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Cover illustration: Kurt Schwitters. Die Scheuche.
From Merz *14–15. 1925.*

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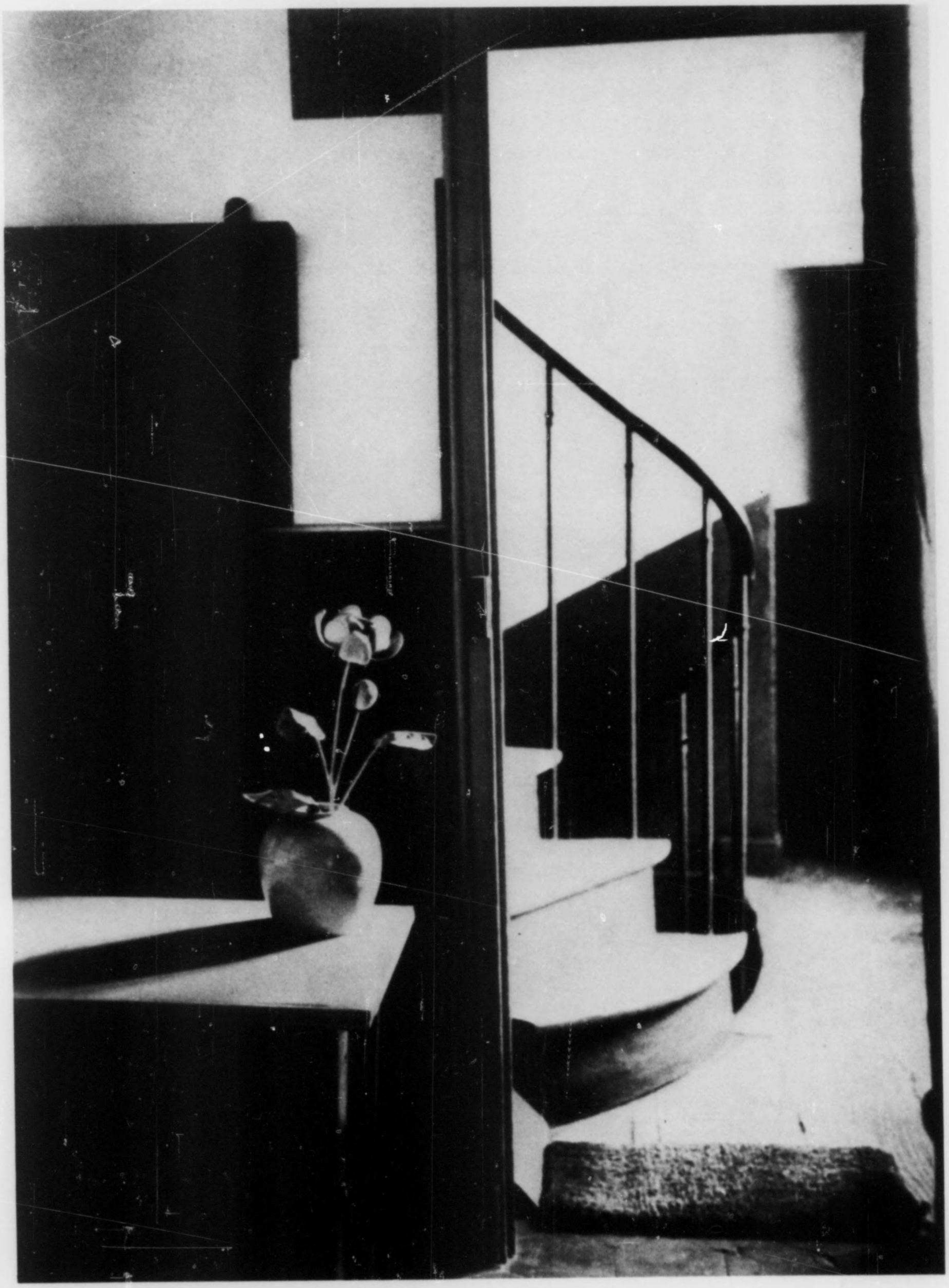
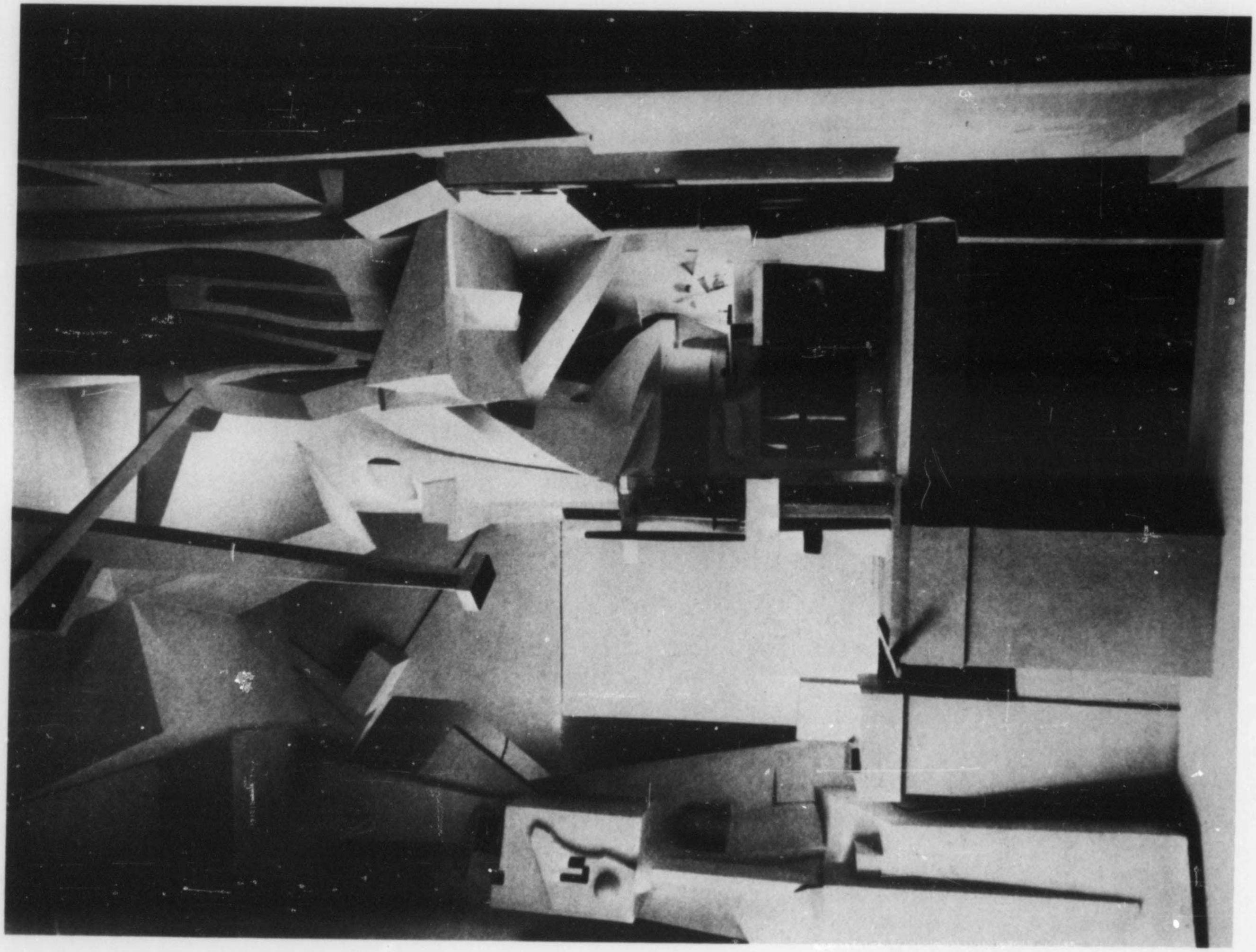
In our acknowledgements of assistance with OCTOBER 21, a special issue on Rainer Werner Fassbinder, we failed to mention the generosity of New Yorker Films and its director, Dan Talbot, who, in addition to his special help with this issue of OCTOBER, is largely responsible for bringing Fassbinder to the attention of American filmgoers. We apologize to Mr. Talbot and his staff for this omission. sion.

Opposite: Entrance to Mondrian's Paris Atelier. (Photo: André Kertész.) Following Page: Kurt Schwitters. The Hanover Merzbau.





De Stijl, Its Other Face: Abstraction and Cacaphony, or What Was the Matter with Hegel?*

ANNETTE MICHELSON

for Bénédicte Pesle

In 1822, Hegel, touring the Netherlands, wrote from Holland to his wife:

> What a lovely country! This is a land for strolling; green meadows everywhere, with contented, well-fed cattle and no whip-holding cowherds behind them. Long parks filled with oaks and beeches; country villas—Holland is the most densely populated land in the world, but there are few villages in the flat lands. Brabant, a fertile area full of villages. Haarlem, clear, large and lovely as the others, lies on Haarlem Lake. For all the beautiful things and places I have seen, and am seeing, there are just as many, equally beautiful ones, that I have not seen, but I have seen the most important, the finest and the best. Every city is rich, dainty and clean. I still cannot tell where they keep the common folk and the poor, especially in the Hague; no dilapidated houses, patched roofs, rotten doors, broken windows anywhere. In the Hague and generally here, all the streets are filled with the finest shops, in the evening all the streets are lit up by their illuminations; endless assortments—gold, silver, porcelain, tobacco, bread, shoes—everything perfectly arranged in booths.[1]

The enthusiasm of the genial tourist finds its rhapsodic echo—and its complement—exactly one century later when, in 1922, Kurt Schwitters, fresh from his tour of Holland in the company of the van Doesburgs and Vilmos Huszar, describes the lecture tour that was to become known as the *Dada Feldzug in Holland*. Their alliance was tactical certainly, but more than that;

* This essay was first presented as a lecture on May 8, 1982 at the symposium on De Stijl organized for the exhibition held at the Hirshorn Museum of the Smithsonian Institution.

1. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, Herausgegeben von Johannes Hoffmeister, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1953, Band II: 1813–1822, p. 362. An English translation of this passage appears in Franz Wiedmann, *Hegel*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, New York, Pegasus, 1968, p. 88.

for Schwitters, van Doesburg had already proved himself "a connoisseur of things Dada." Here is a fragment of his account of their introductory evening in the Hague Kunstring:

> I was supposed to provide an example of Dadaism. But the truth is that van Doesburg, as he appeared on the platform in his dinner jacket, distinguished black shirtfront, and white tie, and on top of that bemonocled, powdered all white, his severe features imprinted with an eerie solemnity, produced an effect that was quite adequately Dada; to cite his own aphorism: "Life is a wonderful invention."
>
> Since I didn't know a word of Dutch, we had agreed that I should demonstrate Dadaism as soon as he took a drink of water. Van Doesburg drank and I, sitting in the middle of the audience, to whom I was unknown, suddenly began to bark furiously. The barking netted us a second evening in Haarlem; as a matter of fact it was sold out, because everyone was curious to see van Doesburg take a drink of water and then hear me suddenly and unexpectedly bark. At van Doesburg's suggestion, I neglected to bark on this occasion. This brought us our third evening in Amsterdam; this time people were carried out of the hall in a faint, a woman was so convulsed with laughter that for fifteen minutes she held the public attention, and a fanatical gentleman in a homespun coat prophetically hurled the epithet "idiots" at the crowd. Van Doesburg's campaign for Dadaism had gained a decisive victory. The consequence was innumerable evenings in all the cities of Holland, and everywhere van Doesburg managed to arouse the most violent hostility to himself and his forces. But again and again we all of us ventured to beard the infuriated public which we ourselves had taken pains to infuriate, and despite his black shirtfront, Does always produced the effect of a red rag. The Dutch found this deep-black elegance and distinction atrociously provocative, and consequently he was able to plough his public round and round, to cultivate his soil with the greatest care, so that important new things might spring from it.

And of another evening: "The police, who had been called in, wept; the public fought furiously amongst themselves; on all sides people congratulated us and each other with black eyes and bloody noses. It was an unparalleled Dadaist triumph."[2]

2. Kurt Schwitters, "Theo van Doesburg and Dada," trans. Ralph Manheim, in Robert Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, New York, Wittenborn Schulz, 1951, pp. 273–276.

Kurt Schwitters and Theo van Doesburg. Kleine Dada Soirée. *1922*.

Within the century's interval between these two triumphal tours, the progress of Hegelian thought in Holland had been steady, wide, decisive. Hegel's visit had been arranged on invitation by Peter Gabriel van Ghert, an early pupil and faithful friend from the Jena period, now charged with educational policy and administration in the Dutch Ministry of Culture. Van Ghert had, in fact, also arranged an offer of a chair of philosophy in Holland and a contract with a publishing house. Hegel's thought, once implanted within Dutch culture, was there to prosper, subject, of course, to the many corruptions and mutations familiar to us from the period preceding World War I. Theosophy and its influence upon the founding members of De Stijl, we must see as yet another vicissitude of the Dialectic. It is, to begin with at least, its specifically Hegelian heritage that I now wish to invoke. And in so doing I will, in referring to the writings of both van Doesburg and Mondrian, claim for their enterprise something more than a utopian direction; their aesthetics were, in fact, projects of an eschatological dimension.

Let van Doesburg have the floor. The text is an excerpt from the eloquently titled *Resurrection*, "an historical-philosophical play of Beauty and Love

in one act, enacted in the twentieth century." It was written in 1915, and the characters are three: Adonis, a painter; Jorsa La Fara, painter and friend of Adonis; a girl, the model (who remains silent throughout this excerpt). It is Jorsa who first speaks:

> Art, believe me, aims not for the new, but for the eternal. If the artist wants to speak of something eternal. . . . If he wants to penetrate to the being of things . . . to the being of the universe, then . . . then he must create from . . . the Feeling of Eternity. . . . This feeling contains all other feeling. . . . In this feeling he will bind all men together . . . as he now separates them through beauty . . . he will make them into one man. . . . This Feeling raises the dead . . . it is the cause and ultimate object of all form, of the whole cosmos. . . . To teach through this feeling . . . to live and die in it, one makes himself the midpoint of the universe.
> Adonis' voice (from the depths; wild): Huh. . . . Pause. . . .
> Jorsa's voice: You feel that this is an advance, not of the Artist alone, but the advance to a higher . . . a better . . . freer image of life. A victory over matter.[3]

It is the voice of Hegel speaking here, echoing the stilled voice of Becoming in the repose of Absolute Spirit, in that place where the Dialectic comes to rest, that point beyond Time, at the end of History. In Time, the Future has primacy, and its name in the real world is that of Desire (Mondrian will call it "tragedy" and urge its abolition through Art). Time in the world is the mode of human life. The temporal is understood as human and conversely, Man's action, arising from nonnatural human desire, is action in negation, determined by his conception of the Future. Man, as creator, is Logos. The empirical existence of Idea in the World is subtended by Time. It is human Desire that transforms the World. To understand the Real in its modes of presentness, between Past and Future, is to understand dialectically. To understand Man's Future as his death is to attain wisdom. The understanding of History, of Man and of his actions as finite entails a view of universal History as finite. It is from this outer limit that van Doesburg's artist speaks, from the midpoint of the universe, beyond History. Art is the eschatological agent of resurrection, Man's link with Being.

Now, Being, in the Dialectic, is both Identity and Negativity within Totality, the fundamental and universal ontological category. Thus, to Mondrian, in his essay of 1920 in dialogue form, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*:

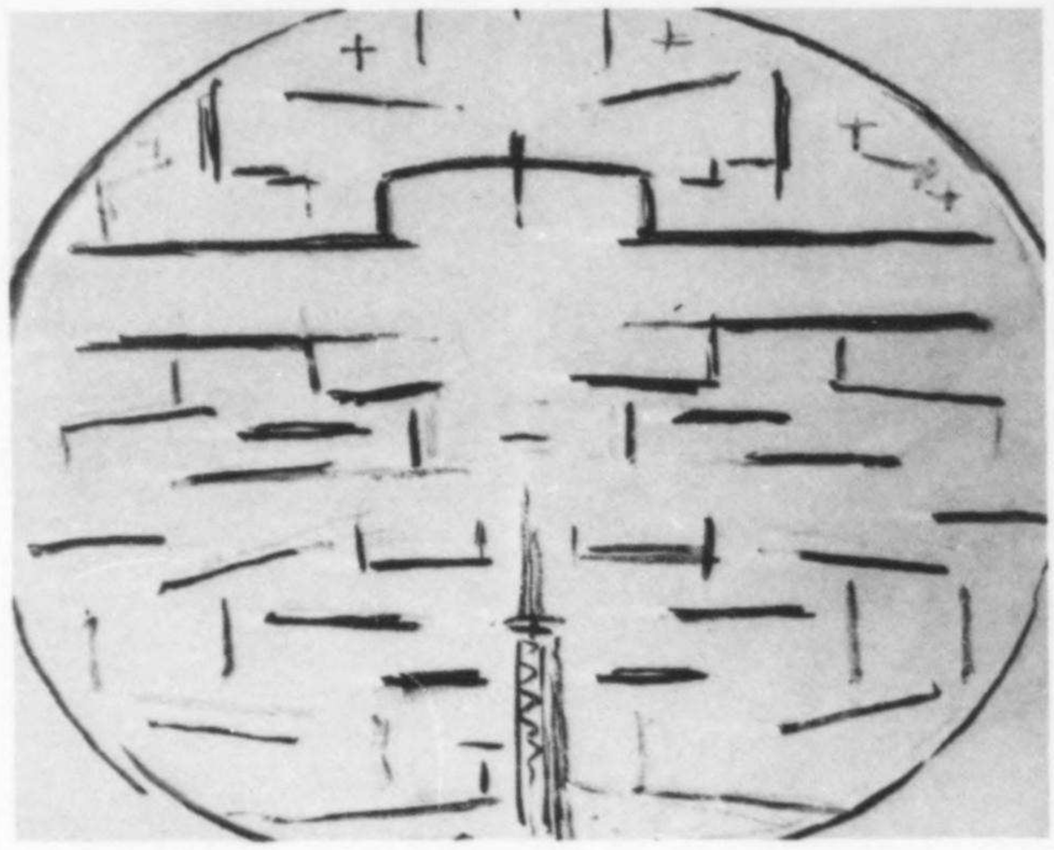
3. Theo van Doesburg, "Resurrection: An historical and philosophical play of Beauty and Love in one act," trans. Hannah Hedrick, *The Structurist*, no. 9 (1969), 14–18. This text was first published in the last issue of *De Stijl*, January 1932.

> The number "two" which is one plus one, is a duality and yet a whole: and conversely unity implies duality. Unity appears as such only to us: In fact, it is a composite. Each unity is already a new duality, a whole, each thing is a miniature replica of the whole—a composition. . . . *So all we have to do is to consider each thing in itself as a duality—a multiplicity, a complex, then we will see only relations, and we will know things by other things.*
>
> We are men and still have to represent repose by movement, unity by multiplicity. In the art of painting, it is a rhythm of lines and colors that has to make us feel the real. *The original relation, that is, the right angle, is, of course, a living reality in itself, but it becomes a plastic reality only through the relativity, that is, the multiplicity, of relations.* We ought not to look past nature, rather we should look through it; we ought to see more deeply, our vision should be abstract, universal. Then externality will become for us what it really is: the mirror of truth. To achieve this we must free ourselves from our attachment to the external, for only then do we transcend the tragic, and are enabled consciously to contemplate in repose.
>
> Man is enabled by means of abstract-aesthetic contemplation to achieve conscious unity with the universal. . . . The deepest purpose of painting has always been to give concrete existence, through color and line, to this universal which appears in contemplation. . . . Our age, as it reaches ever higher degrees of consciousness, becomes increasingly capable of transforming the various moments of contemplation into one unique moment, into permanent contemplation.[4]

4. Piet Mondrian, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," in Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian*, New York, Abrams, undated, passim, italics added. This important text deserves a closer reading than those provided until now. Mondrian scholarship of the past two decades has been largely concerned, as in the work of Robert Welch and Joost Baljeu, with establishing the theosophical basis of a possible iconography. A reading of the Hegelian discourse as filtered through the texts of Mondrian and Kandinsky in their anthropomorphical and theosophical registers would, I believe, offer a more interesting avenue of investigation. A recent popular account of Mondrian's work offers a résumé of existing scholarship. Thus, Peter Gay, *Art as Act: Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian*, New York, New York University Press, 1976: "Mondrian's art is quintessentially modern, certainly, but its eloquence is only apparent. His art is, in effect, wholly unreadable.

"There is something appropriate about this illegibility. Mondrian, after all, was not a political cartoonist. Yet the conviction will not down that the striking resemblance of his work to the blank faces of skyscrapers or the angular compositions of modern design is not fortuitous. Mondrian's vision and the most modern manifestations of the modern world seem somehow and intimately involved with one another."

The number of presuppositions involved in this fragment and the text from which it is extracted, suppositions as to the nature of meaning, of iconographical method, of pertinence, of



Piet Mondrian. Pier and Ocean. *1914 (this page). 1914 (right). 1915 (far right).*

Van Doesburg had developed the eschatological thrust of the Hegelian discourse. It was Mondrian's task to produce the implementation of the Logic as an aesthetic, hypostatizing the notions of Identity and Negation in the deployment of right angles, primary colors, black and white, in what he named "an art of pure relations." (That, as we know, was the phrase constantly on his lips.)

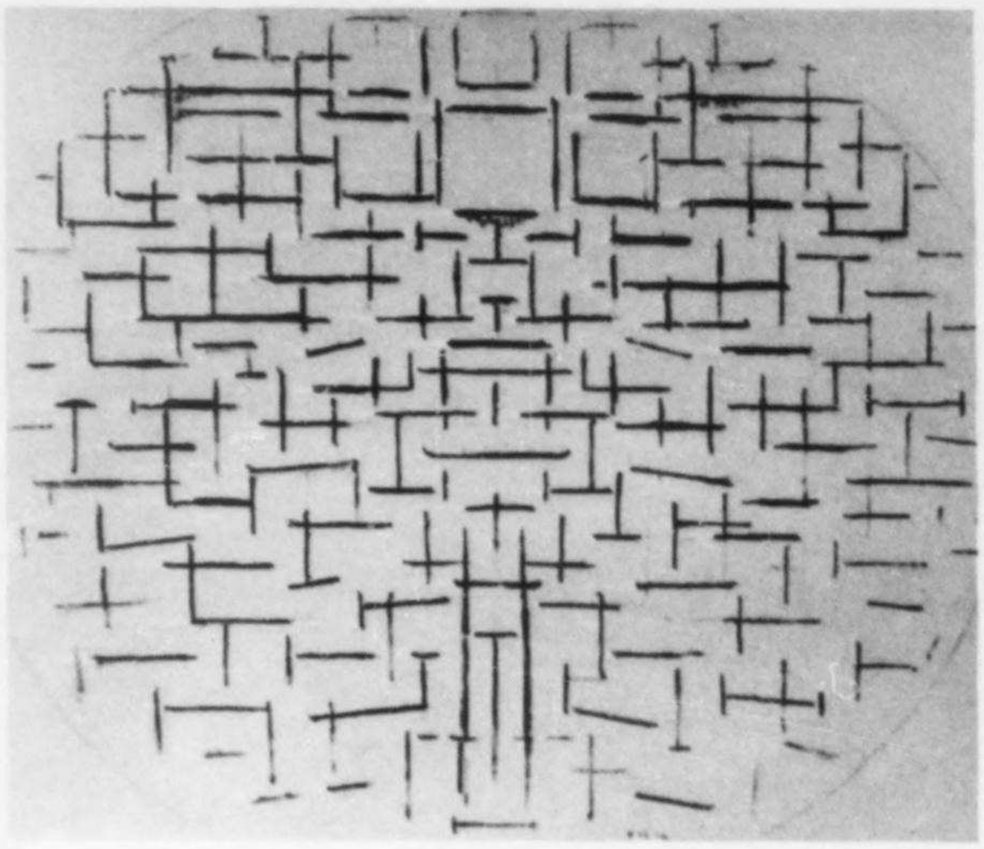
It is not, however, only the grand order and design of the Logic that Hegel bequeathed to De Stijl. Hegel offers, as well, a reading of Holland's pictorial tradition in its historical continuity, which we would be ill advised not to heed—and it is my feeling that modernist criticism and theory have been insufficiently attentive to it. I turn, therefore, to the account of Dutch art in the first volume of the *Aesthetic*, surely one of the richest of the art-critical texts in the century that saw the flowering of the discipline. It is here that Hegel offers his altogether dazzling analysis of the nature and origins of that transfiguration of the commonplace that constitutes for him the ideality of Dutch art.[5]

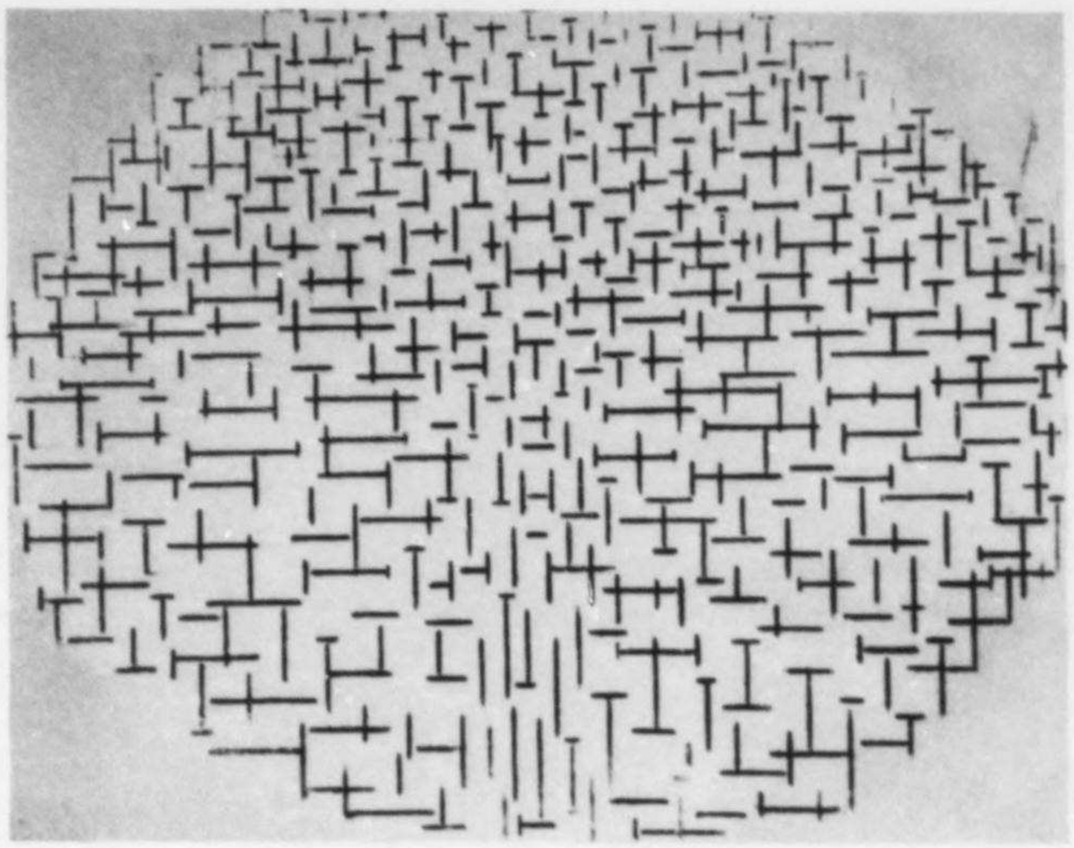
It is, he tells us, the Dutch and the Venetians, seaside dwellers, inhabitants of netherlands scattered with marshes and canals, who have revealed themselves as the supreme masters of color, of light and the play of light. Here

---

"reading," of the modern, of surface, and of facade preclude unpacking here. Gay's text is, however, interesting in that it rehearses the range of prevalent notions and methodological options, joining to them a psychoanalytically inflected description of the subject, Mondrian.

5. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Esthétique*, trans. S. Jankelevich, Paris, Editions Aubier, vol. I, part 1, passim. My attention to Hegel's remarks on Dutch art was first drawn by the excellent selection offered in Bernard Tesseydre, *Hegel: Esthétique de la peinture figurative*, Paris, Editions Herrmann, 1964, pp. 156–173. My translation is from the French.

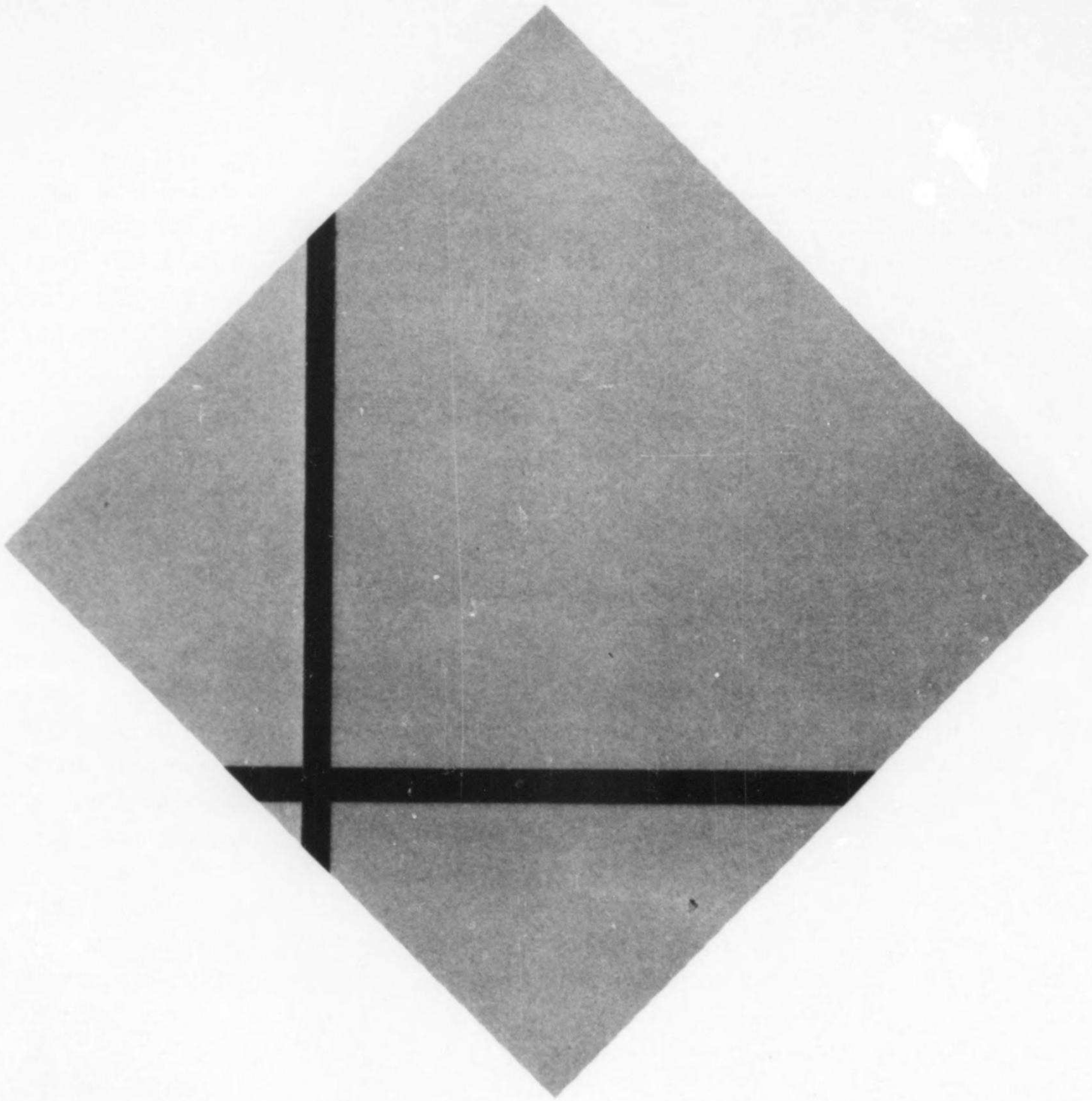




is the central task to which their artists addressed themselves. The content of this art, he goes on to say, is fairly indifferent, and may interest us but little. Rather it is the fleeting appearances of nature and its infinity of effects—the sheen of silk, the glow of velvet, the shine of metal, the haze of smoke, the gleam of wine in crystal—which are, in the painting of the Dutch masters, rendered in a manner such that the material world, exterior and sensual, is transformed to its very depths. In a particularly noteworthy passage, he speaks of

> the way in which appearances, created by the mind, are, together with the prosaic quality of the real, transformed into a miracle of ideality. Here is a kind of irony, exerted at the expense of the external world; here is a triumph of art over the decadent, perishable aspect of life and of nature, a triumph which transcends the power of substance over the fleeting moment, causing us even to doubt that power. This art, adopting as its content the appearances of objects as such, goes further still; so that it is the subjective skill in the means of art which becomes the object of the art work, its magic of color and charm of mystery. It has the look of an objective music; a sonority of color. It is as though this color were music, in which an isolated sound signifies nothing, taking on meaning only in its relations with other sounds, relations of opposition, accord, fusion, or transition.

To paint was for Mondrian to radicalize that irony, to instantiate the movement of the Dialectic toward Ideality through the progressive elimination of particular determination. By the election of the right angle, the relating of horizontal to vertical, he hypostatizes the resolution of Desire in the image of



Piet Mondrian. Composition with Two Lines. *1931*.

Equivalence. Equi-valence, we might more properly say, remembering, as well, that for Mondrian, repose is the relation of valences of force and energy within the play of absolute difference. His art of relations generalizes and sustains that play of difference, with a force and tenacity wholly unprecedented: Dialectic is projected as a diacritically structured system of signs.

*

It is an interesting and insufficiently explored fact, everywhere verifiable in Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, that the decade surrounding World War I, the extended final moment of the nineteenth century, witnesses a crisis of the verbal sign epitomized in poetry. This crisis is most immediately and generally articulated in a straining at the limits of meaning, a loosening of signifier from signified. We encounter it in the poetry of Russia, Italy, Germany, France—and, as we shall see, Holland. The new poetics, exemplified in the work of Marinetti, Tzara, Joyce, Schwitters, Kruchonykh, Kamensky, Stein, Khlebnikov, Morgenstern, is contemporary with the development of what we have come to know as abstraction in art and the dissolution of music's armature of tonality. Were I a linguist, or even a literary historian, I should gladly adopt the investigation of these interrelated events as a life project; no other seems to me more urgent and more revealing in its generality. It is upon its localization within dadaism, and within Italian and Russian futurism (in both *parole in libertá* and *zaum*: words in freedom and the language of transsense), and their particular point of juncture with De Stijl that I now wish to focus.

The crisis of language is both contemporary with and consequent upon the founding moment of modern linguistics (Saussure died in 1913). It is, in fact, even as the nature of the linguistic system is clarified that it is placed in crisis through the art of its period. Let us remember, too, that Saussure, in elaborating his definition of the linguistic sign, had wrested it, once and for all, from a certain variety of picture theory; he therefore posited the sign as composed of two elements, indissociable and "arbitrarily" related: signifier and signified are compared, in the celebrated image, to the reverse sides of a single sheet of paper. The referent, that entity in the real world, is to be distinguished from the concept inscribed in the signified. It is, as we have seen, reference or determination from which Mondrian wished to sever painting. Signs, then—to rehearse the Saussurean claim—are not pictures of anything, but rather double articulations, diacritical, arbitrarily constituted within a system of differences and/or oppositions, deriving their meaning from within the totality of the system as such. Two considerations must now be borne in mind: Saussure's radical insistence on the unmotivated nature of the sign[6] and the consequent founding of his method on the level of phonology, that of the linguistic atom, the smallest element of utterance, the individual sound. The phoneme, seen

6. Recent research has modified this view of the sign as arbitrary. This question is discussed in its recent developments by Joel Fineman in "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980), 47–66.

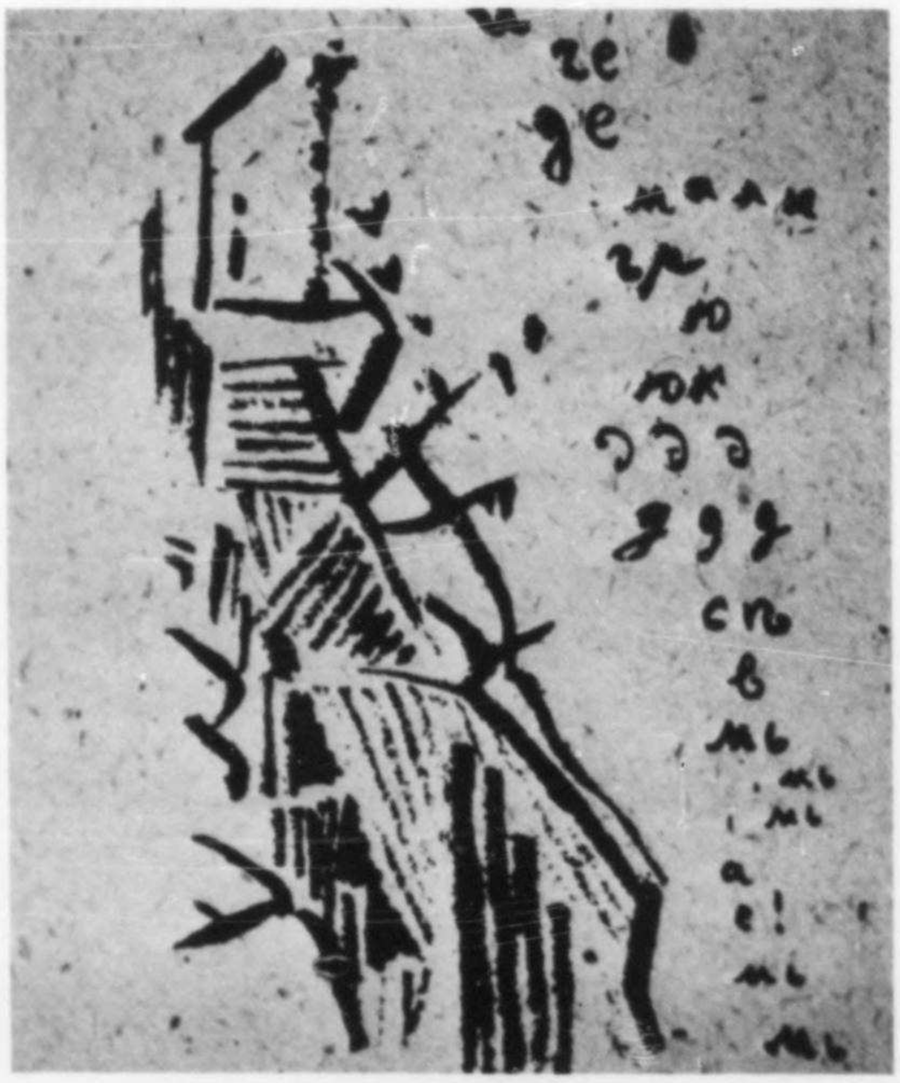
thus, performs the function of distinction, and it is insofar as this system of differences is available to us that we make meaning. It is, then, in 1912 that Marinetti proclaims, in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, a poetics *dictated by the propeller of his plane*, while flying high over Milan. It calls for:

> the destruction of syntax
> the dispersal and doubling of nouns
> the stress upon, and systematic use of, infinitives
> the abolition of the adverb and of punctuation
> the adoption of mathematical symbols as surrogates for relations of conjunctions, accumulation, subtraction.[7]

What was wanted was an orchestral style, polychromatic, polyphonic, and polymorphous. And Marinetti gave to his renewal of language the name *parole in libertá*. This renewal of language, of meaning, was to proceed through the destruction of the I, that is, of psychology, and it called for the invention of a "wireless imagination" (*Immaginazione senza fili*) in which the first terms of all

7. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," in *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, ed. and with an introduction by R. W. Flint, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971, pp. 84–89.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Parole in Libertá. *1913.*



Alexei Kruchonykh. Page from Explodity. *1913.*

analogies are suppressed. A revealing detail from David Burliuk's hilarious account of Marinetti's 1912 tour of Russia describes a reading before a group of young futurist poets assembled in St. Petersburg and determined to withstand the conquering Italian's patronizing bravado. As Marinetti proclaimed, with his usual panache, that he had eliminated grammar and syntax, he was loudly corrected by the group, with Kruchonykh exclaiming, "But your style of declamation restores them immediately!"

The linguistic utopia of Russian futurism was certainly sympathetic to the wireless imagination. It proposed an analysis and resynthesis of language in the creation of a poetics whose universality was contingent upon a transcendence of the limits of nationality, as of rationality. Thus *zaum*, the transrational, trans-mental idiom of its radical poetics, is a Russian phonemic condensation of special resonance. One may see *zaum* as the radical challenge of the *Logos* as *ratio* within the Western metaphysical tradition. The fragmentation of the word, the reassemblage, in invented orders (those which in rhetoric we call anacoluthia) of the elementary root structures, of old Russian morphemes, of onomatopoeias, characterizes the futurist publications, enhanced by the advanced graphic design of the time, its typography, and sense of *mise en page*. For the Russians—and Kruchonykh's view is perhaps the clearest at this early stage:

> Artists until now had proceeded to the word through thought, and we, we grasp immediacy through the word. We declare the word to be larger, wider than meaning; the word (and its component parts) is not only idea, not only logic, it is, above all, transmental, related to the irrational, the mystical, the aesthetic. And each letter counts, each sound. We must master our materials as the mystics, members of religious sects have, speaking in tongues.[8]

And an entire linguistic tradition, from Rosenstein in the nineteenth century, through Tynianov and Jakobson in the twentieth, will define the significance of the word as indeterminate except in relation to other words—subject, in any case, to fluctuating signification, susceptible to the loosening of signifier from signified that we on occasion term non-sense. Let us center our reflections upon this development on three poetic texts, drawn from German dada, the "critical" literature of Russia, and from Holland. They represent different moments in that development, and I shall consider them without regard to their chronological order. The first, the greatest and most celebrated from within the dada movement, is Schwitters's *Merz-Poem No. 1*, to his beloved, Anna Blume, so named for reasons that become explicit in what we may well

8. A. Kruchonykh, "*Les Voies nouvelles du mot (langue de l'avenir: mort au symbolisme*), 1931, trans. from the Russian by Henri Deluy, *Action Poétique*, no. 48 (1971), 42–49.

call the body of the text, and translated by Schwitters, during his residence in England, as "eve Blossom has wheels."[9]

O thou, beloved of my twenty-seven senses,
I love thine!
Though thee thee thine, I thine, thou mine, we?
That (by the way) is beside the point
Who art thou, uncounted woman,
Thou art, art thou?
People say, thou werst,
Let them say, they don't know what they are talking about.
Thou wearest thine hat on thy feet, and wanderest on thine hands,
On thine hands thou wanderest.
Hallo, thy red dress, sewn into white folds,
Red I love eve Blossom, red I love thine.
Thou thee thee thine, I thine, thou mine, we?
That (by the way) belongs to the cold glow!
eve Blossom, red eve Blossom, what do people say?
PRIZE 1. eve Blossom is red.
2. eve Blossom has wheels.
QUESTION: 3. what colour are the wheels?
Blue is the colour of your yellow hair,
Red is the whirl of your green wheels,
Thou simple maiden in everyday dress,
Thou small green beast,
I love thine!
Thou thee thee thine, thine, thou mine, we?
That (by the way) belongs to the glowing brazier!
eve Blossom,
eve,
E-V-E
E easy, V victory, E easy,
I trickle your name.
Your name drops like soft tallow.
Do you know it, eve,
Do you already know it?
One can also read you from the back.
And you, you most glorious of all,

9. Kurt Schwitters, "eve Blossom has wheels," trans. by Schwitters, in Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, New York, Abrams, 1967, p. 204.

You are from the back as from the front,
E-V-E.
Easy victory.
Tallow trickles to strike over my back!
eve Blossom,
Thou drippy animal,
I
Love
Thine!
I love you!!!

Schwitters here acknowledges the libidinal source of the will to confound beginning and ending. The rejection of a structural telos (of the genital grammar of the body) is linked with pleasure in the ambi-valence of the name E-V-E newly bestowed upon the beloved. Grammar and genitality are both subsumed in the delighted insistence on the body as text to be ambivalently read as it is polymorphously enjoyed. (Or as Schwitters was to say, on another occasion, "Why shouldn't a locomotive run backwards from time to time?") Liberated from the constraints of purposiveness the autotelic text extends *une promesse de bonheur*, "a promise of bliss." The utopia of Russian futurism, absorbed into the Soviet constructivist aesthetic, was, as one might expect, not wholly congruent with that of dada's polymorphous perversity. It was, however, as we shall see, by no means unrelated to it.

Consider Kamensky's ferro-concrete "Poem on the Letter *K*," listed as number 82 in the catalogue *The Avant-Garde in Russia.*[10] It is an example of *zaum* that depends for its full effect upon both sound and sight, here reproduced in transliteration and literal translation:

K	(Klinók)	K (Blade)
Kak		As
Kirká	KólKo	Pick (Chopping)
Kólet	Kámen	Stabs Stone
Tak	Kukúshki	Like Cuckoo Clock (Steam Locomotive)
Krik	Ku-Ku	Shouts Cuckoo
Kóvka	Gálka	Forging Jackdaw
Kóvka	Pálka	Forging Stick
Ka–Ke–Ki		Ka–ke–ki
1918		1918
Ko	Kamenski Vasilii	Ko Kamensky Vassily

The text is patently aggressive in its imagery, but it contains as well a subtext or foretext/pretext which stands forth in the capital letters strewn reiteratively over the surface. They stand for the poet himself, his name Kamensky, which contains, of course, *Kamen,* or stone. He offers us this earnest of his presence in the letter *K*. *K*, then, or Ka, as the letter is pronounced in Russian, is the basic phonemic element of this subtext, pretext, foretext, which we must read as "Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka." This dispersal of meaning is the explosion of matter in the face of the reading and listening public.

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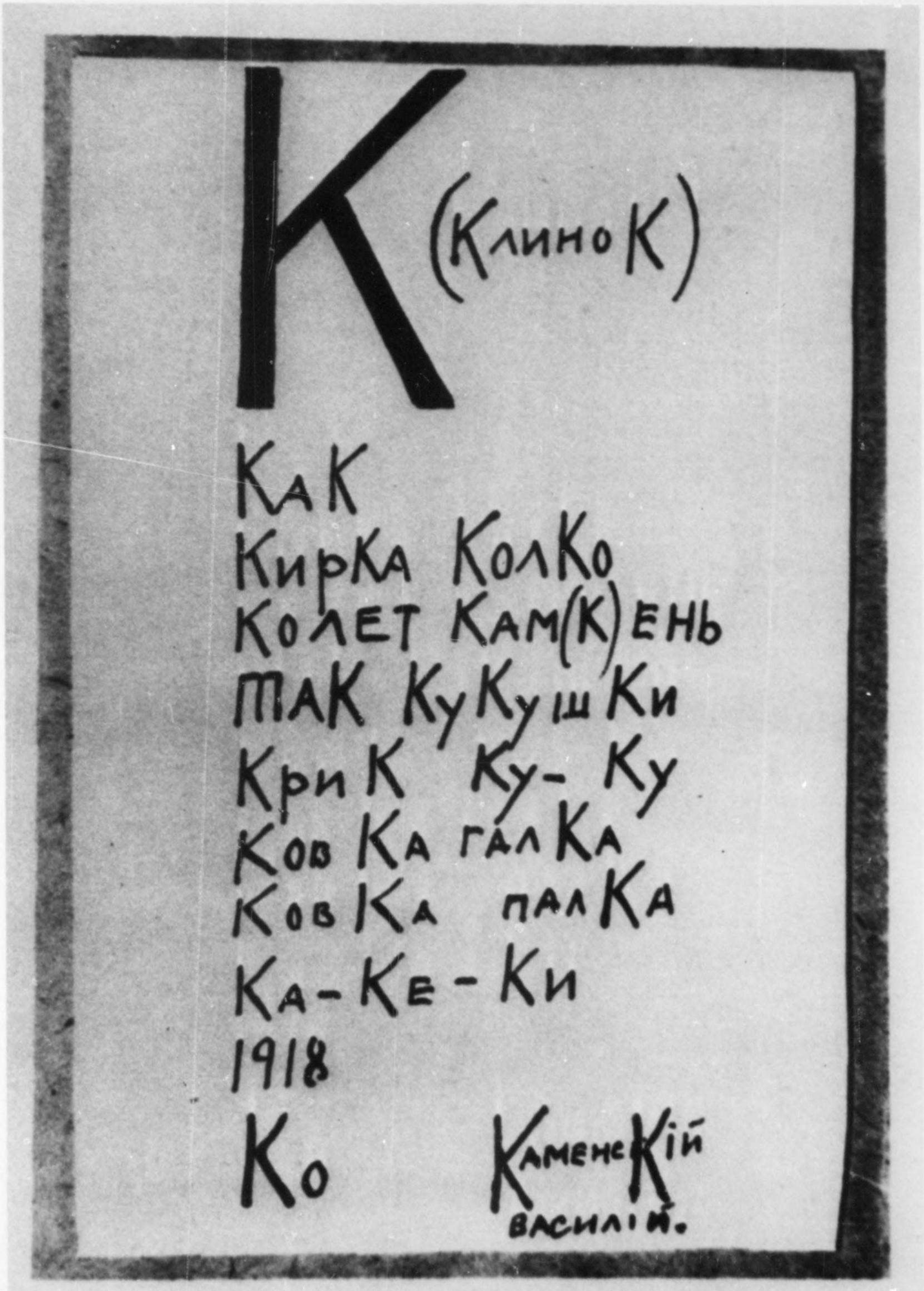
It is precisely at this point in our story that the plot thickens. Enter suddenly another character, none other than the mysterious I. K. Bonset. And who is he? Well, as all scholars of the movement know, he is a man of parts: poet, contributor to *Merz*—Schwitters's journal—he is also the editor of his own journal, *Mécano*, whose design and typography are the work of none other than Theo van Doesburg. And, in addition, he publishes from time to time in *De Stijl*. Dada Piet, who regards dadaism as a strategic ally in the destruction of

10. Vasilii Vasilievich Kamensky, "Poem on the Letter *K*," linocut, 1981, reproduced in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930,* Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1980, p. 161.



Vasilii Vasilievich Kamensky. Poem on the Letter *K*. *1918. (Courtesy Thomas P. Whitney.)*

Theo van Doesburg. Letter-Sound Images. *1921*.

Theo van Doesburg. Mécano, *nos. 4–5. 1923*.

pictorial representation, nevertheless warns van Doesburg against further publication of Bonset's texts, for he is obviously "using their ideas"![11] Bonset, is, of course, van Doesburg's alter ego (or rather one of them, for he has split himself into parts); he appears first in the December 1919 issue of *De Stijl*, in a text entitled "The Other Face," which marks his wish to link the cause of his movement with that of dada. As I. K. Bonset (whose true identity is carefully concealed from Mondrian) he may cavort in ludic freedom in the pages of his new journal. This release, this coming out, came not a moment too soon; for the canon of van Doesburg's writings includes the futurist *X*-image poems and letter-sound images, the entire program of a new poetics elaborated as early as 1915 (two years before the founding of *De Stijl*). "Sound," proclaims van Doesburg, in accents which are becoming familiar to us, "should live and be heard, not merely read."[12]

X-IMAGES

i am penetrated by the room where the tram glides through
i have a cap on
organ sounds
from outside—through me
disintegrate behind me out of tune
little fragments
TIN TIN TIN
and glass
little black cyclists
in my likeness glide and disappear n
+ LIGHT
the palsied quaking tree crown
fragments the exterior
into multicolored matter
the blackwhite waterpilings
4 × HORIZONTAL
innumerable vertical pilings
and too the high
curved blue
INFINITE SPACE
AM I[13]

11. Mondrian in a letter to van Doesburg, cited in Joost Baljeu, *Theo van Doesburg*, New York, Macmillan, 1974, p. 38.
12. Cited in Hannah Hedrick, "Van Doesburg's Dream," *The Structurist*, no. 9 (1969), 11.
13. Theo van Doesburg, "*X*-image poem," from the collection, *Cubistic Verses, 1913–1919*,

For Hannah Hedrick, the editor of a selection of theoretical and poetic texts, van Doesburg creates "an intermediate form of poetry, exposing his readers to abstractions, in order to prepare them for his later, more radical work."[14] *Ik Kom*, an unpublished manuscript, declares his intention to destroy the old forms and to impress the world with the power of the word. Ms Hedrick passes lightly, however—and in this she is not alone—over an extremely interesting text of van Doesburg's, his very first sound poem, written, while on military service, to his friend Anthony Kok, in 1915, two years before the founding of the movement. Here it is:

A-/aba-/ca ca-/ca, ca ca/ ca da,/da, da,-/ da da da.[15]

It is the founding father of *De Stijl*, the celebrant of the Dialectic, the Hierophant of the Absolute who has produced this text. Kruchonykh, Kamensky, Schwitters, van Doesburg, Tzara, "cacaphonists" all. We seem to have wandered into a pan-European nursery, resonant with an infantile demotic that inscribes within the empyrean of Hegelian onto-aesthetics the discourse of a primitive anal eroticism. As Schwitters was later to say, "Dada had to arise and let out the pent-up gases; poop-poop!"

How does this come to be, and what can it signify? I turn for further instruction to the tradition of linguistics that culminates in the work of Roman Jakobson, and most particularly to his work on the elements of language formation as observed in children, for as Jakobson, quoting Buhler, reminds us, "the child provides the only opportunity that we have to observe language in its nascent state."[16]

The child borrows and creates, through modification of his linguistic models, persevering in deviations, resisting every attempt at correction. Children will often create a separate language. Above all, the child is an imitator who is imitated. We know this from our observations of the way in which adults will speak to children, adopting their pronunciation, approximating their timbre. The child begins, however, as a babbler, producing a huge, all-inclusive panoply of sounds; the babbler will, in fact, with no difficulty reproduce, in an unstructured chain, a kind of phonetic abundance of "wild sounds," which are then transformed into entities of linguistic value. That is to say, the first stage of actual language entails a reduction of that enormous range, a selection of

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trans. Hannah Hedrick in *The Structurist*, no. 9 (1969). This text was first published in *De Stijl*, vol. III, no. 7 (May 1920), 57.

14. Hedrick, "Van Doesburg's Dream," p. 11.

15. This first "sound-poem without words," contained in a letter of September 22, 1915, from van Doesburg to his friend, the poet Anthony Kok, is cited by Hannah Hedrick.

16. For the following exposition I have drawn on "*Les Lois phoniques du langage enfantin et leur place dans la phonologie générale*," "Why 'Mama' and 'Papa,'" and "Phonology and Phonetics," Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, vol. I, The Hague, Mouton, 1962.

speech sounds for the construction of a phonemic system. Once that system is launched, we observe a succession that is universally valid and strictly regulated by structural laws.

The acquisition of language is determined by the physiological structure of the organs of utterance (mouth, tongue, vocal cords). At the beginning of the first stage of language development, the acquisition of vowels is launched with a wide vowel, and, at the same time, the acquisition of consonants by a forward articulated stop. An *a* therefore emerges as the first vowel, and generally a labial *m* as the first consonant, in child language. The first consonantal opposition, then, in the construction of differences within language, is that of nasal and oral stop (e.g., *mama-papa*). This is followed by the opposition of labials and dentals (e.g., *papa–tata* and *mama-nana*). These two oppositions form the minimal consonantal system of the languages of the world. These are the only oppositions that cannot be lacking anywhere, provided that there is no mechanical deformity of the speech apparatus (*dyslalia labialis*). The general loss of labials in the language of females in several central African tribes is caused by the ritual of lip mutilations.

The construction of the more complete system of utterance involves the acquisition of back consonants and presupposes the acquisition, already accomplished, of the front consonants, labials and dentals. Thus, the velar sounds—*g* and *k*—require solidarity with *p* and *t* or *m* and *n*. There are languages without velar sounds, but where they exist they do so in relation to the foregoing. The two first consonantal oppositions are followed by the first vocalic opposition; narrow vs. wide vowel, or *papa-pipi*. Then *papa*, *pipi*, *pupu* or *papa*, *pipi*, *pepe*. As Van Ginneken has observed, in studies of Dutch children—but it is a rule that is generalizable—"The development is from general human language to Dutch."

In that development, the velar sign *k* and its twin *g* emerged at a particular stage, detaching themselves and in opposition to the dental sound *d* and its twin *t*. *Dada* and *kaka* or *caca*, then, are linked in the paradigm of the secondary stage of language formation. And as *mama* (the first level of opposition) represents the child's first effort, through repetition, to install a lexicality within the oppositional basis of a language system, so we may see *dada* and *kaka* as linked in its elaboration. It is, as well (as we have seen) a common speech of European modernism. What remains to be said in our reading of that point of junction between De Stijl and dada?

First, that the glossolalic poetics of European modernism in the second decade of the century represents the development of the autotelic text of free play. The semiotics of *zaum*, *merz*, *parole in libertá*, *X*-images, like that of music, is, in a sense, one of auto-signification, introvertive like that of nonfigurative sculpture and painting. Second, it would appear to be this historical moment of aspiration to the universal, to the Equivalence of the Absolute, to an art of pure relations, which secretes, as it were, the glossolalic poetics of anal eroticism.

We have recognized this discourse as that of the early stages of formation of symbolic sign systems, that moment in which the relations of phonemic oppositions come to symbolize the child's situation in the world of its immediate concerns (Ma, Pa, Ka, Da). But it is, of course, also that moment in which everything relating to themselves is endowed by children with a narcissistic esteem. It is, as psychoanalysis has taught us, only as we grow older that we learn secrecy and shame, for children exhibit pride in their own excretions, and use them in their relations with adults. The excremental impulse and the sexual instincts, for reasons both anatomical and cultural, are not yet quite distinct in children; and it was Freud's view that the child recapitulates the cultural phylogeny of the race in learning shame.[17] (The persistence of coprophilic rites in folklore and language testifies to the ancient esteem for excrement which is preserved from childhood.) The literature of psychoanalysis—the case studies of Freud and of Klein among others—is rich in the theorization of the role of faeces in the child's development: the equation of faeces and baby, the fantasmatic projection of excrement as both good and bad substance. Children are known to use excrement as a weapon, and to make of it a gift. It is fantasized as a magical substance for the gaining of control; it is magical in its protean character, the manner in which it assumes the function with which the child has endowed it. As Schwitters said, "Merz had no meaning when I formed it. Now it has the meaning I gave it."

Marion Milner has related the analysis of an eleven-year-old girl who fervently and defiantly scribbled over every surface she could find:

> The apparent defiance did not change until I began to guess that the trouble was less to do with faeces given in anger and meant to express anger, than with faeces given in love and meant to express love. In this sense it was a battle over how she was to communicate her love, a battle over what kind of medium she was going to use for the language of love. The battle over communicating the private vision, when the battleground is the evaluation of the body products, has a peculiar poignancy. In challenging the accepted objective view and claiming the right to make others share their vision, there is a danger which is perhaps the sticking point in the development of many who would otherwise be creative people. For to win this battle, when fought on this field, would mean to seduce the world to madness, to denial of the difference between organization and chaos. Thus in one sense the battle is a very practical one; it is over what is a suitable and convenient stuff for symbols to be made of; but at the same time it is also a battle over the painful recognition that, if the

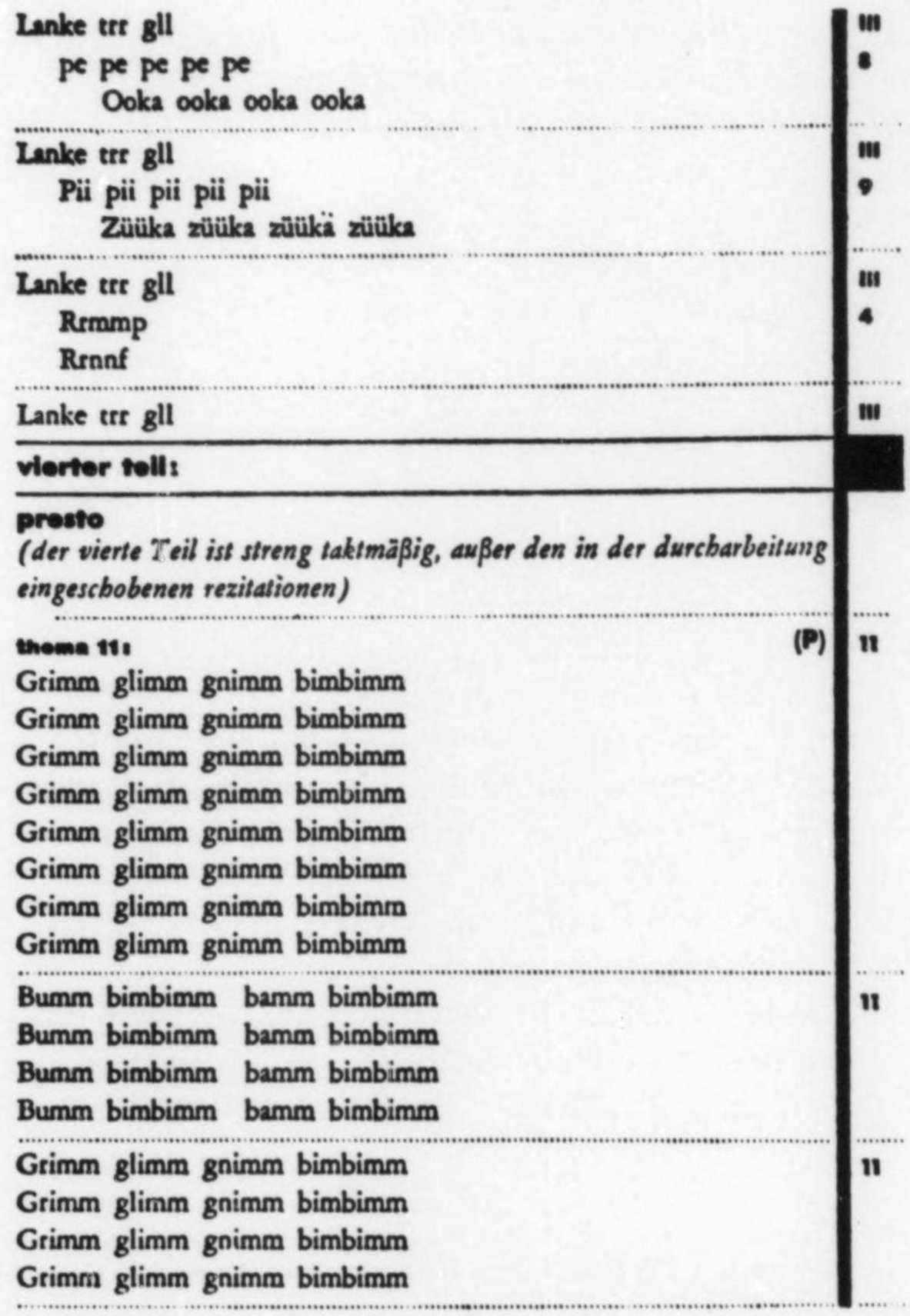
17. The locus classicus of these considerations is Sigmund Freud's "Preface to Bourke's Scatalogic Rites of All Nations," (1913) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 12, pp. 333–340.

> lovely stuff (or matter) to the children is to convey the lovely feelings, there must be work done on the material.[18]

Or, as we say, work upon the signifier is the principle of the modern artistic text. The poetics of anal glossolalia may be seen as the hyperbolic instance of the sliding of signifier over signified in the choreographic movement of a glissade.

18. Marion Milner, "The role of Illusion in Symbol Formation," in *New Directions in Psychoanalysis: The Significance of Infant Conflict in the Pattern of Adult Behaviour*, ed. Melanie Klein, Paula Heimann, R. E. Money-Kyrle, London, Tavistock Publications, 1955, p. 108.

Kurt Schwitters. Page from the Ursonote. *1932.*



It was the grand cacaphonist, Schwitters, who said, "Today expression in a work of art seems to me injurious to art. Art is a primordial concept, exalted as the Godhead, inexplicable as life, indefinable and without purpose. . . ." And, "Merz aims only at art, because no man can serve two masters." But we *do* serve two masters, and do not Mondrian, Schwitters, and van Doesburg rehearse the dynamics of the Freudian topology, with van Doesburg as its mediating instance? He had, of course, to split himself to do it. It is Mondrian and Schwitters who have, with Hegel, had the last words.

Mondrian: "The purpose of Neo-Plasticism for the New Man is to awaken the deepest interiority, which is to say, the Universal, and not only to stir it powerfully, but also to express it with precision."

Schwitters: "A game we play with serious matter, that is art."

This essay is, in large part, a first result of a continuing exchange upon questions of language and aesthetics with my coeditor, Rosalind Krauss. To her stimulating interest and encouragement it owes a great deal.

The Judgment Seat of Photography

CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS

From a photographic print, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense.

—Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

My ideal is to achieve the ability to produce numberless prints from each negative, prints all significantly alive, yet indistinguishably alike, and to be able to circulate them at a price no higher than that of a popular magazine or even a daily paper. To gain that ability there has been no choice but to follow the path that I have chosen.

—Alfred Stieglitz, catalogue preface to his exhibition at the Anderson Galleries, 1921

Photography, at least from the inception of Fox Talbot's negative/positive technique, would seem the very type of what Jean Baudrillard has recently called the "industrial simulacrum"—his designation for all of those products of modern industrial processes that can be said to issue in potentially endless chains of identical, equivalent objects.[1] Duplicability, seriality, "copies" that refer back to no "original": these are the hallmarks of Baudrillard's "order of simulacra." They are, as well, precisely those characteristics one might ascribe to photography as the principal source of the mass imagery that ceaselessly circulates throughout the global *société de consommation*.

1. Jean Baudrillard, *L'Echange symbolique et la mort*, Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1976, pp. 85–88.

This perspective, needless to say, is considerably at odds with the institutional trends that have, in recent years, borne photography triumphantly into the museum, the auction house, and the corporate boardroom. A curious denial—or strategic avoidance—of the fact of photography's sheer multiplicity informs much of today's authoritative discussion of the medium. Consider the assertion of the present director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography that "a photographic print is a much less predictable product than a print from an engraving or an etching plate," or his assurance that the likelihood of a photographer's being "able truly to duplicate an earlier print is very slight."[2]

This passage from multiplicity, ubiquity, equivalence to singularity, rarity, and authenticity seems conveniently to account for the kind of closure effected by photography's gradual reconstitution as an art and as the museum's natural and special object of study. When we turn, however, to consider the institutional setting in which this transformation might be said principally to have taken place, we quickly discover the process to have been more complex and equivocal than suspected. I speak, of course, of the MoMA Department of Photography, which for nearly half a century, through its influential exhibitions and publications, has with increasing authority set our general "horizon of expectation" with respect to photography. MoMA's assimilation of photography has indeed proceeded, on the one hand, through an investing of photography with what Walter Benjamin called the "aura" of traditional art—accomplished, in this case, by revamping older notions of print connoisseurship, transposing the ordering categories of art history to a new register, and confirming the workaday photographer as creative artist. But equally important has been the museum's considerable effort to reappropriate, on its own terms, those very aspects of photographic reproducibility believed by Benjamin to signal the aura's demise.

The cultural transformation of photography into a museum art provides, and in no small degree, an ironic postscript to the thesis that Benjamin elaborated in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." And it is for that very reason that I shall retain, in the background of the discussion that follows, the pair of terms "cult value" and "exhibition value." Their opposition provides the basis for Benjamin's claim that "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art."[3]

This oft-cited fragment compresses into aphorism a rich and ingenious argument, one by now sufficiently familiar to require no full-scale treatment here. In brief, Benjamin proceeded from what he saw as a historical distinction

2. John Szarkowski, "Photography and the Private Collector," *Aperture*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Summer 1970), n.p.
3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 223.

between two modes of reception of art. Cult value was rooted in art's origins in religious/magical ritual, whence the unique presence manifested in the aura of the work of art. Exhibition value involved the gradually changing function of the work of art as it became portable and (later) duplicable—thus, the passage from the fixed fresco or mosaic of the Renaissance to the mobile "public presentability" of easel painting. Tracing these two modes to modern times, Benjamin described a secularized cult value that revealed itself in a preoccupation with the singularity and the physical authenticity of the treasured art object. Here, moreover, religious mystery was progressively displaced by the mysteries of creative genius and eternal value, mysteries whose meaning could be interpreted to art's public only through the mediations of the art expert and the connoisseur. In this view—and Benjamin is writing during his least ambiguously Marxist phase—the aura of the secular work of art, the "unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be," is disclosed as a function of its embeddedness in the constraining discourse that bourgeois society calls cultural tradition.

But tracing the course of exhibition value in similar fashion to the present, Benjamin saw in the nineteenth century's perfection of technically precise reproduction media such as photography and film the opportunity not only to prise art from its cultural constraints, but to transform radically its traditional functions. As the singular original gave way to a plurality of increasingly precise copies, so would the previously unbridgeable gap between art and its audience give way to universal availability and accessibility. Hence, Benjamin anticipated a "dissolution" of the aura, a proliferation of meanings, in short a "tremendous shattering of tradition." It is here that the Marxist thread of his discourse emerges explicitly, for Benjamin welcomed the de-sacralization of the work of art, the "liquidation" of cultural tradition, as clearing the way for a radical critique of bourgeois society. In particular, he identified photography and film—forms conceived as inherently reproducible—as the indispensable instruments of such a critique, since they promised to introduce new modes of perception and analysis in ways immediately comprehensible to a mass public.

Now while the last decade has seen a remarkable renewal of interest in those facets of Benjamin's thought that I have so schematically outlined, there has been a notable absence (at least in America) of a corresponding reexamination of the shrewdest criticism it originally received—that of Theodor Adorno. After reviewing what he called Benjamin's "extraordinary study," Adorno nonetheless voiced a strong skepticism in regard to its argument. By setting up an enabling opposition between cult value and exhibition value, privileging the latter, and representing it as an unequivocally positive agent of change, Adorno felt that Benjamin had lapsed into a technological determinism. The techniques of reproducibility, Adorno claimed, having arisen wholly within the framework of the capitalist order, were not to be so easily disentangled from their role in the functioning of that order. If the historical processes that

Benjamin condensed under the rubric exhibition value were not, in fact, incompatible with the values of bourgeois culture, they could not fulfil the conveniently one-sided role that Benjamin wished them to play. Of the relation between the traditional forms of high art and the new technical modes, Adorno insisted, "Both bear the scars of capitalism, both contain elements of change. . . . Both are torn halves of full freedom, to which however they do not add up."[4]

One can only share Adorno's belief that Benjamin's undeniably pioneering effort carries more than a trace of the social and technological romanticism so evident in Germany between the wars, evident in figures as diverse as Brecht and Moholy-Nagy. With this proviso, however, and aware of the utopian aspect of exhibition value, we can see Benjamin's two modes of reception as providing a useful starting point for the consideration of a remarkable process: the way in which photography—the medium believed by Benjamin to have effectively overthrown the "judgment seat" of traditional art[5]—has in turn been subjected to the transfiguring gaze of art's institutional guardian: the museum.

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From the time of MoMA's opening in 1929, photography received the museum's nodding recognition as one branch of modernist practice, doubtless spurred by MoMA director Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s awareness of the photographic activity of the European avant-garde. The first showings of photography at the museum resulted, however, from the intermittent enthusiasms of Lincoln Kirstein, then one of the most active members of the MoMA Junior Advisory Committee. It was Kirstein who, with Julian Levy, in 1932, arranged the first exhibition to feature photographs (in this case giant photomurals by Steichen and Berenice Abbott, among others) in "Murals by American Painters and Photographers." The next year, Kirstein sponsored the showing of photographs of American Victorian houses by his friend Walker Evans—a project Kirstein had conceived and personally financed. Until 1935, however, the date of Beaumont Newhall's arrival as librarian (replacing Iris Barry, who now headed the new Film Department), no MoMA staff member spoke with authority for photography's interests.[6]

4. Quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, New York, Free Press, 1977, p. 149. The Adorno-Benjamin correspondence has been published in *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, New Left Books, 1977. A discussion of Benjamin's use of "cult value" and "exhibition value" can be found in Pierre V. Zima, "L'Ambivalence dialectique: Entre Benjamin et Bakhtine," *Revue d'Esthétique*, no. 1 (1981), 131–40. Benjamin's friend Brecht detected a lingering theological tone in the concept of the aura, calling it, in his *Arbeitsjournal*, "all mysticism, mysticism, in a form opposed to mysticism. . . . it is rather ghastly" (Buck-Morss, p. 149).

5. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 1972), 6.

6. Kirstein was the author of what was apparently the museum's first major statement on the subject, "Photography in the United States," in Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., eds., *Art in*

Murals by American Painters and Photographers.
MoMA installation. 1932.

Newhall's exhibition, "Photography 1839–1937," is usually cited as a crucial step in the acceptance of photography as a full-fledged museum art. Considered from a slightly different perspective, it also emerges as an important link in the series of four great didactic exhibitions staged at MoMA during 1936–38; the others were Barr's "Cubism and Abstract Art" (1936) and "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism" (1936), and the retrospective "Bauhaus: 1919–1928" (1938). Together, these exhibitions demonstrated MoMA's influential modernization of what had come to be known among museum profes-

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America in Modern Times, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934. The essay was based on a talk given as part of a series of MoMA-sponsored coast-to-coast broadcasts introducing the American radio audience to modern painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, and film.

sionals as the "aesthetic theory of museum management."[7] The central tenets had at first been spelled out in the dramatic reorientation of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts three decades earlier. At that time the educational role of art museums had been sharply distinguished from that of history or science museums. Rather than provide useful information or technical instruction, the art museum was increasingly directed toward the service of "joy not knowledge." That is, it began to serve as *vade mecum* to aesthetic appreciation; it became a treasure house of "eternal" monuments of art, the guarantor of art's continuous tradition. Like Barr, Newhall had been schooled in the essentials of this approach—connoisseurship and rigorous art-historical scholarship—in the famous museum seminars led by Paul Sachs at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum.[8] By the mid-'30s, MoMA's refinement of these methods—through the rationalization of collection building, the augmentation of the role of the research library, and the extension of scholarly commentary to exhibition catalogues—accounted in part for its reputation in museum circles. The four exhibitions of 1936–38—with their vast installations, exhaustive documentation, and ambitious catalogue essays—carried the process one step further. They sought to impart a convincing retrospective order to their heterogeneous domains, and, by so doing, to confirm MoMA's claim as the preeminent institutional interpreter of modern art and its allied movements.

Turning again to "Photography: 1839–1937," we can see that Newhall's exhibition is frankly uninterested in the old question of photography's status among the fine arts; rather, it signaled MoMA's recognition that implicit in photography's adoption by the European avant-garde was a new outlook on the whole spectrum of photographic applications. The approach of photography's centenary year provided reason enough to stage in America the kind of far-reaching examination that had been common in Germany, for example, for over a decade. Newhall's exhibition—comprising more than 800 catalogued items grouped according to technical processes (daguerreotypy, calotypy, wet-plate, and dry-plate periods) and their present-day applications (press photography, infra-red and X-ray photography, astronomical photography, "creative" photography)—clearly seems guided more by Moholy-Nagy's expansive notion

7. Certainly a major factor in this movement was the proliferation of art reproductions. The issue of copies (public education) versus originals (aesthetic appreciation) came to a head at the Boston MFA over the purchase of plaster casts of original marbles, and ultimately led to the resignation of the museum's director, Edward Robinson. For a full account of that museum's subsequent formulation of the "religion" of art, see Benjamin Ives Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, Cambridge, Mass., 1918.

8. Sachs, in addition to his incalculable influence on the emerging American museum profession, more particularly served as the principal academic presence on the committee convened by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in 1929 to draw up plans for a Museum of Modern Art. Sachs long remained an important member of MoMA's board.

of *fotokunst* than by Stieglitz's *kunstphotographie*.[9] Moholy was, indeed, one of Newhall's principal advisers and "teachers" before the exhibition. Stieglitz, on the other hand, who still insisted on the utter opposition of fine-art and applied photography, not only declined to cooperate with Newhall, but refused to allow his later photographs to be represented.[10]

Without resorting to devices as overtly didactic as Moholy's eight "varieties of photographic vision," Newhall nevertheless conceived the exhibition primarily as a lesson in the evolution and specialization of photographic techniques; the work of Muybridge, Atget, Stieglitz, and Anschutz, for instance, was presented under the rubric of dry-plate photography. The scope of the exhibition, its organization primarily along technical lines, and Newhall's refusal to make the expected pronouncement on photography's place among the fine arts—together these represented a notable departure from the usual practice of an American art museum. Lewis Mumford raised the question in the *New Yorker*:

> Perhaps it is a little ungrateful for me to suggest that the Museum of Modern Art has begun to overreach itself in the matter of documentation. . . . What is lacking in the present exhibition is a weighing and an assessment of photography in terms of pure aesthetic merit—such an evaluation as should distinguish a show in an art museum from one that might be held, say, in the Museum of Science and Industry. In shifting this function onto the spectator, the Museum seems to me to be adding unfairly to his burden. . . .[11]

Mumford notwithstanding, we need only to look more closely into Newhall's catalogue essay to locate the emerging signs of MoMA's reordering of photography along lines consistent indeed with the conventional aims of the art museum. In Newhall's long essay (the seed of his subsequent *History of Photography*), we find an explicitly articulated program for the isolation and expert judging of the "aesthetic merit" of photographs—virtually any photograph, regardless of derivation. Newhall's method here seems to me directly related to that of Alfred Barr in his *Cubism and Abstract Art*, published the previous year.

9. Newhall's exhibition follows precisely along the lines of the series of large photography exhibitions held in Germany from 1925 until the early 1930s, as described by Ute Eskildsen, "Innovative Photography in Germany between the Wars," in *Avant-Garde Photography in Germany 1919–39*, San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1980. These joint showings of scientific, commercial, and creative "new vision" photography and film placed the camera at the center of the postwar technological aesthetic in Germany, and should be seen as forming part of the background of Walter Benjamin's writings during this period.

10. For an indication of the position of Stieglitz's die-hard followers regarding photography outside the fine-art tradition, see R. Child Bayley's remarkably brief "Photography Before Stieglitz," in *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, New York, The Literary Guild, 1934, pp. 89–104.

11. Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker*, April 3, 1937, p. 40.

Barr's famous flow charts of the various "currents" of modern painting depended on an admittedly formalist supposition: the existence of a self-enclosed, self-referential field of purely aesthetic factors, untouched by the influence of any larger social or historical forces. What is explicit in Barr (and what provoked, by way of rejoinder, Meyer Schapiro's "Nature of Abstract Art") reappears sub rosa in Newhall. Drawing on the earlier, overwhelmingly technical histories of photography (those of Eder and Potonniée, in particular), Newhall outlined photography's history primarily as a succession of technical innovations—independent, for all intents and purposes, of developments in the neighboring graphic arts or painting—that were to be assessed above all for their aesthetic consequences.

How were these aesthetic factors to be isolated? Newhall found the key in the purist/formalist appeal to those qualities somehow judged to be irreducibly intrinsic to a given medium or, in Newhall's words, "generic to photography."[12] In this case, "In order that . . . criticism of photography should be valid, photography should be examined in terms of the optical and chemical laws which govern its production."[13] On this basis, and taking his cue, I suspect, from Barr's well-known opposition (in *Cubism and Abstract Art*) of the "two main traditions of abstract art," Newhall likewise located two main traditions of aesthetic satisfaction in photography: from the optical side, the *detail*, and, from the chemical side, *tonal fidelity*. This "schism" is found "to run through the entire history of photography"[14] from the daguerreotype (detail) and calotype (tonal mass) to the modern high-resolution products of the view camera and the less precise but graphically more forceful images of the miniature camera. The creative application of these primary qualities consists, for Newhall, in the recognition of "significant" detail, and in the arrangement of "large simple masses" or a "fine range of shimmering tones."[15]

The aims of this method, as specified in the preface added to the next year's revised edition, were "to construct a foundation by which the significance of photography as an esthetic medium can be more fully grasped."[16] The limits and constraints of these aims are nowhere more clearly revealed than in Newhall's remarks on the nineteenth-century French photographer Charles Marville. Marville had, in the 1860s, documented the condemned sections of

12. Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: 1839–1937*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1937, p. 41.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44. This duality was already a commonplace in the 1850s, as evidenced in Gustave Le Gray's preface to his *Photographie: Traité nouveau* of 1852. For a contemporary "inquiry into the aesthetics of photography" along the same line, see James Borcomon, "Purism versus Pictorialism: The 135 Years War," in *Artscanada*, vol. 31, nos. 3–4 (December 1974).
16. Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: A Short Critical History*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1938, p. 9.

old Paris before they were razed to make way for Haussmann's boulevards. For Newhall, Marville's photographs can be considered "personal expressions" principally by virtue of the photographer's "subtle lighting and careful rendition of detail."[17] Having once established this priority, any social/historical residue can be unobtrusively rechanneled as nostalgia—in Newhall's words, "the melancholy beauty of the condemned and vanished past."[18]

The appearance at MoMA, three years before the founding of a full department of photography, of this rudimentary way of "looking at photographs," seems in retrospect the real point of interest in Newhall's 1937 exhibition. By carefully limiting his attention to what he later codified as the "relationship of technique to visualization,"[19] Newhall opened the door to a connoisseurship of photographs that might easily range beyond the confines of art photography, yet still avoid the nettlesome intermediary questions raised by the photographic medium's entanglement in the larger workings of the world.

Newhall never fully explored the implications of such a method; by 1940, when he was named the museum's curator of photography (the first time any museum had created such a post), he had already redirected his interests to what he conceived as photography's creative, rather than practical or applied, side. In his "Program of the Department," he now called for the study of photography to be modeled on that of literature, conventionally conceived: as the examination "under the most favorable conditions, of the best work that can be assembled."[20] In practice, this involved a new dependence on the connoisseur's cultivated, discriminating taste; on the singling out of the monuments of photography's past; on the elaboration of a canon of "masters of photography"; and on a historical approach that started from the supposition of creative expression—in short, an art history of photography. For the sources of this reinscription of photography within the traditional vocabulary of the fine arts, we must look not only to Newhall, but to the two others who presided with him over the inception of the department: the collector David Hunter McAlpin and the photographer Ansel Adams.

Signs of this reinscription were already clear in 1938, when Newhall's earlier essay reappeared, revised, as *Photography: A Short Critical History*. Where Moholy-Nagy might be seen as the guiding spirit of 1937, now Stieglitz was firmly installed as *genius loci*: a new dedication rendered homage to Stieglitz,

17. Newhall, *Photography: 1839–1937*, p. 48.
18. *Ibid.* Newhall was aware of the very different method at work in Gisèle Freund's *La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle*, Paris, Monnier, 1936, which he cites. The validity of his own method must have seemed self-evident, for the possibility of alternative procedures is nowhere acknowledged.
19. Beaumont Newhall, "Program of the Department," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, vol. 8, no. 2 (December-January 1940–41), 4.
20. *Ibid.*

and one of his photographs was reproduced as frontispiece. More revealing was the disappearance of that section of the earlier essay in which Newhall (echoing Moholy) had scored the dependence of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession group on the models of genre painting, and pointed out that its members' production of prints had been "arbitrarily limited, in spite of the fact that an inherent characteristic of photography is its ability to yield infinite identical prints."[21] In its place there now appeared a paean to Stieglitz as visionary, which revolved around the claim that "the step to modern art was logical and direct, for Stieglitz and the group were alive to every type of revelation through pictures."[22]

Newhall's new alignment with such a transcendent claim of modernist photography, rather than with the more openly functionalist claims of the "new vision," can be seen as one means of attracting the support necessary to establish a full department at MoMA. The key step was the involvement—thanks to Newhall's friend Ansel Adams—of David Hunter McAlpin, a wealthy stockbroker related to the Rockefeller family, whom Stieglitz had groomed as a collector of photographs. It was McAlpin who initially agreed to provide funds for the museum to purchase photographs, and who was subsequently invited to join the MoMA board as the founding chairman of the Committee on Photography. In 1940, it was McAlpin who arranged to bring Ansel Adams to New York as vice-chairman of the new department, to join Newhall in organizing its first exhibitions.[23]

Looking at the first exhibition staged by Newhall and Adams, "60 Photographs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics," and reading the texts that accompanied it, one finds a number of markers set in place to delimit the kinds of photographs with which the new department would be concerned. Quick to appear are notions of rarity, authenticity, and personal expression—already the vocabulary of print connoisseurship is being brought into play. The collector David McAlpin introduced the theme of the rarity of the photographic original:

> The history of painting, sculpture, and the other arts . . . is widely accessible to all. By reason of the perishable nature of plates, films, and prints, original photographic material is scarce. Much of it has disappeared. What remains is scattered, its whereabouts unknown.[24]

Newhall, elaborating upon this idea, broached the possibility of a rarity of still greater degree:

21. Newhall, *Photography: 1839–1937*, p. 64.
22. Newhall, *Photography: A Short Critical History*, p. 64.
23. Newhall's account can be found in the interview included in Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979, pp. 389–390.
24. David H. McAlpin, "The New Department of Photography," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, vol. 8, no. 2 (December-January 1940–41), 3.

> From the prodigious output of the last hundred years relatively few great pictures have survived—pictures which are personal expressions of their makers' emotions, pictures which have made full use of the inherent characteristics of the medium of photography. These living photographs are, in the fullest sense of the word, works of art.[25]

Having indicated the narrowing scope of his interests, Newhall went on to imply a comparative system of classification of photographic prints, one ultimately enabling him to suggest the way in which the question of authenticity might be addressed. Physical authenticity could be referred back to considerations of technical process, which had figured so prominently in his 1937 essay; "60 Photographs" allowed Newhall to emphasize his expert familiarity with the special characteristics of calotypes, albumen prints, platinum prints, direct photogravures, palladio-types, chloride prints, bromide prints, and so on. But a more subtle test of authenticity was the degree to which a photograph might be enveloped, without incongruity, in the language and categories usually reserved for fine art. Thus Newhall called attention to the photographic interpretation of such traditional genres as landscape, portraiture, and architectural studies. Further, a way of placing photographs according to the degree and direction of visual stylization was suggested, along an axis bounded by the terminals of "objective" and "abstract" renderings.

But the chief claim made for the work presented in "60 Photographs" was this: "Each print is an individual personal expression."[26] As the ultimate guarantee against the charge that the photographic process was merely mechanical, this claim presents no special difficulty when made, as it was here, on behalf of photographers like Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, Sheeler, and Walker Evans—self-conscious modernists all. The stakes are somewhat different, however, when the same claim is extended to earlier photographs made in a variety of circumstances and for a variety of reasons. And it is here, I think, that we may look to Ansel Adams for the first flowering of a practice that reappears, in the tenure of John Szarkowski, as a crucial feature of MoMA's critical apparatus: the projection of the critical concerns of one's own day onto a wide range of photographs of the past that were not originally intended as art.

Not surprisingly, Adams undertook a modernist rereading of the work of the nineteenth-century wet-plate photographers of the American West in the light of the post-Stieglitz "straight" aesthetic. Just before his move to New York in 1940, Adams (with Newhall's help) organized a large exhibition in San Fran-

25. Newhall, "Program of the Department," p. 2.
26. Beaumont Newhall, "The Exhibition: Sixty Photographs," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, vol. 8, no. 2 (December-January 1940–41), 5.

cisco that highlighted such early western photographers as Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, Jack Hillers, and Carleton Watkins. By confining his attention to questions of photographic technique and the stylistics of landscape (and pushing to the margins the very different circumstances that had called these photographs into being), Adams was able to see in them "supreme examples of creative photography," belonging to one of the medium's "great traditions"[27]—needless to say, his own. The same pronounced shift in the "horizon of expectation" brought to earlier work is evident, as well, in the essay—"Photography as an Art"—that Newhall contributed to the same catalogue. In it he redrew the boundaries of art photography to accommodate the Civil War documentation of the Brady group. Admitting that the photographs had been made "without any implied esthetic intent," he claimed them for art on the grounds that they seemed, to him, undeniably "tragic and beautiful" and that they specifically prefigured the concerns of latter-day documentary stylists like Walker Evans and Berenice Abbott.[28] These Civil War and early western photographs were brought together at MoMA two years later, beginning their long rehabilitation as independent, self-contained aesthetic objects.

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To a remarkable degree, the program of nearly thirty exhibitions mounted by the MoMA Department of Photography from 1940–47 anticipates what has emerged only in the last decade as the standard practice of other American museums.[29] The exhibitions centered on historical surveys ("French Photographs—Daguerre to Atget," 1945), the canonization of masters ("Paul Strand," 1945, and "Edward Weston," 1946), and the promotion of selected younger photographers (Helen Levitt and Eliot Porter, 1943; Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1947). Typically the photographs were presented in precisely the same manner as other prints or drawings—carefully matted, framed, and placed behind glass, and hung at eye level; they were given precisely the same status: that of objects of authorized admiration and delectation. In this museological mise-en-scène, the "outmoded" categories of artistic reception that Walter

27. "Above all, the work of these hardy and direct artists indicates the beauty and effectiveness of the straight photographic approach. No time or energy was available for inessentials in visualization or completion of their pictures. Their work has become one of the great traditions of photography" (Ansel Adams, introduction to *A Pageant of Photography*, San Francisco, San Francisco Bay Exposition Co., 1940, n.p.).

28. Beaumont Newhall, "Photography as an Art," in *A Pageant of Photography*, n.p.

29. Any assessment of Newhall's department must bear in mind the complicated comings and goings that marked the war years. On Newhall's departure for military service, his wife Nancy became acting curator. The next year saw Willard Morgan (husband of the photographer Barbara Morgan) named director of the department, an arrangement that lasted only one year. And in 1942 and 1945 Edward Steichen was brought in to stage spectacular patriotic exhibitions.

Benjamin had expected photography to brush aside—"creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery"—were displaced onto a new ground and given new life. Photography—an admittedly narrow range of it, initially—was laid out on an institutionalized interpretative grid and made the object of expert aesthetic judgment. Moreover, by extending the axes of this grid—formalist reading, the presupposition of creative intent, the announced preciousness of the photographic print—it was conceivable that a related order might eventually be imposed on the outlying regions of photography's past.

One may reasonably wonder, then, seeing that Newhall's curatorial policies so clearly anticipate today's uncontested norm, why, in the summer of 1947, did MoMA's trustees cancel their support for those policies, name the sixty-eight-year-old Edward Steichen as director of the photography department, and accept Newhall's sudden resignation?

Simply put, it seems clear that Newhall's exhibition program failed equally to retrieve photography from its marginal status among the fine arts and to attract what the museum could consider a substantial popular following. While Barr's exhibitions, "Cubism and Abstract Art" among them, were instrumental in creating a flourishing market for modern painting and sculpture, thereby

The Photographs of Edward Weston. *MoMA installation. 1946.*

confirming MoMA's status as an important art-world tastemaker, Newhall's photography exhibitions had no comparable effect. A striking index of photography's marginality can be found in a curious 1941 MoMA showing called "American Photographs at $10," which offered for sale limited-edition prints by the photographers who figured most prominently in Newhall's emerging canon—Stieglitz, Weston, and Adams, among them. The language in which the prints were presented all but confessed the absence of an audience attuned to the proclaimed transcendent aims of modernist art photography:

> The exhibition and sale is an experiment to encourage the collecting of photographs for decoration and pleasure. Once a photographer has worked out a suitable relationship between grade of paper, exposure and development to make one fine print, he can at the same time make many more of identical quality. Thus the unit cost can be lowered.[30]

More seriously, Newhall's insistent championing of photography as fine art drew the open hostility of that section of the photographic press that claimed to speak for the nation's millions of amateurs: the department was called "snobbish," "pontifical," and accused of being shrouded in "esoteric fogs."[31] In light of the museum's desire for funds for expansion in the mid-1940s, the declaration of John A. Abbot, vice-president of the museum's board, that MoMA intended actively to seek the "support of the photographic industry and photography's vast and devoted following"[32] clearly spelled trouble for Newhall. In Newhall's later recollection:

> Suddenly I was told by the director that the Trustees had decided to appoint Edward Steichen as the Director of Photography. I'd felt that I could not work with Steichen. I respected the man, I knew the man pretty well by this time. I just didn't see that we could be colleagues. It was as simple as that. My interests were increasingly in the art of photography; his were increasingly in the illustrative use of photography, particularly in the swaying of great masses of people.[33]

The approach that Newhall had mapped out at MoMA survived, of

30. Wall label for "American Photographs at $10," visible in an installation view filed in the MoMA archive. As the history of the Julian Levy Gallery during the 1930s made evident, the market for original photographs was never strong enough to support even one gallery specializing in photography.
31. Bruce Downes, "The Museum of Modern Art's Photography Center," *Popular Photography*, February 1944, p. 85.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
33. Newhall interviewed by WXXI-TV, Rochester, 1979, transcript pages 27–28.

course: as an influential text (his *History of Photography*, first published in 1949[34]) and in an important institutional enclave (the George Eastman House, whose first director he became). Nevertheless, the next fifteen years at MoMA were marked by Steichen's inclination not to give a "hoot in hell"[35] for photography conceived as an autonomous fine art.

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In his 1947 study of the former Bauhaus artist/designer, Herbert Bayer, Alexander Dorner offered this ironic conception of the classically conceived exhibition gallery:

> The gallery shows works of art containing eternal ideas and forms in an equally immutable framework of space which itself has grown out of the absolute immutability of the inner form. . . . The visitor . . . is supposed to visit a temple of the eternal spirit and listen to its oracle.[36]

Announcing to his American audience that the age of art forms such as these was at an end, Dorner hailed the Bauhaus for its "explosive transformation of the very idea *art*"; in language strikingly similar to Walter Benjamin's he described the situation brought about by the decline of traditional art forms as one "bursting with energies which, once set to work in the practical context of life, might well influence life on a tremendous practical scale."[37]

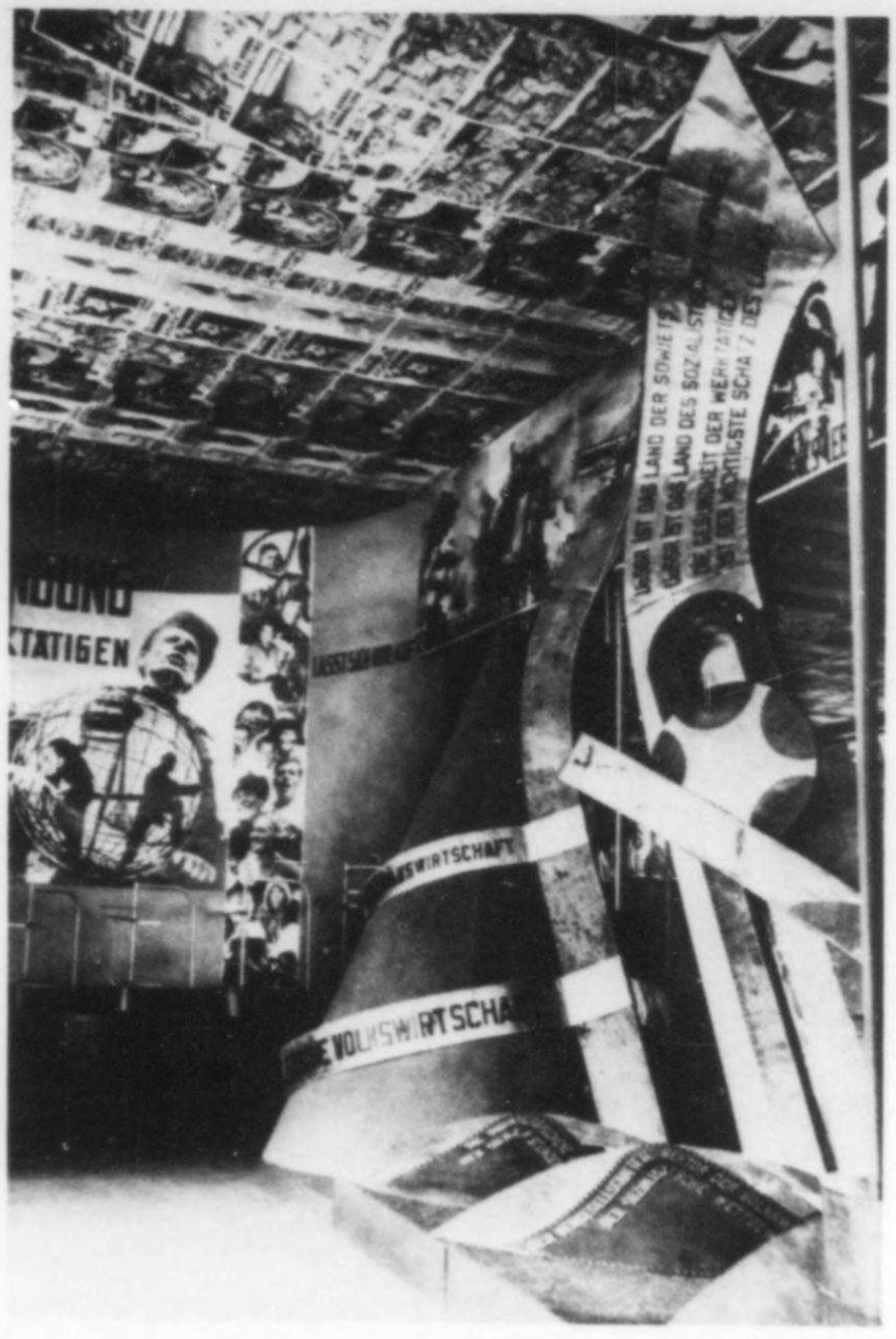
Bayer's own contrasting idea of the aims of the modern exhibition descended from El Lissitzky's revolutionary use of repetitive photographic/typographic clusters in the late 1920s, mediated by the Bauhaus's rationalization of Lissitzky's techniques in the 1930s. Bayer called on the modern exhibition to apply all of the techniques of the "new vision" in combination with color,

34. In light of the increasing awareness of the problematic role played by narrative representation in historiography (see, for example, Hayden White's "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 2 [Winter 1973]), it deserves to be noted that the narrative strategy of Newhall's 1949 *History* was devised with the aid of a Hollywood scriptwriter, Ferdinand Reyner. See Hill and Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography*, pp. 407–408. In Newhall's words, "*The History of Photography* was deliberately planned with the help of a storyteller."

35. "When I first became interested in photography, I thought it was the whole cheese. My idea was to have it recognized as one of the fine arts. Today I don't give a hoot in hell about that" (Steichen on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, as reported in the *New York Times*, March 19, 1969).

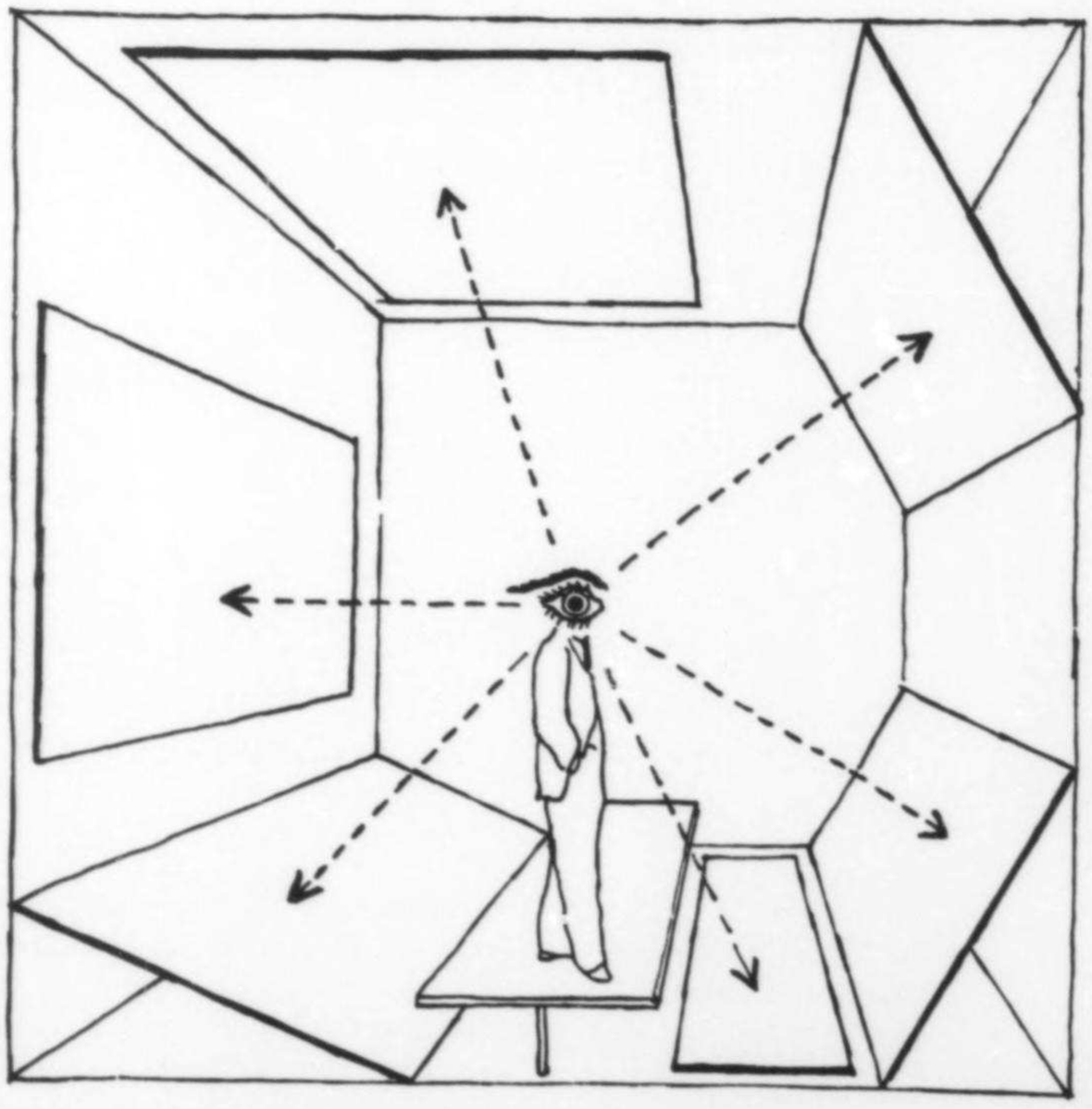
36. Alexander Dorner, *The Way Beyond "Art": The Work of Herbert Bayer*, New York, Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947, pp. 107–108. Dorner was the former director of the Landes Museum in Hanover, Germany, for whom El Lissitzky had designed special rooms for the exhibition of abstract art in 1925. After emigrating to the U.S., he joined the faculty of the Rhode Island School of Design.

37. Dorner, *The Way Beyond Art*, p. 15.



El Lissitzky. Soviet Pavilion, International Hygiene Exhibition, Dresden. 1930.

Herbert Bayer. Diagram of extended vision in exhibitio presentation. 1930.



scale, elevation, and typography—all of these to serve, moreover, a decidedly instrumental end. The modern exhibition, he wrote,

> . . . should not retain its distance from the spectator, it should be brought close to him, penetrate and leave an impression on him, should explain, demonstrate, and even persuade and lead him to a planned and direct reaction. Therefore we may say that exhibition design runs parallel with the psychology of advertising.[38]

In the Germany of the 1920s and early '30s, this turn of emphasis could well be seen as essential to the rapid education of a backward public to the complexities of an emerging technological culture; such, of course, was one of the overriding themes of the entire Bauhaus project. But these principles, transported to the America of the postwar period, proved quite readily adaptable to very different ends—particularly when used to shape the extravagant thematic exhibitions that marked Steichen's years at MoMA.

Now it might seem that Steichen—one of the founders of the Photo-Secession and, with Stieglitz, one of the first promoters of European modernist art in America—was uniquely fitted to fulfill Newhall's efforts to consolidate a place for fine-art photography within the museum. But since the 1920s, Steichen's ambitions had carried him far beyond the confines of art photography: his portrait and fashion photography for *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* brought him personal celebrity and fortune, and during his service in the U.S. Navy in World War II he learned the enormous power of quasi-documentary reportage aimed at the home-front audience. It was with this knowledge that, in 1942, he first came to MoMA:

> During the war I collected photographs and organized an exhibition called "Road to Victory," and it was that exhibition which gave ideas to the board of directors of the Museum. Here was something new in photography to them. Here were photographs that were not simply placed there for their aesthetic values. Here were photographs used as a force and people flocked to see it. People who ordinarily never visited the museum came to see this. So they passed the proposition on to me that I keep on along those lines.[39]

The impact of "Road to Victory" depended largely on the ingenious installation devised for Steichen by Herbert Bayer, who had left Germany in 1938. Spectators were guided along a twisting path of enormous, free-

38. Herbert Bayer, "Fundamentals of Exhibition Design," *PM*, December/January 1939/40, p. 17. *PM* (Production Manager) was the publication of New York's Laboratory School of Industrial Design.
39. Edward Steichen, "Photography and the Art Museum," in *Museum Service* (Bulletin of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences), June 1948, p. 69.

Above: Road to Victory. *MoMA installation by Herbert Bayer. 1942. Below:* Power in the Pacific. *MoMA installation by George Kidder Smith. 1945.*

standing enlargements of documentary photographs—some as large as ten by forty feet. This arrangement was calculated to produce a visual narrative that combined the most dramatic devices of film and *Life*-style photojournalism. In *PM*, the photographer Ralph Steiner wrote, "The photographs are displayed by Bayer as photographs have never been displayed before. They don't sit quietly on the wall. They jut out from the walls and up from the floors to assault your vision. . . ."[40] The exhibition attracted immense crowds and critical plaudits, as did its 1945 successor, "Power in the Pacific."

It was in just this direction, and in this style, that Steichen was invited to continue at MoMA after the war: rather than contest the peripheral status of art photography, he was to capitalize on photography's demonstrably central role as a mass medium that dramatically "interpreted" the world for a national (and international) audience. That the museum harbored such an interest seems peculiar only if one ignores MoMA's extensive wartime program, in which the museum's prestige was directed towards the "educat[ion], inspir[ation], and strengthen[ing of] the hearts and wills of free men in defense of their own freedom."[41] Later—as Eva Cockcroft has shown—after carrying out a number of wartime cultural missions for Nelson Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs, MoMA emerged as one of the principal actors in the cultural Cold War.[42] In welcoming Steichen to MoMA in 1947, Rockefeller (then president of MoMA's board) served notice that the Department of Photography's concerns would no longer be confined to the aesthetic realm:

> Steichen, the young man who was so instrumental in bringing modern art to America, joins with the Museum of Modern Art to bring to as wide an audience as possible the best work being done throughout the world, and to employ it creatively as a means of interpretation in major Museum exhibitions where photography is *not the theme but the medium through which great achievements and great moments are graphically represented.*[43]

One can, with Allan Sekula, see productions like "The Family of Man" as

40. Ralph Steiner, in *PM*, May 31, 1942. The Edward Steichen Archive, MoMA. A more complete account of the "Road to Victory" exhibition can be found in my "Steichen's 'Road to Victory,'" *Exposure*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Fall 1980).
41. Quotation from John Hay Whitney, then president of MoMA's board, cited in Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, New York, Athenaeum, 1973, p. 233.
42. Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 10 (June 1974), 39–41.
43. "Edward Steichen Appointed Head of Photography at Museum of Modern Art," undated 1947 MoMA press release, The Edward Steichen Archive, MoMA, italics added. Rockefeller notes, in conclusion, "I am particularly pleased that the enlarged program for the Department, headed by Mr. Steichen, has the endorsement and support of the photographic industry."

exercises in sheer manipulation; but one can also see in their enthusiastic reception that familiar mass-cultural phenomenon whereby very real social and political anxieties are initially conjured up, only to be quickly transformed and furnished with positive (imaginary) resolutions.[44] From this standpoint, in "Korea: The Impact of War" (1951), doubts about dispatching American soldiers to distant regional battles are acknowledged (in a careful juxtaposition of the photographs of David Douglas Duncan), only to be neutralized in an exhibition setting that emphasized stirring images of American military might. In the same way, the global patriarchical family proposed as utopia in "The Family of Man" (1955) stands to gain considerably when set as the only opposing term to the nightmare image of atomic destruction. And "The Bitter Years" (1962)—coming at the height of the superpower war of nerves over Cuba and Berlin—consciously revived (for the first time in two decades) and reinterpreted the FSA's Depression-era photographs as an inspirational demonstration of the "fierce pride and courage which turned the struggle through those long bitter years into an American epic."[45]

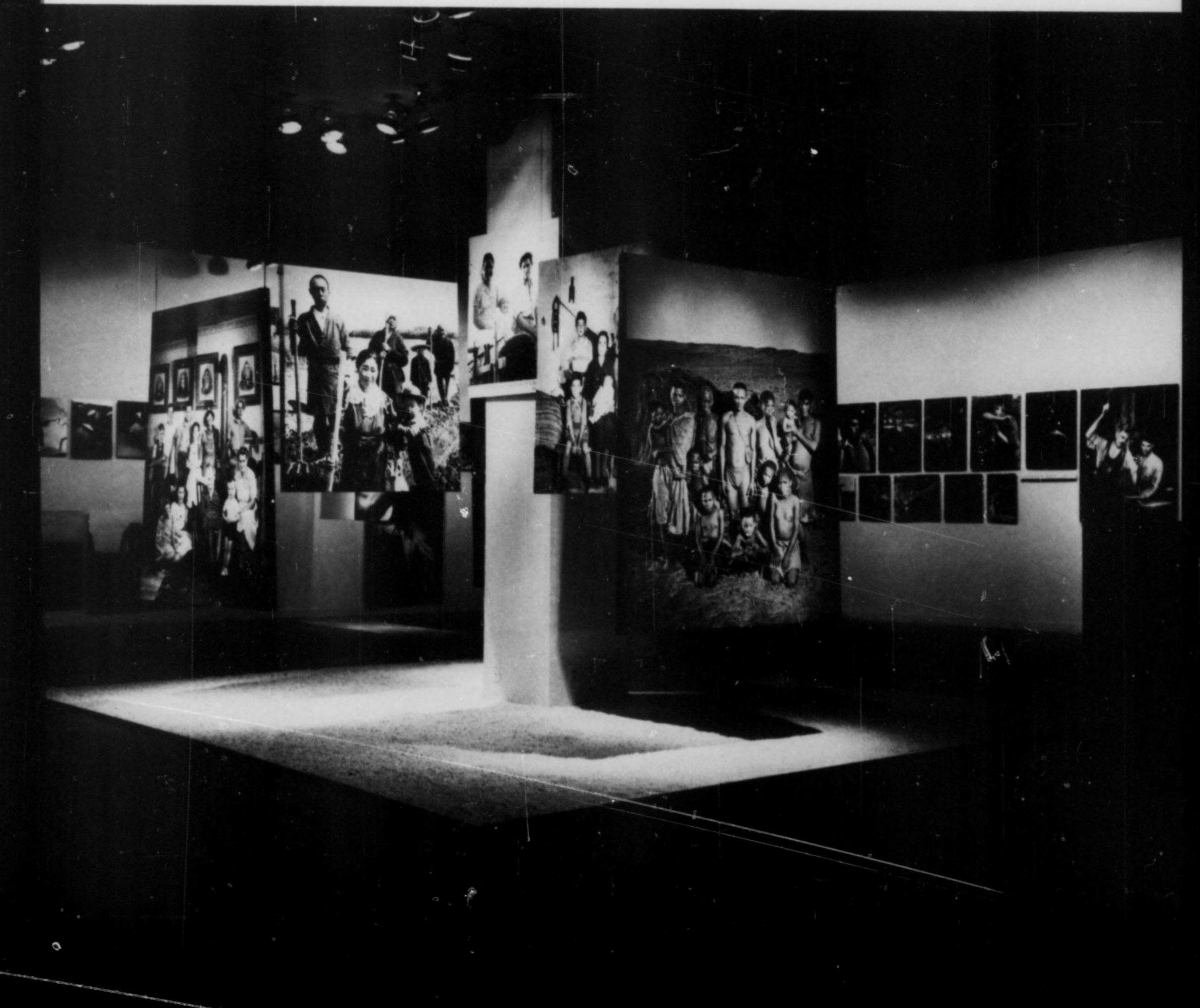
While one could profitably examine such exhibitions as Barthesian "mythologies," ritual reenactments and carefully channeled resolutions of Cold War anxieties, I wish to call attention to the form in which they were conceived and circulated. For the underlying premise at work is that of the ultimate availability and duplicability of photographs—a notion believed to have revolutionary implications in the 1930s, but now reappropriated and domesticated in a later and very different set of circumstances. To prise photographs from their original contexts, to discard or alter their captions, to recrop their borders in the enforcement of a unitary meaning, to reprint them for dramatic impact, to redistribute them in new narrative chains consistent with a predetermined thesis—thus one might roughly summarize Steichen's operating procedure.[46] Furthermore, beginning as early as the 1942 "Road to Victory," each of these thematic exhibitions was conceived not as a single presentation, but as a set of multiple "editions" of varying physical dimensions intended to circulate—in the manner of motion pictures or magazines—throughout the United States and the world. Thus, by the mid-1950s, MoMA's initial press release anticipated that "The Family of Man" would open simultaneously in New

44. See Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring 1981), 15–25. See also Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979), 130–148.

45. "A Talk with Steichen," *WPAT Gaslight Revue*, vol. 8, no. 2 (October 1962), 40.

46. In the 1942 "Road to Victory," for example, the dramatic turning point of the exhibition hinges on the juxtaposition of a photograph of the Pearl Harbor explosions with a Dorothea Lange photograph of a grim-visaged "Texas farmer" who is made to say, in caption, "War—they asked for it—now, by the living God, they'll get it!" Examining the original Lange photograph in the MoMA Archive, one finds this very different caption: "Industrialized agriculture. From Texas farmer to migratory worker in California. Kern County. November, 1938." For similar instances involving recropping, see Ulrich Keller, "Photographs in Context," *Image*, December 1976, pp. 1–12.

The Family of Man. *MoMA installation by Paul Rudolph. 1955.*



York, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, thereafter to travel globally for two years.[47]

The successful application of such techniques entailed, of course, two major factors: the all-but-total disappearance of the individual photographer within the larger fabric, and a disregard of the supposed personal-expressive qualities of the "fine print."[48] The photographers complied, for the most part, signing over to the museum the right to crop, print, and edit their images. In this way, the potential void left, at one level, by the abandonment of Newhall's main tenets—the photographer as autonomous artist, the original print as personal expression—was promptly filled at another by the museum's emergence as orchestrator of meaning. One would by no means be mistaken in seeing Steichen as MoMA's glorified picture editor, sifting through thousands of images from different sources and recombining them in forms reflecting the familiar mass-cultural mingling of popular entertainment and moral edification.[49]

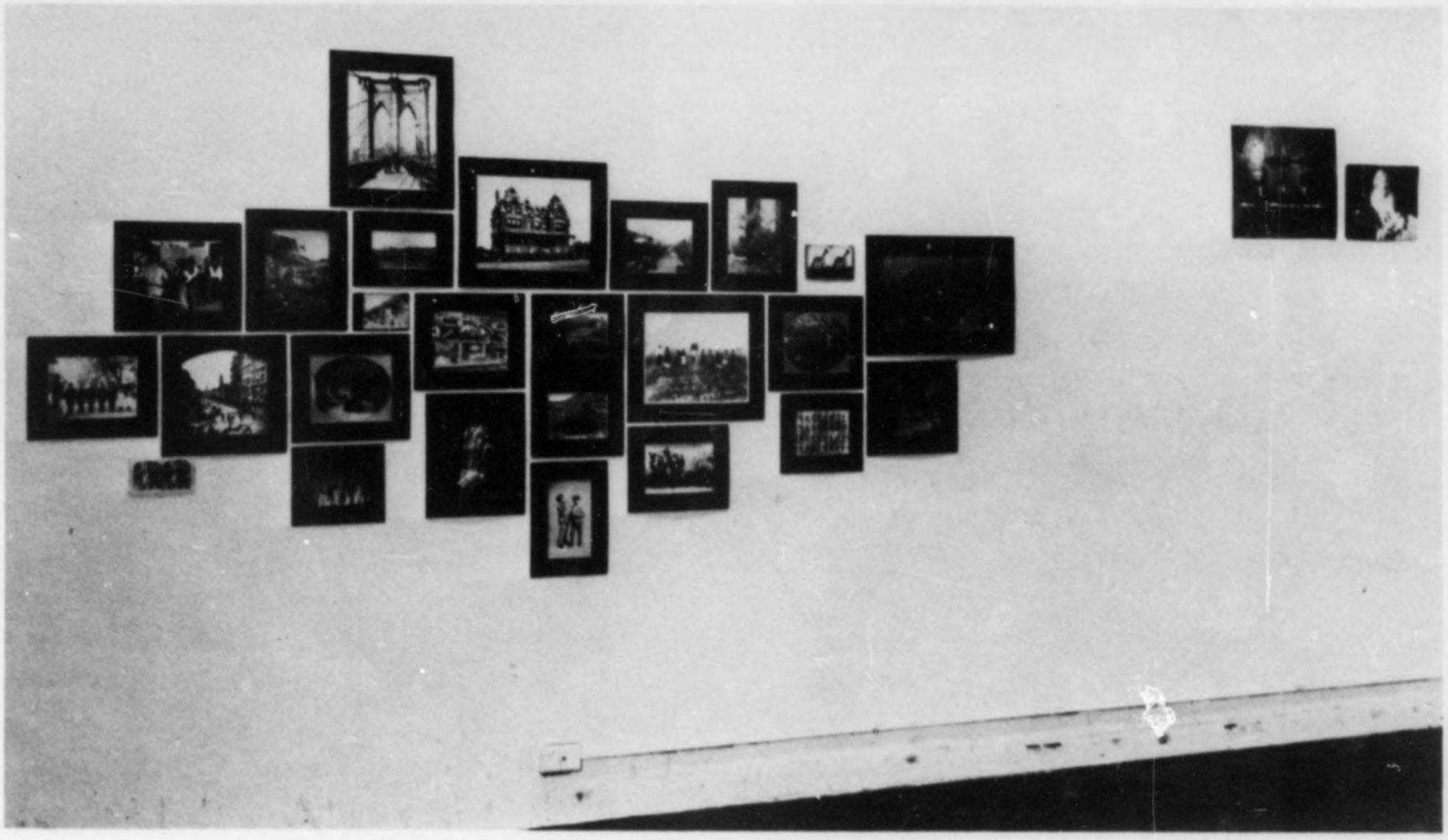
This slippage of the photographer from the status of autonomous artist to that of illustrator of (another's) ideas marked the entire range of Steichen's exhibitions at MoMA; and it was not confined to the giant thematic shows that constituted its most visible aspect. The young photographers, however, who came of age just after World War II and looked to the mass-circulation magazines for their livelihood, generally understood illustration as the condition of photography. The most renowned artist-photographers at this time could expect to sell their work for no more than fifteen to twenty-five dollars per print.[50] Irving Penn was surely not alone in his insistence (at the 1950 MoMA symposium, "What Is Modern Photography?") that "for the modern photographer the end product of his efforts is the printed page, not the photo-

47. "Museum of Modern Art Plans International Photography Exhibition," MoMA press release, January 31, 1954. The Edward Steichen Archive, MoMA.

48. This was the point of Ansel Adams's main complaint. "The quality of the prints—of all his exhibits of this gross character—was very poor. . . . If a great Museum represented photography in such a style and quality, why bother about the subtle qualities of the image and the fine print?" (Ansel Adams, correspondence with this writer, January 30, 1980).

49. "The Family of Man" can be seen to spring directly from the series of photo-essays supervised by picture editor John G. Morris for the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1947. "People Are People the World Over" used photojournalists like Robert Capa and Larry Burrows to present the everyday lives of families from twelve countries, on the premise that "the family is still the basic building block of society."

50. At the MoMA Christmas print sale of 1951, one could buy photographs by Weston, Ansel Adams, Frederick Sommer, Charles Sheeler, and Berenice Abbott, among others, for $10–$25. At this particular sale, Harry Callahan (7), outsold Weston (5). The virtual nonexistence of a market for original photographs underlay the continuing difficulties of Helen Gee's Limelight Gallery, from 1954–61 the only New York gallery to regularly feature photography; see Barbara Lobron, "Limelight Lives," *Photograph*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1977), 1–3. As late as 1962, at the time of Steichen's retirement, Harry Callahan could expect to receive five dollars for each print purchased by the museum.



Forgotten Photographers. *MoMA installation. 1951.*

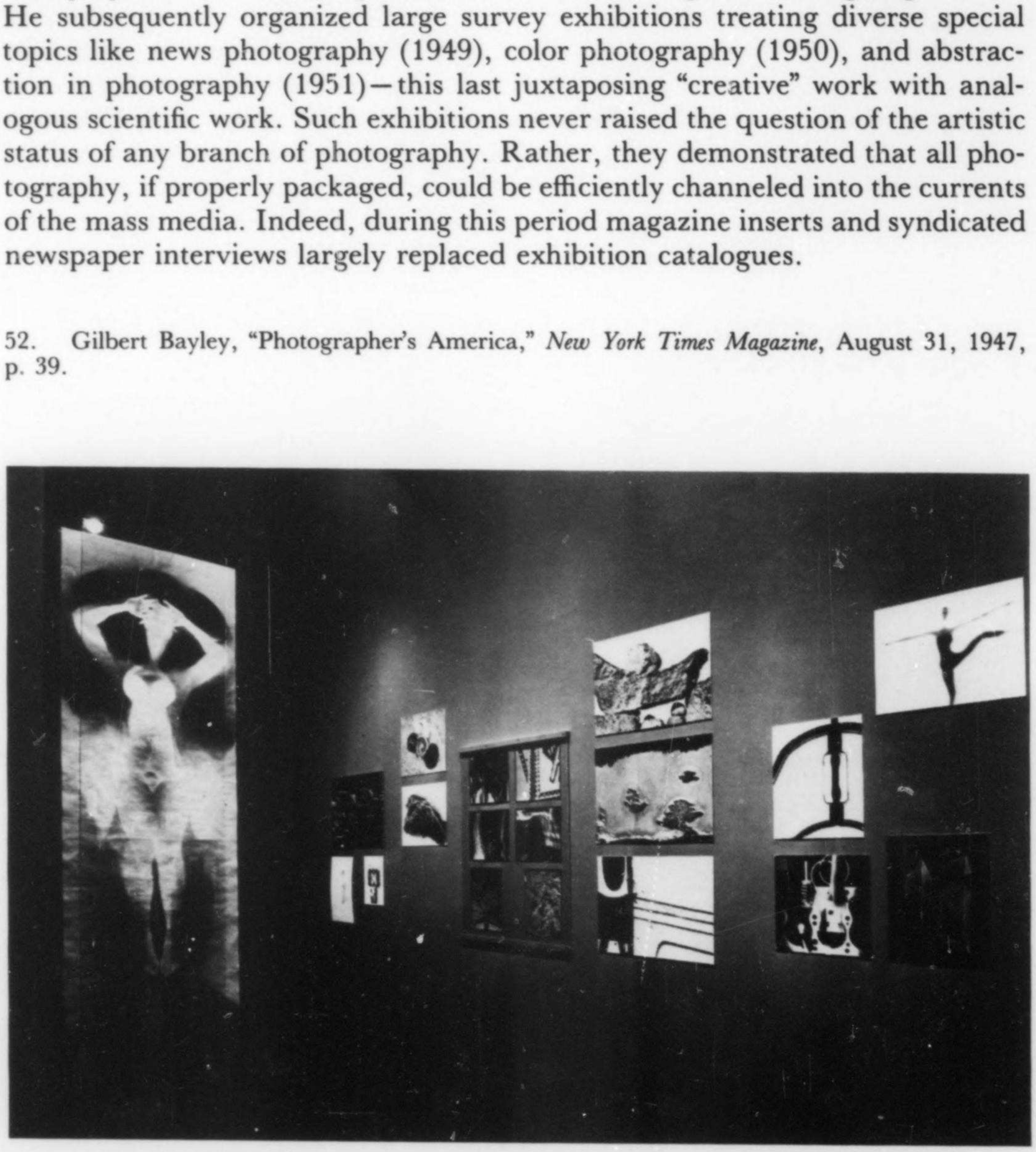
graphic print. . . . The modern photographer does not think of photography as an art or of his photograph as an art object."[51]

This view could only be reinforced by the presentation of photographs in the MoMA galleries. Under Steichen, the typical gallery installation resembled nothing so much as an oversized magazine layout, designed to reward rapid scanning rather than leisurely contemplation. Too frequently, the designer's hand appeared to greater advantage than the photographer's eye. Even in exhibitions of "creative" photography, the preciousness of the fine print was dramatically deemphasized. Prints were typically shown flush-mounted on thick (nonarchival) backing board, unmatted, and without benefit of protective glass. In addition, one could from time to time expect to encounter giant color transparencies, commercial press sheets, and inexpensive prints from color slides.

51. Quoted in "What Is Modern Photography," *American Photography*, March 1951, p. 148. The symposium included statements by Penn, Margaret Bourke-White, Gjon Mili, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, and Charles Sheeler, among others. Each participant, however, was limited to a five-minute statement, in order that the proceedings might be carried to a "Voice of America" radio audience.

It should not be thought that fine-art photography of the kind that Newhall had sponsored vanished entirely from the MoMA galleries—it did not. It was, however, acknowledged as a tiny band on the photographic spectrum, at a time when Steichen—an adept auto-publicist—encouraged a view of himself as the grandfatherly "dean" of *all* photography and MoMA as its institutional monitor. Soon after his arrival at the museum, for example, he let it be known that "he want[ed] to gather under his wing the 200,000 of America's amateurs . . . and teach them something about making pictures. Later on he want[ed] them to send the pictures to him for sorting and cataloguing. . . ."[52] He subsequently organized large survey exhibitions treating diverse special topics like news photography (1949), color photography (1950), and abstraction in photography (1951)—this last juxtaposing "creative" work with analogous scientific work. Such exhibitions never raised the question of the artistic status of any branch of photography. Rather, they demonstrated that all photography, if properly packaged, could be efficiently channeled into the currents of the mass media. Indeed, during this period magazine inserts and syndicated newspaper interviews largely replaced exhibition catalogues.

52. Gilbert Bayley, "Photographer's America," *New York Times Magazine*, August 31, 1947, p. 39.

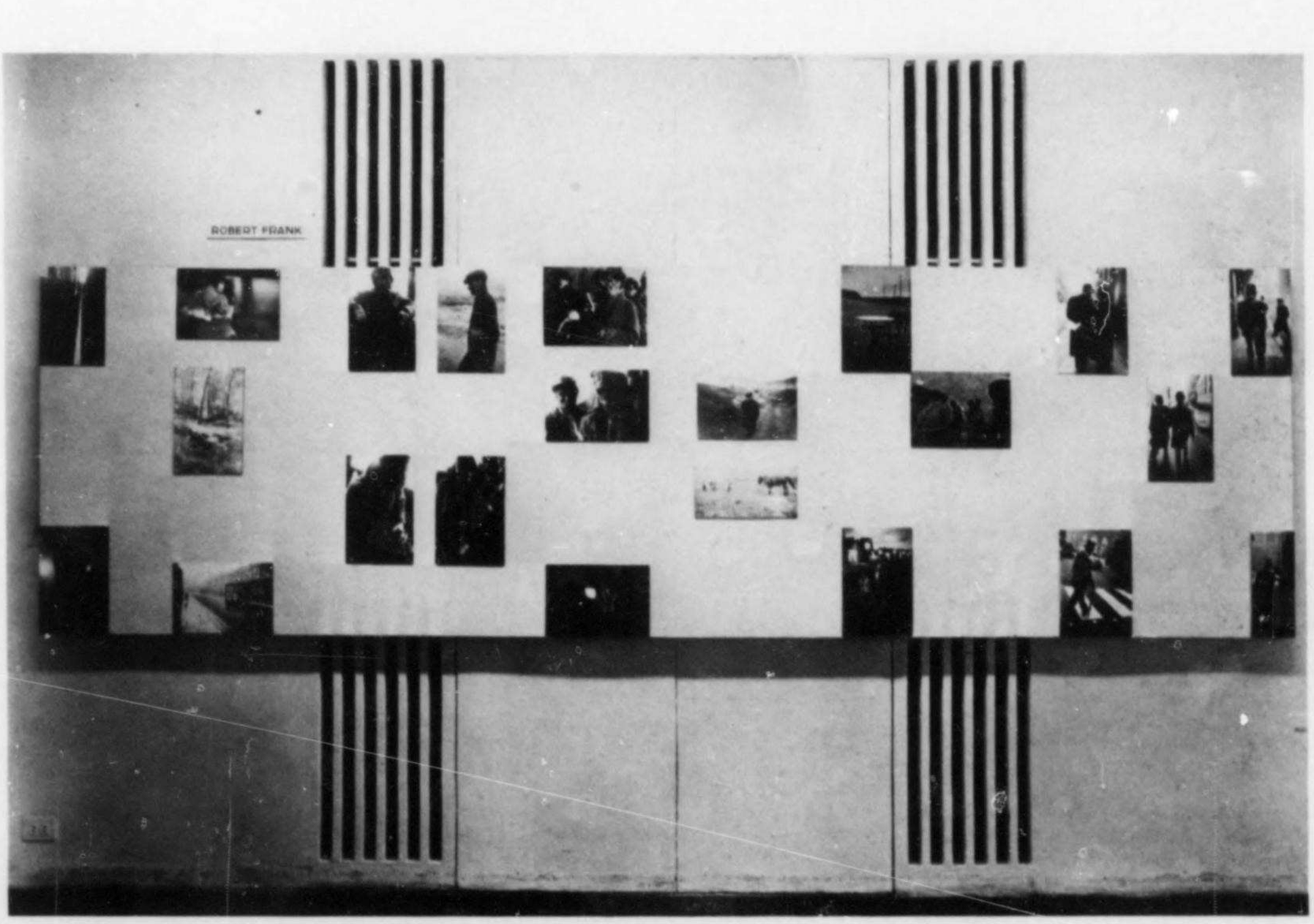


Abstraction in Photography. *MoMA installation. 1951.*

Two irregular series of smaller exhibitions clearly showed the limitations of Steichen's approach when applied to the handling of historical and serious contemporary photography. Photography's past was acknowledged in a number of so-called "flashback" exhibitions interspersed between the larger shows. These surveyed the work of the Photo-Secession (1948), nineteenth-century French photography from the Cromer Collection of the George Eastman House (1949), and the work of Stieglitz and Atget, shown together in 1950. But in the absence of extensive magazine coverage, exhibition catalogues, or critical writing, these exhibitions attracted little attention and left virtually no trace.[53]

More significant were the many small exhibitions organized to illustrate various photographers' treatments of a given theme—the theme was defined, of course, by Steichen. The best-known were the five installments of "Diogenes with a Camera" (1952–61), in which a great many photographers presented the

53. According to Newhall's count of selected publications on the history of photography from 1900–70, the 1950s saw fewer than half as many publications in this area than had the 1930s. The 1960s, on the other hand, witnessed a dramatic increase, more than doubling the number of publications of the 1930s. Newhall's compilation was made available at the Photographic Collectors' Symposium, George Eastman House, October 1978.



Postwar European Photography. *MoMA installation.*
1953.

results of their ostensible search for truth—the whole notion, one may suppose, a remnant of the claims previously made for art photography's incorporation of transcendent values. Gradually these exhibitions fell prey to Steichen's sentimental and moralizing tendencies; so much so that in 1962, when he wished to pair two of his favorites, Harry Callahan and Robert Frank, in a final "Diogenes," Frank flatly refused to exhibit under that title.[54]

The photographic values that Steichen consistently encouraged remained those of the glossy picture magazines: emotional immediacy, graphic inventiveness, avoidance of difficulty. Photographers who chose to explore what were defined as peripheral areas—whether of a social or an aesthetic nature—quickly faced loss of access to what had become (thanks in part to Steichen's proselytizing) a mass audience for photography. Callahan and Frank were typical of the ambitious younger photographers whose reputations benefited from their regular inclusion in MoMA exhibitions, but who nonetheless eventually chafed at the constraints of the mass-media model imposed on all of the work presented there. Callahan's rigorous formalist side was never shown to advantage, nor was his extensive work in color; as he later remarked of his exhibitions at MoMA during those years, "It was always a Steichen show. Always."[55] In the same way, the poignant, romantic Robert Frank whose work appeared at MoMA resembled only slightly the photographer whose corrosive social vision informed *The Americans*—a book that defined itself in opposition to the reigning norms of *Life* magazine and professionally "committed" photojournalism. ("I do not like the adoration of grand old men," was Frank's later, testy dismissal.[56])

At a time, then, when most American art museums still considered photography well beyond the pale of the fine arts, a peculiar set of circumstances allowed Steichen effectively to establish MoMA as the ultimate institutional arbiter of the entire range of photographic practice. In dissolving the categories by means of which Newhall had sought to separate fine-art photography from the medium's other applications, Steichen undermined the whole notion of the "cult value" of the fine print. In the process he attracted a wide popular following for photography as a medium, and won for it (and for himself) the regular

54. Frank agreed to show his work minus the "Diogenes" label. But "Modern Art Museum officials were dismayed over the number of beatniks—about 80 of them—who crowded in the swank, private opening of Robert Frank's new photography exhibit. There wasn't much the museum could do about it, though. The beats were Frank's friends. . . ." *New York Daily News*, March 5, 1962. The Edward Steichen Archive, MoMA.

55. Jacqueline Brody, "Harry Callahan: Questions," *Print Collectors' Newsletter*, January-February 1977, p. 174. A good discussion of Callahan's relation with Steichen can be found in Sally Stein, "Harry Callahan: Works in Color/ The Years 1946–1978" in the exhibition catalogue *Harry Callahan: Photographs in Color/The Years 1946–1978*, Center for Creative Photography, 1980.

56. Robert Frank, "Letter from New York," *Creative Camera*, July 1969, p. 234.

attention of the mass press. The price exacted at MoMA was the eclipse of the individual photographer and the subordination of his or her work to the more or less overtly instrumental demands of illustration. This was the situation inherited by Steichen's successor in 1962.

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A survey of the installation views of MoMA's photographic exhibitions from the early 1960s to the present induces a dizzying realization of the speed of photography's cultural repackaging. Steichen's hyperactive, chock-a-block displays metamorphose before one's eyes into the cool white spaces of sparsely hung galleries. Mural-sized enlargements shrink to conventional proportions, and the eccentric clustering of photographs of wildly assorted dimensions gives way to an orderly march of prints of utterly uniform size. The fine-art accoutrements of the Newhall years—standard white mattes, wooden frames, and covering glass—quickly reappear. With no knowledge of the particulars of John Szarkowski's program as director of MoMA's Department of Photography, one could easily surmise that the museum's claims for photography's "cult value" had been dusted off and urgently revived.[57] What one could not infer, of course, is the extent to which those claims resounded beyond the museum's walls to a rapidly proliferating network of galleries, collectors, critics, and arts administrators, all specializing, in one way or another, in photography.

The barbed title of his first exhibition, "Five Unrelated Photographers" (1962), announced that although Steichen had personally chosen him as his successor, Szarkowski was no acolyte. It gradually became apparent that Szarkowski, trained as an art historian, held no affection for Steichen's casting of photography in the role of social instrument and "universal language." Instead, he represented an aestheticizing reaction against Steichen's identification of photography with mass media. While deploring the "graphic gymnastics" of latter-day photojournalism, however, he showed equally little interest in the "artistic" alternatives at hand, in the photomysticism of Minor White or the expressive abstraction of Aaron Siskind. Szarkowski noted "incipient exhaustion" in the bulk of the photographs of the past decade, adding, "Their simplicity of meaning has—not to put too fine a point on it—often verged on vacuity."[58]

What Szarkowski sought, rather than a repetition of Newhall's attempt to cordon off a "high" art photography more or less independent of the medium's

57. The MoMA Archive holds a full selection of installation views from the early 1930s to the present. These provide an invaluable record of the ways art has been presented to the public over the last half century.
58. John Szarkowski, "Photography and Mass Media," *Aperture*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1967), n.p.

everyday uses, was the theoretical salvaging of photography in its entirety from the encroachments of mass culture. He wished, on this account, to redefine the medium's aesthetic nature in such a way as to set it on an irrevocably autonomous course. At a time when most excursions into photography's history still followed the narrow genetic-biographical path evidenced in Newhall's *Masters of Photography* (1958) and shared its emphasis on "the unmistakable authority of genius," Szarkowski turned to quick advantage the presumption (inherited from Steichen) that the MoMA Department of Photography might address any of the medium's multiple facets. From this institutional salient, he was able to set about reconstructing a resolutely modernist aesthetic for photography and remapping a "main tradition" in order to legitimize it.[59]

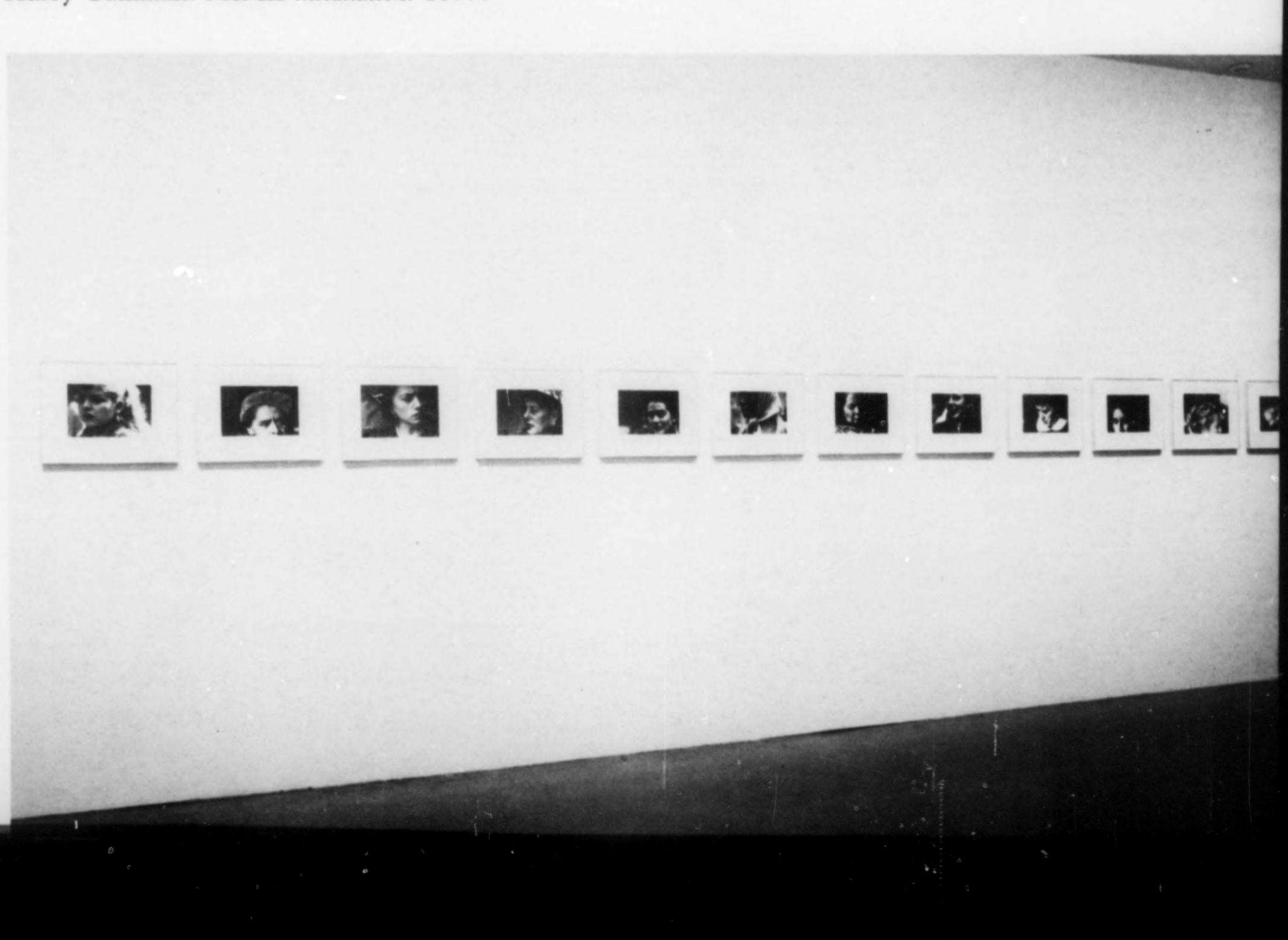
59. Andreas Huyssen distinguishes modernism from avant-garde by means of the relation of each to artistic tradition, modernism, devising more and more hermetic strategies to preserve art's realm of autonomy, avant-garde as the embodiment of postauratic antitradition. See "The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (Winter 1981), 23–40. In this light, see Hilton Kramer's uncomprehending "Anxiety about the Museumization of Photography," *New York Times*, July 4, 1976, in which he castigates Szarkowski for "providing a haven for the anti-art impulse."

Diogenes with a Camera *(Harry Callahan). MoMA installation. 1952.*

Even before coming to MoMA Szarkowski had clearly indicated the direction his search for a usable tradition would take. In 1958, linking his own ambitions as a photographer to the precedents set in the previous century by Brady, O'Sullivan, and Jackson, he proclaimed, "I want to make pictures possessing the qualities of poise, clarity of purpose, and natural beauty, as these qualities were achieved in the work of the good wet-plate photographers."[60] In 1967, five years after arriving at MoMA, he elaborated on the same theme. In the essay "Photography and Mass Media," he sharply distinguished the work of these nineteenth-century photographers from the "flabbiness" of media-age photography and its ostensibly creative offshoots. These latter he faulted as "less and less interested in clear observation," which was what he felt photography's true vocation to be.

60. John Szarkowski, *The Face of Minnesota*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1958. The book's format—short informal essays paired with single photographs—anticipated Szarkowski's MoMA productions. Two years earlier, Szarkowski had attracted attention with his Guggenheim-sponsored book *The Idea of Louis Sullivan*, featuring his own photographs of Sullivan's buildings and a short, lyrical essay. His photographs served as his initial point of contact with both Newhall and Steichen.

Harry Callahan. *MoMA installation. 1977.*



> During photography's first century it was generally understood . . . that what photography did best was to *describe* things: their shapes and textures and situations and relationships. The highest virtues of such photographs were clarity of statement and density of information. They could be read as well as seen; their value was literary and intellectual as well as visceral and visual.[61]

With such an agenda—realistic description without overt prescription—Szarkowski could view with equanimity the impending collapse of photojournalism in the early 1970s. Assuming more and more the role of aesthetic guide, he recommended as models to younger photographers the works of Atget, Sander, and Frances Benjamin Johnston—all "deliberate and descriptive," and "constructed with the poise and stability which suggest Poussin or Piero." Such pictures, he advised, "are not only good to look at, they are good to contemplate."[62]

Szarkowski's ambitious program for establishing photography in its own aesthetic realm has been set forth explicitly in no single work, but arrived at piecemeal in a series of slender essays over the last twenty years. His project has followed, I think, three main lines. These include: (1) the introduction of a formalist vocabulary theoretically capable of comprehending the visual structure (the "carpentry") of any existing photograph; (2) the isolation of a modernist visual "poetics" supposedly inherent to the photographic image; and (3) the routing of photography's "main tradition" away from the (exhausted) Stieglitz/Weston line of high modernism and toward sources formerly seen as peripheral to art photography.

The formalist theme first appeared in *The Photographer's Eye* (1964), in which Szarkowski presented a selection of photographs—both celebrated and anonymous—that epitomized for him the visual characteristics intrinsic to photography. Reworking John Kouwenhoven's thesis (outlined in the 1948 *Made*

61. Szarkowski, "Photography and Mass Media."

62. *Ibid.* It seems worthwhile to note that of the two illustrations introduced to underline his point, only one (a carefully staged tableau by Frances Benjamin Johnston) is a photograph. The other—connecting Szarkowski's pictorial concerns to an older, more prestigious tradition—is Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*. Using just this painting as his object of commentary, Louis Marin has recently provided a remarkable analysis of the contemplative process in question here, as well as a partial "history of reading" in the visual arts. What Marin calls the post-Renaissance classical system of representation, founded on one-point linear perspective and the assumed transparency of the picture plane, permits two simultaneous and contradictory readings: (1) as a duplication or immediate mirroring of objects or scenes; or (2) as (someone's) representation of those scenes or objects. As we will see, for Szarkowski the operation of these contradictory modes is a precondition for the emergence of what he calls the "narrative voice" in modernist art photography. See Marin, "Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*," in Suleiman and Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 293–324. Also see Craig Owens's valuable commentary in "Representation, Appropriation, and Power," in *Art in America*, May 1982, pp. 9–21.

in America) that the American artistic tradition could be conceived as the interplay of native ("vernacular") and European ("cultivated") strains, Szarkowski offered a list of photography's basic formal elements that drew equally on what Kouwenhoven had called the American "respect for optical reality" and the essentially European concern for coherent, self-sufficient form. His five characteristics—the detail, the thing itself, time, the frame, and the vantage point— provided not only a checklist that could be held up to any photograph for the cool appraisal of its organizing logic, but also a range of stylistic alternatives that were explicitly regarded as "artist's choices."

Interestingly, Szarkowski's concern with locating photography's formal properties signaled no incipient move toward abstraction. The formal characteristics he acknowledged were all modes of photographic *description*: instead of stressing (as had Clement Greenberg in his formalist essays on painting) the necessary role of the material support in determining the essential nature of the medium, Szarkowski wished to reserve unexamined for photography that classical system of representation that depends on the assumed transparency of the picture surface.[63] Thus the delimitation of formal elements could prove no end in itself, but only set the stage for a move to the iconographic level.

The central text in this regard is the curious *From the Picture Press* (1973), an investigation of the formal and iconographic properties of the "millions of profoundly radical pictures" that have filled the pages of the daily press. The enabling assumption here—one with important consequences for Szarkowski's whole aesthetic enterprise—is that of the "narrative poverty" of the photograph, a notion first broached in *The Photographer's Eye*. In essence, this entails the view that, considered strictly in terms of the visual descriptions inscribed within the picture frame, an individual photograph can, at best, give a "sense of the scene" but can never convey a larger narrative meaning. For Szarkowski, it does not follow that one ought to seek a supplement to the image beyond the frame. (What is at stake, after all, is the self-sufficiency of the photograph.) He recommends, instead, a particular mode of transformation of pictorial content: "If photographs could not be read as stories, they could be read as symbols."[64]

63. See Victor Burgin's commentary in "Photography, Phantasy, Function," in *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1980). As suggested by his emphasis on pure photographic description, Szarkowski has shown little interest in work in which the photographer's "hand" figures prominently, or work that explicitly calls photography's means of representation into question (as with Michael Snow or Jan Dibbets). As curator of the Department of Photography in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Peter Bunnell covered these areas to some extent in exhibitions like "Photography as Printmaking" (1968) and "Photography into Sculpture" (1970). Bunnell directed considerably more attention than Szarkowski to the connoisseurship of the "fine print," especially to the "subjective mannerisms, in part directed by techniques and materials, which render each print unique and which, in the last analysis, place man as the actual medium of expression" ("Photography as Printmaking," *Artist's Proof*, New York, Pratt Graphics, 1969, p. 24).

64. John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, New York, MoMA, 1965, n.p. Benjamin, of

Selecting a number of press photographs from the files of the *Daily News* (with the help of Diane Arbus and Carole Kismaric), *From the Picture Press* provided an admittedly witty exercise in aesthetic reprocessing. Separated from their original contexts and their original captions, organized into iconographic categories ("ceremonies," "disasters," and the like), the images could now be savored for their surprising conjunctions of formal coherence and narrative ambiguity. They could be seen, in Szarkowski's words, as "short visual poems—they describe a simple perception out of context."[65] It is significant that the vocabulary of indeterminacy used thus to characterize the poetics of imagery duplicates that already familiar throughout the range of modernist art and literature: "As images, the photographs are shockingly direct, and at the same time mysterious, elliptical, and fragmentary, reproducing the texture of experience without explaining its meaning."[66] Moreover (as becomes clear in a later essay), Szarkowski finds these the essential qualities built into the images produced by the photographic medium; in this way photography can be claimed to produce its own, inherently modernist "new pictorial vocabulary, based on the specific, the fragmentary, the elliptical, the ephemeral, and the provisional."[67]

Szarkowski's distribution of emphases—falling, as I have indicated, on the transparency of photography's representational apparatus, the formal/stylistic elements peculiar to its descriptive system, and its ready-made modernist pictorial syntax—finally prepares the ground for the emergence of an aestheticized authorial "voice" proper to photography. In the work of Gary Winogrand, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and William Eggleston, for example— Szarkowski's "heirs of the documentary tradition"[68]—the adoption of the unmanipulated "in-

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course, in "A Short History of Photography," cites Brecht on the necessity of constructing a supplement to the photographic image. And Dorothea Lange, in *An American Exodus*, conceives the documentary mode as depending on what she calls a "tripod" of meaning furnished by the relation of the image, the caption, and the text.

65. John Szarkowski, *From the Picture Press*, New York, MoMA, 1973, p. 5.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

67. John Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide*, New York, MoMA, 1976, p. 6. Elsewhere Szarkowski links photography to the modern literary imagination. Writing of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, he calls it a "profoundly photographic book," and speculates that Crane had "surely known" the Brady photographs. As Szarkowski describes the "thousands of Civil War photographs that survive," we see "only bits of machinery, records of destruction, a bit of a forest where a skirmish had occurred, and little knots of grey clad men, living or dead, waiting for a revelation of the larger meanings of the conflict." He describes Crane's book, similarly, as "the personal trial of one ignorant participant, seen from so close a perspective that large patterns are invisible" (Szarkowski, "American Photography and the Frontier Tradition"). Presumably Crane or Szarkowski might have found the same effect in Stendhal, writing well before the invention of photography.

68. "The heirs of the documentary tradition have redirected that idea in the light of their own fascination with the snapshot: the most personal, reticent, and ambiguous of documents. These photographers have attempted to preserve the persuasiveness and mystery of these humble, intuitive camera records, while adding a sense of intention and visual logic" (John Szarkowski, wall

visible" style of documentary initially links their work to that aspect of the classical system of representation that posits (in Louis Marin's words) that "nobody is speaking; it is reality itself that speaks." But the new critic/connoisseur is on hand to certify the presence of the artist, and to provide expert guidance to the formal strategies of concealment through which the artist-photographer (to quote Marin on the reverse face of the classical paradigm) "inscribes himself as the center of the world and transforms himself into things by transforming things into *his* representations." These "contradictory axioms" of the classical system operate with considerable force in photography and, in Szarkowski's scheme, ultimately to the advantage of the artist-photographer. Thus his insistence that even though at first Winogrand's pictures may seem the uninflected "mechanical utterance of a machine,"

> As we study his photographs, we recognize that although in the conventional sense they may be impersonal, they are also consistently informed by what in a poem we would call a voice. This voice is, in turn, comic, harsh, ironic, delighted, and even cruel. But it is always active and distinct—always, in fact, a narrative voice.[69]

Admittedly, this postulation of a unitary authorial "voice" makes it possible to reckon critically with those contemporary artist-photographers who (proceeding along the familiar modernist route that Shklovsky called the "canonization of peripheral forms") have chosen to mimic the unperturbed stability of nineteenth-century topographic photographs, or to adopt the snapshot's seemingly unpremeditated jumbling of visual events as a metaphor for the fragmented, elusive quality of modern life. More subtly than Newhall's emphasis on "personal expression," it restores the presence of the artist through a reading method that makes it possible to see Eggleston's laconic photographs, for instance, primarily as "patterns of random fact in the service of an imagination—not the real world."[70] But whatever its value as a critical procedure for valorizing the work of one privileged sector of today's art photography, it provides at the same time a powerful rationale for the systematic rereading, along precisely the same lines, of the photographs of the past. Unfortunately, since photography has never been simply, or even primarily, an art medium—since it has operated both within and at the intersections of a variety of institutional discourses—when one projects a present-day art-critical method across the entire range of the photography of the past, the consequences are not incon-

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label introducing "Photography: New Acquisitions," April 1970). Winogrand, Arbus, and Friedlander had already shown together in the exhibition "New Documents" (1967).

69. John Szarkowski, "American Photography and the Frontier Tradition," *Symposion über Fotografie*, Graz, Austria, Forum Stadtpark, 1979, p. 107.

70. Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide*, p. 8.

siderable. Nor, given the prevailing winds of today's art market, are they likely to be disinterested. Thus, for example, the critic Ben Lifson's automatic reinterpretation of Robert Capa's politically committed Spanish Civil War reportage as a self-conscious "experimenting with photographic syntax." For Lifson, Capa's redemption for an aestheticized photographic tradition can proceed only by means of his transformation into an artist/author whose photographs can be safely read as a "fiction of his own creation."[71]

Such selective and reductive readings are, however, sanctioned by Szarkowski's conception of photography's past and its "central tradition." He writes: "Most of the meanings of any picture reside in its relationships to other and earlier pictures—to tradition."[72] But turning away from Newhall's lineage of successive individual "masters," he redirects attention to those photographers who "chose not to lead photography but to follow it, down those paths suggested by the medium's own eccentric and original genius."[73] Although echoing Eliot's insistence (in "Tradition and the Individual Talent") that the poet has not a personality but a medium to express, and that the medium's "main current . . . does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations," Szarkowski nonetheless goes far beyond Eliot's proposed "ideal order" of "existing monuments." His ideal order theoretically extends to *all* of photogra-

71. Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photophilia: A Conversation about the Photography Scene," *October*, no. 16 (Spring 1981), 107. Describing the work of Robert Capa in the same language he might employ for that of, say, Gary Winogrand, Lifson brings to mind a 1970 MoMA exhibition called "Protest Photographs." Staged just after the mass protests that greeted the American invasion of Cambodia, the exhibition presented a number of prints push-pinned to the wall, as if they had just been rushed over from the photographers' darkrooms. One might have thought that here was a contemporary reflection of the concerns that animated photographers like Capa. On closer inspection, however, the photographs were revealed as exercises in virtuosity by Winogrand, Burk Uzzle, and Charles Harbutt—all using demonstration sites as an arena for what Szarkowski (writing elsewhere of Winogrand's formal bent) called "the recognition of coherence in the confluence of forms and signs."

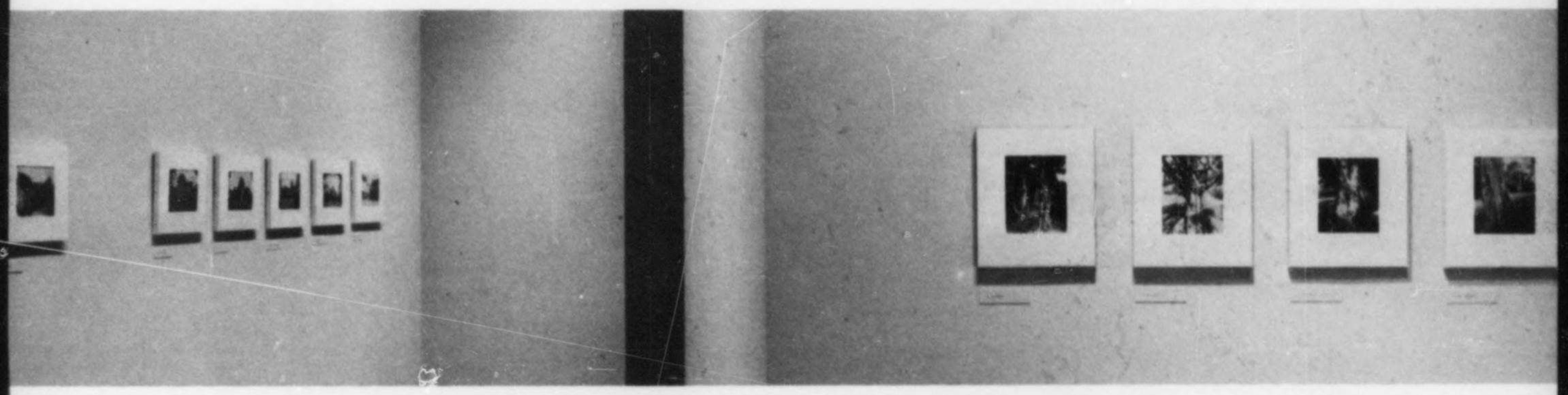
72. John Szarkowski, *New Japanese Photography*, New York, MoMA, 1974, p. 9.

73. Szarkowski, "American Photography and the Frontier Tradition," p. 99.

New Documents. *MoMA installation. 1967.*

phy: "Not only the great pictures by great photographers but *photography*—the great undifferentiated whole of it—has been teacher, library, and laboratory for those who have consciously used the camera as artist."[74] It would seem, then, that for Szarkowski historical practice should consist of the sifting of fragments and shards, and their reordering as a privileged representation of moments in the unfolding of photography's main tradition. If, as Edward Said has suggested, the proper vehicle for the display of such fragments is the chrestomathy, we can see in *Looking at Photographs* (1973), Szarkowski's most widely read book, a connoisseur's collection of photographic fragments ordered by and encased in his own richly allusive prose.

One further consideration remains. Szarkowski's comparison of the bulk of the photographic production of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to an "untended garden"[75] and a "genetic pool of possibilities"[76] hints that, indeed, he regards the development of photography as "something pretty close to an organic issue."[77] Reaching for a suitable analogy, he likens his search for photography's main tradition to "that line which makes the job of curator rather



similar to the job of a taxonomist in a natural history museum."[78] Can one say, then, that Szarkowski conceives of photography as endowed with an essential nature, determined by its origins and evident in what he calls an "evolutionary line of being"?[79]

Such would appear to be the case, at least on the basis of MoMA curator Peter Galassi's 1981 exhibition "Before Photography," which sought to give substance to Szarkowski's conjecture that photography was "like an organ-

74. Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, n.p.
75. Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs*, New York, MoMA, 1973, p. 11.
76. Quoted in Maren Stange, "Photography and the Institution: Szarkowski at the Modern," *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Winter 1978), 701.
77. *Ibid.*
78. *Ibid.*, p. 698.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 701.

The Work of Atget: Old France. *MoMA installation. 1982.*

ism . . . born whole."[80] Galassi's slim but ambitious catalogue had two aims: to portray photography as the legitimate (albeit eccentric) offspring of the Western pictorial tradition and to demonstrate that it was born with an inherent "pictorial syntax" that forced originality (and modernism) upon it. In stressing photography's claims as the heir to the system of one-point linear perspective, Galassi argued that the advent of photography in 1839 issued not from the juncture of multiple scientific, cultural, and economic determinations but from a minor tendency in late eighteenth-century painting. It was this tendency (evident primarily in hitherto-unremarked landscape sketches), notable for an embryonic pictorial syntax of "immediate synoptic perception and discontinuous forms," that somehow "catalyzed" photography into being. The larger point of this peculiar argument is that while photography incorporated what has been called here the classical paradigm of representation, the new medium was incapable of taking over painting's conventional pictorial language. For, according to Galassi, "the photographer was powerless to com-

80. Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, n.p.

Before Photography. *MoMA installation. 1981.*

pose his picture. He could only . . . take it."[81] By reason of this "unavoidable condition," originality was forced, not simply on the photographer, but on the medium itself. In this way, what Szarkowski elsewhere referred to as the "monstrous and nearly shapeless experiment" of photography's first century can be seen as the unbidden working out of the "special formal potentials" of photography's inherent and singular syntax of the specific, the fragmentary, the elliptical, and so on. Incarnated in the work of "primitives" (Szarkowski's term) like Brady and O'Sullivan, this "new pictorial language" awaited its recognition and appropriation by self-conscious artist-photographers like Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, or Robert Adams.

Thus endowed with a privileged origin—in painting—and an inherent nature that is modernist *avant la lettre*, photography is removed to its own aesthetic realm, free to get on with its vocation of producing "millions of profoundly radical pictures." As should be apparent, this version of photographic history is, in truth, a flight from history, from history's reversals, repudiations, and multiple determinations. The dual sentence spelled out here—the formal isolation and cultural legitimation of the "great undifferentiated whole" of photography—is the disquieting message handed down from the museum's judgment seat.

81. Peter Galassi, *Before Photography*, New York, MoMA, 1981, p. 17. Three generally critical reactions to Galassi's argument are developed in S. Varnedoe's "Of Surface Similarities, Deeper Disparities, First Photographs, and the Function of Form: Photography and Painting after 1839," in *Arts Magazine*, September 1981; Joel Snyder's review in *Studies in Visual Communications*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1982); and Abigail Solomon-Godeau's "Tunnel Vision," in *Print Collectors' Newsletter*, vol. 12, no. 6 (January-February 1982). Only the last-cited attempted to establish the connection between Galassi's effort and Szarkowski's critical position.

The De-Politicization of Gustave Courbet: Transformation and Rehabilitation under the Third Republic

LINDA NOCHLIN

Two quite different pursuits lead to the place from which to contemplate the late nineteenth-century "rehabilitation" of Gustave Courbet. The first is my ongoing investigation of Courbet within the framework of those issues of realism that were his concern. The second is a meditation on the questions feminism poses for art history and theory: the pair, of which one part is "Why have there been no great women artists?" and the other, its corollary, "Why *have* there been great male ones?" Why has this entity, the great artist, existed at all, in short? And more specifically, what configuration will the notion of the great artist have at given moments in history? How is this entity "the great artist" constructed? And to what purposes? What political needs, what psychological yearnings, what ideological functions, does such a notion serve? And more concretely, how was a former Communard, an exile, a still-controversial and prickly painter like Courbet transformed, during the decade between 1879 and 1889, into something approaching a cultural hero of the Third French Republic?

The steps in Courbet's actual rehabilitation are easy enough to follow and have been succinctly outlined in the current literature.[1] In 1877, a year before his death, Courbet was still in official disfavor, in exile in Switzerland, as a result of his participation in the Commune, and more to the point, his supposed responsibility for the destruction of the Vendôme Column. As late as November 26, 1877, a little more than a month before the artist's death, the court-ordered sale of his works for payment of the reconstruction of the column brought in, altogether, the derisory sum of 10,000 francs. Courbet died on New Year's Eve of 1877, on the uneasy brink of the Republic of the Opportunists, a year before MacMahon was replaced by Jules Grevy, a veteran of 1848, a year before the republic was actually controlled by the republicans.

In 1878 Courbet made a minor showing at the Exposition Universelle

1. See Jean-Pierre Sanchez, "La Critique de Courbet et la critique du réalisme entre 1880 et 1890," *Histoire et Critique des Arts*, vols. 4–5 (1977–78), 78–79, for a summary. My interpretation of this criticism is somewhat different from that of Sanchez.

Gustave Courbet. Portrait of the Artist in Sainte-Pélagie. *1873–74?*

and a far larger one at the Retrospective Exhibition of Modern Masters at Durand-Ruël, where he was represented by thirty works. But it was not until 1881–82 that a more definite and official blow for the rehabilitation of the artist was struck with the brief ascension of Gambetta and the left wing of the Opportunist Republicans to power, and the creation of a Ministry of Art, with Antonin Proust, the boyhood friend of Manet, at its head. It was during this period that Courbet's family donated the *Burial at Ornans* to the Louvre, and the state and the city of Paris bought five major works for a price of 150,000 francs, an impressive sum. It was during this period, too, that the critic Jules Castagnary, friend and supporter of the painter; Courbet's family; and the government got together to organize a major exhibition of his works at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, an exhibition sanctified by the approving presence of the president of the republic himself.[2] By 1889 Courbet was quite literally enshrined within the great tradition of French art in a major republican celebration of that tradition: eleven of his works were featured in the Great Centennial Exhibition of One Hundred Years of French Art at the Paris World's Fair of 1889, an exhibition celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the Revolution.

These, then, are the basic facts of Courbet's promotion to the ranks of greatness: it is the how and the why of this promotion which is of more interest. Both the goals and the strategies of the reconstruction of Courbet need to be examined through several critical texts from this period, texts that both justified and at least to some degree prompted this new republican interpretation.

In the years from 1878 to 1889 there seem to have been three main tasks, all of them interrelated, facing Courbet's republican reconstructors. First, and perhaps most urgent, Courbet had to be definitively separated from his politics. Not, of course, from his wholesome and sympathetic interest in the peasant and the popular subject, which was—within certain limits of decorum—laudable, and even necessary to republican ideological strategy.[3] But more specifically he had to be detached from his all-too-well documented participa-

2. Théodore Duret, *Courbet*, Paris, Bernheim-Jeune, 1917, pp. 117–118. All other citations of Duret refer to this text.

3. This strategy must, of course, be understood within the context of the more general goals of the early Third Republic, especially those of its liberal wing, dominated by the figure of Gambetta. The government was intent on maintaining a coalition among the economically dominating *haute bourgeoisie*; the more recently created, upwardly mobile middle bourgeoisie, the so-called "*nouvelles couches*"; and the peasantry through the creation of a cultural front at once aggressively secular, popular, and progressive, spiced with a certain democratic combativeness, yet at the same time bearing the promise of social and political stability to a nation recently shaken by conquest and civil strife. Both the democratic aspirations and the craving for stability and order were reinforced by nostalgia for the sturdy virtues of French provincial tradition, the vanishing strengths of the *menu peuple* of the countryside, at the very moment when this population was deserting the country for the city.

tion in the Commune—a terrible thorn in the side of the supporters of the Republic of the Opportunists—and from his equally notorious responsibility for the destruction of the Vendôme Column.

Secondly, Courbet's practice and his production had to be firmly attached to the realm of nature. In all the republican critics we will be concerned with, a dichotomy is established between the sociopolitical and the natural. Externalized, this dichotomy is envisioned as an opposition between his subject paintings of the 1850s (seen as bad or, at best, as limited) and his later landscapes, hunting scenes, nudes, and still lifes (seen as poetic, expansive, more universal). Internalized, it is posed as an opposition between the "natural" Courbet, the creature of pure intuition and "unerring instinct," and what one might be tempted to call the "corrupted" or "fallen" Courbet, the Courbet who misguidedly attempted to make choices or formulate theories, to participate—in short—in history.

And third, these critics, Castagnary especially, attempt to transform Courbet into a suitable great artist by inserting him into the ongoing, uninterrupted tradition of great art—great French art above all—in a ploy that is at once aesthetic and nationalistic, elevating and neutralizing. The Courbet of 1889 has been assimilated to the pantheon of national artists who shed glory on the republic. In so doing, Courbet is, like his predecessors, transformed into a kind of commodity—a French tourist attraction, as it were—and hero at once.

One hundred years after Courbet's birth, Théodore Duret, journalist, art critic, long-time republican, supporter of Manet and the impressionists, could state with complete assurance: "Today, in 1918, Time has made its action felt. Courbet the political man has vanished from our attention; the passing judgments brought to bear on his works by his contemporaries are forgotten. The works themselves remain in all their power." But in the early days of the Third Republic, the case was less clear-cut. One could not eradicate the memory of the political Courbet quite so easily. In 1878, the year following Courbet's death, when the artist becomes the object of history, so to speak, rather than an agent still acting upon it, the situation was less assured; the political Courbet, Communard and fabled destroyer of the Vendôme Column, was still a living memory. Nor had the works themselves yet been recuperated, bought by the nation, exhibited at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. In 1878, the artist was, if no longer among the living, still problematic. His status as a Communard could not so easily be dismissed in the years preceding the General Amnesty of 1880, years in which the questions of whether Communards should be forgiven and to what degree were still much debated.

In 1878, three relatively serious studies of the recently deceased artist appeared, two in the form of books, by Camille Lemonnier and by the Comte d'Ideville, and one book-length, three-part article in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* by Paul Mantz. Mantz, one of the *Gazette*'s most active writers, had been a government administrator in a minor capacity under the Second Empire and was

finally but briefly promoted to the post of Director General of the Beaux Arts in the early 1880s, under the Republic.[4]

The first two studies can be disposed of fairly easily; Mantz's work, more ambivalent and complex, deserves more detailed analysis. But what seems clear, first of all, about all three—ranging in tone as they do from the skeptically positive to the positively ecstatic—is that they are as anxious as Duret to detach their version of Courbet as effectively as possible from the taint of the political. D'Ideville's strategies are fairly simpleminded. He admits that Courbet's politics are indeed interesting, and goes so far as to devote a whole chapter to "Courbet homme politique," but ends up by completely discounting Courbet's political activities and ideas on the grounds of the artist's total incapacity in that realm. "If we have a deep admiration for Courbet the painter; if, despite its faults, we place the author of the *Covert of Roe Deer* in the ranks of the greatest artists of our century, we must admit with no less sincerity that Courbet, as a philosopher, as a moralist, and as a politician, seems to have been a simple idiot. . . . Politics," d'Ideville declares, as though this were a self-evident proposition, "has nothing to do with art. . . . Even if he actually took down the [Vendôme] Column, which he denies, the friend of Proudhon has nevertheless painted—and it is both his glory and ours—the *Covert of Roe Deer*, the *Stags at Bay*. . . , which will be the glory of our museums." In his clumsy way, d'Ideville has effectively, if unconsciously, set about the task of "professionalizing" the artist by declaring that his is a very specialized realm of competence; by the same token, his very proficiency as an artist is what renders him incompetent in any other areas of expertise—the political above all.

What is it that saved Courbet the painter from what d'Ideville terms these "pernicious influences," that is to say, complex or political ideas, and made him the marvellous interpreter of nature that he in fact was? Nothing else but Courbet's unique intuitive powers, or what d'Ideville terms "une intuition de paysan contemplateur." Courbet's intuition, like his political naiveté, becomes an article of faith of Third Republic Courbet hagiography, an essential feature of the "difficult but talented" artist. More than once, Camille Lemonnier reiterates this notion of the instinctive Courbet: "Courbet was an instinct more than a brain" and "He painted things as they are, with a dumb instinct which had something of genius in it." Paul Mantz, who from the start insists upon Courbet's faulty intellectual culture, declares that for him "many things remained in a state of instinctuality."

Mantz's entire formulation of Courbet is marked by a kind of irritated or

4. These studies are: Camille Lemonnier, *G. Courbet et son oeuvre*, Paris, 1878; Henri d'Ideville, *Gustave Courbet, notes et documents sur sa vie et son oeuvre*, Paris, 1878; and Paul Mantz, "Gustave Courbet," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1878; Part I: (t. XVII), pp. 514–527; Part II: (t. XVII), pp. 17–30; Part III: (t. XVII), pp. 371–384.

Gustave Courbet. Covert of Roe Deer. *1866*.

regretful ambivalance. He begins what is after all an extended obituary notice not with the expected encomium, but with a put-down, a long, rambling account of the artist's exaggerated opinion of himself: "Courbet s'est follement aimé." By privileging the notion of Courbet's overweening pride, Mantz achieves two things. He distances himself and, by implication, his readers, from his subject; and he prepares the ground for the artist's eventual downfall: Courbet's hubris serves to justify his future punishment. Throughout, although Mantz expresses sympathy and admiration, he at the same time emphasizes formal flaws and missed opportunities. If in 1851 Courbet seemed to be the ideal opponent of the modish insipidness of the time, he aroused hopes that to a large measure remained unfulfilled, hopes that he would be an artist of poetry, of feeling, an artist who might have expressed the pathos of the life of the poor and disinherited, a kind of Octave Taessaert writ large, as Mantz put it, or, to borrow another of his phrases, "un Shakespeare de la rue Mouffetard."

But such, alas, was not to be. Courbet was not the long-awaited poet. It is around the words *poet* and *poetry* that Mantz's invention of Courbet begins to intensify. Mantz worries the notion of poetry like a dog with a bone. He is never quite sure where the artist stands in relation to poetry, or to put it another way, where he is going to make his version of Courbet stand in relation to it. The reconciliation of Courbet with poetry might at first seem like an impossible dream, Mantz admits, but, nevertheless, he maintains, in Courbet's best work of the later 1850s and '60s, above all in his landscapes and seascapes, the impossible occurs: Mantz's Courbet becomes a poet in spite of himself. He literally falls under the spell of poetry, the seductress. "At the very moment when the artist proclaims himself the humble translator of external spectacles and objective realities, he invariably adds, often without realizing it, something that he takes from his own thought." This personal feeling, this legitimate exaggeration, is his concession involuntarily made to the ideal. "Courbet," Mantz concludes, "railed against poetry just when he submitted to her adorable despotism."

Courbet's practice, or at any rate a certain part of it, can be summed up to contravene his foolish theories, his fatal manifestos, his misguided participation in the Commune, which Mantz slides by so discreetly that we hardly realize what he is talking about, excusing himself all the while by saying that such "events" (as he calls them) are simply outside the framework of his habitual competence. Rather, it is only in contact with nature that this unconscious, seductive, but redeeming poetry finds its best expression in Courbet's work—and, one might add, that Courbet's political theories, his awkward notions of subject matter, and what Mantz thinks of as his errors in taste and construction are most notably absent. "What is best in the work of Courbet," Mantz concludes, waxing rather poetic himself, "are his landscapes, his green valleys of the Franche-Comté, his rocks carpeted with grey moss, his wooded interiors where hidden streams flow, and, above all, his blond banks of the

Mediterranean or the Atlantic, where, in the midst of fiery redness, the sun sinks slowly into the infinity of the sparkling sea."

These themes, sounded by the protorepublican writers of 1878, are taken up and developed with far greater range, depth, and sophistication by Jules Castagnary in his biography of Courbet, left unfinished at the time of the critic's untimely death in 1888.[5] Castagnary was a long-time republican, friend and defender of Courbet in the disastrous aftermath of the Commune; and, for a brief period from 1887 until his death in May 1888, director of the Beaux Arts under the ministry of Eugene Spuller. His fragmentary study of Courbet can only be understood in the context of the writer's other critical efforts at the time.

First of all, Castagnary's construction of Courbet must be interpreted in the light of his ongoing attempt, throughout the 1860s, to establish France as the preeminent artistic nation of the time on the basis of her achievement in landscape, which he held to be the most progressive form of painting. Second, and more materially, Castagnary's vision of Courbet in the later '80s must be seen against the critic's engagement in the plans for the great exhibition of 100 years of French art that he had conceived to celebrate the centennial of the French revolution. Castagnary's Courbet, then, must be located in the context of the biographer's ongoing engagement with landscape as both French and progressive, but even more particularly, with the critic's attempt to create a continuous French—specifically a postrevolutionary republican French—tradition.

His account begins with a simple statement of origins in which the national and the natural aspects of his subject neatly coincide. "Gustave Courbet was born June 10, 1819 in Ornans, a little town of the Franche-Comté in the valley of the Loue. No other territory seems to have been as well prepared as this to be the cradle of a painter. The picturesque abounds there." Courbet, Castagnary maintains, comes from a region at once profoundly rooted in French traditional culture and unparalleled in its richness and variety of natural beauty.

For Castagnary, Courbet's realist masterpieces of the early '50s were great achievements, expressions of contemporary life rooted in his Franc-Comtois heritage, devoid of any conscious or overt political overtones. Of Courbet's three major offerings to the 1851 Salon, the *Burial at Ornans*, *The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair*, and the *Stonebreakers*, Castagnary declares, "One might have said that these were a fragment of the Franche-Comté detached from that robust province and transported to Paris."

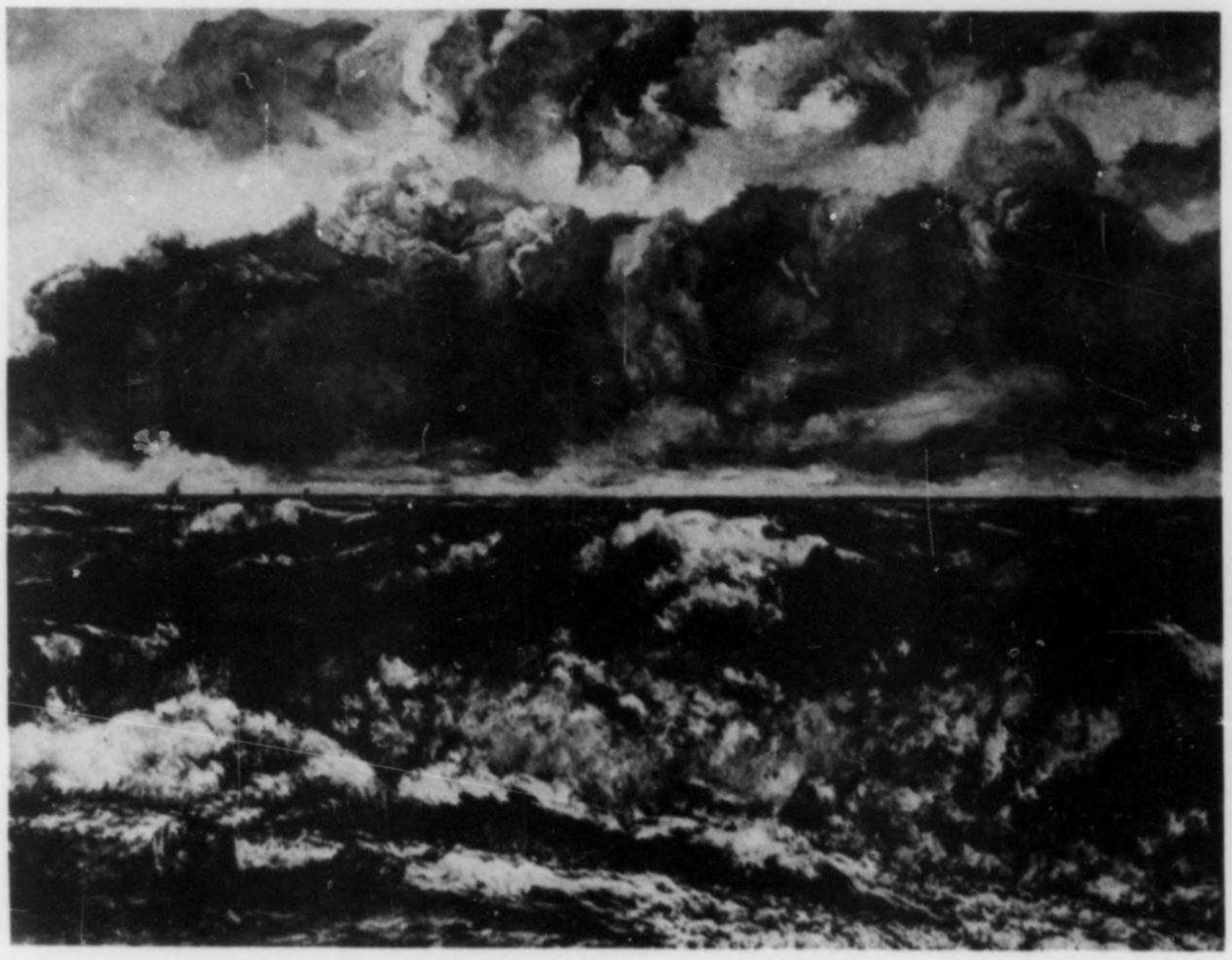
Yet it is clear that the critic's heart is with the later works, the landscapes above all. His Courbet, the hero of that French tradition he is in the process of

5. [Jules] Castagnary, "Fragments d'un livre sur Courbet," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1911: Part I (January), 5–20; Part II (December), 488–497; Part III, 1912 (December), 19–30.

Gustave Courbet. The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair. *1850, 1855*.

constructing, must be something more than a mere regionalist; he must have ambitions on a national scale. To use Castagnary's own words, "The Franche-Comté is not all of France, popular customs are not all customs. Courbet, without abandoning his ideas in any way, felt the necessity of enlarging his frame of reference." What Castagnary means by "enlargement" is Courbet's turning away from concrete subjects taken from contemporary life to a more diffuse, varied, and, although Castagnary never says it in so many words, a less politically provocative kind of subject. "Without exactly fleeing humanity, [Courbet] now considered to a greater extent the sky and the sea, leafage and snow, animals and flowers. He loved them with a particularly tender feeling." Courbet's abandonment of his earlier projects, the depiction of contemporary, popular subjects, Castagnary breathlessly mythologizes as a fantastic voyage of discovery into the mysteries of nature, a *symboliste* journey into an invigorating realm of the unknown:

> Avid to see and to penetrate the world open to his observation, he had in his quest the happy surprises of the ancient navigators: he discovered virgin territories where no one had yet set foot, aspects and forms of landscape of which one might say that they were unknown before his arrival. He climbed free heights where his lungs could expand; he plunged into mysterious caves; he was curious about unnamed places, unknown retreats. Each time he plunged



Gustave Courbet. The Wave. *1870*.

> thus into the deep bosom of Nature, he was like a man who has gone through a beehive and comes out of it covered with honey; he returned weighed down with perfume and poetry.

The penetration of the unknown and of nature, the transformation of nature into landscape—these are Courbet's triumphs, and poetry the prize of this mythic daring. *Poetry*—once more this word comes to the fore in the Third Republic's image of Courbet. If Mantz's Courbet, the Courbet of 1878, had been a painter plagued by weakness, who from time to time succumbed to the lure of poetry more or less in spite of himself, Castagnary's Courbet is a painter for whom poetic sensibility is a defining virtue. An exquisite sensibility, an incomparable technique, with these, "Courbet has made a new stream of poetry gush forth," declares the critic.

Yet even this is not enough to justify Courbet as a great painter, an artist hero of the Third Republic. To complete his project, Castagnary feels another step must be taken. Courbet must be made secure not merely within the feminine bosom of nature but within the more masculine precincts of tradition—French tradition above all. To secure tradition for Courbet and Courbet for tradition, however, Castagnary must temporarily abandon his Courbet the poetic landscape painter, and return to the earlier Courbet, the pictorial translator of the social realities of his time.

Having established firm historical precedents in the Dutch school of the

seventeenth century, in the German Holbein, and the Spaniard Velásquez, all of whom, like Courbet, represented the society of their times with unmediated veracity, Castagnary turns to the tradition of France itself, above all, that established by the major artists of the preceding hundred years. In his penultimate paragraph he calls forth that grand procession of painters of living history in which his Courbet will now take a place. Castagnary calls the role with rhetorical questions: "Did not Louis David look for truth above all, when, seizing the events of his time, he sketched the *Oath of the Tennis Court* and captured on canvas the portrait of the murdered Marat?" "And Gros?" he continues, "Has there ever been anyone more taken with contemporary events, more in love with the human spectacle? The whole society of his time lives again in his painting. And Géricault?" Castagnary demands, "In what path was he going when death stopped him. Is not the *Raft of the Medusa* a simple *fait divers de journal* writ large, dramatized, and translated into painting by means of the most eloquent of compositions?" Courbet's art is authorized by precedents at once national and revolutionary, in the broadest sense of the term. By this process, innovation itself can be justified by precedent, daring assimilated to the best of tradition and transformed from contemporary scandal into cultural contribution.

I might say, parenthetically, that, of all the strategies employed to transform the ambiguous Courbet of the prerepublican period to Courbet the culture hero of 1889, the strongest and most enduring is the one based on the premise that there is in fact an ongoing and continuous stream of great art with which the artist can be fused. This is that same tradition that Harold Bloom has recourse to in his formulation of the great (male) writer, and the lack of which Virginia Woolf postulated as equally responsible for the difficulties faced by his female counterparts when, in *A Room of One's Own*, she declared, "But whatever effect discouragement and criticism had upon their writing . . . that was unimportant compared with the other difficulty which faced them when they came to set their thoughts on paper—that is that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help." Nor is the avant-garde by any means immune to the blandishments of tradition when it comes to asserting their claims to greatness. It was Guillaume Apollinaire who, in 1912, established the pedigree of cubism as a valid art by declaring that "Courbet was the father of the new painters," as though this recourse to the tradition of French art, albeit a revolutionary tradition, in some way justified the new movement.

To return to Castagnary's account of Courbet, it is not so much that the critic, a good, leftish republican, eliminates Courbet's politics from his painting in his account of the artist, but that he neutralizes it. For Castagnary's Courbet was not being outrageous when he painted his *Stonebreakers* or his *Burial at Ornans*, he was simply following something called the dictates of the times: he could hardly have done otherwise. "Certainly," Castagnary asserts, "in 1848, at the time when Pierre Dupont rimed the miseries of the workers and when

George Sand wrote *La Mare au diable*, there was nothing excessive in the fact that a painter, born of the people, republican by custom and education, took for the subject of his art the peasants and burghers of the milieu in which his childhood had unfolded. The humility of his subjects in no way militated against their aesthetic value; the important thing was to treat them with force and seriousness. In painting them on a natural scale, in giving them the force and character which had hitherto been reserved for gods and heroes, he created an artistic revolution." So much for Courbet the political painter. This is the Courbet of the survey of art history and of canned culture. With very few changes, Castagnary's paragraph could serve as the catalogue introduction for a present-day Courbet exhibition without attracting any particular notice. Castagnary's construction of Courbet is not so far from what one might term the contemporary "mainstream" view of Courbet.

But what of Courbet the political activist of recent memory, his undeniable participation in the Commune, his implication in the destruction of the Vendôme Column?[6] Castagnary first of all dulls the effect of Courbet the Communard by carefully embedding his brief account of the matter in a more general one of Courbet's patriotic activities during the defense of Paris that preceded it and the unjust severity of the punishment that followed. This technique resembles that of the child who disguises the taste of a particularly unappetizing morsel of food by embedding it in a heavy coating of mashed potatoes.

In the second place, Castagnary effectively detaches Courbet from his own political activity by constructing Courbet the Communard entirely in the passive voice. The Commune, by implication, was simply something that happened to poor, unwise Courbet. "Named member of the Commune in the complementary elections of April 16," Castagnary explains, "he did not have the wisdom to decline this mandate. . . . After the taking of Paris by the troops of Marshall MacMahon, he was arrested, led a prisoner to Versailles, and included in the general accusation which weighed on all the members of the Commune, accused more specifically of having toppled the Vendôme Column." With this latter issue, Castagnary breaks out of the passivity of historical apologia into contemporary indignation. "The Vendôme Column!" Castagnary explodes. "He was as foreign to the affair as you or I." And Castagnary has the documents to prove this. There follows an account of Courbet's trial, his imprisonment, the wild exaggeration of his fine, and his exile, followed by the assertion that concludes Castagnary's discussion of the political Courbet: "With his death, hatreds and rivalries are obliterated and justice, which was silent, rises to formulate the indisputable judgment." What Castagnary means, of course, is that

6. Castagnary had explicitly exonerated Courbet from all responsibility in the Vendôme Column affair in his pamphlet, *Gustave Courbet et la Colonne Vendôme. Plaidoyer pour un ami mort*, Paris, 1883.

Courbet the artist has been redeemed by history, while Courbet the Communard has conveniently been forgotten. The Commune, then, was simply something that happened to poor, naive Courbet, his complicity in the destruction of the column simply part of a plot on the part of the closed-minded and the envious to discredit—and ultimately, to destroy—the artist.

In a way, this sounds like a credible account. It goes along with the Courbet we have become familiar with during the course of this text—a countryman, not too bright, a powerful observer and recorder of peasant customs, a poet deeply involved with nature and intuitively capable of transforming it into substantial art, gullible, enamoured with his own not too clear-headed ideas, quick to fall under the sway of political agitators—a marvellous, mindless artist who unwittingly got himself into trouble.

This sounds like the truth and seems to be supported by a certain amount of evidence. Or, at the very least, one might say that it is the consensus of Courbet's supporters in the first decade following the artist's death. Yet not quite. Before we accept this as a balanced view of Courbet, we should at least become aware that other views—positive views, that is—were possible. We should realize that another Courbet could be articulated in 1878, a very different one from any of those we have been considering: a Courbet for whom the experience of the Commune was central, a Courbet whose political and artistic practice were seen as inseparable—two sides of a single being, rather than opposing tendencies. This is the Courbet of Jules Vallès, novelist, journalist, and fellow Communard, who wrote about his Courbet a week after the artist's death, on January 6, 1878, under the name Jean de la Rue, when Vallès himself was still in exile in England.

In Vallès's account of Courbet, it is the Commune that provides the controlling imagery for Courbet's achievement. Far from trying to detach the artist from his political activism, he centers his Courbet within it. He begins his obituary notice solemnly, with the column itself: "The Column has lost its hostage; the one who had to pay the damages." Nor is the image of Courbet he creates that familiar one of the passive, bumbling political naïf, but rather, of a lucid participant. "Man of peace, thrust into battle, he looked for the blow he could strike without any arms," Vallès explains. "He who painted the *Spinner*, the *Stonebreakers*, the *Burial at Ornans* inevitably had to be—the day when he had to choose—on the side of labor, poverty, and paving stones." Unlike Castagnary, who spares no effort to exonerate Courbet in the affair of the destruction of the Vendôme Column, Vallès credits him with participation in the event. "Poor mad man," says Vallès ironically, "you don't attack bronze fetishes with impunity." But no, he goes on, "He wasn't so crazy; he knew perfectly well what would happen to him. The day that the Column was toppled, he was there, at the *Place*, with his twenty-sou cane, his four-franc straw hat, his ready-made overcoat. . . . 'It'll crush me as it falls, you'll see!' he said, turning to a group of friends."

If Vallès's Courbet, like Mantz's and Castagnary's, is a man of nature, it is a very different relationship of artist to nature that Vallès projects. If for Courbet's other biographers, Courbet the nature lover, the painter of landscapes, the countryman is constructed as the redemptive antithesis to Courbet the man of the left and of political scandal, for Vallès, nature is firmly united with the political. In Vallès's final peroration, the final paragraph of his obituary for a dead friend, nature itself is politicized, swept up into the élan of the vanished Commune:

> He crossed the great streams; he plunged into the ocean of the crowds; he heard the heart of a people beat like the thuds of a cannon; he ended up in the heart of nature, in the midst of trees, breathing the scents which had intoxicated him in his youth, beneath a sky unstained by the fumes of great massacres, but which tonight, perhaps, set ablaze by the setting sun, will spread itself out on the house of the dead man like a great red flag.

Finally, far from trying to aggrandize his Courbet by inserting him into a great tradition, Vallès explicitly cuts his artist off from it: his Courbet was a "deserter" who boldly rejected the barracks of established art, and was singled out for punishment because of that. "The pistol shots that are fired against tradition, even when the barrel of the pistol is a paint brush, disturb the tranquillity or the servility of those who lick their fingers over paintings, who lick their fingers over ministers," declares Vallès. This shooting against tradition irritates even the independent spirits, who, although they may be worthy in the face of people, are cowardly when it comes to theories. If Delacroix had been alive, would he have saved Courbet from execution, if Courbet had started to say, with his coarse laugh, speaking of the Louvre ceiling, or the frescoes of Saint-Sulpice, of the *Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople*, "You actually knew them, then, you, Apollo, and Saint Thingamabob and Jesus Christ?" The bourgeois, Vallès concludes bitterly, are more pitiless than the soldiers. Not for Vallès the easy connection of Courbet with an existing tradition of great art. On the contrary, it is Courbet's difference, his irrevocable disjunction even from the most innovative achievements of the recent past that arouses Vallès's admiration and sympathy.

If I have cited Vallès's text last and at length, it is not because it is "right" and the others "wrong," but rather to indicate that like his the others are selections, constructions, based on an ultimately limitless material; that the "facts" in each case are chosen; that the vision of the artist embodied in each text, far from being a mere recounting or commonsense description is to a greater or lesser extent a work of creation, like a short story or a novel but with different intentions, strategies, and premises. Vallès's text, then, must not be taken as an antidote but rather as an alternative, the alternative of an outsider, a *réfractaire*, an alternative that, however, sets the basically constructed and

ideological character of all the other accounts of his time into the sharpest possible relief.

At the present time, when the artist's biography is introduced more and more to explain the work of art, it is interesting—if not particularly original—to consider how the artist's biography, or rather the texts that set forth the artist, are no more privileged as empirical givens—as a species of raw data—than the art works themselves that such texts are called on to explain. Rather, they are complex constructions. Artists' biographies must be considered as artistic creations, mediating the various ideological and psychological positions of those who create them.

Alienating Alienation: Fredric Jameson's Revisionary Romance

Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist. *By Fredric Jameson. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979.*
The Political Unconscious. *By Fredric Jameson. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.*

PERRY MEISEL

What stirred Freud on his first visit to Rome in 1901—as it had George Eliot and Walter Pater before him—was surely the disconcerting lesson that the city's form was its content. It was decay, the very decay of Europe inscribed in the "Eternal City," that startled in Freud its recognition and defense. A modernist reading of this episode would gloss it as an allegory of the soul's privation in a world of crumbling values. Yet the revolutionary side of this, Freud's representative experience, is not allegorical but structural. For in such a moment of vision we find the exemplary collapse of the romantic oppositions that had organized Freud's thought: form/content, self/other, subject/object, reader/text, consciousness/unconscious.

It has taken years for the consequences of this collapse to spell itself out in the various disciplines or gazes it invokes. And only in the dissemination of (post-)structuralist thought over the last decade or so have the consequences grown formalized enough to produce anything like the mighty narratological machinery engineered in the United States by Fredric Jameson. Especially significant is that Jameson's most recent work—*The Political Unconscious* and *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*—goes out of its way to restore to criticism in the current continental mode what its often lewd and ignorant opposition claims it lacks: an ambition beyond mere "formalism," some evidence against its supposedly aggressive contempt for "referentiality." Both *The Political Unconscious* and *Fables of Aggression* are monuments to the renewal or, really, the reinsertion of what we might call the referential imperative that proceeds directly from (rather than against) what Jameson will polemically call the "windless closure of the formalisms."

Key to the problem of referentiality for Jameson's noninstrumental or nonmimetic view of language is the problem of what really mediates social life and literary language. If language doesn't simply mirror the world, in what fashion does it refer? Much of the strength of Jameson's revisionist Marxist intervention derives from the answer to the question provided by the French refocusing on what in Marx is crucial, a project historically analogous to the

great though troubled rereading of Freud begun by Lacan and recentered by Laplanche and (silently and negatively) by Foucault. Lacan's counterpart in the Marxist tradition is Althusser, and Pierre Macherey his Laplanche. Even the title of Macherey's *Theory of Literary Production* (Paris, 1966) already reverberates with the metaphorical linkage it enacts—a rapprochement between the production of goods and the production of texts. Needless to say, Lacan's rereading of Freud lighted on a metaphor in psychoanalysis structurally similar to the metaphor of production in Marx (note also the advanced efficiency with which it explained both Freud's system and its revisionary ratios). In psychoanalysis what had been revalorized—largely by an act of retranslation—were the Freudian notions of psychic *economy* and psychic *investment* (the latter a reappropriation of James Strachey's Hellenizing version of *Besetzung*, "cathexis"). Suddenly Freud could be inserted into the discourse of economics, much as Marx's language allowed art and ideology to find far closer and reflexive relations to the means of production than they seemed to have had before.

Though Jameson himself is quick to refute the production analogy as a homology (one evidence perhaps of his certain indebtedness to it), it is nonetheless from this level of presupposition that his project is set in motion. The rejection of homology is in fact part of what Jameson claims the restoration of the category of mediation makes plausible all over again, namely, the staggered or "dialogical" relation between the social order and its symbolic products. Rather than an isomorphic relation between base and superstructure—for example, the production of material goods is structurally equivalent to the production of cultural goods—Jameson proposes the (only slightly) more complex notion that artistic texts are ideological products that try to escape or outwit the contradiction inherent in the production of goods as such. Thus the task of ideological production is to rewrite the contradiction as a "coherent" narrative.

Central, then, is the definition of ideology, which Jameson takes from Althusser's deconstruction of the classic Marxist opposition between base and superstructure. Ideology, says Althusser, is "the imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her real conditions of existence." Jameson "refines" Althusser's definition "by distinguishing between such an 'imaginary representation' and its narrative conditions of possibility." To determine the latter, Jameson revalorizes the aesthetic in such a way as to "complete" Althusser, as he puts it, by offering, in *Fables of Aggression*, the following notion of aesthetic value as a methodological proposition: "that great art distances ideology by the way in which, endowing the latter with figuration and with narrative articulation, the text frees its ideological content to demonstrate its own contradictions; by the sheer formal immanence with which an ideological system exhausts its permutations and ends up projecting its own ultimate structural closure." Hence the privileged status of literature as a means of studying in action what Gramsci called "hegemony." "Ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic productions," writes Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*.

"Rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions."

Thus Jameson's object is to intercept aesthetic form at its historical limit, indicating closures and/or breaks rather than narrating—overtly at least—a development or teleology that (in)directly causes or even governs the shifts his choice of texts enacts (modernism in the Lewis book, the movement from Balzac's classical realism to Conrad's impressionism in *The Political Unconscious*). And though ideology is narrative (and vice versa), history itself cannot be narrated as such because it is—Jameson uses another of Althusser's formulations—the always "absent cause" (like the Freudian unconscious) that the critic or historian can only reconstruct after the fact, as a paradigm or model installed retroactively by the act of analysis.

If Jameson's Marxism is largely Althusserian, the precise source of his methodological apparatus is in turn Lévi-Strauss's "The Structural Study of Myth," that central essay in which (the) myth(ological) is apprehended (as Barthes would also show) as an ideological structure. This structure is ideological in Althusser's exact sense: "as the imaginary resolution," as Jameson puts it, "of a real contradiction." But the myth's ideology is also structural, yielding thus to the analysis of its terms. Presented at length in *The Political Unconscious*, the Jamesonian "permutational scheme" (in his usage, always referred to as *combinatoire*) is a structuralist invention designed to supersede the impossible options now open to "normal" criticism: "between antiquarianism and modernizing 'relevance' or projection." Such a "double bind" is especially familiar—indeed, exacerbated—in the study of preromantic writers such as Shakespeare (did Hamlet have a "character problem" before the nineteenth century gave him one?), the history of whose criticism is, more than any other, a history of criticism's own historical determinations. In pre-Renaissance writers such as Chaucer, the "double bind" is especially obvious, forced as scholars are to choose between Talbot Donaldson's modernist, virtually Proustian reading of Chaucerian narration and D. W. Robertson's absolutist historicism, insisting, contra Donaldson, that Chaucer is unreadable without learning one's way back into the knowledge and presuppositions of the Middle Ages—only, of course, to remain there.

The specific elements Jameson has plugged into Lévi-Strauss's compensation structure are each familiar enough (semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism), although it is in the exchange among the three levels of analysis it projects that its peculiar strength is to be found. Before showing how the *combinatoire* works in practical criticism, let us quickly sketch its components in more detail:

(1) The introduction of Greimas's semiotic rectangle in order to diagram the binary oppositions that organize a given fiction's options: the ideals to which

its world can aspire (usually through its characters), and the levels to which it can sink.

(2) The use of psychoanalysis at a Derridean level of apprehension: that is, narrative (like memory or language) as an exercise in simultaneous cancellation and preservation (the model of mind that emerges in Freud's "Note on the 'Mystic-Writing Pad'").

(3) The use of an Althusserian notion of mediation which seeks the closures of the resolution that a given text tries to perform upon its own "raw materials." It is also at this level that we see what Jamesonian mediation promises to produce: that opening onto the real or to history that emerges against the horizon of ideological closure dis-closed by the first two steps of analysis (what a given text resists, its "absent or unrepresentable infrastructural limiting system"). Thus the modernist ideology of *ressentiment* as Jameson describes it in an unlikely chapter on Gissing—the familiar modernist ideology of a restive resistance to civilization as such—becomes itself no more than the inverse of the order to which it is opposed, and so exposes not only the slavery of avant-garde sensibility to the master it seeks to dethrone, but also the shared capture of both sides of the (now sham) struggle within the same epistemic closure. Liberation and repression can be thought only in relation to each other.

In *Fables of Aggression*, Jameson appeals to Deleuze's and Guattari's distinction between the molecular and molar levels of narrative as a means of shifting his gaze from one level of the *combinatoire* to another, the levels in turn of a narrative's molecular or micro-components ("style," figural motifs) and its shaping or containing strategies at a more holistic level (often that of genre, such as the imposition of a romance tag in the second half of *Lord Jim*). Nor is the "unity" of a work what the *combinatoire* desires, but rather an understanding of it at the level of its production, a process that, by definition, unfolds at different and nonhomologous levels, a heterogeneous process or "functional operation" that the *combinatoire* is designed to register and unpack.

From Jameson's point of view, the novel is therefore a privileged form, not only because it is the classic site of the production of the bourgeois subject, nor even because ideology understood as narrative has no more exact expression than in the mechanisms of prose fiction. No, the novel is significant above all because it is a genre that takes earlier genres—as well as the codes of contemporary social life and value and *their* histories—as its own "raw materials" or "ideologemes." Jameson's notion of the novel is, from the start, that of the representation of representations even in its moments of realist desire. For even the classical realist is in fact reflexive, since the signifiers of his text are drawn from the signs that constitute the culture he depicts: if life itself is a matrix of sign systems, then representational art is always already a kind of (meta)commentary. Here the full extent of Jameson's particular debt to Bakhtin emerges, since these representations or ideologemes are the sedimented inheritances of social and aesthetic laws of every kind and description, laws or languages with

which a "novel" (including what Jameson calls the "artificial" or vernacular epic) is, by definition, in constant and polyphonic dialogue (Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" or "dialogism" proper).

How does the *combinatoire* work in practice? In truncated form in a reading of *Wuthering Heights*: The question of Heathcliff's status as villain or hero is dismissed as a "disguise," his apparent centrality merely a function of his role as donor in the sedimented genre of the folktale (here Propp emerges behind Greimas) at work in the novel as an ideologeme. Though Heathcliff is no longer "the hero or protagonist in any sense of the word," the text nonetheless "deliberately" projects such a "misreading" to cover his function as "a mediator and a catalyst" in "his twofold mission . . . to restore money to the family and to reinvent a new idea of passion." (The habits of mind produced by this kind of narratological exercise even allow Jameson such provocative throwaways as the following brief meditation on the nature of tragedy and our customary interpretation of it: "Neither Creon nor Iago can be read as villains without dispersing the tragic force of the plays; yet our irresistible temptation to do so tells us much about the hold of ethical categories on our mental habits.")

With Jameson's reading of Balzac, we can watch the *combinatoire* stretch out a bit more. The semiotic rectangle allows Jameson to map out social inconsistencies or contradictions in a given novel as precise antinomies. Presented as a series of logical permutations, they offer fictional ways out of the "intolerable closure" of thought and action described by the diagram in order to produce a "solution" realizable only at the level of the imaginary or ideological. Thus in *La Vieille fille*, Mademoiselle Cormon's two suitors come to represent (as productions of the "anthropomorphic combinations" of historically given possibilities that generate "characters") a double bind with no apparent escape: the impossible coexistence of Napoleonic energy and bourgeois impotence on the one hand (Du Bousquier) and, on the other, of languor and the (once-)legitimate power of the *ancien régime* (the Chevalier). Mademoiselle Cormon is thus denied an acceptable "match" from either point of view, since neither produces the ideal permutation that history has already taken away: energy combined with aristocracy. Hence the appearance of the exiled aristocratic officer, the Count de Troisville, who represents in a single figure what the other two cannot: the "legitimacy" of an aristocratic lineage and the almost "bourgeois" energy of a Napoleon. But because the count is already married, the solution or "match" can be thought at the only level proper to it—the imaginary. The count's emergence produces what Jameson calls the novel's "horizon figure," one who "blocks out a place which is not that of empirical history but of a possible alternate one: a history in which some genuine restoration would still be possible, provided the aristocracy could learn this particular object lesson, namely that it needs a strong man who combines aristocratic values with Napoleonic energy."

With Conrad we come to the edge of the history *The Political Unconscious* narrates (the earlier Lewis book continues the later one's historical trajectory

into modernism proper), largely because Conrad's work embodies a "fault line" at which the nineteenth-century reduction of experience to the subject specific, or psychological, reaches its outer limit. What Jameson calls Conrad's "sensorium"—the tendency of perceptual impressions to replace the objects that prompt them—is a "strategy of aestheticization," which turns the object world into a virtual museum by means of fetishizing the "independence of the image," thus recontaining it politically. Hence emerge (as one theorization) those ideologies of autonomous art, formalism, and so on, that may be said to (be able to) derive from the novel's first part (and that Conrad himself sought to guard against even earlier in the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*). And yet because this first theorization threatens to collapse under the burden of what it represses, the text must produce a second part that will recontain what is socially dangerous in it (here we may recall too that Conrad interrupted composition of the novel at its midpoint):

> On the one hand the manifest level of the content of *Lord Jim* . . . gives us to believe that the "subject" of this book is courage and cowardice, which we are meant to interpret in ethical and existentializing terms; on the other, the final consumable verbal commodity—the vision of the ship—the transformation of all these realities into style and the work of what we will call the impressionistic strategy of modernism whose function is to derealize the content and make it available for consumption on some purely aesthetic level; while in between these two, the brief clang from the boiler room that drives the ship marking the presence beneath ideology and appearance of that labor which produces and reproduces the world itself, and which, like the attention of God in Berkeleyan idealism, sustains the whole fabric of reality continuously in being. . . .

Thus the second half of *Lord Jim* is, according to Jameson, little more than melodrama (shades of the later Conrad?), which functions to recontain the explosive possibilities of the first half under the (now-)archaic genre of romance. *Lord Jim* becomes, then, an "ideological fable designed to transform into a matter of individual existence what is in reality a relationship between collective systems and social forms."

Focused as it is on the self-erasing structure of ideology or "mythology," Jameson's exemplary reading of Conrad's novel is obviously not limited to use on modernist, novelistic, or even canonical texts alone. The same sort of operation motivates many television advertisements today: Beta Max commercials, for example, about the simultaneous marriage of quadruplets—copies of copies for copies—bearing the "unifying" or recontaining "logo": "the one and only"; or even news shows advertising paintings of their video images as proof of their

"originality." (*Mary Tyler Moore* had already only a few years before demystified the latter by making the production of a news show its enabling comic fiction.) Jameson's analysis of founding modernist documents such as *Lord Jim*, then, actually uncovers and elaborates the paradigm that produces ideological formations even in their broadest contemporary manifestations in popular culture.

Nostromo, too, indicates the limits of its ideological closure, but, as Jameson shows, in a way that inverts the strategy of *Lord Jim*, and, in the process, allows the later novel to touch upon history in a manner the earlier one cannot. For in *Nostromo*, the apparently psychological or personal drama of Decoud and Nostromo produces the emergence of the far more genuinely public drama that they secretly represent: "a narrative production of society itself" in their passage from nature to culture as they cross the gulf with their lighter of silver. But the cost of this production (the nuances of its development are too elaborate to recapitulate here) is the repression of one form of popular insurrection in the service of the new culture (the Montero brothers, whose "caesarism," as Jameson calls it, disallows them the right to represent "democracy" in a separatist occidental republic), in favor of another version, that of old Viola and the spirit of Garibaldi. The phenomenon, says Jameson, is "akin to Freudian splitting," whereby the "bad double" of the Monteros is canceled (even as it is preserved) by the valorization, instead, of the European (and so "properly" Latin) representation of revolution.

In the earlier *Fables of Aggression*, the *combinatoire* (there only implicitly formulated) performs similar work on Wyndham Lewis's corpus, and allows us to see the strategy of recontainment at work in a starker manner than in either Balzac or Conrad. At the molecular level of Lewis's sentences, argues Jameson, the trope of *hypallage* is privileged and therefore symptomatic: this is the trope by which an adjective comes to refer to a substantive different from the one to which it is assigned by the grammatical context. The opening of Lewis's 1917 *Cantleman's Spring Mate* displays *hypallage* exactly: "Cantleman walked in the strenuous fields. . . ." Thus, remarks Jameson, "The attributes of actor or act are transferred onto the dead scenery. . . . 'Properties' come loose and stick to the wrong places." Metaphor, to put it another way, yields up its secret status as metonymy, thus collapsing the sacred difference between the languages of prose and poetry (at least in Jakobson's influential reading). And the point of Lewis's aggressive use of *hypallage*? To "transform the figurative into the literal," and so to "kick . . . away the metaphorical apparatus by which we have risen into the figural."

Before the consequences of such a claim rebound upon the later Lewis, however, the simple recontainment strategy of the "national allegory" of his early fiction will do, since his text does little to threaten it, hence gives it little to repress. "National allegory," after all, retains all those categories of essence and

original qualities (racial type and so on) that are in fact vouchsafed by a prose that believes itself closer to the real than any literary language before it. For any speech with so much faith in its ability to achieve a higher verisimilitude must presume not only the existence of a natural and/or object world independent of language as such, but also the existence of fixed, universal essences that metaphysically—rather than socially—determine the fabric of social law from a transhistorical, archetypal, ultimately racist point of view.

The break in Lewis's career comes, however, when the earlier molecular strategy of a "literal" prose ends up deconstructing the conditions of its own possibility, admitting the price of its readability:

> This complex narrative operation thus involves a four-term process. The novelist establishes an initial "literal" (which is to say, "fictive") situation, only immediately to fragment it into the building blocks and components of a new allegorical and thematic textual narrative, which has little enough thematic relationship to the original. The reader is then obliged to begin with the fragments of the allegory, which must be reconstructed in narrative form before the first-degree or "realistic" narrative can be deduced and inserted beneath the text as the latter's signified.
>
> Yet this signified exists nowhere: it is an evanescent effect of the reader's own "prior knowledge" or existential experience, which comes before him/her with the force of something already known, something recognized, rather than witnessed for the first time.

So in order to repress the inauthenticity (in the Frankfurt Jameson's vocabulary) of modern life, Lewis is forced to invent a new kind of molar recontainment that will repress—that will (in the vocabulary of the Derridean Jameson) preserve and cancel at one and the same time—the utterly figurative nature of the "raw materials" of both life and literature. And what danger does its leakage threaten to expose? That of the "crisis" of the "authentic self," as it is dispersed into a vortex of ideologemes, transformed into what Jameson calls, following Jean-François Lyotard, a "libidinal apparatus." So the new vision that "displaces the crisis of the self" as it is decentered into a force field of dialogical proportions is the recontaining myth of the "strong personality" (Lewis's "proto-fascism" and its lineage in the earlier "national allegory"). By aligning the determinate possibilities of existence in a semiotic rectangle that allows only such judgments as weak/strong, mediocre/masterful, the only possible imaginary solution is that of the "strong personality."

To resuscitate Lewis, however, is also (and here Jameson follows Lewis himself exactly) to dismiss those canonical modernists situated squarely within romantic tradition such as Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The repression (through a strong misreading) of Woolf and Joyce alike is symptomatic at a number of levels, especially when we remember that the "libidinal apparatus" is dramatized

with far more pungency and authority in Woolf (or even Lawrence) than in Lewis (that "jar on the nerves," as Woolf puts it, skewing subjectivity in her fiction as severely as a different Woolf posits personality in her essays); or, even more, when we recall that the decentering of the subject at the mercy of the raw materials of the vortex becomes an older Stephen Dedalus's overweening preoccupation in *Ulysses*. Of course, the flooding of a weak novelist by a strong critic is probably the real motivation for both Jameson's choice of Lewis and the swerve from canonical orthodoxy, even though the strategy carries in its train other side effects as well, especially the questionable endorsement of only those writers who practice an overtly "dialogical" prose fiction—James and Beckett in particular. (Why Jameson is willing to grant a separatist legitimacy to a postmodern literature still almost wholly within the debt of Joyce also remains enigmatic.)

Surely, then, the dialogical appeals to Jameson not only because it describes the novel equally well from both a dialectical and a differential point of view, but also because it mirrors the structure of his own imagination so neatly. As a tissue of relations to other discourses and traditions, Jameson's own discourse constantly shifts its relations to its relations—moving, most characteristically, from Derrida in one phrase to the Frankfurt hermeneutic in the next—and can thereby change its entire range or play of epistemological coordinates from moment to moment in a transpositional strategy at once exhilarating and exasperating. To invoke Jameson's use of Bakhtin in his own defense is therefore a necessity as Jameson moves through the dialogical operations of the *combinatoire* by means of what he himself calls an "unavoidable shifting of gears." But whether this is all a calculated effect or simply the overflow of a sensibility overdetermined to the point of saturation remains for us to consider. Does Jameson's text, dialogical as it may be, perform the "critical return upon itself" that Jameson maintains all texts should display as a sign of auto-accountability, of what he calls the necessity of "reflexive play" in analysis?

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Surely the relative autonomy that Althusser gives to art requires aesthetic discourse to play at the limits of its possibilities. Jameson is, of course, a critic at the limit, but also a critic at a moment of crisis as he comes into his maturity. However, can we legitimately address Jameson's project in the vocabulary of those now-suspect romantic terms: development, style? And what of Jameson's often rawly layered prose, an insufficient irony, even an insufficient truculence? Can we say such things without presuppositions of personality and expressiveness that the Derridean (if not the Frankfurt) conscience forbids? Is Jameson's intent simply to reject the problem of style altogether in favor of a dialogism that can border on a resurrection of the Imitative Fallacy? Does Jameson genuinely relinquish the pose of the critic as sensibility in favor of the critic as mere

functionary or sieve for the knowledges (*sciences*) that leak through his texts? Or, by contrast, is Marxism itself an elaborate defense mechanism by which he can, in conscience, allow himself to dodge the question of his status as a writer under the shelter of the collective?

Lest we be accused of ideological capture by speaking of what may seem to be "style" in the quaint sense, let us recall that our purpose is not to reconstitute an Author, but to indicate gaps in the text's accounting machinery. One trope by which we can intervene in the problem of thinking the "collective" (for we do retain, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us, our "bodies" and our "pleasures") is to reconsider that agency identified by another hybrid kind of criticism as the Reader (the best of it indebted to the last, decisive paragraphs of Barthes's "Death of the Author"). Who is the Reader if not precisely that absent but organizing agency that Jameson seeks in his attempt to find an equally totalizing subject to follow, even to rival (with all the requisite epistemological hedges) history in Althusser's sense, or the unconscious in Freud's? And what better model to mediate not only the dialogical relations already in place in a text of the past (Jameson's aim), but also to mediate in turn the additional relation of the belated Reader to the dialogical brew?

And yet despite whatever accommodations may be possible at the level of redefining the collective, graver difficulties emerge when we consider the stamina with which Jameson defends the classical Marxist notion of alienation within the vortex of a postauthenticist deconstruction of the mythology of voice and presence (hence it is tempting to reconsider the trope of alienation, like much of the terminology of classical Marxism, as an ideologeme in its own right). From an immediate point of view, of course, no one can doubt that certain laborers are alienated from their work by a structure of relation quite different from the intellectual's. And yet to insist, as Jameson does, on a relative identity is not only to presume some "nature" from which "we" are supposedly estranged, but also to reconstitute that homology between the production of goods and of thought that Jameson himself rejects.

As the Lewis book attests, Jameson knows well enough that alienation is not simply the precondition of the artist as we know him. It is (also) his precise goal. In the romantic case above all, the "originality" of the artist and his work—even of personality as such—is a product of precisely the degree of alienation from precedent that allows us to see something else, something "new" emerge from its sources in force fields whose agency the "new" text wishes to cancel ("individual talent") even as it preserves ("tradition"). The structure of subjectivity and alienation are one and the same. This is, of course, the very structure of Lewis's problematic (and therefore exemplary) modernity, the separation that defines connection that in turn requires separation that in turn requires connection, and so on. Jameson correctly identifies this chiasmatic or transgressive schema as the recurrent structure of the modernist imagination, but the curious denial of its primary novelistic exponents returns again as a symptom that must mean something else.

Why, then, the repression of romantic modernism despite its even richer possibilities for Jameson's argument than Lewis? Largely because it allows Jameson to repress that which in Marx he seems to go out of his way to avoid, but which *The Political Unconscious* reconstitutes—or, better, recontains—in its final, and quite unexpected, chapter. There Jameson simply asserts an avowedly utopist view of what we might call the "socialist projection," a view of history as "a single vast unfinished plot," with the Marxist garden/resurrection marking the limits of its desire. Astonishingly enough—especially given the gear marked "Althusser"—here Jameson fully recuperates those apparently offhand Frankfurt tropes scattered throughout his text—the "fallen world of capitalism," the "radical impoverishment and constriction of modern life"—in order to produce the terms of an argument guaranteed (like the arguments of the canonical high modernists he deplores) to result in that Eliot/Lukacs (!) view of contemporary society as one of "reification" (the latter as much an ideologeme now as alienation). In fact, we may even say *The Political Unconscious* is structured very much like *Lord Jim*: it recontains at the molar level of the romance of Marxism the molecular level of the deconstructive insurgencies of a practical critic who, like the text of the first part of *Lord Jim*, is already beyond the closure of the macro-text's inevitably frustrated strategy of recuperation. Despite Jameson's rejection of Hayden White's reading of Marxist historiography as romance in structure, Jameson quite clearly means to preserve the truth of the romance or the humanist argument—the Frankfurt reading of Marx—even as he cancels it with the voice of the French, Althusserian rereading. And to say that Marx is, like Hegel or Freud, a product of romantic tradition anyway is to say nothing new at all.

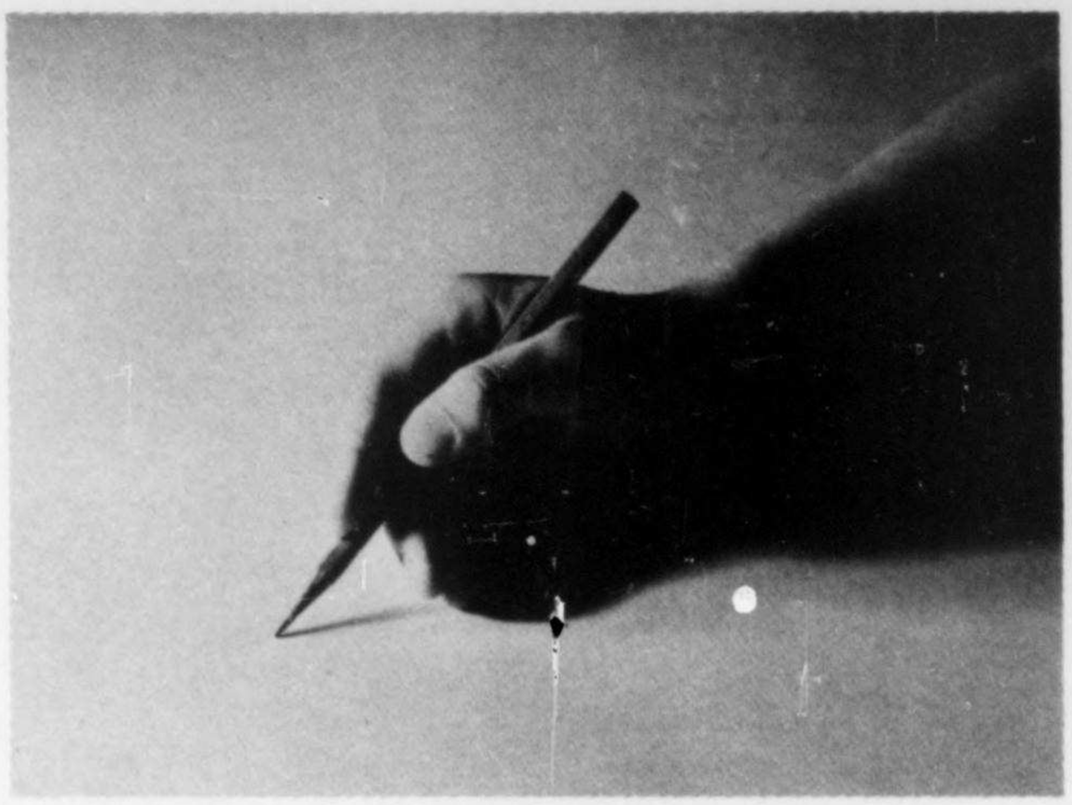
By what transdiscursive authority, then, can Jameson speak of an ability to achieve what no philosophy has ever achieved—freedom from the closure his work describes? Even the simplest formulations make the problematic of prognosis a delicate one indeed, whether Freud's ("Only a wish can impel the psychic apparatus to activity."), or Marx's own, which reaches its limit in the fragility of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. The authority to which Jameson appeals, of course, is that of Marxism itself, to that (representation of a) "resistance to matter" which is, as he puts it, the crucial third term missing both in Derridean differ*a*nce and in the (ultimately non-)dialectic of Hegel's master/slave relation. It is here that the ultimate instance of Jameson's self-accounting (or lack of it) emerges, and it lies in the difference, as it were, between dialectic and differ*a*nce. Whether there is such a difference or not is the central but largely repressed question that Jameson himself raises only briefly, in the relative safety of an aside in *Fables of Aggression*. (In *The Political Unconscious*, he directly rejects any identity between the two procedures.) To try to mediate between a notion of differ*a*nce and dialectic is, as Jameson suggests in an undeveloped footnote in the later book, to appeal to another notion of temporality altogether (here the readerly alternative of *nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness, recurs).

But the question remains: Do Derrida and, through *nachträglichkeit*, Hegel, deconstruct Marx's "contradictions" into Foucault's chiasmatic, productive oppositions, the force fields of the symbolic, the very structure of ideological closure? If Marxism is a "romance" (whether Jameson assents or not), then its transcendental signified is the production of precisely that absent third term whose presence, as Jameson well knows (whether it is history, the unconscious, or the Real) is marked only by its absence. Indeed, the very reflexivity by which Jameson tries to have his garden and deconstruct it too is Derridean rather than properly dialectical (for the dialogical can also be read either way): "to invent a space from which to think . . . two identical yet antagonistic features together all at once." Of course, what merges in this double definition is also what merges when we note that the structure of surplus value in Marx—the difference between a worker's pay and the value of the object his labor produces, the classical measure of his alienation—is also the structure of signification as such for Derrida: the necessity of a surplus or residue of the always-already against which all that may be must come into being.

*

Despite these inevitable difficulties—even despite the fact that the irritation they often engender can become an odd source of pleasure—we owe to Jameson, as to no other Anglo-American critic, the debt of a profound politico-aesthetic revelation and example. It is not surprising, then, to find that, unlike the relatively recent *Fables of Aggression*, the newer *Political Unconscious* is addressed to a public rather more general than Jameson's work has presumed to address before. Life Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness*, it is additional evidence of avant-garde criticism giving way to the necessity of a more public stance, already a symptom of the resistance to theory that now becomes a subject in its own right. Such resistance suggests, of course, that public issues of the gravest significance are at question, especially the question of political action itself. Given Jameson's attraction to Nietzsche's deconstruction of antinomies such as good and evil, might not his own ideologemic position suggest in turn the historicization of left and right as we crest a new wave in history?

Jameson's most powerful contribution to the politics of theory, then, is not simply the referential yield of his rigorous discipleship to European criticism, not even the practical fusion his work enacts between New York social criticism and New Haven close analysis. It lies instead, in the final instance, in the force with which it pressures the necessity, intentional or not, of rethinking the political agenda through the cautionary epistemologies that Europe has produced as the price for its dead.



Herbert Bayer. Self-Portrait. *1937*.

When Words Fail

ROSALIND KRAUSS

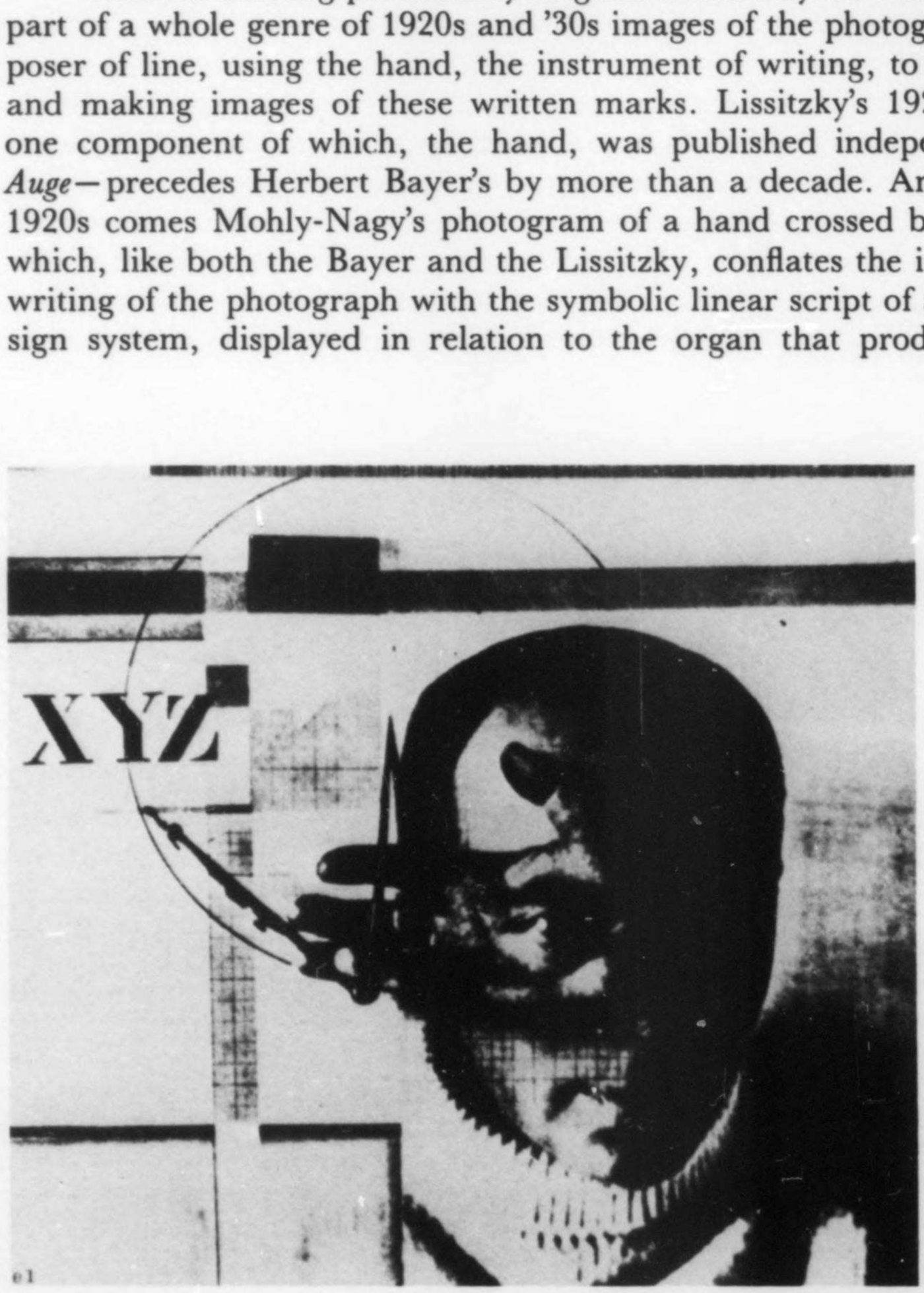
"When Words Fail" was the slogan used as the title of a three-day colloquium to celebrate, document, and—presumably—analyze the rise of photographic practice in Weimar Germany.[1] With this phrase, the colloquium's organizers echoed the declarations pronounced so frequently by a host of German artists, intellectuals, and propagandists: declarations to the effect that language was about to be eclipsed by vision. Not only do we think of Moholy-Nagy's dictum that the illiterate of the future would not be the man unable to read, but the one who could not take a photograph; we also hear Johannes Molzahn intoning, "The photograph will be one of the most effective weapons against intellectualization, against the mechanization of the spirit. Forget reading! See! That will be the motto of education. Forget reading! See! That will be the essential policy of newspapers."

When Words Fail is, we could say, a slant rhyme on the notion *Forget reading! See!* Thus it is very curious that this pronouncement of the antiverbal,

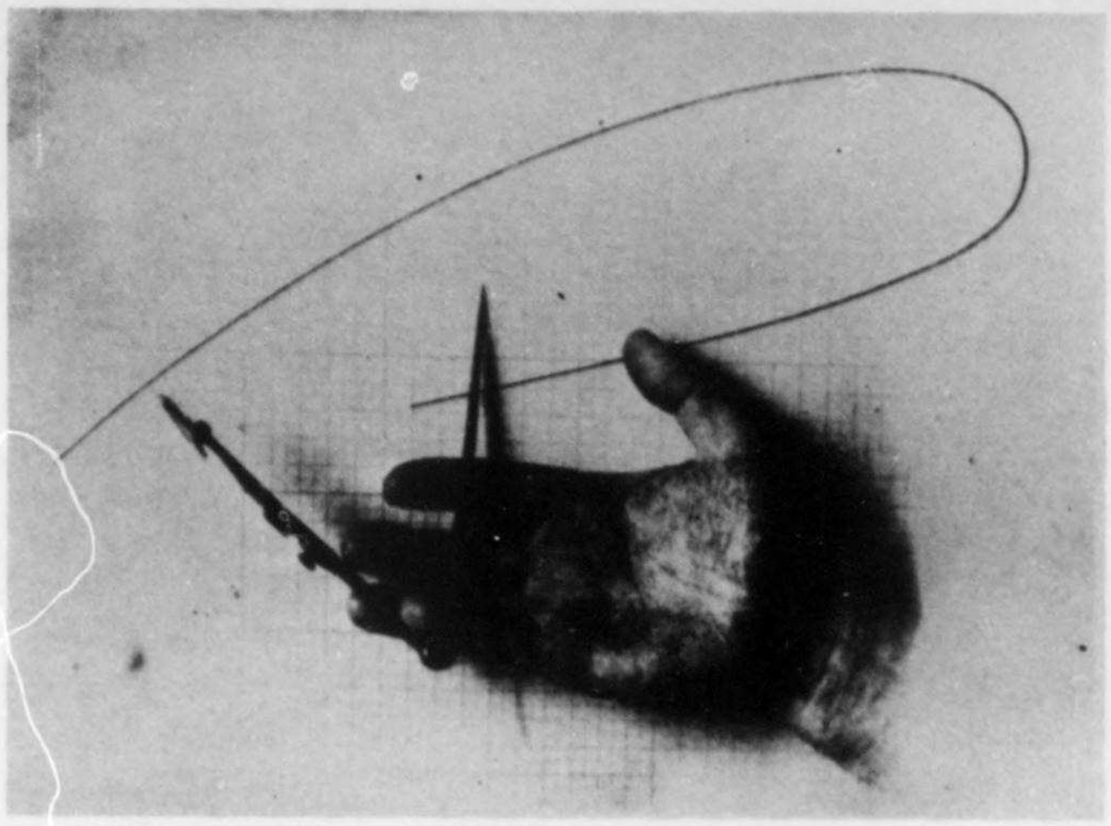
1. *When Words Fail* was organized by the International Center of Photography and the Goethe House, February 19–21, 1982. It coincided with two exhibitions then mounted at the ICP: *Avant-Garde Photography in Germany: 1919–1939*; and *Heinrich Kühn: Turn-of-the-Century Master*. This essay is a modified version of the paper read by this author at the colloquium in a session devoted to the stylistic results of the new camera technologies of the 1920s. (For a review of the exhibition *Avant-Garde Photography in Germany*, see my "Jump over the Bauhaus," *October*, no. 15 (Winter 1980), 103–110.

culture-of-the-visual should have been accompanied in all the announcements and programs for the colloquium by a photograph of a hand holding a pencil—and holding it, moreover, not in a position to draw so much as to write. The photograph, made in 1937, is Herbert Bayer's *Self-Portrait*. Perhaps it is with this particular conjunction of text and image, placed in the service of the analysis of photographic culture, that one should begin an examination of the misconceptions that operate at the very heart of present critical discourse on photography. Nowhere could one find confusion more clearly displayed than in the use of this *Self-Portrait* to illustrate *When Words Fail*.

There is nothing particularly original about Bayer's work, of course; it is part of a whole genre of 1920s and '30s images of the photographer as a composer of line, using the hand, the instrument of writing, to mark the image, and making images of these written marks. Lissitzky's 1924 self-portrait—one component of which, the hand, was published independently in *Foto-Auge*—precedes Herbert Bayer's by more than a decade. And from the mid-1920s comes Mohly-Nagy's photogram of a hand crossed by a mesh of line which, like both the Bayer and the Lissitzky, conflates the image of the light writing of the photograph with the symbolic linear script of a totally different sign system, displayed in relation to the organ that produces that script,

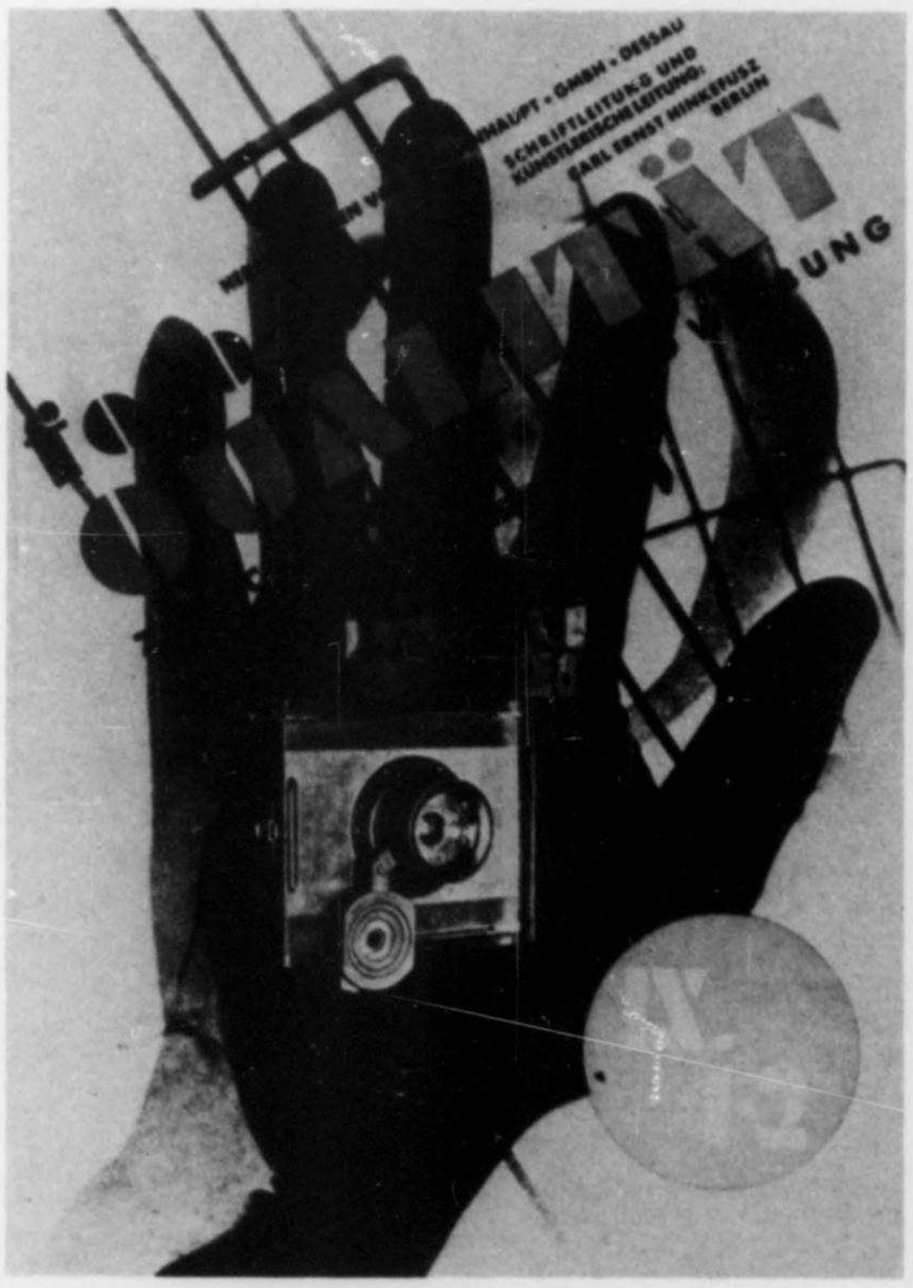


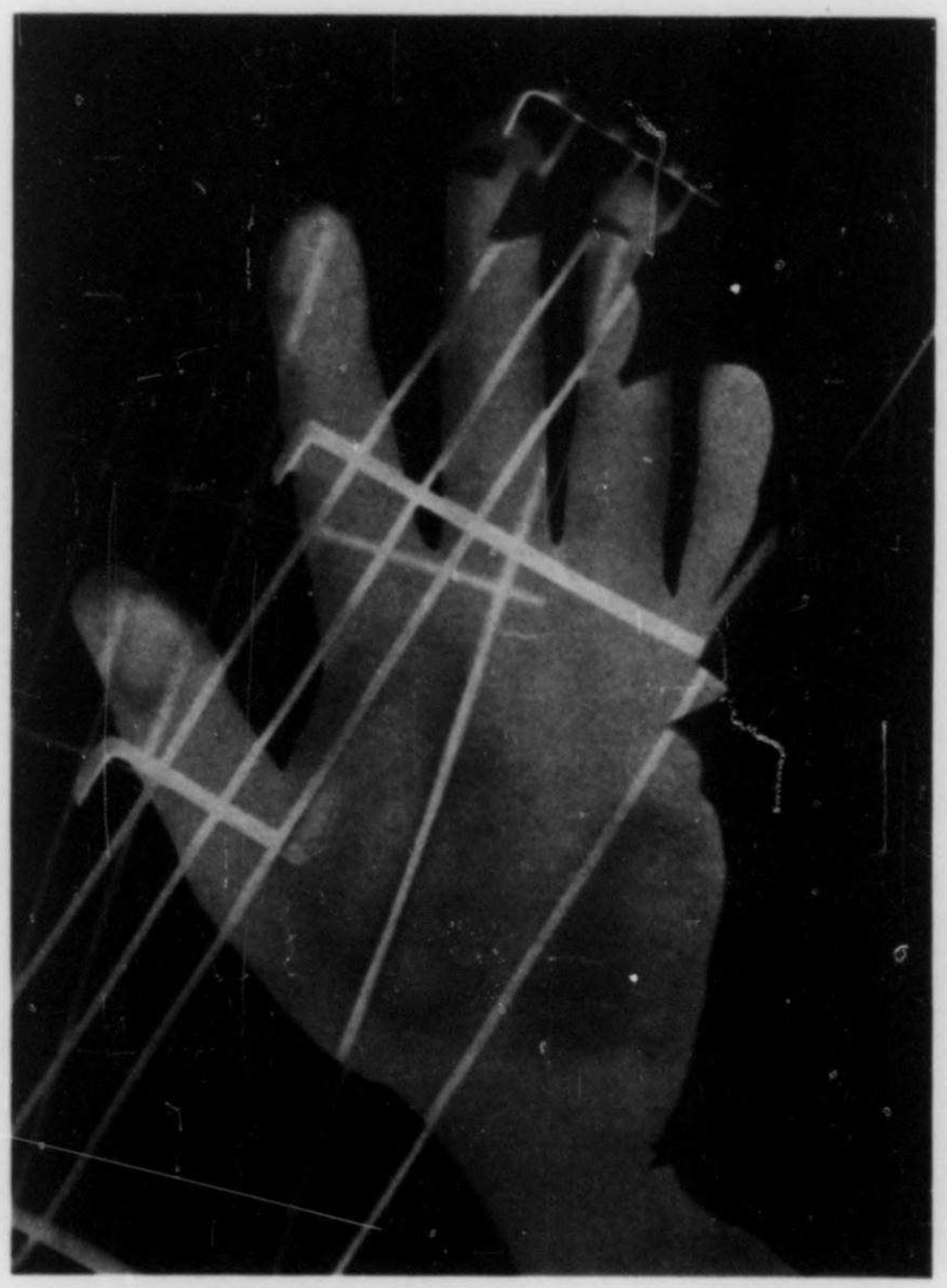
El Lissitzky. The Constructor (Self-Portrait). *1924*.



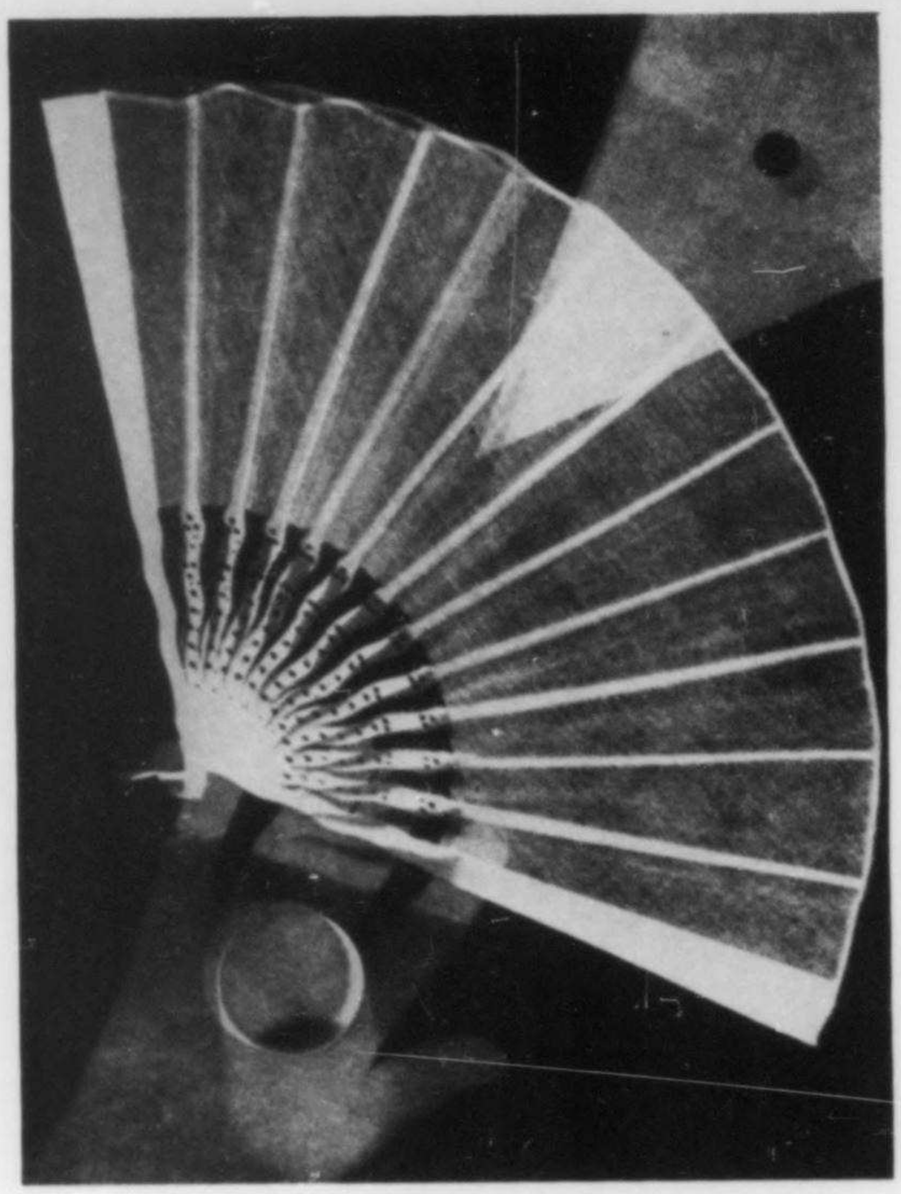
El Lissitzky. Composition. *1924*.

namely, the human hand. This three-way relation between hand and camera, and hand and writing, is made much more explicit in the montage Moholy created from the earlier photogram when he designed the title page for *Foto-Qualität* in 1931. The artist/photographer as a writer and the camera projected as a surrogate hand—the instrument not of instantaneous vision but of writing—all of this presents itself here, within the very heart of the "new vision," as a curious contradiction to the manifest content of *When Words Fail*.





László Moholy-Nagy. Left: Title page for Foto-Qualität. *1931. Right: Photogram. 1925–27.*



Left: Walter Peterhans. Still Life. *c. 1929. Right: Man Ray. Photogram. c. 1924.*

"Here comes the new photographer!" we can say all we like; but paradoxically he comes tricked out as a scribe.[2]

This peculiar relationship set up between photography and hand-construction or handwriting is to be found throughout the images produced by the "new vision." But it appears as well in various texts produced at the same time, although obviously not those of Moholy's "illiterate of the future" or Molzahn's "Forget reading! See!" One of the texts that recognized this relationship is *Civilization and Its Discontents*, composed by Freud in 1930. There we encounter the description of civilization's means for extending the powers of the human body by equipping that body with prosthetic devices, or artificial limbs:

> By means of all his tools, man makes his own organs more perfect—both the motor and the sensory—or else removes the obstacles in the way of their activity. Machinery places gigantic power at his disposal which, like his muscles, he can employ in any direction; ships and aircraft have the effect that neither air nor water can prevent his traversing them. With spectacles he corrects the defect of the lens in his own eyes; with telescopes he looks at far distances; with the microscope he overcomes the limitations in visibility due to the structure of his retina. With the photographic camera he has created

2. Werner Gräff's *Es Kommt der Neue Fotograf!* (Berlin, Verlag Hermann Reckendorf, 1929) functioned as a manifesto for the new photographic sensibility. *The New Vision* is Moholy-Nagy's term.

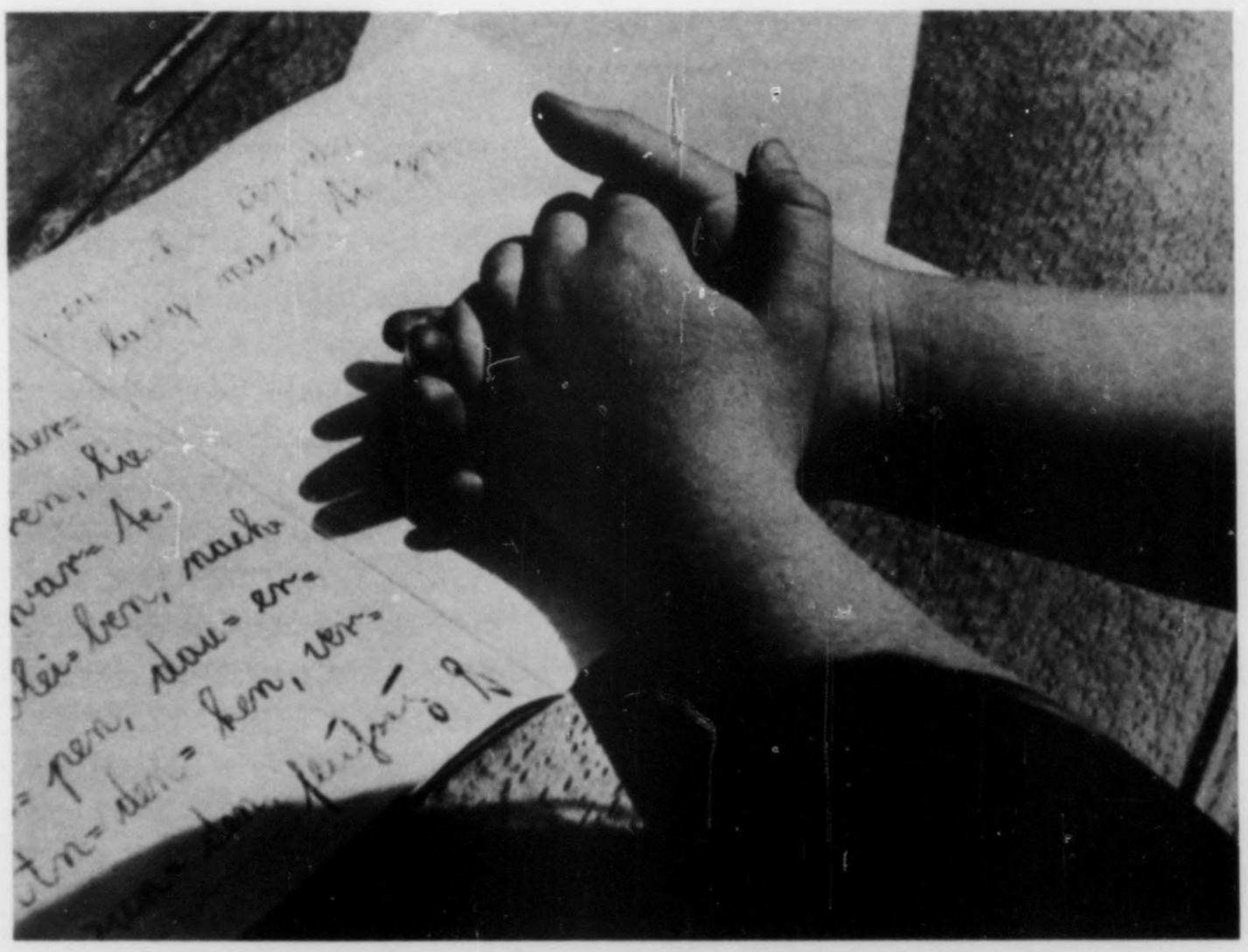
> an instrument which registers transitory visual impressions, just as the gramophone does with equally transient auditory ones; both are at bottom materializations of his own power of memory.[3]

The notion of capturing and holding the transient experience, recording the present and storing it up against the future, is used here by Freud to characterize photography; but before photography this was the common description of writing, whose function was also to set down a present speech for transmission to an absent place or a future time. Writing was the tool of memory. Like other tools it was an operation of the hand, transferring speech from one organ—the mouth—to a lower, blunter one.

With the advent of the newer, lighter, hand-held camera and the emergence of the "new vision," comes an intense experience of the camera as another hand-manipulated tool, extending the body's powers in much the way the pencil does, functioning, in Freud's terms, as a kind of artificial limb. One result of this associative logic linking camera to hand is a particular type of somatic setting for the photographic image. It is an image, frequently repeated within the commercial photography of the '20s and '30s, in which the experience is of the photographer looking down at his or her own body. Whether these hands are

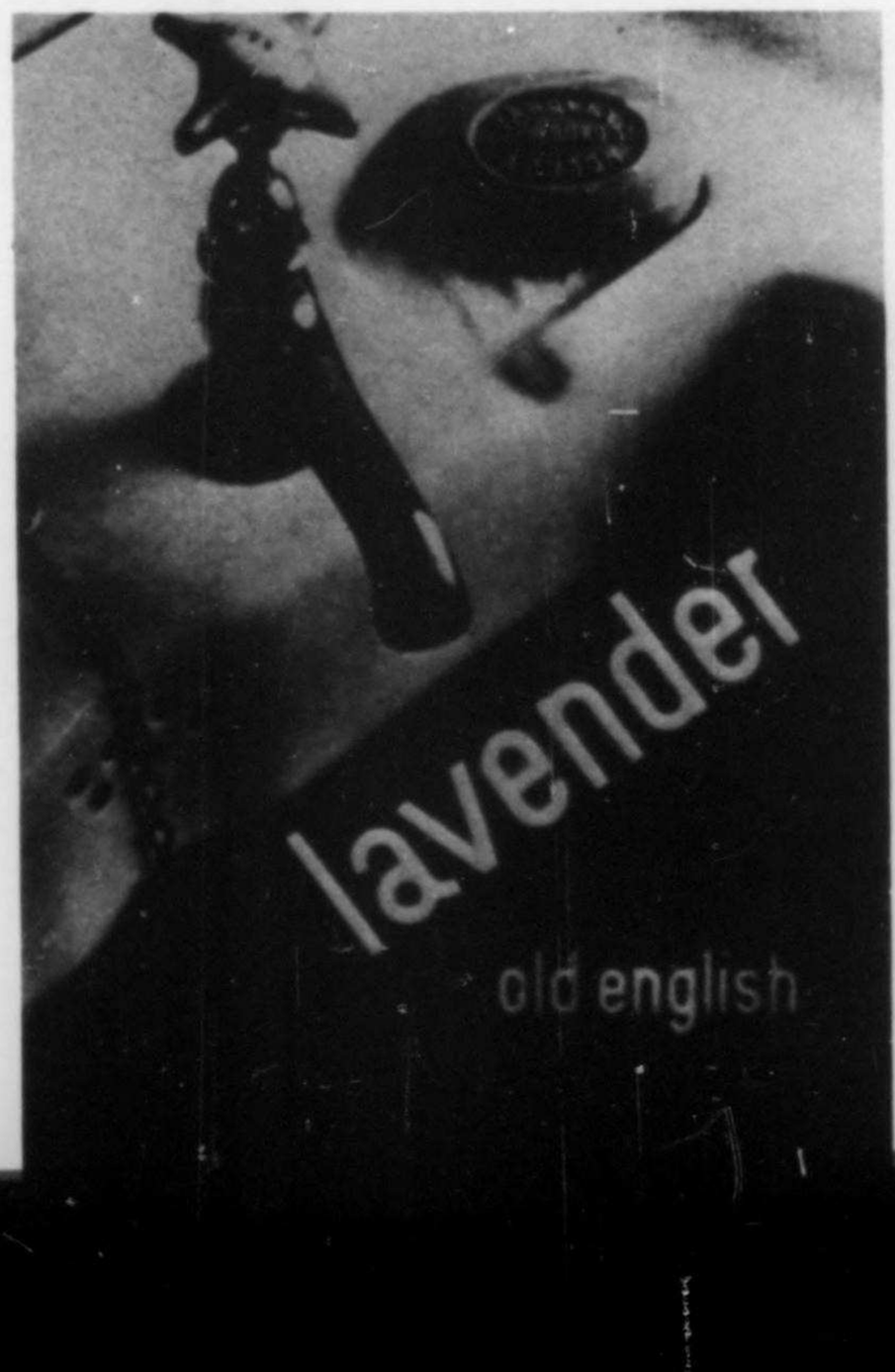
3. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Garden City, New York, Anchor Books, 1958, p. 34.

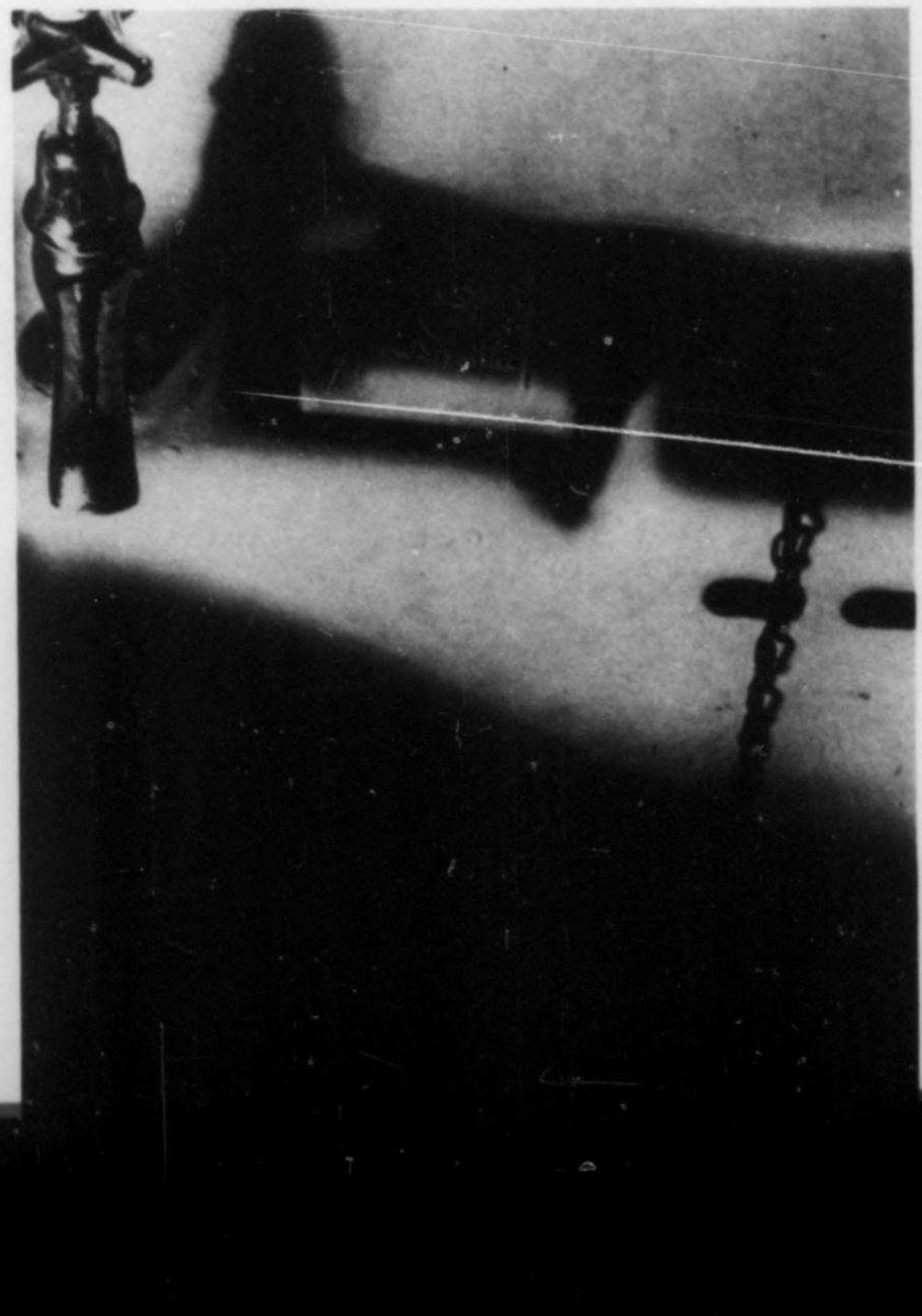
Aenne Biermann. Child's Hands. *c. 1929*.



Max Burchartz. Untitled photograph. c. 1928.

actually those of the photographer is, obviously, irrelevant; the point is the intense simulation of this relationship. The field of the image is established as a physical extension of the source of vision, which is to say, the camera's own point of view. And what both inhabits the photographer's somatic or bodily field and extends or enlarges it, are the hands, viewed from above. This sense of the photographic frame as a visual stage waiting to be filled by the image of the hands and their prehensile relation to the world informs the mise-en-scène of various advertising photographs for soap from the period, such as George Trump's image from 1930–31.



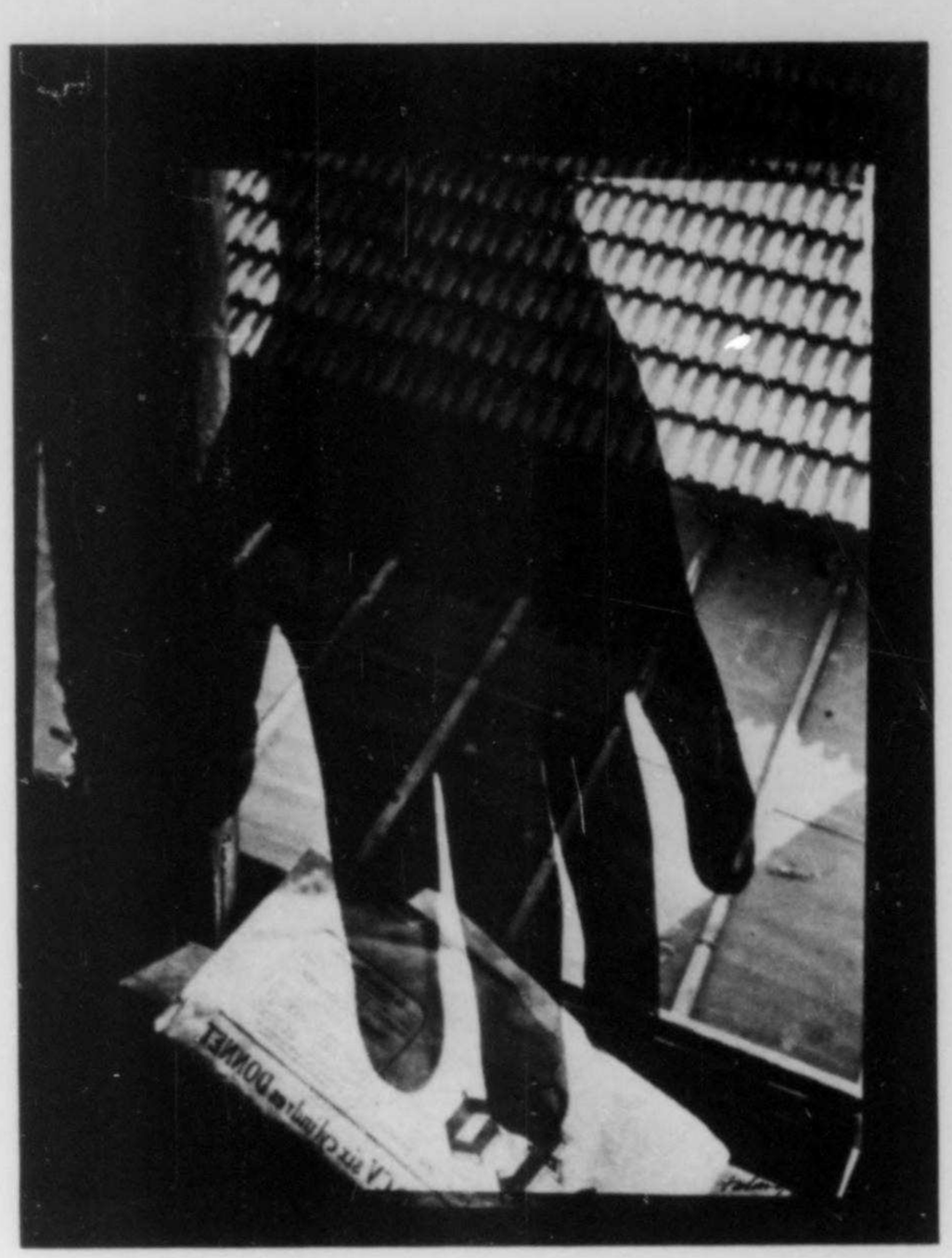


Far left: Gerrit Kiljan. Advertising photograph. c. 1928. Left: George Trump. Advertisement for Mouson soap. 1930–31. Above: Martin Munkacsy. Shadows. *1933.*

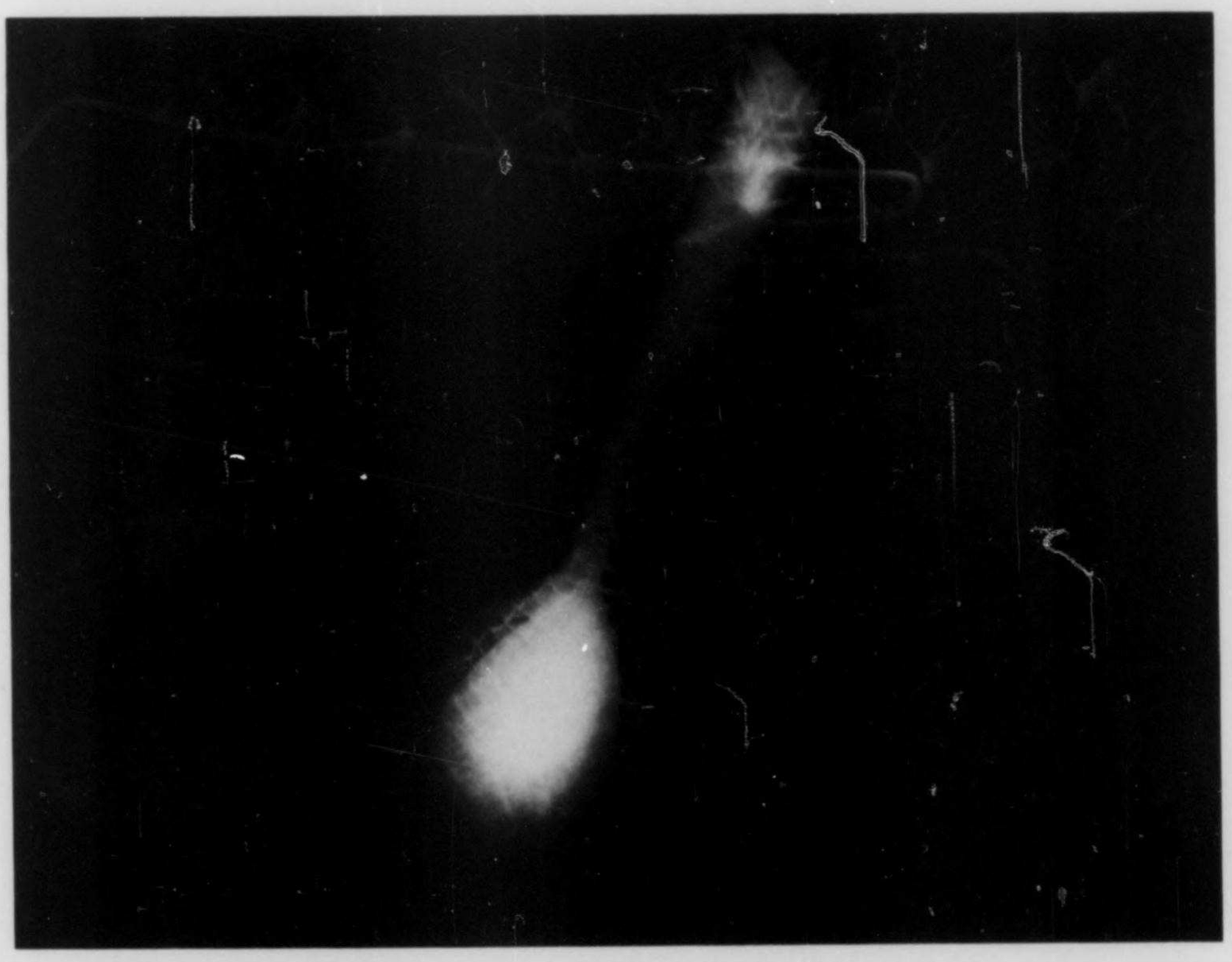
André Breton. Automatic Writing. *1938*.

The photograph as a paradoxically visual stage for the hand and its relation to writing is not only the property of German practice but also informs surrealist practice in the 1920s and '30s.[4] André Breton's self-portrait, a 1938 photo montage, is entitled *Automatic Writing* and refers back to a relationship he had drawn between automatism and photography as early as 1920. Similarly, various composite prints by Maurice Tabard from the late 1920s stage what is by now a familiar situation of the hand's relationship to the printed page, the space of writing. The surrealists' interest in occult phenomena brought them close to palmistry—which is to say the hand's own surface of lines and traces—a kind of self-inscription of the body. This is what Roger Parry was obviously reaching for in a photogram of the early '30s, one that might serve as an emblem for the entire phenomenon of the surrealist relation to photography. But the trace of the splayed palm is also one of the most ancient examples of the body's entry into the field of representation, the primitive attempt to make and leave a mark—the palm print that occurs in paleolithic caves, on archaic stelae, in children's drawings. It is the image of the body's field preparing its own remains, tracing the outline of the palm in a gesture of self-representation that is infinitely repeatable. It was not only the surrealists who loved this image, though love it they did. It was also close to the sensibility of other European avant-gardes, as one can see in early photogrammatic work by Lissitzky. Its entry into photography was swift and sure.

4. See my "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October*, no. 19 (Winter 1981), 3–34.

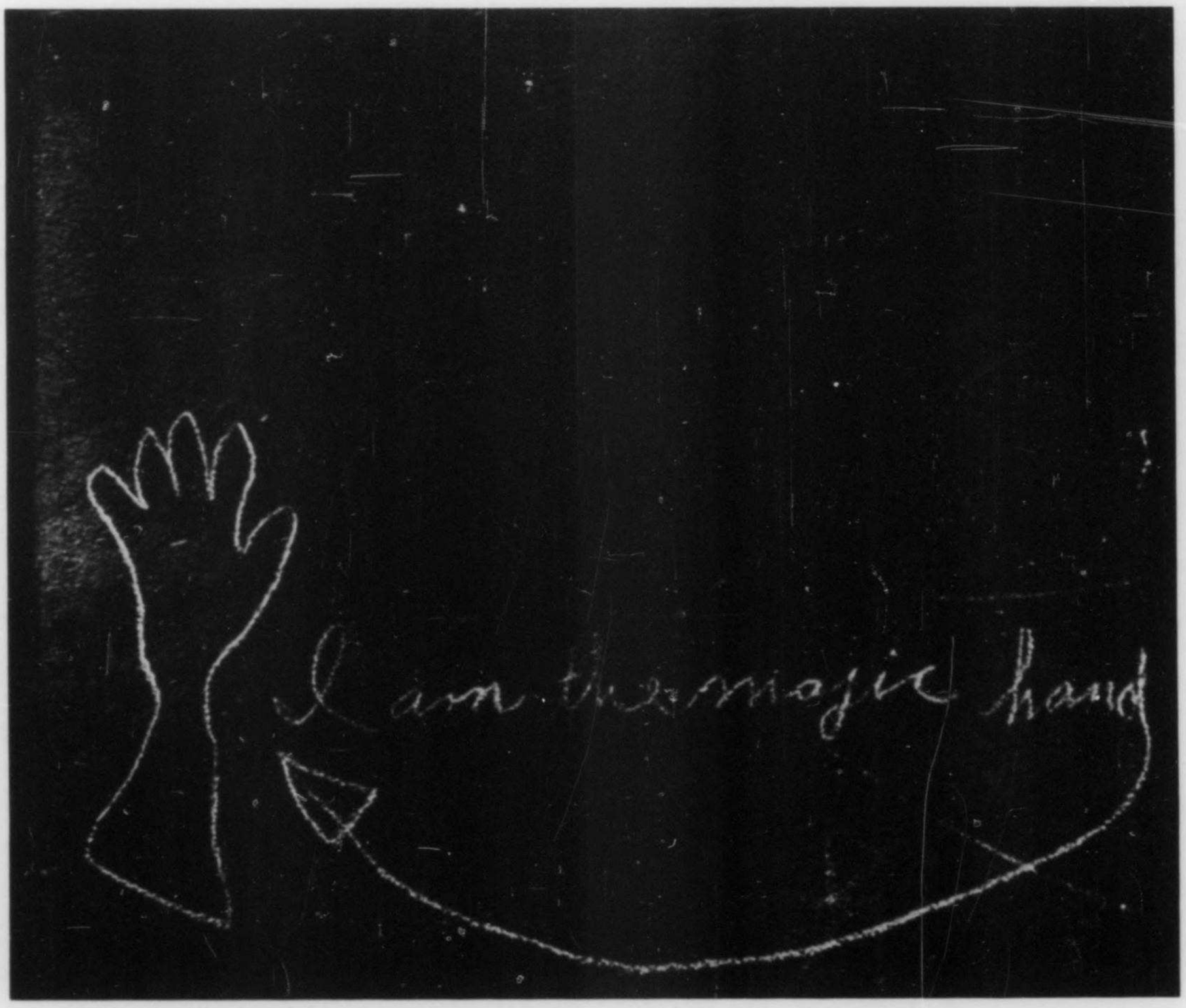


Above left: Maurice Tabard. Hand. *1929. Right: Roger Parry. Photogram. c. 1932. Below: El Lissitzky.* Composition with Spoon. *1920.*



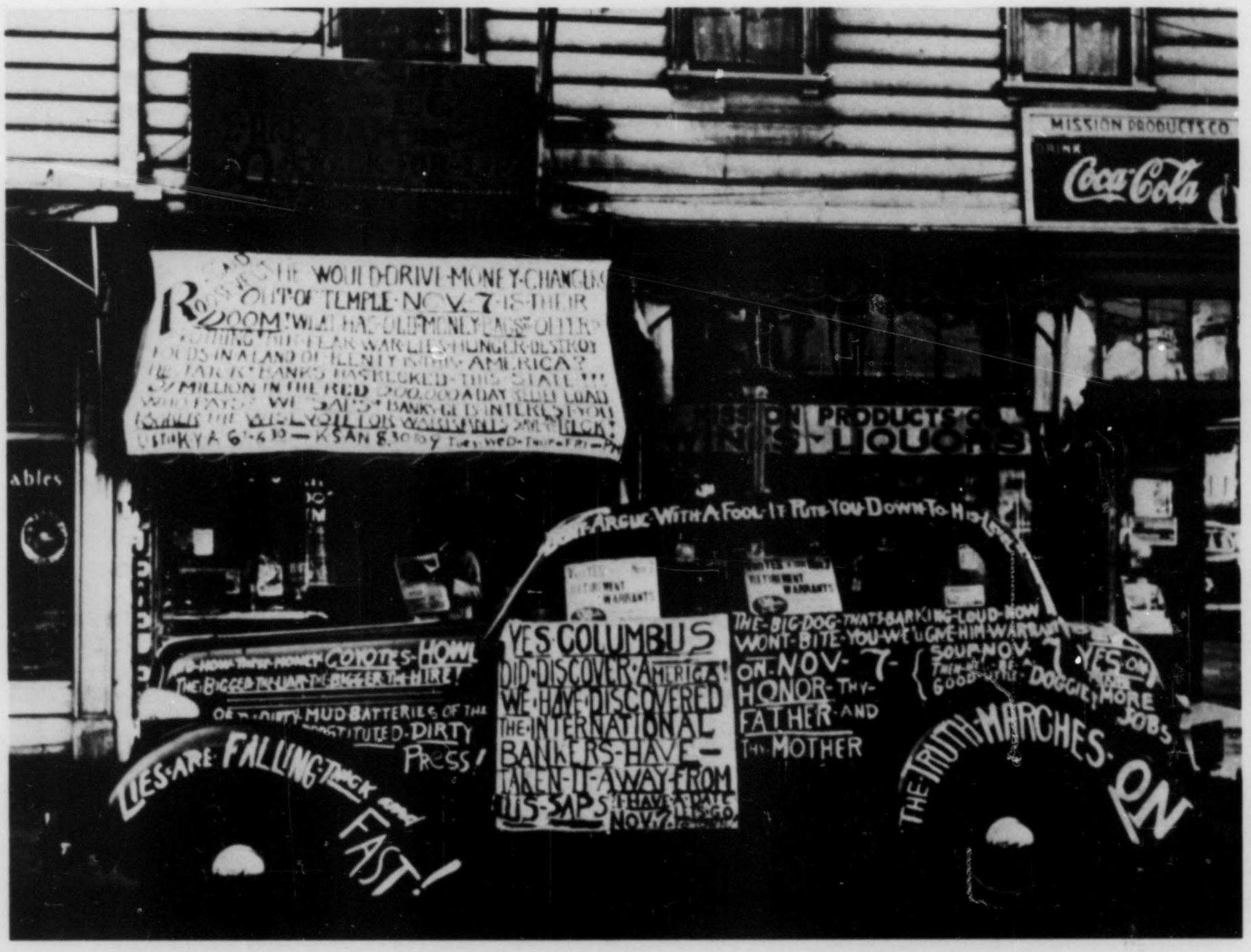
The palm of the hand as a manifestation of the natural impulse to make and leave traces obsessed photography and usurped the field of the photographic image, stamping it as well with the permanence of the written mark as opposed to the transience of the merely visual image. Words may fail to mean, but they cannot fail to remain. The invasion of the visual by the textual is one of the unwritten chapters of photography between the wars. The example of John Gutmann, who left Germany in the 1930s to come to the United States, is particularly instructive. Gutmann's work is obsessed with this magic of the record, which is a magic of writing, writing transforming all surfaces into the bearers of the written word, flattening and obliterating them. In much of his work all reality is shown transformed into the "talking picture." Reality is ultimately squeezed, shaped, usurped, supplanted, by the word, by a writing that is very far from having failed.

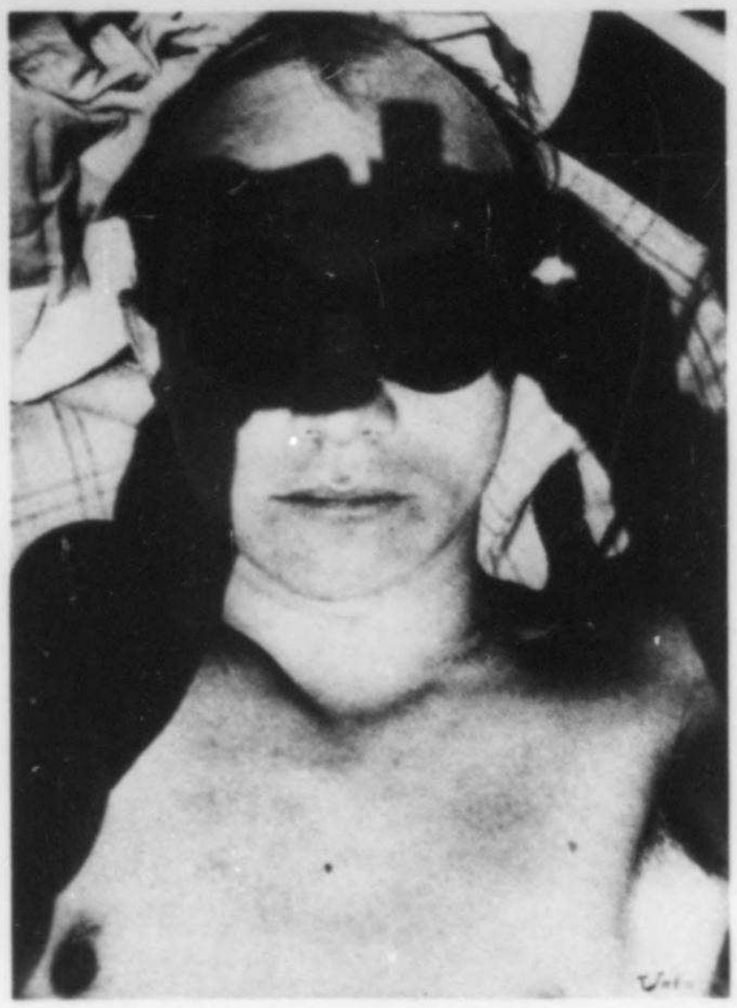
John Gutmann. Untitled photographs. c. 1938.



The "new vision" sets up a constant relationship of the hand to vision, yet it is one that is not in fact cooperative, but competitive, with vision not necessarily depicted as in the ascendent. The gesture of the hand, the gesture of the trace, the gesture that records is shown again and again, through a variety of strategies, as something displacing, crowding out vision. And for this reason the beautiful paradox of the emblematic image of the colloquium to analyze the "new vision"—the photographic self-portrait of Herbert Bayer, failed by words but writing nonetheless—is truly, though unintentionally, representative.

As is another self-portrait from the period, Umbo's from 1930, in which the trace or mark of the camera as the reflected projection of the photographer's hand is internalized within the field of the image, shown as both the means of recording the human presence and, simultaneously, the agent of displacing that presence. For the shadow of hands and camera falls over the subject's eyes,

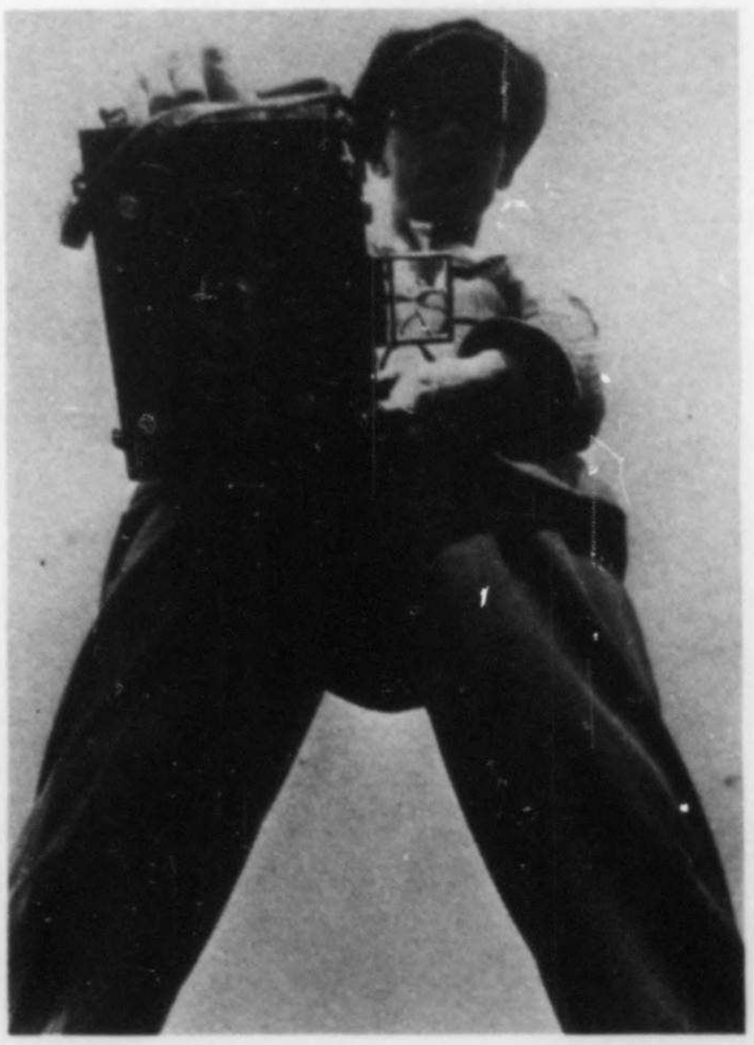




Umbo. Self-Portrait. *c. 1930.*

his center of vision, replacing the activity of sight with the instrument of recording, producing for us the image of the real body becoming subject to the domination of the prosthesis of vision—the artificial limb of the camera. And Freud, addressing the discontents of this increasingly technologized civilization, remarks, "Man has become a god by means of artificial limbs, so to speak, quite magnificent when equipped with all his accessory organs; but they do not grow on him and they still give him trouble at times."[5] Umbo's portrait is an overt depiction of this trouble. Like Bayer's it is emblematic of the strange paradoxes uncovered in the wake of the new photographer as, here he comes, into the age of modernity.

5. Freud, p. 35.



Willi Ruge. The Photojournalist as Caricaturist. *c. 1927.*

László Moholy-Nagy. Self-Portrait. *n.d.*

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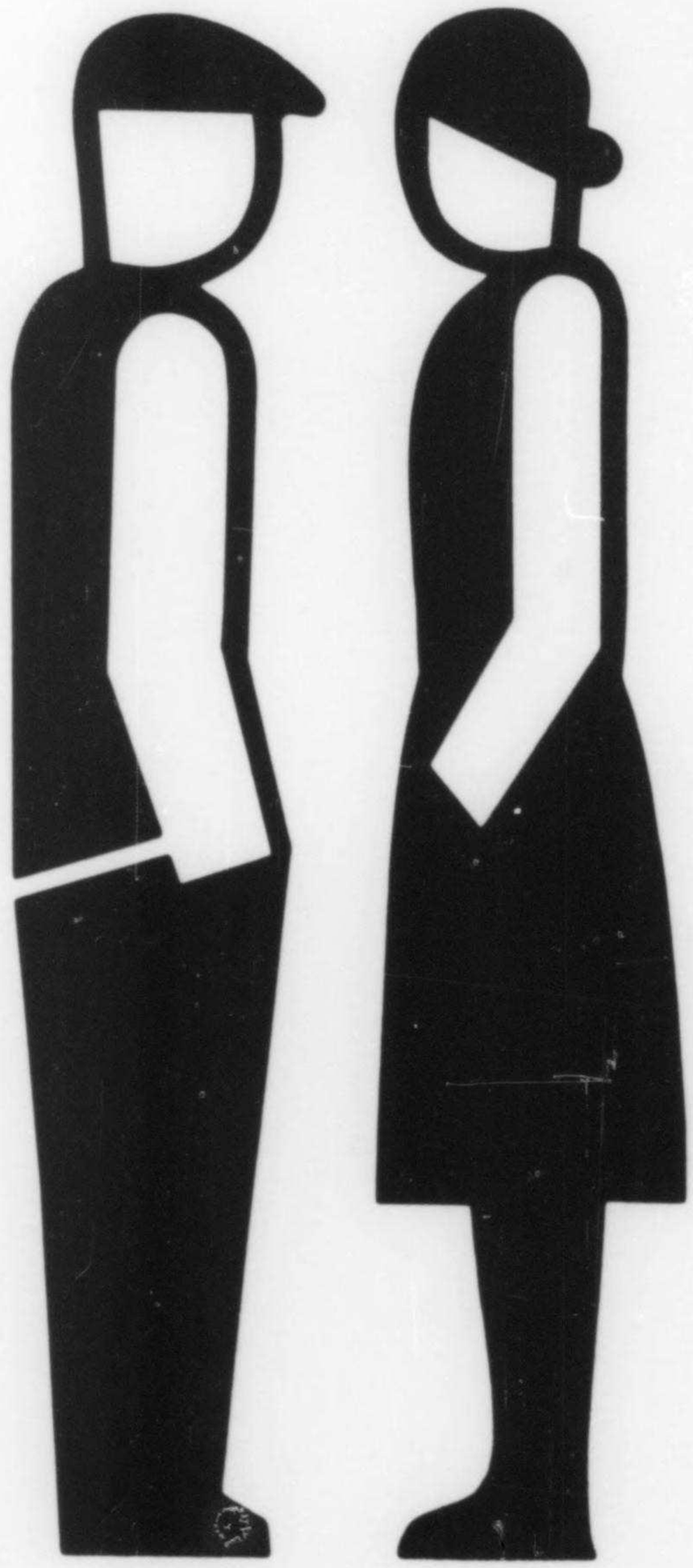


Documenta 7: A Dictionary of Received Ideas

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

Absences

In both its inclusions and omissions, the selection policy for Documenta 7 constituted a symptomatic display of repressive tolerance, an intensified form of amnesia with regard to real historical conditions. It is not so much a question of the absence of individual artists (although one can certainly speculate about the omission of political artists such as Victor Burgin, Darcy Lange, and Steve Willats from the otherwise virtually complete repetition of exhibitors that Rudi Fuchs, Documenta's Artistic Director, had shown at his home base at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven). It is, rather, the absence of perspective, methodological or historical—not to mention critical or political—that gave the show its fundamental sense of pompous and pretentious obsolescence. It is what one might have found at a turn-of-the-century salon, when the greedy anxiety of a ruling class to maintain its position dimmed critical perception.

This absence of perspective was, of course, rationalized as liberalism, pretending, as it did, to offer absolute freedom to the work of art understood as an autonomous, ahistorical entity, a product of the artist seen as the "last practitioner of distinct individuality."[1] Thus, a perspective which would attempt to encompass the most productive investigations of the function of visual representation within contemporary culture was replaced by a desperate attempt to reestablish the hegemony of esoteric, elitist modernist high culture. And this occurs just at that moment when the inadequacy of this framework has been made most apparent, having become the central object of contestation in art history, critical theory, semiology, and feminist theory alike.

The fifth and most important in the series of Documenta exhibitions—organized by Harald Szeemann in 1972—had at least begun to question a general focus on high art. Therefore, ten years later, one might have expected from a team of highly qualified curators[2] a slightly more complex organizing

1. R. H. Fuchs, catalogue preface in *Documenta 7*, Kassel, 1982, vol. 1, p. XV.
2. The team consisted of an Artistic Director, Rudi Fuchs, Director of the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and an Artistic Committee composed of Coosje van Bruggen, formerly

Michael Asher. Proposal for official poster for Documenta 7. 1982.

principle than that of the simple agglomeration of the most recent samples of market-oriented avant-garde products.

Adorno

In 1959, some ten years after his return from exile in America, the philosopher T. W. Adorno encountered for the first time, at the second Documenta, the work of Jackson Pollock. For him, as for so many other visitors to the exhibition, that work became and remained a central point of reference for contemporary visual thinking. More than twenty years later at Documenta 7, American critics have converted the veins of Adorno's aesthetic thought—even while his major work, *Aesthetische Theorie*, remains untranslated into English—into a mine from which to extract a vocabulary of empty radicalism that is informed by neither the historical specificity nor the political acumen of its model. Rather, Adorno simply provides them with a jargon of justification for the reemergence of irrationalism in contemporary German painting.

Asher

Michael Asher's contribution to Documenta looked as if its censorship had been merely the product of circumstance. His proposal: the reconstruction of the wing walls from the ground floor of Haus Esters in Krefeld, Germany (a private residence designed and constructed by Mies van der Rohe in 1931, recently restored to function as a museum with one of the curators of Documenta 7 as its director). The walls of Asher's reconstruction were intended to be installed according to their original floor plan on the second floor of the Orangerie at Kassel and to function there as regular display surfaces in the context of the exhibition. This proposal was accepted by the curatorial committee several months before the opening of the show, and construction had begun when Asher visited Kassel in May. With the walls nearing completion, however, the curators must finally have understood the implications of the work. Construction of the walls was abandoned before the addition of the dark stained door frames and baseboards that Mies's design had provided for the framing of the stark white walls of the home. The framed objects to be displayed on the walls would have suffered—in the opinion of the curators—from the suggestion of the architectural conditions of the private home. As though Cindy Sherman's fashion plates depicting the cynical recapitulation of the rituals of female submissiveness could be affected by baseboards.

Curator, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Germano Celant, Contributing Editor, *Artforum*; Johannes Gachnang, formerly Director, Kunsthalle, Bern; and Gerhard Storck, Director, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld.

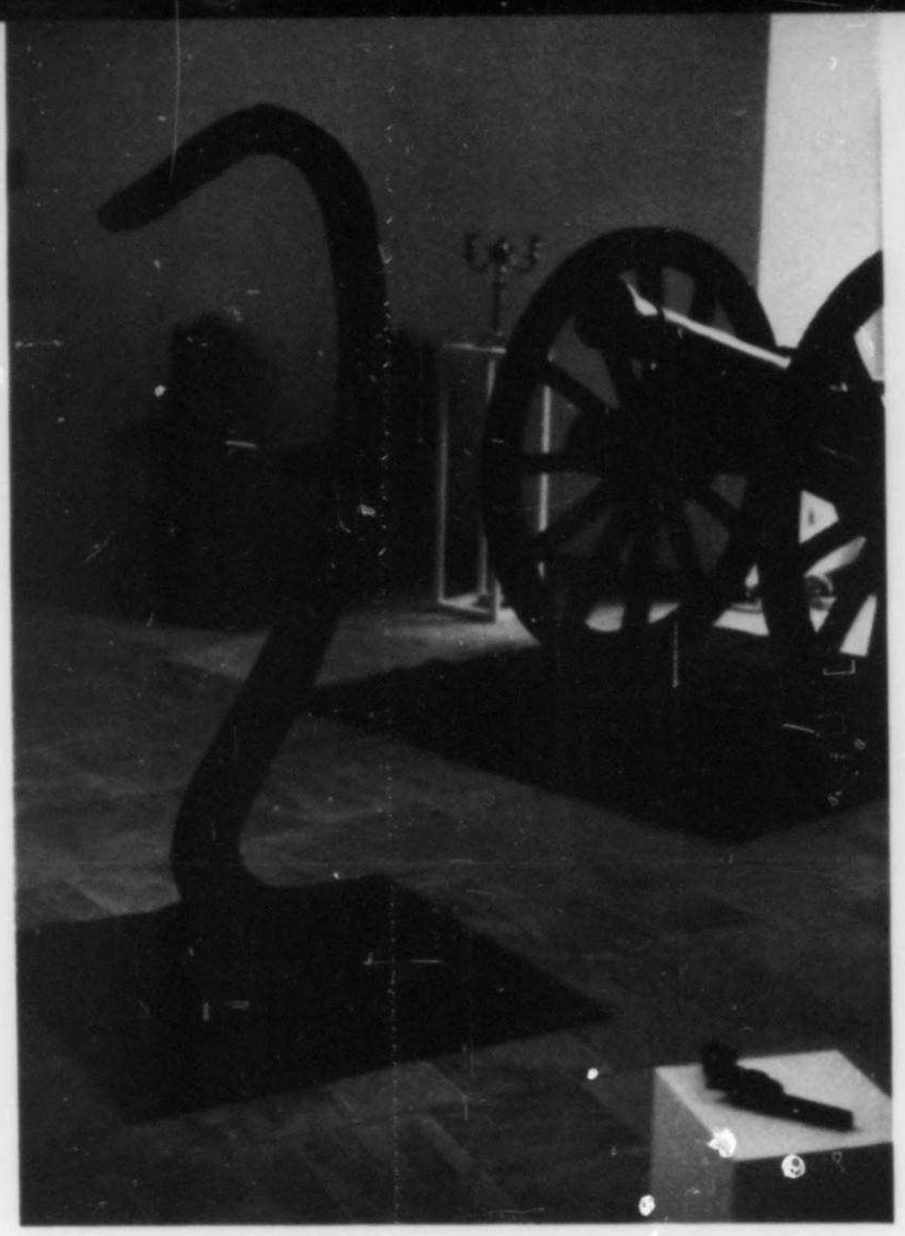
Broodthaers

If only what John Russell wrote in the *New York Times* had been true: "Documenta 7 could indeed be said to be under the benign and posthumous aegis of Broodthaers." Marcel Broodthaers's work was the sole exception to the exhibition's proviso that nothing be included if it dated from more than two years back. (Presumably this rigorous but pointless imposition was established as a selection criterion by the curators to guarantee the currency of the exhibits.) Broodthaers's oeuvre is beginning to emerge as one of the most complex aesthetic investigations of the conditions of artistic production and reception within the framework of modernism and its social institution, the museum. As such it embodies the true postmodern practice of the 1970s. In their random juxtaposition of mutually exclusive aesthetic positions, the curators may well have attempted to imitate certain aspects of Broodthaers's work. But for Broodthaers himself, this notion of aesthetic paradox did not arise from compromised thinking or lack of historical commitment, or from the used art dealer's attitude that anything goes. On the contrary, when, in 1972, Broodthaers commissioned both Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz to paint paintings of eagles for his final museum fiction, the *Museum of Eagles*, his purpose was not to effect a liberal reconciliation of contradictions in order to affirm the existing power structure, but rather to intensify the dialectical opposition of the two approaches, to sharpen the viewers' awareness of the framing conditions within which both practices are contained.

Curatorial Creativity

A second work by Asher, one that had been commissioned for Documenta, was dropped without explanation. This was to have been a poster for the exhibition, for which Asher used the figures representing male and female unemployed workers, which had been designed in the early 1930s by the Cologne progressivist artist Gerd Arntz for the Isotype language developed by the Viennese sociologist Otto Neurath. The poster implicitly questioned the historical adequacy of an international art exhibition costing seven million Deutschmarks at a moment of considerable social instability and economic crisis. Paradoxically, Asher's proposal was replaced by a design that the exhibition's curators culled from an earlier work by him for the Art Institute of Chicago, in which he had integrated a sculpture by Jean-Antoine Houdon into his installation. Misunderstood, Asher's idea returned, inverted, in their design for the official poster and postcard for Documenta 7, which used a photograph of Johann August Nahl's neoclassical portrait of the Landgrave Ludwig II, a reference to the past and its inherent authority.[3]

3. That Walter Nikkels's design for Documenta referred specifically to Asher's Chicago in-



Marcel Broodthaers. Décor. *1975. (Detail of reconstructed installation at Documenta 7.)*

Artists can, in fact, be excellent designers, especially at a historical moment when ornament and decoration are among the only practices they are allowed to reactivate. But the curator as poet and the designer as artist—insofar as the curators and designers of Documenta 7 tried their hands at it[4]—only constituted a leaden addition to the verbal and visual ballast that has accumulated within the ideological space of culture.

Décor

Décor—A Conquest was the title of Marcel Broodthaers's installation at the ICA in London in 1975. This, his last major installation work, was reconstructed under the supervision of his widow at Documenta 7, where it functioned as an allegorical anchor. The work consisted of two main sections. One was an arrangement of lawn furniture, including a table on which a puzzle of the Battle of Waterloo was scattered, accompanied by a collection of contemporary machine guns. The other was an awe-inspiring arsenal of historical cannons interspersed with eighteenth-century furniture and candelabra, a taxidermist's boa constrictor, palm trees, and red carpets. Broodthaers's *tableaux morts*—they

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stallation is evidenced in the Documenta catalogue, vol. 2, p. VIII, where the design is pictured in conjunction with two photographs of the Art Institute's sculpture of George Washington by Houdon, one in its old location at the museum's entrance, the second showing its relocation by Asher in the eighteenth-century gallery.

4. See, for example, the statement by Walter Nikkels, the designer of the exhibition, in which he states: "The placement of the walls within the classicistic order of the spaces can be seen as a negative sculpture" (Documenta catalogue, vol. 2, p. XXXIX).

function as hybrids of the contemporary *nature morte* and historical *tableau vivant*—were always conceived for and placed within the particular circumstances and specific moments of an exhibition and an institution. *Décor—A Conquest* originally provided the setting for the shooting of Broodthaers's last film, *La Bataille de Waterloo*, which combines shots taken from the window of the ICA of the Trooping of the Colors on Pall Mall, in celebration of the Queen's birthday, with footage of a woman trying to piece together the puzzle of the Battle of Waterloo taken in the installation itself. It is impossible to verify whether the film stemmed from the installation, or the installation served as a pretext for the film, and it was therefore only appropriate that *La Bataille de Waterloo* had its German premiere during the opening of Documenta 7. We can rest assured, however, that Broodthaers would have proposed an entirely different work for the context of this exhibition, which makes it all the more astonishing that *Décor* could unravel the secret fatality of the historical moment within which Documenta 7 seemed to rejoice.

Discoveries

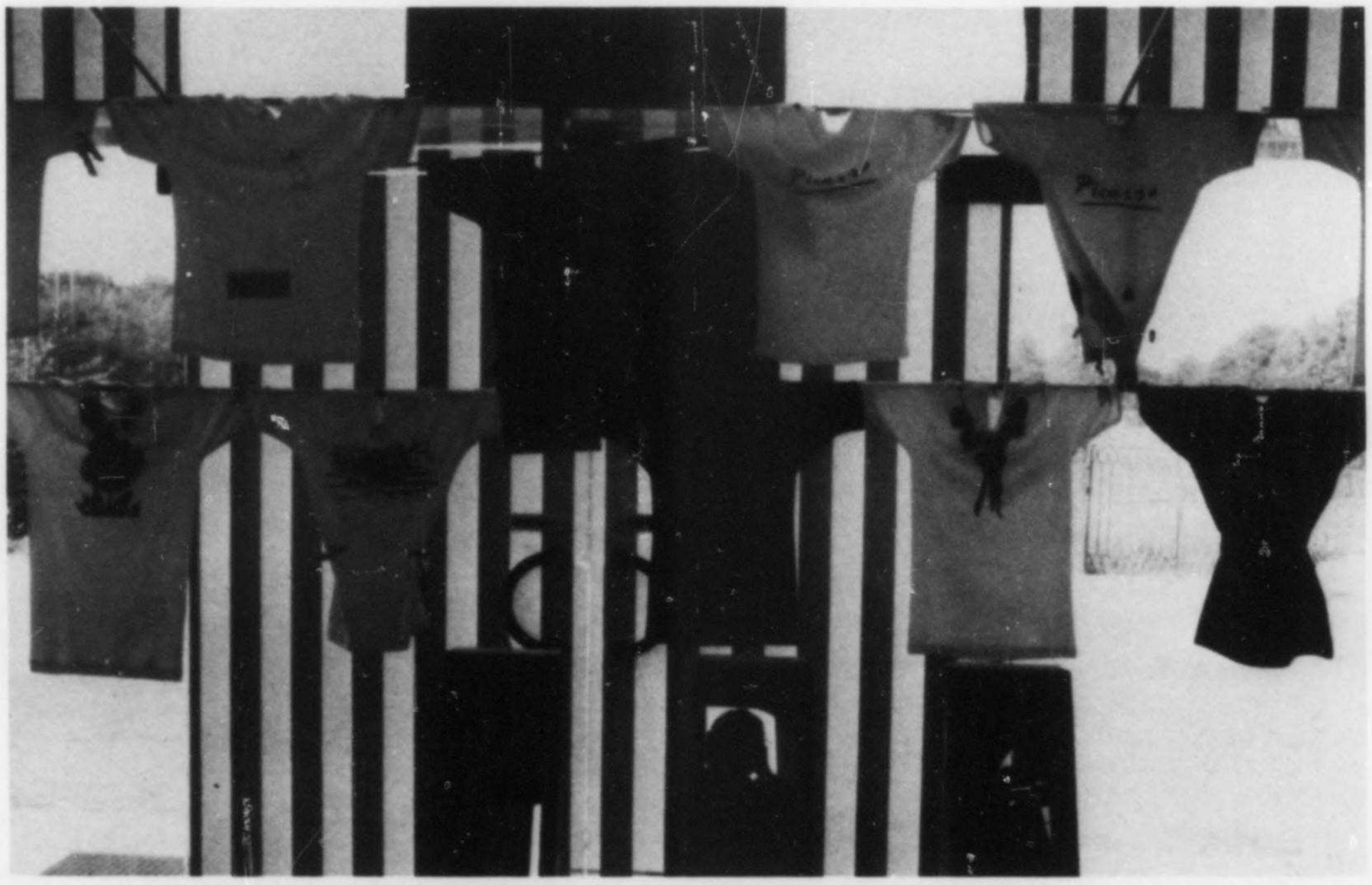
It might be expected that one of the functions of an exhibition of contemporary art on the scale of Documenta (one of its curators compared it, in the catalogue, to the Olympic Games) would be discovery: of new perspectives and unknown artists, of unrecognized contexts and relationships within various disciplines, of new methodological approaches, as well as of rediscoveries of artists whose works deserve reevaluation. In 1972 Documenta 5 disclosed a whole range of such new perspectives, and introduced new work by young artists of considerable consequence for the definition of art practice in the years to come. Moreover, it opened the exhibition to a notion of visual culture that threw into the sharpest possible relief the obsolescent isolation of autonomous high culture. Ten years later Documenta 7 closed down that investigation in favor of a conservative realignment of the Beaux-Arts categories and a methodological agnosticism which undoubtedly sees itself as postmodern. Its reaffirmation not only emphasizes the hegemony of painting and sculpture, but also reestablishes the supremacy of the museum as the social institution within which the discourse of high art originates and must remain. Documenta 7 proclaimed the individuality of the artist and the autonomy of artistic practice. (Fuchs's statement—"Modern art does not have a history—it is an experiment"[5]—is one that we might last have read around 1955 in a commercial gallery's brochure promoting French tachism.) It obviously does not consider the current historical framework and how that might have determined the curators'

5. R. H. Fuchs, "I Want to Make an Opera out of Works of Art," interview by Heiner Stachelhaus, *Das Kunstwerk*, June 1982, pp. 4–5.

present enchantment with conservative clichés. The painted expression, that predictable stereotype that stared out from every second wall surface of the show, promised aesthetic discoveries and adventures of the kind one expects to parade down a fashion-show runway: too shallow and breathless to be said to be bathed in ideology, they can only be said to be soaked in Zeitgeist.

Fashion Moda

The Fashion Moda pavilion at Documenta, transplanted from the South Bronx to its temporary high-art setting in the Fridericianum's English garden, was one of the few courageous curatorial choices. Through its petty-commodity program, where artists' tchatchkis and souvenirs were traded over the counter, the hidden order of exchange value underlying Documenta's high-art pretenses was revealed. One would hate to think, however, that this might be Fashion Moda's final destination (even though the name does suggest the ultimate location of the enterprise). Jenny Holzer, who, in collaboration with Stefan Eins, was responsible for bringing the Fashion Moda pavilion to Documenta, excels in both unmasking ideology at work in language and masking art as business to achieve a wide dissemination of her texts—printed on everything from T-shirts to facades. But when the work enters or leaves the gallery in the form of bronze plaques, small change indeed seems to have compromised Holzer's original radicalism.



Fashion Moda display of T-shirts by, among others, Christie Rupp and John Fekner. (Shown in front of Daniel Buren's work in situ at the Orangerie.)

Daniel Buren. Les Guirlandes. *1982. (Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren.)*

Garlands

Daniel Buren's work, *Les Guirlandes*, introduced sound and motion into Documenta 7, which was given over to painting's silence and stasis (in spite of its pretense of emotional turbulence). Together with the sound, the sense of historicity and temporal continuity of Buren's work contradicted the exhibition's general claim for the universality and timelessness of contemporary aesthetic production. A collection of musical samples—ranging from Lully and Philidon l'Ainé through Bach, Purcell, Mozart, Beethoven, and Verdi, to Offenbach and Scott Joplin—were broadcast over the large field leading the visitors to the Museum Fridericianum. These musical offerings were regularly interrupted by a litany of color names recited in fourteen languages. In the strict chronology of the musical samples, as well as in the abstract administrative listing of color terms, a parodic framework of historicization was proposed as a counterpoint to the exhibition's—and the curators'—concerted efforts to override the viewers' discovery of the real historical conditions of aesthetic practice by inspiring awe and dignity. Pennants of Buren's recognizable colored and white stripes were stretched above the field on the same poles that carried the loudspeakers, complementing the musical sideshow with an ambience of gaudiness appropriate to a fun fair or the grand opening of a gas station. This, in open confrontation to the discretion and rigor of the newly constructed white wall system that had been installed in the eighteenth-century museum for the display of objects. The successful synthesis of all these elements in Buren's work probably accounts for the attempt by the majority of the show's curators to prevent its installation (although they finally relented at the last minute) since the majority of viewers might have perceived the work as a decoration installed by the exhibition's organizers to celebrate the inauguration of their show.

Haacke

Hans Haacke's two-part installation, *Oelgemaelde—Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* (1982), was neither very well placed within the exhibition nor very well received. Benevolent critics deemed it necessary to defend Broodthaers's work against its genuine historical and political potential as that potential was revealed in Haacke's timely homage. The juxtaposition of the meticulously painted portrait of Reagan (Haacke's own accomplishment) with a mural-sized photograph of an antiwar demonstration on the occasion of Reagan's visit to the German capital, brought too many aspects of the interdependence of aesthetic and political matters into focus to please those conservative critics who would prefer to neutralize Broodthaers's work within an aesthetic nebulosity. Haacke's reference was to an installation by Broodthaers at Documenta 5 in which inscriptions contained within a black square were painted on the floor. Such inscriptions as "rêver, peindre" were replaced halfway through the exhibition's duration by "private property." The elements of traditional museum exhibi-

Hans Haacke. Oelgemaelde – Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers. *1982*.

tions that demarcate the threshold between life and high art—stanchions, velvet ropes, carpets—frequently used by Broodthaers in his installations, returned in Haacke's work as the means of bracketing the two apparently incompatible elements of his work, the painting of the leader and the photograph of the crowd. But the particular depiction in Haacke's painting and its mock-dignified presentation generated discomfort within the ambience of an exhibition where the dignity of both art and its manner of presentation were declared primary concerns of the curators (Fuchs at one point mentioned that he would install carpets in what had once been a gutted building). If Haacke's work once again broke the unspoken rule that art can be critical as long as it is discreet—a rule that Broodthaers had often emphasized in work that pointed to rituals of discretion—then it responded to a historical situation and a particular instance where Broodthaers's strategies had themselves been acculturated and falsified by the curators. The repeated devaluation of these already devaluated strategies was, then, seen by Haacke as the only means by which to pay homage to the inherent political radicalism of their author.

Kassel

Every four or five years, a small provincial city in West Germany (comparable in size, climate, and location within the country to Akron, Ohio) requests the pleasure of the international art world's company. In the eighteenth century, Kassel was the glamourous residence of the aristocracy of Hesse, patrons of one of the first museum buildings of Europe (1769–79), the Museum Fridericianum. Hesse was, at the time, a feudal state notorious for the rigidity of its army. It was the state where one of the most innovative German playwrights, Georg Büchner, was born, prosecuted, and imprisoned after the failure of the revolution in the early nineteenth century. In the 1930s Kassel served as one of Hitler's most important ammunition depots, a central point connecting Berlin, capital of the Reich, with its western and southern regions. Destroyed by the Allies in the final phase of World War II, Kassel was reconstructed in a rush during the economic miracle to become one of the ugliest cities west of Siberia, a city where Volkswagens are now assembled by Turkish, Spanish, and Italian hands. The blandness of the architecture is only exceeded by the blandness of the inhabitants, who seem to have eaten their way from their Fascist past to their neo-capitalist present. The population of Kassel could not care less about Documenta and international contemporary art, just as the international art world could not care less about the people of the city and state that sponsors the most expensive of art exhibitions. But the 250,000 to 450,000 visitors that the exhibition attracts during the 100 days of its installation come from all over the country as well as from neighboring countries, excluding, of course, those neighbors to the east, the East Germans. Unlike its visits to the Venice or Paris biennals, where the food is good and the monu-

ments are plenty, the international art world dreads going to Kassel, yet is always eager to participate, for Documenta—both the exhibition and its tradition—is an ideological institution where the aesthetic stock of the present day is evaluated and tested.

Mysticism, Postmodern

In one of his many pronouncements on Documenta artists, Rudi Fuchs declared Lawrence Weiner a mystic and paired him with Jannis Kounellis, whom he wished to be seen as Weiner's Greco-Italian counterpart. Six years earlier, Fuchs had described Weiner's work in the catalogue of his exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum:

> Is this work then visual art? That depends on use (on what one wants or expects to do with it); also it depends on how a notation can be read. The use of language conforms in no way to the use of language within poetry. Designation of the work as visual art is a question of utility only. (There is no reason to name it differently.)
>
> The work is pure praxis. It is not carried by an aesthetic theory; there is just a sense of utility. Important is that it enters the culture —not as aesthetic satisfaction but as a methodology to deal with material culture.[6]

If this description does not correspond to our notion of mysticism, it nevertheless helps us understand the recourse to mysticism that pervades the catalogue rhetoric and installation strategies of the present exhibition. In this context mysticism is called up to reconcile the blatant contradictions within current aesthetic practice, and is required to cover over the systematic breakdown of liberal thought and its present conversion to outright reaction. To be committed intellectually to a program of bourgeois enlightenment and rational progress as long as the expanding economy allows for it, but to fall back into a swamp of irrationalism when economic crisis requires a legitimation of hierarchical order and privilege—this is the historical constellation that generates the perverse embrace and willful combination of mutually exclusive aesthetic practices forming the foundation of Fuchs's installation. The postmodern coexistence of aesthetic contradictions pretends to assure and defend the continued existence of a sublime high culture against the vulgar forces of "the media and politics," as Fuchs puts it. (Whose media? Whose politics?)

Certainly in the 1930s one could have combined a painting by Mondrian and a flower still life by Vlaminck (they had once been historically and geo-

6. R. H. Fuchs, *Lawrence Weiner*, Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, 1976, pp. 19–20.

graphically close enough to be thought of as artists of the same region who "spoke the same dialect") in the same way that Fuchs combined, for example, the work of Hans Haacke with the paintings of a lost local talent called Jörg Immendorf. But it takes a particular urgency for mystification to claim for such juxtapositions—of eminently relevant artistic practice, on the one hand, and the current revival of trivial picture making, on the other—that they represent the "battle of the century."[7] With this inflated phrase, Fuchs refers to another such combination, that of Andy Warhol and a painter from the rural environment of southern Germany by the name of Anselm Kiefer, who uses straw and tar in his paintings to give tangible form to his desire to return to primary matters.

Opera and Operator

Too numerous and too frequently quoted from his notorious letter inviting artists to participate in Documenta 7 are the confessions of the Artistic Director's creative ambitions to make the exhibition into anything other than an exhibition—a poem called *Le Bateau ivre*, a story, a fairy tale, or, ultimately, an opera: "I understand myself to be a composer. I will make an opera out of works of art, paintings, and objects. . . ."[8] Such explicit manipulation stands in overt contradiction to Fuchs's professed concern to present the artworks without an imposition of historical or stylistic categories, as immaculate aesthetic conceptions. This reveals the extent to which the administration and distribution of the individualized products of the contemporary avant-garde partakes of the conditions of the culture industry, which must constantly mythify its activities in order to maintain its credibility. Or—its dialectical complement—the extent to which industry must employ the clichés of individualism and the cult of personality as a means of selling its products at a time when genuine individuality is most threatened. No wonder, then, that the desire for poetry expressed by high culture's top manager (the three-year salary of Documenta's Artistic Director was 365,000.00 DM) and the private confessions of the corporate entrepreneur coincide almost word for word. Thus, Ralph Lauren:

> I'm inspired by America. . . . When I do the shows, it's all a dream . . . There's a vibration I'm expressing, as if I'm a writer. When that model came down the runway in the patchwork skirt and the pictorial sweater with the school and the kids and the trees across the front, and Neil Diamond was singing "Hang onto the Dream"—that was everything I believe in, everything I am.[9]

7. Fuchs, "I Want to Make an Opera."
8. *Ibid.*
9. Jesse Kornbluth, "Ralph Lauren: Living the Dream," *Vogue*, August 1982, p. 305.

Parsifal's Props

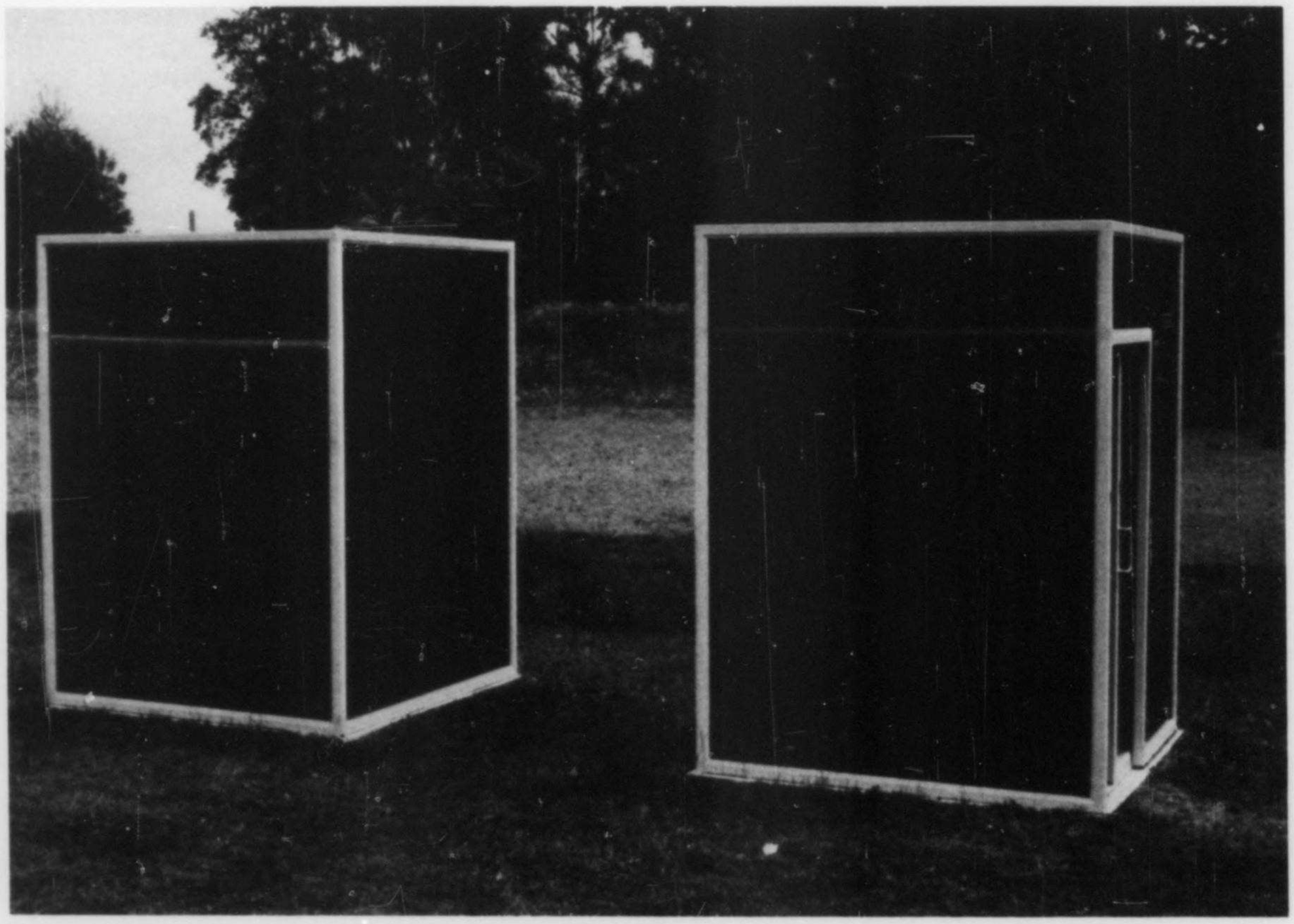
Paradoxically Documenta 7, whose declared goal was to restore dignity to the visual arts and to defend high culture against the incursions of the media, opened with the German premiere of Syberberg's *Parsifal*. The film's French producers, with their businessmen's sense of what is proper, had turned down Fuchs's plea for the world premiere, thus frustrating the conservative aesthete's attempt at a media coup for Documenta. Nevertheless, the film director's pathetic desire to be an artist and the exhibition director's ambition to participate in the Zeitgeist on a grand scale did find their meeting ground: in the basement of the Fridericianum. There the monumental kitsch of *Parsifal*'s gigantic plaster props (Wagner's head, Hitler's hand) loomed in the dark (where better might the exhibition's repressed desires be displayed?). In the moviemaker's obsession to be taken seriously as an artist, while also cashing in on the media's current success at toying with fascism under the guise of historical introspection; in the exhibition director's need to show these emblems of the fashionable taste for the prohibited, together with his wish to make the historically unacceptable tasteful—in these the collapse of modernist aesthetic criteria that pervaded the exhibition as a whole revealed its implications for the future: the conflict between the forms of mass culture—which appear as seamless totalities within which the individual subject is constituted—and the aesthetic practices of individual artists—which open up a dimension of critical negativity—cannot be resolved by the social institutions which support and contain aesthetic practice. They lack the critical resistance, let alone the political consciousness, and under the pressure of crisis will yield to whatever system of representation and method of distribution is necessary for the ideologically organized dismantling of modernism.

Sculpture, Outdoors

With Documenta 7's renewed faith in the institution of the museum—both its mode of display and the ideology it imposes—sculpture appears to have entered a historical cul-de-sac. This is particularly the case for that work which, partially motivated by a critique of the discrete object, extended its investigations to an architectural dimension. Either by excluding certain sculptors or by presenting their work in an incoherent manner (Richard Serra was, for example, represented only by a drawing), the curators made it appear that sculptural activity had withered to utter marginality. One has only to remember the extraordinary sculpture exhibitions organized by Germano Celant—"Ambiente Arte" at the 1976 Venice Biennale—and Kaspar Koenig—"Skulptur" at Muenster in 1977—to realize the drastic change in recent curatorial attitudes. Three works in Documenta 7 did, however, engage in an exemplary way in a reflection upon the transformation of sculpture during the past two decades, including the recent preoccupation with outdoor installation: Claes Oldenburg's

Pick-Axe (1982), Carl Andre's *Steel Peneplain* (1982), and Dan Graham's *Two Adjacent Pavilions* (1978–82). Rather than having to face the contradictions of placing contemporary sculpture in the urban environment, these works accepted their confinement in the setting of an eighteenth-century English garden, but at least they did not destroy the garden's historical architecture as did the sculptural installations of past Documenta exhibitions.

Oldenburg's work, placed on the bank of the Fulda River, introduced a giant tool of physical labor into a landscape of leisure. The blue steel axe was tilted at an angle reminiscent of Tatlin's monument and its attempt to replicate the inclination of the globe. Oldenburg's work escaped questions of the paradoxical nature of iconic representation using large scale steel construction by functioning in relation to Kassel's *Hercules* sculpture. Oldenburg confronted that work, "an aristocratic folly on top of a hill," with a banal contemporary object turned into a sculptural sign of classicist measure. The dimension of collectivity—the essential quality of any public monument—in Oldenburg's work depended upon iconicity and its scale, but it remained external to the



Dan Graham. Two Adjacent Pavilions. *1978–82*.

sculpture's structure. In Andre's steel plate sculpture that collective dimension was achieved mechanistically through the sheer expansion of size—to 300 meters in length—and through the implicit use of the work as a walkway in the park.

Graham's work is dependent upon both Oldenburg's ingenious transformation of public signs into monumental sculpture and Andre's materialist definition of perception through the physical involvement of the viewer. But Graham incorporates the dimension of collectivity into the material structure of the work, insofar as the work embodies that dimension in both the perception and the use of the sculpture. Graham's pair of two-way mirrored pavilions differed from each other only in the light conditions resulting from their ceilings, one of which was opaque, the other translucent. This determined whether the viewers inside the pavilion could watch people outside without being observed, and vice versa. Using the most common element of recent international-style corporate architecture, the mirrored glass curtain wall, Graham transformed that architecture into particularized pavilion units of a size—just large enough to feel more spacious than a telephone booth, yet not as large as, say, a bus shelter—which did not impose upon the eighteenth-century garden architecture. The pavilions engaged the visitors to Documenta in a reflection upon the social implications of perceptual activity, ranging from self-reflection, through interactions generated by the two pavilions among groups of spectators, to the inversion of the language of corporate architecture into an analytical model that could be seen as architectural sculpture.

Warhol

As a collector of weathervanes, Andy Warhol apparently knows as much about how oxidation is induced as he does about painting. His *Oxidation Paintings* at Documenta were among the rare pleasurable exceptions to the generally somber and pompous offerings of the exhibition. From a distance they appeared to be a new version of Art Informel; their glistening metallic surfaces, their emphatic splashes and spots, their undercover preciousness seemed to share the worst aspects of Yves Klein. (These qualities already made viewers aware that they were looking at very contemporary work.) When, however, the authorship and production procedure of the works were revealed—Warhol or an assistant urinated onto canvases prepared with a copper emulsion, causing highly gestural green splotches of oxidation to form on the reddish ground—it became clear that their mysterious quality was not only the result of their sheer physical beauty nor even their truth to materials. Indeed, what arrested the viewers in their disenchanted wanderings through the show that had attempted to be a fairy tale was relief from the manufactured angst of the dozens of Dutch, German, and Swiss art-school graduates.

Lawrence Weiner. Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side to Form a Row of Many Colored Objects. *1978–82. (Photos: Daniel Buren.)*

Weiner

For the past fifteen years or more Lawrence Weiner has consistently used language as a medium to respond to the contemporary desire for aesthetic representations. The success of his linguistic strategies—in his texts, films, and videotapes—is evident in the almost total defeat of the critics' and historians' attempts to impose a secondary discourse on the primary language (the paraphrasing paragraphs which accompany Weiner's statements in Rudi Fuchs's 1976 catalogue form one of the rare exceptions). Weiner's tripartite contribution to Documenta 7 consisted of one inscription on the museum's exterior frieze, three on the museum's interior walls, and one on the paper wrapper that binds together the two volumes of the catalogue. Laconically, in the manner of allegorical inscriptions, these sum up not only the conditions of their own existence; but also, metonymically, the conditions, performance, and mode of representation of adjacent art objects; and finally, by logical extension, those of the exhibition at large. Weiner's statement, "Many colored objects placed side by side to form a row of many colored objects"—painted in upper-case letters in German on the frieze of the Museum Fridericianum beneath allegorical sculptures representing Philosophy, Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, History, and Astronomy—counterposed itself to the Latin inscription on the museum's portico frieze. The latter is incised into the architecture and gilded, while Weiner's inscription consists of bronze-colored letters applied with automobile lacquer sold by Chrysler to BMW. The particular function of this work was the restoration of the real conditions of discourse which underlay the accumulation

of mythical objects on display inside the museum. Its placement in an architectural setting insured a public mode of address, and its particular material pointed to the extension of the conditions of imperialism from economic to aesthetic matters.

Women Artists

Undoubtedly it was Coosje van Bruggen, the curator responsible for the selection of American artists, who was also responsible for the inclusion of a number of women artists whose work continues and develops the radical implications of the major work of the 1960s and '70s, and offers, therefore, the most stringent negation of what is currently presented as the new, predominantly male avant-garde of painting. Adequately presented within the exhibition, the work of Dara Birnbaum, Jenny Holzer, Sherrie Levine, and Martha Rosler would presumably have helped a wider audience to understand that the puerile performances of neoexpressionist artists are, despite their spectacular success, insufficient proposals for a definition of contemporary cultural practice. Prominent display was provided instead for the work of Gilbert and George, who seem to have functioned as spiritual leaders for the male curators in their installation of the masters. Whatever turn one took in the exhibition's labyrinth, one was confronted with another panel depicting Gilbert and George's London lives of petit bourgeois turpitude. And whatever wall space remained on the main floors of the central building had to yield to the German and Italian canvases vying for space, fame, and supremacy. Nevertheless, in spite

of dispersal and displacement (or, in Levine's case, because of the installation in the shadow of an Italian scenario), the women's work managed to function in its subversive contextual strategies.

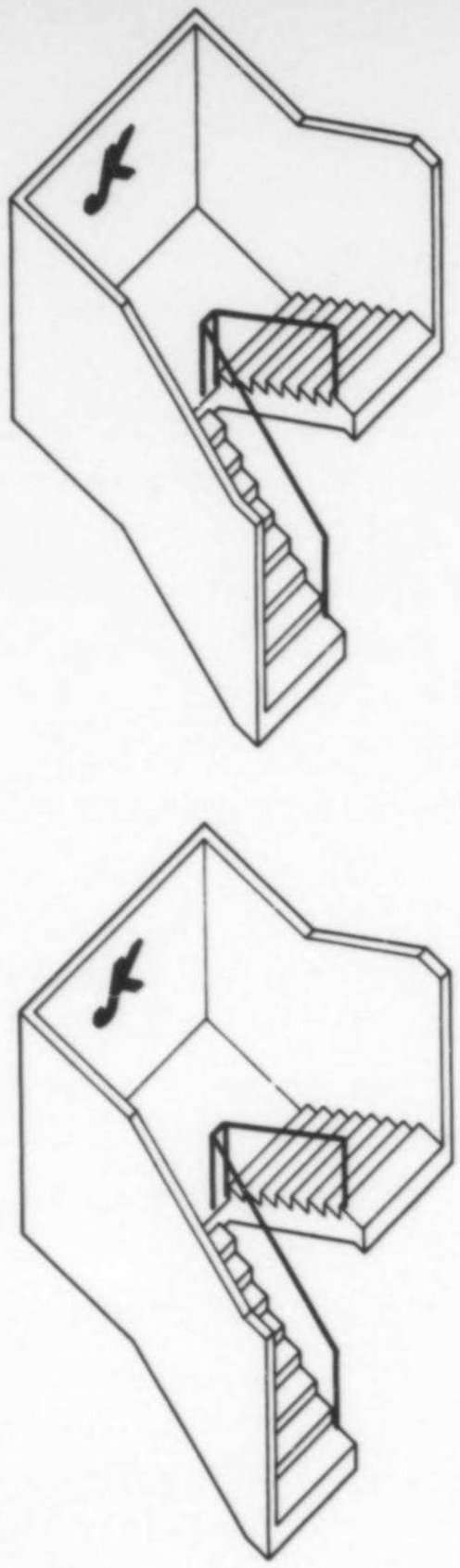
Dara Birnbaum's work, the only video work admitted to Documenta 7, was one of the most successful in the exhibition, even taking into account its juxtaposition with paintings by Boetti. Its success could be seen in its capacity to attract and hold the attention of large groups of predominantly young viewers, who obviously understood its explicit commitment to contemporaneity, a commitment which denies the false imposition of the new aesthetic sanctity. They presumably understood, as well, the work's critical capacity to interfere with the normal perception of that ideological environment which has become so totalizing in its effect upon everyday life, the hermetic environment of television. Clearly those gazing crowds in front of Birnbaum's three-monitor panel installations were not in awe of the dignity of a high-art discipline. Indeed, they were distracted viewers. But their distraction contained within it the seeds of critical distanciation. Their pleasure in the serially repeated TV imagery, as well as the recycled sounds of '60s rock music, shows the possibility of disrupting television's usual totalizing absorption. With Birnbaum's work, as with the tradition of Brechtian strategies generally, the viewers do not abandon reality through tur-

Dara Birnbaum. Left: PM Magazine. *1982. Right:* PM Magazine/Acid Rock. *1982.*

moil. The potential for critical negation in pleasurable distanciation prevents them from entering a spectacle whose apparent liberation only reinforces the reification of the perceptual process.

The last-minute invitation of Martha Rosler to Documenta resulted in a first-day performance, *Watchwords of the Eighties*, that confronted the attending international art world with a very specific question, that of the possibility of cultural resistance and activist criticism under the political and economic conditions of Reagan's America. Her performance, with its self-consciously artificial incorporation of rap talk and graffiti writing, was as specific to contemporary New York culture as the "real" graffiti painter Lee Quinones, who had been invited by the curators to paint the walls of a subterranean pedestrian passageway in Kassel (so much for the curators' commitment to the local dialect of art). As we see Rosler bouncing around stage like a street fighter with a ghetto blaster, it is apparent that her notion of authenticity contradicts the art world's desire to acculturate instantly any authentic sign of denial and resistance. The authenticity with which Rosler confronts the viewer is that of the apparent impossibility of political commitment and cultural activism within the framework provided by the cultural apparatus and the necessity of a transformation of practice within that framework.

Martha Rosler. Watchwords of the Eighties. *1982.*
(Photo: Richard Baron.)



John Knight. Project for Documenta 7. 1981–82.
(Drawing by Fumiko Goto.)

Two works in the exhibition received little attention due to their success in resisting subjugation to the curators' declamatory display style. The two artists deliberately situated their works in the stairwells of the Museum Fridericianum, away from the battlefield of prime exposure and enforced comparisons. Both works, that by German artist Lothar Baumgarten and that by West Coast artist John Knight, were written signs that had been integrated into the museum's architecture. Language was not, however, their primary field of investigation, nor did they subscribe to a reified notion of site specificity that ignores both the linguistic and the ideological dimensions of modernist practice in favor of the perceptual conditions generated by architecture.

John Knight's six nearly identical relief elements—his initials transformed into a logo design and covered with six different travel posters—were installed on the six landings of the museum's two lateral staircases. The symmetry of the installation and the repetition of the elements incorporated the strategies of

advertising and commodity display, contradicting the curators' attempt to camouflage the ways in which such strategies determine contemporary art practice and its exhibition. Through the drastic reduction of the work's material features and functions to the sign of individualization and authentication, Knight's installation made still another condition of the contemporary works at Documenta transparent.

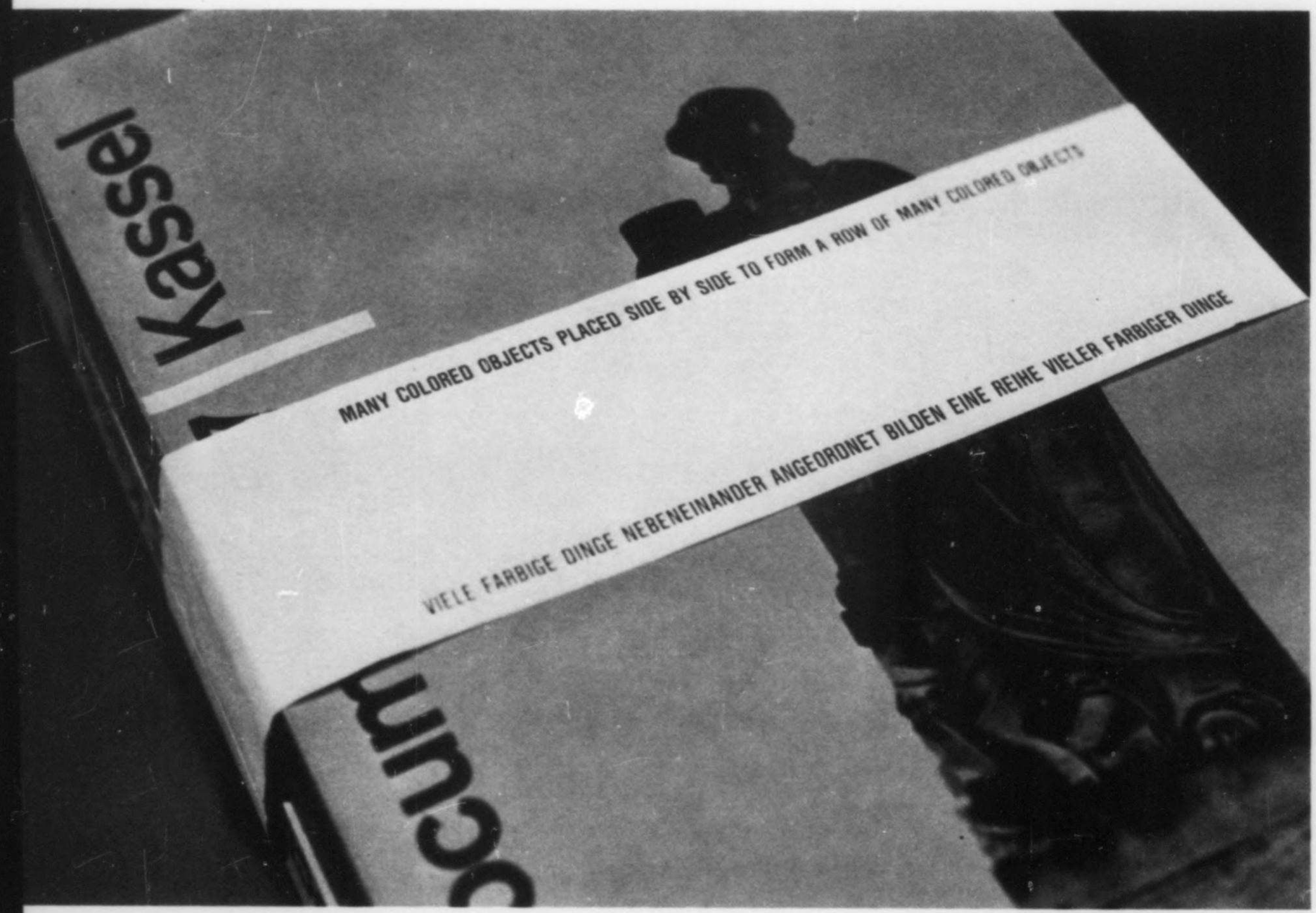
The restriction of drawing, or for that matter any other pictorial maneuver, to the design of a logo incorporating the artist's signature had already been proposed in Broodthaers's plastic plaques of the early '70s, as well as by Luciano Fabro's repeated execution of his signature and address in neon. Using the mode of conceptual tautology then current, these works anticipated in their material structures their inherent function as self-promotion and their ultimate status as commodities. In all of these works contemporary aesthetic practice acknowledges its share in the conditions of the culture industry, especially as it is evidenced in an exhibition like Documenta. Only with the explicit integration of these conditions does it seem that the works can open up a dimension of critical negation and authenticity.

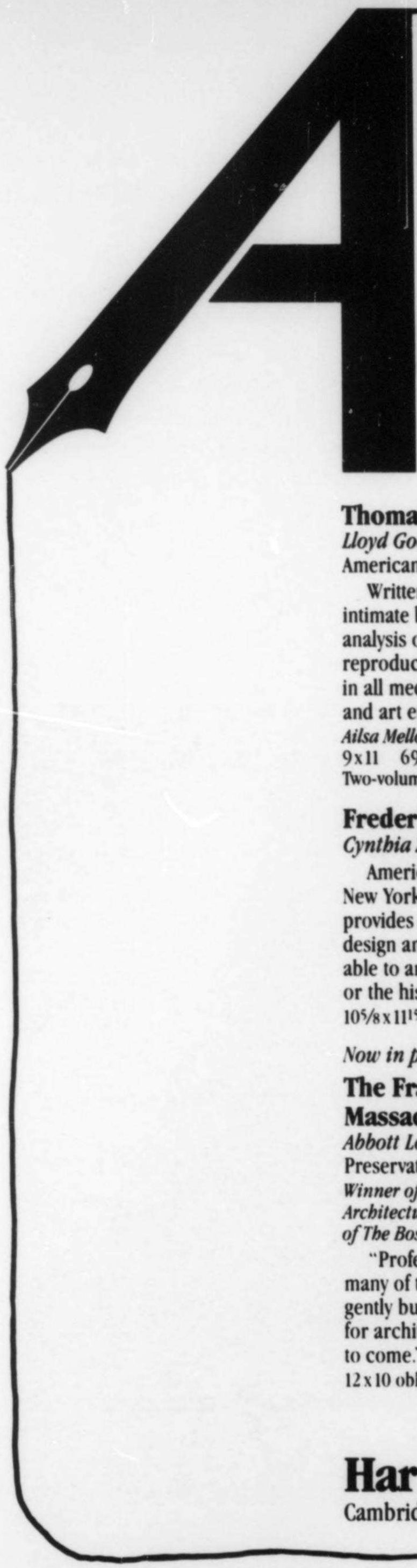
Baumgarten's inscriptions in dark red classicist letters on the balustrade beneath the rotunda of the central staircase listed the names of Indian tribes from the Amazon region, where Baumgarten had lived and done research from

Lothar Baumgarten. Monument for the Indian Nations of South America. *1982*.

1979 to 1981. The names of these tribes, many of which are threatened with extinction, might have appeared to the uninformed viewer like a dada sound poem. In such poems, as Walter Benjamin observed, the rediscovery of the purely phonetic dimension of language liberates the word from its slavery to meaning and simultaneously redeems the historical and material body of language. Thus, in Baumgarten's commemorative inscriptions the historical overdetermination of the current desire for primary expression—the romantic longing for the *Ursprache* of the noble savage that has haunted art since the nineteenth century—is dialectically related to the actual historical and political existence of those cultures that are still perceived by Western ethnocentricism as exotic and primitive, and that continue to be destroyed in the name of enlightenment.

Lawrence Weiner. Wrapper for catalogue of Documenta 7. 1982. (Photo: Louise Lawler.)





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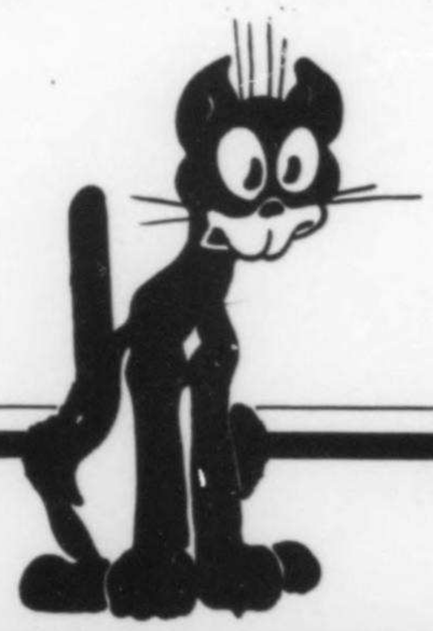

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