Dorothea von Hantelmann

How to Do Things with Art

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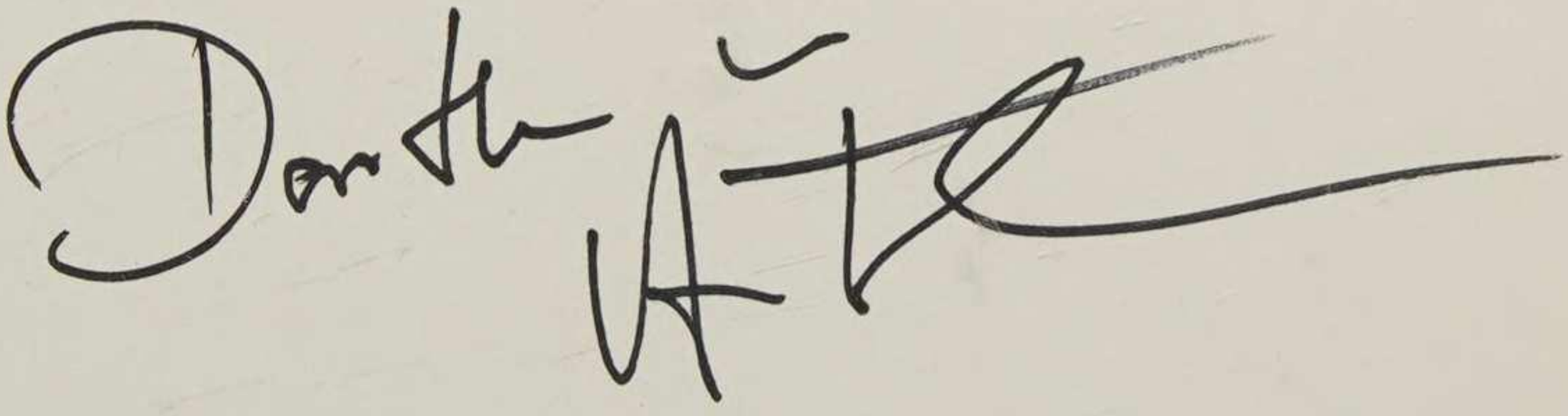

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Dorothea von Hantelmann

How to Do Things with Art
What Performativity Means in Art

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Wily Stratagems
Hans Ulrich Obrist

How to Do Things with Art is a call to the production of reality and the political and societal significance of art.

In an essay on Jeff Koons, Dorothea von Hantelmann recently pointed out her interest in individuals who place themselves "outside of the 'cultural limit' of criticism," those who are "off limits, outside of what dominates a contemporary discourse and its predominant order of thought, perception, speech and understanding." This necessity informs *How to Do Things with Art*; an exploration of the work of four artists, James Coleman, Daniel Buren, Tino Sehgal and Jeff Koons, who operate precisely at the historical limits of what might be called the "paradigm of criticality" and at the threshold of something else, something other.

Von Hantelmann is attentive to artists who—to quote one of the passages from Merleau-Ponty that so inspired Zaugg's *Die List der Unschuld*—"act … as if we still had

everything to learn." Like Rémy Zaugg's attempt to return to a pre-objective mode of cognition and experience in his meditation on a sculpture by Donald Judd, she examines Daniel Buren's early pivotal contributions to the tradition of institutional critique, countering accusations of his more recent work as being too decorative, and instead finding in this work ways to move beyond the conventionalized conception of the exhibition: flights of innovation and invention.

Innovation is about new practices and new ways of doing things, embodied by Oulipo—a group that functions like a permanent research laboratory for literary innovation. Drawing on what Harry Matthews, one of the protagonists of Oulipo, calls "absolutely unimaginable incidents of fiction" the writers of Oulipo, inspired by French poet and novelist Raymond Roussel's playful language games in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, continuously invent new rules to write using arithmetical ideas. François Le Lionnais, another Oulipo protagonist, emphasizes the importance of the term *potentiality*, which he prefers to *experimental*, because it implies the attempt to find something which may not yet have been done but which nevertheless could be.

A key to understanding von Hantelmann's unique approach to contemporary art is the fact that at the end of the 1990s she worked closely with the groundbreaking choreographers Jérôme Bel and Xavier Le Roy. Their focus on what actually takes place has shaped her belief that art has a power and a responsibility, which is manifest throughout *How to Do Things with Art* as she describes how James Coleman, Daniel Buren, Tino Sehgal and Jeff Koons are concerned with what art does and less with what it says. As the title of the book implies—a play on J. L. Austin's lecture series *How to Do Things with Words*, in which Austin redefined the performative, or reality-producing, capacity of language—these artists attempt to reach the limits of artistic practice and to suggest alterations, novelties, changes, introductions, departures and variations from the canonical 19th-century exhibition format.

As Richard Hamilton once told me, "we only remember exhibitions which invent a new display feature." To change the rules of the game today is to change the exhibition format. And von Hantelmann demonstrates that each of these artists, in their own way, invent what Roussel might

have called "wily stratagems"—performative gambits to turn the production of exhibitions into the production of reality.

The Societal Efficacy of Art

At the heart of *How to Do Things with Art* lies the question of art's relevance to society. How does art become politically or socially significant and what preconditions must be fulfilled in order to enable artworks to attain such significance? This book attempts to answer these questions on a theoretical level, and to indicate, via a number of contemporary artworks, how artists can create and shape social relevance. In other words, it attempts to provide what could be called a pragmatic understanding of art's societal impact.

The question of *how to do things with art* seems particularly pertinent today both from a societal and an artistic perspective. Never before has what we call art been so important to Western societies: more art museums are being built than ever before, art exhibitions attract a mass audience, the art world has not only expanded globally but also socially—up to the point where a London journalist calls art

"the social lubricant of our great city"[1]—and probably no other profession has received such a dramatic boost in status as the artist, who perfectly embodies today's prevailing idea of a creative, self-determined subjectivity. Even though from this empirical perspective it is evident *that* art has a substantial impact, it is much less clear *how* this impact actually functions.

Above and beyond the artwork, I argue that it is the format of the exhibition that is the key factor in art's relevance to society. In this respect, the popularity of exhibitions today is not an entirely new phenomenon. It is a continuation of a success story that began 200 years ago: the increasing dominance of a fairly new ritual—the exhibition—that is specific to Western democratic market societies and that ritually establishes and enacts an important set of values and parameters that were and still are fundamental to Western societies: the instantiation of a linear notion of time; the increased valorization of the individual; the exceptional importance attributed to the production of material objects, and their subsequent circulation through commerce.

The exhibition in its canonical 19th-century formation—and the museum itself—provides a reinforcement mechanism in relation to new institutions of social training governed by what Michel Foucault called evolutive time.[2] By collecting artifacts from the past, the museum gives shape and presence to history, inventing it, in effect, by defining the space for a ritual encounter with the past. It marks time into a series of stages that comprises a linear path of evolution; it organizes these stages into an itinerary that the visitor's route retraces; and it projects the future as a course of limitless development. It is in all these ways that the format of the exhibition echoes and resonates with other new institutions of discipline and training through which—via the construction of a series of stages to be passed through by means of the successful acquisition of appropriate skills—individuals are encouraged to regard themselves as beings in constant need of progressive development.

And yet, even more important in terms of the present societal significance of the exhibition is its ability to create and cultivate a specific nexus between the individual and the material object. The notion of the individual is central to the exhibition and cultivated by it on two levels. First, by

displaying works that are informed by and therefore to an extent also mirror the subjectivity of the individual—the artist—and second, because the museum constitutes the first public ritual that explicitly addresses and singles out the individual (as the experience of the visual artwork is conceived as being a one-on-one experience, unlike e.g. theater, which addresses the individual as part of a collective audience). The birth of the museum in fact marks a tipping point in the history of individualization in that it specifically addresses the individual who understands herself first and foremost as such. Crucial to this notion of the individual, however, is that he or she differentiates him or herself through material objects. As a prime place where material objects are valued and quasi-worshipped, the exhibition (and the art exhibition in particular) actively constructs a relationship between the production of subjectivity and the production of material objects. On the one hand it exhibits objects derived from the subjectivity of the artist, and on the other it presents them in a way that seeks to have maximum impact on the subjectivity of the viewer. By bringing these two dimensions together, the object that is produced and the object that is consumed (or actively and intentionally related to), the exhibition in an exemplary way participates in the hegemonic manner in which individual subjectivity is shaped in Western market societies.

And, finally, the very notion of "product" is mirrored in and at the same time ennobled by the conception of the artwork. Market societies derive their wealth from the production of material objects and their circulation through commerce, and the visual art field is engaged in the exact same process. Visual art not only reiterates these basic components of Western societies but, through the museum, even constructs an entire ritual designed to dignify them by removing their objects from a sphere of practice and use, elevating them to a seemingly higher realm in which meaning and subjectivity are produced.

According to this line of thinking, "autonomy" is a euphemism for art's subjection to basic elements of bourgeois democratic market society, and the art exhibition is *the* place where these values and parameters are cultivated and performed in their respective relation to each other. This brings up two decisive questions that this book attempts to

deal with: How is this governing function played out in exhibitions today? And, secondly, if every exhibited artwork —consciously or unconsciously, wittingly or unwittingly— becomes part of the setting outlined above and therefore participates in the political biases of the exhibition format, is there a way for artists to act upon this format?

To understand these questions it is helpful to return to the suspicions and ambitions of the avant-gardes of the 20th century, who attacked art's autonomy in order to lead art "back into the praxis of life," as Peter Bürger phrased it.[3] The museum in particular was seen as the embodiment of art's exclusion from social life. Yet, the history of the avant-garde movements has shown that their attempts to increase art's social effectiveness by breaking with its fundamental conventions—the museum and the notion of the artwork—were largely bound to fail. On the occasion of a Dada retrospective in Paris in 1967, Max Ernst told the curator Werner Spies "to put the spirit of Dada on exhibition […] was like trying to capture the violence of an explosion by presenting the shrapnel."[4] The avant-garde's self-conception was based on an oppositional stance to the conventions of art, but despite their fundamental goal of changing art's relationship to society, their attacks took place *as* art and therefore necessarily *within* a relationship to these conventions. This double-bind-like character of their criticism, which remained attached to (or even dependent on) what it criticized, became blatantly clear when the first avant-gardes became historical and re-entered not only the museum but, with it, also precisely those conventions of a symbolical and material fixation that they had strived to overcome. This was also true for the event-oriented neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and early 1970s, whose re-integration into the museum meant a return to the very conventions that had originally been negated: the material object and the fact that it remains throughout history. Any exhibition about Fluxus, Happening or Performance Art renders this visible: instead of the singularity and the live quality of the event, we see relics, material substrata and endlessly reproduced videos. However, this museification of the avant-gardes even makes sense in a way, for their critique of the separation between art and a living practice actually *belonged* to the museum. Only there could the attacks against

the conventions of art be understood. Avant-garde art ultimately became an art of the museum precisely by struggling to wrench itself free from it. The avant-gardes have without a doubt succeeded in significantly modifying the notion of the artwork by opening up new contents and forms. But, viewed in terms of their own ambitions, namely to fundamentally change art's social reality, they failed.

From today's perspective and for a generation of artists that fed off the achievements (and failures) of the avant-gardes, their legacy includes two lessons to be learned: first, although the avant-gardes marked the 20th century as an era of artistic rupture with convention, their own history demonstrates that there are some conventions that cannot be broken. Among them the objecthood of the artwork, its status as a product and the artwork's historical persistence. As these conventions constitute the idea of art in the modern era, one cannot break with them without ultimately breaking with what constitutes art itself. Art that doesn't offer a possibility of enduring over time either is made durable (as with the event-oriented neo-avant-gardes, Fluxus, Happening and Performance Art), or in the long run falls out of the canon of visual art (the Situationists might be the best example of this, as they came closest to a complete withdrawal from museification). Second, the avant-gardes taught us that art was never autonomous to begin with. The German philosopher Hermann Lübbe once said that, in art, "self-purpose is state purpose"[5]—a useful phrase for describing the societal function of art in modernity. The fact that art lost its practical, immediate function does not mean that it no longer has a social and political function. Autonomy does not mean that art breaks free from its use for non-aesthetic purposes, but rather indicates that the level on which this purpose is fulfilled has shifted from the form and content of individual artworks to art's conventionalized ways of production, presentation and experience in which very basic constitutive parameters of modern societies are kept and cultivated.

In the ninth of his *Ten Theses on Politics*, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière states that the "end of politics" and the "return of politics" are two complementary ways of "forgetting politics."[6] Societal significance can neither be carried into the arts, nor can it be left outside. A political relevance is always there, but this does not mean that it

cannot be shaped. The fact that the exhibition affirms, enacts and cultivates a number of the most basic categories of a democratic market society does not imply that the public sphere which the exhibition participates in producing does not exist. It also does not mean that the political bias of art is already completely determined *a priori* by this institution. Yet it is only from *within* these conditions that we can start a discussion on art's significance, and the consequences of this assertion is what this book will explore: the artwork does not *gain* a societal impact by rupturing these conventions; it is via these conventions that there already *is* a societal impact. The exhibition format, as the avant-gardes taught us, cannot be taken out of art, just as it cannot be taken out of art's politicity. It is essential to a work's praxis, and therefore part of art's public and political existence. Any impact art has can therefore occur not by breaking with this context, but by making it the place where art takes place in praxis.

The four artists in this book—James Coleman, Daniel Buren, Tino Sehgal and Jeff Koons—exemplify such work on and within the exhibition ritual. Each of these artists operates upon some of the very fundamental parameters of art in modernity, which constitute art's intrinsic connection to the socio-economic order of modern societies: the notion of evolutive time, the focus on the individual that recognizes and differentiates him or herself vis-à-vis the material object, and the status of this object as a product.

Given that the museum—in its original conception—is a machine that produces an evolutive and linear conception of time, development and progress, how can an artwork exist in the museum without subordinating itself to this conception of history? How can an artwork within the museum, which already implies a specific notion of time, insert a different temporality? The works of the Irish artist James Coleman provide a highly complex answer to this question. Many of his visual-acoustic installations thematize issues and practices of cultural memory. Yet as his works are composed in a fragmentary and structurally time-based way, remembering plays an essential role in the constitution of the artwork itself. If anything, it is only in the viewer's perception and memory that the images and the spoken words come together to form a "work." This, one might say, is true of many

multimedia installations today. But as Coleman prohibits any technical recordings of his work, one's own necessarily fragmentary and subjective memory gains a different, constitutive status. I had to rely on my own memory in writing about the work at the center of the chapter about Coleman, *Box (ahhareturnabout)* from 1977. His works are marked by a particular interconnectedness of content, structure and impact. They not only thematically deal with history and remembrance, but we will see how they also—in practice—insert a different culture of remembrance, namely the memory of the body and the tradition of oral history, into their conception as artworks.

In contrast to Coleman, who creates a particular space for most of his artworks, a particular space that is visually and acoustically separated from the exhibition context, Daniel Buren chooses the opposite strategy and dissolves the boundary between the artwork and its presentational situation. The exhibition in all its parameters becomes his medium, or even the actual work of art. Buren's oeuvre takes its starting point in the acknowledgement of the impact that a given situation or context has on the meaning and experience of an artwork. In fact he is the first artist to systematically address and reflect on this impact, which makes him a kind of touchstone for the thesis of this book. His early works from the late 1960s and 1970s indicate the various parameters of an artwork's context, while his more recent works since the 1980s attempt to challenge and transform this context. In all of Buren's works, however, the artwork as a self-contained, enclosed entity that catches a viewer's gaze in order to be appropriated, as a meaningful object, no longer exists. It is not the object but the context and its underlying conventions that become the protagonist of meaning production. And as artistic autonomy can only be achieved by taking all parameters of this context into consideration, Buren operates like a metteur-en-scène on all aspects of the exhibition ritual. This accounts in a particular way for Buren's newer works, such as his 2002 retrospective *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in which Buren challenges the idea of a retrospective by changing the kind of experience a retrospective exhibition conventionally produces. Buren works on the level of the impact and effects in order to eventually establish a new exhibition ritual.

Although among the artists I discuss in this book Buren most extensively reworks the conventions of visual art, the one parameter that Buren leaves untouched is also the most fundamental convention, the materiality of the artwork. And indeed here an intrinsic connection between visual art and the socio-economic order of Western (post)industrial societies manifests itself. If artworks establish a particularly sophisticated relation between the individual and a material object, then it is precisely this attachment of subjectivity to things that lies at the heart of bourgeois industrial (and consumer) culture. It is thus no coincidence that a social order that measures itself against what it produces—a "productivist society," as Felix Guattari calls it[7]—ascribes so much significance to a ritual that is centered on the material object. Tino Sehgal throws particular light on the significance of the artwork's object-matter because, as a matter of principle, his works refuse to participate in this mode of production. They categorically redefine the material basis of a visual artwork. His works manage to exist and remain without any kind of material objecthood. In doing so, they raise questions like: What does it imply that artworks are things and what does it mean to challenge this premise? To what extent is it possible to claim the status of a visual artwork for a situation that implies no object-matter? Which conditions have to be fulfilled in order to transform "nothing" (in a material sense) into "something" (economically and symbolically) valuable? Sehgal's works realize themselves in actions and movements, as spoken or sung voices, and materialize temporarily in the human body. And yet, they are—like any visual artwork—present for the entire duration of an exhibition. In this way Sehgal's works fulfill the status of a visual artwork without materially being one. In a sense they continue the claims of the avant-gardes while turning them upside down. They durably rupture the convention of the material object, and thereby give art a new form of existence. Yet contrary to the avant-gardes, Sehgal claims a position for his works within the very structures that the avant-gardes disavowed, namely the museum and the market. His works are exhibited, sold through galleries and enter museum collections.

If since the 1960s a societal significance of art has been primarily seen in art's ability to produce some kind of "critical awareness," it is striking that with regard to the

artists discussed here the idea of criticality falls short in accurately describing their positions. Using the works of Jeff Koons, who explicitly rejects the notion of criticality, the final chapter of this book is dedicated to a discussion of the conditions and limits of criticism as a cultural practice. Thereby Koons's works conceptually condense what I would claim is already central to the works of the other artists discussed in this book: the questions if and how art, aside from being critical, can create and challenge reality. Taken as a whole, *How to Do Things with Art* can be understood as either a theoretical elaboration of this question, or as a manual for artists—and I hope the book will be both.

Last but not least, some thoughts about the methodology of this book. The title is a play on John Langshaw Austin's seminal lecture series *How to Do Things with Words*.[8] In the lectures, held at Harvard in 1955, Austin discussed the performative, or reality-producing, capacity of language. Since then the term "performative" has become a key word of art discourse and, given the fashionable appeal of a new term that has gained a certain academic attention within the last decades, it is mostly used in a way that is a complete distortion from its original meaning. Today it is widely believed that "performative" can be understood as "performance-like." Understood in this false sense it has become a ubiquitous catchword for a broad range of contemporary art phenomena that, in the widest sense, show an affinity to forms of staging, theatricality and mise-en-scène. As a category, however, it remains stubbornly slippery, and for good reasons, because it is based on a complete twist of the word "performative." Hence I trace the term back to its original usage in the philosophy of Austin and later in the works of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, not only because I want to restore the methodological precision that the term seems to have lost with its popularity. This book is also an attempt to make it productive for and within the discourse on visual art.

My line of argument is based on the two theoretical premises from Austin and Butler: first, there is no performative artwork, because there is no non-performative artwork. Austin introduced the notion "performative" into language theory in order to refer to the act-like character of language. In certain cases he argued that something that

is said produces effects that reach beyond the realm of language. Under certain conditions signs can produce reality; one can *do things with words*. The classic examples for what Austin at first thought would constitute a particular category of utterances—the "performatives"—originate in legal discourse: "I now pronounce you man and wife" and "I hereby sentence you to six years imprisonment without parole." Although Austin had originally planned to isolate certain utterances under the notion of the performative, he soon understood that a clear-cut distinction cannot be made between a constative (descriptive) and a performative way of speaking. If every utterance contains both constative and performative aspects, it is tautological to speak about "performative language." I believe the same principle applies to artworks. It makes little sense to speak of a performative artwork, because every artwork has a reality-producing dimension.

To ask about the performative in relation to art is not about defining a new class of artworks. Rather it involves outlining a specific level of meaning production that basically exists in every artwork, although it is not always consciously shaped or dealt with—namely its reality-producing dimension. In this sense, a specific methodological orientation goes along with the performative, creating a different perspective on what produces meaning in an artwork. It means to recognize and bring into discourse the productive, reality-producing dimension of, in principle, any work of art. What the notion of the performative brings into perspective is the contingent and difficult to grasp realm of impact and effects that art brings forth both situationally, i.e. in a given spatial and discursive context, and relationally, e.g. in relation to a viewer or a public. Consequently, we can ask: What kind of situation does an artwork produce? How does it situate its viewers? What kinds of values, conventions, ideologies, and meanings are inscribed into this situation? Art's performative dimension signifies art's possibilities and limits in generating and changing reality.

Second, the notion of performativity has nothing to do with the art form of performance. In its canonical form, the model of performativity is defined by the philosopher Judith Butler.[9] Taking Austin as a starting point, Butler holds onto the reality-producing character of language, but instead of the individual speaker, who for Austin is the central

authority, she stresses the power of social conventions that empower the speaker but also relativize the impact of the individual's intentions. A performative act, for Butler, produces reality not by virtue of will or intention, but precisely because it derives from conventions that it repeats and actualizes. Every utterance and every individual action needs to be part of a conventional context in order to be understandable and recognizable. It can only create an impact by drawing upon certain (linguistic) conventions. Only pre-existing conventions render a present speaking powerful, enabling it to produce effects that go beyond language, entering the realm of reality.[10] Yet, as no act of repetition is identical, it contains not only reproductive but also differentiating or deviating moments. For Butler it is only within this nexus of convention and innovation, repetition and difference that any action directed towards change can happen.

Thus the theoretical model of performativity and the art form of Performance Art are based on not only different but antagonistic worldviews. While Performance Art, at least in its own constitutive self-understanding, was linked to the individual performer and the singular, autonomous act; performativity (in Butler's sense) refers to a non-autonomous and non-subjectivist idea of acting. Performance Art operates with an ideology outside of the social systems of the museum and the market, while in Butler's model of performativity there simply is no such thing as an outside. While Performance Art strived to break with the fundamental conventions of art, for Butler any form of acting is only thinkable *within* the constitutive and regulative structure of conventions.

Given Butler's argument, it is clear that the idea of a radical break with conventions *must* fail and is therefore uninteresting. Singular expressive acts that completely withdraw from discourse are not only irrelevant; they are not even thinkable. The idea of efficacy produced by a rupture from conventions is replaced by the use of conventions—a use that also contains a transforming potential. With this notion of performativity we can, for example, concretize how every artwork, not in spite of but by virtue of its integration in certain conventions, "acts": how, for example, via the museum it sustains or co-produces a certain notion of history, progress and development. The model of performativity points toward these fundamental levels of meaning production. It puts the

conventions of art's production, presentation and historical persistence into focus, shows how these conventions are co-produced by any artwork—independent of its respective content—and argues that it is precisely this dependency on conventions that opens up the possibility of changing them.

[1] Nick Foulkes, "Why art is the social lubricant of our great city," *London Evening Standard*, 10.7.2009.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Allen Lane, London, 1977. See also Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory. Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004.

[3] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde, Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 4, trans. by Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 49.

[4] Werner Spies, "An Aesthetics of Detachment," Werner Spies (ed.), *Max Ernst. A Retrospective*, Tate Gallery London, Prestel-Verlag, Munich, 1991, p. 18.

[5] Hermann Lübbe, "Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Berliner Museumsgründung 1830," *JbPKB*, Berlin, 17 (1981), p. 93.

[6] Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* (online Journal of John Hopkins University Press), 5, 3 (2001).

[7] Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis, an Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 1995, p. 20.

[8] John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J.O.Urmson, Clarendon, Oxford, 1962.

[9] See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Routledge, New York, 1993; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, New York, 1997.

[10] Butler refers to the sign theory of Jacques Derrida, according to which any use of signs is determined by a general iterability (see: Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 307-330). Signs are subject to a continuous play of repetition and difference, which on the one hand enables their meaning, but on the other prevents any meaning from being able to exist as such in a total sense. This double effect of repetition and difference, in which Derrida recognizes a structural principle of language, marks for Butler the principle by which fundamental societal parameters—such as identity and gender—are produced and reproduced in and through the actions of the individual.

CHAPTER I

The Temporality of Art

Presence, Experience and Historicity in the Works of James Coleman

Traditionally, an artwork endures in its material permanence in the museum. There, it is able to engage in a kind of inter-generational dialogue with other works of art and through this to provide us with information on how we position and reflect on ourselves in history. Visual artworks in museums, as Donald Preziosi points out, "are assumed to bear within themselves traces of their origins; traces that may be read as windows into particular times, places, and mentalities."[1] The museum is conceived as a place that enables the individual to experience his or her own formation as a historical process and as a process rooted in history.

In contrast, the 1960s and 1970s saw the birth of an art practice —Fluxus, Happening and Performance Art—that lived in the moment and had no interest in making the present a repeatable or reoccurring experience.[2] "The culture of the 1960s was about immediacy and presentness," writes Dan Graham.

"The present was detached from historical time. It was thought that one was to experiment in the here and now: thus life was a perceptual experience."[3] Yet today these forms of art are part of art history and have become part of the museum, albeit marginally. Not, however, in what is fundamental to them: their eventfulness, but rather transformed into something else, into a document or a relic. The art of the 1960s and 1970s pronounced the experience to be art. But it did not solve the problem of how event-oriented art can exist in the long term within a cultural framework that is geared towards permanency, conservation and archiving. For the most part it did not even touch upon this issue. "Event art is actually ahistorical art—it cannot be handed down," writes philosopher Dieter Mersch, describing a "fundamental difference between event and historicity, between singularity and permanence," which ran through culture at the close of the 20th century.[4]

In opposition to this asserted "fundamental difference"—and by means of James Coleman's work *Box (ahhareturnabout)* from 1977—I will pose the question here: Can we conceive of a conception of an artwork, the museum and history that is based *not* on dichotomies of event and permanence but rather on their mutual, intertwining relationship? What sort of *Zeitdiagnostik* (time diagnostics) can be conducted by an art that is primarily event-oriented, that takes place as a momentary, instantaneous experience? Do means for an experience of history and historicity in art exist that are not bound to the object character of an artwork?

The oeuvre of James Coleman engages in a speculative discourse on these issues, both on a structural and topical level. Coleman's work deals with the continuity of history and its suspension; it is both event-oriented and durational. Every work creates a scenario that—in regard to both its structural composition and its subject matter—provokes a reflection on the fleetingness of the moment and the possibilities of its endurance. Coleman's work addresses historical and modern forms of representation; it reflects on the production of history and its spectacularization; it broaches the issue of recollection and memory and at the same time renders the impossibility of remembering a constitutive aspect of the work itself.

Coleman belongs to a generation of artists who confronted the legacy of Modernism. Having grown up with Minimal and Conceptual Art, i.e. movements that brought Modernism to an end, artists like Coleman, Graham and Jeff Wall have a heightened awareness of the reductivist qualities of Modernism, especially of its ahistorical and universalist tendencies. Attempting to reintegrate a historical dimension into art, Wall in the late 1970s embraces the historical gesture of painterly depiction, for example, he goes back to the tableau of Renaissance art.[5] And from the mid-1970s Graham begins to incorporate more traditional forms of representation and narration into his art practice. When in the early 1980s a return to these conventions began to assert itself as a general traditionalism, however, artists such as Coleman, Graham and Wall had to face the question (that Walter Benjamin had already raised): How can one reference tradition without lapsing into a fabrication of history as an uninterrupted continuity?

Questions on how historical time can be reintegrated into art, how a consciousness of historicity is developed without fetishizing history, and how such a conception of history might be defined, were posed by many artists during this period. The impact of the Vietnam War and the radical social and political changes that shaped the late 1960s honed people's awareness for experiencing history. In Coleman's work, however, these questions have a specific framework that cannot be ignored. In no European country are contemporary politics so conflict-ridden as a result of history and the problems arising from its appropriation and interpretation as in Ireland. "Amnesia and nostalgia, the inability to remember and the incapacity to do anything else, are terrible twins,"[6] writes Terry Eagleton about Ireland, a country in which archaic and modern elements come together in a singular manner. Ireland is characterized by an uneven development between tradition and the modern age, which Eagleton (using Marxist terms) refers to as a "combined and uneven development."[7] Modernization did occur in a number of areas (e.g. in parliamentary politics, in the colonial administration and in art), but in other areas the country lagged behind (industry, agriculture, education). This produced a dynamic, modern culture, which bears within itself tense contradictions between the archaic and the modern. The double bind between continuity and renewal, tradition and

the modern, is a phenomenon historically anchored in this culture. Coleman takes up these contradictions—and through works that negotiate these tensions he introduces them into contemporary art.

Coleman's early installations, produced when he was living in Milan in the early 1970s, explore the experience of time and recollection within a meticulously staged exhibition situation. Already these early pieces testify to Coleman's interest in a subjective perception of time, an interest that anticipates his later preoccupation with the representation and experience of history. *Flash Piece*, a work from 1970, consists of different colored, alternately flashing light intervals, whose varying rhythms allow time to be perceived as something experienced subjectively.[8] "In fact," writes a critic, "the length of this duration, difficult to memorize, and its variable location within the cycle [...] lead to different perceptions of time."[9] In this work Coleman introduces the light flash as a principle that will play a significant role in later works such as *Box (ahhareturnabout)*: the *flash* as an instantaneous, flashing moment that elevates time to a structuring principle of the artwork and simultaneously makes it appear to stand still for an instant. These moments are dramaturgically arranged time segments or time sections that generate a before and after, memory and repetition.

One year later Coleman produced the work *Memory Piece* (1971), in which the visitor listens to a tape recording of a text approximately four minutes long, which he or she can then recite from memory onto a second tape recorder. This second recording is then played to the next visitor who memorizes and recites it once again into another tape recorder, and so on. Produced and reproduced afresh each time the work is transformed through a temporal process involving appropriation and transmission. Maurice Blanchot once described the experience of an artwork as a presence that also is disappearance.[10] Coleman is interested in the role that recollection plays in these dialectics of appropriation and loss, and how time shapes and influences it. It is in these non-linear and non-fixable to and fro movements of recollection that his exploration of a contemporary portrayability of history takes its point of departure.

Since the early 1980s, Coleman has produced elaborately staged slide shows accompanied by voice-overs, which

he calls "projected images": *Living and Presumed Dead* (1983–1985), *Seeing for Oneself* (1987–1988), *Charon (MIT Project)* (1989), *Lapsus Exposure* (1992–1994). In darkened, soundproof rooms often lined with carpet, several slide projectors coordinate the rhythmic sequence of a large number of images that appear and disappear, superimposed with other images and alternating with black transparencies. Technically, the "projected images" are subject to a linear, chronological process (one slide after another), but their dramaturgy is non-linear; it unfolds with forward and backward movements, repetitions, discontinuities and loops. Through their seriality, the individual images lose their stability, as if set in motion from the inside, rather than being blurred into an action or narrative. Not unlike a poem, the depiction seems condensed in a back and forth between current and virtual images, between present and memory. When recollecting the piece, one remembers not a sequence of distinct images but rather an endless variation of a single image. Kaja Silverman describes the work *Initials* (1993–1994) as a "single, long pulsating photo," as if it were a single freeze-frame containing an infinite variety of potential different images.[11]

Many of Coleman's works have as their subject matter performances and stage situations. There are scenes from a boxing match in *Box (ahhareturnabout)* (1977), in *Living and Presumed Dead* (1983–1985) a series of actors stand in a line at the front of the stage awaiting applause at the end of a performance, while a complex and dramatic narration unfolds, and in *Photograph* (1998–1999) students in glittery costumes practice for a dance performance. The actual event, however, the performance itself, is omitted in all these works. What is shown is the preparations and follow-up, the act of entering and leaving the theatrical presentation. Precisely because the depiction of the actual event is left out, or as in the case of *Box (ahhareturnabout)* rendered indiscernible, the experiential dimension of the artwork takes center stage. Above all the expressive, onomatopoeic qualities of the voice suggest a simultaneous presence of actors and spectators. It generates the illusion of a simultaneity of production and reception which is usually intrinsic to theater. Within the works conception—and this is what constitutes its aesthetic virtuosity—, the perception and experience of the work itself seems to be integrated, in effect something that in

a visual artwork (in contrast to a theater performance) by nature takes place retroactively. "Why do you gaze one on the other?" asks the young girl in *Photograph* and "We were ... being positioned. [...] Come into ... the light," says the voice in *Background* (1991–1994). By using such dialogue that seems to address the spectator directly, Coleman opens up the representational level of his work to the situation in which it is presented. In *Lapsus Exposure*, the viewer sees a group of musicians on break in a recording studio. A speaking voice discusses the production of images and argues about the sound quality of the live voice over the recorded one. Topically, Coleman's works often deal with performance situations, or rather the *making of* a performance, while simultaneously referring explicitly to their own event-like character. The content corresponds to the impact that the work has on a viewer. I will discuss this particular aesthetic structuring of an artwork at greater length in relation to *Box (ahhareturnabout)*. Although Coleman's works are representations, they also *present* something, place it in the world and render it existent. Their performative power is shaped and allegorized on various levels, as demonstrated in *Initials* (1993–1994), where a child's voice spells out individual words and gradually familiarizes itself with them letter by letter, first the sound and then the meaning, as if the phonetic components of the words were physically present in the exhibition space, and in this manner their plasticity is made concrete for both the speaker and listener.

With the exception of a few authorized illustrations Coleman prohibits any documentation or technical recording of his work. His works are only constituted in the here and now of their perception and in the recollecting (necessarily subjective) speaking and writing about them. There is nothing that places itself above the situation in which the work is perceived; no privileged body such as a video recording that can be employed to verify the objective content of what is remembered. Equally in writing about these works I can only rely on my memory. Of course, to a certain extent, every artwork relies on the reconstruction of memory, but in Coleman's work this instable process is reflected in the work itself. His works deal with how memory operates by raising the subjective and incomplete quality of memory to the structuring principle of the artwork. Topic, structure and

reception by the viewer enter into an inextricable bond. In a work like *Photograph*, Coleman shows only the preparations and pauses rather than the event itself, thereby emphasizing the missing part of the representation while at the same time the omissions in the memory one has of the work effectively become a constitutive element of it. Coleman operates within a structure that cannot be fully grasped and reconstructed, always remaining fragmentary, and indeed it must remain so because the work relies on the discontinuous appropriation and recollection of the viewer. He sees representation itself as a dynamic and not as a static reality, produced through the viewer's perception, appropriation and recollection. This intrinsically fragmentary existence of the artwork lays the ground for Coleman's exploration of ways of representing history and historical experience. Central to this is the medium of the projected image, whose nature lies in being an image that takes place in space and time, and in the presence of the viewer between the projection device and projection surface. By presenting the projected images in a series, Coleman negates the permanence of the individual image, so that one must remember it. While watching the series of images, one instinctively compares and connects the preceding images, which now are part of one's memory. In this manner Coleman renders the process in which his work is formed in a viewer's mind into a structural part of the artwork, which is reinforced by the subject matter.

Box (ahhareturnabout), 1977

Box (ahhareturnabout) from 1977 is the work of Coleman's that most strongly cites and involves the body. It takes up the rhythm of the human pulse and hence is based not on a formal but on a structural similarity with the body. Already from a distance one hears a hollow beat that fights its way through the exhibition like blood pumped through the body by a beating heart; an even, thunderous beat which reverberates like that of the systole and diastole of the human heart. When *Box* was shown at the Popes' Palace in Avignon in 2000 as part of the extensive exhibition *La Beauté*, this beat passed through the solid walls of the building, becoming louder the closer one got to the installation. On entering the room it reached the limit of the tolerable; the rhythm took

possession of the visitor's body almost violently, and made it the resonating chamber for an artwork. Gilles Deleuze wrote that rhythm's "capacity reaches much more deeply than the gaze [or] the hearing."[12] Similarly the beat of *Box* had such a total impact on the body, going through it uncontrollably and with a vengeance.

The room was so dark that one had to feel one's way through it. At regular intervals it brightened for fractions of seconds, allowing a glimpse of scenes from a boxing match. The visual staccato of stark black and white contrasts was no less violent to the eye than the acoustic beat was to the rest of the body. The flare-like flashing sequences of images were so brief that it was impossible to follow the course of the match. Rather than proceeding towards a climax one experienced the sequence of images as a continuous repetitive loop. The poor quality of the documentary material, the interference and the disjointed movements of the figures indicated that the footage was vintage. The visual staccato of stark black and white image contrasts reinforced the sense of the violence of the artwork. While the beat pulsated from an enormous loudspeaker, words and fragmented sentences like "Do it—again, again—stop, s-t-o-p, return ... aha/aha, ah ... go on, go on ... again, again" spoken by a male voice could be heard from another loudspeaker. Commands like "break it, break it, stop, s-t-o-p-i-t," a description of the fear ("regressive, to win, or to die") and of the doubt and pain ("ooh ... aah ... the liver ... the liver") of the fight, were repeated several times as if someone were thinking out loud, interspersed with loud breathing or gasping. The voice seemed to be articulating the inner thoughts of one of the boxers, as if one became a witness to the boxer's inner state of mind; speaking in an overly dramatic manner, like the voice of a body that has reached the limit of physical tolerance. The expressive intensity of its onomatopoeic quality recalls Antonin Artaud, who speaks of the "visual and plastic materialization of speech,"[13] of using it "in a concrete and spatial sense" and dealing with speech as with "a solid object, one which overturns and disturbs things."[14] Fragmentary and veiled allusions like "Murphy's the best" or "... the wood ... the sticks ... not capitals ..." in a vague, regionally specific, coded manner suggest a historical and local anchoring of the work—depending on one's knowledge of Irish culture and

history, e.g. if one knows that Murphy is a brand of Irish beer as well as a character in one of Beckett's novels. In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard talks of the "resonance of an image, which arouses echoes of the past."[15] Similarly, *Box* connects to a history that never becomes concrete.

Box is Coleman's only work that is based on documentary material. The images in this artwork are taken from footage of a fight between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey, to which the artist added regular black film frames. The September 22, 1927 Chicago fight is legendary in the history of boxing. It was the rematch of two world heavyweight champions. Jack Dempsey, responsible for taking boxing mainstream, was one of the most famous athletes of his time. He was the first boxer to earn millions of dollars. Like no other Irish athlete before him, he embodied the American Dream of working his way up from being the son of a penniless immigrant family of Irish miners and shoe shiners. Famous for his lightning speed punches, Dempsey succeeded in holding the heavyweight title for almost seven years. In 1926, the "caveman" who was considered unbeatable lost the world championship in front of a crowd of 120,000 fans. The fact that he had to hand over his title to an unknown fighter was considered a scandal. Gene Tunney, also of Irish origin, was the complete antithesis of a natural-born fighter. He did not at all conform to the image of a champion, read poetry and Shakespeare, and was considered too aesthetically refined and good-looking to be a boxer. The rematch a year later, awaited with great excitement, was to go down in boxing history as one of the most spectacular fights of its time. Initially, Dempsey appeared to be the stronger one. When he knocked Tunney to the mat, the referee did not start his count because Dempsey, rather than going to his corner, stood over the other fighter's body, giving him a few extra seconds to recover. Tunney won the fight, but his victory was not widely accepted, because it was believed that he had only won because of the extra time. Dempsey was robbed of his victory in a fight that went down in history as the "long count."

More myths have grown up around the boxer than around almost any other sports figure. In innumerable stories the boxer embodies the rebel who employs his seemingly superhuman powers to fight for a place within the social order,

frequently symbolizing the revolt of the individual against repressive social conventions. In connection with Coleman's work, a symbolic reading of the fight between Dempsey and Tunney almost suggests itself, which, taken in conjunction with the recited sentence fragments, seems to allude to the conflicts of Irish history. Coleman's work, however, aims neither to exploit the myth of the boxer, nor to deconstruct it. Although there might be a suggestion of such readings in *Box* they fade instantaneously behind the aesthetic impact of its visual and acoustic stimuli.

According to the historical version, everything was at stake for Tunney in this fight. The fight was a rematch, he had to win a second time to keep his title. At the moment of the fight he has his status, and yet simultaneously does not. In order to retain his identity as a champion he had to repeat, one might say reiterate, what he already is. This motif of repetition in a moment of existential instability characterizes Coleman's work. In a boxing match it is not only the two contestants but also the spectators who share a common space and time; the division between the boxing ring and the spectator seems suspended by the spectator's identification with one of the boxers. Similarly, in his work Coleman sublates the division between the representation of a historical event and its present experience, between an artistic representation and its (physical) perception. In her 1987 essay *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates describes a boxing match as an artistic dialogue between two bodies, which is comparable to dance or music.[16] For Oates boxing is "incredibly intimate" which might sound strange, but indeed reflects an experience that to a certain extent corresponds to the feeling that Coleman's installation evokes. The pulse of the beat in one's own body and the drama of the spoken word mimic the feeling of being both *in the body* and *in the consciousness* of the boxer. At this moment the division between inside and outside becomes permeable—as with the boxer, who is isolated and at the same time the center of a nervous, energetically charged perceptual field directed by a public. Coleman orchestrates a (visitor) body, who forms a bond with the visual and acoustic apparatus. This becomes most evident in the afterimages, which the eye of the observer produces on the screen in reaction to the stark contrasts between light and dark, the abrupt alternation of bright images and black film

segments. These afterimages add an uncontrollable, physical aspect to the artwork, which fills the space between flashing image projections with the viewer's feedback.

This fusing of body and cinematographic apparatus, of perception and portrayal, calls to mind the revolutionary gesture with which Walter Benjamin—in the figure of *corporeal space* (*Leibraum*) and *visual space* (*Bildraum*)—develops a vision of a mechanism that absorbs the subject; of an image that, as Sigrid Weigel writes, "moves in on the subject and materializes itself in physical innervations."[17] Coleman connects the perceptual apparatus to the spectator's body; he links the mechanism to a visual-aural experience. This produces not only the highly complex aesthetic structure of the artwork, in which theme, structure and effect are interwoven and correspond to each other, but ultimately also results in an intertwining of various time levels. The representation of the historical event and the perception of the artwork become, as it were, permeable to one another. For a moment it seems as if the historical was not depicted or represented, but rather rendered present and suspended in the aesthetic experience.

The Temporal Structure of *Box*: Rhythm, Fragmentation and Repetition

Rhythm (the structuring of time) is the central structural, topical and aesthetic principle of *Box*. On a structural level, Coleman draws from experimental film, more precisely from 1960s Flicker Films, which create a visceral experience, because they stimulate and confuse perception with an interruption, a stopping of time that disrupts the illusion of cinematic movement. In their most rigorous form, Flicker Films use only the essential components of the medium: a light to dark flickering of images and alternation between sound and silence in an ordered rhythm.

Rhythm, a measure of time subjected to certain rules, is a significant component of *Box*, not only in structural terms but also as subject matter. One could describe the boxing match as a temporal drama, or, better still, as a struggle with and against time. This is particularly true for the fight on which Coleman's work is based. After all, it went down in history as the "long count," the winner supposedly owing his victory solely to the prolonging of a measure of time:

the timed count for the opponent lying on the floor. Oates writes about the significance of time in boxing:

> When a boxer is "knocked out" it does not mean, as it's commonly thought, that he has been knocked unconscious, or even incapacitated; it means rather more poetically that he has been knocked out of Time. (The referee's dramatic count of ten constitutes a metaphysical parenthesis of a kind through which the fallen boxer must penetrate if he hopes to continue in Time.) There are in a sense two dimensions of Time abruptly operant: while the standing boxer is *in time* the fallen boxer is *out of time*. Counted out, he is counted "dead" […][18]

Time, or rather the measure of time, is of central importance in the history of boxing. The Queensberry Rules were introduced in England in 1867. These rules gave boxing a new rhythm and time frame, civilizing boxing and elevating the visual spectacle to a certain level of social acceptability. They also regulated the fight in terms of time with the introduction of three-minute rounds with one-minute breaks and ten seconds for a boxer to get to his feet after being knocked down (the count previously had been 30 seconds). These regulations must be seen as symptomatic of a historical transition, namely the development of controlled and standardized time—World Standard Time was introduced in 1884—that structures private and public experience within the industrializing societies of the 19th century. In the same way that factory whistles structured the work time and interruption of work, the new rules prescribed a temporal rhythm for the bouts and breaks of the boxing match. Essentially, boxing was adapted to the pulse of the modern age, to the tangible fact of passing time. As Oates writes, time became the "invisible opponent"[19] that can beat the boxer or knock him out. It is the invincibility of the third opponent—time, that accounts for the frequently melancholic aura surrounding the boxer, who is both hero to and victim of the public and greedy managers alike. The boxer fights only in order to fight again and, ultimately, to move ever closer to a final defeat, and with it the inevitable social, emotional and mental decline. "In the ring, boxers inhabit

a curious sort of 'slow' time [...], while outside the ring they inhabit an alarmingly accelerated time."[20] The boxer's time inevitably runs out.

Remarkably, Coleman replaces this linear conception of time with principles of fragmentation and repetition. There is no beginning and no end to the fight, just as there is no winner or loser; the rhythmic principle of the work loops endlessly. The experience of time that Coleman makes concrete is not narrative and focused on end as in Lessing's conception of time and motion, but instead operates with repetitions, feedbacks and loops between apparatus and body. Rosalind Krauss's book, *The Optical Unconscious* (1993) on the temporality of the visual is revealing in this context. As opposed to the timeless and incorporeal conception of seeing that is typical of modernity, she combines seeing with time, the body and the unconscious.[21] In a kind of anti-history of seeing in modernity, the title of her book refers to Walter Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" (1931) which describes the specificity of the medium of photography to create meaning—the ability of the camera to capture time and motion in a manner that the naked eye cannot.[22] Benjamin combined a psychoanalytical yet materialistic perspective towards the technical and material properties of this new artistic medium. Influenced by his argument, Krauss turned to various artworks of the historical avant-gardes, including the Dada collages of Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp's *Precision Optics*, both from the 1920s, introducing an innovative conception of temporality in visual art.[23] Ernst uses new optical instruments such as the magic drum (*Daedalum*) in his Dada collages to produce an ambivalent, broken image. From the outside, the rotating *Daedalum* presents a seemingly uniform image, while on the inside one sees an event broken into its individual components, but, as Krauss explains, what unites the experience of outside and inside, the perception of an illusion and its mechanics, is a beat or an oscillation that strikes through the field of the magic drum. For more than 15 years Duchamp was concerned with the *Precision Optics,* revolving discs specially adapted to record players in order to reveal colored patterns. As these discs rotate in an organic rhythm, these patterns appear to lose their shape and then regain it. The discs use a temporal rhythm, a beat, to create a shape

and simultaneously negate it, which breaks up the formal coherence and constancy of the artwork from the inside out. Krauss sees a connection between this temporal pulse and the influence of the new phenomenon of mass culture: "It is," she writes, "through the lowest and most vulgar cultural forms that the visual is daily invaded by the pulsatile: the blinking lights of neon signs; the 'flip books' through which the visual inert is propelled into the suggestive obscene; the strobe effects of pinball machines and video games—and all of this undergirded by the insistent beat of rock music surging through car stereos or leaking voicelessly through portable headsets."[24]

In outlining her concept of a "pulsating" visuality, Krauss also refers to Coleman's *Box* as an artwork, which because of its rhythmically composed structure is never entirely manifest or present.[25] The visual flash of *Box* elevates time to a structuring principle and simultaneously makes it appear to stand still for an instant, breaking up the coherence of the form and connecting it to the productive force of the visitor-body. However, there is an aspect of the artwork that Krauss does not consider. In *Box* the rhythm introduces a concrete historical reference. In what Krauss describes as "a kind of pulsating On/Off, On/Off, On/Off," a past event and historical moment flashes up. As such, the temporal rhythm in *Box* constitutes a time axis that mediates between present time and historical event, quite literally in the sense of a mediator through whom the historical can be experienced both *in* the present and *as* the present. There are two levels of time that play a role in *Box*, those of *experienced time* and *historical time*, which are united by the rhythmic principle of this artwork and mediated in the spectator's bodily and aesthetic experience. This particular aesthetic structure makes the historical appear in a unique way: history is not represented but rather evoked in and as a present experience. *Box* produces an image of the historical, which takes place in a space beyond all pictorial representation. One way to discuss this particular notion of history and experience is through Benjamin's thoughts on the philosophy of history, which were relevant to the art discourse critical of Modernism in the 1970s and seem to bear a particularly intimate relation to this artwork.

History and Experience

For Benjamin, too, the afterimage plays a role in his theory of experience and history. Drawing on the writings of Henri Bergson, the afterimage is a philosophical term describing the turn towards something that is already a thing of the past and can only enter the philosophical consciousness as a complementary entity or as an image contrasting with the present.[26] The afterimage projects a memory, or as Bergson might say: it *is* memory. In that moment we see memory as present. For Bergson this idea was of central importance, because he thought—and this is the concept that Benjamin refers to—that every form of experience, of experienced time can only exist because a present perception combines it with a memory, interlocking the present and past.

As part of a longer passage that reflects on history and historiography, Benjamin writes in his history of Paris in the 19th century, *The Arcades Project* (1927–1940), "Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time."[27] For Benjamin it is in the idea of a compression of time—both within and outside the human body—when the mutual bracing of past and present becomes concrete, which embodies his vision of a history that continues to be operative in the present and a present that refers to history. This construction is based on Benjamin's idea of a materialist historiography. The materialist conceives of time not as governed by the law of progress, but to construe and construct from *jetztzeit* a discontinuous compression and materialization of history. Essentially, Benjamin turns against a historicist concept of history and takes up the critique Friedrich Nietzsche had presented 40 years earlier, an idea which recurred in the philosophical debates of the 1920s. In historicism, history is construed as a constant chain of cause and effect that proceeds more or less without interruption, and like Newtonian mechanics is based on a conception of time as both continuous and linear. In this argument both humans and things are subject to objective processes, and this is what Benjamin criticizes in *On the Concept of History*, which he wrote in 1940, shortly before his death: "The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such

a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself."[28]

Benjamin's concept of history presumes the destruction of the historical continuum. He counters the mechanical, Newtonian notion of time with a "dialectical relationship in leaps and bounds" between the past and the present. The prevailing principle is that of interruption, fragmentation and repetition. Only when physical time is abrogated does historical time appear—in the sudden flickering of an image. For Benjamin, this is the mystery of time being rendered present, opening itself to history, thereby suspending all linearity. The *flash* or *shock* become images for this sublation of linear time. These formal principles translate modern forms of experience into the realm of the aesthetic. According to Benjamin, in modern urban life, a continuum of traditional experiences is replaced by isolated experiences, and, as he described it in an essay written a year earlier, "On some Motifs in Baudelaire," "this may be due to a change in the structure of […] experience."[29] This loss of continuity becomes the starting point for Benjamin's deliberations on the philosophy of history. Benjamin's main focus is on finding a productive side to this rupture and grasping it not as a deficit but as a constitutive element in a new conception of memory and experience. The *shock* or *experience of shock* are concepts that Benjamin developed in his study of Charles Baudelaire and considered dialectically as designating both a loss and a gain in experience. On the one hand, the *shock* stands for the "energies threatening the living organism" that, if the consciousness's defenses fail or do not materialize for some reason, penetrate the psychological apparatus. In this sense, it constitutes the loss of continuity and the dissolution of coherence.

By contrast to these threatening shock energies, however, the *shock* as an aesthetic figure can also trigger insights. As regards its effect, threatening and yet triggering experience, the image of the *shock* possesses a dialectic characteristic in Benjamin's thinking. It is threatening, a massive stimulus that has to be repelled; yet, as a stimulus that breaches defenses and penetrates into the deep levels of the psychological apparatus, it also generates experience. A process is brought to a standstill and fixed for a moment, enabling it to appear in a new, independent way. Baudelaire captured the

breakdown of the shock defense not in a boxing match, but in a duel, which can also be read as a symbol for the process of artistic creation.[30] In this struggle against the symbolic order, the writer fights himself, "'stabs away with his pencil, his pen, his brush; [...] thus he is combative, even when alone, and parries his own blows.'"[31]

The specific quality of Benjamin's concept of history is to have linked it to a lived dimension of experience just as, conversely, he extracts the concept of experience from its rationalist reduction in the philosophy of his day, and gives it a historical dimension. In the essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin writes on the philosophical debate over the concept of experience and makes special mention of Bergson's research:

> Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of the "true" experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. It is customary to classify these efforts under the heading of a philosophy of life. Their point of departure, understandably enough, was not man's life in society. [...] Towering above this literature is Bergson's early monumental work, *Matière et mémoire*. More than the others, it preserves links with empirical research. It is oriented toward biology. The title suggests that it regards the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience. Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as in private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data. It is, however, not at all Bergson's intention to attach any specific historical label to memory.[32]

Bergson must be credited for linking perception as experienced time to the productive activity of memory and, moreover, for having shown how perception and memory interpenetrate. Just as perception of the present is fuelled by images from memory, the past can be given a more differentiated form in relation to the present. Benjamin quotes from Bergson's *Matter and Memory*: "Memory thus creates

anew the present perception; or rather it doubles this perception by reflecting upon it either its own image or some other memory-image of the same kind."[33] In our perception we are, as Bergson puts it, "constantly creating or reconstructing. Our distinct perception is really comparable to a closed circle in which the perception-image, going towards the mind, and the memory-image, launched into space, career the one behind the other."[34] While for Bergson memory as time brought into the present is determined subjectively and later biologically, Benjamin is interested in images of collective memory. "Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with the material of the collective past," as he writes.[35] In this sense, "experience" can be understood comprehensively as the potential of a past that is rendered present. This was Benjamin's revolutionary achievement, for he transferred the experience of lived time from the personal into the historical sphere and thus proposed a new type of mediation between the collective and the individual, the past and present.

One of the linguistic concepts that Benjamin uses in order to find an aesthetic form for the linkage of history with present experience is that of the *dialectical image*. For Benjamin, the dialectical image is an image that is imbued with time. The dialectical image is imbued with real time "not in natural magnitude—let alone psychologically—but in its smallest gestalt."[36] This "smallest gestalt" is the temporal difference discerned in a quotation or testimony to the past. In it, we find a concrete instance of that volatile linkage of *jetztzeit* and past that Benjamin tries to pinpoint. In *The Arcades Project* he writes:

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relationship of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.[37]

Benjamin's "image" of history initially refers to the rejection of a one-dimensional understanding of history as a linear-successive process. In the dialectical image, time is sublated as a linear notion when in the "now of its recognizability" the past and the present meet directly and without distance.[38] The past is rendered present; it flashes up as an image, creating correspondences between *jetztzeit* and the past. In the dialectical image, past and present here and there mutually illuminate one another. It is an image that, to quote Georges Didi-Huberman, "is able to remember without imitating, that comprises a new, indeed unheard-of and truly invented form of memory."[39]

Although Benjamin's dialectical image is not meant to be a material image, but suggests a form of representation that is beyond all image-based visualization, as a figure of thought it sheds light on the aesthetic structure of Coleman's installation. In *Box*, the representation of a historical event and its direct, physical experience, or in general terms, topic, compositional structure, materiality and effect, incessantly and dialectically refer to one another. Coleman's work creates a representation that cannot be pinned down. The subject of the boxing match corresponds to a mode of representation that is structurally very similar to the rhythm of the punches, to the discontinuous shock-like rhythm of the visual pulse with the hammer-like beat. Coleman's work produces an effect (the rendering present of a fragmentary and discontinuous image of history) that is already an innate structuring principle in this work (as fragmentary and dissociating as it is). The artwork is based on a form of fragmentary representation, which concurs with a conception of history that is likewise defined by fragmentation and dissociation. Because the dividing line between the artwork and the viewer's body appear to dissolve, seemingly we, the viewers, penetrate the body of the boxer, just as the visual/aural apparatus penetrates our bodies. If we understand this artwork—and in fact this is what I would like to propose—as a kind of contemporary history painting, we must also accept it as a radical renegotiation of this very idea. Not only because it questions a positivist tradition of historical representation and the beliefs in continuity, progress and permanence that come with it; nor—as I have discussed in reference to Benjamin—because it replaces a linear

understanding of time with an idea of history that is seized and actualized from the present and at the same time in the present, but because the artwork creates an image without being a representation. Like Benjamin's idea of the dialectical image, *Box* evokes an image of history that is beyond pictorial depiction. And this is because its actual location is neither the visual nor the aural medium but a visitor-body that is physically seized by the impact of the beat and integrated into the work. It is only in the visitor's physical and reflective experience that the individual parts of *Box* (the visual pulse, the beat and the voice) blend to form the work. Only there does this installation materialize in its entirety as an artwork. And only there does this work's conception of condensed time become concrete—in a moment that is both *jetztzeit* and history simultaneously, like, to borrow Benjamin's words again, "a muscle that contracts historical time."

In this staging Coleman brings two distinct levels of the work of art together: the level of representation and portrayal, which shows and re-presents *something*, and a dimension within which this portrayal shows *itself*, making its reality-creating effects explicit. Coleman's work produces an effect (the envisioning of a fragmentary and discontinuous image of history) that is already present in the (just as fragmentary and dissociated) structure of the work. It is only through the conjunction of these three areas of subject matter, structure and physical effect that the meaning of the work finally emerges. It is in this particular aesthetic construction that the singularity of this work of art lies, and also its link to an aesthetics of the performative, in Austin's terms.

Digression: The Saying of Doing (John L. Austin)

When John L. Austin introduced the expression "performative" in the mid-1950s, he was referring to the active character of speech. The underlying proposition of his argument is that under certain conditions language creates the reality it describes, so that one actually *does* something with words. In the 1990s, Judith Butler gave Austin's linguistic theories a social and political horizon by emphasizing the constitutive and the restrictive powers of conventions; both are prerequisites to giving the individual the performative power to create a reality.

Butler's wider application of the performative subsequently was adopted by cultural studies, in that it is also possible to examine the performativity of visual art as a specific area of social praxis. In my view, however, this extension of Austin's theory also led to the loss of an essential aspect of the concept: Austin not only describes how we take action with words, but also develops a way of speaking in his own presentation in which his *saying* and *doing* with words are related to one another in a performative manner.

Austin's lectures, published posthumously in 1962 as *How to Do Things with Words*, operate as a kind of instruction manual; establishing the existence of a performative level of speech by demonstrating how the production of meaning can be created through "doing" while speaking. This view of Austin is also suggested by Shoshana Felman and Sybille Krämer (independently of one another and with different emphases), both of whom I draw on here.[40] Their reading of his text varies from the usual one inasmuch as they understand *How to Do Things with Words* not only as a proposition, but also as a staging; not only as a text that speaks *about* doing things with words, but that also does something through speech. According to Krämer, "understanding Austin not only means listening to what he says, but also looking at what he is doing by saying it."[41] But what does Austin do? He begins his lectures by aspiring to formulate a theoretical definition of the performative, based on the distinction between a performative-generative and an asseverative-constative use of language. Austin very soon realizes, however, that this distinction is untenable, as there is no unequivocal criterion by which the performative and the constative can clearly be differentiated. At this point he decides to "go back to fundamentals," as he puts it.[42] He examines a series of criteria and rules through which he continually awakens new expectations of a theoretical systemization. As the newly conceived rules become more and more complex, the reader begins not only to doubt their validity, but also to wonder whether Austin is even interested at all in establishing a clear theoretical definition of the performative. He contrives a wealth of situations in which the performative power of the act of speech comes to fail: he marries donkeys, baptizes penguins, appoints horses as consuls. In the end, every absurd and at times mysterious attempt to fix the meaning of the term performative

demonstrates the failure of the rule. For most academic readers, Austin's lectures are a seminal but flawed attempt to define a theory of the performative, and therefore in need of improvement.[43] Read with Felman and Krämer, however, *How to Do Things with Words* seems more like a performance of the failure to establish the meaning of the performative—with the effect that, precisely because the performative cannot be determined in a conventional manner, a different modus operandi is needed to approach the concept and elucidate its meaning.

Austin, who taught at Oxford University, belonged to a continental tradition of analytic philosophy, a system of thought characterized by seeking meaning in concepts themselves, and not in their efficacy. In *How to Do Things with Words* he initially operates within this tradition—as his excessive use of examples illustrates—but eventually causes its internal logic to collapse. Austin shows that in *saying* there is always a *doing* and that this *doing* always brings forth meaning. Finally he demonstrates how this interaction can be configured. Austin devises a concept that eludes its own determinability, but that through a praxis, through use, becomes concrete, and in its application provides the most consistent definition of its own idea. Because of his subtle ability to connect various points of view and ways of thinking, the Wittgenstein philologist Georg Henrik von Wright dubbed Austin the "doctor subtilis" of Oxford postwar philosophy, recalling a 13th-century Oxford colleague who had been given this epithet. Wright sees a similar talent in Austin, describing him as "the unrivalled master in detecting conceptual shades of linguistic usage—superior in this art even to Wittgenstein."[44]

From this perspective Austin's failure to reach a theoretical definition of the performative is not a methodical failure, but a failure with method. In *How to Do Things with Words*, his speech employs aspects of an aesthetic model of tension that is not only rhetorical but also dramatically staged between the levels of saying and showing, message and performance, in which words come to act and through this to mean. Within this conceptual frame, Austin can be seen not primarily as the theorist of a basic but deficient classification of the performative, but rather as a thinker who introduces a new relationship between act and referent.

In the separation between word and deed, between the sign and what it signifies, there is a foundation of enlightened thinking that underlies every cultural praxis. "This is the nerve centre of the idea of 'representation': not epiphany, i.e., presentness, but rather surrogacy, i.e., envisioning, is what signs have to accomplish for us," writes Krämer.[45] This kind of relationship to the world, which is rooted in the semiotics of representation, is countered by Austin, in his concept of the performative, an approach that substitutes an ontological distinction between sign and being, word and deed with an intertwining and mediating of these levels. In *How to Do Things with Words* Austin shows that action can be taken with words and also *how* such action is organized and given significance. He demonstrates, accentuates and frames a performative level of speech, while at the same time providing a model for the consequences of shifting the production of meaning onto this performative level: the perception of the meaning of an utterance or text not only, or not even primarily, in what it *says*, represents or depicts, but above all in what it *does*, i.e., the real effects it brings about.

There is a methodical challenge in this emphasis shift from saying to doing that, as I think, can be made productive to the understanding of works of art. What is the relationship between an artwork's meaning and its effect? How do contemporary artists work with different modes of production of meaning? Every work of art functions by bringing forth a moment of aesthetic experience that can endure, yet is repeatable, thus enabling the work of art to exist in historical time. On a thematic level, Coleman's *Box* allegorizes this temporal existence of a work of art as an experience and portrayal of time. Performatively, however, it shows how the artwork itself can bring about these various levels of temporality and make them tangible—in an artwork that creates a moment that is both now and historical. Coleman's works thematize the practices of cultural memory, consciously aware of being a part of such a praxis which they also modify and form. Coleman sets up relationships between the portrayal and the creation of history; he gives expression within the work of art to a discontinuous understanding of history, and also intervenes formatively and transformatively in the similarly discontinuous passing on of his work into historical record. Understanding this approach as significant and as an

element of his artistic message—in other words, to perceive the saying of doing—requires the methodical shift of emphasis that Austin instigated with his concept of the performative and put into effect with *How to Do Things with Words.*

Box and Minimal Art: Historicity and Experience

Coleman alludes to the distinctive iconographic feature of Minimal Art with the title *Box* and, at the same time, to a certain extent also takes up what Rosalind Krauss calls the primacy of Minimalist sculpture's "lived physical perspective," namely its spatial orientation to the viewer's body.[46] Minimal Art fundamentally changed the relationship between the object and its viewer, between art and its venue, by shifting the meaning of the object completely to the experience that is made with and through the object. The level of representation and that of narration both step behind the object's impact on a situation; an impact that throws the viewer back on him or herself, in space and in a situation. Although it is difficult to pinpoint this experience, it is not only the constitutive role of the viewer that comes into focus here, but also the spatial and atmospheric conditions.

For Krauss this phenomenological orientation towards experience, something she elaborates primarily in reference to Robert Morris's sculptures, brought with it not only a new approach to the physicality of the body, but even a kind of compensatory, if not utopian gesture.[47] A viewer-subject, alienated in everyday life from his or her own experiences, was to be re-aligned with them through the experience of art. "This," Krauss says, "is because the Minimalist subject is in this very displacement returned to its body, re-grounded in a kind of richer, denser subsoil of experience than the paper-thin layer of an autonomous visuality that had been the goal of optical painting."[48] In the course of time, Krauss revises her original position, acknowledging that the promise of Minimal Art not only remained unredeemed, but to a certain extent had even turned into its opposite. Looking back, she no longer considered Minimal Art to be the seedbed of a richer form of art experience, but rather as having paved the way for its own depletion. Because the Minimal Art object focuses not only on the viewer's body but also on the surrounding situation, i.e. the exhibition context, this

desubstantiation of the art experience also impacts on the museum. For what is in the final instance bereft of content is, Krauss suggests, the historical dimension of the art experience, or, more specifically, a dimension that references the historical. Krauss becomes aware of this at that very moment when, at the end of the 1980s in America, the social function of the museum profoundly changed. A new tax law enabled objects to be sold from collections, which affected the status of the museum collection, as did new spatial concepts, new museum design and presentation forms. Krauss quotes Thomas Krens, then the director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, a key protagonist in this change, who referred deliberately to Minimal Art in explaining these developments: "It is Minimalism that has reshaped the way we […] look at art: the demands we now put on it; our need to experience it along with its interaction with the space in which it exists; our need to have a cumulative, serial crescendo towards the intensity of this experience; our need to have more and at a larger scale."[49] Krens understood that conventional museum architecture was not able to provide the kind of experience that these Minimal objects required. These sculptures prompted him to opt for new design paradigms, preparing and anticipating new spatial concepts that took their cue from warehouses and factories and presentation formats that were geared towards comprehensive, monographic shows. "Compared to the scale of the Minimalist objects, the earlier paintings and sculptures look impossibly tiny and inconsequential, like postcards, and the galleries take on a fussy, crowded, culturally irrelevant look, like so many curio shops," Krauss observed.[50]

When, in 1989, Krauss visited the Panza Collection in Paris and saw an exhibition of works by artists such as Robert Morris, Dan Flavin and Carl Andre, she realized in what way Minimal Art indeed heralded a "radical revision" of the museum. The powerful presence of these objects, she wrote, renders the room itself the object of an experience. Thus the museum itself becomes for the viewers an objectified and abstract entity, "from which the collection has withdrawn."[51] This experience, as Krauss explains, is very intense and effective, but in the final instance remains essentially empty, as it is merely aesthetically and not historically determined. The experience evoked by the Minimal Art object is oriented

towards an individual who constitutes him or herself in the act of perception and hence only temporarily, from one moment to the next. This aesthetic experience, in its radical contingency and its dependence on the conditions of the space and its respective situation, creates a specific kind of subjective experience, but not one that can (or intends to) anchor the individual in the coordinates of history. This experience of self is one that neither is nor can be historically underpinned. With Minimal Art, Krauss argues, the museum becomes a space for a new spatial/aesthetic dimension of experience, but is no longer a space where history, or rather, the individual's rootedness in history, can be experienced:

> The encyclopedic museum is intent on telling a story, by arranging before its visitor a particular version of the history of art. The synchronic museum—if we can call it that—would forgo history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial […][52]

Precisely because these objects engender an experience that remains contingent and does not refer to an essentially stable subject, this experience cannot spawn a cultural context such as is traditionally represented by the museum. Instead of "reconciling" the individual with his or her own experiences, Minimal Art, according to Krauss, ultimately serves to underscore what she calls the "utterly fragmented, postmodern subject of contemporary mass culture"[53] that no longer finds the terrain for experience within a historical trajectory. In other words, it nurtured an individual that is subjugated to spectacle.

Indeed, Minimal Art, albeit not in factual terms (as with Happenings or Fluxus events), but with regard to its underlying conception, does not fit into the customary model of history used in museums. Although today Minimal artworks can be grasped as belonging to a specific time and can be represented as such, in terms of their conception they initially excluded a specific type of reference to history. Minimal Art maintains a position beyond the historical determinacy of art and thus also refuses, to a certain extent, to fit into a museum as the mise-en-scène of a sequence of

historically determined artifacts. In a certain way, Minimal Art robs this historical narrative of content, because it shifts the meaning of artworks onto the essentially general and indeterminate level of effect. If Tony Smith's sculptures refer to megaliths, to Egyptian temples and to Herodotus, these references are not legible as the historical source or influence, and instead resort to something indeterminately archaic rather than to a specific historical epoch.[54] Just as Minimal artworks are abstract—with their geometric shapes and qualities as pure objects—and seem to maintain a position outside the representational conventions outlined in art history, so, too, the experience of viewing these artworks remains abstract. This becomes clear, for example, in Smith's oft-cited anecdote of his night-time experience on the not-yet-completed New Jersey Turnpike. Smith drove down the empty road and reported how this experience, for him, was quasi-aesthetic in nature and yet also shattered all the customary aesthetic orders. "There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it," is how he summarized the experience, and it was clear for him that a reformulation of the aesthetic would also provoke a fundamental change in the conception of art,[55] transgressing the aesthetic experience in a way that was universal. It was precisely this universality that ultimately rendered the experience of these works indeterminate and general.

When Krauss's essay was published in *Texte zur Kunst* in 1992,[56] it was prefaced by a film still from the absurd Hollywood romantic comedy *LA Story*, in which the favorite pastime of the protagonist, played by Steve Martin, is speeding on roller skates through museums, something he does twice in the course of the film. First he races through the historical collections at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and then later through the Modern Art Department at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. Euphoric, he enjoys his aesthetic buzz through art history, where the individual artworks pass him by almost like a film. The antithesis to the museum as the location of a collective, historical/cultural memory, as described in Jürgen Habermas's model of the bourgeois institution intended to enable visitors to experience the formation of the bourgeois individual as a process rooted in history, can hardly be better described: here the museum becomes the site of the potential for

hedonistic experience in which a subject is not constituted, but instead loses him or herself, in viewing his or her cultural heritage.

This discussion on the relationship between history and experience allows one to outline the significance of Coleman's work *Box* more precisely: How does this artwork address the dilemma between art that is focused on experience and the structural framework of the visual arts that necessitate duration and continuity? To what extent does it reflect the relationship between artistic production and the culture of the spectacle?

In Minimal Art, it is the human being that experiences itself as a body standing in an indeterminate manner outside power, sexuality and history. In contrast, Coleman gives experience a historical-materialist contour. With Minimal Art, the intention was to oppose the art criticism of the day by producing a form of art that refused any subjective/linguistic appropriation. In *Box*, Coleman introduces a dimension of experience that does not exclude meaning, language, critique and history, but gives these categories a concrete form as the necessary basis for all experience. The subject is presented in a socio-geopolitical context, and at the same time enacted on the uncontrolled level of affect and physicality, thus in this regard unconscious responses. The body is thereby conceived as material, as a semiotic bearer of meaning, and, simultaneously, as a psycho-physiological being.[57] In this way, Coleman roots the individual and the individual's experience in a concrete historical context. But he does not do so out of the wish to re-create a coherent tradition. Coleman's work operates instead with a (Benjamin-like) dialectic between the fragmentary presentation of a historical figure and a present experience. It is as if the intention were to constitute an individual and an idea of history in the process of disappearing, one that results from a depiction and, simultaneously, exists on the very liminal boundary of that which can be represented or experienced. This process is precisely allegorized in the theme of the boxing match. Joyce Carol Oates has written that "every boxing match is a story—a unique and highly condensed drama without words." She suggests that "boxers are there to establish an absolute experience, a public accounting of the outermost limits of their beings."[58]

Benjamin Buchloh terms Coleman's works an "archaeology of the spectacle."[59] "In this respect," he writes, "it is by no means unimportant that Coleman makes the classical arena of the culture of spectacle the object of his work: the public fight between two (athletic) rivals has repeatedly fascinated artists in the 20th century—not only as a primordial form of spectacle but also as a fundamental metaphor for general social relations."[60] The concept of the archaeological introduced by Buchloh can be given greater precision through the thought of Michel Foucault.[61] Coleman's approach is "archaeological" precisely in the sense that it does not involve a linear concept of history, but, in a radically discontinuous way, forges links between subjective experience and specific historical events, relating in turn to general cultural phenomena in the history of modernity.

When Guy Debord, who published his opus magnum *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, was asked 21 years later when he would date the beginning of the culture of the spectacle, he answered that the spectacle was hardly 40 years old when his book first came out.[62] In other words, its historical beginning can be dated to the late 1920s, even to around 1927, the year of the rematch between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey. It was the first boxing match to be broadcast live on radio and transmitted by 79 stations in Africa, Latin America, Europe and Australia. It was thus one of the first global mass sports events, a linking of the body with the abstractions of international transmission.[63] Likewise Joyce Carol Oates describes its character as an event for the masses. "Photographs of these events," she writes, "show jammed arenas with boxing rings like postage-sized altars at their centers, the boxers themselves no more than tiny, heraldic figures. To attend a Dempsey match was not to have seen a Dempsey match, but perhaps that was not the issue."[64]

1927 was also the year in which Benjamin began work on his *Arcades Project*, concentrating on the origins of mass culture in the 19th century: *The Arcades Project* which, although he worked on it until 1940, was to remain fragmentary. Benjamin developed a special combinatorial process comparable to that of a database, through which he cross-referenced quotes, sources and commentaries in an open system. In *Arcades* Benjamin writes on the "standardized and denaturalized" perception of the masses, and on the new

forms of organizing attention generated by technologies that shape the individual and the body in a new way. He introduces film and photography as new media that enable us to grasp a modern experience of accelerated time and fragmented space, one that could no longer be construed in Kantian terms. Benjamin compares the dissecting ability of the camera to new social forms of production. "In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film."[65] As a medium, film offers new technical means of capturing modern forms of experience and perception, and also bears a particular relation to time, history and presence. Essentially, film seems to be about an insistent presence, both of the objects that are represented (the iconic appearance of a person is achieved through filming that person) and of a perceptual presence that seems resistant to the passage of time (an impression that *Box* highlights in its endless and repetitive structure). If film is both like history —in that it represents an absence (the absence of what it re-presents)—and unlike history—in that it seems to erase the pastness of the past—it may very well embody the *now of recognizability* that Benjamin describes as emerging from his dialectical image. In this way, film's temporality may well have transformed our own historical thinking about time and the past.

In a quite Benjaminian way, Coleman both employs the specific dissecting and shock-like abilities of the filmic medium—in order to produce an aesthetic experience that is even more dissociating—and simultaneously reflects on them—in order to shed an allegorical gaze on the interaction of technology, media and experience. *Box* powerfully evokes a direct experience; it is spectacular, but at the same time highlights the historical dimension of that spectacular character. The spectacular is generated in the present and yet given an historical edge; it is depicted at the level of representation, staged at the level of medium, and evoked as an effect. In Coleman's work, as in Benjamin's thought, experience is thereby determined twofold. First, it means construing the aesthetic in terms of a temporal structure, forming a discontinuous, (as it were) anachronistic constellation of the present and the past. Second, attention is focused on the

transformations that emerge, through the course of history, in the structure of experience itself. The experience of the artwork is refracted in the reflection on the historical, cultural and medial origins of that experience. This way, Coleman lends aesthetic experience a specific historical-materialist thrust. The powerful experience is pinned to the moment of perception and yet it has a historical grounding, or rather bears the historical within it, bringing the historical into the present by linking it with testimonies of a specific historical event, charged with all the tensions and contradictions that form an actual historical situation.

The Temporality of Theater: James Coleman, Dan Graham and Walter Benjamin

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many of Coleman's works (including *Box*) represent stage situations or the before and after of a performed event. This reference in the subject matter corresponds to the event-like nature of Coleman's works in general, which is expressed above all in the manner in which the viewer is addressed and his or her perception and experience made part of the work. Yet what does this theatrical dimension of Coleman's works mean? What exactly is their relation to theater—especially in light of Minimal Art, whose orientation towards the viewer Michael Fried has described, in his notoriously influential essay "Art and Objecthood," as "theatrical," thereby rejecting it as a way of addressing the viewer that hinges on dramatic effect and rendering it essentially empty?

I suggest that the art form of theater is a significant model for Coleman, as it is for Dan Graham, whose work I will discuss in relationship to Coleman's.[66] I argue that theater enables a different approach to precisely those issues of the presentation of experience, history and memory that have hitherto concerned us in relation to *Box*. For even if every enactment of a theater piece involves a singular and non-repeatable moment, and even if theater has, since the 1960s, placed itself to a lesser degree in the service of repetition and the repetition of a classical repertoire, and increasingly seen itself as the place where the present and present moments are staged, structurally speaking what characterizes theater as an art form is that it produces continuity as a

cultural practice in connecting repetition and renewal. Theater exists through enactments and repeat enactments and not, as do the visual arts, in the permanence of the object. Generally speaking, for the museum, time primarily exists as *chronos*, as a chronological order. Theater, by contrast, has a far stronger connection to a cyclical, iterative notion of time. Each enactment has a before and an after, each staging a preceding one to which it refers or from which it departs. A moment of the past is always contained precisely in the presence of the theatrical moment, and a past moment is brought into the present—this is the sine qua non of theater. This conception of the dimension of time brings to mind the way in which Bergson thought of the intermediation of past and present, relying on a similar notion of time which Benjamin applied for his theory of history and experience—and which Coleman introduced into the context of the visual arts through *Box*. The reference to theater that artists such as Coleman and Graham make, is articulated from the perspective of a concrete historical situation that is about reintegrating a dimension of history into art; a dimension that modernist discourse had by definition excluded. Theater became interesting because it offered a different access to the representation of spatial-temporal relationships. The focus was thus not primarily on escaping the conventions of art, on a hybridization (which Fried rebukes art for making), but on the necessity of reintegrating a dimension of the historical into art and its experience.

In the late 1960s and 1970s Graham realized a series of performances that he collectively termed *Theatre*.[67] At a time when theater itself did not want to be theatrical (at least not in the traditional, representational sense) and Performance Art was just seeking to achieve independence as an art form by setting itself off from the conventions of theater, Graham explicitly resorted to the art form of theater. Why? Because theater was able to introduce a different perspective on the question of the intersubjective experience of the participants of an art situation, an issue that Graham examined in the light of his involvement with social content. In *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1977—the same year as Coleman's *Box*), Graham stands in front of a mirror that fills the entire back wall of the stage, in effect doubling stage and audience. Facing the audience, he starts to describe his

own behavior—in a tone that is somewhere between that of a reporter and the account of a behaviorist experiment. He then describes the audience's behavior, turns to the mirror and first describes his own mirror image before analyzing the mirrored image of the audience. Graham describes the situation in an objectifying manner and emphasizes the difference between the situation and its representation in the mirror. In the process, his own performance is both situation and representation. To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht, it contains both the visual and distanced depiction and the involvement in one and the same scenario.

Graham developed these performances not least on the back of his study of Brecht.[68] In them he relies on Brecht's alienation effect and refers—half in parody, half seriously—to various contemporary approaches in sociology and psychology. Yet essentially he assumes a concept of theater that has its roots in bourgeois drama. The latter was as important for the art form of theater as the concept of the "work" was for the visual arts. It manifests a concept of theater that was considered hegemonic and sought to be overcome by Modernism. Its essential feature is the principle of division. Spatially, it is organized by an orchestra pit that marks the division between stage and auditorium. Aesthetically, this is continued in the separation of actor and role, of fiction and situation, of representation and represented. In dramatic theater, this aesthetic, conceptual and spatial arrangement enables the person (via the actor as representative of the respective personification of his or her problems, issues, wishes and needs) to encounter him or herself, as it were, to watch his or her own acting and thus establish a relationship to others. "The actor functions as the mirror," writes theater scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, "which reflects the image of the audience as being different to the audience. By reflecting on this image, the members of the audience in turn enter into a relationship with themselves."[69] Theater is fundamentally characterized by the fact that in its occurrence, in performance, it always also establishes a specific form of social interaction. It creates a spatial, temporal and social relationship between individuals *in situ* and *in actu*. Graham's works experiment with this principle. Influenced by his readings of Brecht and Benjamin and motivated by his interest in the political potential of collective activities,

Graham draws on this conception of theater, highlights it demonstratively, and construes it in a new way.

However, the format of theater offers more than the potential for staging social, intersubjective situations. In many of Graham's *Theatre* works, we can also discern an interest in perceptual dimensions that embrace different levels of time. His piece *Past Future/Split Attention* videoed in 1972 shows this in an exemplary manner. Here, two actors face each other. One predicts the other's future actions, while the other speaks of his opposite's past. Since both speeches, each addressing a different section of time, are spoken at the same time and in the same place, they both affect and influence each other. Thus increasingly tension and conflict arises between the two speakers. Both seek, through speaking, to directly affect the other's actions, so that their statements on the past/future increasingly slip into the present, or, to put differently, their present statements collide ever more strongly with the narrated past and the anticipated future. As Graham says about this work, recalling Bergson's mediation of present and past: "It's about the paradox of present time. Because neither stays in the present time as they speak or behave, it's impossible for there to be present time. The only thing resembling present time is a slight projection into the future, or into the just-past."[70]

Graham later takes up the principle of overlayering and subverting various time levels in his use of time-delayed video images. His time-delay rooms from the mid-1970s are indoor installations of surveillance cameras and monitors. The video recordings are displayed after a short gap in time, giving the viewers a delayed images of themselves. This eight-second delay is the period of time "between the moment in which you produce something and the moment it comes back to you as feedback."[71] With this "feedback time," which he also calls "brain time," Graham extends the present, so to speak. "My interest was in an extended present time, extended into the just past and projected into the future,"[72] writes Graham. He stages a time within time, and causes various time levels to meet—the present as a static time, and the extended feedback time. The reproduction technique of time delay becomes a reservoir of the recent past here. It forms a kind of (short-term) memory, similar to Coleman's afterimage, only more narrative. "The observer's

glimpse of him or herself several seconds 'previously' often provokes spontaneous, inquiring, humorous self-expressive behavior. The just-past has a self-conscious, slightly uncomfortable, comic notion."[73] Graham explicitly refers back to Benjamin when he describes this holding onto or repetition of a just-past moment as a criticism of the "pure" relationship to the present in the art of the 1960s:

> I think this led to a series of crises, because I think the idea of basing art on a strict phenomenology of the present and the work's visual presence assumed that every present would be equal to the present that just passed—that we'd have a series of presents, that they would be sufficient. My critique is that this devalues the former, just-past present. Walter Benjamin expresses this idea first. He notes that in consumer culture the importance of what has been recently passed and just discarded, like yesterday's papers, leads to an amnesia about that time period. [...] I think that leaves my position as one that has ultimately to defend a kind of Modernism—one that critiques Modernism but isn't post-Modernist. Modernism has more value and power now that it's been discarded and is repressed—is part of the recent past.[74]

Benjamin wrote his texts on theater in debate with Brecht's theory and practice of an epic theater of the late 1920s. A key starting point for him was the principle of separation, of spatial and temporal dissociation, of confronting oneself and of becoming eccentric—which in differing ways is also of fundamental relevance for Graham and for Coleman's work *Box*. Benjamin says that the central aspect of epic theater is the removal of the orchestra pit, i.e., the essential caesura in traditional theater, which, for Benjamin, "separates the players from the audience as though separating the dead from the living."[75] The separation is annulled but has not forfeited its meaning. Its position is shifted from the space between stage and audience to the stage itself (and into the audience).[76] Instead of a coherent drama we see individual significant processes staged as parallel events that are not necessarily related to one another in causal terms or content. The prevailing principle is that of interruption, fragmentation

and repetition. A process is brought to a standstill and fixed for a moment, enabling it to appear in a new, independent way. By freezing actions, Benjamin suggests, "[epic theater] moves forwards in jumps like the images in a film strip. Its basic shape is that of the shock with which the individual, well-delineated situations in the piece collide."[77] In this way, the staging of theater approximates structures of filmic perception—just as, conversely, Coleman's *Box* takes up this fragmented, *shock-like* principle and turns the film screening into a dissociating bodily experience.

Benjamin's theory of tragic drama does not, like Nietzsche, start from the chorus and music,[78] but from the *Agon*, the dispute, the conflict, the division. In his outstanding work on theater *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin states that "this very similarity reveals most clearly the real significance of the agonal character of the genuinely tragic: that silent struggle, that mute flight of the hero, which in the (Platonic) *Dialogues* has given way to such a brilliant display of speech and consciousness."[79] The linguistic drama, the drama of dialogue and speech, was preceded by the pre-mythical and pre-individual struggle performed in silence. For Benjamin, Greek tragedy marks precisely this transition from the physical to the metaphysical, and this transition is the reason for all dramatic tension, he suggests. This does not arise from the words per se, from debate, and also not from the silent struggle, but from the division of word and act; from what happens between speech and deed. One year after finishing *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin reformulated the theoretical approach in a review of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's modern tragedy *Der Turm*, which he wrote for *Literarische Welt*. "From ritual drama has emerged the primordial type of dramatic tension, the tension between word and action. Not what one speaks of casually, not the tension within the realm of the words themselves (not those of debate) not those of speech-less struggle (battle per se). It is solely the tension of ritual, the polar tension between action and speech itself that transcends thus."[80] Tragic is the polarization of physical action and speech, the speech that gets out of hand, the loss of voice and self, the separation of body, words, and meaning. It is precisely this tension between mind/body and language, between word and action that Coleman stages with *Box*. And as in Coleman's

work, this aesthetic also corresponds in Benjamin's thought with a specific conception of history.

Unlike Brecht, Benjamin did not prepare a treatise or *organon* on theater, nothing that could be presented as a conclusive program. Instead his achievement was to construe theater as constitutive in the course of a critique of Modernity and the modern consciousness, to render it fruitful in the context of a philosophical critique of the subject and history. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin constructs an idiosyncratic correlation between the Baroque and Modernity that is tantamount to reformulating modern consciousness. He describes the Baroque in general, and tragic drama in particular, as a cultural and stylistic phenomenon that is characterized by the traces of difference that run counter to their integration into the history of individuation and secularization. Formally, the tragic drama is defined by the motif of endless repetition devoid of all progress, presenting itself as a form that rejects its own completion. Benjamin understands tragic drama as a kind of distorted image of classical tragedy, a revision of classicism, bereft of autonomous and sovereign subjects and heroes. For him, tragic drama's potential functions as a critique of the Romantic/Idealist concept of history, amounts to a kind of counter-narrative, presenting an image of Modernity that assaults Idealism's historico-philosophical projections. Benjamin's subject is radically theatrical, one that is alienated from itself and behaves in an eccentric manner; it is precisely the product not of self-reflection, but of an experience of the loss of unity and stability and the capacity for self-determination. Benjamin resorts to the eccentric theatricality of the Baroque, to the lack of any self-reflection, of a transparency with regard to oneself. For Benjamin, the formal canon of Brechtian theater and above all the principle of the gesture, marks one possible approach of transposing this epistemocritical model of a non self-aware, theatralicalized subjectivity onto a form of historiography that is not subject-centered and does not take the subject as its starting point.

Benjamin's link between the portrayal of history and theater aesthetics elucidates the consideration of Dan Graham's analysis of the historical development of the theater. In 1983 Graham wrote "Theater, Cinema, Power," an essay about the historical development of theater from

the Renaissance—the development of which coincides with the codifying of perspective—to the Baroque, which grants the ideal view to the prince while simultaneously making him the object of the gaze of his subjects, to the concept of the *theatrum mundi* as a place of a symbolic restaging for the social regulation of the body and the gaze.[81] Graham elaborates the ways in which architecture fixes the position of the viewer within a regulated perspective that, as he says, not only creates a unification of the gaze but also reflects a political hierarchy. He refers back to Camillo's theater of memory, in which the functions of the theater are reversed in such a way that the viewer, from the position of the stage, looks into the auditorium, where the "images of knowledge" are arrayed. Graham's essay also mentions Brecht's idea of the theater as a parliament whose participants enjoy equal opportunity of political action. Graham describes the theater as an apparatus that symbolically reproduces the social regulation of the body, space and time, but which, because it continually needs to be re-created, has an intrinsic revolutionary potential for reversing these conditions by all participants.

In 1987, a few years after this essay had appeared, the gallery owner, curator and author Rüdiger Schöttle brought together the format of the exhibition with the model of a Baroque theater garden in an experimental project entitled *Theatergarden Bestiarium*.[82] Both Coleman and Graham were invited to participate: Graham designed a second version of his *Cinema* model from 1981 called *Cinema-Theater* consisting of two architectural elements divided in the middle by a mirror. The cinema side formed a projection surface for an excerpt from Roberto Rossellini's *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966) in which the king walks through the gardens of Versailles surrounded by his court. On the theater side, the dividing wall was the backdrop for the scene of a play, with a model of a set and performers. Graham wrote an essay for the project in which he describes the theater garden as a historical predecessor of the museum:

> The museum began near the Enlightenment to educate the middle class and to house artifacts. But actually the outdoor parks of the Renaissance, the Baroque period, and those in the time of the Rococo were also

> museums. They related to philosophy, to political allegory, poetry, to science and archaeology, all those things that museums are involved in as well.[83]

In Graham's vision of this other museum one went from stage to stage, from scene to scene, reactivating allegorical spaces of recollection and images of memory. For Graham, the theater garden is a kind of museum scenario, at the center of which is not the classified and exhibited object, but the staging of memory and recollection. On the other hand it can also be seen as a precursor to modern theme and entertainment parks. Through the motif of the theater garden—and here he meets Coleman—Graham opens up an archaeological perspective on the historical connection between history and memory, experience and spectacle. Graham's pavilions take cues from architecture and urban space as well as parks. Coleman, by contrast, takes from the forms of language and visual portrayal passed down through cultural memory. Yet both resort to the art form of theater—to theater as art form and theater as the cultural practice of staging the spatial and temporal relationships that mediate history and present. Both artists critically address, albeit in different ways, historical and modern forms of performing and staging, of representing and spectacularizing history and memory—a shared interest that resulted in a joint project in 1985, when Coleman invited Graham to design a stage set for the theater performance of *guaiRE: An Allegory* in Ireland.[84]

It is not a coincidence that Benjamin's most important epistemological text appeared as a preface to a book on theater and theatricality. For him, the critical inquiry into history first and foremost had an epistemological dimension regarding the problem of representation. In the foreword to his book on Baroque tragedy Benjamin writes about the functioning of representation. Representation and presentation are for him both theatrical and epistemological concepts. They are concepts which arrange knowledge and statements in space and time. Something is presented, located, imagined and spatialized, i.e. staged. For epic theater, Benjamin designates self-referentiality as the decisive factor. He stated that the foremost task of the epic director was "to give expression to the relationship between the action

staged and everything that is involved in the act of staging *per se*."[85] In his inquiry into Baroque tragedy and epic theater, Benjamin himself develops a form of writing that is based on correspondences, on similarities between a theme, its representation and a method. He develops a form of fragmentary representation that concurs with his conception of history, based on fragment and discontinuity, and through which the process of representation intermediates between history and contemporaneity.

In Coleman's work, history and experience are likewise defined by fragmentation and disassociation, by the loss of coherence and stability. He, too, sees a critical inquiry into history above all as the search for a principle of representation that corresponds to this view of history; that does not construe history from the vantage point of the subject, but in a radically discontinuous way, forges links between subjective experiences, historical events and cultural/media historical phenomena. Coleman again finds some basis for this in the art form of theater. As in Benjamin, Coleman emphasizes above all the productive force of presentation, the performative force of bringing forth something, which he masterfully shapes in different levels of his work. *Box* is based on a structure that emerges via similarities between the subject, the mode of representation and the effect. The subject of the boxing match corresponds to a mode of representation that is structurally very similar to the theme: to the rhythm of the punches, to the discontinuous shock-like rhythm of the visual pulse and a hammer-like beat. The performative impact of Coleman's oeuvre stems from this cross-referencing of the theme, the representation and the effect. He presents this reciprocal relationship in the artwork and uses it as the starting point for the production of artistic meaning. Only when we understand the reciprocal relationship between these two levels of representation and their physical presence (the theme, the structure of the work, and its effect), i.e. what it *says* and what it *does*, can we grasp the work's meaning.

Coleman's reliance on a model of updating and passing on history from one person to the next, namely oral history, which precedes bourgeois theater, highlights his interest in the cultural techniques of orally producing continuity in histories that, to a certain extent, are diametrically opposed

to the visual arts and the museum. The initial question I addressed in the beginning was how these two levels could converge in an artwork, and Coleman's *Box* presents the link both at the level of structure (as the link of event-like character and duration) and portrayal (as the dovetailing of history and its event-like actualization). This is also the crucial difference between *Box* and Performance Art in regard to how the notion of the performative is made productive in the visual arts: Performance Art transformed the artwork itself into an event that (qua event) refuses to bow down to the museum and the model of history which the museum represents. By contrast, Coleman integrates the moment of the event into the work. Or to be more precise, he takes up an element of that event-like character which is in principle innate in every artwork, namely the temporal moment of aesthetic experience and takes this as the starting point for a complex reflection, staging and presentation of time, duration and history in art. Instead of believing that the event-like character of art opposed the archival culture of the museum as the transmitter of tradition as members of the avant-garde did, Coleman uses the structural principle of the performative, the generative, the reality-creating, as part of the conception of the work. Coleman does not seek to exit from those conventions that ensure his work will become part of an archive and of memory. He instead utilizes them, shaping them so that the process of becoming history itself emerges as the generation of a history that eventuates anew and continues with each new viewer of the work. In this way he essentially succeeds in overcoming a fundamental dichotomy that the avant-garde had left to postwar art: the difference between the singular presence of the event and the continuity guaranteed in the permanence of the artwork.

Box is a filmic installation that can endure as such in a museum over time. Yet there is an irreducibly event-like character to the work. It is only through the viewer's physical and reflective experience that the individual parts of the work (the visual pulse, the beat and the voice) blend to form the work. Thus the work's actual location is the viewer's body and mind, as only there does the work materialize in its entirety as an artwork. The aesthetic experience is inseparably linked to its physical experience, which *cannot*

be documented (even if Coleman were to permit it), so that the writing and talking about the work (and thus the remembering and repeating of the experience) become a key and constitutive element for its enduring and being passed on. In other words, not only within the artwork are there correspondences between the subject matter, structure and effect. The fragmentary presentation of history in the artwork also corresponds to a similarly discontinuous mode in which the artwork itself becomes part of historiography. Thus, *Box* not only invents a new form of re-presenting history, but, in offering an encounter with the historical that is not bound to the object character of an artwork, also realizes a different mode of producing history. It draws on the fragmentary and discontinuous mode of oral history, of updating and passing on history from body to body, which to a certain extent is diametrically opposed to the culture of the document, continuity and permanence cultivated by the museum.[86] In this respect one could say that *Box* is part of a culture that, simultaneously, it fundamentally questions. And yet it is this ambiguity that not only forms the basis of its dialectical character, but also marks its relevance, as a contemporary artwork that evokes history.

[1] Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2003, p. 19.

[2] This does not necessarily mean that in principle Happenings of Fluxus events were not repeated, but in structural terms these art forms are characterized in contrast with the object-like permanence of visual arts.

[3] Dan Graham in conversation with Ludger Gerdes, Alexander Alberro, *Two-Way Mirror Power. Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London 1999, p. 62.

[4] Dieter Mersch, "Ereignis und Aura," *Kunstforum International*, Ruppichteroth, 152 (2000), p. 102f.

[5] On Wall's relation to the history of painting, see Thierry de Duve, "The Mainstream and the Crooked Path," Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys, *Jeff Wall*, Phaidon, London 1996, p. 26–55.

[6] Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies on Irish Culture*, Verso, London and New York 1995, p. 314.

[7] Eagleton, *Irish Culture*, p. 274.

[8] For a detailed description of this work see Anne Rorimer, "James Coleman 1970-1985," George Baker (ed.), *James Coleman*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 2003, p. 1.

[9] Lisa Ponti, "How Does Your Garden Grow: Documenti e discorsi sul lavoro di James Coleman," *Domus*, Milan, 570 (1977), p. 53.

[10] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1982.

[11] Kaja Silverman, "Growing Still," Helmut Friedel, Lenbachhaus/Kunstbau Munich (eds.), *James Coleman*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002, p. 147.

[12] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith, Continuum, London and New York, 2003, p. 42.

[13] Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. by Mary C. Richard, Grove Press, New York, 1958, p. 69.

[14] Artaud, *Theater and its Double*, p. 72.

[15] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas, The Orion Press, New York, 1964, p. xii.

[16] Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing*, Zebra Books, New York, 1988, p. 15.

[17] Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*, Fischer, Frankfurt/Main, 1997, p. 114–120.

[18] Oates, *Boxing*, p. 15.

[19] Oates, *Boxing*, p. 15.

[20] Oates, *Boxing*, p. 16–17.

[21] Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1993.

[22] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931), Michael W. Jennings a.o. (eds.), *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings Volume 2, part 2 (1931-1934)*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone a.o., The Belknap Press of University of Harvard Press, Cambridge and London, 2005, p. 507–530.

[23] See also Rosalind Krauss, "The Im/Pulse to see," Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, The New Press, Seattle, 1988, p. 51–78.

[24] Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless. A User's Guide*, MIT Press, New York, 1997, p. 164.

[25] Krauss, Bois, *Formless*, p. 161–165.

[26] See Walter Benjamin, "On some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn, Pimlico, London, 1999, p. 152-196.

[27] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2002, p. 479.

[28] Walter Benjamin, "Ten Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, p. 252

[29] Benjamin, "Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 153.

[30] Benjamin, "Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 159ff.

[31] Benjamin, "Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 160.

[32] Benjamin, "Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 153-154.

[33] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by N.M.Paul and W.S.Palmer, Zone Books, New York, 1990, p. 123.

[34] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 126.

[35] Benjamin, "Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 156.

[36] Walter Benjamin, "First Sketches," *The Arcades Project*, p. 867.

[37] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462.

[38] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 473.

[39] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Was wir sehen blickt uns an. Zur Metapsychologie des Bildes*, Fink, Munich, 1999, p. 98.

[40] Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act. Don Juan with J.L. Austin or Seduction in Two Languages*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and New York, 1983, and Sybille Krämer, "Was tut Austin, indem er über das Performative spricht? Ein anderer Blick auf die Anfänge der Sprechakttheorie," Jens Kretschmer, Dieter Mersch (eds.), *Performativität und Praxis*, Fink, Munich, 2003, p. 19–33.

[41] Krämer, "Was tut Austin," *Performativität und Praxis*, p. 19.

[42] John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, J.O. Urmson (ed.), Clarendon, Oxford, 1962, p. 108.

[43] Uwe Wirth (ed.), *Performanz. Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 2002, gives an overview on the debate within linguistic philosophy and literary theory.

[44] Georg Henrik von Wright, *The Tree of Knowledge and other Essays*, E.J.Brill, New York, 1993, p. 39.

[45] Sybille Krämer, "Sprache-Stimme-Schrift: Sieben Gedanken über Performativität als Medialität," Wirth, *Performanz*, p. 323.

[46] Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the late Capitalist Museum," *October*, Cambridge/Mass., 54 (1990), p. 9.

[47] For Krauss on Minimal Art see also: Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility—Reflections on Post '60s Sculpture," *Artforum*, New York, no. 3 (1973), p. 43–53.

[48] Krauss, "The Cultural Logic," p. 9.

[49] Krauss, "The Cultural Logic," p. 7.

[50] Krauss, "The Cultural Logic," p. 4.

[51] Krauss, "The Cultural Logic," p. 4.

[52] Krauss, "The Cultural Logic," p. 7.

[53] Krauss, "The Cultural Logic," p. 12.

[54] On the significance of the archaic and prehistorical in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, see Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay. Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1983.

[55] Quoted from Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, The University Press of Chicago, Chicago and London, 1998, p. 158.

[56] Rosalind Krauss, "Die kulturelle Logik des spätkapitalistischen Museums," *Texte zur Kunst*, Berlin, 2 (1992), p. 131–145.

[57] See also Benjamin H. Buchloh, "Memory Lessons and History Tableaux: James Coleman's Archaeology of the Spectacle" (1995), George Baker (ed.), *James Coleman*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 2003, p. 90.

[58] Oates, *Boxing*, p. 8.
[59] Buchloh, "Memory Lessons," *James Coleman*, p. 91.
[60] Buchloh, "Memory Lessons," *James Coleman*, p. 91.
[61] In Foucault's thought the concept of archaeology refers to a specific kind of relationship to the historical and has both an aesthetic and an epistemological dimension. See Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. Sheridan Smith, Pantheon Books, New York 1972.
[62] Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (1988), Gallimard, Paris, 1992. Quoted after Jonathan Crary, "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory," Rosalind Krauss a.o. (eds.), *October. The Second Decade 1986-1998*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1997, p. 418.
[63] Apparently, over a dozen people died of heart failure while following the match either live or on the radio.
[64] Oates, *Boxing*, p. 97.
[65] Benjamin, "Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 171.
[66] In the context of a discussion of art's political potential, Benjamin Buchloh already alluded to this link between Coleman and theater and also proposed to read it through Walter Benjamin. "Coleman uses," Buchloh writes, "theater as a system of representation, although I cannot say exactly what theater is for him." Taking up Buchloh's idea, I attempt to flesh out the linkage. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Catherine David, Jean-François Chevrier, "Das politische Potential der Kunst 2," Documenta-und-Museum-Friedericianum-Veranstaltungs-GmbH (ed.), *Politics-Poetics. Das Buch zur Documenta X*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997, p. 638.
[67] Dan Graham, *Theatre*, Anton Herbert, Ghent, 1981.
[68] Graham wrote various essays in which he addresses Brecht, the schismatic principle of presence and the self as a dramatic effect. See Dan Graham, "Dean Martin/ Entertainment as Theater," Brian Wallis (ed.), *Dan Graham. Rock My Religion. Writings and Art Projects 1965-1990*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1993, p. 56–65.
[69] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre*, trans. by Jo Riley, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 2.
[70] Dan Graham in conversation with Ludger Gerdes, Alberro, *Two Mirror Power*, p. 76.
[71] Dan Graham in conversation with Dieter Huber, *Dan Graham Interviews*, Hans Dieter Huber (ed.), Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997, p. 14.
[72] Dan Graham in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, Charta, Milan, 2003, p. 330.
[73] Dan Graham in conversation with Eric de Bruyn, Alberro, *Two Way Mirror Power*, p. 117.
[74] Dan Graham in conversation with Ludger Gerdes, Alberro, *Two Way Mirror Power*, p. 76.
[75] Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?" (II) (1939), *Selected Writings Volume 4*, p. 302–309.
[76] On Benjamin, Brecht and the meaning of caesura, see Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation. Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1991.
[77] Walter Benjamin, "The Land where the Proletariat May Not Be Mentioned" (1938), *Selected Writings Volume 3*, p. 331.
[78] Nietzsche describes the "dramatic primordial phenomenon" as a process of transformation in which the individual divides itself up. Separated between actor and audience, like a spirit of itself, it has no authentic place or body. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he writes: "This process is the primal dramatic phenomenon in the tragic chorus: seeing oneself transformed and acting as though one had truly entered another body, another character. This process is the start of the evolution of the drama." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of the Tragedy Out Of The Spirit Of Music*, ed. by Michael Tanner, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, Penguin Books, London, 1993, p. 42.)
[79] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. by J. Osborne, Verso, London, 1977, p. 113.
[80] Since this passage is missing from the existing English translation, it is here quoted from German: Walter Benjamin, "Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Der Turm. Ein Trauerspiel in fünf Akten," Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser (eds.), *Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften III*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1974, p. 32.
[81] Dan Graham, "Theater, Cinema, Power," *Parachute*, Montreal, 31 (1983) p. 11–19.
[82] Chris Dercon, Rüdiger Schöttle (eds.), *Theatergarden bestiarium. The Garden as Theater as Museum*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1990.
[83] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Dan Graham, "Four Conversations: December 1999–May 2000," Marianne Brouwer, Anastas Rhea (eds.) *Dan Graham Werke 1965-2000*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf, 2001, p. 80.
[84] The work was performed in Dungaire Castle in the Southwest of Ireland and it took up the issue of a politically highly weighted culture of memory, that of oral tradition. Yet what makes it interesting in relationship to *Box* is the similarity in terms of a self-reflective structure that is shaped by correspondences between themes and effect. What was performed corresponded with the effect produced by the act of the performing. The depiction of history went hand in hand with an aesthetic experience into which a reference to history (to the construction of history and stories) was inscribed. While, for example, the performance itself centered on the theme of tradition and the question of continuity between the past and the present, it repeatedly also called upon active memory on the part of the audience and highlighted their inability to find a "sovereign" approach to history and the stories. (see: Luke Gibbons, "Narratives of No Return: James Coleman's *guaiRE*," Baker (ed.), *Coleman*, p. 73–81.)
[85] Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? (first version)," *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock, Verso, New York and London, 1998, p. 11.
[86] This essentially also applies to the later *projected images*.

CHAPTER II

The Reality of Art

Context and Agency in the Works of Daniel Buren

James Coleman and Daniel Buren share a pronounced awareness of the influence of the institutional context on a work of art and its production of meaning. But the ways in which the two artists deal with this context are quite different. Coleman creates a separate space for each of his works that is visually and acoustically sealed off from the exhibition context, while Buren, chooses the opposite strategy: he abolishes the distinction between artwork and context. The artwork as a closed, signifying unity, before which the viewer lingers in a deepening process of recognition, no longer exists. Acknowledging that the spatial and discursive context decisively contributes to the artwork's meaning, Buren incorporates this context into the work's conception from the very beginning.

Since his first *in situ* pieces of the late 1960s, with their pre-printed striped motif, it is the

elision of the boundaries between work, framework and the site of presentation that characterizes Buren's art.

In his work of the past four decades, Buren has shown how many levels the context of a work of art can have: It may be spatial, discursive, institutional, economic or even ideological, and can proceed from the architecture of the site, or the conventions of the latter's use, its relationship to the city, to history, to society. The principle always remains the same. Buren integrates all the parameters of the context within which the aesthetic experience of the artwork is to take place into the work's conception and composition. This orientation towards the parameters that determine the real social existence of a work of art gives rise to the central question of Buren's work: If one regards the work of art as inseparably linked to a concrete space and its conditions and conventions, where are the possibilities and limits of artistic activity and agency? Since Minimal Art this question has been central to a tradition of contemporary art that dissolves the clear division between the artwork and the reality of its presentation, perception and reception. In 1986 Buren wrote, "Every work [...] is in reality the result of a sometimes substantial number of interactions. Of interferences. The great beauty of a work lies without doubt in the fact that all the interactions that have brought it about remain visible in the finished piece, making it delicate and open without upsetting its balance."[1] The relationship between (artistic) self-determination and (contextual) heteronomy is central to all of Buren's work, which explores this relationship, makes it visible, gives it form, and finally attempts to change it.

The painter Daniel Buren laid the foundations for his work in 1965 in a radical gesture: a painting both consisting of and depicting stripes. Today these vertical alternations of white and color, each approximately 8.7 centimeters wide, have become a constant in a body of work that has extended this basic principle in a wide variety of compositional and material ways and in more than a thousand site-specific installations to date. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Buren pasted his striped paper onto hundreds of billboards in various cities and towns in the dark of night. He has devised numerous projects and exhibitions for galleries and museums, has worked in public spaces, on buildings, lakes and rivers,

and in parks. In 1986 he provoked a fierce controversy with his redesign of the Cour d'honneur in the Palais Royal in Paris,[2] and in the same year won the Jury Prize of the Venice Biennale for the French pavilion. Today Buren is a kind of national institution in France, mounting projects for public spaces and museums around the world.

The use of stripes was initially determined by an attitude of negation with regard to the subjective-gestural painting of the Ecole de Paris, which Buren countered by painting without meaning or symbolism, without composition, illusion or expression, a "painting at point zero,"[3] as Buren put it in reference to Roland Barthes,[4] in which "the projection of the individual is nil."[5] It is a form of painting that "whether he signs 'his' work or not, it nevertheless remains anonymous,"[6] that no individual—neither artist nor viewer—"could claim […] as *belonging* to him,"[7] but that is still painting, because the stripes fulfill the minimum conditions of composition, namely the differentiation between a foreground and a background (although this differentiation can be reversed arbitrarily), and because Buren (as a reminiscence of the painterly gesture) paints the stripes at either end white.

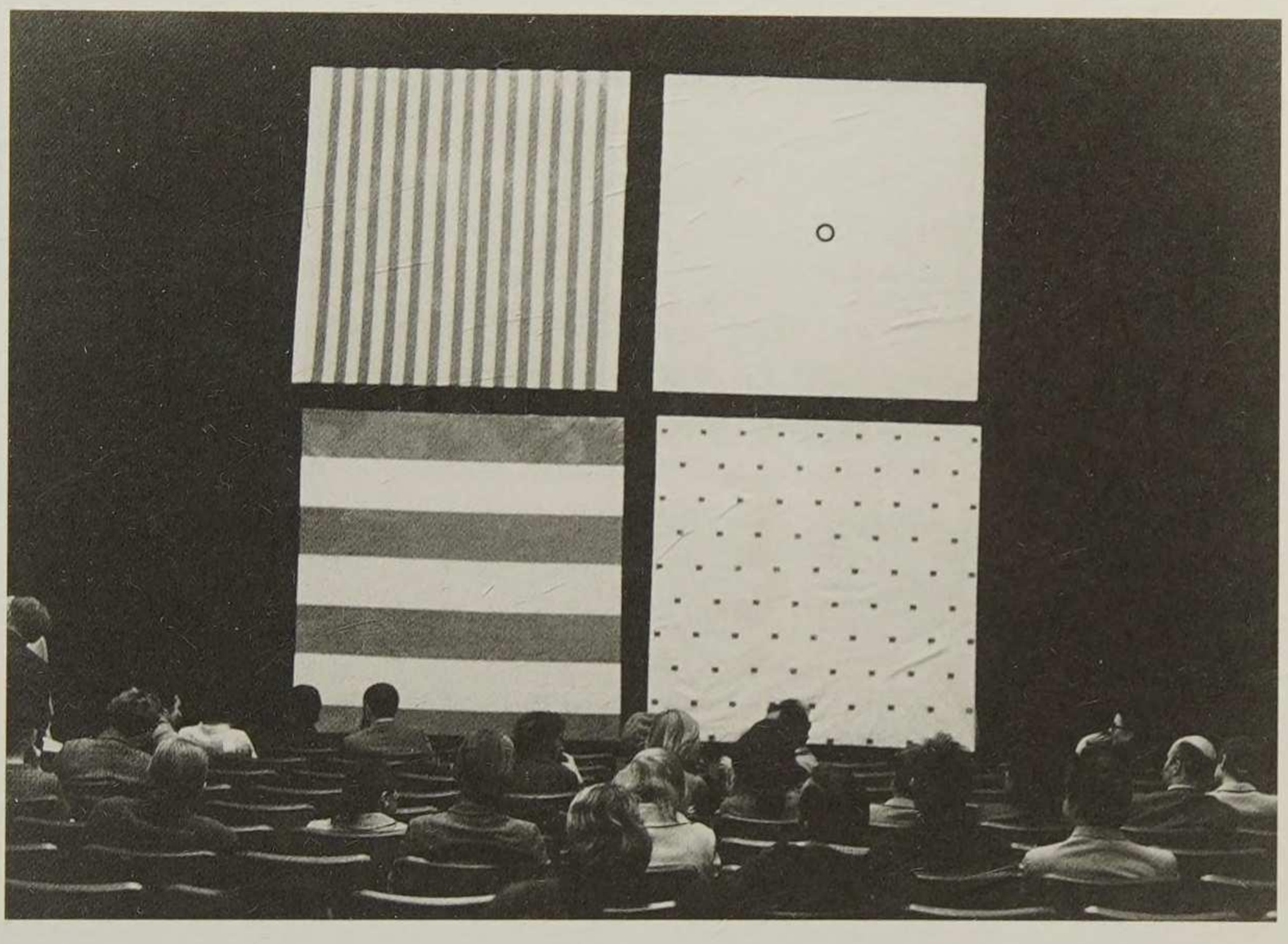
This "painting at point zero" shares certain tendencies in American painting of the early to mid-1960s, primarily in the work of Frank Stella. Both Buren and Stella were interested in painting in such a reduced way that the objecthood of the work of art came to the fore. Yet Buren's works do not follow the Stella paradigm of self-referentiality that is radicalized and exhausted in the tautological principle of *what you see is what you see*. Stella's contention of pure objectness is called into question by Buren, who extends the analysis of the painted work of art beyond its formal and material aspects to its context. Buren's works are open to the spatial context in which they exist. This makes them comparable to a certain extent to the work of some Minimal artists, e.g. Robert Morris and Carl Andre, whose objects are also focused on the spatial exhibition situation.

In 1960, Robert Morris was invited to produce a piece for New York's legendary experimental Living Theatre. For three minutes, Morris presented the audience with a large, white, upright column, which suddenly and unexpectedly fell down. That was all: an absurd mini-drama, reminiscent

of Beckett, reduced to the enactment of a single banal moment. For his part, in 1967, Buren realized an action in the theater of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (in collaboration with Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni, with whom he worked from 1966 to 1967 as the group BMPT)[ill. 1]. The audience saw a 5 x 5 meter tableau consisting of four separate striped or dotted images hanging on the stage. Nothing happened at first. When the viewers began to get restless, the artists passed around signs saying "*Il ne s'agissait évidemment que de regarder des toiles de Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni*," followed by objective, sober descriptions of the paintings.[8] A comparison of these projects illuminates the different approaches to the object and its perception: whereas Morris choreographs the object, Buren (or BMPT) choreographs its perception. Duchamp, who was in the audience in Paris, is supposed to have said, "What a frustrating happening: one couldn't have done it better."[9] The theatrical context enabled BMPT to give the art experience a dramaturgical form. Through the temporal extension of the perceptual process and the simultaneous purging of meaning, they created an awareness of the space, and of the temporal and spatial conditions of aesthetic experience.

"Then, suddenly," Buren observed, "this painting which pretended to be radically other while remaining 'painting' led to the questioning of the location in which all this was happening."[10] The tangible object became a "visual tool," as Buren has always called his stripes, emphasizing their functional character. But a tool for what? It is no longer a work that is intended to be seen and observed, but an element that enables—again different— forms of seeing and observation. The endeavor to give visibility to this difference, which arises from the aesthetic transformation of a given situation, was the essential idea behind the *in situ* principle with which Buren still works today.

Buren's attention to the real circumstances of art presentation, to what "really happens," and his debate with the social reality of art in his numerous texts, has contributed to his works' aura of critical radicalism. For in the end Buren's formal interventions raise questions of power. Who determines a work of art's production of meaning? The artist, the curator, or the conventions to which both are subject? "There is an increasing tendency for exhibitions to display



[ill. 1] Photo-souvenir: *Manifestation N° 3: Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 1967

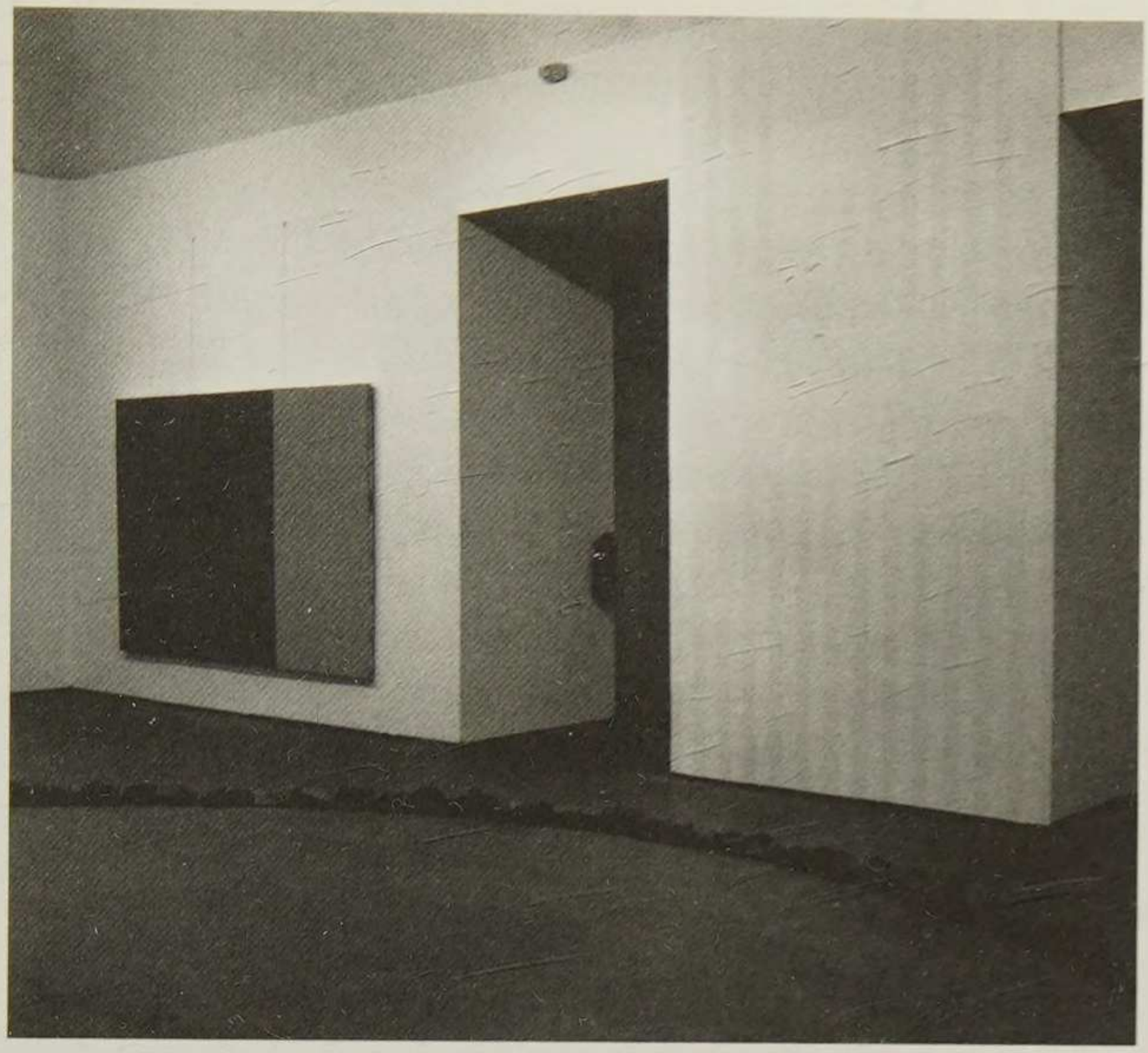
not works of art, but themselves as works of art," writes Buren in the catalogue of Documenta 5.[11] In the same way that Buren makes no separation between image and frame, between work and context, there is also no separation between the formal, cultural and political aspects of a work of art. "Any production, any work of art is social, has a political significance."[12]

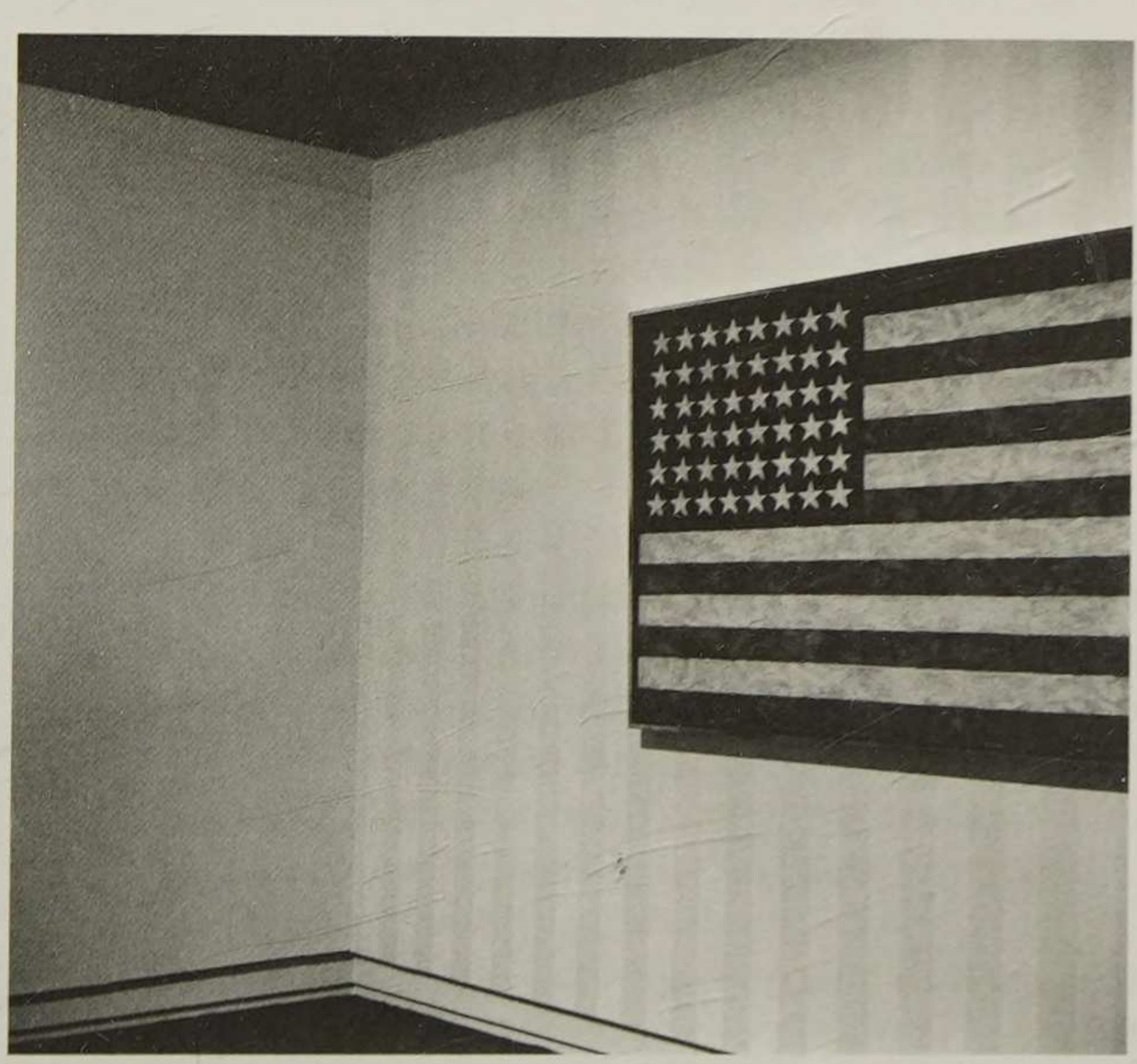
Alongside artists like Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke, Buren is seen as a historical representative of the so-called Institutional Critique of the late 1960s and the 1970s. The term embraces positions that, within the medium of art, entered into a debate with the artwork's surrounding space and its cultural and social significance. In contrast to the historical avant-gardes' criticism of the museum, these artists did not deny the museum, but instead thematized—literally from within—the conventions that determine the production, perception and reception of art.

Buren, however, has always affirmed the museum, as he writes, as the "starting and reference point" for art. "The Museum/Gallery has become the general frame, container of all art as it exists."[13] For him, the attempt to escape the museum means isolation; it is a flight from the necessity of public presentation.

> I don't think I would be interested by the prospect of heading off into the desert to do a piece, as so many artists did back in the 1960s. As a matter of principle, I wouldn't go. It is not an aesthetic point of view. I might go to look around, but not to work. Because at that point, one finds oneself in places where human beings are merely visitors and no longer social beings.[14]

Buren confirms the museum as *conditio sine qua non* of art, without which art as we understand it today would not and could not exist. In this respect it is a mistake to describe Buren as a critic of the institution. It is because Buren, as he says, has a "sensitivity to the public place in the broadest sense,"[15] that he sees—in contrast to many artists of the 1960s and 1970s, who wanted to bring art out of the museums and closer to social realities—in the museum and its conventions the potential to bring about a meeting of art and society *in situ*. Buren is interested in the social reality of





[ill. 2, 3] Photos-souvenirs: *Exposition d'une exposition, une pièce en 7 tableaux*, *in situ* works, in Documenta V, Kassel, 1972, details

art, its social existence and perception, and in this respect the museum is, as he says, "the single viewpoint from which a work is generally seen […]."[16] A position outside the museum would in the end be ineffectual or be outrun by the institution. As the history of Land Art and Performance Art (and in particular the problematics of their institutional historicizing) confirms, Buren has been proved right in this assessment. In the end, those very art forms whose self-conception was based on dissociating themselves from the museum confirmed the institution's validity and its rules when they were later reintegrated as photographic or video documentation. For this reason, according to Buren, such a flight from the museum ultimately and repeatedly means remaining in the museum.[17]

A further reason why it would be mistaken to describe Buren as a critic of the institution lies in the fact that such a description would awaken the impression that he considered the significance of the institution to be greater than that of the artwork. This is absolutely not the case. Buren is primarily interested in art. He recognizes the degree to which art's meaning and effect are also determined by the institution, not only in its physical context, but also through the entire apparatus, i.e. the ensemble of precepts, discourse, and convention within which a work of art exists as such. It is for this reason that he takes the institutional, and thus social, incorporation of art as a starting point for his works. He operates with this incorporation and gives shape to it, instead of leaving it to curators, for example. Buren seeks to conceive the work of art anew, an aspiration that is no less ambitious than that of Duchamp with the ready-made. The ready-made was Duchamp's answer to his question of the possibility of originating an art that is no longer conceived in visual and aesthetic terms. Buren, on the other hand, attempts to conceive art in a new way precisely in terms of aesthetic perception: his works are, as Lyotard says, "ontological in nature."[18] They give art a new kind of being and functionality.

In 1969 Buren quotes a long passage by Maurice Blanchot in which he sees resonance with his own idea of art. "How is it," asks Buren, "that the very moment that art disappears, in that it can no longer be justified," and continues, quoting Blanchot, "it appears for the first time as an

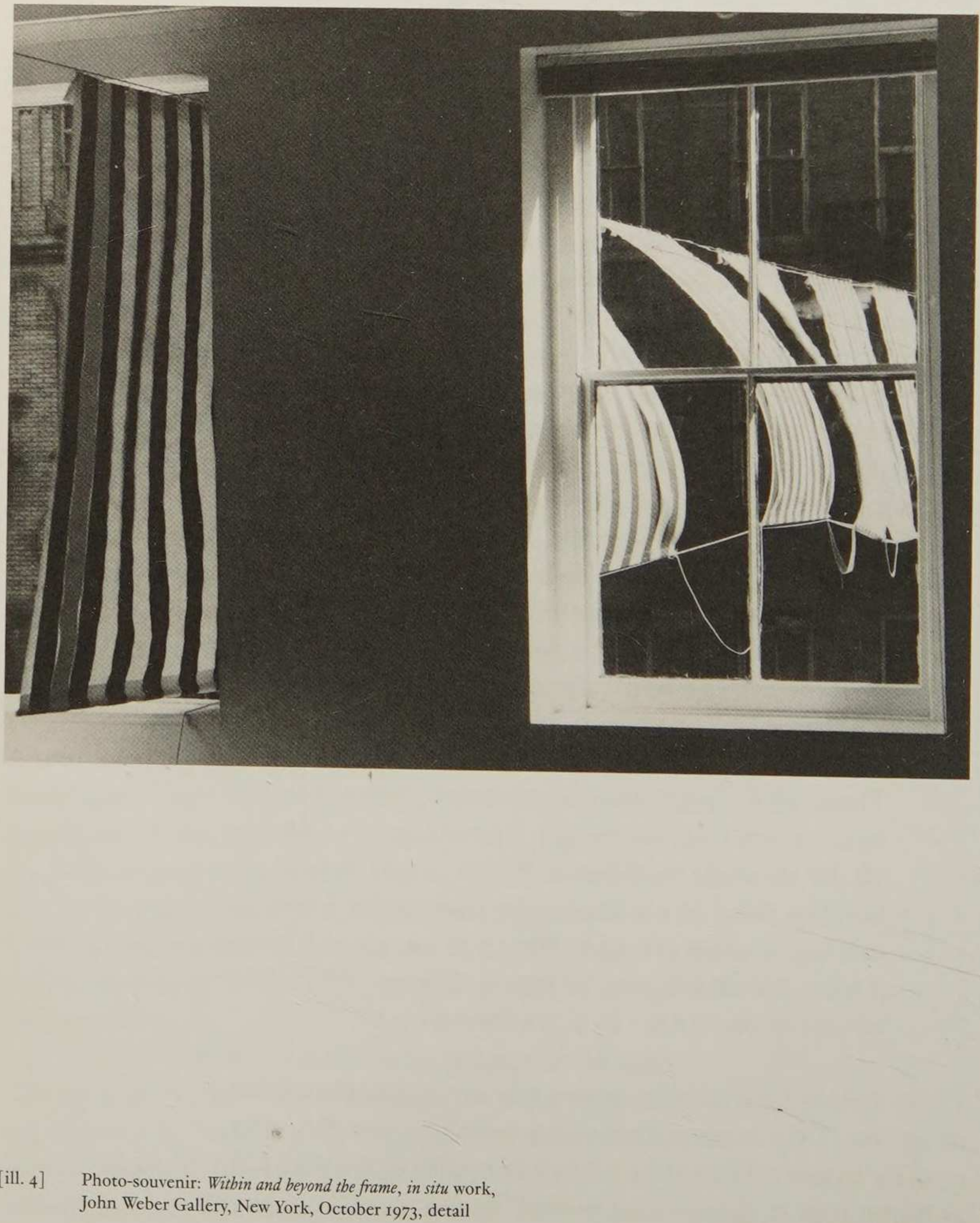
investigation in which something essential is at stake, and what counts is no longer the artist, neither his emotional state nor the immediate presence of his person, not the work, nor the values upon which the world is built or through which the next world was revealed to this one—an investigation that despite its precision and rigor wishes to complete as a work: *a work of which nothing can be said, except that it is*?"[19]

"*A work of which nothing can be said, except that it is*": Buren conceives of an art in which nothing is depicted, an art that does not express the subjectivity of its author, but through the power of its sheer existence in relation to its location and circumstances can make something visible. As implied by the term "investigation," Buren assumes a certain epistemological dimension to this referential aspect.

Buren's use of the word "signe" for his markings perhaps establishes the main significance of the referential aspect of his art. For Derrida, the sign is determined by its ambiguity, by its capacity to take on and also to shift among different meanings depending on its context. What is decisive here, is not the sign's indicative function, but its power to shift meaning, which is rooted in its ambiguity. Derrida distinguishes the "signe" from the "*marque*," which is a sign that doesn't refer to anything, that is entirely subsumed in a movement that produces neither function nor form, but a dynamic.[20] Buren's stripes are both signs and marks, which enter into contexts, cause something, become effective, in that they draw attention to their particular surroundings. They catch the eye as a transcultural, almost universal phenomenon that everyone knows:

> There were already alternating stripes before I began to use them—approximately 8.7 centimeters wide and all the same the world over. Which is very strange, because there aren't many signs that can be found in extenso in other cultures. Wherever you go, to China, Africa, South America, or Japan, they use alternating stripes of around 8.7 to 9 centimeters wide.[21]

These stripes have neither author nor copyright; they belong to no one. They mean nothing in themselves, but they refer to their context. They are a déjà vu as opposed to a déjà fait, as Buren puts it, dissociating himself from Duchamp.[22] Their



[ill. 4] Photo-souvenir: *Within and beyond the frame, in situ* work, John Weber Gallery, New York, October 1973, detail

actual meaning lies in their function as a shift between sign and signed, in this movement towards something else:

> I offer something extremely visible and easily identifiable. But contrary to the whole history of painting, this system makes an announcement: What is happening isn't there: It's between this sign and another sign, for example. It travels in space and time. You have to see materials and forms that are different every time.[23]

Buren's concept of the work of art is fundamentally sustained by the endeavor to gain a specific scope of action and agency for the work of art. Buren dismantles the boundaries of art in the direction of its context in order to transform this context. He proceeds from what *really happens* so as to intervene in this reality of art and configure its effects. This becomes particular apparent in the way Buren has dealt with the exhibition format of the retrospective. As a historicizing show, the retrospective in itself implies a particular understanding of time, history and the development of an artistic oeuvre, in which the individual work of art has its place. An exhibition space is not a neutral space, and neither are exhibition formats like the retrospective, as they place the artworks in a specifically defined context of meaning. The question is, what possibilities for action remain to the artist? Should he or she take the meanings arising from the conventions of the format as given, or is there an opportunity to shape them in some way, perhaps even redefine them?

For a long time, Buren rejected the retrospective format for his work.[24] In a certain sense, his entire body of work is oriented towards creating a specific artistic spatial and temporal presence that is incompatible with the historical duration of art in museums and eludes the model of the retrospective recomposition of an oeuvre. In 1975 he wrote:

> It's also not about a completely arbitrary rejection of the retrospective. [...] Since its very beginning "X" [the pattern of stripes] has been in opposition to the artwork in general and specifically to the illusion of the artwork as a unique, unrepeatable, and undying object, and also to the illusion that the work of art is an object without a context.[25]

[ill. 5] Photo-souvenir: *Within and beyond the frame, in situ* work, John Weber Gallery, New York, October 1973, detail

Yet the question remains as to a historicizing approach to this work, and with the passing of time it has become even more relevant in light of the fact that Buren himself has now become a historical figure. At some point, the retrospective view of decades of successful work comes into play, and it is not within the power of the artist to prevent or negate this. Can an artist like Buren, who painstakingly controls all the modes of presentation, documentation and sale of his work (and who has also influenced its interpretation through numerous texts of his own), exert an influence on the historicization of his work? How does this work, which has developed so decisively in debate with the museum—as the institution that frames, determines, enables the artwork's existence—relate to the museum as the location that preserves and recollects art and transfers it to a collective memory?

Art and Its Conventions

Buren's works are temporary. Their location, time, manner and duration are fixed. The only thing that lastingly remains is *photos-souvenirs*, whose appellation in itself is intended to emphasize the difference between the work and its documentation. It is inherent to the temporary structure of the *in situ* principle that Buren's works defy the conventional format of the historicizing retrospective. The re-presentation of the work in its original contexts would be impossible in a museum situation. And the exhibition of individual components away from their original contexts would not only be nonsensical, but would contradict the spirit of the works, as it would mean ignoring the retrospective's own site.

The repetitive principle of the stripes was always the negation of a social and artistic imperative of progress. The idea was to produce a work that was based not on development and progress, but on repetition and variation.

> From the moment the visible is neutral it ceases to be evolutive, i.e. a neutral form can follow another identical or different neutral form […] The most important point is recognition of the elimination of the concept of progress and perfectibility.[26]

Repetition is the principle that at once combines Buren's individual works into one work, and allows him (to a certain extent) to oppose the idea of progress and development that is inherent to the idea of an oeuvre. In many texts Buren has accentuated the constant repetition of the striped pattern in different contexts as what directs the question of its meaning away from the stripes themselves to their respective context and situation.[27] "Repetition," he writes, "is the ineluctable means of legibility of the proposition itself."[28]

The theme of repetition became concretely significant for Buren in 1975 when he was invited to a second solo exhibition at the Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach. Confronted with the offer of exhibiting for a second time at the same place, of, as he put it, "transforming it anew," raised the question of whether and how the *in situ* principle of a Buren work could be repeated or continued. The previous project, realized in 1971,[29] brought the matter of the retrospective into play, and Buren considered this in order, as he said, to find out "what this inevitable stage in an artistic career glosses over, conceals, or reveals."[30]

For Buren's new work, entitled *A partir de là* ..., he researched the past decade of the museum's installation history—including its specific style of hanging, which Buren describes as the "signature of the museum staff"[31]—and covered the walls of all the institution's exhibition spaces with striped patterns[ill. 6]. He cut spaces into the pattern where paintings hung during exhibitions that were installed by the director Johannes Cladders.[32] The absent works emerge from the stripes as negative forms, giving rise to a kind of "retrospective through absence,"[33] as the cutouts functioned like an index that referred to the past presence of the paintings. Buren's work entered into a particular mutual relationship with the history of the once-presented works. The stripes evoked the absence of the paintings as a shadow of themselves, as it were. To a certain extent this project was also a retrospective view of the history of the presentation of art in this museum. His work marked the past presence of the paintings in the syntax of their spatial arrangement, thus transforming the exhibition history into a new, spatial-simultaneous image that remained inscribed in the depleted impact of the paintings—as vacant space. The exhibition space, with its own history, itself became the subject of a

[ill. 6] Photo-souvenir: *A partir de là..., in situ* work, Städtisches Museum, Mönchengladbach, November 1975, detail

work of art, which appeared to exist simultaneously with the absent artworks, from various historical epochs, marked as gaps. Confronted with looking back on an older work that he had created for this location, Buren applied the retrospective principle to the institution itself.

But the decisive step took place when the exhibition was over and Cladders wanted to acquire one of the spaces for the museum's permanent collection. The museum had recently decided to build an extension, and the question was whether one of the older rooms used in Buren's installation could be integrated into the new building. Although this request in fact contradicted the *in situ* principle of his work, Buren agreed. He created a life-size wooden reconstruction of the original space and, instead of empty spaces, cut windows into it, which were closed with transparent film. This room was placed inside one of the new museum spaces. In this way a work that was intended as a marking of museum forms of presentation itself became part of a museum collection. This step was decisive in that Buren in retrospect created a kind of prototype for a new kind of sculptural installation, which he began to produce in the 1980s: the *Cabanes éclatées*, the broken-open cubes or huts. The basic principle of these works is always the same: they are open, walk-in architectural structures, from which parts are cut away and can be found on the surrounding walls. These *Cabanes* can be presented in various contexts, i.e. they are repeatable, although their appearance changes depending on the context. So the principle of the repetition and continuation of a work that Buren developed in Mönchengladbach is structural to these works. As a kind of space, the *Cabanes* reflect and transform the surrounding location, as each new context in turn transforms their appearance.

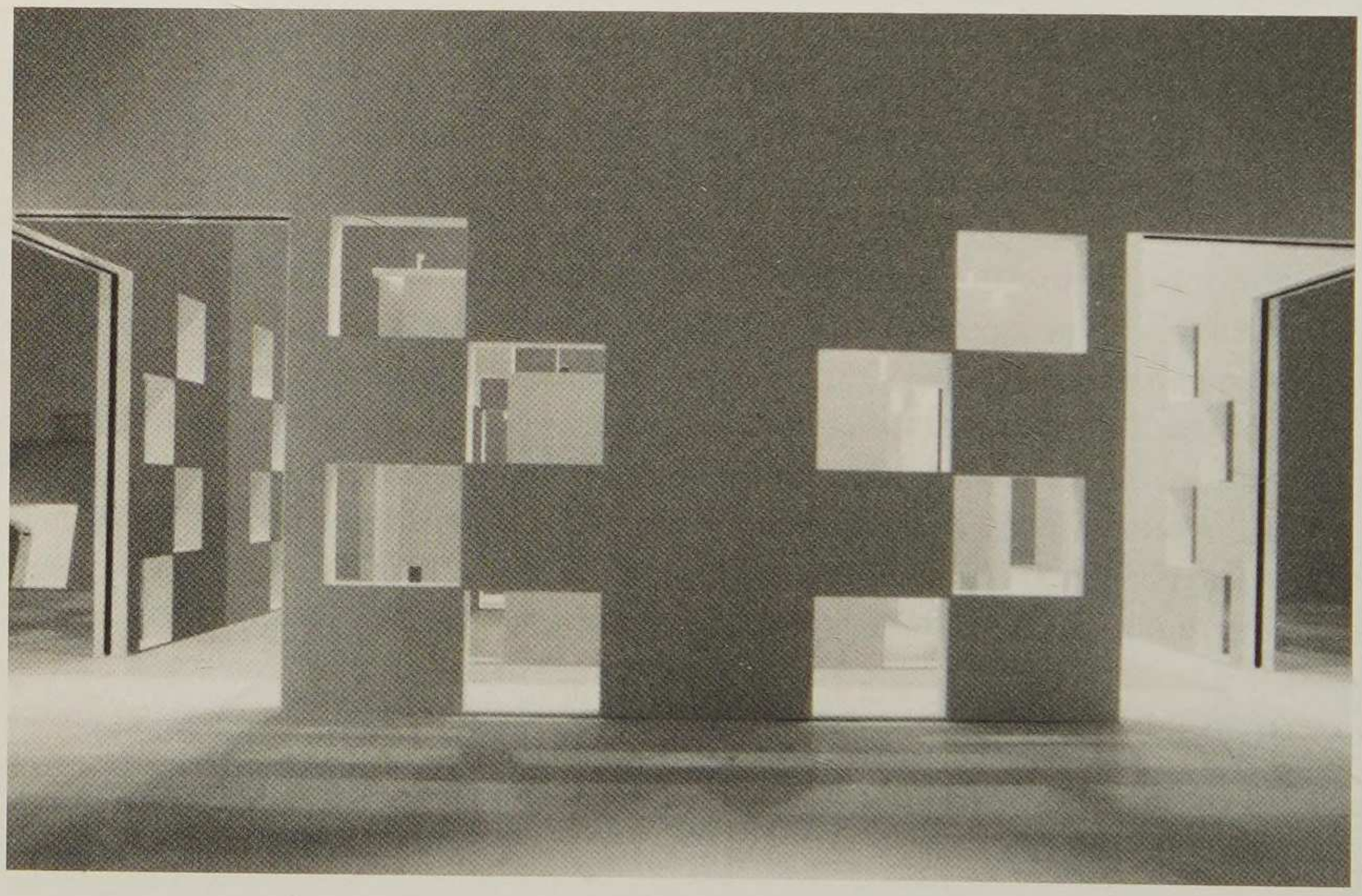
Buren's way of working changed with these works. Buren creates objects, but they have an interdependent relationship with their spatial context. With the *Cabanes* Buren gives his work a different form of being. There is no longer the one, final version of a work that cannot be repeated or reproduced. From that point, every formal appearance is only one of many possible manifestations inherent to it. When Buren presented the first *Cabanes* in Düsseldorf, he said that his idea had been to create a work that could be shown in various places and be objectively different each

time. A work that, as the artist Pierre Huyghe said in conversation with Buren, "[…] can be played again elsewhere in a different way."[34] Buren introduces a dimension of relative permanence into his work that his previous *in situ* works didn't have. It is not the permanence of the museum, whose intention is to conserve the original state of a work, but rather a kind of changeable permanence, an "impermanent permanence,"[35] as Hans Ulrich Obrist suggests, that is realized in the work's continuous updating and transformation.

In the *Cabanes*, Buren found the possibility of integrating his own form of continuity and duration into his working concept. The problem of a retrospective of his oeuvre remained unresolved, however, and became concrete in a particular way with an exhibition that Buren realized at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2002. When France's most important museum of modern and contemporary art dedicated an exhibition to Buren, at the age of 65, this exhibition would inevitably be perceived as a retrospective. Buren must have been particularly aware of the performative power of this convention. With this exhibition, which from the very beginning was seen by the museum as a kind of retrospective—a text by its director Alfred Pacquement confirms this[36]—Buren took on the challenge of artistically dealing with, and at the same time rerouting, this format. The Paris exhibition transformed the format of the retrospective into something new, into an original form of re-viewing a body of work through which Buren so thoroughly resets the parameters of the retrospective that the exhibition, not without justification, is entitled *Le Musée qui n'existait pas.*

Le Musée qui n'existait pas, 2002

The main part of Buren's exhibition took place on the sixth floor of the Centre Pompidou. The artist had divided the space into 71 cubic modules in a grid system. Connected to each other via passageways, each of these spaces was constructed differently, but none of them formed an independent unit[ill. 7–13]. The ensemble of spaces extended in a repetitive rhythm without beginning or end, without consolidation or focus, with no separation between artwork and frame, form and content. From space to space Buren's decorative canon repeated in endless variations and differentiations. The walls,



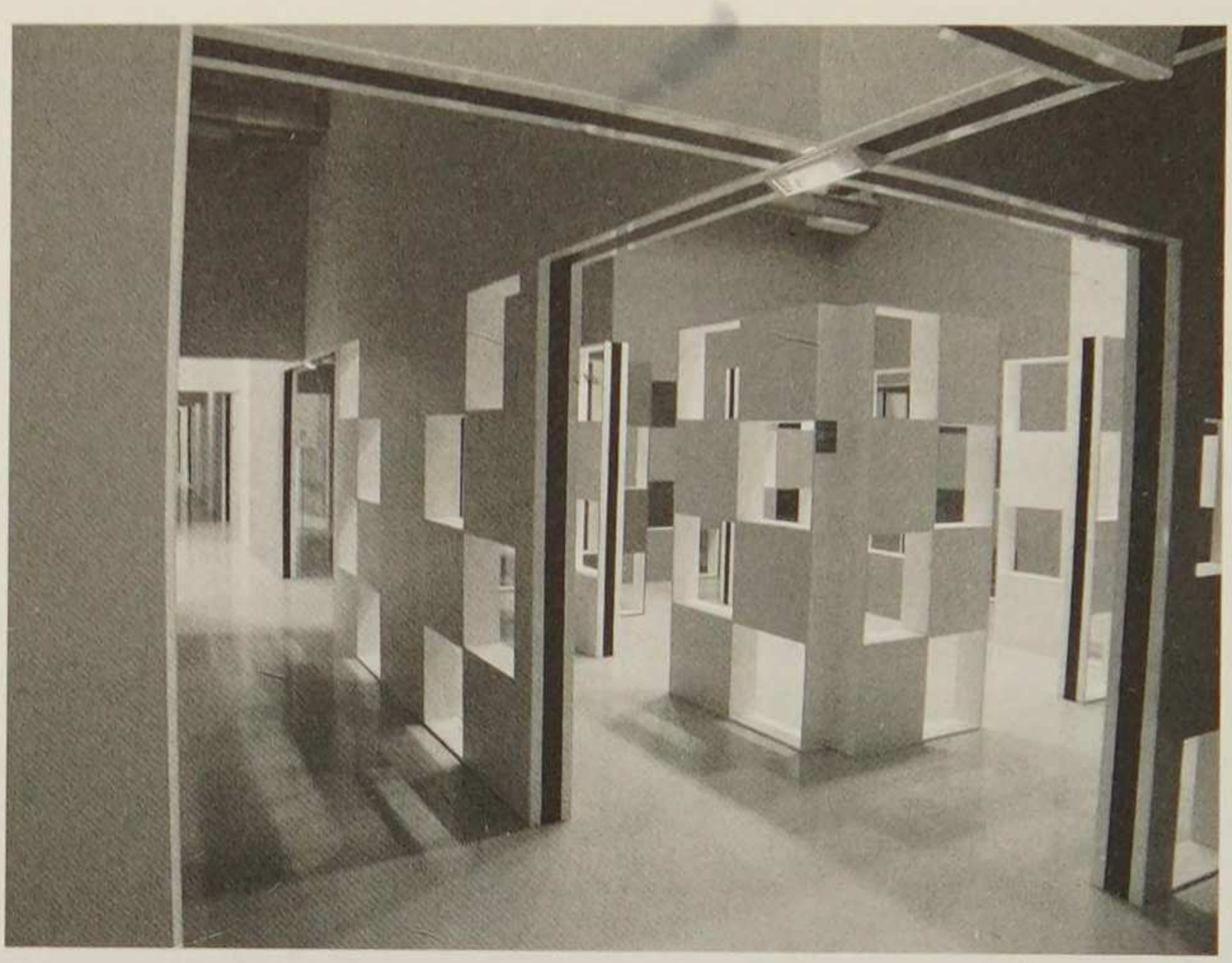
[ill. 7] Photo-souvenir: *La Cabane implosée: les rumeurs de la ville, in situ* work, in *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, detail

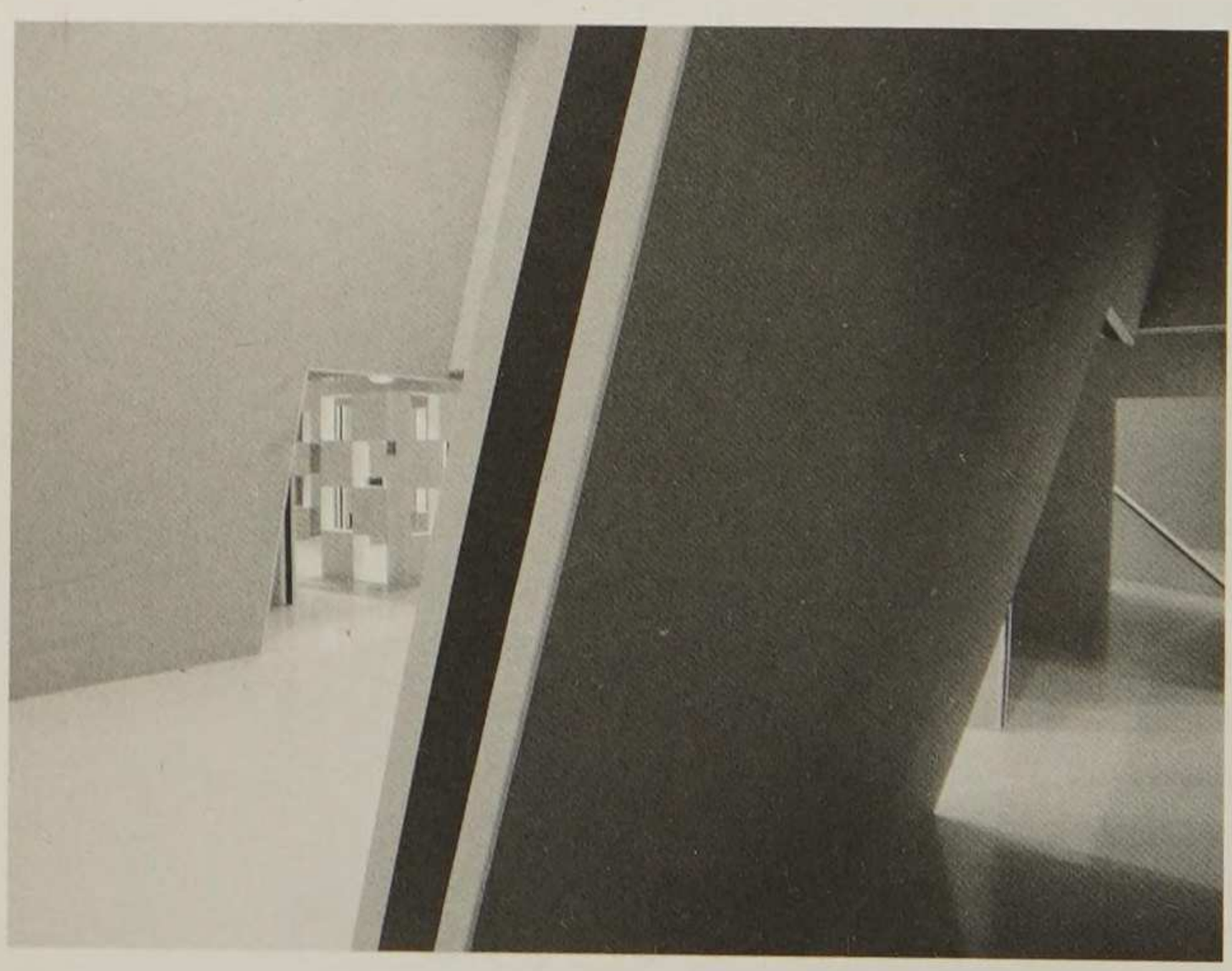
no longer the bearers of art, were themselves part of a decorative system; the space was no longer the site of a composition taking place within it, but rather seemed to disappear entirely in its utter transformation.

Parallel to this exhibition (but outside the central exhibition space), two of Buren's older works from the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne were presented again. For the work, *Les Couleurs: sculptures*, conceived for the Centre Pompidou in 1977, Buren had placed striped flags on the roofs of various buildings in the city that could be seen through a telescope on the sixth floor of the museum. The other was shown in the galleries of the permanent collection and had been purchased in 1978. In *Les Formes: peintures* Buren had covered the backs of various paintings from the collection with striped paper, which could be seen from the side if one went up close enough. A sign beneath the actual description of the painting informed the viewer about Buren's intervention. Apart from these older works, there were only two spaces within the exhibition where works from Buren's oeuvre could be identified: In one room, video documentations of several *in situ* works were shown; another room contained sketch-like thematic references to the controversy surrounding Buren's work for the Cour d'honneur in the Palais Royal.

Apart from these concrete references, there were no indications that the exhibition should be seen as a retrospective. On the other hand, it contained many formal and decorative elements, forms and materials that Buren had used in four decades of work. But it was not possible to identify these decorative elements as individual works within his output. What came about was a "retrospective" without any kind of formal or conceptual line of development. What was on view was always a new variation of the same principle, geometrically strict, playfully light, from reduced patterns to opulent cascades of form and color. Without a floor plan to provide an overview of the show, and without a thematic, chronological, or any other kind of recognizable structuring order.

A dramaturgy, rather than a system, of sight lines led through the space. Openings and vistas continually appeared, through which Buren opened the space to an exterior that was brought into the interior: from the exhibition to the restaurant, from the restaurant to the exhibition, from the



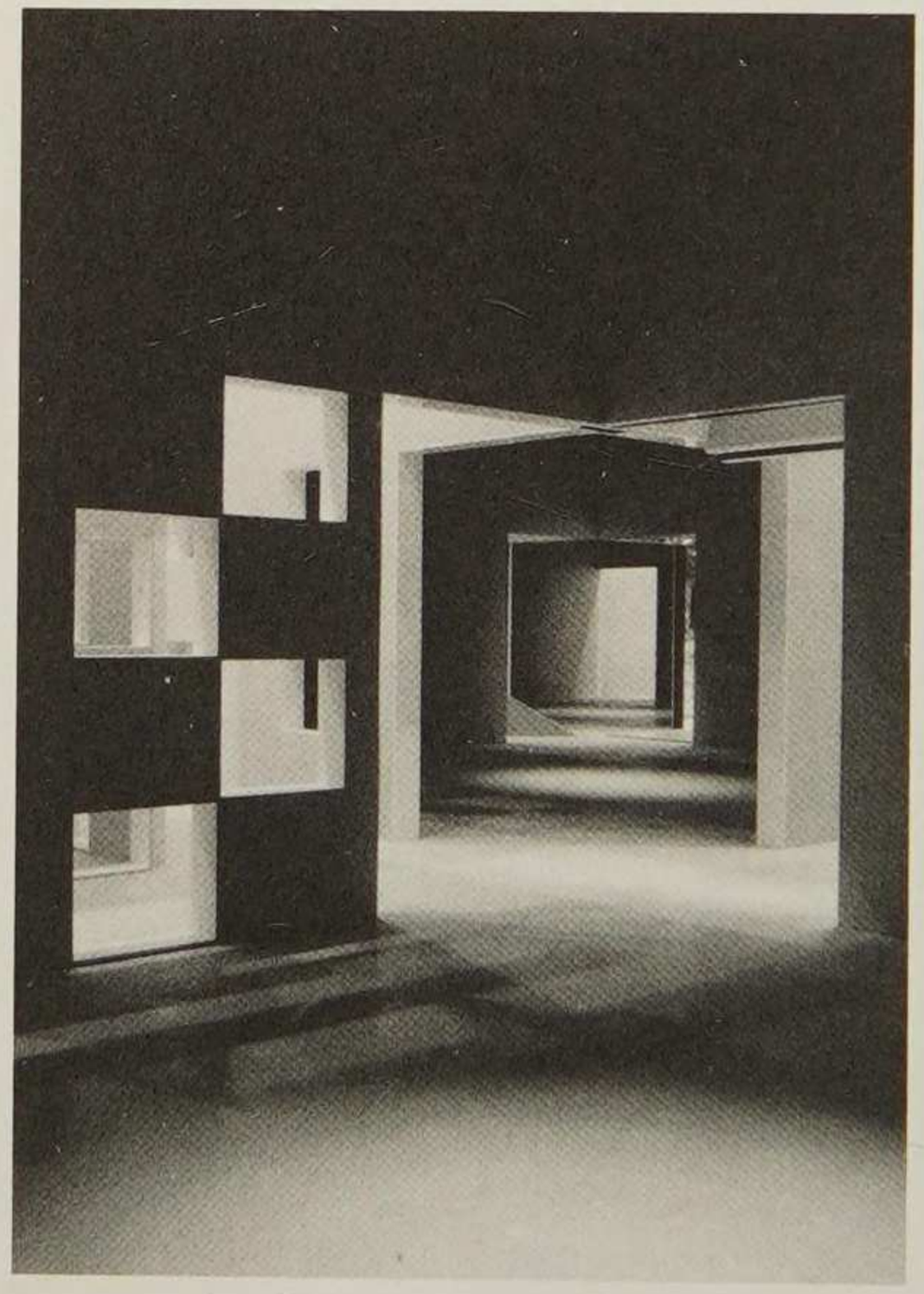


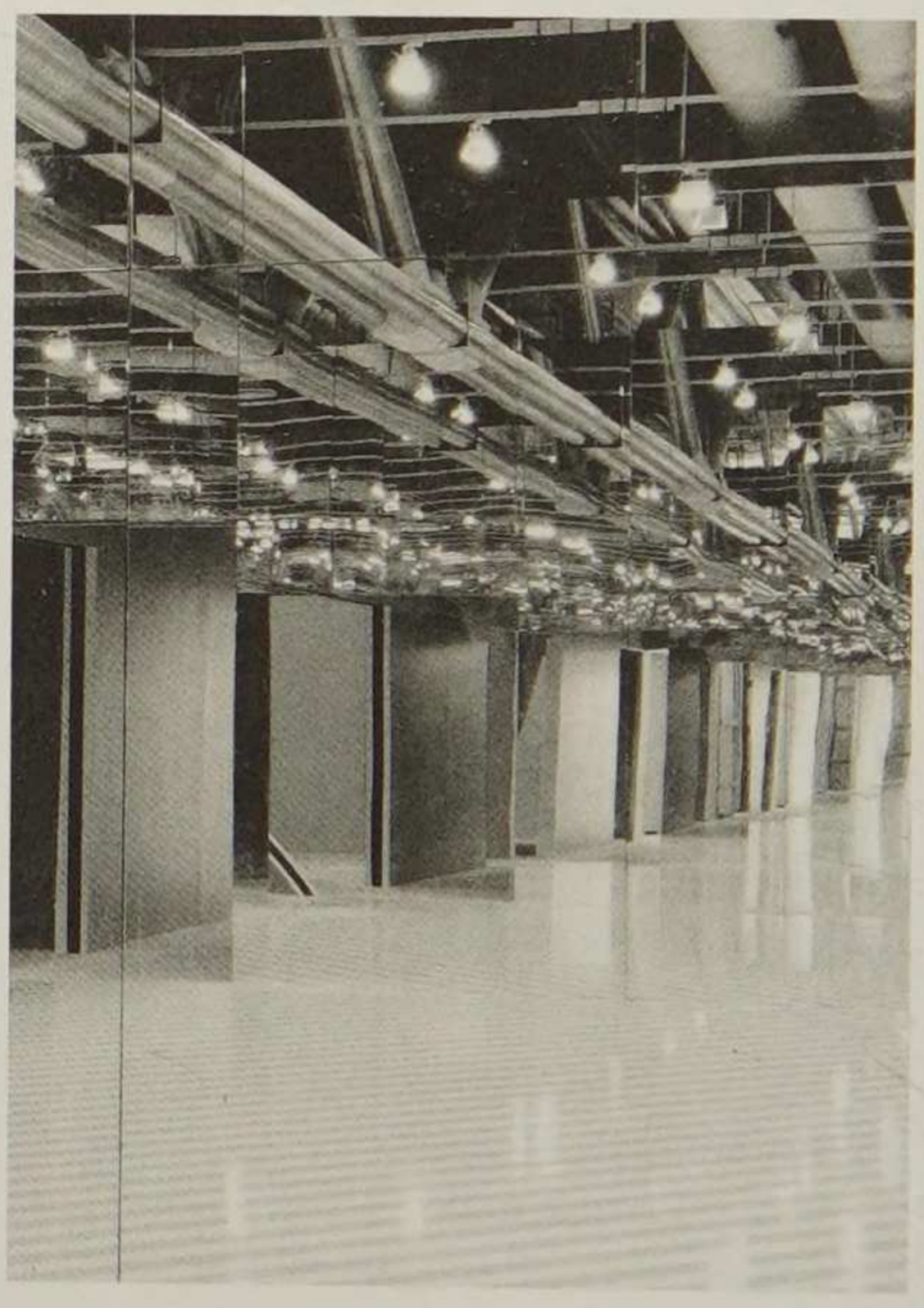
[ill. 8] Photo-souvenir: *La Cabane implosée: les rumeurs de la ville*, *in situ* work, in *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, detail

[ill. 9] Photo-souvenir: *Les murs obliques*, *in situ* work, in *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, detail

exhibition to the urban surroundings. Additional striped markings also extended the exhibition into the entrance lobby on the ground floor. Apart from this staged interplay between exhibition, institution and urban context, within the exhibition itself there were compositional elements that created a dynamic among the individual spaces. The element of the mirror was of central importance here, as it embodies the principle of Buren's work: a mirror relies on a frame, while at the same time creating new frames. With its combination of materiality and immateriality it recedes, as an object, behind a different reality, which is integrated within it as a reflection. With Buren, the mirror—since Uccello, Brancusi and Robert Morris a kind of contextualizing operator within and of art—functions, as Buren says, as a "third or fourth eye," which opens up and multiplies the gaze, always bringing about new refractions.[37] In Buren's work, mirrors are always mounted in such a way that it is impossible to see one's own reflection. Instead they produce vistas that redefine themselves at every step. With his use of mirrors, and by designing the exhibition as a kind of labyrinth, Buren dismantled the total viewpoint in favor of a multiplicity of perspectives. But the actual strategy lay in achieving dynamization of the attention not only with mirrors, but with forms and colors oriented to the viewer. The forms superseded one another in the before and after, the dissolving and alternation of color and gaze, so that the eye was continually led onwards.

This interplay of architecture and visual décor culminated in an astonishing effect: Visitors to the exhibition moved continually from module to module, from space to space—but they never stood still. Indeed, there was no incentive to stand still, because the exhibition lacked a center: a work, in the sense of something to be viewed, in which some kind of meaning or significance could be established. The endlessly varied, playfully decorative visual effects affected the eye and drew attention to themselves, but didn't hold the gaze. One was always surrounded by something, was always *in* a situation, but never found oneself face to face with an assessable, objectifiable work of art. There were (almost) no narrative or representational elements to engage with. Buren had not only abolished the basic precondition of the museum experience—the differentiation between the space and the work—but had also deprived it of an essential





[ill. 10] Photo-souvenir: Passing through *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, detail

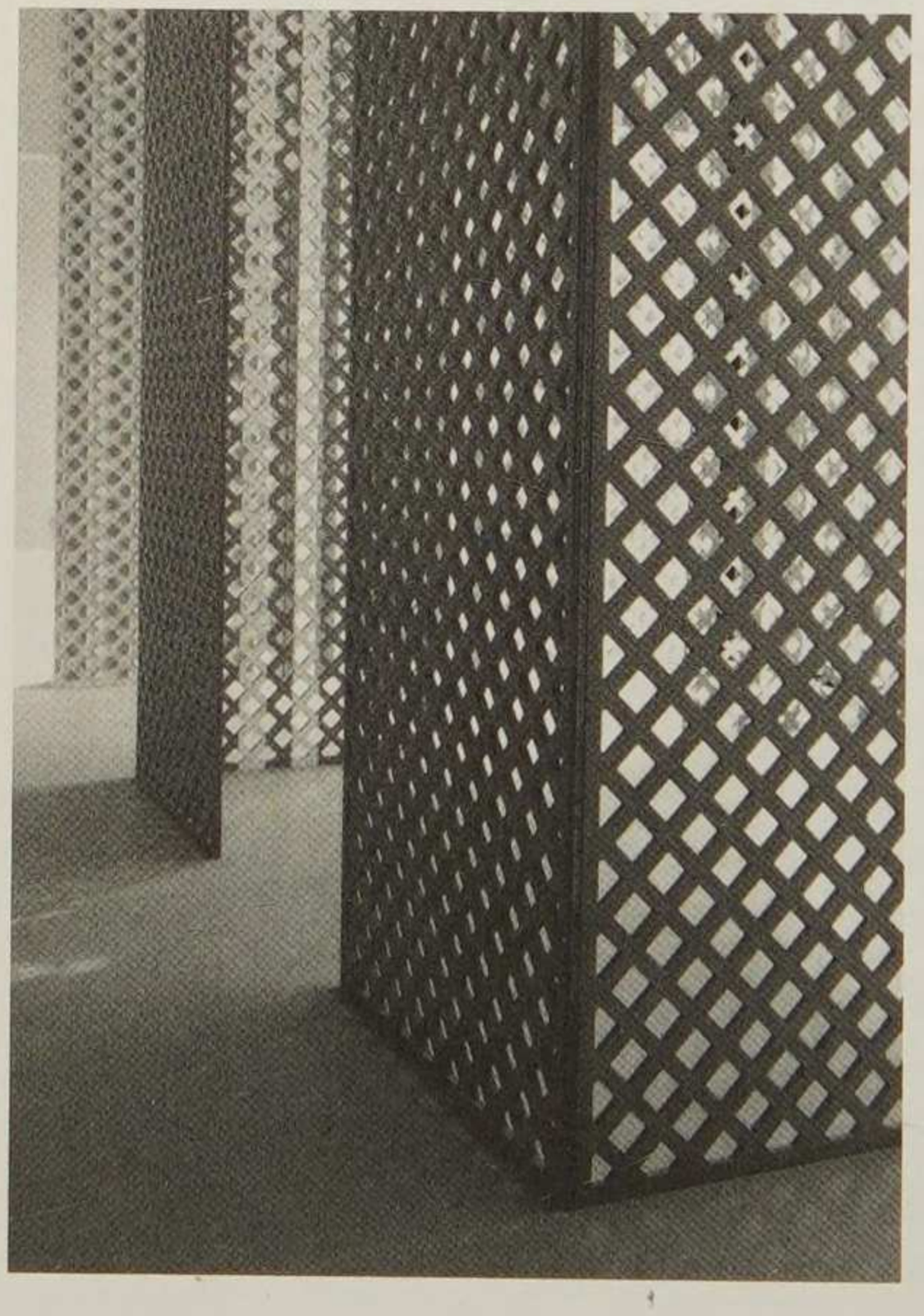
[ill. 11] Photo-souvenir: *Le plancher à l'infini*, *in situ* work, in *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, detail

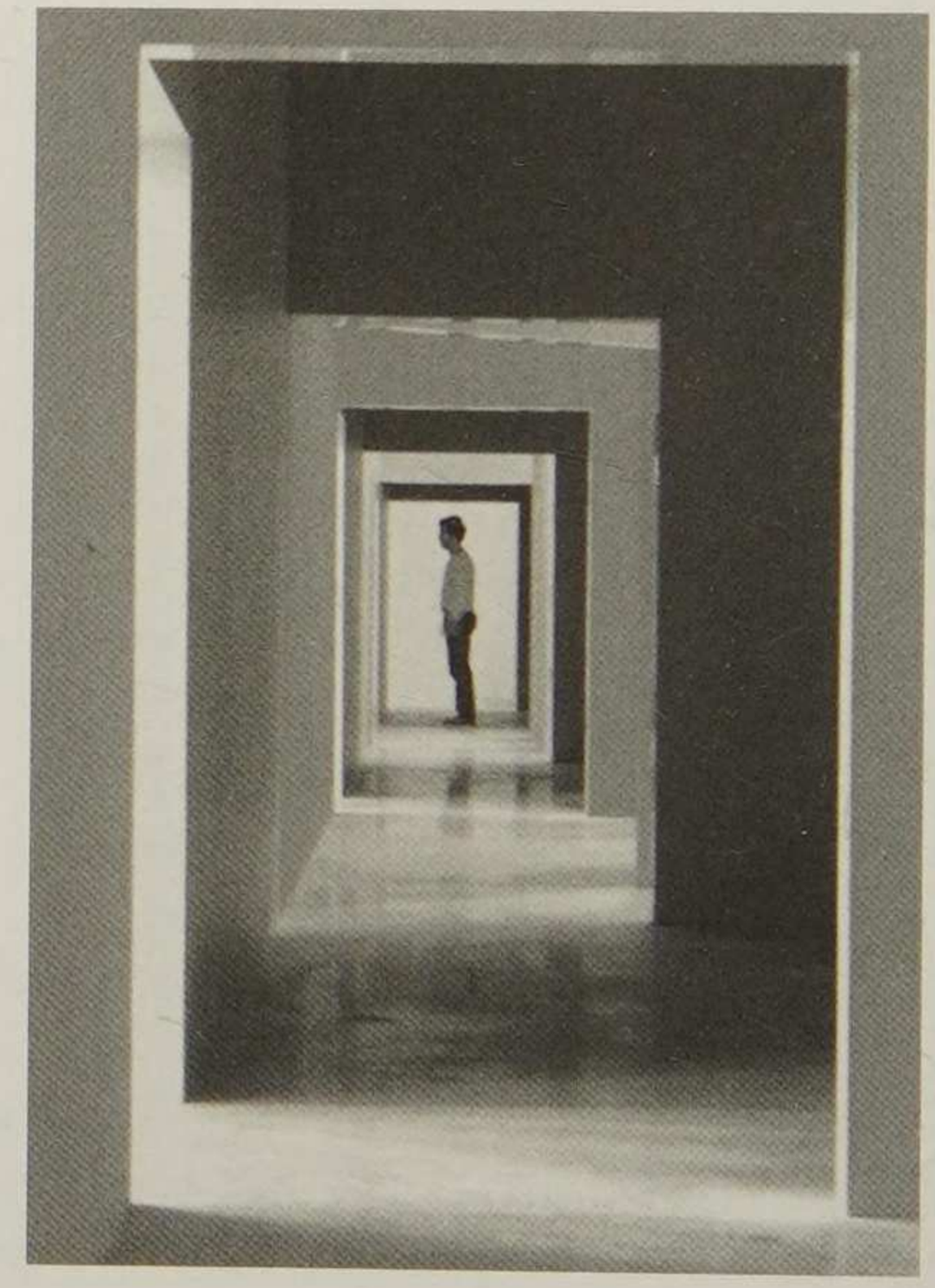
feature, namely the individual object charged with significance. No meanings leading to an understanding on the part of the viewer could be found anywhere in this visual plenitude, this excess of joie de vivre. So one moved on, without standing still.

Referring to his exhibition at the Kunsthaus Bregenz in 2001, Buren spoke of "adding a second rhythm to the building's already existing one."[38] In Paris it seemed as if Buren had given the exhibition a distinct continuous rhythm—which became manifest in the way the visitors moved through the spaces. The individual modules were small enough to shift the gaze onto the overall context, providing an inducement to keep on walking, as one wanted to know how long the show would go on. On the other hand, the individual openings were large enough to allow one to guess the approximate number of distinct spaces, providing a motivation for carrying on walking in order to be able to manage the dimensions. In this way the viewer's span of attention was calculated into Buren's spatial planning of the exhibition space. Although artistic operation on such a level of perception and spatial experience necessarily remains uncertain and uncontrollable, Buren had provided the stimulus to move through the exhibition in a calculated manner. One had the impression of literally being shoved through a spatial-decorative arrangement.

In his book *The Relevance of the Beautiful* Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasizes the significance of the way in which we pause before a work of art. He says that every work of art (not only the so-called time-based ones like music or dance) has its own temporality, which it imposes on the viewer:

> When considering the static arts, we should remember that we also construct and read pictures, that we also have to enter into and explore the forms of architecture. These too are temporal processes. One picture may not become accessible to us as quickly as another. And this is especially true of architecture […] we still have to go beyond the purely artistic quality of the building considered as an image and actually approach it as architectural art in its own right. To do that, we have to go up to the building and wander round it, both inside and out. Only in this way can we acquire a





[ill. 12] Photo-souvenir: *La cabane éclatée aux 4432 trous: dentelle*, *in situ* work, in *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, detail

[ill. 13] Photo-souvenir: Passing through *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, detail

> sense of what the work holds in store for us and allow it to enhance our feeling for life. To sum up the results of these brief reflections: in the experience of art we must learn how to dwell upon the work in a specific way. […] The essence of our temporal experience of art is in learning how to tarry in this way.[39]

This kind of "dwelling" in front of a work of art did not occur in Buren's exhibition. There was more of a choreographed striding through it,[40] which didn't pause in contemplation of a particular work. A striding that, because it wasn't oriented towards a work, gave one the feeling of not being in an exhibition, or rather, of being *differently* in an exhibition, of somehow being in a different temporal and spatial relationship to art.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michael de Certeau writes that the act of walking is to urban space what utterance is to language.[41] Similarly to the way in which an abstract system of linguistic rules is realized through speech, urban space realizes itself by being walked through. In both cases, a structure, a particular systematic order is realized and actualized through its use. Can we make a similar claim for the exhibition? What exactly is it that becomes concrete in the form of walking through a museum? A possible answer derives from an examination of the history of the museum and how its specific performative impact has evolved.

The Performativity of the Museum

The modern art museum emerged around 1800, at the same time as the concept of the public. It is the fact of accessibility to visitors that turned a collection into a museum, and here the modern art museum is particularly significant to the question of the performative-generative effect of the museum in relation to the (political) constitution of the subject as citizen. For if it is the idea of the historical museum to subsume the individual subject into the whole (the community of the nation), i.e. to deprioritize the individual, then the task of the art museum in contrast lies in addressing subjects as individuals and constituting them as a community of individuals. The specific social function of the institution of the museum consists in being a place

of both representation and forming of a civil public and a civil subject. In the museum—and this particularly applies to the art museum—two different concepts of government meet: on the one hand, the museum has a representative function. It serves to represent state power and sovereignty, or is a place in which the abstract category of the state is concretely manifest. On the other hand, the museum is also the place where art and the cultural property of a state are made accessible to a civil public and symbolically given over. The individual subject, both artist and art-viewing citizen, becomes the central category of the museum of the 19th century. The museum orients itself towards "the public," but this public is precisely not a linked group: the museum visitor is addressed as an individual; an artwork can best be observed when one is alone in quiet contemplation. In bourgeois understanding, art, or the art museum, becomes *the* place in which the subject—via an object in which the history of his or her culture is reflected—affirms his or her individuality, but also that of his or her fellow citizens.

The structural correlation between the formation of the modern individual, the concept of the public, and aesthetic experience was philosophically illuminated by Immanuel Kant in his figure of the "subjective universality," as formulated in his *Critique of Judgement*.[42] In civil society, the individual experiences his or her fellow citizens only as a counterpart, either in commercial life or as the "objects" of his or her moral principles. For the individual, it is thus impossible to experience the other as an equal subject. But in the experience of viewing and judging art, the subjective, according to Kant, merges with the universal. Assessing a work of art is subjective because it isn't based on a conceptual judgment, and it is universal because the subject assumes that everyone has the same aesthetic experience with regard to beauty: the subject presupposes that this judgment is shared by his or her fellow subjects. In this way the subjectiveness of the aesthetic judgment restores an awareness of the subjects belonging to the universal. In the act of aesthetic judgment the subject comes to know that its own subjective rationale likewise applies for all other subjects.

In the mid-1990s, in his study *The Birth of the Museum*, the sociologist Tony Bennett describes how this universality of the aesthetic judgment has an effect on the education of

the museum visitor.[43] Following Foucault, Bennett examines the significance, or rather the performative effectiveness of the museum in relation to new forms of self-government. In his studies on power and the epistemes—the structures within which knowledge is rationalized and organized—Michel Foucault describes a process of social transformation that is fundamental to modernism. It is characterized by a shift in the power principle from the exercising of power by a ruler to the individual, who increasingly rules and regulates him or herself through norms, rules, and discipline. "Instruments of government," writes Foucault, "instead of being laws now come to be a range of multiform tactics—and especially of tactics which, in aiming at changed conduct as their outcome, depend on a close relationship between the government of the state and the government of the self."[44] Foucault characterizes this relationship between the forms of state rule and a rule of the self with the term "governmentality." In the course of the internalizing of power that was essential to the development of a civil subject and public, the museum, as Bennett observes, took on a particular significance.

How exactly was the link between culture and new forms of government realized? How could museums—particularly anthropological and science museums—affect particular forms of behavior? What meaning did the museum have for the development of a civil subject and public? For the individual, according to Bennett, the symbolic participation in the sovereignty of the state implies the requirement to cultivate his or her attitudes and behavior in museums. Bennett gives various sources to support his theory, e.g. educational writings by English social reformers from the mid-19th century, which claim that visiting museums would have a beneficial influence on the social behavior of the individual citizen.[45] Bennett particularly examines how this influence could be made effective, and how architecture, or a specific architectural spatial order, plays an important role here. The new architectural forms of the 19th century—arcades and museums—are linked by a common principle. Their architectural construction is aimed at encouraging an awareness of personal individuality, but in social relationship to others, who can be seen either close or at a distance. These buildings are constructed to isolate and bring forth the individual from the crowd. "The transparency of the crowd to itself,"

according to Bennett, "prevents it from being a crowd except in purely numerical terms."[46]

In the art museum this kind of spatial order is particularly connected to the demand for aesthetic education. Carol Duncan talks of the museum as a "civilizing ritual."[47] This "civilizing" effect of the art museum is realized in the conjunction of a new form of social behavior and aesthetic pleasure. Through the particular mutual relationship between the individual experience of art and its assumed general applicability, the individual is able to see him or herself both as individual and member of a citizenry. He or she is mirrored by the others in their individual attitudes to the artworks. As Bennett says, because the museum was open to the public, which consisted of various social classes, it was able, with the aid of a specific kind of architecture, to provide the opportunity of observing and adopting the behavior of other classes from a safe distance and in a relatively isolated, contemplative stance.[48]

> Relations of space and vision are organized not merely to allow a clear inspection of the objects exhibited but also to allow for the visitors to be the objects of each other's inspection—scenes in which, if not a citizenry, then certainly a public displayed itself to itself in an affirmative celebration of its own orderliness in architectural contexts which simultaneously guaranteed and produced that orderliness.[49]

The museum is *the* institution dedicated to the self-formation of the individual. A self-formation that the museum specifically combines with an experience of time, history, and development. The museum was conceived essentially as a place where the experience of the subject becomes tangible as a historical process. In the science and anthropological museums of the late 19th century, this context attains an ideological dimension, namely the demonstration of progress. Bennett uses the metaphor of the museum as a "machine of progress" in order to illustrate this. He is not only concerned with the question of how the ideology of progress is represented in the individual institutions, but also with the way in which their various types of representation are made palpable and comprehensible to a viewer through a specific form

of perceptive organization. In general, the museum is seen as a place that is primarily organized in visual terms. However, pointing to the ritual character of the museum experience, Bennett emphasizes that the concept of progress can only become effective in the literal walking through the building, i.e. in the transfer of a mental principle into a physical one. Through this ordered walking, the classification of objects in terms of an evolutionary principle is physically imitated and gradually becomes comprehensible.[50]

The art museum is often seen as an exception to this model. Even in 1991, Stephen Greenblatt says that the modern art museum is subject to the principle of the wondrous masterpiece,[51] in the sense that the viewer is compelled to observe the work of art with a feeling for its uniqueness. But it may be doubted as to whether such a view can be sustained, as it can scarcely be denied that the art museum, just as other museums and for similar reasons, is fundamentally dominated by the principle of historical development. Also in the art museum the model of progress is realized performatively. The chronological disposal arrangement of the artworks is not enough to make this model effective. The spatial and discursive structure of the museum is realized in the act of walking, through which the visitor both mentally and physically recapitulates the historic development of art. Progress is experienced through one's own physical (and mental) progress. Bennett emphasizes the ritual aspect of the museum experience of art here, quoting Phillip Fisher who says: "That we walk through a museum, walk past the art, recapitulates in our act the motion of art history itself, its restlessness, its forward motion, its power to link."[52] Within the museum's performative dimension, aimed at the self-formation of the individual (as a politically mature citizen), lies a historical and cultural achievement that not only includes viewer participation, but is even exclusively oriented towards it. The question is whether and how the ideological goal of this combined impact of architecture, artwork, and viewer can be artistically formed and altered.

Configuring the Ritual

In 1888, at the British Association of the Advancement of Science, the military general and anthropologist Henry Pitt

Rivers came forward with a suggestion as to how to give spatial form to the relationship between progress and differentiation. He spoke of an "anthropological rotunda," through which the course of evolution from simple to complex life forms could be understood as a kind of cycle.[53] In the following discussion, this suggestion was widened. The spatial model of a continual spiral would be better than a rotunda, as it would present the gradual development of human evolution without breaks. Almost 70 years later, the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright built one of the most famous art museums in the world—the New York Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, completed in 1959—the architecture of which is dominated by the motif of an upwardly winding spiral. From the very beginning, the form of the spiral, with its curved walls and ramp, attracted criticism, most vehemently from artists,[54] who saw the building as unsuitable for the presentation of paintings. For his part, Wright spoke of an "uninterrupted, beautiful symphony" that would come about between the works of art and the architecture.[55] Here, as his biographer Vincent Scully puts it, the visitor would experience a "journey through time and space," in which the upward ramp suggests the conquest of time itself.[56] In this museum, more exactly in what is indeed called the rotunda, Daniel Buren realized one of his first large international *in situ* works in 1971, sparking off a controversy that still resonates today,[57] as Buren's work was dismantled before the opening as the result of pressure from several of the artists whose work would also be on view in the same exhibition[ill. 14]. Buren had produced a monumental, 20 x 10 meter striped canvas that hung from the ceiling and filled the entire central space. With this work Buren radically intervened in the impact of the museum. His work referred to the architectural context, but did not subordinate itself to it. It wasn't the artwork that was integrated into the architecture (whose pronounced meaning Buren had recognized), but the architecture into the artwork: the otherwise dominant architecture became the set for a staging that was now dominated by Buren's work, the effect of which was intended to deplete Wright's concept of its inherent evolutionary principle. One went spiraling from floor to floor with a continually changing perspective of the same thing—Buren's striped intervention.

[ill. 14] Photo-souvenir: *Peinture-Sculpture*, *in situ* work, in *VI Guggenheim International*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, February 1971, detail

Buren's work was particularly attacked by Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. Apart from the fact that it probably made every other piece in the exhibition look like a toy, Judd saw Buren's contribution as an affront to the principle of the "specific object."[58] The work, whose outermost stripes were painted white, was entitled *Peinture-Sculpture*. Depending on one's point of view (and because of the rotunda, this constantly changed), it looked like either a painting or a sculpture. From the front or behind, the canvas could be perceived as a surface, but from either side it was more like a cut through space. It appears that Buren wanted to conceive of a viewer-oriented counter-project to Judd's "specific objects," which were intended neither as painting nor sculpture. Judd insisted on the non-relational, non-compositional type of Minimalism, on the integrity, compactness, and object-ness of form, and on the reality of the space and time in which this object would be experienced. The term "specific" was intended to describe these qualities.[59] For Judd, art was an essentially pictorial endeavor. In his text *Specific Objects* he describes the transition from painting to three-dimensional form in space, but he thinks about this space, similar to an image, as a primarily visual composition.

> The several limits of painting are no longer present. A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be. Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface. Obviously, anything in three dimensions can be a shape, regular or irregular, and can have any relation to the wall, floor, ceiling, room, rooms or exterior or none at all.[60]

For Buren, however, the art space has a functional context and impact that is ideologically loaded. The essential conflict with Judd consists in the understanding of what it means to stage a work of art in relation to its location. For Buren this doesn't only mean—as he accuses Judd of doing—placing something in a space "with the precision of a watchmaker," and orienting it towards the body of the viewer.[61] For him it means referring to the conventions of the museum, recognizing its performative and implicative power, and integrating this into the work. Buren is concerned with gaining agency for art, which is why he proceeds from the aspect that

most strongly governs and restricts this—in the case of the Guggenheim work, the spatial structure of the building in which a notion of progress manifests itself that will always be reproduced by the artwork in as much as it remains untouched by it. It is because Buren understands his work as a part of this correlation of architecture, specific conventions, and the ideologies inherent to them that he proceeds from the architectural motif and its forming effect on the viewer. In New York he realized a work that was able, precisely through the way it related to the principle of the spiral, to deprive the architectural motif of its inherent ideology. Instead of propagating an ideology of progress, it now, through Buren's work, proclaimed the constant variation of the same. One may take issue with Buren's critique of progress, but it is interesting how he realizes it performatively. Through operating with the conventions materialized in the architecture, Buren intervenes in their effect and function. He acts like a director trying to transform the dramaturgy of the building, even to reverse it. This strategy was apparently so effective that it fell victim to censorship.

The Agency of a Work of Art (Judith Butler)

> Or, to put it another way, as finite beings, we already find ourselves within certain traditions, irrespective of whether we are aware of them or whether we deceive ourselves into believing that we can start anew. For our attitude does nothing to change the power that tradition exercises over us. But it makes a difference whether we face up to the traditions in which we live along with the possibilities they offer for the future, or whether we manage to convince ourselves that we can turn away from the future into which we are already moving and program ourselves afresh. For of course tradition means transmission rather then conservation. This transmission does not imply that we simply leave things unchanged and merely conserve them. It means learning how to grasp and express the past anew. (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of Beauty*)[62]

The philosopher Judith Butler describes this relationship between repetition and displacement as the operation of

performativity. Butler understands performativity as an agency that is both enabled and regulated by conventions (understood in the widest possible sense as agreements that regulate our actions and speech). She describes as "performative" action that creates reality, but not through the intention of a subject, not because it reflects the aim or will of an individual, but because it derives from conventions, which it modifies and restages. In order to distance this concept from the "performance" as a singular artistic act, executed by a performer, she writes:

> […] performance as bounded "act" is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in this sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's "will" or "choice" […][63]

Butler assumes that an act, in order to become effective at all, has to take place within a framework of conventions and traditions. The aspect of repetition comes to the fore here. For Derrida assumes that a sign only becomes a sign if it iterates, i.e. if it is consistently, but never exactly repeated, and hence never has identical meanings.[64] He insists on a difference, in which the power to act, however small, presents itself. Butler extends this model to action in general. In view of the individual ability to act, the necessity of the repetition of, and integration into, particular conventional structures is both restrictive and constitutive here. With reference to Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Butler assumes that normative systems (like subjectivity or gender) are unstable at their core; they only live in, and by virtue of, the habitual praxis of the people who orient their actions according to them while simultaneously reproducing them—in the same way that, conversely, every individual action and utterance needs to be embedded in a conventional context in order to be able to bring forth a real effect.

Of course, the fact that social values and conventions are produced and reproduced by our everyday actions doesn't mean that they can be arbitrarily altered and recoded. Butler's model of performativity questions exactly this, which is why she excludes the realm of symbolic

action—for example, that of an art performance—from it, similarly to the way that Austin insists that a performative utterance has no validity if spoken by an actor on stage.[65] The question remains to ask, however, whether this exclusion is based on a misunderstanding of the mode of functioning of an artistic utterance. A theater piece or an artwork must also fulfill certain conventions in order to be read and perceived as such, in order, in Austin's sense, to "succeed." "Every work of art," writes Boris Groys, "consists of repetition and variation: through repetition the work of art is identified as such, and through variation the individual artwork shows its originality, which points to the individuality of its creator."[66] In this sense, Butler's model of performativity also applies to art, which after all does not lie outside of social reality. It is a specific part of society in which the interaction of subjectivity and conventionality that Butler describes is put into effect in a specific way. One could even say that the institution of the museum makes this intertwining of innovation and convention especially tangible. For although the performative power or effectiveness of a work of art in a museum essentially depends on reference to the historicity of convention, to what was already there, its individuality lies in recoding these conventions. A work of art paradoxically only gains its singular power through a certain degree of quotation and repetition. "Innovation," as Groys summarizes this relationship, "means a strategy that links a positive and a negative continuation of tradition in such a way that both the continuity and the break are formulated with maximum clarity and intensity."[67]

Buren's work is characterized by an awareness of this correlation, through which it operates. What may at first appear to be a concession to the contextual framework of art is in the end the will to artistic effectiveness. In contrast to the avant-gardes, Buren sees this capacity to act not outside but inside the institutional framework of art. Differentiating himself from the avant-gardé principle of breaking with convention, action for him means the use of convention, as the possibility of difference is inherent to this use (and only to it). I have tried to show how this deliberate configuration of difference can be realized by reference to Buren's work for the Guggenheim. Thus while of course it would be impossible for a single work of art to unhinge the progressive spirit of a

museum, the point is to recognize (and use) agency in view of the fact that one's own work of art or artistic statement always reproduces such ideologies as well. With Buren, artistic action, in other words to do something with art, means sounding out exactly this relationship between artistic self-determination and contextual heteronomy.

A Different Retrospective

Buren's work is determined by acting with and in conventions, which first and foremost enable an artistic statement to be made, but also limit its force of expression. This principle also applied to the Paris exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* and the question it raised about the defining notion of the retrospective. In this exhibition Buren also operated with the intertwining of repetition and difference, (artistic) intention and its framing through convention, as in Butler's model of performativity. I don't think that Buren's project represents the "refusal of a retrospective," as Alison Gingeras has claimed.[68] Buren doesn't simply deny the principle of the retrospective because he is more than aware of the power of these conventions, and knows that this exhibition—independently of whether it is described as one or not—will be viewed as one. Buren's strategy is, in my opinion, a different one: he undermined the performative effectiveness of this exhibition as a retrospective, in the sense of a linear, historical development. I have already mentioned the recognition factor that the exhibition offered visitors who were familiar with Buren's work over the previous decades. Apart from the fact that two older works by Buren were integrated into the exhibition (*Les Couleurs: sculptures* and *Les Formes: peintures*, both from the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne), apart from the references to Buren's project for the Palais Royal, and apart from several videos that documented *in situ* works from 1959 to 2002, one often had the impression of recognizing certain conceptual elements of Buren's oeuvre. Parts of the exhibition alluded to the decorative canon of earlier works, despite the fact that these associations never crystallized into "works" or an "oeuvre." One space led into the next, one element of the décor referred to another. In this way it was impossible to isolate individual works. The show was instead staged as a

gesamtkunstwerk in which everything was compositionally related to the same idea. What was on view wasn't divided into discrete units, but was instead a continual, circular, repetitive, varying flow. The category of the individual artwork—in the sense of a distinct unit, and the matter of its placement within an oeuvre—had been abandoned.

The essential artistic strategy through which Buren denied the show's effect as a retrospective was the experience of aimless walking. The decisive factor was of course not in the walking itself, but the fact that there was no incentive to stand still. Buren gave the exhibition a different rhythm, which was not defined by a purposeful movement from beginning to end, from early work to the present, but by a flow, an excursive circulation within a fragmented space. In a conventional retrospective, one walks through a life (an oeuvre) from the beginning to end; one passes through stages, emphases, and highpoints; in short, a conventional retrospective mirrors the historical developmental dynamic that Buren recoded. No matter how far one walked, there was neither a beginning nor an end to this exhibition; no progress and no development, only the constant differentiation of the same. This is the "different retrospective" that Buren integrated into the museum as archive, as storage. This walking, in which the narrative of history and of progress becomes both mentally and physically concrete, converted into a different idea of history and progress: a "retrospective" in the form of repetitive, differentiating snapshots of the movement of a work, not as fixed points brought to standstill.

In a certain sense Buren's Paris exhibition showed his proximity to the Situationists, to whom Buren always felt related.[69] His nocturnal forays of the late 1960s, in which he pasted striped posters in various towns and cities, are evidence of this. But here it seems as if Buren has brought the Situationist principle of wandering, which Guy Debord described in his "Theory of the dérive,"[70] into the exhibition. Debord writes about the relatively swift crossing of zones of various intensity in which for him the Situationist idea of the "construction of situations" is realized. In Buren's exhibition, however, the constructed situation is no longer a counter draft to a work; it *is* the work, which is extended into the exhibition praxis that is recognized and reconfigured as an area of action and effect.

Both similarities and differences of approach can be seen in comparison to the piece for the Guggenheim. The similarities lie in the orientation towards the location and its realities, traditions, and conventions. In 1971 the project *Peinture-Sculpture* took up the exhibition context and inverted it. In 2004, however, the exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* was less of an intervention, more of a construction. Instead of relating to a given effective context, Buren developed a new one in which the original location and context seemed completely to disappear. This constructive character is typical of Buren's more current works and distinguishes them from the early works of the late 1960s and the 1970s, which referred more directly to existing locations and their differing conditions.

Critique and Construction

The reception of Buren's work is marked by a more or less explicit break that took place in the 1980s. With his large and spectacular projects, e.g. for the French pàvilion at the Venice Biennale in 1986, Buren became a favorite of the public, but fell out of favor with the critics. This break can be explained by the early and misconceived perception of Buren's work under the premises of Conceptual Art or Institutional Critique. Those who, in the 1970s, had declared him to be at the front line of institutional criticism had particular difficulty with the colorful and formal opulence, the playfulness and the monumentality of his later work. The initial visual tool, used in a radical gesture of revealing a context, now only served a decorative playing around with color and form, so the argument went. For many critics, Buren's obvious interest in beauty and visual pleasure could only mean an aberration in the direction of effect and spectacle. In 1997, Buchloh said that Buren's critical stance amounted to nothing more than "comply[ing] with (culture) industry standards and yet maintain[ing] the avant-garde gesture of refusal to deliver meaning to the apparatus of domination."[71] Since then, Buren's work has tended to be seen as "merely decorative." But what does this accusation mean? Apparently that his work no longer has any content. But did it ever? Wasn't the striped pattern intended to replace such a conventional level of symbolic meaning production? In my opinion,

Buren's recent works have not become "uncritical," but the way in which their critical stance is realized has significantly changed: It has moved in the direction of the performative.

A comparison between Buren's exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* and two earlier works gives evidence of this change. Both works have already been mentioned in this chapter: *A partir de là...*, created in 1975 for the Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach[ill. 6], where Buren covered the walls of the museum with striped wallpaper into which he cut gaps corresponding to the works which had once hung there, so that these works emerged in their absence as breaks in the striped pattern, and *Les Formes: peintures*, made in 1978 for the Musée National d'Art Moderne in the Centre Pompidou, with striped fabric that Buren had attached to the backs of certain paintings. These works evoke a complex relationship between the museum, the present or absent work, and the hidden or revealed presence of Buren's interventions. Both works mark an intervention that brings the institution's form of presentation to the fore, and that marks, modifies, and generates the relations between the artworks, their location and the practices of showing them. In both case an intervention occurs—but one that is relatively easy to put into words and to interpret in terms of its function of as "Institutional Critique." Accordingly, Buchloh writes about *Les Formes: peintures* as follows: "Buren's installation, concealing itself as the dimension of history, reveals the secretive practices of the museum, its installation modes, its institutional power as those of historicizing actuality and actualizing history in a seemingly neutral space."[72] Read in this way, Buren's work continues a critique of modern sculpture and painting that began with Minimal Art, which conceived the object in relation to the concrete spatial situation and the presence of the observer. Buren goes a step further and re-historicizes this situation by examining its institutional conditions.

Although Buren's striped pattern does not have a semantic level of meaning, these works include a referential dimension that enables them to be read as critique. Beyond their reference to a location and surroundings, they have a recognizable discursive level. They point to something, they make something visible that wasn't previously perceived as such, and in doing so they put the conditions of artistic production and reception that precede the individual work

into a critical perspective. By marking the space between paintings, or their visible front and invisible back, they highlight these very conventions, literally "pointing them out." Through marking the frame or parameters within which they manifest, the conventions themselves become present as a reference within the work. *A partir de là...* exhibits the idea of a painting, the conventions of its presentation, and its inherent narrative, but in this demonstration it also repeats these references—albeit as a shadow of themselves, as a blank, an index. It is exactly this repetition that makes the conventions present within the work—and that makes the work readable, in and as a relation to these conventions.

This is different in Buren's more recent work, such as the Paris exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, for example. There is no longer the level of critical reference to the circumstances. *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* did not refer to the conventions of the museum in which it took place (on the contrary, the institution almost vanished from the consciousness of the viewer), but transformed the space in such a way as to bring forth a different museum, the one *qui n'existait pas*. Buren's work is fundamentally characterized by an awareness of being part of a functional context, to which it refers. But the significance of this reference changes from the earlier to the later works. The early works such as *A partir de là...* are constituted in their reference to a location and its conditions. The work, it could be said, *is* the reference. In *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* there is also a thematic reference, namely to the organizing principles of the retrospective, i.e., the linear sequence of individual works. But as a work (and in my opinion, the exhibition as a whole can be described as a work) it is not constituted as a reference, a "critical view" of specific conventions, but as a construction, a different principle, with which Buren counters the conventional format of the retrospective. The work is both aesthetic reference and positing. This incidence of positing is the central aesthetic figure of the performative. For the performative is not founded in negation, it is not rooted in a relation or difference, but in the affirmative power of the factual. It is not placement "as," but placement "that."

"Does art," asked Lyotard in 1987, "put its disdain of meaning in the foreground when it emphasizes its pragmatism? At any rate it professes an interest in those situations

that actuate the efficiency of their works."[73] This shift from critical reference to the configuration of a performative power does not mean that a work has no meaning. But to discern it requires—and here I refer to my discussion of Coleman's *Box*—a methodically different view of the artwork: as long as its performative effectiveness is not recognized as significant and as a producer of meaning, the work seems to mean nothing. It remains, in the case of Coleman's work *Box*, an opaque and hermetic reference to a historical event, and in the case of Buren stays "merely" decorative. The meaning of this work can't be "read"; it is not something hidden within that must be discovered. Rather it is manifested in an experience that proceeds from exploring and perceiving the exhibition. In *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* it is not the thematic reference to the principle of the retrospective that becomes explicit, but the concrete experience of aimless walking. Or to put it more precisely: the subject matter of the work is the way in which a retrospective usually, i.e. habitually (to follow Bourdieu, the dedicatee of Buren's book for the exhibition), becomes concrete in experiences and physical activity. This type of shaping of experience—Buren himself talks of his works as "exemplary experiences"[74]—is of course much more difficult to grasp, because its subject matter can't be objectified independently of one's own perception and experience.

Lyotard has already made the attempt to accentuate the constructive dimension of Buren's work, to which he attributes "not the function of overcoming alienation, of opening the eyes, not the function of telling the truth, but that of inventing a different play of language, a different play of art."[75] "A different play of art" is what Buren realized in *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*. This exhibition did not mark its location, but to a certain extent created a new one. It was not defined, as Buren's earlier works were, in relation to a surrounding larger reality that it takes up, makes visible, and subjects to a critical view. Buren manages to transform this place completely into something new which lies beyond the parameters of (cultural) criticism. The "critical reference to" is replaced by a construction, by the creation of something new that—and here too he recurs to a principle of the Situationists—arises in the use of existing structures. In use there always lies a possibility of the *détournement* of the existing.

The Artwork as Décor

"The deliberate use of décor will bring about continually re-generating forms of conduct," is what the *Internationale Lettriste* replied to a questionnaire by René Magritte in 1954.[76] This notion is helpful to understanding Buren's use of the decorative. Seen positively, the accusation of "decorative" is not only correct, but even applies to a central aspect of Buren's concept of art, namely the re-conception of the art object as décor.

Buren has always spoken out against the discrediting of the decorative and accentuated its importance for the art of the 20th century.[77] One of his first works was a commission to decorate the walls of a Caribbean hotel that he painted, as he says, in a naive figurative style somewhere between Matisse and Diego Rivera.[78] The decorative was an element of his painting from the very start. Every painting, of course, essentially fulfills a decorative function in the context of its presentation. One can negate this, or use this fact as part of the production of meaning in a work of art. Buren decided on the latter. He takes up the décor, derided in modernism for its service function, and makes it the starting point for a new conception of the artwork.

Pierre Huyghe has described Buren's works as "hollowed out objects" that can be experienced visually but not appropriated.[79] They are objects, says Huyghe that, contrary to the general functional principle of a work of art, do not "produce an attraction but open a space for distraction, hence for thinking elsewhere."[80] They initiate something more like a perpetual interplay, in which the eye of the viewer is attracted only to be redirected. Buren forms and composes this interplay with the aid of the object as décor. In this sense all of his works can be characterized as decorative, for they take up a particular mode of functioning that is inherent to décor. Gadamer, who links the concept of the decorative to the question of the nature of the image, describes this mode as follows:

> The nature of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation: namely to draw the viewer's attention to itself, to satisfy his taste, and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the life context which is accompanies.[81]

This account tellingly places the meaning of décor entirely within what it does and how it functions. Gadamer's accentuation of the double orientation towards a viewer and a place exactly corresponds to the functional principle of Buren's striped pattern. It halts, interrupts and blocks the gaze, but also, because it cannot be read as a sign, opens the gaze up to something else, causes something to occur. This "two-sided mediation" makes the décor basic to the specific functioning of Buren's art. In this sense the following words by Gadamer can be applied almost directly to these works:

> Certainly it should not invite us to linger and notice it as a decorative motif, but should have a merely accompanying effect. Thus in general it will not have any representational content, or will so iron it out through stylization or repetition that one's eye glides across it.[82]

The phrases "not […] to linger," "the eye glides across it," also precisely describe the perceptual experience of *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*. Just as a play—which is what for Gadamer a work of art is—embraces each of its players and takes their perception beyond the given circumstances, Buren's décor halts the gaze, but does not hold it; the eye is directed on, led through the space in continual attraction and relinquishment so that one never stands still and never becomes immersed in the unified context of meaning that a single object accumulates. The "sign" can only comply with this form of operation because it doesn't mean anything, doesn't have any semantic significance other than its function of attracting and then redirecting the attention. In other words, it is in its very meaninglessness as décor that it can generate the forming effect of aimless walking. The meaninglessness of the striped pattern offers Buren the possibility of leaving the sphere of semantic signification in favor of one of meaning-denying actions. In contrast to an artist like Marcel Broodthaers, whose décor objects enter into a debate with the problem of reference and the question of a function of art between aesthetics and décor, Buren leaves semantic reference behind, turning instead to decoration's performative-generative effect. For him, the décor is more being than meaning; more ontological than semantic. It is a sign that in

its status between painting and architecture has a function of reference to both location and viewer.

It took critics a long time to recognize this decorative level in Buren's work, judging from the way in which they described its decorative aspects. They primarily attempted to give the décor precisely what it does not have: a depth of meaning. Buchloh for example writes about works from the 1970s:

> As Buren's work adds surfaces onto architectural surfaces without actually altering the architectural elements, it enters the discourse that is traditionally defined as decoration [...]. Buren's concern for decoration is [...] a logical consequence of his recognition that art production is innately bound to the realm of superstructure (i.e. decoration, fashion, etc.).[83]

From this perspective the decorative in Buren's work seems to be an apparent, or rather pseudo concession to art's loss of a social function, which degrades art to a decorative and affirmative accessory, and the artist, as Buchloh says, to a "deliberate decorateur of the status quo." Markus Brüderlein argued in a similar way, talking about Buren's "critical décor,"[84] and Gudrun Inboden writes that "the initially superficial and affirmative-seeming habitus of Buren's art at once turns out to be calculation. He creates an apparent spectacle, apparently stages an attractive event, in order to demystify our event culture itself as appearance, decoration, and spectacle."[85] I very much doubt that Buren has ever followed such a way of thinking. If he did, the work would remain a conventionally significant object (even if such a significance is critical, the way in which it produces meaning is conventional, because it considers what it shows in terms of a hidden message). A work like *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* is not "apparently" decorative. It *is* decorative; it has no significant depth, and for this very reason it challenges us to perceive a different, performative level of significance. The fact that Buren works with the mode of decoration can in principle be derived from the approach that is basic to his art.

> It [the decorative] creeps into all works of art, even the most traditional and transportable, which believe

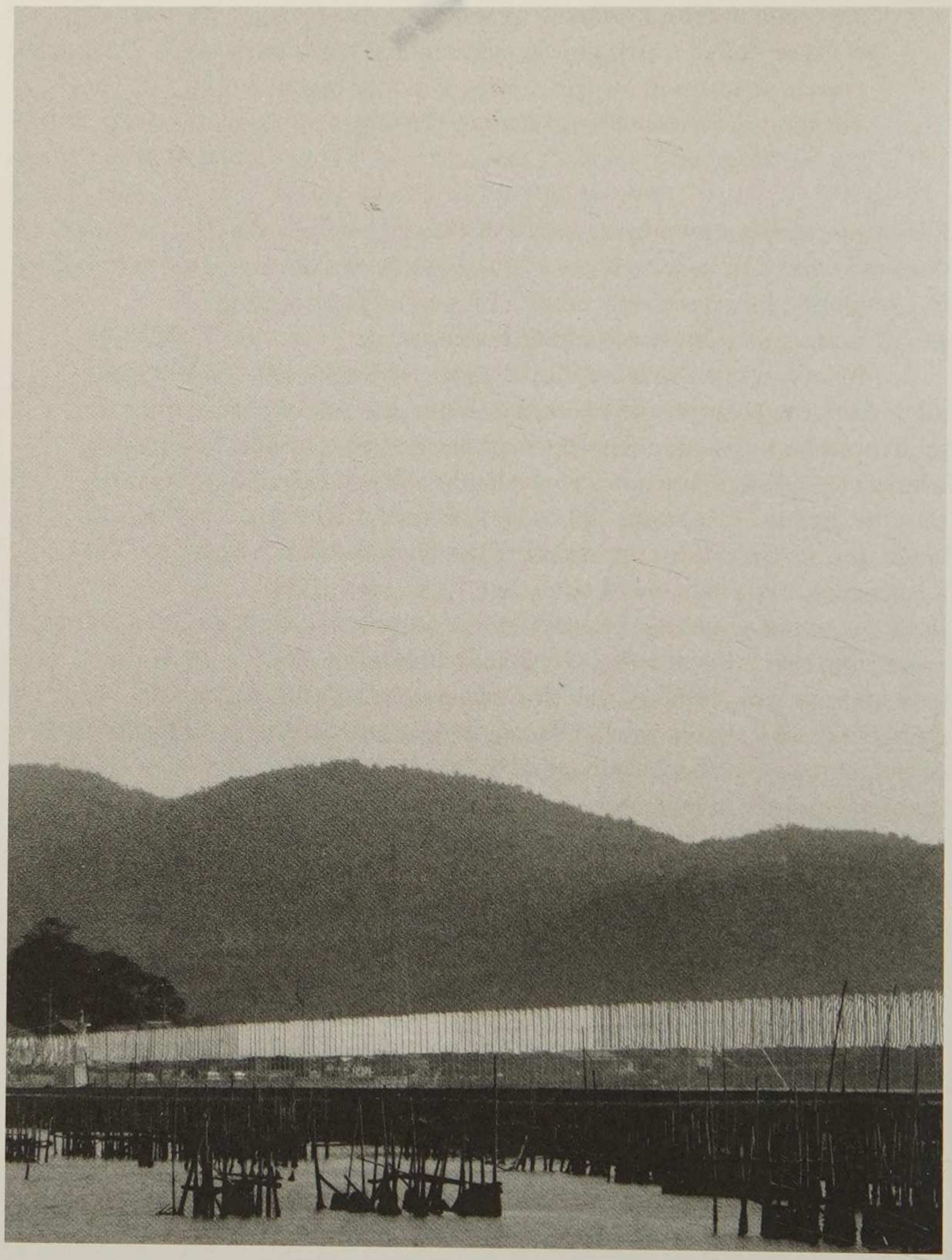
> they can evade it. It often appears to the disadvantage of these works, which now become "décor" for a wall, a space or location for which they were not planned. These works become decorative in the negative meaning of the word.[86]

Buren adopts the same strategy towards the decorative as he does to context. In order not to be at the mercy of a decorative tendency, he aggressively takes it on and includes it from the very beginning in the conception of the work.

In an interview in 2000, Buren speaks about an element from the Japanese garden tradition that has profoundly influenced him: *shakkai*, a framing-window principle through which a far-off natural feature of the landscape is integrated into the garden.[87] The word *shakkai*, in contrast to Western languages, doesn't mean the "framing" or "inclusion" of a landscape, but a "borrowed landscape." The idea of the *shakkai* is to not produce an excerpt from reality but to mark something that is already there; it frames and directs the gaze without tying it down. It is this principle of "borrowing" that is of central significance to Buren, which as an aesthetic principle manifests itself in many of his works through his continual use of references that link interior and exterior, with the doubling and breaking open of spaces in the *Cabanes éclatées*, etc. It is not only a technique, however, but is inherent to the work's being and functioning. As Buren writes, for example, about *Deux Plateaux* in the Palais Royal in Paris:

> One might say that I borrowed the Palais Royal. One can no longer separate the Palais Royal from what I did without destroying either what I did, or the Palais Royal, or both. Even if it is to last fifty or hundred years, this osmosis between the addition and the existent has to be considered as a loan. It didn't become my own and yet at the same time it is no longer quite the way it was, no longer quite the previous Palais Royal.[88]

Buren's artistic stance, which composes reality without fixing it through appropriation, is manifested in this osmotic back and forth, in the continual interaction between a location and its artistic transformation[ill. 15]. "It is the opposite of



[ill. 15] Photo-souvenir: *L'Arc en ciel*, *in situ* work,
Ushimado (Japan), November 1985, detail

appropriation," he writes. "Borrowing is not appropriating."[89] It would go beyond the scope of this book to make a thorough comparison of these two concepts, to look at the difference between aesthetic appropriation and borrowing in cultural and philosophical terms. But Buren's reference to *shakkai* makes clear that ultimately his concept of the artwork has to do with ethical and cultural questions. It has to do with the attempt to create a work of art that cannot be fixed spatially or temporally and that merges with characteristics of place, situation, conventions, etc., without appropriating this context or being appropriated by it.

A similar principle is realized by Buren by means of the décor. As a temporary occupation of space, the décor attaches itself to a place without offering itself as "content" or "meaning." For Buren, the décor is a device with which he realizes a different idea of the object. With the object-as-décor he backs away from the idea of the autonomous, discrete object, for as décor it *cannot* assert autonomy, as it only exists—by definition—in relation to location and as a function. "A work of art belongs so closely to what it is related to that it enriches the being of that as if through a new event of being,"[90] writes Gadamer. This is the ontological perspective on décor that can be found in Buren's work.

> In all my work there is the question of the boundary between what is decorative and what isn't, because the thing that is hung on the wall itself becomes the wall. Here we come to another problem: this seems to imply that the wall itself is decorative! And here we (the viewer) lose all points of reference and the question starts to become interesting.[91]

In the context of the discussion about the concept of the work and object that has been taken up periodically throughout the entire 20th century, the specificity of Buren's position becomes particularly clear in its differentiation from Duchamp. During the mid to late 1960s, when Buren was formulating his artistic position, the ready-made stood for a fundamental shift in what was considered to be the artistic in a work of art—a shift from the visual aesthetic to the conceptual. Not that the ready-made didn't also have an inherent aesthetic component, even if this only lay in the

proclaimed indifference of the artist to any form of aesthetic specification. But the essence of the ready-made is that it is not primarily an aesthetic proposal, but a conceptual-linguistic assertion: it is a demonstration that more or less says, "This is art." Buren, however, comes from painting and has always pointed out that his art is meant *to be seen*.[92] His criticism of art is not primarily aimed at the primacy of aesthetics. He criticizes the naive belief in the autonomy of art, although in his understanding of the constitutive power of the museum he is certainly in accord with Duchamp. But he does accuse Duchamp of drawing the wrong conclusions.[93] For Buren, the ready-made is the wrong road, because in its conceptual-linguistic artistic base it offers no solution to the problem of the object.

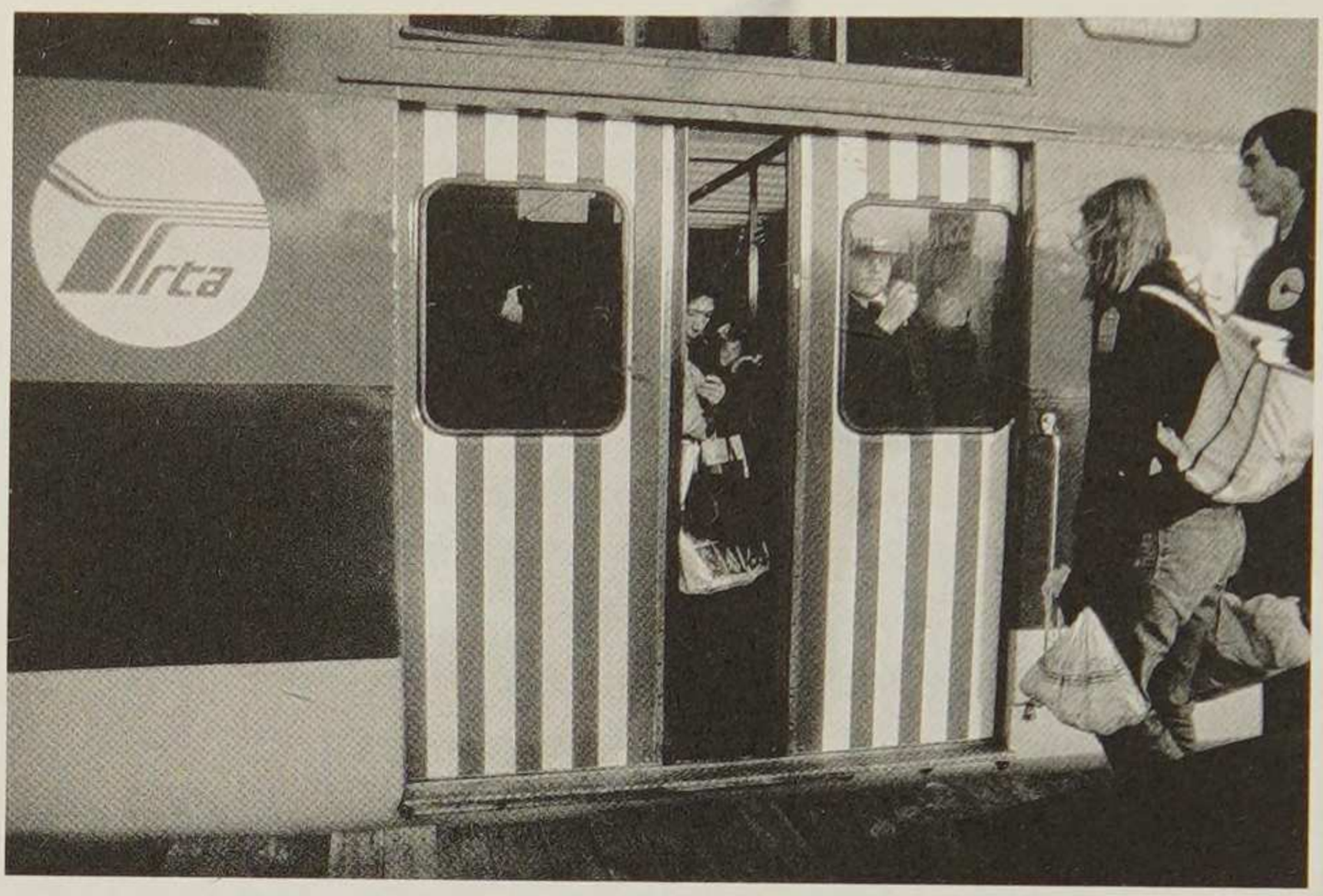
Duchamp succeeded in revealing—in exhibiting, to a certain extent—the symbolic meaning that the museum context has for the perception of artworks as artworks. But this context remains unaffected in the way the artwork functions within the museum. In the end the effective power of the museum as a place of symbolic charge is strengthened through the extension of its power onto everyday objects. If a traditional work of art, according to Buren, consists of taking something—for example, a landscape or an object—out of its original context and transforming it into an aesthetic portrayal, what Duchamp does is to exhibit the object directly. But in the end even this apparently *more real* object will become a symbolic one. "We find ourselves today," Buren writes, "confronted by objects of another age, simply privileged and committed to the role of witnesses of an era by the magic of art, the talent of the artist."[94] The ready-mades appear as icons of a modern productivist industrialized society; as demonstrations of a modern paradigm of production. But by exhibiting this reality, they basically affirm it. This is the political core of Buren's criticism: the ready-made implies an acceptance of the world as it is. Whereas art, for Buren, who demonstrates his Situationist heritage here, has the task of engaging in, shaping reality.[95]

Nothing is gained in the end, according to Buren, by giving up artistic representation in favor of the exposition of the apparently *more real* everyday object. The type of appropriation of the object, its reception as an artwork, remains the same. Buren, in contrast, wishes to create works of art

that set up a fundamentally different relationship between the reality of the artwork and everyday reality. For this project, Cézanne is a starting point. In Cézanne's paintings the reality of the portrayal, the materiality of the painting and its canvas, is emphasized above what is portrayed. Cézanne's paintings hold in abeyance a kind of interplay between simple materiality and aesthetic figurativeness in which both the materiality of the painting and the ambiguity of its depiction become important. Whether the blotches indicate a wall or a field in bloom can only be surmised in relation to other blotches, and this conjecture is subject to constant modification. In this way Cézanne broadens the *seeing as* to the point where it is cognitively void and only tangible as a process. "It is this specular (reflecting) or schismatic power of sight," writes Lyotard, "through which the visible questions the viewer, that [Daniel Buren's] work invokes and awakens (like Cézanne's work, but on a different level)."[96]

This divesture of the cognitive function of seeing is expressed in the term *signe leurre*, the "false sign," which Buren used to describe his work in his conversation with Jérôme Sans in 2000. Buren talks of the *signe leurre*, a sham (i.e. the opposite of a marking or display), a sign that only pretends to be a sign.[97] The term also appears in the writings of Jacques Lacan, who uses it to describe something deceptive, a "game of optical illusion" in which he fundamentally places the functional principle of the image.[98] The dimension of "deception" that Lacan emphasizes consists in the process of portrayal itself, in which there is always a "deceptive" dimension. For the act of showing and the thing shown continually topple into one another—exactly the process that Buren accentuates. Décor in his work could be described as such a *signe leurre*. It looks like a sign, but it is actually in its non-indication that a degree of reality comes into operation that intends to affect the space and viewer.

Let us return to the question that underlies and motivates Buren's work: Where are the possibilities and limits of artistic action? Judith Butler places the question of practical-political action at the center of her theoretical model of performativity. The correspondence to Buren lies in the premise that action aimed at change can only be realized within convention and tradition, which both enable and



[ill. 16, 17] Photos-souvenirs: *Watch the doors please!*, *in situ* works,
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, October 1980, details

limit its individual force of expression. Buren's work sounds out this mutual relationship between self-determination and heteronomy. While his earlier works attempted to make the performative dimension of the institution recognizable, his later ones instead demonstrate a potential for action that lies in the use of those conventions on which the institution (of the museum) is based.

When J.L. Austin introduced the neologism "performative," he said that one was "more than entitled not to know what the word 'performative' means. It is a new word and an ugly word, and perhaps it does not mean anything very much. But at any rate there is one thing in its favor, it is not a profound word."[99] Austin was concerned with the question of how a semantic field could be grasped conceptually, and so he devised a term that produces what it was he was interested in: it is the non-existing "depth" that in fact causes one to seek other forms for the production of meaning that come about in use, in implementation, and through their effect.

With Coleman there still is a meaningful depth hidden within the work, but he mediates it through, and confronts it with, a different mode of production of meaning, with the effects and experiences that the work brings forth. Coleman connects the levels of the "saying" and "doing" of a work of art to one another. In Buren's work, however, the production of meaning is entirely shifted to the level of "doing." It is because he relinquishes this level of "depth," through the use of décor, that his work challenges us to understand "meaning" in quite a different way. This is how Buren should be understood when he writes that he intends neither to insert his works into the existing art system, nor to contradict it. He is much more concerned with altering the rules of the game so fundamentally that a new and different game becomes possible. "The work in progress has the ambition, not of fitting in more or less adequately with the game, nor even of contradicting it; but of abolishing its rules by playing with them, and playing another game, on another or the same ground, as a dissident."[100]

The Paris exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* demonstrates, however, that this "new game" (in contrast to the artist's apparently "more critical" earlier works) is not neutral, and that the shift to the performative also has ideological

consequences. In the extent to which Buren increasingly operates with the performative dimension of art (and the museum), his relationship to criticism has also changed, as shown in the comparison with Buchloh's criticism of the work in the Centre Pompidou. While an attitude such as Buchloh's, which he also claims for Buren's earlier works, presupposes a distance from which the critical-negative view of the criticized is aimed, such a distance has been relinquished by Buren's more recent works. From an art-historical point of view a development in Buren's oeuvre can certainly be detected here. Although his works have been based for more than four decades on the same basic principle, at different points in time this has been linked to different cultural paradigms: from a "painting at point zero" during the mid-1960s, to the critical stance of the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the mode of configuration and transformation that characterizes his more recent works. These phases manifest a differently accentuated relationship between the self and the world that can be traced in the literal relationship the works take to their surrounding context. The early works relate to their location and circumstances, while the later ones transform their location into a new one. In this sense there is a more general meaning in Buren's development from critique, understood as critical reference, to performativity, understood as transformative composition. This distancing from the mode of critique accentuates a cultural, political and ideological dimension of the performative that we shall return to in the final part of this book.

[1] Daniel Buren, "Dekonstruktionen," *Daniel Buren. Erscheinen, Scheinen, Verschwinden*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Richter, Düsseldorf, 1996, p. 106.

[2] "One of France's most memorable cultural battles in recent years," as Garry Apgar summarized it in an article about the controversy. In early 1985 Jack Lang arranged for Daniel Buren to take on this commission, which was met with embattled resistance from the conservatives. In an open letter to President Mitterand, Raymond Triboulet, a Minister under de Gaulle, denounced Buren's "columns" as "vandalism against this temple of symmetry." See: Garry Apgar, "The 'Colonnisation' of the Palais Royal," *Art in America*, New York, 7 (1986), p. 31–35.

[3] See Daniel Buren in conversation with Jérôme Sans, Jérôme Sans, *Daniel Buren. Au sujet de... Entretien avec Jérôme Sans*, Flammarion, Paris 1998, p. 23ff. "Point zero" or "zero state" are concepts from Roland Barthes's literary theory. The word at point zero is detached from all relationships within the sentence in its isolated potentiality and lexical ambiguity, which originate from various applications. In zero state the word itself is treated as a real object, as a unified phenomenon. For Barthes *degree zero* was an expression of the struggle of literature against literature and its traditional principles of meaning and order. Buren's stripes were a similar questioning of the conventions of painting.

[4] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers a.o., Hill and Wang, New York, 2001, p. 47f.

[5] Daniel Buren, "Beware!," *Studio International*, London, 920 (1970), vol. 179, p. 103.

[6] Buren: "Beware!," p. 103.

[7] Buren: "Beware!," p. 103.

[8] See Sans, *Buren. Au sujet de...*, p. 41ff.

[9] Quoted from Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon Press, London, 1998, p. 175.

[10] Daniel Buren, Conversation between Daniel Buren & Pierre Huyghe, *Parkett*, Zurich, 66 (2002), p. 107.

[11] Daniel Buren, "Exhibition of an exhibition" (originally written for the catalogue of Documenta 5, Kassel 1972), here from *L'Exposition imaginaire—The Art of Exhibiting in the 1980s*, SDU Uitgeverij & Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, The Hague 1989, p. 66.

[12] Buren, "Beware!," p. 100.

[13] Daniel Buren, "Critical Limits" (written 1970, trans. by Laurent Sauerwein), *Daniel Buren. Five Texts*, John Weber Gallery, New York, 1973, p. 47.

[14] Daniel Buren in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, Charta, Milan, 2003, p. 130.

[15] Sans, *Buren, Au Sujet de...*, p. 114.

[16] Buren, "Critical Limits," p. 51.

[17] Buren, "Critical Limits," p. 47.

[18] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Ueber Daniel Buren*, Edition Schwarz, Stuttgart, 1987, p. 72

[19] Maurice Blanchot, "L'Avenir et la Question de l'Art," *L'Espace littéraire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, p. 295. Quoted from: Daniel Buren, "It rains, it snows, it paints," *Painting, Object, Film, Concept / Works from the Herbig Collection*, Christie's, New York, 1998, p. 82.

[20] Jacques Derrida, "Signature—Event—Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984, p. 307ff.

[21] Buren, "Dekonstruktionen," *Daniel Buren. Erscheinen, Verschwinden*, p. 97.

[22] Buren, "Dekonstruktionen," *Daniel Buren. Erscheinen, Verschwinden*, p. 98.

[23] Daniel Buren in conversation with Jérôme Sans, *Forum International*, Antwerp, 2 (1991), p. 37.

[24] Daniel Buren, "A partir de là" (1972–1975), quoted from *Daniel Buren. Von da an/A partir de là*, Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach, Mönchengladbach, 1975, unpaginated.

[25] "Il ne s'agit pas, là non plus, d'une volonté arbitraire quelconque d'y échapper [...] 'X' met en accusation, dès son tout début, l'œuvre d'art en général et spécialement l'illusion d'objet unique, celle d'objet immortel, ainsi que celle d'objet sans contexte." Daniel Buren, "A partir de là," *Introduction au guide de l'exposition*, Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach, Mönchengladbach, 1975, p. 17f.

[26] "A partir du moment où la forme visible est neutre, elle n'est plus évolutive, c'est-à-dire à une forme neutre peut succéder une autre forme neutre identique ou différente [...] Le point le plus important, c'est la prise de conscience de l'élimination du concept de progrès, de perfectibilité." Daniel Buren in conversation with Anne Baldessari, *Daniel Buren. Entrevue*, Le Musée des Arts décoratifs, Flammarion, Paris, 1987, p. 48.

[27] Buren, "Beware!," p. 102ff.

[28] Buren, "Beware!," p. 102.

[29] *January 1971, Position-Proposition*: Buren pasted striped paper in several locations in Aachen, Dortmund, Essen, Hamburg, Hanover and other cities. This was pasted over certain walls of the museum on the day the exhibition opened—in the places that remained free after the previous exhibition had been hung.

[30] "[...] ce que cette étape inéluctable de la 'carrière' recouvre, cache ou montre." Buren, "A partir de là," p. 2.

[31] "signées par les hommes de musée," Buren, "A partir de là," p. 15.

[32] Buren, "A partir de là."

[33] Daniel Buren, "November 1975. A partir de là," *Daniel Buren*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, 1990, p. 17.

[34] "Conversation between Daniel Buren and Pierre Huyghe," *Parkett*, Zurich, 66 (2002), p. 106.

[35] Obrist, *Interviews*, 2003, p. 132.

[36] Reproduced in Daniel Buren/Centre Pompidou (eds.), *Mot à Mot*, Editions du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002, p. 47.

[37] Obrist, *Interviews*, 2003, p. 138.

[38] Daniel Buren in conversation with Eckhard Schneider, *Daniel Buren. Les Couleurs Traversées. Arbeiten vor Ort*, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Walther König, Bregenz and Cologne, 2001, unpaginated.

[39] Hans Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 45.

[40] Buren himself has spoken of "choreography" in relation to the staging of his work. See Sans, *Buren. Au sujet de...*, p. 115.

[41] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1988, p. 97.

[42] In the "Analysis of Beauty," § 6-9, § 20. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis, 1987, p. 55–64, 87.

[43] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London/New York, 1995.

[44] Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1991, p. 95.

[45] Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 1995, p. 17ff. Bennett primarily refers to the writings of the social reformer James Silk Buckingham, c. 1850.

[46] Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 1995, p. 48–58, here p. 55.

[47] Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals. Inside Public Art Museums*, Routledge, London/New York, 1995.

[48] Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 1995, p. 47.

[49] Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 1995, p. 52.
[50] Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 1995, p. 46.
[51] See Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Press, Washington and London, 1990, p. 42–56.
[52] Phillip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art. Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991. Quoted from Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, p. 45.
[53] Quoted from Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, p. 182.
[54] In 1967 Wright received a letter signed by several artists (including Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning) which said that the building's curved exterior walls and upward ramp would make the presentation of paintings impossible. See Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (ed.), *The Guggenheim Correspondence*, The Press at California State University/ Southern Illinois University Press, Fresno and Carbondale, 1986, p. 223.
[55] Wright, quoted from Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (ed.), *Frank Lloyd Wright in the Realm of Ideas*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1988, p. 13.
[56] Vincent Jr. Scully, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, George Braziller, New York, 1960, p. 30.
[57] For details and background to this conflict see Alexander Alberro, "The Turn of the Screw: Daniel Buren, Dan Flavin, and the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition," *October*, Cambridge, 80 (1997), p. 57–84; or *The Buren Times*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (ed.), New York, 2005.
[58] For a thoroughgoing analysis of this conflict, see Guy Lelong, *Daniel Buren*, Flammarion, Paris, 2002, p. 40–45.
[59] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," Gerd de Vries (ed.), *On Art. Artists' Writings on the Changed Notion of Art After 1965*, DuMont International, Cologne, 1974, p. 120–135.
[60] Judd, "Specific Objects," p. 128.
[61] "Les expositions de Donald Judd sont exemplaires: un discours entièrement fondé sur la rigueur et la précision et qui, de fait, n'est qu'un discours de surface jamais poussé dans ses conséquences, reposant sur une supercherie mercantile..." (Buren in Sans, *Au sujet de...*, p. 115.)
[62] Hans Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 48f.
[63] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter. On the discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p. 234.
[64] See Jacques Derrida, "Signature—Event—Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 307–330. For the passages in which Butler refers to the tradition of the utterance theory, see her introduction to *Bodies that matter*, p. 13ff and p. 224ff.
[65] Austin excludes the area of symbolic and aesthetic action because in this case the context is not a "serious" one that lays down certain consequences for the person taking action. "A performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration." (John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, p. 22.) This passage is central to the deconstructivist critique of Austin. In "Signature—Event—Context" Derrida rightly questions Austin's understanding of the general containability of contexts, countering him with a concept of iteration, of infinite requotability and endless recontexualisation, in which the meanings of utterances continually reconstitute themselves dependent on their contexts.
[66] Quoted from German: Boris Groys, *Logik der Sammlung. Das Ende des musealen Zeitalters*, Hanser, Munich and Vienna, 1997, p. 10.
[67] Quoted from German: Boris Groys, *Ueber das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*, Hanser, Frankfurt/Main, 1999, p. 87f.
[68] Alison Gingeras, "The decorative as strategy," *Parkett*, Zurich, 66 (2002), p. 84.
[69] Buren, who is not an art collector, has acquired a collection of Situationist documents. (Buren in conversation with the author.)
[70] Guy Debord, "Theory of the derive," *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. and edited by Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, 2006.
[71] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Sculpture Projects in Münster," *Artforum*, 9 (1997), p. 116.
[72] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "The Museum and the Monument: Daniel Buren's Les Couleurs/Les Formes," *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, p. 134.
[73] Lyotard, *Daniel Buren*, p. 20.
[74] Sans, *Buren. Au sujet de...*, p. 126.
[75] Lyotard, *Daniel Buren*, p. 22.
[76] Quoted from German: Robert Ohrt, *Phantom Avantgarde. Eine Geschichte der Situationistischen Internationale und der modernen Kunst*, Lutz Schulenburg, Hamburg, 1990, p. 79.
[77] "Le problème du décoratif est récurrent dans tout l'art du XXe siècle, bien avant de l'être dans mon travail. Il est récurrent de deux façons: l'une péjorative, car il n'est pas d'insulte plus forte pour qualifier quelque chose de mineur ou de mauvais; l'autre plus noble, autour de laquelle, toutes tendances confondues, les grands artistes de ce siècle ont agi et réfléchi, que ce soient Mondrian, Matisse, Picasso, Léger, Rivera, Van Doesburg, El Lissisky, Malevitch, Newman ou Pollock... à l'instar des Aztèques, des Egyptiens ou, plus proche de nous, des artistes de la Renaissance à ceux du XIXe siècle. Le décoratif, au sens noble du terme, me semble absolument fondamental dans l'art, mais ce terme rencontre une réprobation tellement unanime en ce XXe siècle que je m'interroge sur cette attitude." (Buren in Sans, *Au sujet de...*, p. 119.)
[78] Sans, *Buren. Au sujet de...*, p. 20f.
[79] Daniel Buren in conversation with Pierre Huyghe, *Parkett*, Zurich, 66 (2002), p. 108.
[80] Daniel Buren in conversation with Pierre Huyghe, *Parkett*, Zurich, 66 (2002), p. 108.
[81] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by W. Glen-Doepel, Continuum, London, 2006, p. 151.
[82] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 151.
[83] Buchloh, "The Museum and the Monument," p. 136.
[84] Markus Brüderlin, "Beitrag zu einer Aesthetik des Diskursiven. Die ästhetische Sinn- und Erfahrungsstruktur postmoderner Kunst," Jürger Stöhr (ed.), *Aesthetische Erfahrung heute*, DuMont, Cologne, 1999, p. 296.
[85] Gudrun Inboden, "Vorwort," Gerti Fietzek and Gudrun Inboden (eds.), *Daniel Buren. Achtung! Texte 1967-1991*, Fundus, Dresden and Basel, 1995, p. 21.
[86] Buren in conversation with Eckhard Schneider, Kunsthaus Bregenz, unpaginated.
[87] Obrist, *Interviews*, p. 133.
[88] Obrist, *Interviews*, p. 132.
[89] Obrist, *Interviews*, p. 133.

[90] Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 141.
[91] Daniel Buren, "Il est encore une fois: Voile/Toile, Toile/Voile," Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne, 1980, unpaginated.
[92] Buren, "Critical Limits," p. 134f.
[93] See Daniel Buren, "Standpoints," *Studio International*, London, 932 (1971), p. 181–185.
[94] Buren, "Standpoints," p. 184.
[95] "It is traditional art and not a rupture with this art. [...] Duchamp made traditional art, adding a new form (without great consistency) to the multiples which make an art history possible. [...] We said that one of the questions posed by Cézanne's work was: is it possible to eliminate the subject in painting and to manifest only painting as painted—or paint itself—that is, to show a painting without a history other than its own, without illusion, without representation of the beyond, without perspective, without a framework other than the one on which this 'painting' is inscribed—its support? [...] The only way is to show the object itself. Thus thinks Duchamp. There is no more representation and one approaches the complete, global solution and its consequences: rupture. Because then the object presented will be only 'that which it is.'" (Buren, "Standpoints," p. 184).
[96] Jean-François Lyotard, "The Works and Writings of Daniel Buren. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Contemporary Art," *Artforum*, New York, 6 (1981), p. 63.
[97] Sans, *Buren. Au sujet de...*, p. 112.
[98] For the game of optical illusion and the dimension of deception in Lacan: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, W.W. Norton & Co, New York, 1977, p. 103.
[99] John L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," J.O. Urmson (ed.), *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973, p. 233.
[100] Daniel Buren, *Reboundings*, trans. by Philippe Hunt, Daled & Gevaert, Brussels, 1977, p. 77.

CHAPTER III

The Materiality of Art

Object and Situation in the Works of Tino Sehgal

"I believe that the problem of the object," Daniel Buren told Seth Siegelaub in a conversation referring to the debates of the 1960s regarding the transgression and dissolution of the traditional notion of the artwork, "is one of the most interesting problems that needs to be faced, but that one cannot solve it by producing a work without objects."[1]

Both theory and practice in the late 1960s put the status of the object and traditional notions of artistic production up for negotiation: the title of Harold Rosenberg's book from 1966, *The Anxious Object*, indicates the precarious status of the object. In 1973, Lucy Lippard's radical book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* not only marks the birth of Conceptual Art, but argues that "the material is negated." And finally in 1975 in a new volume of *American Art Since 1900* Barbara Rose entitles a chapters on 1970s art "Beyond the Object."[2]

Today one must conclude that the farewell to the object was rather premature. Buren gets to the core of the artistic and theoretical debates of the 1960s more accurately when he speaks of a new "economy of means."[3] Apart from a few exceptions, there has never been a "dematerialization" of art. There are very few examples where material support for the art work does not exist. As the artist Robert Barry put it: "We are not really destroying the object, but just expanding the definition, that's all."[4]

However, in the work of Tino Sehgal there are no objects. His work is realized as actions, as movement and talking; the only material support they require is the human body. Often this is the museum guard, who, when one enters the exhibition space, executes a choreography which he then discloses to the viewer as a work by Sehgal. Or it could also be the person who sells the ticket at the entrance, who after the purchase recites a headline from the daily newspaper followed by the title of Sehgal's piece, *This is new*. At the Frieze Art Fair in London in 2003 at the booth of The Wrong Gallery from New York, Sehgal positioned two children about eight years old, who welcomed entering visitors with the words, "Hello. Welcome to the Wrong Gallery. We are showing *This is right* by Tino Sehgal," and proceeded to enact five of Sehgal's works to potential buyers, informing them about their prices and edition sizes. At the art fair in Basle one year later, the artist arranged a pas de deux of his dealers,[5] whom he choreographed to simultaneously cooperate with and compete against each other. They enacted various works to potential buyers, but were restricted to speaking alternately only one word at a time. In order to conduct a conversation with potential buyers, they had to cooperate even to the point of formulating a grammatically correct sentence.

Sehgal's work gives art a new material foundation, but nonetheless claims the status of visual art. His works are presented continuously during the operating hours for the standard duration of an exhibition. They are traded by dealers and sold to collectors who acquire the right to exhibit them and therefore allow the work to become part of museum collections. As art Sehgal's works fulfill all of the parameters of a visual artwork except an essential one, its inanimate materiality. While James Coleman and Buren start

from an object, which they lend an event-like quality, Sehgal starts from an ephemeral event, like singing, moving, or speaking, lending it an object-like quality.

Object and Situation

In 2005 the Institute of Contemporary Art in London presented a solo show of two works by Sehgal, including one of his earliest works, titled *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, which was created in 2000. At the far wall of a vast, long, otherwise empty exhibition space a young woman lying on the floor was moving slowly, into the room and back again. Her body was never still, but in constant movement, changing its gestalt without emphasizing any of the individual movements. The figure seemed introverted, in a strange way distant or remote, almost as if in a trance. One had the impression that the movements happened without intention, as if body parts were following rather than actively conducting, moving automatically through a sequence without beginning or end, without a center and without the intention to express something specific. The impulse for the movement seemed to stem entirely from the breath, which generated a steady rhythm of contraction and release in the torso, the extremities followed automatically and unintentionally. Approximately every two-and-a-half hours, the dancer was replaced by a new dancer, who lay down, taking the exact position, continuing the movement, while the first one stood up and left. In this manner the work existed—executed by different dancers (male and female, young and old)—every hour of every day that the museum was open, from the first until the last day of the exhibition.

Nothing in the figure's movements suggested that they were addressing the viewer. Possibly this was one of the reasons that it didn't occur to many visitors that they were seeing a choreography enacted in front of them. The body produced the impression of an object; at certain moments it even appeared as an undefined, anthropomorphic mass. At precisely the same time, this introverted movement gave the dance a sense of self-absorption that made it possible to experience this situation as an artwork. Visitors to the museum reacted in various ways. Some just passed by, others were

irritated and a few became confused, even frightened and insecure. Apparently, for many it was not easy to categorize what they were seeing. Visitors often alerted the staff at the front desk that something was wrong. Sometimes they talked directly to the dancer, asking, "Are you all right?" When I saw the work in 2001 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm,[6] one visitor lifted the dancer and carried her away, explaining that he was a doctor. Other viewers apparently thought that they were looking at an automated doll. Many however, as if to restore the normality of a situation that so obviously did not correspond to the norm of museum experience, inspected the work with the same degree of attention that they give to other pieces in the museum collection. Once a group of schoolchildren began dancing after they read the title of the work: *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*.

The title refers to Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, who both integrated modalities of dance into their practice after being influenced by the minimal dance of choreographers like Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti. Nauman and Graham are mostly cited for employing the moving body in their film and video pieces, thus expanding the media of visual art. *Tony sinking into the floor, Face up and Face down* and *Elke allowing the floor to rise up over her, Face up*, both made in 1973, are Nauman's first works where he used actors, whom he instructed to imagine specific situations, like sinking into the floor. *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968) is an early work in which Nauman takes up different positions, each one creating a new configuration between his body, the wall and the floor. In his focus on space, there is a strong connection to Minimal Art, with the decisive difference that Nauman uses the body as both material and medium. These movements were recorded by Nauman and then shown as a video in exhibition spaces. The camera, which Nauman largely uses in an unreflective manner, becomes an integral component in the work of Graham. *Roll* (1970) is one of a series of films in which Graham experimented with the interplay between camera, gaze and body. Lying on the floor, the artist rolled around his own axis while holding a camera, and at the same time was filmed by a second camera, placed on the ground some distance away, thereby generating two film sequences: in one the fixed camera is filmed by the camera held by

Graham, and in the other the artist is trying to keep his gaze and camera directed towards the fixed camera while he rolls.

Sehgal took stills that had been published from *Roll* and integrated them as movement poses in his own choreography. Like Graham and Nauman, Sehgal refers to the art form of dance and integrates it into the context of visual art, but the way in which this connection is made differs fundamentally from the work of these other artists. Both Nauman and Graham work with elements of dance or movement, but the moving body enters the exhibition space not as a body but as a moving image—a transformation that Graham anticipates and incorporates into the work itself. In contrast, Sehgal introduces the choreographed body *as* choreographed body—not as a video image—to the context of visual art. While Graham and Nauman brought dance and choreography into the visual art context by translating them from one medium to another, Sehgal asks how the moving, choreographed body can itself become a work of visual art.

At one moment in *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, the dancer lifts her head and looks in the direction of the viewer, her hands forming a rectangular shape as if she were holding a camera to photograph the viewer, which seems to allude directly to *Roll*, specifically the moment when Graham focuses the camera he is holding on the fixed camera that is standing on the floor. Sehgal's fictive camera generates a similar effect to Graham's actual camera, but while Graham sets up a closed circuit between two cameras, Sehgal initiates a closed circuit between the dancer and the viewer. The dancer's pantomime of the camera eye seems to return the gaze of the viewer. Both works experiment with forms of mediatized communication, but Sehgal omits the technology. The extra space between *some* and *thing* in the title of Sehgal's work can be understood programmatically: the material object is replaced by a situation between two people; while one embodies an artwork, the other observes the embodiment of the work.

Sehgal's works are conceived as situations that unfold in time and space. The work *is* the situation including the viewer. How do they become part of history? Sehgal, like Coleman in large part, does not allow visual documentation

of his work in order to prevent the translation of situations into a two-dimensional medium, thus preventing documentation from functioning as a kind of surrogate for the work.[7] For both artists, although for different reasons, it is of crucial significance whether a situational artwork enters history as a memory or as a document. For both artists (even if Coleman is somewhat less strict in this matter, as he does allow very few illustrations of a work) visual illustrations not only reaffirm the two-dimensional image as the dominant historical record of visual art, they reinscribe the work in precisely that mode of permanence and conservation that the work opposes.

As specific situations, Sehgal's works are ephemeral and singular, but structurally repeatable, and *that* is what makes it possible for them to persist. His work transcends the essential distinction between event and permanence. Coleman integrates oral transmission and bodily memory—traditions that are antithetical to the museum's principle of conserving artifacts—into his works. For Sehgal these traditions become the essential and constitutive principles, as the transmission of his work relies entirely upon the mode of memorization. The work persists only via the body, which naturally cannot generate an identical repetition because transmission via memory can never guarantee an identical recreation of a situation. Thus the structure of the artwork always remains open and subject to modification although this does not imply an arbitrary enactment. There is indeed a clearly defined way to execute the work, but, because there is no fixed original, the respective individual way of interpreting it co-defines the work. Over the years a work of Sehgal can circulate through hundreds of bodies; through those who enact them—but astonishingly, many visitors also react mimetically to Sehgal's works, imitating, impersonating and enacting them, as well as telling them to others. These forms of representation interest Sehgal in contrast to the permanence of the material object and its documentation via images.

In *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, Sehgal takes up an art historical discourse, namely the recourse of visual artists to incorporating movement and the idea of intermediality implicit therein. He borrows from a specific aesthetic, which he then transforms into his own, which is precisely not based on a

mixture of media but focused on the choreographed body in a medium-specific way. This kind of referencing of historical predecessors serves to illuminate their practice or, in the words of Paul Veyne, their mode of "doing/making." Veyne once wrote about Foucault that it was his "most central and original" thesis to have shown that "what is done or made, the object or thing" can be explained by "what—in a given historical moment—(was understood as) 'doing/making.'"[8] In this line of thinking the object, the thing or the product recedes behind the act and the mode of production, i.e. behind the practices that generated it, which themselves stem from specific conventions. It is precisely such a perspective that Sehgal puts forth. If one looks at the works of Nauman, Graham and Sehgal on the level of what is represented, they are definitely similar, if not somewhat comparable, in spite of the fact that they are realized in different media. The material-medial level however constitutes an essential difference. Nauman and Graham represent the body by the mediatized image and thereby produce an enduring object; with Sehgal the artwork consists of a choreography, which is temporary, but by virtue of being repeatable achieves durability and the potential to be transmitted. Here it is not only or not primarily a question of *whether* the event can be integrated into the museum or—more generally—into an archive (thereby obviously changing the cultural imperative of the archive), but rather it is a matter of emphasizing the act of archiving as an event in itself. Jacques Derrida has called such a shift (which he examines mainly in the medium of writing) the transition from the "archived event" to the "event of archiving."[9] He refers to the late texts of Paul de Man, who proposes distinguishing between an event that has irreversibly taken place and the production of an event in the act of archiving. Derrida emphasizes this act of an actual material inscription, of "something that occurs materially, that leaves a trace on the world, that does something to the world as such."[10]

Here the notion of history departs from its focus on the temporal and connects with the question of the power to posit, of the power to inscribe, to integrate into an archive. "This value of occurrence," Derrida writes, "links history not to time, as is usually thought, nor to the temporal process, but, according to de Man, to power, to the language of power,

and to language as power. Hence the need to take into account performativity, which defines precisely the power of language and power as language."[11] The notion of performativity reappears here: it denotes the act of a temporal, material, societal positing.

In *Archive Fever* Derrida traces the etymology of "archive" and gives it a political thrust.[12] The archons of ancient Greece were not only responsible for the preservation of important documents, but also had the power to interpret the law—political leadership and exegesis went hand in hand.[13] Derrida politicizes the problematic of the archive, but not by adding a political dimension to the supposedly neutral archive. The question of the archive is not a "political question among others. It runs through the whole of the field and in truth determines politics from the bottom as *res publica*. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."[14]

It is one thing to allow the forgotten, the marginal and the suppressed to be part of the archive, to continuously open it to what it did not have access to. It is something else to claim another mode of archiving for what has been excluded, as Rebecca Schneider suggests in an essay that another mode of the archival is inherent to the body, to fleeting movements and gestures, to the spoken word.[15] Drawing on Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche, she speaks of a "counter-memory" that is not only inseparably attached to the body, but also challenges traditional distinctions between absence and presence, being and disappearance, original and mimesis. Sehgal integrates such a "counter-memory" into the hegemonic archival culture of the museum. He insists on the museum as the context for his works because, as he says, "I'm interested in the political efficiency of the museum—it is still one of the main agents of cultural values, and over time, offers a possibility for long term politics. It is a place where one can influence discourse in the future perfect tense: 'This will have been the past.'"[16] The artist not only acknowledges the museum's significance for a sustainable, long-lasting existence of art, but also accepts the institution as an instance generating societal values.

As a counterpart to *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, Sehgal's

work *Kiss* is enacted by two dancers in a close embrace who move very slowly and continuously through different choreographic constellations that draw from images of kissing couples throughout the history of art: at times one may recognize the kiss of Rodin, or those of Brancusi and Klimt, or a Picasso, at other times the sexual positions of Jeff Koons and Cicciolina, and then back to Rodin and so on. As in *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, this work is realized as a continuous, uninterrupted flow of movement. No position is held or especially accentuated, although sometimes one recognizes a figurative scene, which then dissolves once again into something illegible, undefinably anthropomorphic. The work functions as a kind of *boîte-en-valise*.[17] In this reenactment of historical sculptural works as choreographed movements, we find again an understanding of continuity and duration as the simultaneity of (art) history and the forms of history's actualization, which is precisely the modality of the performative—repetition and transformation. In *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* Sehgal situates his medium in a specific tradition of visual art, dealing with dance in the 1960s, while in *Kiss* he refers in his medium to the masterpieces of high culture. At one point in the choreography the dancers recite alternately with their faces averted from the visitor: "Tino Sehgal, Kiss, 2002, Fonds national d'art contemporain," orally transmitting the information one would usually find on a label next to the artwork: the name of the artist, the title, the year of its creation and its provenance. The choreography repeats, but with the dancers in reversed roles. This work is equally conceived as a loop, and it exists, executed by changing dancers, for the entire duration of the exhibition.

Kiss and *Instead of allowing something to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* are Sehgal's most sculptural works; in fact, *Kiss* may be even more clearly perceived as a sculpture as one can move around this "freestanding" work and view it from all sides. The slowness with which the movements are executed in both works adds to their sculptural quality: the near-stasis produces the impression that the work is generating a multiplicity of sculptures, but, unlike a tableau vivant, it doesn't statically hold the pose. It might seem far-fetched to introduce the category of sculpture as a

reference to these works. In my view, however, it is precisely because these works insist on a status as an artwork beyond the material and static object that they establish a dialogue with sculpture, which over the course of the 20th century has increasingly distanced itself as an art form from its fixation on the material art object. In contemporary art the term *sculpture* has become unspecific as a categorical designation, as Rosalind Krauss's term "sculpture in the expanded field" demonstrates, situating sculpture in a wider arena which includes environments and installations.[18] However, I will employ the term in its historical specificity to highlight the connections to and distinctions from Sehgal's work. One could say that the work of Sehgal takes on the classical parameters of this art form and twists them: while classical sculpture tries to transcends its own static materiality via the composition and the staging of the human figure, Sehgal's work is enacted by living bodies presented in an object-like manner. Thus he touches upon a topic that is essential to sculpture and inscribed into its history from its origins. Sculpture has always been marked by its aspiration to transcend its own material objecthood, an aspiration that is continued in modernity with the attempt to negate the commodity status of the artwork, which was seen to relate to its physical materiality.

The Problem of Sculpture with Its Materiality

Since antiquity the discrepancy between sculpture as a representation of a living human being and its literal materiality as a *thing* made of stone, bronze or plaster is considered a problem of this art form. Pygmalion, who after Ovid is seen as one of the prototypes for the figure of the artist, begs Venus to bring the female object of desire that he made of stone to life. Although painting has had to constantly battle with the allegation of the falseness of the illusion it generates, it does not share the frustration about the lifelessness and material properties of an artwork that evokes the living presence of a figure as an effect, but precisely because of this effect always renders the imprisonment of the figure in the material apparent. On the one hand, the immobilization, this freezing of human traits in sculpture, allows for a greater understanding of the meaning of humanness than one is

aware of in real life; on the other hand, it is this very immobility and lifelessness that brings the sculpture close to being nothing more than a *mere thing*, that limits its capacity for emotional and psychological expression.[19] The fact of being an object and the wish to transcend its own objectness belong to the essence of sculpture as an art form. In his famous essay on Laocoon, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing poses the question of whether there is an inherent difference between an event and a static object, and what this difference might mean. For Lessing, the essence of sculpture lies in its static character. Unlike in a poem, for example, in a visual work of art all of the individual parts are accessible to the viewer at the same moment. He recognizes, however, that sculpture also inherently depends on its distribution as an object in space implying a certain temporality:

> All bodies, however, exist not only in space, but also in time. They continue, and, at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the centre of a present action.[20]

For Lessing this potential of bodies to change within the course of an action crystallizes in the "most fruitful moment and the most fruitful aspect of the moment."[21] This moment is characterized by having the potential to generate a narrative, i.e. a before and after are inscribed into it.

The 18th-century custom of viewing sculptures as tableaux vivants by torchlight (thereby giving them a ghostly presence) expressed the human desire to overwhelm the limits of the dead medium via illusion. Such a paradoxical quest to appear both alive and quasi-human as well as abstract and ideal is equally inscribed into a normative notion of sculpture, just as it is embodied by the ideal, classic sculpture. In his *General Theory of the Fine Arts* (1771–1774) Johann Georg Sulzer leaves no doubt about the fact that sculpture has nothing to offer but dead material which is brought to life in a quasi-metamorphic way by the imagination of the viewer.[22] In a classicist conception of sculpture, the inevitable narrowness of the art form must be compensated for

by the imagination of the viewer and yet, at the same time, must satisfy the standard of wholeness and completeness necessary to represent a human figure in order to evoke a corresponding effect in the viewer at the moment of apprehension.

As long as sculpture was embedded in an architectural and ritual context, its meaningfulness was secure, but as an object in a museum it lacked this context, making its status problematic. It was in danger of becoming a mere object, a thing. Baudelaire compared sculpture to a primitive fetish that has been deprived of its magic and can now only evoke the false allure of the commodity.[23] Which order does an artwork belong to that is no longer anchored in religious belief and ritual but is merely an object of contemplation? It becomes part of the economic order. For Baudelaire the tension between the ideal of a true work of art whose imaginative force seizes us in the moment of its apprehension and the trivial existence as mere thing or commodity, inherent to the artwork in modernity, is most strongly embodied by sculpture. Based on the assumption that a convincing sculptural depiction of the human form now relies on the acceptance of its objecthood and no longer on the illusion of transcendence, sculpture of the early 20th century emphasizes its own objecthood. The attempt to be something that it was not compromised the fundamental qualities of sculpture, or so it was thought. This imperative was so powerful that in his famous essay from 1907 Rainer Maria Rilke, in his ambition to portray Rodin's oeuvre as radically modern, introduced the artist's sculpture not as figures but as things.[24]

Situated between Rodin's oeuvre and the 1960s, the sculpture of modernity brings forth new forms of objecthood that are fundamentally distinct from the monumentalizing tendencies of classical sculpture. This development towards the literalness of the object found its endpoint in American Minimalism. In their self-referential conception, Minimal Art objects are simply there, sharing a common space with the viewer. They no longer present an internal structure that can be read as a formal equivalent to the human figure or as an embodiment of human subjectivity. Thus the site of meaning shifts from an inner, formal structure to the common presence of work and beholder, generating a kind of "intersubjective drama," which is described as "theatrical"

by Michael Fried. Minimal Art, which Fried calls "literalist art," "[…] aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such."[25] In its literal objecthood it seemed to question the assumption that every artwork embodies a formal-aesthetic logic that is different from the material properties of a mere thing, thus producing, as Fried writes, "the risk, even the possibility, of seeing works of art as nothing more than objects […]."[26] This potential was already implied in the objects of the Dadaists and other avant-gardists, but now that it had arrived at the heart of modernism it apparently was more threatening. Fried therefore declared the project of modernist painting "to defeat or suspend its own objecthood" as the leitmotif of *Art and Objecthood*, arguing that sculpture should attempt to transcend its objecthood instead of just falling into the literal and exhibiting the inevitable void of meaning. This premise remained central to Fried until he quit art criticism in 1970, which testifies to a consciousness of the fact that the illusion that an artwork is more than the literalness of its material consistence is fragile and—especially in the case of sculpture—constantly endangered.

Object- and Thinghood: Theodor W. Adorno and Michael Fried

Even if Theodor W. Adorno and Michael Fried belong to different generations and intellectual contexts—Adorno exercised a decisive influence on politically oriented writing on art, while Fried has been heavily attacked by a critical art history for his adherence to modernism—, there is an interesting relationship between Fried's central postulate that art needs to transcend its factual objecthood and Adorno's analysis of the thinghood (*Dinghaftigkeit*) of the artwork in the modern world.[27] From different perspectives, both reflect the modern claim to art's autonomy and the resulting tensions, from which the artwork cannot escape. "The perennial revolt of art against art has its *fundamentum in re*,"[28] Adorno writes in the *Aesthetic Theory* that he was working on in the 1960s around the same time that Fried published "Art and Objecthood."

In Adorno's view, the thinghood of the artwork is inevitable, and at the same time it is that which art must always turn against.

> If it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus art turns against art. The totally objectivated artwork would congeal into a mere thing, whereas if it altogether evaded objectivation it would regress to an impotently powerless impulse and flounder in the empirical world.[29]

Without a doubt there are essential differences between Adorno's concept of the thinghood of art and the mere objecthood that Fried ascribes to the objects of Minimal Art. Nonetheless the polarities that Adorno assesses—the artwork as mere "thing" and the dissolution of its thinghood in the "subjective impulse"—parallel Fried's claim of the literal objecthood of Minimal Art and its unsubstantial, theatrical effects. Fried suggests the existence of a higher plane on which the antagonism between the artistic and the object character can be transcended in the work itself, even if only for rare and short moments; as he writes in "Art and Objecthood," "presentness is grace."[30] For Adorno this transcendence of objecthood can occur only in negativity. To succeed in being art, art must turn against itself, against its own thinghood, and negotiate this antagonism in its form.

> What appears in artworks and is neither to be separated from their appearance nor to be held simply identical with it—the nonfactual in their facticity—is their spirit. It makes artworks, things among things, something other than thing. Indeed, artworks are only able to become other than thing by becoming a thing, though not through their localization in space and time but only by an immanent process of reification that makes them self-same, self-identical.[31]

According to Adorno, the integrity of an artwork lies in its constant aspiration to resist the inevitable process of its own reification. Adorno's reflections on the objecthood of art stem from a Marxist theory of reification. Therein lies an essential difference to the literal objecthood of which Fried speaks. Adorno situates the structural tensions within a larger cultural and societal process of reification to which the artwork is subject. Both the appearance of an artwork

and its perception are decisively determined by reification. "Only a philistine and stubborn faith in artists could overlook the complicity of the artwork's thing-character with social reification and thus with its untruth: the fetishization of what is in itself a process as relation between elements."[32] Adorno is not concerned with the property of the artwork as a physical object, but rather with the societal process that allows it to emerge and makes it perceivable as an artwork, a process through which it is constituted as a commodity. The only artwork in Adorno's view that can satisfy is the one whose individual moments of sensuous particularity are not related to each other in a unifying manner and thus never become a whole. "This objectivity grants entry exclusively to the *membra disjecta* of the world of objects, which only in a state of decomposition becomes commensurable to the law of form."[33] It is not surprising that Adorno finds his examples for this idea of a consequent negation of thinghood predominantly in theater (Beckett) and music—which is, according to Beckett, the "most immaterial of the arts"—as it is difficult for visual art to satisfy the claim of a consistent and sustainable negation of thinghood. Art cannot exit this context of the material object and its commodity status. In every artwork something is materialized and it is only then that it becomes an artwork, but thereby it is also structurally a thing and thus available to the commodity form.

The critique of the object status of the artwork is one of the central themes of art in the 20th century. It reappears periodically, but it becomes especially virulent in the late 1960s and 1970s with Fluxus, Performance and Conceptual Art. What are the defining features of this critique? What was achieved, and what made these new art forms fail? The Happening and Fluxus events of the early 1960s tried to replace the object with the processual; Performance Art utilized the body of the artist as material and signifier instead of the object. Conceptual Art, however, carried out the critique of the object within the object itself and thereby led to lasting changes—but also to unresolved contradictions in the critique of the object status of the artwork.

Critique of Conceptual Art

There is no consistent or cohesive model of Conceptual Art.

How we understand it today stems from different, sometimes competing approaches. Today four artists are generally considered the protagonists of Conceptual Art: Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, although one could also add Art & Language and Mel Bochner. Initially Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt were the first artists to call themselves "conceptual artists." Although nowadays LeWitt is not usually seen as a protagonist of Conceptual Art, he was the first one to pin down its essential feature: the idea is more important then the form of its materialization. In 1967 LeWitt published "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in which he wrote:

> In conceptual art the idea or the concept is the most important aspect of the work. [...] In other forms of art the concept may be changed in the process of execution. [...] When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art.[34]

In a larger sense Conceptual Art denotes a diverse set of artistic practices during the 1960s and early 1970s that in different ways undertook a rigorous questioning of the parameters that constitute the work of art. Of central concern to my argument here are the critique and the dismantling of the traditional definition of the art object, which Lucy Lippard misleadingly called "dematerialization." A truly dematerialized artwork has never existed and cannot exist, as any artistic utterance has to be mediated by material support. At best one can speak of the altered status of the object's art character, which shifts toward the idea and away from the forms of its material fixation. Materialization can take place via language (as "critical language" as in the works of Lawrence Weiner) or can be site-specific (for example, in the works of Michael Asher, although he never defined himself as a Conceptual artist) or can take the form of documentation (as in the work of Douglas Huebler). The object recedes behind the processes of information or communication for which it is now merely a trigger. This shift is original, and artistically implies a fundamentally new definition of the formal, aesthetic and material properties of art.

There was always a critical and political aspect to Conceptual Art that was latently or explicitly inscribed. In a broad sense one can speak of a conglomerate of artistic and political anti-establishment attitudes that coalesced in the late 1960s with a politicized cultural criticism. Two aspects are at the center of this critique: the artwork as a privileged aesthetic object, and the artwork as commodity. Both are related yet become effective in different ways. The critique of the primacy of the aesthetic in art is grounded in an intentional self-liquidation and asceticism, a reductionism that emphasizes the similarity of art and non-art and resists any form of (aesthetic) privileging or hierarchy. This attempt has its roots in the utopias of modernity, which believed that the participation of the masses in social production and political life would lead to radically different forms of perception and culture. In 1967 Roland Barthes published two treatises that were highly influential for art criticism, *Death of the Author* and *Birth of the Reader*, which together formulated a critique of the traditional notion of the author.

In relation to the work of Lawrence Weiner one can argue that both the negation of the privileged object and the decentering of the position of the author manifested themselves when Weiner wrote in 1967: "Everything is an object. It's just the idea of realizing and accepting that one object is not necessarily better than another."[35] And one of the artist's most quoted statements is: "1. The artist may construct the work. 2. The work may be fabricated. 3. The work need not be built. Each being equal and consistent. With the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership."[36] By transferring the responsibility for the execution of the work from the artist to the buyer or collector, Weiner decentered the position of the author—at least this was the idea, since such an ambition is contradictory in many ways. Delegating the execution and thereby also the responsibility for the artwork does not mean that the artist literally gave up the position of the author. The author of the work is still Lawrence Weiner, as the delegation is part of his intention and therefore ultimately refers back to him. A similar principle holds true of the alleged annihilation of the privileged object: the transformation of the object into language as an (allegedly) direct, critical and democratic form of expression does not equal an abolition

of privileges. The artist *cannot* abolish the "privileged artistic object," as it is not he or she who privileges it, but rather the gaze upon it and the institutional framing of it. Thus a work by Lawrence Weiner is also a privileged work and not an "object like all others."

In a quintessentially modernist dialectic, Benjamin Buchloh writes that the artwork is "simultaneously the exemplary object of all commodity production and the exceptional object, which denied and resisted the universality of that reign."[37] Behind this dialectic stands the conviction that the object and the commodity or product status of art are inseparably linked. Because art is an object, it is sellable, and becomes part of a market, circulating inside this market as a commodity. If one inverts this notion—and this idea was of central importance to Conceptual Art—then one can argue that the more immaterial the art, the stronger its resistance against market forces. This uneasiness—uttered latently or explicitly—about the commodity status of the artwork must be seen in the context of the social and economic changes that occurred in the United States in the 1950s and in Europe in the 1960s. In the heyday of economic success, many believed that continuous growth was assured, but it came with a sense of the ever increasing economization of all areas of life. A concern about this economic invasion came not only from real life experiences but from reading politicized theoretical treatises, like Marx's critique of the fetish character of the commodity, in which the principle of exchange is the dominant principle that defines the relations of individuals to each other, and from Horkheimer/Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), which outlines a theory of the "culture industry" and which has dominated the New Left's criticism of both art and culture after 1968.

In summary, the critique of the equalization of art, object and commodity was fuelled by the aspiration to transcend the objecthood of art and keep it aside from the economic sphere, and thus the domain of capitalism. Underlying this aspiration is the utopia of a communication freed from commodity production, of an activity freed from the primacy of economic exchange value. But the unresolved and unresolvable contradictions implicit in such an attitude become apparent when these political positions are confronted with real circumstances, with people's own desires. The

critique of the product or commodity status of the work was nourished by the idea of an outside position that was neither feasible nor desirable in the long run—not only because artists have to generate income, but because art can only continue over time if the works circulate and persist.

Additionally, despite its dissociation from theories of taste and aesthetic positions, Conceptual Art ultimately remained on the level of the aesthetic, which led to fundamental artistic changes, but did not change the commodity or product status of art, largely because it assumed a very narrow definition of product. In an aesthetic sense, Conceptual Art does not aspire to live up to standards of taste, but nevertheless immediately establishes new standards, which Buchloh calls an "aesthetics of administration," referring to the preference of Conceptual Art for the forms of expression of bureaucracy.[38] It failed to recognize that anything can be a product, even a mere piece of paper, as long as there is somebody who recognizes value in it. Favoring the idea does not challenge the commodity status of the artwork in the least. A work—like that of Lawrence Weiner—that can only be bought as a surrogate, namely as a certificate, may render the procedure of acquisition and collecting a bit more complicated, but structurally and literally this work is just as much a commodity as anything else that is traded in the market. There is a kind of elitism in the belief that these products could not be appreciated in value and be validated by the market. History has indeed shown that many Conceptual artists of the 1960s have been surprised by the interest of collectors in their work. Although Conceptual artists broke with aesthetic conventions—and in that sense maybe weakened their commodity status—the innovation of these works is definitely valued.

The Limits of Critique and the Power of the Factual

The achievement of Conceptual Art lies in having generated—historically and aesthetically—the notion of *art as such* that substantially altered accepted ideas of art. Since art was primarily about the idea, which could basically manifest itself in any medium, suddenly one could be an artist without having to be a painter, sculptor, musician or poet. But as for a substantial and structural modification of visual art in

terms of its relation to the economic, Conceptual Art met its limits. More than any other artistic phenomenon of the late 1960s, Conceptual Art exposed the gap between the ambition to change the way art is interwoven with society and the limitation of such an ambition. From a culturally critical standpoint, Conceptual Art exposed the inner conflict of art between its own ambition and social reality. Such an assessment comes close to the attitude of Buchloh, for whom "it seems obvious, at least from the vantage of the early 1990s, that from its inception Conceptual Art was distinguished by its acute sense of discursive and institutional limitations […] without aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions."[39]

From this perspective the claim for artistic and social impact transforms into an exposition of those circumstances that render a direct intervention and effectiveness of art impossible. Thus there isn't a gap between saying and doing or, in other words, no contradiction between the ambition of art to negate its product status and its ultimate failure to do so. Rather this tension expresses a dialectic that characterizes the status of the artwork in bourgeois society. An understanding of the commodification of art can be derived from Adorno, for whom culture is deeply embedded in the structure of commodity production, which is on the one hand necessary, because only then does it accrue a certain ideological independence—from the church and the aristocracy—but on the other hand makes the art object a mere market commodity deprived of a social function. And art as a "free" aesthetic work has to oppose that status. To this dialectical condition belongs art's dual character "as both autonomous and fait social,"[40] or as Adorno also phrases it, "autonomous structures and social phenomena."[41] According to Adorno, art is not only a "fait social" because of "its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated" and not because its themes are social ones, but also "by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position as autonomous art."[42] Only via critique can an artwork that itself is part of an essentially alienated society transcend society. Art can acquire significance only if it manages to implicitly criticize those conditions from which it cannot escape. The involuntary complicity between art and society urges art towards protest, yet necessitates that any

protest immediately becomes choked and fruitless, more a formal gesture than an angry polemic. This limit of critique, which is rendered explicit in Conceptual Art, determines the relation between art and society.

Adorno's conception of the dialectical relation of art and society derives from the historical approaches that aspired to overcome the tradition of an idealistic separation of artistic and social production in aesthetics. Marx introduces the term "production" for the production of both intellectual and material necessities. His ambition was to overcome the antagonism of the aesthetic and the practical that constituted the core of philosophical idealism. "Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc. are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law," he writes.[43] Marx brought together the force of production and form—i.e. social relations—and marked them as different aspects of one phenomenon.

The specificity of Adorno's position lies in his attempt to combine an approach critical of ideology with the concept of art's autonomy. In Adorno's view, the artwork exists in a society that does not have an outside, yet the artwork must claim an outside to legitimize itself as art. It needs to create a distance from the sphere of objects, to be a "[thing] of a second order,"[44] a spiritualized version of the commodities it opposes. Since art is inseparably linked to society by its own historical and material preconditions, it can only gain legitimacy by distancing itself critically from society. The fact that art is embedded in society is unavoidable, but nonetheless compromises it. It is a necessary evil that the artwork must overcome via its form and method of signifying. On a level of representation art can claim an outside that it does not and cannot have.

Adorno's theory combines the autonomy of the artwork, i.e. its position outside, with a radical critique of society. But the critique signifies a negative force, which can only materialize in the artwork against what already exists. This negativity is without immediate application or use, because Adorno has a deep mistrust for any immediate pragmatic intention of art.

> It is not only through its manifest practical intentions, but rather through its mere existence—indeed,

> precisely through its impractical nature—that art manifests a polemic, secretly practical character. This however, cannot be reconciled through the insertion of culture as a category—"cultural activities"—into the totality of prevailing practice as has been done under current conditions with total smoothness.[45]

Adorno is skeptical of any kind of productive or pragmatic impact of art on a social level, because for him the societal is just a sphere of alienation. Therefore the relation between art and society can only be conceived of as one of negation—but a negation that always remains symbolic and that has to come to terms with its own limitations with respect to its impact on real circumstances Seen from a theoretical perspective, the relation of art to its own praxis remains a blind spot and a paradox that cannot be overcome. Art is fueled by the ambition to negate or overcome something with which it is and remains inseparably linked on. In this regard, there is a connection between the art form of sculpture that attempts to transcend its own materiality and Adorno's postulate that art must strive to negate its own participation in society. The failure lies in art's inability to extend signification to the level of the factual. In its practice, in its performative effect on the circumstances it criticized, Conceptual Art neither criticized nor weakened, but rather further differentiated and elaborated, what one culturally and historically understands a commodity to be. And it had a similar effect on the critique of the object. The introduction of certificates (which guarantee the authenticity of the artwork in many examples of Conceptual Art) has reaffirmed the inevitability of a material fixation when art encounters the museum and the market, instead of suspending it.

This perspective becomes apparent when one focuses on the factual, cultural and ethical implications of an aesthetic that is oriented towards the performative dimension of art. Its point of departure is less the recognition of problematic conditions and circumstances than the way in which these circumstances constantly get produced and reproduced via practices and actions—and by any given artwork. As we have seen in the context of Buren's works, Judith Butler theorizes this process as "performativity." By this we can understand what an artwork is capable of generating—be it

affirmative or towards social change—, precisely because of its linkage to social institutions and processes. What becomes significant and meaningful here is not the representational level of the artwork, not what it signifies, depicts or represents, but its factual existence, which becomes the point of departure for artistic agency and positing.

To understand the concept of the performative in this way means to focus not only on what an artwork intends to do, but also on its unintended and unreflected effects. The performative emphasizes an artwork's constitutive effect on precisely those conditions into which it is embedded and by which it exists. From the perspective of the performative, artworks not only are products of given circumstances, they also contribute to the existence of these very circumstances. Not only is social reality represented in artworks, but they also constitute it both concretely and categorically. Concretely here refers to processes that are initiated by the production and the existence of the artwork; categorically, refers to categories that are intentionally or unintentionally reproduced in the process. Seen from this angle, the artwork is far from powerless; on the contrary—as an integral part of society—it has an inherent agency (which, however, can be directed intentionally only to a limited degree). Via the concept of performativity one can explain how an artwork co-constitutes social reality in its most fundamental parameters (for example, the historical and cultural form taken by the category of the commodity).

Models of an Alternative Production

Sehgal's work has the character of an experiment at the heart of which lies the question of how to create *something* from *nothing*; how to semantically create meaning and create economic value without producing a physical object. Conceived in order to formulate and circulate an idea of the object, the product and the artifact that does not rely on what Sehgal calls "the transformation of material,"[46] he turns to traditional art forms like dance and singing, which generate meaning exclusively via the human body without necessitating the production of a material object. He confronts media with the context of visual art, a sphere in our society that gives a high—if not the highest—symbolic (and monetary)

value and appreciation for the material artifact. The museum in turn offers a ritual stage for this high appreciation. In visual art the object, in the sense of an object of perception and communication, is physical, whereas in dance, song and spoken poetry it constitutes itself *in situ* and *in actu* in the materiality of the body. Sehgal's work revolves around the significance of this difference and its cultural and political implications.

Sehgal's work evinces an understanding that the relation between art and society begins long before a thematic reference is made and that this relationship does not lie primarily in the employment of specific techniques taken from everyday life—as in collage or montage, for example—but resides first and foremost on a fundamental level—namely, how the artwork is produced, or, in other words, which modes of production are applied in the process. Unwittingly and independent of its content, the visual artwork affirms certain social conventions and traditions via its mode of production, most centrally the common conviction that economic value must exist in a physical object, that only via the process of physical materialization can *nothing* become *something*.[47] Basically one can characterize any work of visual art as affirming this model of production, intentionally or not. One can say that those arts that are bound to physical materials constitute the social sphere that provides this model with an element of transcendence. This dominant model of production, which is so fundamental to the history of civilization that it almost seems unassailable, is what Sehgal turns against. He differs fundamentally from Conceptual Art and its theoretical references in that he is not concerned with a critique of the market or the commodity status of the artwork. Beyond issues concerning the system of distribution, his critique is aimed at the prevalent model of production: the transformation of material into goods, as it is reproduced by visual art.

> In this respect I consider communism and capitalism as two versions of the same model of economy, which only differ in their ideas about distribution. This model would be: the transformation of material or—to use another word—the transformation of "nature" into supply goods in order to decrease supply

shortage and to diminish the threats of nature, both of course in order to enhance the quality of life. Both the appearance of excess supply in western societies in the 20th century, as well as of mankind's endangering of the specific disposition of "nature" in which human life seems possible, question the hegemony of this mode of production, in which the objecthood of visual art is profoundly inclined.[48]

Sehgal's line of argument is as follows[49]: Historically this model of the economy served to secure the necessities for survival, enhance quality of life by diminishing lack and, as he puts it, banish the "threats of nature." But in the 1950s in North America and in the 1960s in Europe—exactly at the time that the artistic critique of the object status of art was restored—paradigmatic changes occurred that, according to Sehgal, make the hegemony of this model of production dubious.[50] For the first time in the course of civilization, Western societies did not face a lack of goods to cover basic needs, and at the same time it became apparent that a model of production that was supposed to enhance quality of life might actually decrease it in the long run. Over time, the depletion of finite natural resources as well as the emission of harmful substances could result in those modes of production that were designed to solve civilization's problems creating new ones instead, and thereby no longer enhancing the quality of life but actually worsening it. For Sehgal it therefore becomes problematic to hold on to this model at a time when its historical premises are no longer in place, and especially so in an institution like the museum, which deals with shaping values in the long term. In Sehgal's view art can therefore not be about somehow weakening the object, and definitely not about replacing it with a certificate or documentation, but rather about literally changing the material substance of a visual artwork, which has always followed the model of production of the transformation natural resources.

> Visual art has always reflected, consciously or not, the latest in technology. From the very beginnings of civilization with the recognition of stones as a tool going hand in hand with cave drawing until the latest in military technology resulting in video or internet

> art [...] Basically all visual art works are produced by transformations of material, there are only very few exceptions (Barry's telepathic piece, some of Michael Asher's works).[51]

Any visual artwork begins with a transformation, a crafting of material; in principle this applies to a Leonardo da Vinci as much as it does to a Marcel Duchamp, a Gerhard Richter or a work of a Lawrence Weiner. Of course their works represent different statements, attitudes, and worldviews, so to speak. But in Sehgal's line of thinking, the choice of a medium already implies a specific relation to society, technology and (technological) progress. He therefore situates political significance and the encounter of art and society on the level of the artistic medium.

To get a better sense of Sehgal's understanding of the political implications of an artistic medium, it is helpful to contrast his position with that of Clement Greenberg, with whom he shares a focus on the factual aspects of an artwork. Coming from Marxism, Greenberg's examination of the artistic medium does indeed have a socio-political dimension. The search for a specific essence of art equaled a "progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium."[52] Because of the inseparable bonds between art and society, it seemed essential to Greenberg to assign a specific realm to the aesthetic experience of art in order to prevent it from deteriorating into kitsch and mere entertainment.

> At first glance the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion's. Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple, and entertainment itself looked as though it were going to be assimilated, like religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity. Each art, it turned out, had to perform this demonstration on its own account. What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general,

functions. Thus the critique in the case of both artists shifts from the level of the symbolic or representational to the factual level of production and construction.

Positing and Empowerment

How does Sehgal's work find its way into the museum? How does it become part of the art world? Does the work enter the market? Which conditions must be given, which conventions adhered to, so that *nothing*—in a physical sense—can become *something* of—economic and symbolic—value? According to Boris Groys, as we saw in the last chapter, innovation in art always takes place by simultaneously rupturing and continuing traditions, as a "positive and negative adaptation of tradition."[57] The story of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) might have come to a quick end when it was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, if Duchamp had not, as Thierry de Duve describes in his reconstruction of the "R. Mutt case," very strategically launched its entry into art history.[58] He made sure that Alfred Stieglitz photographed it in his characteristic symbolic manner to give the profane object a Buddha-like aesthetic, shifting it from a mere provocation to an artwork, thereby ensuring that the urinal would be judged aesthetically. Duchamp not only "let the viewer complete the image" but, by involving Stieglitz, he selected a middleman who, as the former honorary president of the Armory Show, patron of the American avant-garde and a well-known artist in his own right, had the authority to grant Duchamp's ready-made the status of an artwork. But even the ready-made—which probably more than any other object embodies the idea of rupturing artistic conventions—connects to specific aesthetic conventions. On the one hand, it constitutes itself via "aesthetic contrasting," as Groys formulates, but on the other hand, the ready-made can also be connected positively to cultural traditions, via the reference to Buddhist iconography as well as erotic and taboo connotations. Only through this oscillation between positive and negative cultural references could this object have achieved the status of an eminent work of art. According to Groys, "an everyday object without such an aspiration would have no chance of being put in a line with precursors from the past to then make the aesthetic contrast perceivable."[59]

Innovation can thus be understood as an act of re-evaluation and a reassessment in specific value hierarchies.[60] Precisely because an artist like Daniel Buren reverts to the most conventional medium of visual art—painting—it is essential for him to change the rules. In some sense the opposite is true for Sehgal: he has to adhere to certain conventions precisely because he has removed the most fundamental convention of visual art, namely, the material support.

Sehgal's work follows the mode of presentation of a conventional visual artwork: it is always present and can be viewed during all of the opening hours of an exhibition from the first to the last day. Of equal importance is the fact that, although the work is a temporary artifact, it can be repeated in another venue, therefore it persists and can be transmitted over time. It is only because of the adherence to these conventions that this work achieves the status of an artwork, and thereby manages to generate significance in the realm of visual art. In other words, only via the affirmation of the set of conventions to which a visual artwork is usually bound is it possible for Sehgal to negate the most fundamental convention—the material object—and for his work to be relevant as works of visual art. It seems apparent in Sehgal's work—even more so than with Coleman and Buren—how the performativity of an artwork, its embeddedness in and its production of reality, has become the tool for an artistic statement.

Finally, it is also essential that the artworks can be bought and sold. The artist works with galleries, who sell the works' rights and instructions to museums and collectors. There exists no material object in these transactions, not even a certificate as a material surrogate for the artwork. Buyer, dealer and artist meet in the office of a notary and agree to the terms of the contract orally. An official whose usual function is to write things down, the notary in this case, functions only as a witness and an expert in contractual issues. Other expert witnesses are also present—curators, critics and/or museum directors—who agree to memorize the contents of the contract in case of a dispute. The contract itself is not unusual. It contains clauses that define the rights and the obligations of the artist and the buyer; for example, the presentation of the work (the artist agrees to brief a person he has authorized on the correct installation of the

work and the buyer agrees to show the work in the context of a collection or temporary exhibition for a period of time that is no less than six weeks); prohibition to document the work; the resale of the work (must be through another notarized oral contract); the payment of the persons executing the work (dancers and interpreters), etc. Both parties agree to the contract with a handshake; nothing is written down. The conventions of a sale are adhered to, but Sehgal strips them of their center, the material object. If Daniel Buren, as Pierre Huyghe says, produces "hollowed out objects" by stripping from the object its usual importance, then Sehgal produces "hollowed out conventions." Since Sehgal takes away their center the objects appear as rules, as cultural agreements that are negotiable and can be fulfilled in a different way.

Sehgal's affirmative relation to the market is decisively different from the critique of the commodity status of the artwork in the 1960s and early 1970s. From Sehgal's perspective, it is not the fact *that* something is sold but *what* is sold that is decisive. Therefore his work is designed to change the nature of the commodity or product but not to attack the commodity status itself. "I am still producing objects not in the material sense of the word, but in the product sense of the word."[61] Sehgal's works draw attention to the social and cultural processes of exchange, which constitute what we call "the market." His argument is that precisely because the market is constituted performatively, i.e. via actions like offering and demanding, in principle the market has an inherent openness within which his work operates. In this respect the market is not the end, but the beginning of agency. Art in particular represents a field that can create a different model for the product, a *progressive* product so to speak, that on the one hand does not involve the transformation of material, but on the other hand nonetheless fulfills what constitutes the historical core of an artwork, offering the collector the possibility of aesthetic experience and social status.

Since 2001, Sehgal has created a number of works that are executed by museum guards (interpreters dressed in the uniform of the museum guard and therefore perceived as guards). According to Sehgal:

The guard is an interesting figure, because the guard is the person who watches over objects. So the material objects are creating meaning, while the guard doesn't create meaning. This is a strange relationship, somehow that in this moment these objects become more important than this person. So, what I did was to put meaning into the guard and asked, what if this person, who is anyways there, creates meaning, what is the difference? What does this imply in terms of how one produces things?[62]

He begins with the usual situation, the institutionalized exhibition of objects and system of surveillance, and chooses the person rather than the material object as the conveyer of an artwork.

These works take place in either museum collection galleries or temporary exhibitions, and involve one or more guards. *This is good*, for example, is a work from 2001 that was also shown at the 2005 Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art (among other places) and was enacted mainly by older male guards. When a visitor entered the room, the guard suddenly started moving, with straight legs jumping from one foot to the other and simultaneously rotating his outstretched arms like a windmill in front of his body. After a few seconds he stopped and said, "Tino Sehgal, This is good, 2001, Collection Museum Ludwig, Cologne." The work *This is propaganda* is enacted by a female guard. When one enters the room, she turns away from the viewer and sings in a high and powerful voice: "This is propaganda, you know, you know, this is propaganda," then gradually turns back to the visitor and continues to sing the refrain, "you know, you know," and ends with "Tino Sehgal, This is propaganda, 2002, courtesy Jan Mot Gallery." As we have already seen with *Kiss*, Sehgal goes one step further in terms of dematerialization with these works and asks the people enacting the work to say the information one would normally find on a label next to the work. In *This is exchange*, which was also presented at the German pavilion in Venice in 2005, the guard welcomed the visitor with the following sentences: "Hello, my name is …. This is a piece by Tino Sehgal, entitled, This is exchange. This piece is an offer. We offer to pay you half of the amount you paid to enter the museum if you make a

short statement about market economy and discuss it with me. Are you interested in this offer?" If one answered in the affirmative, one immediately found oneself in a conversation about market economy. At the end of the conversation the viewer was given a password; when this was told to the person at the front desk the viewer received half of the entrance fee.

Almost all the titles of these works begin with *This is* which acts not only as a signature of the work but also fulfils an essential performative function which is to constitute these incidents as an artwork. It gives the work a title, but it is also part of the work, because the title is uttered as part of the work itself. It is precisely because Sehgal's titles are tautological that their performative-generative function comes to the fore. "*This* is the most present tense word there is […] stronger than now," Michael Snow once wrote about the usage of this term in his films.[63] Sehgal uses "This is" as a kind of mimetic trick to communicate the situation and transport the questions of content and meaning into the here and now. They emphasize this situation, place value on what happens at this very moment, in precisely this inter-subjective relationship.

As an assertion *This is* appears in different contexts in the art of the 20th century. As a gesture that declares the object as art, it is inscribed into Duchamp's ready-mades. "This (urinal) is art" is the statement that accompanies *Fountain*, thus signifying and actually carrying out the performative act of the symbolic transformation of the thing from its primary reality as an object to its secondary reality as a meaningful sign, which is directly linked to the context of art, a museum and a viewer. The negative version of this gesture is the famous image of a pipe by Magritte. In *The Treason of the Images* (1948), with the caption "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," Magritte performs the opposite process: he disassembles the sign into its parts, the mental image and the material signifier. In 1972 at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf Marcel Broodthaers brought together these two approaches: he presented an exhibition of 266 representations of eagles taken from art, culture, science, religion, politics, history and advertising; each exhibit had a label inscribed in German, English and French: "This is not a work of art." In the catalogue Broodthaers wrote that the label "illustrated an idea of Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte" and put an illustration of the *Fountain* next to a

reproduction of Magritte's painting of a pipe.[64] Broodthaers uses the figure of the eagle as a sign that is overdetermined in a double sense—as artwork and as symbol—to pose the question of the relationship between the image, the object, its signification and meaning. Broodthaers also refers to the then little-known essay by Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*,[65] in which Foucault relates Magritte's pipe painting (or rather another version of it) to a calligram.[66] He traces the confounding discrepancy between representation and signification that characterizes this image back to a calligram that underlies its structure. Synonymous with a "calligraphic image," a calligram suspends the distinction between figurative and linguistic representation and thereby dissolves different systems of signs like text and image, drawing and writing, utterance and figure, giving the depiction the quality of a symbol and writing the spatial dimension of a painted depiction. Its complexity lies in "trap[ping] things in a double cipher."[67] "Thus," as Foucault says, "the calligram aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read."[68] Magritte dissolves the order of sign systems; nonetheless he is concerned with signification, with designation, and not with being. Nobody would seriously claim that the image of a pipe really *is* a pipe. In this respect Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" differs from Duchamp's implicit "This is art" and Sehgal's "This is good." For both Duchamp and Sehgal are concerned with showing, even exposing, the reality claim of their statement.

The presentation of Duchamp's ready-mades in the museum demonstrates that in principle anything can be art. From Sehgal's perspective this *anything* is confined to specific limitations, namely the parameters of physical materiality. The illocutionary (generative) function of "This is good" lies first of all in making that which it designates appear as *something*, in distinguishing *something* from *nothing*. It identifies the incidents as something that has a symbolic, artistic meaning. Its actual content is thus: "This is something"—and not *nothing*. This is the crucial function of Sehgal's title. Its execution, taking place, is itself a positing.[69] In this we find an affirmation of the "that" (quod) of positing, which was already of significance with respect to Buren. It is first

> but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art.[53]

This oft-cited passage from his essay "Modernist Painting" clarifies how Greenberg realizes his concept of distinction: he makes the individual aesthetic experience of an artwork dependent on its respective medium. Greenberg reinterprets from the side of an aesthetics of production the claim for the specificity of the art experience. He relates the essence of the art experience to specific material properties and conventions of formation. Greenberg proposes that each respective medium should have to prove that it has something singular and irreplaceable to offer. Thus the artistic medium is not a neutral support and therefore cannot be filled either with just any content. Every medium, irrespective of the content, has a specific meaning of its own, which can be resistant.

Sehgal shares Greenberg's perspective on the specificity of an artistic medium, but he addresses the underlying question of the relation—both practically and politically—of art and society in a different manner. Greenberg is concerned with the dissociation and distinction of the arts; in this respect his position intersects Adorno's. But again Greenberg's argument takes place on an aesthetic level, which explains why its ability to distinguish is limited, as the history of modern art has shown. How else would one explain that a Pollock, whom Greenberg regarded so highly, could also end up becoming a kitchen poster? Sehgal's work performs a cultural distinction on another, deeper level. It is realized in the choice of another model of production for the artwork. As Buren did in his later works, Sehgal recognizes a potential for agency in the factual social embeddedness of the artwork, in which there always exists the possibility of marking out an actual difference. His work exhibits this difference concerning the question of how far one's artwork perpetuates this model of production or substitutes it via another. With Sehgal, as with Buren, an attitude of criticality transforms into construction the proposal of having something else take place. Instead of formulating a critique of the object character of art as Conceptual Art did, but then ultimately maintaining this object status, or more precisely criticizing the objecthood of art in order to actually attack its status as a product, by ultimately maintaining the status

both as product and as object, Sehgal creates a model of art that does without any physical object.

> My point is that dance as well as singing—as traditional artistic media—could be a paradigm for another mode of production which stresses transformation of acts instead of transformation of material, continuous involvement of the present with the past in creating further presents instead of an orientation towards eternity, and simultaneity of production and deproduction instead of economics of growth.[54]

How does he do that? Sehgal's work materializes as temporary artifacts in the body of the person who enacts them. He stages the becoming-object of actions—not of humans—which by nature do not use what the artist sees as the problematic consequences of the usual mode of production. He introduces this medium (which from a purely technical standpoint can be described as archaic) not only as "high cultural" (as in *Kiss*) but also as "contemporary." At the 2005 Venice Biennale Sehgal presented the work *This is so contemporary*, which was enacted by three people. When a visitor entered the exhibition space they danced in a happy, emphatic way around him or her singing in the sing-song style of a nursery rhyme: "Oh, this is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary. Oh, this is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary." The melody was so catchy and the dancing so contagious that quite a few visitors left the German pavilion dancing. In a nearby pavilion I heard a visitor whispering to his neighbor, "and this is not so contemporary."

These anecdotes demonstrate that the different mode of production of Sehgal's work generates not only another concept of the artwork but ultimately also another kind of viewer. What started as a focus on the performativity of the artwork, of its own coming-into-existence, leads to a very specific performative effect on the situation and the viewer. Any work that is presented at the Venice Biennale stands for what is deemed to be contemporary in art and can claim to be "contemporary," thereby not only representing an idea of what is contemporary but also fundamentally co-constituting it. In this respect the title is first and foremost tautological. But by making explicit, one can even say by exhibiting, the

performative power of the art institution to define what is contemporary in the work, Sehgal also opens the notion of what is contemporary up for negotiation. "Normally we tend to think of contemporary culture as informed by the latest in contemporary technology […] and that is how we construct contemporariness. I was interested if we can construct a contemporariness without using contemporary technology or without even making reference to it but using the oldest means possible, just people moving around."[55] In declaring his medium as contemporary although from a technological perspective that seems improbable, Sehgal makes use of his own power or rather performative power to intervene into the process to define what is the contemporary, a power granted to him as the artist representing the German pavilion. Ultimately, however, the claim he makes via this work is affirmed only when the visitor confirms the work as being contemporary, or something new and culturally valuable. In that moment the work—performatively—generates what it says: "If you are seduced by the thing and you say, 'This is actually contemporary,' then this whole structure of 'contemporary equals informed by contemporary technology' has broken down..."[56] The artwork is thus a discursive interrelationship of different values, which become concrete through a system of validation and judgments about those values. One might reply that this interrelationship applies to every artwork. Yes, which is why every artwork has a performative dimension that comes into play in exactly this manner. Sehgal's work, however, actively constructs this process. It renders its own performative power to posit explicit, thereby marking it as a process in which a number of factors (including the visitor) are involved.

This joyful and positive attitude can indeed be taken programmatically. Sehgal employs affirmation to counter an attitude of criticality towards spectacle, as Buren did in *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* (2002). There is a spectacular element in the work that the artist can allow precisely because the work's critical stance resides not in its representation but in its mode of production. In other words, Sehgal can afford a celebratory tone, because he has built his own political stance into the foundation of the social existence of his artwork. Similarly, Buren can allow his work to be decorative, because he has changed the fundamental way the artwork

and foremost a matter of the positing "that," of the fact of its positing, of its existence and not of positing "as." Sehgal's work does not refer to reality, but emerges from the transformation of a given situation. The usual painterly or sculptural object of art constitutes itself via an ontological difference to the world of things that surround it. Therefore Adorno speaks of the artwork as a "thing of a second order,"[70] marking its ontological difference from an everyday object. In Sehgal's hands, however, the artwork realizes itself not as an ontological difference but as an ontological shift from an everyday situation to an artwork that temporarily materializes in actions, movements and speech. The transition between the everyday situation of an exhibition space and the work of art is thus fluid. After they have enacted the work, the interpreters, as there is no textual information in the exhibition space, also function as commentators or critics as they are the only ones available to speak about the work they just embodied. The objects of Minimal Art transform the experience of art into an experience of the situation itself, which is potentially endless. In this regard Michael Fried spoke of the "indeterminacy of the situation" and for Sehgal this is even truer, since the works are not only a trigger for the experience of a situation, but can also react to the viewer. There is a reciprocal exchange between work and viewer that has the potential of being truly indeterminate or infinite. But precisely because there are no clear boundaries between work, viewer and situation, there is a necessity for something that delimits the work—and this task is fulfilled by the title.

Although Sehgal's titles are tautological, they also produce meaning. When the guard says, "This is good," after having enacted the work, it is in principle tautological, since every work of art implicitly maintains this claim and—considering the double meaning of *good*, as a positive evaluation but also in the sense of as a product or commodity—fulfils this status. Nevertheless the situation in which the title is uttered is more complex and in some sense far from tautological, since it is not clear to what the title refers when it is spoken. One can understand it self-referentially (referring to what has just happened); one could also relate it to the art objects in the room. The status of the title is unclear and thereby exposed as a process, in which the institution,

the work of art and also the viewer (in her or his judgment) are performatively active by allowing certain values—like *contemporariness*—to be realized. In *This is good*, the title ultimately confronts visitors with their preconceptions, i.e. if he or she attributes the status of an artwork to the movements of the guard or solely to the object next to them. Through his titles, Sehgal makes explicit the different aspects that his works deal with. *This is propaganda* addresses the political dimension of art, *This is so contemporary* art's power to shape and posit values, and *This is exchange* exhibits the difference between saying and doing. In fact, *This is exchange* is the most explicit work in terms of Sehgal's consideration of economics and the culture of the market. If the visitor accepts the offer to reimburse half of the entrance fee for a conversation on the market economy, then he or she generates a real product inside the framework of a work that itself is a product. The fact that the visitor plays an unusually constitutive role is an essential part of the work.

Technologies of the Self

One of Sehgal's most complex works to date is *This objective of that object* from 2004, which was shown at London's ICA in 2005 with *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*. One entered the site of the work through a corridor from which two exhibition spaces branched off on either side, both appearing to be empty. After a short while, however, while still in the corridor, one was suddenly encircled by five people, one of whom blocked the exit to the staircase. One after the other, five people walked backwards towards the visitor from the hidden corners of the spaces and stopped at a distance of about three to four meters in a circular formation. They all had their backs to the visitor and were breathing heavily and in synchronous rhythm. At first a hardly audible murmur turned to a phrase that was delivered in unison and repeated insistently: "The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion." The louder this sentence was spoken, the more emphatic it sounded, like a demand with increasingly long pauses between each utterance. This was the prologue of an artwork that aspires to provoke its own commentary. If the visitor does not comment, i.e. if there is no reaction by the

visitor, the players collapse after a few minutes. Their voices become weak, as they slowly sink to the floor, and as if with the last breath of their life utter for a last time "the objective ... of this work ... is to become ... the object ... of ... a discussion." That was it, then in silence, the players lie lifeless on the floor. Without a comment, without communication, the artwork has no life force. But as soon as something occurs, even just a visitor clearing his or her throat, they stand up again and excitedly say: "We have a comment, we have a comment. Who will answer, who will answer?" Then one of them answers "me" or "I will ... " which initiates a discussion among them. The players discuss—always remaining in circular formation with their backs to the visitor—the possible meanings and implications of the visitor's comment. As the comments are likely to be different, the discussions differ considerably. One discussion I experienced was initiated by the frequent question: Why do the players always remained with their backs turned, which led to a conversation about the cultural significance of eye contact. The sudden ringing of a cell phone, laughing, a comment in a foreign language, can be the beginning of another discussion. The players interpret the visitors' comments in a way that is similar to the way a critic would discuss an artwork. Although visitors are able to influence the course of the discussion by contributing to what is being said or interjecting a comment, they nonetheless never attain a position equal to that of the players, in part because of the formal arrangement of the situation. The stratification that Sehgal constructs with this work is a strange mix between a conversation and a sculpture or a social situation and its aesthetic. The visitors are crucial and constitutive to the work, without their comments the main part could not take place. If no comment is made, the work does not go beyond the invariable prologue. The artwork needs to become the object of the reflection, just as the visitors must become the object of the conversation they witness—it is as if the work of art were holding a mirror to the observer.

> Normally when you go into an exhibition you are confronted with something. [...] this object [...] represents a certain *Zeitgeist* or a certain culture which our society or our state thinks is worth preserving. In my

> case […] the work basically asks the viewer, "What do you think?" and thereby also infers, what you do or what you say matters and will also change the course of this work.[71]

The artwork and its reception are in an infinite feedback loop, with a fragile and constantly negotiated power relation between the players and the visitors that, to a certain extent, is directed by Sehgal's mise-en-scene and dramaturgy. If there were five pairs of eyes directed at them, the visitors would be subjected to a completely different kind of power. The fact that the players are facing the wall is crucial, as it allows the visitors to perceive this formation as something constructed and aesthetic. This spatial configuration creates a kind of equilibrium between those enacting and those visiting. The players know what is to be done and the visitors can identify the players. Since the players are always facing the walls and do not have a complete overview of the changing situation, they cannot be aware of things like nonverbal communication between visitors. "It's something between ballet and chess," one visitor commented, and in fact this work functions like a spatial and formal game that the visitors try to understand and also to control. "The visitors are trying to play a game on us," one player said, as a number of visitors drove her into a corner in an attempt to see her face, thereby altering the spatial configuration of the work.

With respect to this piece, Sehgal says, "In most of my works there is this moment when the visitor can speak with my interpreter and I wanted to integrate this moment, which was always part of the piece for me, really into the piece. […] I wanted to make it kind of the center of the piece."[72] And in fact he does give the viewer a share of the responsibility and thereby realizes an ethical dimension to this work, if one understands ethics as "the forming of relations to others and oneself" as Foucault once said, that marks an essential feature of all of Sehgal's works. The simple fact that the visitor triggers the work, that it only exists for her or him for that moment, contains an element of empowerment for the viewer. This "empowerment" is crucial to Sehgal's work, which is not only produced in a completely different way but, compared to Coleman and Buren, also generates a different kind of viewer. Coleman's work reflects the dissolution of the

ideology of a sovereign, self-determined subject that prevailed in modernity. There is a strong element in Coleman's work of the viewer being addressed but—as is apparent in *Box*—it is dialectically contrasted with an equally strong element of dissociation, dissolution and almost violent encroachment on the viewer. Almost all of Coleman's works allegorically circle around the subject. It exists, but only in its disappearance, as a figure that is experiencing its own dissolution. If Coleman stages the figure of the subject in the process of its dissolution, then in Buren's work the subject is emptied out by the weakening of its counterpart, the object. Buren's work generates a strong aesthetic experience, but one that remains diffuse, that does not allow for immersion or contemplation, but rather is designed to dissolve that very form of art experience.

In Sehgal's work the conception of the subject is different. Precisely because he has changed the parameters of visual art so fundamentally, he can re-address the role of the subject in a positive manner and newly define it. One could say that in *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* Sehgal reverts to a contemplative form of the work-viewer relationship that seems almost anachronistic. As in a Chardin painting, at least for a certain amount of time one can experience oneself in the immersion represented in this work. In this respect Sehgal comes surprisingly close to what Fried calls "absorption."[73] Fried takes up a model developed by Denis Diderot for both theater and painting, which presupposed the nonexistence of the viewer in front of the image or of the spectator in theater. The figures involved in a representation or the actors in a play should not turn outwards. They were to be fully taken up by their actions and interactions. Yet precisely the representation's focus on itself, precisely the negation of the viewer, his or her exclusion from the compositional focus, ultimately involves the viewer even more strongly and more authentically in what is represented. Sehgal utilizes this model as an artistic technique, which allows him to constitute his work as a work of art and its counterpart as an object-viewer. In this way he constitutes a work-beholder relationship that is no longer generated via an object, or as Fried describes it, "epitomized in the object." Herein lies the crucial difference of Sehgal's work. Via a mental and quasi-metaphysical experience of the artwork and the self,

Fried's viewer is to be in a "perfect trance of involvement,"[74] as he calls it, and should forget that he or she is ultimately standing in front of a profane thing.

> […] translating literal duration, the actual passage of time as one stands before the canvas, into a purely pictorial effect: as if the very stability and unchangingness of the painted image are perceived by the beholder not as material properties that could not be otherwise but as manifestations of an absorptive state—the image's absorption in itself, so to speak—that only happens to subsist.[75]

Ultimately there always remains a certain stasis inherent to the kind of object-subject relationship construed here. This explains many of the critiques of the artistic approaches of the 1960s and 1970s, which were directed towards activating and opening the parameters of this relationship and thereby generating a more open form of subjectivity. As there are no material objects in Sehgal's work, and the artwork and beholder are of the same *medium*, they generate a fluid and active movement between player and visitor that constantly changes with any activity inside this relationship. When Adorno speaks of artworks that "open their eyes,"[76] he means it metaphorically. In Sehgal's work a look can change the entire situation. It can hit the gaze of the viewer who might then look to the floor or turn away. In these moments Sehgal's works are not only eventful, but momentarily they constitute an event. As a philosophical category the event is characterized by the occurrence of a situation that cannot be categorized. This is true of Sehgal's work in the moments something occurs that is not preconceived in the given context and that eludes any existing category of aesthetic experience. Understandings that we all share—every child that walks through a museum knows that this is a place where things stand or hang and are viewed—seem suspended. For a short moment an order that is taken for granted is penetrated by an experience that claims a radical alterity. Gilles Deleuze writes that "Making an event—however small—is the most delicate thing in the world: the opposite of making a drama or making history."[77] The event can neither be directed intentionally nor reduced to a content. It is a moment

of pure singularity which, following Deleuze, belongs to "another dimension than that of denotation, manifestation, or signification."[78] Such an event only exists for a short and singular moment, in the case of Sehgal's works it is followed by a search for potential explanations and categorizations. "He has gone crazy," some visitors said when they encountered the dancing guard. And a woman said to the museum guard who was singing *This is propaganda* and whose voice could be heard throughout the museum, "I could have sworn that you just sang."

With Tony Bennett one can understand the museum as a place that contributes to the instantiation of specific *technologies of the self*, which were constitutive for the historical formation of a bourgeois subjectivity. In Sehgal's work the museum on the one hand becomes the site of an experiment, but on the other hand the experiment is based precisely on those conventions of subject constitution that have always been inscribed into the institution of the museum. As in Buren's exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Sehgal takes up fundamental conventions of self-formation that the museum cultivates and steers them in another direction, as the artist emphasizes:

> […] actually what I am doing is quite media-specific to the exhibition. The exhibition has always been much more about people, that is, visitors, walking through spaces as individuals, being addressed by an art experience as individuals. That is really the innovation of the exhibition, of the public exhibition, without the guided tour. The specificity of an exhibition is that it can single out citizens as individuals and not, let's say, like cinema still does or theatre has done for thousands of years: address people as "the people." The exhibition has always been much more about individuals and about individuals also seeing each other.[79]

Indeed, the historical and cultural achievement of the museum lies essentially in the fact of having constructed a historical and cultural ritual that serves the formation and self-formation of the citizen. From this perspective the

museum is not only, and maybe not even primarily, the place for the exhibition of objects. Rather these objects function as tools for a "civilizing ritual" for the individual, as Carol Duncan writes, that aims at the internalization of control and power. The museum is thus not only the place where values and ideologies are represented in artworks. It is equally the place where these values become part of a mental and bodily exercise; where they are and have to be embodied to be at all effective. For Sehgal this ritual of perception and reception differentiates itself even further, as it is the individual in relation to itself that is addressed in his work—though not only as perceiving and receiving, but as an active instance that intervenes into and shapes what is going on. The individual has agency and carries responsibility: is engaged in a work of self on the self, so to speak.

At the beginning of the 1980s Foucault, who had been involved since 1966 in the project of dissolving the modernist ideology of a sovereign, self-determined subject and had worked over decades on the position of the subject in the relation of knowledge and power, took up the question of the subject from a different perspective. He was no longer primarily concerned with a critique of the notion of the subject of enlightenment, but rather with *practices of self*, via which individuals recognize themselves as subjects. In this project he turned to Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment?": "The general framework of what I call the 'Technologies of the Self' is a question which appeared at the end of the 18th century. […] This question is very different from what we call the traditional philosophical questions: What is the world? What is man? What is truth? What is knowledge? […] The question, I think, which arises at the end of the 18th century is: What are we in our actuality? You will find the formation of this question in a text written by Kant."[80] Philosophically exemplary, according to Foucault, is Kant's outline of an ontology of the present, in which he asks what it means to be a responsible and, in a political sense, mature person today. Foucault, however, is interested in the practices or "technologies" of self through which an individual constitutes itself as a moral subject.

> This latter is not simply "self-awareness" but self-formation as an "ethical subject," a process in which

> the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the percept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. […] And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. […] Moral action is indissociable from these forms of self-activity.[81]

Foucault is interested in concrete forms of subjectivity as a way of relating to oneself and one's existence. The ethical subject that constitutes itself in experience and shapes itself via practices—the work on the self that the subject carries out—is foregrounded. Foucault focuses on the creative potential of the individual without returning to the notion of the subject of modernity, which is usually linked to the concept of creativity. Rather, he understands creativity from its technical side, as a capacity to appropriate certain techniques and to apply them in specific ways, as the willingness to follow as well as to break rules to formulate new ones. Sehgal's work also tackles the issue of an ethic that is concerned with practices of self and the resulting process of the differentiation of the self. His work conveys both a sense of power and powerlessness to the visitor as well as a sense of the possibilities and limits of his or her agency. In short: it addresses viewers as potent and responsible individuals. What was subtly implied in *Instead of allowing...* becomes more and more clear in subsequent works: the visitor becomes the instance that initiates the taking-place of the work and whose decisions influence and form the course of the work. In this manner the ethical dimension of responding, of responsivity, becomes the central element of the work. The fact of being produced differently ultimately generates a different beholder; a visitor who is no longer only a receptive instance, but a figure that shapes and responsibly influences the work. Regardless of whether one feels called to direct action or is addressed in a more subtle sense by a work like *Instead of allowing...*, Sehgal's works always imply questions of responsibility and agency within an intersubjective relationship. One is constantly interrogating oneself: Should I watch this person? How do I position myself towards him? Or during the *dying*—the sinking to the floor of the players

when there is no comment—in *This objective of that object*: Am I the cause of this? That cannot really be true. Do I have to do something? This work in particular generates a constantly shifting relationship between the players and the visitors, who themselves feel mirrored and somewhat exposed, since their comments becomes the object of a discussion. Not all visitors are comfortable going along with this. One visitor, who experienced this work with me, refused to comment, observing "I don't want to talk about it in this space."

[1] Daniel Buren in conversation with Seth Siegelaub and Michel Claura, *Daniel Buren. Erscheinen, Scheinen, Verschwinden*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Richter, Düsseldorf, 1996, p. 113.

[2] Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object*, Horizon, New York, 1964; Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, New York, 1973; Barbara Rose, *American Art since 1900*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, New York, 1975.

[3] Buren, *Erscheinen, Scheinen, Verschwinden*, p. 112.

[4] Interview with Robert Barry in: Alexander Alberro, Patricia Norvell (eds.), *Recording Conceptual Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2001, p. 90.

[5] Jan Mot from the Galerie Jan Mot in Brussels and Jörg Johnen from the Johnen Galerie, Cologne/Berlin, alternating with members of their staff.

[6] As part of the exhibition *I'll never let you go*, curated by Panacea/Marten Spangberg, January 31—February 28, 2001.

[7] Concerning the non-documentability/non-documentation and live nature of Sehgal's works, see Sehgal in conversation with Jörg Heiser in: Jörg Heiser (ed.), *Funky Lesson*, Revolver, Frankfurt/Main, 2005, p. 104f.

[8] Quoted from German: Paul Veyne, *Foucault. Die Revolutionierung der Geschichte*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1992, p. 36f.

[9] See Jacques Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) ('within such limits')" Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller (eds.), *Material Events. Paul De Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2001, p. 310.

[10] Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon," p. 320.

[11] Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon," p. 319.

[12] See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995.

[13] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 2.

[14] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 4.

[15] Rebecca Schneider, "Archives. Performance Remains," *Performance Research*, 2 (2001), p. 100–108. See also: Nancy Spector, "Tino Sehgal: This is not an object," *The Hugo Boss Prize* 2006, Guggenheim Museum, Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2006, p. 89–93.

[16] Tino Sehgal quoted after Claire Bishop, Claire Bishop, "No Pictures, Please: The Art of Tino Sehgal," *Artforum*, New York, 5 (2005), p. 217.

[17] In 2000 Sehgal created a dance piece as a kind of *boite-en-valise*. In (untitled) Sehgal literally moves through the history of dance in the 20th century. He dances 20 sequences, each a few minutes in length, of dance styles that marked this century. Thus his body becomes the site of a retrospective of dance in the 20th century. This theatrical work maintains a similar status in Sehgal's oeuvre to that of Coleman's *guaiRE*. It testifies to his interest in body to body transmission and alternative forms of archiving and passing on of knowledge.

[18] Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1986, p. 276–290.

[19] For an extensive analysis of this argument see Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, Yale University Press, London, 2000.

[20] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon. An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. by Ellen Frothningham, Robert Brothers, Boston, 1874, p. 91f.

[21] Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 16.

[22] See Johann Georg Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, vol. 1, Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, 1994, p. 292–294.

[23] Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 63.

[24] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, trans. by Daniel Slager, Archipelago Books, New York, 2004, p. 68ff.
See also: Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 77ff.

[25] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998, p. 151. (The original essay was published in *Artforum*, New York, 5, 1967.)

[26] Fried, "Objecthood," p. 160.

[27] See also Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 199ff.

[28] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London, 2004, p. 230.

[29] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 230.

[30] Fried, "Objecthood," p. 168.

[31] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 114.

[32] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 130.

[33] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 223.

[34] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, New York, 5 (1967), p. 79–84.

[35] Conversation with Lawrence Weiner, Alberro, Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art*, p. 109.

[36] This is Weiner's *Statement of Intent* from 1969 that counts as a kind of guiding line for the reception of his work.

[37] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Open Letters, Industrial Poems" Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (ed.), *Broodthaers. Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, The MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1988, p. 72.

[38] See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, 55 (1996), p. 105–143.

[39] Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," p. 141.

[40] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 6.

[41] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 323.

[42] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 296.

[43] Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism," Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (III), *Marx, Karl/ Engels, Friedrich: Collected Works*, Volume 3 (1843–1844), Progress Publishers, Moscow; International Publishers Inc., Moscow and New York; Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., London, 1975, p. 297.

[44] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 129.

[45] Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture and Administration" Theodor W. Adorno, J. M. Bernstein, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Routledge, New York, London, 2008, p. 116.

[46] Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Kunsthalle Bremen (eds.), *Kunstpreis der Böttcherstrasse in Bremen 2003*, Kunsthalle, Bremen, 2003, p. 50–55, in particular p. 50.

[47] Sehgal's position becomes very clear in the comparison of two works by Marcel Broodthaers and Sehgal. Broodthaers, who was a poet for 20 years before he became an artist, had throughout his life been concerned with the relationship between language, objects and their respective reality content. In 1968 he made a work that consisted in covering the words in Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* with black bars, thereby both making them illegible and emphasizing the visual and plastic qualities of the layout and in some sense its objectlike character. Broodthaers gave this work the subtitle *Image*. Sehgal contributed to a publication entitled *Perform* (Jens Hoffmann and Joan Jonas [eds.], Thames & Hudson, London 2005), in which he refers to these works by Mallarmé and Broodthaers. Instead of covering the text he substituted it—using the same font and layout—with a new one that, just like Mallarmé's original, could be read on different levels. The main sentence that stretches throughout the pages, reads as follows: "This sentence already performed." The rest of the text that occupies the space between the words of the main sentence documents every step of its own production, i.e. lists the exact quantities of material, resources and energy used in manufacturing (for the given number of the book's edition). These two works mark out the differences between Broodthaers and Sehgal in respect of their positions to the relationship between art and societal modes of production. Broodthaers's work is intended as a critique of Conceptual Art and highlights that even language can become a commodity. With Sehgal the focus shifts, it is no longer a question of if something can become a commodity or not, but rather a statement that every artwork is already involved in the societal process of transforming natural resources—irrespective of its respective thematics and without utilizing explicitly industrial modes of production.

[48] Sehgal in: Dorothea von Hantelmann, Marjorie Jongbloed (eds.), *I promise it's political*, Museum Ludwig Köln, Walther König, Cologne 2002, p. 91.

[49] For an extensive elaboration of Sehgal's argumentation—he is a qualified economist—see Sehgal in: Mark Kremer, Maria Hlavajova, Maria Fletcher (eds.), *Now What? Artists Write!*, Revolver, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, p. 166ff.

[50] On the influence on art of John Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, see Robert Hobbs, "Affluence, Taste and the Brokering of Knowledge. Notes on the Social Context of Early Conceptual Art" Michael Corris (ed.), *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth, and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 200–222.

[51] Sehgal in: Jens Hoffmann (ed.), *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist*, Revolver, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, p. 72f.

[52] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a newer Laocoon" (1940), Francis Frascina (ed.), *Pollock and After. The Critical Debate*, Routledge, London and New York, 1985, p. 68.

[53] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg—The Collected Essays and Criticism. Modernism with a Vengeance*, Volume 4 (1957–1969), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, p. 86.

[54] Sehgal in: *I promise it's political*, p. 91.

[55] Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, Vol. II, Charta, Milan, 2010, p. 833.

[56] Obrist, *Interviews* (II), p. 833f.

[57] From German: Boris Groys, *Ueber das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*, Hanser, Frankfurt/Main, 1999, p. 91

[58] See Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, The MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1998, chapter 2.

[59] Groys, *Ueber das Neue*, p. 87.

[60] Groys, *Ueber das Neue*, p. 14.

[61] Obrist, *Interviews* (II), p. 823.

[62] "The Objectives of the Object. An Interview with Tino Sehgal by Silvia Sgualdini," *UOVO*, Turin, 10 (2005), p. 171.

[63] Michael Snow in "An Intercontinental Collage, Catsou Roberts and Michael Snow (Interview)," Catsou Roberts, Lucy Steeds (eds.), *Michael Snow. Almost Cover to Cover*, Black Dog, London, 2001, p. 15.

[64] *Marcel Broodthaers: Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute*, Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, 1972, p. 12–15.

[65] *Broodthaers: Der Adler*, p. 13; Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and edited by James Harkness, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2008.

[66] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 19ff.

[67] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 20.

[68] Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 21.

[69] The decisive feature of these titles, so one could summarize with Foucault, is the fact *that* they take place. Their "enunciative function" is crucial. "The speech act is not what took place just prior to the moment when the statement was made (in the author's thought or intentions); it is not what might have happened, after the event itself, in its wake, and the consequences that it gave rise to; it is what occurred by the very fact that a statement was made—and precisely this statement (and no other) in specific circumstances." Michael Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A.M.Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, New York, 2007, p. 93.

[70] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 129.

[71] Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2005 (unpublished manuscript).

[72] Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2005 (unpublished manuscript).

[73] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988.

[74] Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 103f.

[75] Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 50.

[76] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 86.

[77] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson a.o., Columbia University Press, New York, 1987, p. 66.

[78] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 52.

[79] Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2005 (unpublished manuscript).

[80] Michel Foucault, "The Political Technology of Individuals" Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1988, p. 145.

[81] Michel Foucault, "The Use of Pleasure," *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 2, trans. by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House Inc., New York, 1990, p. 28. See also: "The Care Of The Self," *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 3, trans. by Robert Hurley, Penguin Books, New York, 1990.

CHAPTER IV

Critique and Construction

Concluding with Jeff Koons

In light of the artistic positions of James Coleman, Daniel Buren and Tino Sehgal, let us return to the initial question of how one can do something with art, the question about the possibilities and limits of acting with and through art.

All the works discussed share a concept of the artwork that integrates a level of effects—which are experienced both individually as well as constitutively for a societal significance of art. The manner in which this is realized demonstrates the different approaches of these artists: the virtuosity with which Coleman intertwines different levels of representation and impact, of saying and doing into his work; how Buren programmatically shifts the production of meaning to a performative dimension of doing; and the efficacy that Sehgal enforces giving significance to an artwork that lacks the most basic precondition of visual art—its physical materiality. With both Buren and Sehgal, the ritual character of the

museum and the experience it provides become apparent; as a specifically created, formed and forming ritual that can be artistically reconfigured. To a certain degree the notion of the work put forth here was introduced in the early 1960s by Minimal Art and continued in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Institutional Critique. What distinguishes the artists discussed here is a consciousness of the significance and alterability of *all* parameters that define the performative effectiveness of an artwork. Unlike with Minimal Art, it is not only a question of the phenomenological conditions of the exhibition space but also of art's discursive framing. And it is not just about rendering visible, or exhibiting these discursive framings and conventions as in Institutional Critique, but about operating with them, i.e. recognizing the potential for construction and change that lies in their usage.

What is striking about these three artists is that they operate at the limit of what one could call the paradigm of criticality. The more the production of meaning takes place within the performative dimension of their work, the more these artists are implicitly or explicitly accused of giving up a "critical" stance.[1] Is there a connection between this aspect of the reception and the work structure that these artists employ? What these artists have in common is a specific approach. Their work is not realized as a critical reference *to* something, but as a creation, a construction, a model of something new. Rather than criticizing the mode of historicization in visual art, Coleman readjusts the artwork's performative dimension toward a different notion of temporality. He challenges the mode in which his work enters history. Buren's exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* is not a critique of the conventional retrospective, but realized itself as the model for another form of (retrospective) exhibition. Sehgal's work does not criticize the production of objects; rather it demonstrates that it is possible to produce visual art and present it consistently in the context of an exhibition without involving material objects.

In contrast to an avant-garde approach, these artists see a societal efficacy not in the rupture with conventions but in their reconfiguration. This is particularly evident in the way they deal with the mode in which their works become historical artifacts. While the event-oriented art forms

of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to free themselves from the conventions of art's permanence, but nevertheless remained within the context of visual art and, as a result, could only enter the museum in a fixed form, i.e. as an object or a document, the artists discussed here develop modes of transmission that are appropriate to their notion of the work: Coleman integrates an aspect of body memory into the conception and reception of his work; Sehgal's work relies entirely on transmission from body to body, via mimetic repetition and narration; and Buren deprives the artistic object of its status as a meaningful and self-contained entity, so that—as demonstrated in his exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*—one work continues in the next, both spatially and conceptually.

The efficacy of these works stems from the constitutive power of conventions, which are taken up and then modified in their usage. Such an operative working on conventions implies an understanding of the relationship between art and its embeddedness in society that differs substantially from that of the avant-gardes. In his *Theory of the Avantgarde* Peter Bürger speaks of the avant-gardist demand "that art becomes practical once again."[2] From the perspective of these artistic positions, there is a contradiction in the idea of "practical once again," since it doesn't take the already existing societal embeddedness of art into account. Bürger's thinking presupposes a position of art outside society, which on the one hand needs to be overcome, but on the other hand is necessary, as only from outside can art fulfill what is, according to Bürger, its actual function: critique. An attitude of criticality like the one Bürger implies necessitates a distance, or at least the striving for such a distance. Likewise for Adorno, art's striving for autonomy is decisive, for only if it is autonomous art can art take up a posture of critique towards the fact that it itself is a *fait social* (i.e. part of society). Adorno calls this relationship "negativity," the negative relationship between art and other realms of empirical reality. According to Adorno, art "becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art."[3] In Adorno's thinking, however, the societal function of art can bring only symbolic, never factual, change. Even without referring to Adorno, contemporary art essentially occupies such a position. Its function lies in

offering "critical" descriptions of society, while always being confronted with the impossibility of actually altered praxis.

Kant, the philosopher of the great investigation into the nature of critique, offers an explanation for the interrelation of critique and its factual ineffectiveness. According to Kant, the societal and moral task of critique is to give incentives for a symbolic transgression and questioning, thereby ultimately reinforcing the authority of power as unassailable. Authority itself lacks the capacity to instantiate its own unassailability.[4] This service is rendered by critique, which simply by making the criticized the topic of a discourse, performatively contributes to authority's continued existence and importance. In Bürger's view, the avant-gardes failed because of the repressive character of the art world's system in our society. For Bürger it is art as an institution that prevents art from having any real effects on society; that "neutralizes the political content of the individual work."[5] Bürger's claim of the avant-garde's failure can be, and has heatedly been, debated. For our purposes, however, it is of greater interest to look at how he explains this failing. Following Marcuse, Bürger believes that the function of the artwork in bourgeois society is characterized by the unity of critical intention and the latter's irrelevance to real circumstances. Therefore the work of art does not have any other option than to formulate a factually hopeless critique. However, in my view, what remains unrecognized is the fact that these artistic approaches (according to their own ambitions) remained without effect in the long run because the work of art left the conventions by which it exists over time untouched.

Paradoxically it was precisely the art that aspired to "lead art back into the praxis of life" (Bürger) that failed to take into account the factual context that provided its existence and survival. Because the avant-gardes did not construct a new context or frame that was appropriate to their critique, they indirectly reinforced the power of the existing status quo and the necessity for a material artifact. This blind spot explains why their critique ultimately remained without effect. The issue with critique is not that it takes a stand for or against, but rather a structural dilemma: Because critique shares the same foundation as what it criticizes, it unintentionally revitalizes what it criticizes in the very act of criticizing it. This relationship always implies an act of

reinforcement. It is for the very same reason that the term Institutional Critique is misleading. There is probably no other contemporary artistic phenomenon that precisely by its critique of the institution has provided it with such a substantial discursive foundation. The philosopher Iain MacKenzie calls a critique that is structured in such a manner an *impure critique*. It is characterized by remaining closely attached to what it turns against.[6] Both share the same ground, and support each other. MacKenzie writes that "criticism is always, at some level, halted by virtue of being implicated with that which is being criticized."[7] This explains not only critique's lack of effectiveness and persuasiveness, but also its double function in contemporary cultural discourse. As part of the legacy of the avant-gardes, it is on the one hand credited with being a vital source of the negotiation of what one could call the "social contract" between art and its public, and on the other hand the mode of critique itself constitutes one essential conventional parameter of this relationship. Critique promotes the questioning of conventions and at the same time constitutes a convention itself. This straightforward performative contradiction between what it says and what it does has either been naively ignored or melancholically accepted. The question is, can this contradiction be overcome in favor of something else?

MacKenzie attempts to give critique a foundation that is qualitatively different, which he calls *pure critique*. A pure critique is not based on the same ground as what it criticizes, and it is not realized as a critical attitude, but rather as the attempt to construct another concept, another foundation.[8] In my view the figure of the performative, as I have proposed it here, offers the possibility for the construction of such a pure critique, and thereby also for another understanding of the effectiveness of art. While impure critique remains on the level of the constative, of a distant reference to the criticized, the performative is focused on praxis and change. Therefore the title of Austin's lectures (and of this book) begins with *How to Do* and not *How to Say*. In this sense we can understand the performative as a paradigm that enables us to conceptualize an artistic, cultural and ultimately a social impact of art that lies beyond the paradigm of critique. It can be used as a kind of tool in order to conceptualize and discursify such a dimension of constructive action.

To conclude and in order to further specify the performative in terms of its cultural and political implications, I will exemplify this figure of thought along the works of Jeff Koons. Jeff Koons not only uses the performative effectiveness of art as an artistic strategy, but also makes it the topic of his work. Thereby he bluntly undermines an oppositional critical stance.[9] Asked to create a photographic project for *Artforum* in 1987, Koons responded with a programmatic statement.[10] The artist pictured himself as a ceramic statuette of Don Quixote standing alongside baroque angels, rococo decors and precious, sentimental church interiors, accompanied by the following text: "To be forever free in the power, glory, spirituality and romance, liberated in the mainstream, criticality gone." These last words, "criticality gone," were laid over an image of a hand with a hammer smashing a ceramic vase of flowers.

Koons is an artist who is as established as he remains controversial. He is the most successful artist of the 1980s, but there a few artists, whom to like or dislike is such an ideologically loaded matter. For many, Koons lies beyond a currently accepted understanding of art, aesthetics and politics, and even mentioning his name can be seen as a faux pas, much like sitting in church and telling your neighbor that you like to play tarot cards. Some reasons for this are obvious. Koons is kitsch, Koons is too explicitly commercial and too unsubtle in his orientation towards the market. With his own audacious statements (that he "operates on the level of the church,"[11] for example) and peculiar demands (that art should reconnect with mythology, or even better, with popular belief), Koons's position seems decidedly anachronistic. However, his political agenda is not so different from that of the avant-gardes. He is concerned with renewing the social contract between art and society by opening up art to a differently structured and more widely conceived public. The crucial difference, however, is that the avant-gardes (both the historical and the neo-avant-gardes) strived to break up art's liaison with the bourgeoisie, to liberate it from its function of confirming their status, and to make it more accessible to a broader public. Koons does the opposite: he rehabilitates the idea of art as an instrument for the self-empowerment of the (bourgeois) viewer. After a century that created doubt about the notion of art, he claims

that art should create trust in the viewer. After a long modern tradition of self-analysis and self-questioning in both art and philosophy, he wants art to have an integrative and empowering effect on the public.

There is an almost utopian aspect to the way in which Koons conceptualizes the performative dimension of art, and in so doing radicalizes an attitude that Coleman, Buren and Sehgal share: the awareness of being an integral and immanent part of social reality. Koons's conception of art is centrally concerned with the responsibility and the potential for agency that comes with this embeddedness. For him, distance implies powerlessness, and renouncing distance means gaining agency. This formula decisively sets him apart from the paradigm of critique and leads us deeper into the cultural and political implications of the performative.

When Koons says, "Embrace your past," it can be understood as: Don't be intimidated, you are fine with where you come from and who you are. It is an attempt to overcome the alienation (from one's own culture) and the powerlessness that a culture of critique has generated. Delivered with his famous salesman's smile, such statements seem to suggest that Koons cannot possibly mean what he says. Even though both critics and the general art public might sense a kind of radicality in this attitude, perhaps even a subversive force, many of them tend to consider Koons as cynical, at best as ironic. Yet Koons insists that his work is not meant ironically. "Irony causes too much critical contemplation," he said in an interview in 1987.[12] This rejection of irony (and of the distance that it creates) marks a crucial difference from the artistic discourse of the 1980s with which Koons is often affiliated. There is an ambivalence in the attitude to critique in the works of artists like Ashley Bickerton, Sherrie Levine and Haim Steinbach that Koons does not share. His *Artforum* project is an indicator of this. Koons doesn't suspend critique the way Warhol did, in an oscillation between criticality and affirmation. Rather he is searching for a position in art that lies beyond both critique and affirmation.

One has to understand Koons as a kind of Conceptual artist. He indeed feels connected to Conceptual Art, even though he undertakes a radical revision of its parameters. He shares Conceptual Art's aspiration for a different societal status and impact of art; he shares its interest in

communication and an opening of art to a more general public. But the manner in which he sees such a communication taking place is radically different. Conceptualism based art on the paradigm of the text, as an allegedly open, accessible and universal medium. But the austere aesthetics of Conceptualism failed to create an art without privilege or without segregation. Asked his opinion on Conceptual Art in 1988, Koons said: "I have always enjoyed that work [...]. But I always felt for myself sometimes that it leaned too much on the cerebral and I've always enjoyed when other needs of the viewer can be met. [...] The ideas are wonderful but they can be presented without that alienating effect."[13] And indeed there is a contradiction within Conceptual Art that has remained unresolved: it operates on the level of an aesthetic of reflection and critical distance and at the same time calls for a more direct form of artistic communication. His remarks about Conceptual Art are aimed at this contradiction between what it says and what it does. Koons actually pursues similar ideals, but being focused on their practical realization, he chooses a different strategy. He attempts to generate a communication with the viewer and ensure it is actually taking place. In his view, art is above all communication. The societal existence and impact of art—the *social pact* that regulates the relation between work and beholder—is the core concern of his work.

Since 1979, when Koons entered the art world, he has completed a number of work series, among them *The pre-New*, *The New*, *Equilibrium*, *Luxury and Degradation*, *Statuary*, *Banality*, *Made in Heaven* and *Celebration*. The early works, like the Hoover vacuum cleaners (1981–1986) or the basketballs floating in a water tank in perfect equilibrium (1985), demonstrate his interest in a metaphorical and emotional charging of the world of objects. These objects are ready-mades of an American middle-class lifestyle. They crystallize a particular psychology, a class-specific way of seeing oneself and the desire for upward mobility. In these works Koons is concerned with the cultural and societal implication of an affective and effect-centered relation to things.

This approach becomes particularly interesting and effective when Koons attempts to performatively realize this affective relationship to things as an aesthetic experience. The level of representation, "saying," steps behind the level

of effect, "doing." He realizes that a political effect does not stem from the (critical or affirmative) attitudes or opinions that an artwork proclaims, but rather from the way in which it addresses a viewer, a public, ultimately society, and from the inclusions and exclusions that come with that address. Koons operates from a position of being aware of the political power of these processes, and his works are an attempt to act upon and shape them. When he says, "Anyone can feel that art can either be something very generous or something that can be a segregator. And the way it segregates them is to make them feel uncomfortable with their own cultural history,"[14] he is implicitly referring to a politicity that takes place in processes of inclusion and exclusion in aesthetic communication. And when he programmatically claims, "My work is not a segregator. No one has ever looked at a Jeff Koons and has felt that this work was speaking down to them, they have always felt above my work,"[15] then he argues from a consciousness of the performative, from a sensibility for the way in which one's work also performatively co-constitutes these hierarchies, this "regime of what can be said and seen" that Jacques Rancière calls the *distribution of the sensible*.[16] Rancière rightly points out that Rauschenberg's combination of a car key and a Velasquez copy on a canvas does not imply the dissolution of the paradigms of high and low.[17] The sphere of high art is in no way abandoned or altered, since the mode of perception and experience of the artwork, in other words the underlying order of the senses that structures the experience of it, remains a high cultural one.

With Koons, however, this fusion does take place on the level of the sensible and of experience. His work is aimed at evoking a desire that—in a kind of balance of mind and sensation—is simultaneously a medium of seduction and reflection. Koons integrates popular culture not as a sign, but as a mode of functioning, as a form of communicating aesthetic effects. He lets the borders between high and low collapse as sensatory borders. The fact that his proposition (the recourse to kitsch, to an aesthetic of the lower classes) indeed becomes effective as a restructuring of the order of the sensible is apparent in the fact that his works are either not comprehensible or seem suspicious or sometimes are even seen as constituting a danger by those recipients for whom the usual, predominant order of the sensible is

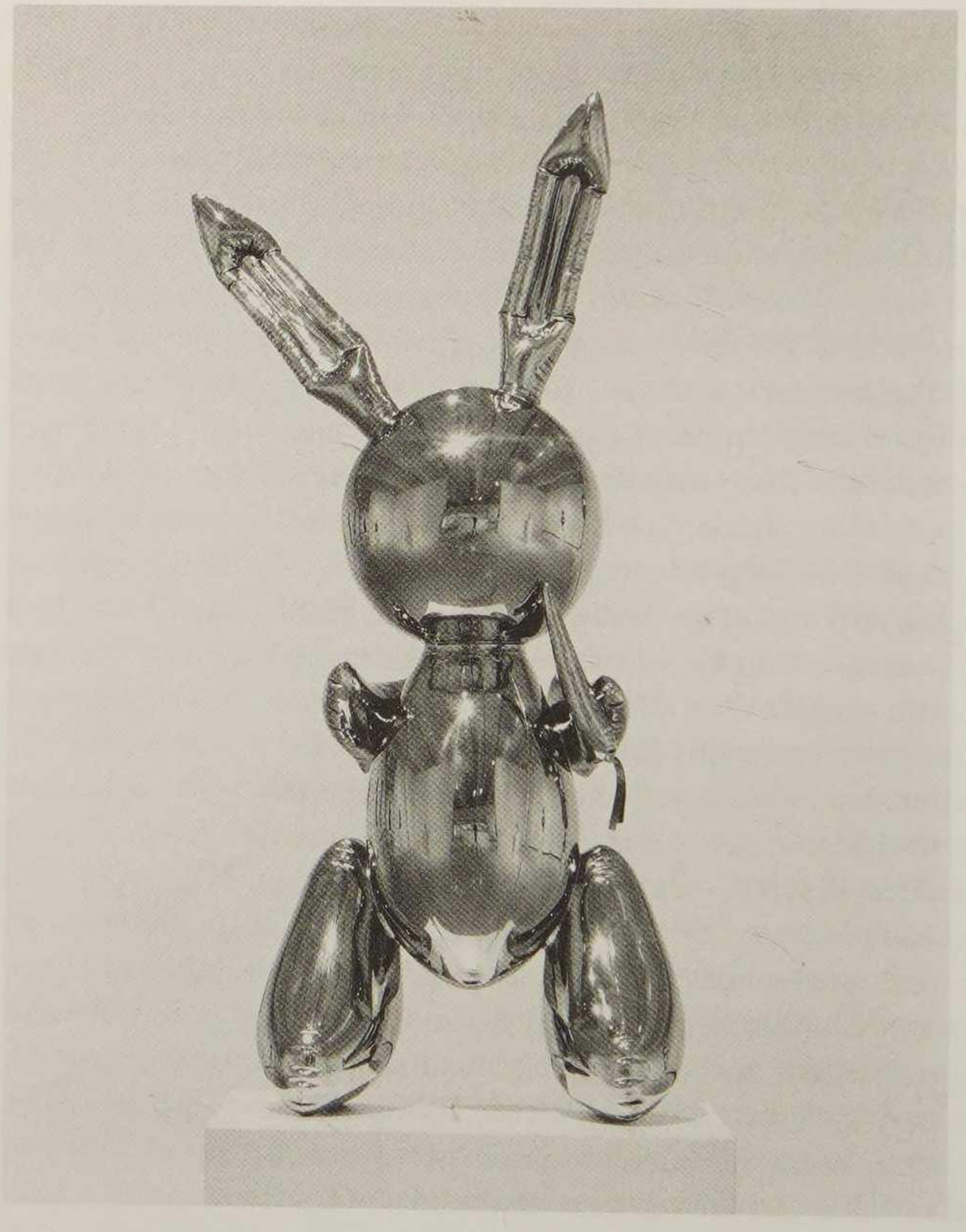
decisive. When Koons says, "My art is not a segregator," he first and foremost implies that every artwork, wittingly or unwittingly, reflected or unreflected, always has excluding and including effects. Further, every inclusion also implies an exclusion, and vice versa. Factually the same is true for Koons's works. They often exclude art critics, for example, albeit a group that already stands in a privileged relationship to art.

If one understands Koons's work as operating with the distribution of the sensible, it has nothing to do with irony. But it is impossible to understand his work in this way, as long as one hangs on to a model of reference, a referential model that is either critical or affirmative. In such a model Koons *can* only be understood as ironic, as a commentary on social conditions, not as the attempt to shape one's own involvement in these conditions. Yet it is not only a misunderstanding to classify him as ironic, in a certain sense it also implies a gesture of power. Seeing him as ironic reintroduces precisely the kind of distance into perception and interpretation that Koons tries to abolish. As ironic, Koons gets reintegrated into a reflexive distance that—according to his own declarations—he wants to get out of. In such an aesthetics of distance Koons necessarily *has* to be ironic, because otherwise no sense at all can be made of his works. Similarly, Buren's works must be "merely decorative" as long as one tries to make sense of them via a mode of reference rather than a mode of effect. In both cases—and a similar move has been discussed in relation to Coleman and Sehgal—there is a transgression from a mode of "saying," of the sign and its representational function, to a mode of "doing," to a performative, reality-producing effectiveness that is accompanied by a shift in the way meaning is produced in art.

Koons realizes this shift not only by operating with the formative effects of aesthetic communication, but also by simultaneously reducing the elements that emphasize subjective intention, representation or formal decisions. According to Koons, "If you put art in the hands of a monarch [...] it will eventually reflect his ego and become decorative. If you put art in the hands of the masses it will reflect their ego and become decorative. If you put art in the hands of Jeff Koons it will reflect my ego and become decorative."[18] Koons is searching for a structurally different foundation for

art from that of representation, one that is wholly focused on effect and effectiveness. In his focus on the cultural and societal implications of this efficacy lies one reason that Koons constantly refers to other historical epochs when art fulfilled other functions—say, religious. His acknowledgement of the performative power of aesthetic experience also explains his interest in the Baroque as an art that in its use of form and materials is entirely focused on the modeling and manipulation of self-esteem, as well as in the Rococo, which can be understood as a meta-discourse for an art that operates with its own artificiality. When Koons answers the question "You would like to become like a kind of guide, a kind of mentor to follow for the masses?" with "I would like to be a political propagandist," and to the follow-up question"How do you think about the real one?" retorts "I think I am the real one,"[19] it is not (or at least not only) a sign of megalomania, but of a consciousness of the reality-producing effects of every artwork. Something similar can be said of a comment like, "Artists somehow develop this moral crisis where we are fearful of being effective in the world. We were the great seducers, we were great manipulators, and we have given up these intrinsic powers of art—its effectiveness."[20] Here again it is crucial to remember that this is not simply about reversing the relationship between reflection and an aesthetic concerned with its effects. Rather it is a matter of reorganizing these antinomies. When Koons came on the scene as an artist at the end of the 1970s, Conceptual Art had just made room for more traditional modes of production and expression. The Neo-Expressionists demonstrated that notions like subjectivity, expression and authorship, which had supposedly been done away with, were easily restored. With regard to this phenomenon, Benjamin Buchloh speaks of a dialectic linking a radical critique and the repeal of traditional notions of representation to their subsequent restoration.[21] It can thus not be a matter of a mere reversal of these models, but rather of questioning which fundamental conventions the notion of art is based on in its respective critical or affirmative instantiations. Koons's work takes this question as its starting point by attempting to conceptualize the aesthetic effect as well as shape the aesthetic efficacy of the Conceptual.

The sculptural series *Statuary* was produced during the mid-1980s. Among works like a bust of Louis XIV (the



[ill. 18] Jeff Koons, *Rabbit*, 1986

monarch) and Bob Hope (the figure of identification for the masses), it contains one of Koons's best-known works, *Rabbit* (1986). Koons transformed this trivial toy into a shining icon that aspires to overcome all social and cultural boundaries[ill. 18]. Its reflective surface is stainless steel, which Koons calls "platinum for the poor," as it simulates the valuable and at the same time generates a merging of the beholder and work through mirroring. It is practically impossible to see the artwork without seeing oneself, hence questions of knowledge, interpretation and understanding recede in favor of the involvement of the viewer. In an enhanced way, these effects can be experienced in the many mirror works that Koons has produced. In his exhibitions there have often been rooms with several mirrors, in which one might find oneself looking at one's own and the other visitors' mirror image in, say, a huge pink cartoon elephant. Here the act of contemplating art constantly oscillates between the collapse and the re-creation of distance. Seeing one's own mirror image in the artwork abolishes the separation from the work—and then the consciousness of being observed during this process and observing others reintroduces it.

Obviously the production of meaning through the impact of aesthetic experience is a highly contingent affair and can easily fail, as was seen clearly in Koons's retrospective at the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo in 2004.[22] A large room of the museum was dedicated to paintings from the *Ethereal* series. For a moment these paintings actually managed to evoke something like a contemporary corollary to the baroque feeling that heaven opens up and a host of angels comes down, as Robert Rosenblum suggests in a documentary on Koons, because they indeed possess exactly those properties of lusciousness and seduction that is innate to the commodities they depict. They are beautiful (aiming to evoke a positive reaction), they strive for objectivity (to reinforce one's trust in one's own perception, one knows and recognizes what one sees), they show something that everybody knows (to shift from the activity of understanding to that of remembering), and they reflect the viewer (to override the process of interpretation with the process of being involved). These paintings stand for an attitude, for a relation to the world and oneself, that in a way constitutes a counter-model to that of critique. Nonetheless they share

comparable ideas and ideals (e.g. the ideal of a more openly structured aesthetic communication), but the strategy of how to get there is different.

On the wall next to these works, the museum put up a text that "encourage[d] [the viewer] to read in these paintings an expression of the emptiness and transience of our consumer-based affluent society." This explanation functioned as a kind of call to discipline. Obviously the museum (embodying the dominant idea of culture today) does not have to worry about presenting the wrong taste, as it has the power to transform it into the right one, but what it cannot present is the wrong discourse. The museum's prescribed culturally critical reading figured here as a kind of custodian of the law, which had to secure the discursive order in which the production of meaning is to take place. Although Koons is such a successful and established artist, his discourse seems so marginal that even people who regard him highly can only legitimate him discursively as a double negation—as if it simply would not be possible to show him in a museum unless contextualized as critique. Inevitably and in the most vulgar form, these works were recuperated for the paradigm of critique. The fact that Koons allows such a wall text (or at least does not prevent it, as Coleman, Buren or Sehgal presumably would) demonstrates that in the end he is more of a Conceptualist than his work demands. It shows that to a certain extent his work is more focused on representing the idea of the effectiveness of the aesthetic than factually fulfilling it.[23]

If we now return to Koons's 1987 contribution to *Artforum*, it becomes clear that the programmatically declared "criticality gone" is not to be understood as a negation of critique. A critique of critique is also a critique, and therefore Koons would remain in the same system. It also does not require renouncing a critical stance, but rather the reorganization of the relationship between sign and effect, "saying" and "doing," that underlies the mode of critique. With his possibly most successful work in terms of his own ambitions, Koons manages to achieve such a reorganization: *Puppy* is a monumental flower-sculpture in the shape of a baby dog that Koons installed in front of a German castle near Kassel in 1992[24], and then a few years later in front of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (where the work still is today)[ill. 19], as well

as at Rockefeller Center in New York. In contrast to most other works by Koons, *Puppy* does not refer to a particular cultural sphere. There is no reference to the world of kitsch, to pornography or to commercials. *Puppy* combines the tradition of the monument, the elevation of man and human history with the organic and natural. In its monumentality it is on the one hand aimed at attracting and seducing. On the other hand it wants to evoke a celebratory mood and a feeling of trust, especially by virtue of the fact of actually being alive, i.e. growing and changing. "I really think," Koons has said, "that *Puppy* is successful because it deals with the issue of control and giving up control. Control is necessary in the creation of the work, but then control is given up [...] this aspect of control is what the viewer is sensitive to."[25] All the aspects that define Koons's artistic position come together in this work: *Puppy* is concerned with the affective potential of art, its capacity to act upon the self-esteem and self-awareness of a beholder and to strike a balance between identification and empowerment. Koons has repeatedly expressed his ambition to create a "contemporary sacred heart of Jesus," and in fact this return to the affective potential of art attempts to reconnect with the aura and the efficacy of religiously motivated art, while at the same time generating the celebratory, generous and integrative aura of which Koons constantly speaks.

Any enlightened cultural practice is based upon the clear distinction between representation and what it represents; between sign and action. This clear distinction and the stability of the order it generates is undermined by Austin's model of the performative. For he initially coined this term for speech acts in which a clear-cut separation between word and act, sign and being cannot be clearly made. There is a certain radicality to this thinking, as the ontological distinction between "saying" and "doing" (with a higher importance given to "saying") is replaced by the meshing of these levels: what appears is the actional aspect of meaning and the meaning of action. The artists discussed in this book demonstrate what it means to artistically operate with this relationship (with a higher importance given to "doing"). The cultural implications of this shift are what Koons's works are focused on. They demonstrate the limits of a cultural paradigm of critique—those

[ill. 19] Jeff Koons, *Puppy*, 1997

limits that Iain MacKenzie has formulated from a theoretical perspective. In regard of these positions, a space beyond critique need not necessarily mean a step behind it, but can also overtake critique in the direction of construction. Today an art that is ambitious with regard to its societal impact mostly operates under the paradigm of critique. An art that is conscious of the efficacy of its own performativity could possibly replace it with a more constructive and effective attitude.

[1] Buchloh e.g. speaks in relation to Sehgal's works of a "pointless radicality" (Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "The Curse of Empire," *Artforum*, New York, 9 (2005), p. 254).

[2] Bürger, *Theory of the Avantgarde*, p. 49.

[3] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 296.

[4] In his *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant states: "[T]he origin of supreme power […] is not discoverable by the people who are subject to it. In other words, the subject ought not to indulge in speculations about its origin with a view to acting upon them […]." Immanuel Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals," Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 143. See also Jens Bartelson, "The Conditions of Criticism," *I promise it's political*, p. 123–125.

[5] Bürger, *Theory of the Avantgarde*, p. 90.

[6] Iain MacKenzie, *Idea of Pure Critique*, Continuum, New York and London, 2004.

[7] MacKenzie, *Pure Critique*, p. XVII.

[8] MacKenzie's attempt is to give philosophical thinking a constructive ground that allows for the generating of concepts. In this he follows Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattarri, according to whom philosophy is neither contemplation (Plato), nor reflection (Kant), nor communication (Husserl), but construction, generating concepts.

[9] This is the main reason for the estrangement that Koons incites in many critics. Thomas Crow for example speaks of a "genuine strangeness to the cultivated art world" in relation to Koons (Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1996, p. 98).

[10] Jeff Koons, "Baptism: A project for Artforum," *Artforum*, 26 (1987), p. 101–107.

[11] Jeff Koons cited after Robert Rosenblum, "About Jeff Koons," *Jeff Koons Handbook*, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, Thames and Hudson, Munich, Paris and London, 1992, p. 23.

[12] "Luxury and Desire. An interview with Jeff Koons," *Flash Art*, Milan, 132 (1987), p. 73.

[13] Jeff Koons in conversation with Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Conceptual Art of the 60s and 70s Alienated the Viewer," *Flash Art*, Milan, 143 (1988), p. 113–14.

[14] "Jeff Koons im Gespräch mit Jérôme Sans," museum in progress/Kunsthaus Bregenz (ed.), *KünstlerInnen. 50 Positionen zeitgenössischer internationaler Kunst,* Walther König, Cologne, 1997, p. 148.

[15] Koons, *KünstlerInnen*, p. 148.

[16] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London and New York 2004, p. 12ff.

[17] Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Aesthetics," lecture, given at the Sommerakademie Frankfurt/Main, September 8, 2004.

[18] Koons, *Handbook*, p. 76.

[19] Koons, *KünstlerInnen*, p. 148.

[20] Jeff Koons in conversation with Burke & Hare, "Full Fathom Five," *Parkett,* Zurich, 19 (1989), p. 47.

[21] Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," p. 107.

[22] *Jeff Koons: Retrospektiv*, Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, September 4–December 12, 2004.

[23] Similar things can be said of an exhibition of Dan Graham's pavilions, which often seem rather to represent a notion of experience than factually shape an experience.

[24] For a project by Veit Loers that took place as a satellite event to Documenta 9.

[25] *Jeff Koons: Retrospektiv*, Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo, 2004, p. 65.

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If what we call art has never been so important to (Western) societies as it is today, the question that lies at the heart of *How to Do Things with Art* takes on an ever greater urgency: how does art become politically or socially significant? Dorothea von Hantelmann addresses this issue on a theoretical level, and indicates, through the analysis of works by James Coleman, Daniel Buren, Jeff Koons, and Tino Sehgal, how artists can create and shape social relevance; in other words, she provides what could be called a pragmatic understanding of art's societal impact today.

Dorothea von Hantelmann is an art historian and works at the Collaborative Research Center "Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits" at Berlin's Free University.

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