melancholic contemplation. His work is almost totally constructed in the juxtaposition of various discourses of power and the subliminal gesture of arranging appropriated elements. In the same way that the reinstallation of the dog sign in the park of the museum denies the historical interest of an academized notion of site-specificity in response to the topic of the exhibition, the reference to the movie and its star (as the donor of the painting) confronts the museum's function and activity with the comparison of high culture and mass culture, and the gradual transformation of high culture's institutions into appendices of corporate culture and the culture industry. The historical absurdity of an easel painting that was commissioned by a movie corporation from a master of representational painting, as a promotional gadget for the release of a film, and that was subsequently donated by a movie star to the collection of the museum, transcends any simple reflection of the local cultural conditions in Los Angeles. The iconic reference to the dog in fact functions as a pretext to the hidden dimension of authoritarianism in the representational painting.

Ultimately it is in the nature of the objects (i.e., their materiality and status) and their placement, as much as in their interrelationship, that the complex references of Asher's work become fully evident. Each element continues to exist within its own context as well as entering the superimposition of discourses that is Asher's work. By setting Benton's painting within its historical context (i.e., its place and function, its patron and original purpose), it acquires exemplary significance for contemporary painting and its conceits. As technically reproduced images, the poster and still photograph that were placed in the muse-



Martha Rosler, untitled, ca. 1968, mixed media collage, 8 x 10".

um's showcase doubled their representation; they assumed temporarily and peripherally the status of art objects in the context of Asher's work, clarifying the unique, auratic object's dependence on technical reproduction and mass culture. The sign in the park, the only manufactured object produced for the purposes of this installation, was in fact the most functional object. In Asher's work the appropriated objects are not subjected to a finite status as art objects. To the degree that their historical authenticity and function are maintained and a decentralized reading and viewing are necessitated by the absence of a unified, authorial presence, the work avoids the status of the fetish and resists commodification.

For the time being, at least, Sherrie Levine functions as the strongest negation within the gallery framework of the re-emergent dominance of the art commodity. Her work, melancholic and complacent in defeat, threatens within its very structure, mode of operation, and status the current reaffirmation of individual expressive creativity and its implicit reaffirmation of private property and enterprise. At a historical moment when a reactionary middle class struggles to ensure and expand its privileges, including those of cultural hegemony and legitimization, and when hundreds of talents in painting obediently provide gestures of free expression with the cynical alibi of irony, Levine's work places itself consistently against the construction of the spectacle of individuality. Continuing and readjusting a position defined by Duchamp and updated by Warhol, her allegorical appropriations prove that Baudelaire was wrong when he argued that the poetical was necessarily alien to female nature since melancholy was outside the female emotional experience. Enter the female dandy, whose disdain has been sharpened by the experience of phallographic oppression, and whose sense of resistance to domination is therefore more acute than that of her male colleagues, if they still exist.

In the current historical situation artists adopt the psychosexual standards of obsolete role models and provide products for the market, but fail to change esthetic practice. However, by transcending character formation, commodity form, and institutionalization through the redefinition of esthetic practice, they may fail to enter public awareness since they do not fulfill the public's expectations, and do not abide by the rules of culturally acceptable deviation. Contemporary male avant-garde models, in particular, seem to imply a return to obsolete notions of culture in order to "... exemplify an attitude within which the bourgeois world can first and foremost find its identity, that of the enchanted consumer. . . . By doing so the ideological condition of the *posthistoire* which late capitalism claims for itself, would equally be reaffirmed by art practice."¹⁶ No wonder, then, that strategies of allegory and montage which once dislocated and decentralized the hierarchical subject, generating participation in the tactility of the particularized fragment and rupturing the contemplative stance of the viewer, now return in painting, reconciled and thwarted, as abused gadgets of a decoration that offers empty codes and strategies for sale.

Strategies of fragmentation in contemporary painting seem to have sunk literally to the level of household goods. What was once, in the work of Antonio Gaudí and Simon Rodia, an index of the collective participation in everyday life of the oppressed and exploited, and which therefore rightfully entered the language of architecture as ornament in Gaudí's and Rodia's visionary constructions, has now been reduced to the level of gewgaws in paintings for a clientele whose vision is limited to the index of the commodity market.

By contrast, the contemporary montage work of Asher, Birnbaum, Levine, and Rosler uses methods of appropriation and montage conclusively and explicitly without estheticizing them in a historicist conceit that functions as an auratic disguise of the commodity. We can find strategies

and procedures of quotation and appropriation in contemporary painting, but the very mode of painting provides an experience of reconciliation.

In contemporary paintings the ultimate subject is always a centralized author, whereas in contemporary montage procedures the subject is the reader/viewer. Even the "conspicuous" delegation of certain painterly tasks of figurative representation to anonymous commercial experts or professionals, who draw bunnies or bombers, does not resolve the historical limitations of this production procedure and its incapacity to develop an adequate viewer-text relationship.

It is in the critical analysis of the actual procedures and materials of production and reception that a work's historical legitimacy will be evident. In expanding the spacing of elements,¹⁷ singularizing the elements of appropriation, and redirecting the viewing/reading to the frame, the new montage work decentralizes the place of the author and subject by remaining within the dialectic of the appropriated objects of discourse and the authorial subject, which negates and constitutes itself simultaneously in the act of quotation.

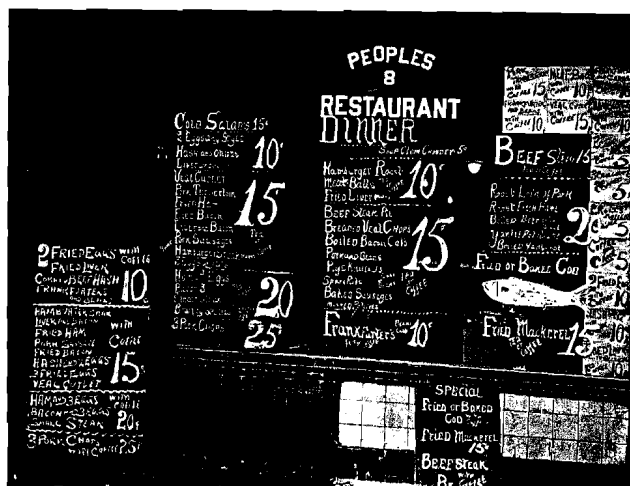
To the degree that the various sources and authors of quoted "texts" are left intact and fully identifiable in truly contemporary montage, the viewer encounters a decentralized text that completes itself through his or her reading and comparison of the original and subsequent layers of meaning that the text/image has acquired.

Levine's notion of fragmentation differs from the phallographic tendency which associates fragmentation with broken saucers, burnt wood, and crumpled straw. In her seemingly random selection of imagery from the history of Modernism, representations are literally fragmented, torn from the hermetic totality of the ideological discourse within which they currently exist. Thus, just as Benjamin described the allegorical procedure, Levine devalues the object of representation for the second time. She depletes the current commodity status of photographs by Walker Evans, Edward

Weston, Eliot Porter, and Andreas Feininger for the second time by her willful act of rephotography, by restating their essential status as multiplied, technically reproduced imagery.

Levine's apparently radical denial of authorship might fail to recognize the socially acceptable, if not desirable, features it implies: a reaffirmation of the dismantling of the individual, and a silent complacency in the face of the static conditions of reified existence. The faint historical spaces the work establishes between the original and the reproduction seduce the viewer into fatalistic acceptance, since these spaces do not open up a dimension of critical negativity that would imply practice and encounter rather than contemplation. This is one essential difference between Levine's position and that of Martha Rosler; it is evident in their differing attitudes toward the notion of historical authenticity and the material, i.e., social truth of their objects of appropriation. In true allegorical fashion Levine subjects historical objects to an act of confiscation where their innate authenticity, historical function, and meaning is robbed for the second time. Levine's attitude embodies the ambivalence of the artist and intellectual who lacks class identity and political perspective, exerting a certain fascination over those contemporary critics, including myself, who are equally ambivalent toward their affiliations with the powers and privileges that the white middle class provides. This attitude is evidenced in the following statement by Levine:

"Instead of taking photographs of trees or nudes, I take photographs of photographs. I choose pictures that manifest the desire that nature and culture provide us with a sense of order and meaning. I appropriate these images to express my own simultaneous longing for the passion of engagement and the sublimity of aloofness. I hope that in my photographs of photographs an uneasy peace will be made between my attraction to the ideals these pictures exemplify



Walker Evans, *Bowery Lunchroom*, New York, ca. 1933, black and white photograph. Courtesy, the Estate of Walker Evans.

and my desire to have no ideals or fetters whatsoever. It is my aspiration that my photographs, which contain their own contradiction, would represent the best of both worlds."¹⁸

Walter Benjamin, in spite of his devotion to the allegorical theory and its concrete implementation in the work of Baudelaire and the montage work of the '20s, was aware of the inherent danger of melancholic complacency and of the violence of the passive denial that the allegorical subject imposes upon itself as well as upon the objects of its choice. The contemplative stance of the melancholic subject, the "comfortable view of the past," he argued, must be exchanged for the political view of the present.¹⁹ This view was developed in "The Author as Producer,"²⁰ a text in which all reflection upon allegorical procedures has been abandoned and in which he comes closest to the development of a factographic, Productivist position, as it was outlined in the writings of Brik and Tretiakov.

According to Benjamin the new author must first of all address the Modernist framework of isolated producers and try to change the artist's position from that of a caterer of esthetic goods to that of an active force in the transformation of the existing ideological and cultural apparatus. This essentially different position is evident in Martha Rosler's approach toward historical objects and the photographic conventions they embody. Two works that suggest a comparative reading with Levine's work are *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-75, and the critical essay/piece "in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," 1981.²¹ In both works photographic conventions are addressed as a linguistic practice, whose historical position is evaluated in its varying affiliations with general social and political life, rather than with the criteria of neutrality that the program of photographic Modernism prescribes.

In *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, a

photo-text work which includes black and white photographs of Bowery store fronts and photographs of word-lists describing drunkenness, conventions of urban architectural photography are appropriated in restaged photographs that loosely seem to take the photographic stance of Walker Evans. However, these conventions are executed by Rosler rather than simply confiscated, as is the case with Levine. Rosler's crude attempts to try her photographic hand at mimicking the great urban "documentarians'" style is of course as thoroughly disappointing to the cultivated photographic eye as Levine's photographs are to the collector's hand.

Rosler describes *The Bowery* ... in explicitly allegorical terminology:

"In *The Bowery* the photographs are empty and the words are full of imagery and incident. . . . A lot of photographers made pictures of Bowery bums. That upset me because I thought it was a false endeavor, that it involved a pretense that such photos were about the people when they were really about the sensibility of the photographers and the viewers. It's an illicit exchange about compassion and feeling and the bums are victims of this exchange between the photographer and the viewer. They provide the raw materials for a confirmation of class and privilege. . . . I wanted to make a point about the inadequacy of that kind of documentary by contrasting it with verbal images. . . . I didn't want to use words to underline the truth value of the photographs, but rather words that undermined it. I felt that just as the images are expected to be poetic but aren't even "original"—they follow a tradition of street-photography and have more to do with commerce than with anything else, since they're shopfronts—the words would be a kind of unexpected poetry. Their ironic humor would cut against and be cut against by the deadpan photographs."²²

It is not surprising that in the same interview Rosler

introduces the question of a contemporary collage practice and its historical function and possibilities into the discussion of her work, and that the definitions she supplies coincide with the general outline of contemporary montage as I have tried to develop it in the course of this essay:

"I think it's even more valid to talk about contradiction than about collage, because much of the collaging consists of contradiction, putting things together that don't go together, but that are connected in some way. . . . Many of the contradictions I want to talk about in my work are not simple riddles of existence but things that arise from the system we live under which makes impossible and conflicting demands on us. I like to point to situations in which we can see the myths of ideology contradicted by our actual experience."

If Levine's position seems to originate from the cynical tradition of dandyism, then Rosler's seemingly naive attempt at recycling exhausted photographic conventions to clarify their historical meaning and their inadequacy for contemporary documentary production insists on maintaining an element of individual practice. In the futility of that naive attempt and in the revelation of its shortcomings she disqualifies the ahistoricity of abstracted photographic ambition all the more.

Rosler's critical writing such as "in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," uses the format of criticism successfully to analyze the historical and political implications of contemporary photography. Here, instead of restaging photographic conventions, Rosler transforms the current interest of certain photographers (who have turned back to the history of their own discipline by rephotographing "in the manner of the masters" "the subjects of the great tradition of Modernist photography") into actual confrontation with the material reality of the "subjects," i.e., the "victims" of photography. In so doing she takes away that veil of esthetic neutrality behind which photographic activity

hard drinker
funnel
drinkitite
emperor
bingo boy, bingo mort
dipsomaniac

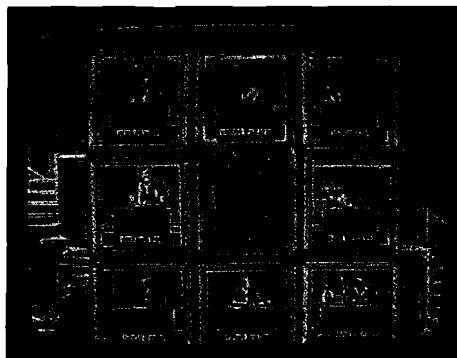


Martha Rosler, from *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-75, black and white photographs, 7 x 10" each.

has hidden. If Levine's abstract and radical denial of production and authorship could place her ultimately on the side of the existing power structure against her wishes, then Rosler's attempt at constructing artwork outside of the existing level of esthetic reflection and formal procedures places her on the side of a political commitment which could fail precisely because of its lack of power within current art practice.

Dara Birnbaum's work does not merely employ rediscovered Pop art strategies, as is currently fashionable in the context of painting and still photography. Her work critically embodies all the concerns that originated in Pop art and were subsequently developed further in Minimal and post-Minimal art of the late '60s and early '70s. When she states that she "wants to define the language of video art in relation to the institution of television in the way Buren and Asher had defined the language of painting and sculpture in relation to the institution of the museum," it becomes clear that her work operates programmatically within both frameworks. It analyzes the overt ideological functions of the language of mass culture with the tools that the practice of high art provides. Simultaneously it looks upon the conditions of high culture—its isolation and privileged position, its commodity status and fetish existence—from the perspective of mass culture in its most advanced form: the television industry. Birnbaum's work integrates both perspectives in a dialectical exchange which has the potential to affect the languages of both art and television, though the work has not yet assumed a comfortable position in either institution. Seeing her work in a traditional gallery situation—for example, during her installation at P.S. 1 in New York in 1979—made the work's references (both implicit and explicit) to the past decade of sculptural thinking and transformation instantly readable. It emerges out of that historical moment in sculpture when artists such as Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham began to use video as a tool to implement a phenomenological understanding of viewer-object relationships as they had been introduced through Minimal sculpture. They gradually developed analytical video installations and performances that not only focused on the viewing process, but involved either author and audience, audience and object, or audience and architecture in an explicit and active interchange.

With the growing theatricalization of video and performance in the mid-'70s and its increasing tendency to narcissistic estheticization, it is understandable that the focus of the video activities of politically committed artists would return to television. At that time such tapes as Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People*, 1973, emerged, differing substantially from the artists' tapes for television broadcast that had been previously produced but that had simply channelled artistic performance material on videotape through television, rather than addressing the language of television itself. The programmatic position of Fluxus ideas in Nam June Paik's pioneering video/television work of the mid to late '60s was that the visual culture of the future would be contained in and affected by the emergence of television as the primary social practice of visual meaning production, just as visual culture



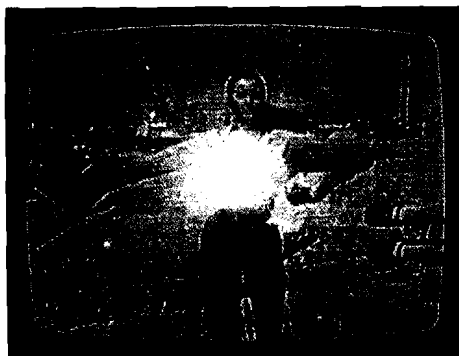
Dara Birnbaum, three sequential stills from *Kiss The Girls: Make Them Cry*, 1979, color videotape with stereo sound, 7 min.

in the 19th century had been profoundly affected by the invention of photography. Birnbaum logically refers to Paik as one of the key figures to have influenced her thinking, along with Graham, with whom she collaborated in 1978 on a major project proposal entitled "Local Television New Program Analysis for Public Access Cable TV."²³

Birnbaum's tapes using material taped off broadcast television focus first and foremost on the meaning of technique, the specific conventions and genres of television. In the formal analysis of these conventions and the mixing of genres their ideological functions and effects become transparent. It is crucial to understand to what extent Birnbaum's work is anchored in the structures that determine collective perceptual experience. Due to its revelatory deconstructive procedures, the work does not participate in the proliferation of artist-produced, innovative media strategies which in the end only function to bring television ideology esthetically up to date.

Birnbaum's videotapes appropriate television footage ranging from sitcoms and soap operas such as "Laverne and Shirley" and "General Hospital" to live broadcast material such as "Olympic Speedskating" and commercials for the Wang Corporation. They are ultimately destined for television broadcast, where they could most effectively clarify their functions in situ and in flagrante, but the contradictions within which the work exists place it, for the time being, exclusively within the framework of a high-art, avant-garde discourse. Should it actually be shown on commercial television, its essentially esthetic nature might become all the more apparent, and its critical potential might decrease. The striving, necessary as it is, for a position of power within the media is therefore also the most vulnerable aspect of Birnbaum's work. This becomes most evident in *Remy/Grand Central: Trains and Boats and Planes*, 1980, where the attempt to embody the interests of a corporation's "support" for young artists in a simulacrum of an advertisement results in a construct that at best could be perceived as parody, and at worst could all too easily be misperceived as a new advertisement gimmick. It is not surprising that the work's potential for affirming a final, totalitarian synthesis of the culture industry and esthetic production would occur in an independent construct that mimics advertising conventions rather than addressing its critical acuity to found materials, which is the rule in almost all of Birnbaum's other tapes.

Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, 1978-79, unveils the puberty fantasy of Wonder Woman that has grown historically from a comic-book figure to a nationally broadcast television series. This progression provides an image of crisis which, like the resurrection of Superman in film, feeds a collective regression toward icons that recall the monolithic powers that children perceive heroes, parents, and the state to be. The prime focus of this tape seems to be the inexhaustible special effects that corporate television and film producers draw upon when state power most urgently needs to be mystified. Iconographically this tape runs parallel to the comic-book-hero-turned-television-mi-



Dara Birnbaum, three sequential stills from *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978-79, color videotape with stereo sound, 7 min.

rage in the same way that Lichtenstein's paintings placed themselves within and against the graphic techniques of comic-book reproduction in the '60s.

The formal procedures of fragmentation and serial repetition to which Birnbaum subjects the appropriated television material expand Warhol's pictorial strategy of serializing commodity imagery, and his and Bruce Conner's device of using film loops and serialized segments. They break the temporal continuity of the television narrative and split it into self-reflexive elements that make the minute and seemingly inextricable interaction of behavior and ideology an observable pattern. As a result of the precision with which Birnbaum employs these allegorical procedures we discover with unprecedented clarity to what degree the theater of professional facial expressions, performed by actors in close-ups on the television screen, has become the new historical site of the domination of human behavior by ideology. This becomes particularly evident in the ingenious juxtaposition of segments from a live broadcast of women speedskating at the Olympics and a segment from the "real-life" soap opera "General Hospital" in her tape *POP-POP-VIDEO: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating*, 1980. The desperation of a female doctor, confessing in a series of reverse-angle shots to her paternal male colleague her failure in handling a communication breakdown with a man whose identity is not revealed, is tightly counterpointed by the spectacle of Olympic vigor and velocity. The splendor of a neo-futuristic imagery that celebrates the subjection of the female body to abstract instrumentalization does not become a sort of Leni Riefenstahl on color TV because of the image's constant paralleling with the spectacle of neurotic collapse in the features of the female doctor. Physiognomic detail and its meaning spark off even more in the tape *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, 1979, which extracts segments from the game show "Hollywood Squares."

Walter Benjamin's observation that neurosis has become the psychological equivalent of the commodity becomes obvious in the physiognomic detail of hyperactive television actors and actresses, a reading that is provided by Birnbaum's astute selection of details and the formal procedures to which she submits her material. The total apparatus of television technology and the machinations of its conventions become readable as instruments of ideology in visual language; the ideological instrumentalization of the individual is manifested in physiognomic spectacle. In Birnbaum's work the viewer is confronted with bare layers of ideology *mise en abyme*: the patterns of behavior on the screen anticipate and exemplify what television aims to achieve within the viewer—they are exercises in submission and adaptation.

Birnbaum's perspective on the technique of television does not seduce her into using those techniques as visual gadgetry employed for the sake of "pure pleasure" or "formal play," which always conceal aestheticizing ideology. The visual pleasure that Birnbaum's tapes may generate in the viewer is balanced by cognitive shock. For example, in her *Wonder Woman* tape special effects appear as sexually



Dara Birnbaum, three sequential stills from *POP-POP-VIDEO: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speedskating*, 1980, color videotape with stereo sound, 6 min.

disguised violence offering images of power and technological miracles as a diversion from the reality of social and political life; the shock resides in the recognition that such sexist representations of a female figure as a vehicle of male and state power are the cynical ideological complement to an actual historical situation in which radical political practice seems to have been restricted to feminist practice.

This becomes all the more transparent in the juxtaposition of sound and imagery that occurs in the second part of the tape. In the first part the staccato serializations and freeze-frame images of a spinning, running, fighting Wonder Woman are accompanied by original soundtrack fed through the same formal procedures as the images. The second part of the tape visually consists of the lyrics (in white letters on a blue background) of a disco song also called "Wonder Woman." Birnbaum happened to come across this relatively obscure disco song while she was editing the television footage. The graphic, scriptural representation of female sighs and of lyrics that we are normally supposed to hear, but not to read, inverts the split of the phonetic and graphic elements of language which we saw earlier in Duchamp's pun. Here, in the scriptural allegorization of the disco song, we become aware that even the most minute and discrete phonetic elements of such popular music (sighs, moans, etc.) are as soaked in sexist and reactionary political ideology as the larger syntactic and semantic structures of the lyrics.

The dimension of sound plays a very important role in Birnbaum's tapes in general—it does not perform the subservient role of phonetic illustration and emphatic massage to which music in film and television usually has been reduced. The restoration of sound to a separate discourse which runs parallel to the visual text makes the viewer aware of the hidden functions that sound normally fulfills.

In one of Birnbaum's recent works, *PM Magazine*, 1982, a four-channel video and sound installation at the Hudson River Museum,²⁴ she extrapolates the function of sound even further, just as she expands the material elements into the conditions of painting and sculpture, and of the museum framework which contains them. Two panels on opposing walls featured large black and white photostat images extracted from the television footage used in the installation, framing one and three monitors respectively. A wall surface was painted bright blue for the three-monitor panel and bright red for the one-monitor panel, both of which were graphically emphasized by Birnbaum. The panels possess the qualities of the kind of enlarged photographic imagery that might be encountered in trade-show displays. They are reminiscent of the grand-scale exhibition panels in the later Productivist work of El Lissitzky, such as his installation for the Soviet Pavilion of the International Pressa Exhibition in Cologne in 1928 with Sergei Senkin, or the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden in 1930, in which photomontage techniques were expanded onto the level of agitprop architecture. Birnbaum's panels have lost their "agit" dimension for the sake of the museum "prop." As such they enter a dialectical relationship with the current return to large-scale figurative multi-panel painting which uses quotation as an end to legitimize historicism.

Quotation functions in Birnbaum's work as a means to disentangle this historicist collapse and to reinstate each element to its specific function and place. She transfers the procedure and syntactic structuring principle of spacing, which Rosalind Krauss has discussed in the context of Dada collage and Surrealist photography, from the level of material and iconic elements to that of perceptual modes—visual, tactile, and auditory—and their material correlates—the conic image, the planar sign, color, architectural space, and sound.

In this complex work the framework of the museum is bracketed with the commercial display, on the one hand, and the historic dimension of agitprop montage, on the other. In the *PM Magazine* trailer Birnbaum juxtaposes state-of-the-art editing techniques with electronically generated imagery of state-of-the-art animation techniques, recycling icons of the '50s American dream of leisure time and consumption. Television techniques and technology are made to refer to themselves and become transparent as the ultimate instance in which ideology is structured and contained. In the same way that the visual material is processed in four three-minute loops, the soundtrack of the trailer—or the key motifs of it—are run through four channels. Once again it is the auditory dimension that reveals most clearly the work's essential decentralization. The elements of the installation could only become congruent as text within the individual experience of an active viewer.

Birnbaum unfolds the historical potential of montage technique as it originated in Cubist and Constructivist relief constructions and as it was transformed and particularized in the work of the '60s and '70s ranging from Dan Flavin, Nauman, and Serra to Graham and Asher. Her installation, saturated with historical understanding and striving for contemporary specificity, provides an adequate definition and reading of the original implications of relief and montage techniques at a time when the market tries to assure us that their historical fate was to end up as Frank Stella's corporate brooches and Julian Schnabel's art-historical gingerbread.

While it is essential for the work of Birnbaum and Rosler to operate simultaneously inside and outside the framework of institutionalized art distribution, Levine's work functions exclusively within this framework. Only as a commodity can the work fulfill all its functions, and yet, paradoxically, for the time being it cannot be sold. Its ultimate triumph is to repeat and anticipate in a single gesture the abstraction and alienation from historical context to which work is subjected in the process of commodification and acculturation. In this respect Levine's and Birnbaum's work reveals an historical affinity with the position of Warhol, the first American dandy to systematically deny individual creation and productivity in favor of a blatant reaffirmation of the conditions of cultural reification. Warhol's curriculum ended in the institutions of fame and fashion, as de Sade ended in the Bastille. The fate of his work, which once subverted painting by precisely the same allegorical techniques of confiscating imagery, bracketing high-art and mass-cultural discourses, individual production and mechanical reproduction, was to produce the most singularized and rarefied icons of Pop art.

The artists under discussion here appropriate or "pirate" the material and imagery that they use for their investigation. Like the radical conceptual artists of the late '60s, they question the necessity of their work being relegated to the status of an individualized commodity. And they have been successful in their assault, if only temporarily so—until the general acculturation process finds ways to accommodate these works or their authors find ways to accommodate their production to the conditions of the acculturation apparatus. For ultimately it is the visual, rather than textual existence of a construct that imbues it with material reality, since that reality is the basis of its existence as commodity. In *Mythologies*, 1957, Roland Barthes deconstructed such contemporary myths as designed objects of consumption and advertising. In certain respects this can still be considered as the originary model for the deconstructive approach of the criticism of ideology as it has been developed in the work of the artists analyzed here. Unlike some of these artists, Barthes did not encounter problems of ownership and copyright. But the visual object/image has become the essential ideological correlate of private property. ■

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1. The introduction of this essay follows partially an argument that has been developed in Ansgar Hillach's attempt to define a notion of montage in the avant-garde of the '20s and its relationship to Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory. See: Ansgar Hillach, "Allegorie, Bildraum, Montage," in *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt: Edition Suhrkamp, 1976, pp. 105-142. For a more specific analysis of the complexities and historical changes of Benjamin's allegory-model, I would refer to Harald Steinhagen, "Zu Walter Benjamin's Begriff der Allegorie," in *Form und Funktionen der Allegorie*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979, p. 556 ff, and Jürgen Naeher, *Walter Benjamin's Allegorie-Begriff als Modell*, Frankfurt: Klett-Cotta, 1975.

More recently, in regard to Benjamin's theory of allegory, see Binaud Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," in *New German Critique*, No. 26, 1982, p. 109-122. Cowan's assumption that Benjamin's theory of allegory "... has gone virtually without thorough explication," however, indicates, as does his text, that he is not familiar with the more recent literature.

2. George Grosz, quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Kunst und Antikunst*, Cologne: Dumont, 1963. English translation from Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, N.Y.: Phaidon, 1976, p. 10.
3. Raoul Hausmann "Fotomontage," in: A.Z. No. 16, Cologne, May 1931. Reprinted in *Raoul Hausmann*, exhibition catalogue: Hannover: Kestnergesellschaft, 1981, p. 51 ff. (my translation).
4. Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1, 2, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974, p. 660 (my translation).
5. The spatialization of time and the adoption of a contemplative stance towards the world that Benjamin discussed in 1925 as the experiential conditions of allegory in the European Baroque, were discussed in 1928 by Georg Lukacs as the essential features of the collective condition of reification:

"Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labour is progressively rationalised and mechanised, his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative. The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to a dimension of space."

Georg Lukacs, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971, p. 89.

6. Benjamin, "Zentralpark," p. 681. The famous anecdote in which Kurt Schwitters described the origin of the term "Merz" as a result of his encounter with an advertising for the "Kommerzbank" contains equally in *nuce* all the essential features of the allegorical procedure: fragmentation and depletion of conventional meaning are followed by acts of willful meaning-assignment which generate the poetical experience of primary linguistic processes.
7. Yve-Alain Bois, "Ryman's Tact," *October*, No. 19 (Winter 1981), p. 94.
8. Dan Graham, "Homes for America," *Arts Magazine*, December/January, 1966-67.
9. Dan Graham, "The Book as Object," *Arts Magazine*, June 1967.
10. Marcel Broodthaers, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, Antwerp: Wide White Space Gallery, 1969.
11. Marcel Broodthaers, *Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute* (The Eagle from Oligocene to Today), exhibition catalogue, Vol. I and II, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, 1972.
12. Daniel Buren, "Exposition d'une Exposition," in *Catalogue Documenta*, Kassel, 1972. See also Daniel Buren, *Rebondissements/Reboundings*, Brussels: Daled-Gevaert, 1977.
13. Haacke's work is documented in the following publications: Edward Fry, *Hans Haacke*, Cologne: Dumont, 1972; Hans Haacke, *Framing and Being Framed*, Halifax/New York: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press/ New York University Press, 1975; Hans Haacke, *Der Pralinenmeister*, Cologne: Paul Maenz Gallery, 1981. English edition: Toronto: Art Metropole, 1982.
14. See the exhibition catalogue: Christopher D'Arcangelo, Louise Lawler, Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, New York: Artists Space, 1978.
15. For a notable exception, see Anne Rorimer, "Michael Asher: Recent Work," *Artforum*, April 1980.
16. Annegret Jürgens-Kirchhoff, *Technik und Tendenz der Montage*, Glessen: Anabas Verlag, 1978, p. 191.
17. The notion of "spacing" as a linguistic function has recently been introduced into the discussion of collage/montage esthetics of the '20s. See Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October*, No. 19, (Winter 1981).
18. Sherrie Levine, unpublished, undated statement, ca. 1980.
19. Walter Benjamin, *Angelus Novus*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966, pp. 204.
20. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *The Frankfurt School Reader*, New York: Urizen Press, 1978.
21. Martha Rosler, *Three Works*, Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1981.
22. Martha Rosler, interviewed by Martha Gever in *Afterimage*, October 1981, p. 15.
23. Dan Graham, *Video-Architecture-Television*, Halifax/New York: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press/New York University Press, 1979.
24. Variations of the work have been subsequently installed at the Art Institute of Chicago's 74th American Exhibition and at Documenta 7 in Kassel.