A SEMBLANCE OF POLITICS: THE DEMATERIALIZATION OF ART AND LABOR IN

ARGENTINA, MEXICO AND CHILE

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This dissertation studies the purported political radicalization of experimental art and design in the late 1960s and 1970s in Argentina, Mexico and Chile. Through the examination of artists, designers and critics including the Grupo Arte de los Medios, Oscar Masotta, Octavio Paz, Oscar Bony, Felipe Ehrenberg, the Groups Movement, Gui Bonsiepe and the cybernetic management project Cybersyn, I study how terms and problems such as the avant-garde, the socialization of art and the mutual implication of industrial design and management contemplated art's relationship to the social relations of production at a moment in which the challenge to art's traditional supports and the intensified socialization of productive labor made these two realms increasingly difficult to distinguish. In the Argentinean case, I show how Oscar Masotta and the Grupo Arte de los Medios pointed to the de-naturalization of ideology as the task of the avant-garde and, at the same time, to the limit of this same procedure in the inseparability of image and enjoyment. In the Mexican case, I argue that the Groups addressed the Revolutionary legacy of art's socialization by simultaneously inhabiting the form of the artists' collective and re-defining both art and artistic labor as cultural work within the social relations of production. The Groups thus point to the political potential inherent in their organizational form both through and against the muralist legacy. In the Chilean case, I argue

that Cybersyn consummated the fraught relationship between art and industry that defined the avant-garde of the Bauhaus and Ulm School of Design by transforming the sticky question of style into the infrastructure of subjectivation in the management of the Chilean workforce. Style thus marks the thin line joining and separating auto-poiesis and praxis. Whether through the intervention into the mass media, the collectivization of cultural work or the making operative of style through the infrastructural function of industrial design, I argue that each case points to a form of ideological mediation that cleaves close to the figure and process of capitalist self-reproduction while still insisting on this slight subjective gap as the space of its potential politicization and critique.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Karen Benezra was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. She earned her B.A. from Bard College in 2004 before pursuing her doctorate in Romance Studies at Cornell University. She has served on the editorial board of *diacritics* and continues to work as a corresponding editor for *ARTMargins*. Karen is happy to be returning to the city of her birth.

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This dissertation studies the political radicalization of experimental art and design in Argentina, Mexico and Chile in the 1960s and 70s, arguing that we understand the critical value of such gestures through, but also beyond, the immediacy of their transgressive claims or utopian social propositions. My readings thus brush against the grain of a growing corpus of art historical and cultural criticism that has arisen over the last twenty years in response to the archival dispersion or institutional marginalization of works and movements like the ones examined here during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Such criticism has tended to locate the inherently political or emancipatory nature of such artistic works and movements as the feature that defines their critical import for the present. I argue that the works considered here are both more historically and socially complex and also more critically self-reflexive, or at least symptomatically charged, than claims based on their determinate content or immediate historical context can support. They asked how and why art should define itself with regard to other, heteronymous forms of social communication and labor, in short, to the social relations of production at the moment in which capitalist development would seem to blur this distinction. At the same time, they attempted to re-define the avant-garde or to grapple with the shortcomings of its earlier instantiations. In each case, I try to show how the contemplation of art or industrial design's social function was mediated by a shift in the regime of capitalist accumulation and the forms of subjective constitution and control it produced.

Two basic suppositions ground my choice of objects, periodization and theoretical framework. The first is that the shift from industrial to post-industrial capitalism insinuated itself in the global periphery even though its articulation at the social and economic level was neither uniform nor complete. Rather, the cases I study attest to the disjunction between the material processes of production and the seemingly precipitous articulation of new forms of subjective

constitution and control contemporary with them. The second is that the fields of art and design serve as privileged loci for analyzing this revolution of the social link. Art's turn away from its traditional supports and design's turn away from the spiritual aspects of form imply a larger critical, methodological question not so much about what defines art, but rather how to conceptualize the persistence of ideological mediation within contemporary capitalism at the formal level of its mediation.

The suggestive word "de-materialization," coined almost simultaneously by the Argentinean and North American art critics Oscar Masotta and Lucy Lippard circa 1967, provides a bridge between these ideological and infrastructural processes. By suggesting this connection, I should clarify that my goal is not simply to note either the simultaneity or the mechanical determination of one by the other. Rather, I signal the ways in which the challenge to art's material supports and purported social autonomy pointed to the slight difference separating the realm of social self-reproduction internally under the emergent conditions of real subsumption.

I attempt to give account of this movement through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework to the extent that it allows us to contemplate a subject of experience constituted by his or her relationship to a historically determined social structure. Likewise, it allows us to trace how this the social link or structure entails a dynamic relationship its own incompletion and potential revolution at any given moment. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three, Lacan's notion of the social link or discourse understands structure as a dynamic action producing and also produced by its relationship to the real beyond, or implanted dynamically within, symbolic deceptions or imaginary identities. Far from determining the subject, it is precisely the subject's internal exclusion from the social that points at once to the ambivalent

hold of the status quo and its point of fracture. Beyond affirming or "applying" this framework, it allows me to register the ways in which the coordinates of knowledge, enjoyment and authority manifest a profound change in the works and period studied.

I draw on Lacan's development on the psychotic *sinthome*, a term that refers to the knotting of enjoyment and imaginary content meant to serve as the subject's minimal relationship to the social link. Implicit in the sinthome's function is a *connaissance* about the material contingency that grounds symbolic identification and, in turn, the social link. Via Lacan's interpreter, Jacques Alain Miller, Slavoj Žižek has often pointed to the *sinthome* as a clinical phenomenon and theoretical notion indicative of the limits to cultural critique in the present because of its constitutively unanalyzable character. By constituting the subject relation to the social in lieu of the paternal function, the *sinthome* also signals inefficiency of symbolic authority in contemporary society from this perspective. Against such facile analogies between the clinical and the social, I explore the ways these works trace this minimal relationship to the social as the form of mediation proper to contemporary capitalism and the political prospects of our resistance to it. While it would be inherently contradictory to speak of a "psychotic" social link, Lacan's development on the *sinthome* nonetheless provides a suggestive way of broaching a formal understanding the social link that resists complicity with the immanence of political change to social production whether in an affirmative or negative tone. What emerges from the works I study here, as from the subjective practice of the *sinthome*, is the insistence of a certain minimal space of subjectivation, or at the very least, of an unresolved historical problem analyzable at a formal level. One of the theoretical questions posed by present study is how Lacan's interest in the failure and refashioning of the paternal function questions the conditions under which the labor of the unconscious resists or complies with its subsumption under capital.

The subsumption of labor by capital refers to the process by which capitalism survives only in its constant self-destruction and renovation either by extension or intensification. Whereas in formal subsumption existing social relations are transmuted from within, leaving the old shell on a society now mediated by abstract values, Marx defines the process of real subsumption as one that realizes capitalist social relations of production properly speaking. It extracts surplus value through the qualitative, rather than just quantitative, changes to the technologies, organization and control of the factory and labor, and, consequently, to the whole of social relations. As discussed in Chapter Two and as often signaled within contemporary interpretations of immaterial and collective work, this process presumes the increasing socialization and "de-materialization" of manual labor, such that the general social knowledge expropriated and objectified in technology eventually re-absorbs this labor. We can understand de-materialization, in this sense, as referring both to the decreasing need for (manual) labor Marx foresaw in the most advanced modes of capitalist production and to the way in which general social knowledge would eventually come to mediate between socialized labor and the social body they produce. Where this process should have upended the source of value in labor, the increasing socialization and de-materialization of non-specialized labor has in fact only intensified and expanded the realms of productive activity, along with the forms of subjectivation necessary to ensure capitalism's supposedly smooth functioning.

Real subsumption thus also describes the logical operation at work in what is often discussed in the same breath as a shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist regime of accumulation, that is, a structural change in the social and political systems, as well as in the material processes of production, circulation and consumption, whose effects were felt most widely beginning with the oil crisis of 1973. By insisting on the way that the politicization of art and design in the 60s

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and 70s passes through a reflection on the social and subjective effects of this change, I have tried to challenge the dominant trend in the how Latin American cultural criticism has periodized this shift over the last twenty-five years.

Many Latin American countries experienced the world-wide crisis of the Fordist model of accumulation through the crisis of the national-popular state projects. In addition to the political inclusion and ideological capture of hitherto marginal populations, the national popular political economic model also implied the development of domestic industrial production and increased consumer buying power, phenomena fueled by protectionist import substitution policies and a hegemonic class alliance favorable to, if ultimately repressive of, organized labor. This combination of factors succeeded in effecting economic growth and a certain degree of social mobility during the mid-twentieth century in all three of the countries studied here. While the economic determination of the demise of the national popular project is in some sense assumed, it is rarely explored in its social and subjective dimensions. The economic shift that de-stabilized the often precarious class alliances and ideological-cultural projects characteristic of popular front politics, did not only manifest itself subjectively in the form of left-wing and right-wing political radicalization. Rather, the political and economic crises of the 1960s and 70s point to the articulation of an incipient and fragmentary change in the social relations of production in capital's peripheries as well as in its centers. The forms of mediation we find contemplated in art's dematerialization were determined by and determinate for the unfolding of capitalism's own self-revolution.

My interest is not to imprison the radical political and cultural endeavors of the period, like those analyzed here, into a form of rigid and mechanical economic determinism. Rather, it is to come to an understanding of the critical and perhaps even political potential in such moments

by interrogating the ways they thought or symptomatized the dynamics of subsumption socially, institutionally and ideologically both within and beyond their particular, national contexts. I attempt to do this by revealing the contradictory and temporally fragmented historical terrain of this process, as well as the moments of critical lucidity and political radicalization it produced, over and against the purported inevitability of the present.

In the Chapter One, "The Media Art Group: Ideology and Critique 'After Pop,'" I study the critical legacy of Oscar Masotta and the Media Art Group in the context of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella's Center for Visual Arts in the mid-1960s. I show how Oscar Masotta and the Grupo Arte de los Medios pointed to the de-naturalization of ideology as the task of the avant-garde and, at the same time, to the limit of this same procedure in the inseparability of image and enjoyment. Art's de-materialization before the influx of the mass media, as Masotta suggests, opens onto a tacit understanding of the material enjoyment at the productive core of ideology.

Chapter Two, "To Reconcile Art and the People: Octavio Paz and the Groups Movement" examines how the Groups, a movement of autonomous art collectives active in the 1970s, intervened at the symptomatic crux named by art's socialization and its legacy in post-Revolutionary Mexico. Against both liberal accounts that view the Groups as precursors to the freedom from national ideology in the free reign of the global art market and utopian approaches that praise collectivism in and of itself, I argue that the Groups' critical acuity lies in the way they problematized the socialization of labor and the educational function of art by assuming their organizational form as the vehicle of their intervention.

Chapter Three, "Cybersyn: A Revolution in Style," studies the history and artistic reception of a Cybersyn, a project for the cybernetic management of the nationalized industries of Salvador Allende Gossens' Popular Unity government in Chile. I argue that Cybersyn

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consummated the fraught relationship between art and industry that defined the avant-garde of the Bauhaus and Ulm School of Design inherited by the project's designer, Gui Bonsiepe, by transforming the sticky question of style into the infrastructure of subjectivation in the management of the Chilean workforce. As a project in the social technique of communication and control, rather than in the development of computational infrastructure, Cybersyn does not become culture in the absence of this infrastructure, but rather marks the thin line between subjective self-production and praxis.

CHAPTER 1

The Media Art Group: Ideology and Critique "After Pop"

Introduction

The Media Art Group [*Grupo Arte de los Medios*] was formed at the University of

Buenos Aires's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in 1965 under the leadership of Oscar Masotta,

literary critic, autodidact philosopher and soon-to-be "anti-happenista" extraordinaire. The

Group took shape amidst the creative and commercial effervescence of the experimental art

scene flourishing at the epicenter of the Argentinean capital at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella's

Center for Visual Arts (CAV). Masotta and his colleagues claimed to redefine the social scope of

avant-gardist practice for the visual arts at the dawn of late capitalism. Though "conceptualism"

was a term foreign to experimental Argentinean art at the time, the Media Art Group not only

exemplifies one aspect of conceptual art but also charts a new and alternatively critical beginning

for conceptualism. In this sense, the Media Art Group's claim on the avant-garde and conceptual

art was concretely historical, reacting both to the encroachment of mass culture upon the

institution of art and to a broader shift in the social link and its relationship to ideology.

The Media Art Group sought to unmask the reified or mythical nature of information in

the mass media by intervening directly into it. At the crossroads of semiotics, Marxism and

media theory, the Media Art Group articulated the framework through which the avant-garde of

the late 1960s would interrogate the "political efficacy of art," as its members often referred to it.

The avant-garde's rebellion against the institution of art was simultaneously couched in an

understanding that the institutions themselves were inseparable from and implicated in the

fragmented but palpable articulation of postmodern culture in the capital city. Creating works

that revise the way in which we view the critical, anti-aesthetic gesture of conceptualism, the

Media Art Group paved the way for its radicalized successors by thinking and challenging the naturalization of ideology specific to late capitalist society at the formal level. In arguing for the continuity between the Media Art Group and its successors, I claim that the "political" valence of this work be read in opposition to the more typically avant-gardist claims on the collapse of art into life or political action that have come to define experimental art in Argentina during this period. Recuperating the simultaneously symbolic and historical acumen of the Media Art Group's project allows us to rethink the grounds on which we understand the radical political valence of the 1960s avant-garde in Argentina both on its own terms and, more broadly, as it relates to art's conceptualist or anti-aesthetic turn beginning in the 1960s.

Conceptualism, originally deemed "concept art," describes a tendency or general change in attitude toward the traditional object of art most closely associated with Anglo-American art criticism in the 1960s.[1] While descriptions and histories abound, Peter Osborne has provided perhaps the most succinct definition to date. Emerging from the crisis of the modernist paradigm, conceptualism made modernism's self-reflexivity the center of its articulation. At the same time, it rejected those aspects that defined modernism for the prominent theorist Clement Greenberg: the strict division of the arts and the supposedly intrinsic qualities of their media; the inherent privilege enjoyed by visual form; and the autonomy that this form presupposed at both the subjective level of contemplation and the social level of art's institutions and commercial sale.[2]

In part because of its limited and schematic nature, Osborne's definition allows us to approach some of the most lasting and important features of conceptualism, as articulated by the artist ideologues of first wave or "hard" conceptualism in the U.S., among them, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, and Lawrence Weiner. It is against the work, writings, and legacy of Kosuth, in

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[1] The artist Henry Flynt coined the term in an essay by the same title in the 1961 Fluxus book *An Anthology of Chance Operations*.

particular, that the "ideological" and "political" character of Latin American conceptualism is often posited. Glossing the very limited number of English-language sources available on Latin American conceptualism, even Osborne himself forgets the heuristic nature of his definitions. He characterizes all of Latin American conceptualism through reference to the very particular cases of Argentina and Brazil and then restricts their contribution to one aspect of the conceptualist project as a whole: the challenge to art's social autonomy through a direct engagement with publicity, mass media, and the market in everyday life. While Argentinean conceptualism does do this, it also does more than this with respect to its status as conceptual art. As Osborne points out, the critical potential in Kosuth's version of conceptualism became the very obstacle to realizing that potential. Freeing art from the determinations of artistic medium and form, conceptualism was to realize the purely self-reflexive and anti-aesthetic potential within modernism, taking Duchamp's readymade as its paradigm. The pretense to reduce art to the gesture of its own self-questioning meant privileging the idea of the work over the material through which this questioning would take form. Kosuth's representative brand of conceptualism thus made Duchamp's negative or anti-aesthetic gesture normative. In other words, art's self-questioning became the objective of art-making itself in a solipsistic gesture that tended to reinforce, rather than question, art's being. The attempt to question art by juxtaposing it to non-art came to define and dictate the contours of conceptual art and to reinstate its social autonomy, thus also failing to account for the new marketability of the minimal material support that even "art as idea" inevitably required. [3]

By allocating the contribution of Latin American conceptualism to its direct engagement with the social, Osborne implies that Media Art were to have somehow transcended Kosuth's

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[2] Osborne, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy," 18.
[3] Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, 33.

dilemma. To a certain extent, this is true, but only insofar as Masotta and his successors avoided Kosuth's peculiar attachment of conceptualism to a logical, positivist view of language. Media Art's contribution, in this sense, was to have predicated the radical, avant-garde potential in art's dematerialization on the very specific, historical relationship between the appearance and disappearance of art and ideology in the 1960s. In other words, those interpretations of the avant-garde that reinforce its claims to abolish art in the name of political action ignore the social context and subtle ways in which such works pretended to change the register through which we approach art's political efficacy.

The way in which Media Art understood the dematerialization of the art object as a critique of ideology expands upon Osborne's framework in advancing a militant notion of avant-gardism that was already critically aware of the historicity of this aesthetic remainder. In other words, we find the more directly political aspect of Media Art with respect to conceptual art in the productive tension between its anti-aesthetic gesture and material remainder. Key, here, is how Media Art contemplated this material remainder in its own practice. In fact, Media Art already constituted a meta-reflection on the kind of dialectical critique Osborne hoped to salvage from the anti-aesthetic gesture of Anglo-American conceptualism. The framework that the Media Art Group laid out for its immediate successors, as in the case of the "counter-informational" research project and installation *Tucumán Arde* (1968), looks back to the historical-critical nature of art characteristic of the anti-aesthetic turn at the same time that it reaches beyond the parameters of immanent critique that Osborne set forth. It already begins to act self-reflexively upon the two poles of modernism's artificial autonomy, on one hand, and the market's grasp on the aesthetic, on the other. It is this very keen historical acumen that forms the crux of Media Art's singularity and, at the same time, its universal claim on the political relevance of the anti-

aesthetic turn. Following their precedent, Media Art's inheritors do not just announce the

disposition of dematerialized art to critique, but already begin to perform it.

In the sections that follow, I will briefly outline the institutional context of the Di Tella

Institute's Center for Visual Arts within the economic context of Argentina's capitalist

modernization at mid-century. This economic context will allow us to problematize both the

institutional politics of the plastic avant-garde during the post-Peronist period and the discursive

framework of its more recent reception. Next, I will place the historical context of the

Argentinean avant-garde in its official and radicalized faces into dialogue with Peter Bürger and

Hal Foster's competing interpretations of the avant-garde's legacy and critical possibilities for

the present as well as with the dominant narrative of the Argentinean experience in the works of

Mariano Mestman, Ana Longoni, and Andrea Giunta. To do this, I examine the production of the

Media Art Group along with manifestoes and critical texts of the same period by artists such as

Luis Felipe Noé, León Ferrari, and Teresa Gramuglio and Nicolás Rosas. I conclude with a

detailed analysis of Oscar Bony's performance work and photograph, *La familia obrera*. These

writings and works have often been identified as representative of Argentina's politicized avant-

garde. In response to Bürger's centrality to discussions of political art since the 1960s, I suggest

that these works point to a way of theorizing the socially critical nature of the 1960s avant-garde

that lies beyond, or, more precisely, in, the impasse between Foster's attempt to detect the

political relevance of the neo-avant-garde through a procedure of symptomal reading and

Longoni's contrary insistence on defining the Argentinean experience through its transcendence

of socio-symbolic mediation. In the final section, I discuss *La familia obrera* in order to signal

the historical and theoretical stakes of conceptualism and its legacy. By photographically

reproducing a staged, but supposedly real, working-class family in the Di Tella's *Experiencias*

68 exhibition, Bony's intervention highlights the way in which the material cause of a social

structure comes to be represented in late capitalism. In particular, I argue that *La familia obrera*

exemplifies the problem of ideology critique established by the Media Art Group and

transformed within Ferrari and Noé's writings. Rejecting the defamiliarization fundamental to

the Media Art Group's stated program, the performance embodies the immanent relationship

between truth and form suggested in the works and texts previously reviewed. This form of

ideology critique remains similar to but never quite one with late capitalist society's dynamics of

representation. I draw on Lacan's formulation of the *sinthome* in order to understand the

dynamics of symbolization that arise from the so-called decline of symbolic efficiency, or the

ability of linguistic and social convention, law, social institutions, etc. to convey their own

legitimacy. Rather than offering the ultimate model through which to interpret the avant-garde's

critical interventions, I take Lacan's late reformulation of the symptom as something of a

problématique: that which sustains and underlies the social link particular to late capitalist

society.

     As an attempt to critique (and eventually condemn) the social institution of art in its

unprecedented relation to the larger cultural and economic dynamics of postmodernity, the

Media Art Group and its successors understood the complex and inextricable relationship

between the institution of art and the rise of a new social link. In a gesture attuned to the social

dynamics of its moment, the Argentinean avant-garde did not seek to destroy the symbolic nature

of art in order to reach a "real" of political action beyond it, but rather sought to give form to

truth within the symbolic coordinates of its moment.

The Di Tella in the Context of the *Revolución Libertadora*

     The eleven-year period following Juan Domingo Perón's military overthrow (1955),

played host to the first elaboration of a national avant-garde movement within Argentina's plastic arts. The articulation of this avant-garde is inseparable from the economic, institutional, and ideological shifts that characterized the short-lived liberal, democratic presidencies of Arturo Frondizi and Arturo Illia (1958-66). After a brief overview of the economic context of the Peronist and immediate post-Peronist period, I will turn to the institutional context of the Di Tella Institute, focusing on the artistic and ideological program of the Center for Visual Art's prominent curator and director, Jorge Romero Brest. In this vein, I follow the art historian Andrea Giunta's account of Romero Brest's role in articulating the boundaries of the avant-garde and its complicated, complicit relationship to the broader discourse of developmentalism. However, I also point to the ideological pitfalls in her approach as they bear on the larger consequences of the contemporary critical reception of the plastic avant-garde(s) of the 1960s in both Argentinean and in European and American contexts.

Following the two years of military rule known as the *Revolución Libertadora*, President Arturo Frondizi's liberal democratic administration was characterized by the promotion of scientific and technological progress, the aperture of the economy to foreign investment, and the palpable effects of consumer culture, particularly in the increasing presence of television and advertising. Perhaps the more salient point of this era, however, is the extent to which the Di Tella Institute's historical and institutional context speaks to the disjointed nature of social and cultural change with respect to economic modernization in the 1960s. As John King points out, the Di Tella Foundation and Institute were outgrowths of the SIAM-Di Tella industrial complex, one of the largest metalworking industries in Latin America, whose postwar business extended into industrial machinery, household appliances and automobiles.[4] Begun in July 1958, the Foundation was created as a means for the Di Tella family to maintain majority control and

hereditary rights over the corporation.[5] Significantly, the Di Tella Institute was also the first non-profit arts organization in Latin America to receive corporate, rather than individual, patronage, following North American models like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, from which the Di Tella would receive partial support.[6]

While the pioneering experimentalism in the Institute's cultural centers has tended to characterize the euphoric and tumultuous feeling of a new kind of modernity, the foundation was premised on the fleeting economic circumstances under which SIAM-Di Tella had flourished, particularly under Peronist economic policies, which favored the growth of national industry at least until 1953.[7] The eventual collapse of the SIAM corporation and the ensuing closure of the institutes in the early 1970s is indicative of the extent to which the social and cultural effects of modernization would seem to precede its concrete, economic causes. In a very direct sense, the influx of foreign capital and the growing gap in technology and efficiency between foreign and domestic industries led to the creation of the Di Tella Foundation, shifting production in the "flagship industry" of Peronist national capitalism from steel to culture.

As the economic conditions of the Di Tella Institute signal, Argentinean modernization followed the norms of what has been described as national-populist industrialization or development, a paradigm whose crisis was embodied by SIAM Di Tella. Prior to World War II, Argentina's economy had been characterized by the accumulation of capital through a dynamic

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[4] Brennan and Rougier, *Politics of National Capitalism*, 64.
[5] King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta*, 64. The Institute comprised of the Center for Visual Arts (CAV), the Center for Audiovisual Experimentation, and the Latin American Center for Advanced Musical Study, in addition to an independent research center in the social sciences.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Although both of the Perón administration's five-year plans garnered wide support, both popularly and among industrial special interests, the Second Five-Year plan, inaugurated in January, 1953 differed from the first in handing over economic activity and entrepreneurship to private industry. This took the form of a reneging of Perón's earlier, vociferous refusal of foreign industrial investment as well as a retreat from the administration's earlier policies of wealth redistribution by mediating between national capital and labor. Brennan and Rougier, *Politics of National Capitalism*, 72-82.

agricultural export sector.[8] The impulse towards the growth of national industry and domestic

markets resulting from the foreign trade crisis of the war, combined with favorable market prices

for agricultural exports after the war, permitted the formation of a class alliance between the

industrial bourgeoisie, a financial agricultural sector on which industry depended, and an

organized urban working class.[9] Simultaneously, inward economic expansion called for both the

economic and political incorporation of new urban massesfrom the country's interior of the

country. Though Peron's first-term economic policy benefited national industry, the effort to

create a national, industrial bourgeoisie capable of a more profound economic transformation

from within was hampered, in part, by the class alliance that had brought Perón to power. Indeed,

despite the conflicting interests between agricultural and industrial sectors and between an

industrial bourgeoisie and laboring class, the alliance survived, in part because of the favorable

international market conditions, expanded mass consumption and raise in workers' wages that

characterized the post-war period.[10] Argentina's industrialization was thus an already truncated

project from its inception, facilitating the transformation of the state into an entrepreneurial

economic actor where private industrialization failed.[11] Though the popular political experience

of worker organization and political subjectivation under Peronism should not be overlooked, the

mediating nature of the state between the interests of the working class, industrial bourgeoisie

and agricultural sector limited the opening for worker demands beyond those preordained by the

national populist alliance.[12] By 1954, Argentina's increasing trade deficits and rising inflation

would give rise to the liberalization of trade tariffs and the retreat of the state's active role in

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[8] Cardoso and Faletto, *Dependency and Development*, 133.
[9] Ibid., 133-34.
[10] Ibid.*,* 136.
[11] Brennan and Rougier, *Politics of National Capitalism*, 4.
[12] Cardoso and Faletto, *Dependency and Development*, 137.

wage negotiations on behalf of labor. The dynamism and accumulation of the agricultural sector ceased to support industrial import substitution and the populist class alliance.

Throughout the following decade and the overthrow of Perón, the Argentinean economy would continue to expand, as would the number of salaried, middle class workers.[13] This was due largely to the increase in foreign investment in all sectors of the economy, particularly in industry, and the corresponding need for professional and technical employees.[14] Nonetheless, the national industrial sector would remain stagnant, indeed decreasing its contribution by some nine percent between 1954 and 1962.[15] Likewise, the national economy would see its greatest growth in construction and small, service-related commerce, though only as a complement to other economic necessities and to the exclusion of organized labor. Cyclical crises in trade and inflation, followed by stabilization policies, would both hurt organized labor and allow for a significant contraction in the number of small industrial firms. Although Arturo Illia's administration (1963-66) attempted to advance the interests of national capital and the working class in terms of price control and wage increases, its relationship to foreign corporate interests remained virtually the same.[16]

In terms of the felt effects of this transition, several symptoms stand out as indicative of the fragmented manner in which modernization would articulate itself in the crisis of the import substitutive model. The presence of foreign capital would be experienced in the way it would insinuate itself, through the purchase of or association with national firms, into the patterns of service and consumption.[17] While an expanded and educated middle class would appear to be ripe consumers, this middle class was unstable, overeducated for the amount and kind of

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[13] Romero, *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina*, 158.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 153.
[16] Ibid., 149.

employment available. Simultaneously, the insertion of foreign capital and the collapse of the

sugar and cotton industries in the north affected patterns of internal immigration, attracting

immigrants from the north as well as from neighboring countries, resulting, to a certain extent, in

the displacement of Buenos Aires as the principal site for foreign investment in favor of

provincial capitals like Córdoba and Santa Fe.[18] Further urbanization in geographic and

demographic terms similarly combined with a "massification" of urbanity in media and

advertising. New patterns of mass-mediatic consumption would find new outlets for social

stratification – at least at a symbolic level – at the same time as they would allow socially

marginal populations to access relatively new and esteemed merchandise like television sets.[19]

The penetration of foreign capital and the expansion of consumer markets allowed for

increased artistic autonomy and experimentation as new channels for the financing and

distribution of literature and the visual arts were created.[20] That the developmentalist ideology

characteristic of the post-Peronist period seeped over into the impetus to "modernize" art is only

one element in the overall structural changes to the production, circulation, and consumption of

art at this time. On one hand, these changes were based on a newfound reciprocity between

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[17] Ibid., 152-53.

[18] Ibid., 158.

[19] Romero, *Breve historia contemporánea*, 157 and García Canclini, *Producción simbólica*, 101-102.Luis Alberto Romero points here to the upsurge of suburban "belts" of slums on the periphery of urban centers, as well as to the presence of status symbols inside, captured in the image of tin-roofed houses with television antennae. U.S. foreign investment in Argentina increased 243% between 1960 and 1968. Television in particular experienced a radical increase: from 800,000 sets in 1960 to 3,700,000 in 1972, a phenomenon that lent greater force to the advertisement and consumption of other individual, consumer products.

[20] García Canclini, *Producción simbólica*, 110. On the same block where the Jockey Club and the liberal, avant-gardist and characteristically anti-Peronist literary journal, *Sur*, held their offices, the Di Tella had become the face of the changing relationship of culture both to the political orientation of the incipient new left and to the dynamics of a similar logic in capitalist production. Oscar Masotta and Juan José Sebreli, two of the central intellectual figures of Contorno, the cultural, philosophical and political magazine that would mark the intellectual left's self-critical aperture toward Peronist politics, held court at the block's Bar Cotto. At the same time, the "manzana's" many bookstores where themselves hosting a more insidious torsion in the dynamics and politics of commercial publishing led by the newly forged Eudeba, the publishing house of the University of Buenos Aires, which would nationalize the Boom in the sense of both initiating a renaissance of national authors from the past and present and diversifying the offering for the different economic strata within the country's expanded, urban readership (Podalsky, *Specular City*, 149).

industry and contemporary art. This can be seen in the sponsorship of exhibitions and biennials

by both foreign and domestic companies. Formal academicism and salon-style institutionalism

was being replaced by the direct promotion of new industrial materials in art. More importantly,

between art and industry acquired a more ethereal association in the process of production's de-

materialization.[21] Romero Brest articulated this change in the catalog for the Di Tella's

upcoming *Experiencias visuales* 67 young artists' competition and group exhibition, associating

its relevance with the contradictory opposition and assimilation to the dominance of consumer

capital in the U.S.: "The audience will also have the opportunity to understand the attitude of our

young creators, those who have just shown their experiences at the Institute, dangerously and

heroically anticipating the development of a still incipient but inexorable economy."[22] As

Romero Brest goes on to state, the "true artistic consciousness" capable of confronting reality

will be that which helps to "develop the economy" and, with it, make behavior, artistic and

otherwise, more flexible.[23]

Though established in 1958, the Fundación Di Tella and its three artistic centers: the

CLAEM [Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales]; the CEA [Centro de

Experimentación Audiovisual], focused largely on theater; and the CAV, would take shape

definitively in 1962. Their physical installation would be in the unoccupied offices of SIAM Di

Tella on Calle Florida in the heart of downtown Buenos Aires, famously baptized the "*manzana*

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[21] García Canclini cites the case of the 1968 exhibition *Materiales, nuevas técnicas, nuevas expresiones* [Materials, New Techniques, New Expressions], sponsored by the Cámara Argentina de la Industria Plástica in the Museo Nacional de Argentina in Buenos Aires (García Canclini, *Producción* 113). The Córdoba Bienial, sponsored by the American Kaiser corporation, which would soon usurp SIAM in the production of automobiles before reorganizing its production in the late 60s serves as another telling illustration of this trend, as do the incipient exhibitions in Mendoza in the same period. The proliferation of corporate sponsorship for contemporary art in the interior cities is similarly of note and related, at least in part, to the increase in foreign investment in those more provincial cities, rather than in the capital.

[22] Romero Brest, *Experiencias visuales 67*, np.

[23] Ibid.

loca" [crazy block].[24] The Di Tella thereby became a "physical, social and cultural space" in the

capital city and its imaginary."[25] In the words of Enrique Oteiza, the Institute's original director,

it "came to exist… as a center where 'things happened.'"[26] The Di Tella's cultural centers would

transform Buenos Aires's business and shopping district, then also host to the University of

Buenos Aires's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, into a bohemian playground by night.

At the same time that the Di Tella embodied a visible change to the urban façade of high

art, its influence was also quite novel because of the way its fame spread through the mass

media. According to Néstor García Canclini, "the phenomenon 'Di Tella' and the phenomenon

'avant-garde' were, to a certain extent, 'facts' constructed by the press that represented the

industrial bourgeoisie in the economy and culture."[27] García Canclini refers here specifically to

the commercial magazine *Primera plana*, which, while ideologically aligned with the dominant

liberal, developmentalist ideology of the period, appealed to a trendy, youthful public. At the

height of the CAV's productivity in 1967, a sociological study of artistic production carried out

by the Di Tella Institute would similarly conclude that the medium of dissemination was more

important than the work itself.[28] In publicizing the goings on of the incipient contemporary art

world, the commercial news media also played a role in the selection and innovation of the

works in what was coming to be understood as a reciprocal relationship between the institution

of art and the press whose objective was awakening and maintaining the interests of the

consumer.[29]

The tense and, as the contemporary left would allege, complicit relationship between the

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[24] Podalski, *Specular City*, 139; King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino*, 80-85.
[25] Oteiza and Cernadas, *Cultura y política*, 80.
[26] Ibid.
[27] García Canclini, *Producción simbólica*, 118.
[28] García Canclini, *Producción simbólica*, 131.
[29] Ibid.

Di Tella's experimental art scene and the logic of consumer capitalism is perhaps best captured in the 1965 billboard on the corner of Florida and Viamonte Streets by three of the Di Tella's most pop-oriented and prominent cadre of young artists. The Rosarinos Dalila Puzzovio, Edgardo Giménez, and Rafael Sqirru painted cartoonish, almost surreal, nightmarish self-portraits on a billboard with the caption, "*¿Por qué son tan geniales?*" [Why are they so brilliant?] (Figure 1.1). The leading, if not facetious, nature of the question already implies the difficulty of responding to it: the apparent marketability of the Di Tella's "scene" stood atop the increasingly blurry line dividing mass culture from high art as well as the form of critique capable of responding to this ambiguity.

Figure 1.1 Dalia Puzzovio, Carlos Squirru and Edgardo Giménez, *¿Por qué son tan geniales?*, 1965.
John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta*, p. 184.
© 2000 by Asunto Impreso Ediciones, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.2 Dalia Puzzovio, Carlos Squirru and Edgardo Giménez, *¿Por qué son tan geniales?*, 1965.
John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta*, p. 184.
© 2000 by Asunto Impreso Ediciones, Buenos Aires.

As Laura Podalsky has suggested for the case of the youth-oriented cultural magazine *Primera plana*, founded the same year as the Di Tella in 1962 and one of the key promoters of the CAV's famously hip artistic scene to a mass audience, "The significance of the new cultural institutions went beyond simply producing and transmitting new cultural values to wider sectors of the Buenos Aires populace."[30] What was at issue was not only the promotion of novelty and transgression for their own sake but also the fictive constitution of "modern life" in Buenos Aires, as one of *Primera plana*'s columns was titled. The CAV in particular produced both novelty and the appearance of novelty. Being modern meant seeming modern. "*¿Por qué somos tan geniales?*" brings art outside of its traditional institutional setting at the same time that it prompts us to ask whether the billboard stands as the truth of the CAV in relation to the mediatized and peculiarly post-modernized urban scene of which it formed part. It was not a piece of art staged in the public space outside of the gallery, but the exteriorization of the place of art in an emerging commercial sphere transposed onto the public space of the city.[31]

In a sense more directly imbued in the billboard, Puzzovio, Giménez and Squirru, like the Media Artists who followed them, were keenly aware of the way their artistic production had entered into a contradictory relationship with the marketing of culture, particularly progressive youth culture. In the words of María José Herrera, "Their smiling effigies of movie stars, on show in the heart of the city, made them appear ambiguously ironic and satisfied to be the main characters of the international modernization of the sixties. Whether an attack on sensationalism or an optimistic vision of mass-media culture, the artists showed their image to a visually-

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[30] Podalsky, *Specular City*, 170.
[31] Indeed, the hybrid bird and insect figure on the right was named "*la mamouschka operada*," one of a series of hybrid animal-like "objects" Giménez created for gallery display. The "*mamouschka*" in particular appeared as part of a larger sculptural costume in the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art's 1964 *Objeto 64* exhibit (Ibid., 252). The billboard was hand painted by one of the artisans at the Meca advertising agency according to a collage of the artists' photos that Giménez designed.

obsessed urban society."[32] Longoni and Mestman have similarly noted the role of the commercial press in attenuating the shock value of the happening and the extent to which the phenomenon inspired the Media Art Group's "dematerialization" through those same media outlets. While the happening intended to displace the spectator's expectations about the object of art and its conditions of reception, the press quickly made its "utopian spirit" into a "fashion" in its own right.

The avant-garde's attack against the Di Tella as an institution both financing art and dictating its norms must thus be placed within the dynamics peculiar to the emergence of post-modern society in the 1960s. Contrary to the Peter Bürger's well-known *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), the Argentinean avant-garde of the 1960s did not rebel against the Di Tella's bourgeois pretense toward the autonomy of art from the social dynamics conditioning it, but rather critiqued the extent to which the Di Tella as an institution was embedded in and complicit with these dynamics. Far from criticizing the Di Tella's academicism, the particular way in which the avant-garde concerned itself with the most adequate form for art's political efficacy responds to a more complex and historically specific problem: how the institutional call to formal experimentalism and novelty proved itself permeable to mass commercial appeal even early on and how this same dynamic simultaneously served to perpetuate an economy of prestige between elite buyers, critics, and artists who worked to co-opt any attempt at social critique through formal experimentalism within institutional bounds.[33] Moreover, as Podalsky, Longoni Mestman, and Giménez imply, the Di Tella's function as an institution surpassed that of producing and distributing one specific style or approach to art over another; its name came to brand the ideological complicity of bourgeois class interests, mass culture, and experimental art

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[32] Giménez and Glusberg, *Edgardo Giménez*, 256.

and to take on a significance of its own.

Institution and Avant-Garde

It is important to recall the specificity of the Di Tella's financial, social and symbolic circumstances when considering the claims of both its self-declared avant-gardism in the late 1960s and those of its more recent critics. In this light, Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) is central to understanding the context of Media Art's reception in Argentina. Bürger provides a simultaneously analytic and historical theory of the avant-garde based on the experience of the so-called historic avant-garde movements in Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century. Bürger defines the experience of the historic avant-gardes through two mutually conditional criteria: the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life as a whole: "The unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating aesthetic potential from the institutional constraints that block its social effectiveness."[34]

At first glance, the Argentinean avant-garde of the late 60s and their much later critics claimed to do just this, as Longoni and Mestman affirm. The authors refer directly to Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* according to which the avant-garde's total rupture with tradition requires that they direct their protests against the institution of art as it is formed at the heart of bourgeois society.[35] "In our case," Longoni and Mestman state, "the rupture of the avant-garde movement with the art institution becomes a literal one in the distancing that a significant and numerous nucleus of artists bring about with respect to the circuit of modernizing institutions."[36] The metaphoric language of violence as the material medium of art, discussed below, becomes

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[33] As we will discuss below, Luis Felipe Noé and León Ferrari take these two aspects as their respective points of departure in the critical work *Antiestética* (1965) and the programmatic text "El arte de los significados" (1968).
[34] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 696.
[35] Longoni and Mestman*, Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* 306.

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inverted and realized in what the authors describe as the avant-garde's real and successful break

with the institution of art and its direct engagement with militant politics:

> This process comprehends the displacement of the exercise of violence against artistic
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> institutions within those same institutions, to the violent action in the street or outside the
>
> artistic circuit. Leaving institutional limits behind and taking to the street means losing its
>
> familiar refuge and placing itself in an unprotected and vulnerable place. One risks not
>
> only one's own body as an artist, but also one's body of the work, which sometimes
>
> coincides with that of the audience.[37]

It remains unclear as to which artist-militants the authors refer. They claim to gloss the Chilean

critic Nelly Richard in this passage, who refers to the political and vital stakes of creating street

art during the last years of the Pinochet dictatorship in the cases of Diamela Eltit, Lotty

Rosenfeld, and the Four Mares of the Apocalypse, writers, artists, and performers whose actions

placed them in an artistic avant-garde but not a political vanguard. Longoni and Mestman thus

lead us to believe that they understand the avant-garde's exit from the art institution as a very

literal one: art is not only more acute and effective in its social critique when taken to the streets,

but actually synonymous with politics. As the authors state explicitly, they understand the

Argentinean groups of the 1960s to have actually realized the historic avant-gardes' unrealized

intentions to break their institutional ties and merge art directly into life and politics.

The most glaring assumption in Longoni and Mestman's characterization of the

Argentinean avant-garde is that it makes Bürger's theory – at once historical and logical –

descriptive, applicable to any artistic movement at any moment. As Longoni and Mestman

reiterate, Bürger advances the central place of the institution of art: "The concept of 'art as an

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 305.

institution' refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works."[38] The critical potential of the institution arises, for Bürger, first out of the specific way in which the bourgeois doctrine of art's social autonomy attempted to erase the material determinations of its definition and reception by the late 19th century, and second as demonstrated by the gesture of the historic avant-garde movements themselves. This second point about the critical work of the avant-gardes signals another of the reasons behind the institutional focus of Bürger's theory. The avant-gardes of the early 20th century seized the supposed autonomy of art at the historical moment in which this became possible: when the social autonomy of the institution became confused with an artistic content ever more estranged from social and political concerns.[39] As Bürger affirms, "At the moment it has shed all that is alien to it, art necessarily becomes problematic for itself. As institution and content coincide, social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of art in bourgeois society, and thus provokes the self-criticism of art. It is to the credit of the historical avant-garde movements that thy supplied this self-criticism."[40]

We thus need to add two related qualifications to Longoni and Mestman's adoption of Bürger. The direct translatability of the theory to 1960s Argentina, as Longoni and Mestman

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[38] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

[39] Bürger understands this historical possibility in two ways. The first pertains to the progression of art's autonomy in more plainly historicist and sociological terms. By the end of the 18th century, the most advanced forms of French and perhaps German art had freed themselves of the dictates of the monarchy and fully installed themselves within the confines of the private, bourgeois realm. Autonomy, in this sense, refers to the freedom of individual works of art from the dictate to be socially useful. Their detachment from social praxis is what made them relevant for the wider project of liberalism and rational communication (Ibid., 24-25). This understanding of autonomy applies to the content of the work of art while obfuscating the way in which the institution mediates this content. Although, at the beginning of the 19th century, content and institution could be distinguished – the institutional autonomy of art did not imply that works themselves could not make socially relevant critiques in their content – this distinction tended to wither away quickly during the second half of the century. The modernist privilege of ever more innovative ways of estranging form over content would eventually lead to the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, confusing art's private, bourgeois social status with the social and critical reach of art's content. Any defense of aestheticism claiming the necessity of preserving a realm set off from the demands of social praxis conveniently forgets the historic and class determinations of this doctrine, acting as if the ideology of the late 19th-century bourgeoisie were eternal.

suggest, concerns the predominant discourse of "modernization" within the plastic arts following

Perón's overthrow, which Andrea Giunta has documented comprehensively in *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentine Art in the 1960s* (2001). Through a meticulous study of

the institutional practices and discourse of what Longoni and Mestman refer to as the

modernizing circuit – the Museum of Modern Art, the Di Tella, and the National Museum of

Fine Arts, with their respective young artists' prizes – Giunta points to the way the official state

and international discourse of development permeated the objectives of the art world. In contrast

to its institutionalized literary journals during the early twentieth century, Argentina did not

enjoy a contemporaneous avant-garde movement in the plastic arts on the same scale. Romero

Brest stands out in his efforts to confect the discursive, ideological and institutional realization of

a plastic arts movement that would be at once national and avant-gardist in character. This

attempt, made possible in no small part by U.S. Cold War cultural policy toward Latin America,

was plagued by the contradictions of its cultural and historical moment. The confluence of

formal experimentalism and progressive, if not revolutionary, national spirit characteristic of

Latin America's historic avant-gardes in the twenties and thirties had long passed.[41] Romero

Brest protagonized a push for national cultural hegemony as this very model of political and

cultural representation waned; at the same time, he could only do so by appropriating an

internationalist, U.S. discourse of economic modernization and political centrism known as

developmentalism in the post-War period. Whereas for the earlier wave of avant-gardism being

modern meant being national in some more or less reflexive way, it would become clear by the

mid-1960s that the two were mutually exclusive.[42] The constitution of an avant-garde depended

on recognition by an international audience of critics and consumers who sought the specificity

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[40] Ibid., 27.
[41] On this point, see Chapter 2 of García Canclini, *Culturas Híbridas*, in particular pp.73-93.

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of contemporary Argentinean art in its expression of something identifiably national. Argentinean group shows were deemed alternatively too colloquial (national) or too generic (modern), precluding the combination of the two.[43] What Longoni and Mestman omit in positing the authentic success of the Di Tella's organic avant-garde is thus both the contradictory ideological and concretely economic financial terrain on which the institution of art was grounded – recall the unique financial structure of the Di Tella Institute with respect to its sponsors – and the ultimate failure of the historic avant-gardes in Bürger's account.

This is perhaps the most central and delicate point of Bürger's theory. Even though the historic avant-gardes failed to do what they set out to, their intentions are nonetheless significant. Contrary to Longoni and Mestman's immediacy on this point – the rebellions of the 1960s' avant-garde were significant and resist artistic re-appropriation in their own right – for Bürger, the avant-gardes' historical-material significance cannot be separated from the present historical perspective from which they are appreciated.[44] It is for this same reason that Bürger's theory has proven so contentious: the historic avant-gardes failed to accomplish the joining of art and life because capitalist mass culture beat them to it in the post-War period: daily life had indeed become aestheticized, though in keeping with ruling class interests beyond the now much less relevant academicism of the bourgeois art institution. The avant-gardist gesture remains unrepeatable, if it is to be symbolically meaningful, for precisely the same reasons that conditioned it in the first place: the possibility of rupture with formal academic norms on one hand and the artificial autonomy of the institution as representative of bourgeois ideology on the other.

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[42] García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas*, 78.
[43] See in particular Giunta's excellent analysis of this dynamic in several key exhibitions in 1964 both in Argentina and in a series of group shows of young Argentinean artists abroad in *Vanguardia...* pp 266-83.
[44] Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* 316.

Despite further clarification, Bürger has been harshly criticized for his critique of the neo-avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s. The neo-avant-garde "institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist intentions."[45] The neo-avant-gardist gesture is not only relegated to repeating that of the historic avant-garde, but worse, of deceptively appearing to repeat it. Longoni and Mestman do not claim the success of the Argentinean movement as a neo-avant-garde, but rather as a displaced re-enactment of Bürger's historic avant-gardes, blind to the historical contradictions that conditioned the former.

The Argentinean case's success or failure is conditional on its being recognized as an avant-garde according to Bürger's criteria in the first place. The two are indistinguishable in Giunta's concluding account of the avant-garde's radicalization as exemplified in *Tucumán Arde*. Repeating many now common places about the distinctively "political" nature of Latin American conceptualism in its "orientation towards the transformation of society" in opposition to Anglo-American conceptualism's self-reflexive concern with its status as art, Giunta provides an empirical account of the avant-garde's consummation. The abrupt and empirical end to the anti-institutional avant-garde born from the Di Tella lends a misleadingly teleological tone to Giunta's account: "With *Tucumán Arde* the aesthetic-political avant-garde radicalized all of its positions. The experience was so intense and, in some cases, traumatic that it led many of its participants to the conclusion that it was no longer possible to think about the transformation of reality through art, even of the avant-garde."[46] Politically "effective" art would subordinate itself to what Giunta calls the "multitude's" "collective and violent actions."[47] While the "multitudinal" nature of this collective political action remains questionable, Giunta's ultimate point remains valid: the consummation of the 1960s avant-garde proved the "impossibility" of

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[45] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 58.
[46] Giunta, *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política*, 374.

the Di Tella's project to "modernize" the plastic arts, part of a larger, structural shift in the

articulation of class hegemony.[48]

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

Figure 1.3 Roberto Jacoby, *Mensaje en el Di Tella*, 1968.
John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta*, p.203.
© 2007 Asunto Impreso, Buenos Aires.

While Giunta's study allows for a more nuanced reading of avant-garde versus neo-avant-garde in the Argentinean context, Roberto Jacoby's *Mensaje en el Di Tella* (Figure 1.3), the artist's submission to the Di Tella's *Experiencias 68* exhibit, provides what is perhaps an even clearer awareness of the historic and symbolic conditions of his intervention. *Mensaje...* includes the exposition of a written text declaring the following: "All of the phenomena of social life have become aesthetic material: fashion, industry and technology, the mass media, etc. 'Aesthetic contemplation has ended because the aesthetic has dissolved into social life.' The work of art has also ended because life and the planet themselves have begun to be [art]."[49] In turn, Jacoby declares, "The future of art does not link itself to the creation of works and the artist becomes the propagandist of those concepts. 'Art' has no importance: it is life that counts."[50] Jacoby's intervention proves significant because it posits the typically avant-gardist call to dissolve art into life on the fact of capitalist society having already succeeded in this endeavor. It is also worth noting that Jacoby conceives of art's critical response to this condition in a dematerialized form: the artist is to become a propagandist, making "concepts" rather than objects. *Mensaje...* points to the inability to distinguish between the apparent success versus failure of the avant-garde implicit in Giunta, Longoni and Mestman's descriptive accounts, suggesting that this become the form and criteria for avant-gardist intervention itself. *Mensaje...* similarly signals the extent to which the social and historic conditions of the 1960s neo-avant-gardes in the U.S. and Europe underlay the articulation of Argentina's first avant-garde in the visual arts and, with it, the anti-institutional and social interventions it shares with Bürger's theory.

At the same time, *Mensaje...* also insists that we pay closer attention to the form in which

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[49] Reproduced in Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* 105.
[50] Ibid.

the 1960s avant-garde manifests its critique beyond the institutional coordinates of Bürger's well-known dismissal. In a recent response to the myriad criticisms of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger amends what he considers to be a lacuna in his earlier critique of 1960s art, connecting the "free disposition" of artistic material, on one hand, to the institution's ability to aestheticize avant-gardist gestures and re-establish its supposed autonomy from the social, on the other. Bürger corrects this, affirming that the institution resists attack by effectively reconfiguring its very function. The estranging combination of non-traditional artistic styles among the historic avant-gardes becomes the norm of pastiche and novelty imposed by the institution in the post-War period.[51] While it is true that the institution of art continues to represent and reproduce dominant class ideology, first in its artificial and vacuous autonomy and then in its promotion of pastiche and rupture for its own sake, the qualitative difference between the institution pretending to set art apart from the social and the institution appropriating the language and logic of the market also requires a qualitatively different form of critique. The issue is thus not that, in the post-War period, the institution has renounced the concrete functions of the production and distribution of art and the production and reproduction of ideology such that the formal analysis of discrete artworks might better reveal these dynamics than Bürger's system-immanent critique. As *Mensaje...* alludes to, the concern for either approach is the extent to which the process of unmasking the ruse of these operations has ceased to be an effective form of critique.

Hal Foster's initial response to Bürger in 1994 and subsequent elaboration of this critique in *The Return of the Real* (1996) exemplify precisely this problem. Foster criticizes *Theory of the*

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[51] This revision also responds to Foster's claim that Bürger conflates the institution in its sociological capacity with historical artistic convention in its formal one. According to Foster, Bürger's original articulation thus fails to appreciate the subtle ways in which the avant-garde did not merely seek to destroy the institution but to reveal the conventions upon which art's autonomy was defended through artistic practice (Foster, "What's Neo..." 19).

Avant-Garde for its dismissal of the avant-gardist potential of the art of the 1960s. Foster

reminds us of how conceptualism appropriated many of the devices of the historic avant-gardes,

namely the Dadaist readymade and the Russian constructivist structure, both of which sought to

challenge the autonomy of art's content. That Bürger cannot see the revolutionary potential in

conceptual art's attack on artistic autonomy, for example in the work of Marcel Broodthaers, is

not only a case of excessive historical proximity, but also of methodological and empirical

oversight. According to Foster, Bürger can only see the neo-avant-garde's appropriations as

blindly repetitive and uncritical because Bürger collapses the historic avant-gardes' critique of

convention onto their will to do away with the institution of art.[52] (As already noted, Bürger has

more recently clarified the nature of this relationship.)

Here we come to the crux of Foster's problematic theoretical approach. Rather than

taking up the implicit way in which the critique and revelation of artistic convention also

attacked the ideological armor of the institution, Foster instead abandons Bürger's institutional

focus. Since institutions can only "enframe," not "constitute" artistic convention, it is the legacy

of the latter that must take priority, ultimately to the exclusion of the former.[53] Only in this way

can we see how the neo-avant-garde does not repeat, but rather extends the work of its

predecessors. In order to decipher how this is so, we must treat those practices according to the

textual approach of symptomal reading pioneered by Althusser's return to Marx and Lacan's

return to Freud, i.e., by bracketing out the existing tradition of criticism and the historic cause

that conditioned it, according to Foster.

This reductive characterization of Althusser and Lacan's way of reading similarly limits

the question of avant-gardism to one of textual signification. There where Bürger remarks the

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

heroic intent and failure of the avant-garde movements to definitively revolutionize their own field of production, given the structural conditions of their historical moment, Foster ontologizes this moment through his peculiar rendering of the psychoanalytic temporality of deferred action. The avant-gardes were so contingent that their gesture could not be rendered meaningful in any collective, social way and thus stands as a "trauma," giving rise to the infinite regress of future avant-garde movements as symptoms and their artist-critics as interpreters. Deprived of the logical and historical, structural and contingent nature of the historic avant-gardes, their gesture is of utmost importance and of none at all; all future returns and extensions resignify it for the sake of resignification itself.[54] In Foster's words, "...the so-called *failure* of both the historical and 1950s neo-avant-gardes to destroy the institution of art has *enabled* the deconstructive testing of this institution by the second neo-avant-garde – a testing that, again, is now extended to different institutions and discourses in the ambitious art of the present."[55]

While contemporary commentators have noted the institutionalization of institutional critique as a kind of art practice rooted in the 1960s work of artists like Broodthaers and Hans Haacke, the ambiguity of Foster's assertion remains. What is contemporary art testing in the institution if the institution no longer stands as a remarkable symptom of the dominant ideology (the transplanting of bourgeois institutional autonomy into the contents of the works themselves)? Moreover, if Foster's multiple "institutions" refer to more than the museum system, art's self-questioning about the nature of art with respect to its historic conditions has become

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[54] Regardless of the de-centering of the subject, Foster ontologizes history not, as he suggests, by framing it through a logical, temporal schema but by blockading the place for historical contingency at all levels within that schema. The relationship between the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, after all, is Foster's concern and not Bürger's; transplanting historical mediation with unconscious drive giving rise to the regress of the "trauma" of the historic avant-gardes obscures the historical relationship between the development of an object and its cognition" (Bürger cited in Ibid., 11).

[55] Ibid., 25. The first neo-avant-garde refers to the work of artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s that made use of the avant-garde's rupturist gestures, effectively institutionalizing them once and for all as an institutionally sanctified language (Ibid., 23).

null, together with any discussion about art as such.

The shortcomings of Foster's textual approach are nowhere clearer than in his discussion of Andy Warhol's serigraphic and serially repeated media images from the early 1960s. Refusing the reading that Warhol's work is mimetic with the post-War's reification of appearances (Baudrillard) as well as that which claims Warhol's resistance to this tendency, lending the works a critical social content they may or may not have intended (Crow), Foster affirms that their synchronic, spatial repetition nonetheless refers to the temporal repetitiveness of the drive. In opposition to the previous interpretations Foster cites, he de-historicizes Warhol not only by stipulating a reductive and imprecise psychoanalytic framework but also because in doing so, Foster insists on uncovering the "real" supposedly determining the (serially) repetitive nature of Warhol's reproductions.[56]

Foster's equation of *punctum* and *tuché*, however, reveals itself as symptomatic upon closer inspection. Following Lacan, the contingent event is only significant to the extent that it serves to simultaneously veil and unveil the subject's traumatic place of enjoyment.[57] Structure and chance are perceived as one insofar as they mutually presuppose one another. The true accident as *tuché* sets in motion the cause as both the motor behind and the interruption to its own infinite forms of veiling. *Tuché* is thus not comparable to the punctum's immediate singularity insofar as *tuché* can only be recognized as such when it appears *as if* by chance, as if retroactively produced by an underlying structural lack.[58] The contingent line down the middle of Warhol's print is only significant in this light when placed in dialectical relationship with the logic of reproduction inherent to its medium. Its interpretation can thus neither be divorced from the structural implications of Lacan's *tuché* nor from the historical specificity of Warhol's

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[56] Foster, *Return of the Real*, 132.
[57] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 55

repeated reproductions of mass media images. The tumultuous relationship between form and content – social structure and reified representation – in particular in Warhol's work, demands a reconsideration of the methodological tools by which we come to define the avant-garde.

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[58] Ibid., 54, 60.

Figure 1.4 Andy Warhol, *Ambulance Disaster*, 1963-64.
http://www.artknowledgenews.com/Andy_Warhol_Prints.html
© The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

The Media Art Group

In many ways a culminating moment for the Media Art project Jacoby helped to foster, *Mensaje…* anticipates the shortcomings of Foster's interpretive approach. In reviewing several key works and critical texts by the Media Art Group, my goal is to point to the way its evolving practice and theoretical articulation imply a change in its practice of ideology critique and influenced the anti-institutional gestures of the artists who followed in its wake.

In his 1967 essay "*Después del pop: nosotros desmaterializamos*" [After Pop: We Dematerialize], Oscar Masotta articulates the semiotic and sociological stakes of the already two-year-old practice of Media Art. Masotta's essay is framed as the search for a truer avant-garde against the popularity of both pop art and the happening, understood as an all-encompassing and quasi-ritualistic social gathering and decorative environment.[59] For Masotta, de-materialization, a term he borrows from the Russian constructivist artist El Lissitsky in one of the essay's epigraphs, is not just *a* more distanced or disinterested approach to formal artistic

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[59] The origin of the happening as a term is often credited to Allan Kaprow's 1959 performance *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* at the Rueben Gallery in New York. "A cross between an art exhibit and a theatrical performance," in Susan Sontag's fitting words, happenings can be characterized descriptively by their more direct relation to and sometimes direct participation of the spectator; their use of staged environments often made up of found materials; gestural improvisation over scripted words; and the spatial and temporal division of the happening's action outside of any logical or narrative sequence. Following the synthetic and descriptive definition Alicia Páez offers in Masotta's 1967 essay anthology *Happenings*, while American critics such as Sontag and Lee Baxandall emphasize the happening's departure from the individual personalities of traditional theatrical characters and linguistic sense to physical immediacy and perception, the French artist and critic Jaques Lebel places emphasis on the happening's social and ideological function in its rejection of the economic conditions of the art institution and the release of repressed psychic and political energies. Páez's gloss on a quote from Baxandall's "Beyond Brecht: The Happenings" reveals the extent to which media art would seem to bridge the gap between these two different appreciations of the happening. In Páez's words, "In a world saturated with conceptions imposed through the mass media, the attack should be directed principally at perception, and not to an impediment of critical reason, in order thus to reorient both perception and reason" (Paéz, "El concepto de happening," 41). As Masotta elaborates in his contribution to *Happenings*, discussed in the last section of this chapter, the spectator's relation to new media cannot be reduced to a merely perceptual one nor can technological innovation alone account for the possible critical uses and effects of television in particular. Masotta thus emphasizes the semiotic value of Marshall McLuhan's phrase, "the medium is the message," in his very particular definition of the effect of discontinuity in new media works. For a contrasting view of McLuhan's influence on participatory art, see Boris Groys' "A Genealogy of Participatory Art" in *The Art of Participation*.

innovation but rather *the* only choice left for an avant-garde truly cognizant of, if not in advance

of, its time. For Masotta, both pop art and happenings fail in their critical, historical task insofar
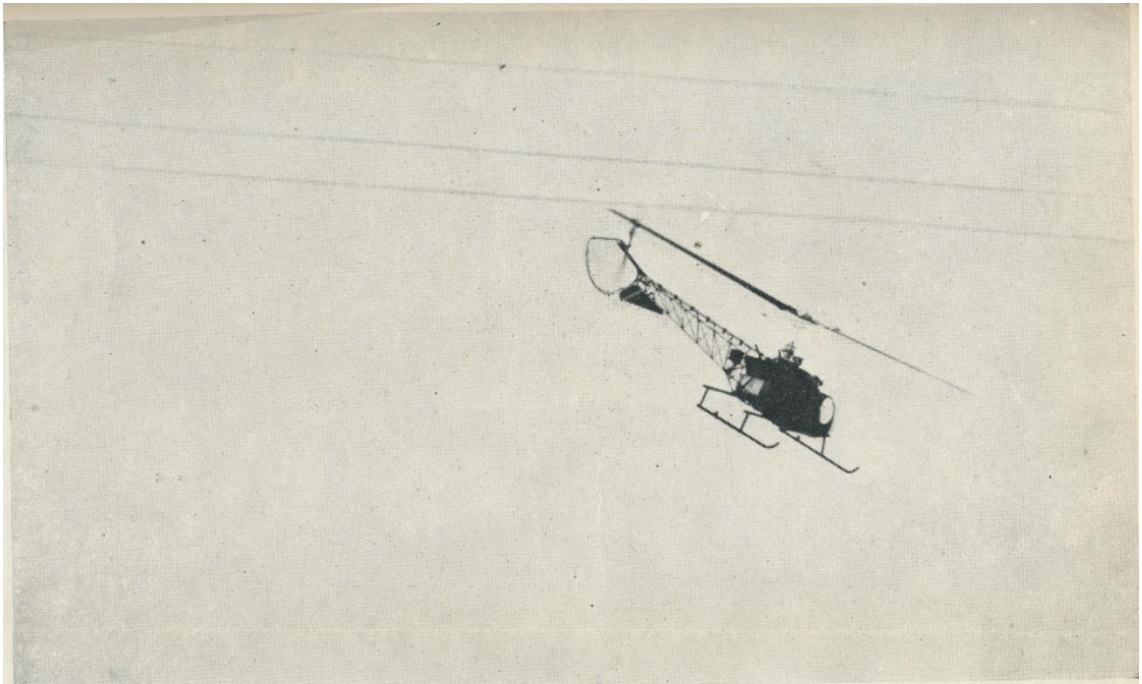
Figure 1.5 Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*, 1966. Helicopter flying over the Anchorena train station. Photo by Carmen Miranda. Oscar Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, np. © 1968 Editorial Jorge Alvarez, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.6 Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*, 1966. Participants waiting for
the helicopter landing at the Anchorena train station. Photo by Carmen Miranda.
Oscar Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, np.
© 1968 Editorial Jorge Alvarez, Buenos Aires.
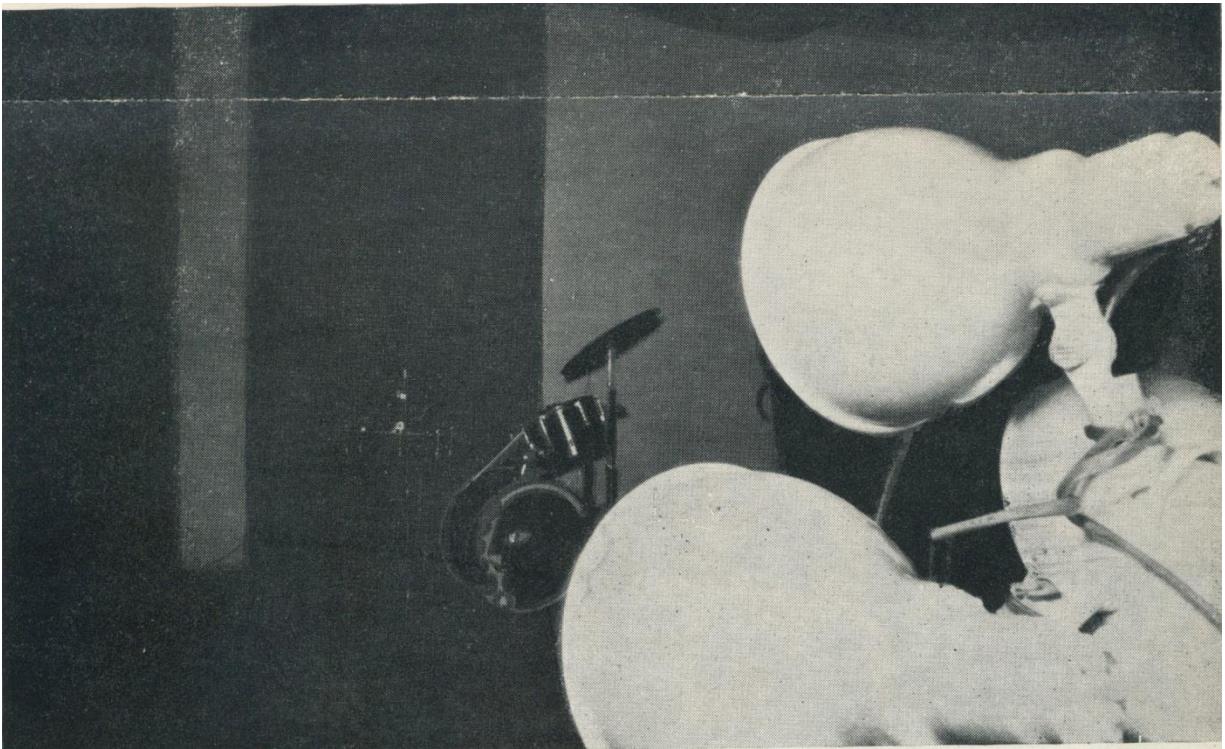
Figure 1.7 Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*.
Drum set and lighting inside the Theatrón ballroom. Photo by Carmen Miranda.
Oscar Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, np.
© 1968 Editorial Jorge Alvarez, Buenos Aires.

as they pretend to respectively represent and present a social reality already reified in the mass media. Masotta argues that even though the happening tries to challenge art's social autonomy and marketability, it has actually become what pop art only aspired to achieve. While Roy Lichtenstein purported to paint images of images taken from popular culture through a medium still essentially confined to the museum, the Buenos Aires mass media had managed to turn the happenings' self-reflexive, critical gesture against the museum into a mediatic representation of its own. According to Masotta, a new avant-garde could only emerge in this situation by turning the negative, self-reflexive, and essentially modernist seed within the happening against the mass media on their own terms.[60] In other words, the Media Art anti-happening is the amalgam of the happening's self-reflexive turn against modernist contemplation in its form and pop art's turn towards mass culture in its thematic content.

If there is a certain utopian tone in Masotta's essay, it is perhaps related to the sensation that the negative forces of bourgeois superstructure and capitalist base would seem to be moving in perfect step with one another, opening the window through which Media Art might discover the relationship between the two. For Masotta's professedly avant-gardist sensibility, there is no way back from pop art because pop art has ushered in a semiotic leveling of all socio-symbolic and cultural products: "Art," Masotta declares in the 1968 preface to *Conciencia y estructura* [Consciousness and Structure], "is not in making images with oil paint nor in the museums: it's in the street and in life, on the covers of magazines and in fashion, in movies that we used to think were bad, in pocket literature and in advertising images."[61] It is for this same reason, however, that a pop art elevated to the level of the traditional aesthetic object appears as a contradiction in terms. Masotta thus concludes that if mass culture supplies the content of works,

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[60] Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, 243-44.
[61] Ibid., 13.

the avant-garde must seek the proper "media" through which to express them. The physical,

material "medium" of the work of art has become inseparable from, if not overcome with, the

"dematerialized" circuits of the mass media: "What is happening today in the best works of art is

that the contents appear fused with the media employed to transmit them. This preoccupation,

then – manifested for the first time by pop artists – is not distinguishable from a truly

sociological preoccupation, i.e., from a new way of returning to the 'contents.'"[62]

In "After pop…," Masotta relates the stories of two works organized in 1966 as part of a

cycle of *anti-happenings* in the Di Tella Institute.[63] Read with but also against the grain of

Masotta's explanations, both of these semiotic events, as they were, begin to point us toward an

approach to ideology critique that reaches beyond Masotta's intentions. Masotta programmed

two anti-happenings, *El helicóptero* [The Helicopter] (Figures 1.5, 1.6 and 1.7) and *El mensaje

fantasma* [The Phantom Message] (Figures 1.8 and 1.9).

In *El helicóptero*, Masotta invited an audience of about 80 people to the Di Tella as part

of a cycle of talks on the happening.[64] Without informing the audience members of their fate,

Masotta then divided them and boarded the two groups on buses headed for two different

destinations: one would go to the Theatrón ballroom, situated in a shopping gallery on the

corners of Santa Fe and Puerredón, a popular commercial and business district, while the other

headed for the abandoned Anchorena train station in the city's more posh northern sector. The

second group would witness a helicopter arrive, while the first, trapped in Theatrón, would be

purposefully made to arrive late to the helicopter landing. While inside Theatrón, the public

would be seated and enveloped in a multi-sensorial environment of live music, flashing lights,

and the projection of a film. The film would be a replica or quotation of a film by the American

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[62] Ibid., 239-240.
[63] Ibid., 244.

pop artist Clas Oldenburg, in which a bandaged subject thrashed around trying to free himself.

Juxtaposed to the film would be a live actor who replicated the same gestures against another one

of the walls of the hall.[65] The subject of Oldenburg's film, in this sense, would capture Masotta's

intention for the work. Despite being exposed to a plethora of sounds and images, these

sensations would not convey any meaning on their own:

> It is certain that this is what the public 'saw' and that the expressionist style of the
>
> situation was the result of what I myself had planned. But it is necessary to point out that
>
> that doesn't have much to do with it [*no tiene mucho que ver*]: given that I did not believe
>
> in that expressionism. I simply want to say that the events at Teatrón were not *all* of the
>
> *happening*: from the point of view of the totality what happened in Theatrón was nothing
>
> but a 'differential' with respect to Anchorena.[66]

In an earlier passage, Masotta similarly stresses that none of the participants could "see" the

totality of events.[67] According to his description of *El helicóptero*, Masotta's intention was to

show how the apparently cohesive meaning of a narrative or myth can first be broken down into

a series of synchronic, structural oppositions that nonetheless fail to account for the irreducible

socioeconomic connotations embedded in the situation's overdetermined geographic sites.

Masotta carefully staged the different categories of binary oppositions – geographic, economic,

socioeconomic, historical-technical and cultural – around which the group's story would have

been constructed, modeling his structural synthesis of myth on Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural

analysis of myth in his essay "The Story of Asdiwal."[68]Masotta goes on to point out, however,

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[64] Ibid., 247.
[65] Ibid., 249-50.
[66] Ibid., 250.
[67] Ibid., 247.
[68] Ibid., 253. Masotta lists these oppositions as follows: the Anchorena sky versus the Theatrón basement;
the residential versus commercial neighborhoods of each; the supposed "neutralization" of class connotation in the
gallery versus the implacable connotation of upper-middle-classstatus in the northern sector of Anchorena; the

that while this schematic demonstration of the myth's composition reveals the "rational structure" within the apparent disorder of the anti-happening, Anchorena's myriad sociohistoric connotations exceed the binaries of his own structural analysis.[69] Initially meant to function as the differential element that neutralizes and equates the semantic contents of each of the event's elements with respect to one another, the helicopter turns out to be the site where a historical contradiction both exceeds a structurally given lack and doubles back on the supposedly neutral terms of the analysis, recodifying them in terms of class conflict.[70]

El mensaje fantasma, the second artwork Masotta describes in "Después del pop," sheds a more complex light on the operations and stakes of art's de-materialization. In this later work, Masotta publicized the transmission of a television broadcast on the walls of downtown Buenos Aires with the words: "This poster will be projected by Channel 11 on July 20."[71] Having bought two commercial television spots through an advertising agency, Masotta projected a message announcing the self-referential poster words themselves. The spot read: "This medium announces the apparition of a poster whose text we project."[72]

While *El helicóptero*, as Masotta clarifies, was meant to bring out the semiotic aspects at play in the happening, *El mensaje fantasma* was supposed to capture the real critical and aesthetic novelty of media art in contrastboth to traditional artistic objects and to commercial advertising,whose medium the work would appropriate as its own. Masotta distinguishes between the media artwork's material, media, and object: "Just as the 'material' of music is found in certain sonorous material . . . or, in the same way, bronze, or wood, or marble, or glass,

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helicopter flying overhead at Anchorena versus allusion to the toilet or "water" in the Oldenburg film; and the expressionist scene of the Theatrón ballroom versus the romanticism of the bucolic landscape around the Anchorena station.
[69] Ibid., 246, 252.
[70] Ibid., 255-57.
[71] Ibid., 259.
[72] Ibid.

or new synthetic materials constitute the 'material' with and on which it is possible to make sculptures, so 'works of communication,' too, define the area of their own 'materiality.'"[73] In addition to addressing the masses as its audience, and in lieu of the select and elite group of aficionados at the Di Tella, *El mensaje fantasma* radicalizes the overdetermined site at which the social code threatens to break down in *El helicóptero*. Similarly, *El mensaje fantasma* transforms the simultaneously historical and irrational connotation at the heart of the social code in *El helicóptero* into a senseless, tautological statement. At the same time, the specific "materiality" or immaterial nature of the media artwork as exemplified in *El mensaje fantasma* moves beyond the objective, physical traits of its technological transmission in order to mark itself as the simultaneously material and sublime condition of ideology at work in both pieces.

Before discussing this point further, it is worth noting how the Media Art Group perceived the broader consequences of dematerialzation for the kind of art-as-ideology critique it proposed. Key to the Media Art project was the notion that it would articulate its doubled edged critique – against both the formalism of the fine arts and the role of the mass media in advancing the position of the dominant ideology of liberal capitalism – through the so-called "dematerialization" of the traditional object of art. As defined in the 1966 "Media Art: A Manifesto," "the work of art would be one in which the moment of realization disappears."[74] The manifesto's authors, Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, and Roberto Jacoby, refer here to the way in which the work of art would amount to nothing more than its own transmission; the work of art as/ in its own disappearance would thus allow spectators to understand it as a "pretext for putting the mass media into motion."[75] Implicit in the fervor with which the artists refer to the "de-realization" of the work of art is a collapse between the elimination of the traditional media

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[73] Ibid., 244.
[74] Costa, Escari and Jacoby, "Media Art: A Manifesto," 122.

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and object of the visual arts – painting or sculpture – and the breakdown of the social boundary

between art and other forms of communication.

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[75] Ibid.

Figure 1.8 Oscar Masotta, *El mensaje fantasma*, 1966.
Publicity poster pasted onto a wall on the corner of Avenida Córdoba and Maipú in Buenos Aires.
Photo by Rubén Santonín.
Oscar Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, np.
© 1968 Editorial Jorge Alvarez, Buenos Aires.
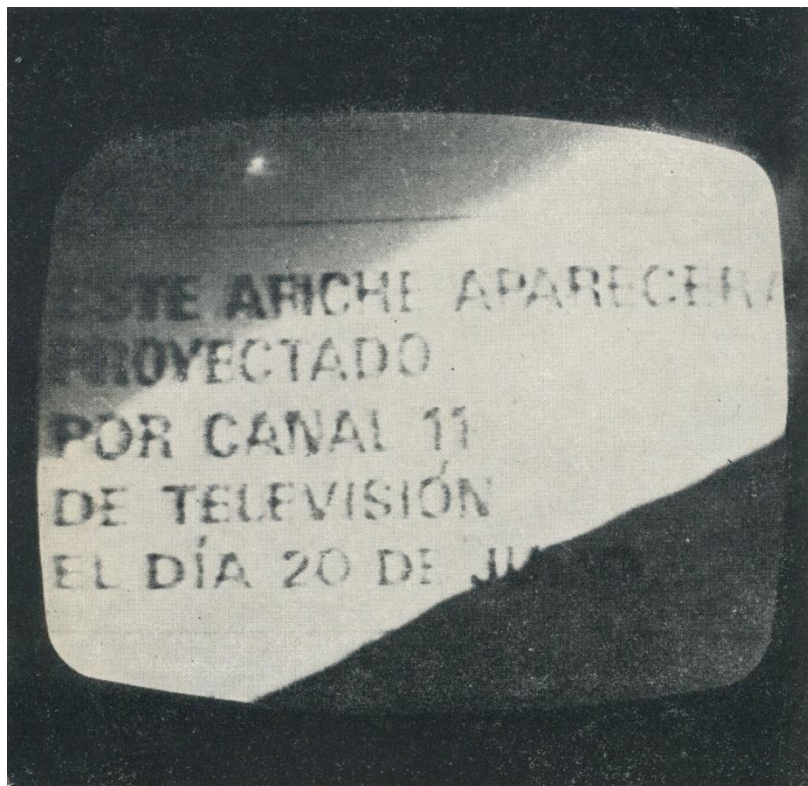
Figure 1.9 Oscar Masotta, *El mensaje fantasma*, 1966.
Channel 11 Broadcast of the poster. Photo by Pablo Suárez.
Oscar Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, np.
© 1968 Editorial Jorge Alvarez, Buenos Aires.

Masotta complicates the task of signaling the naturalized language of the mass media laid out in the manifesto in his comparison of media art and advertising. According to Masotta, advertising's "material" can be considered the "consciousness of the subjects to which it is directed," while its medium can be considered the means employed to reach this end, and the "object" the final product—a commercial or billboard—that results from this.[76] By contrast, unlike both traditional sculpture and advertising, media art lacks the perceptible beauty that might characterize these other forms, regardless of their social register.[77] Masotta maintains a certain distance and wiliness in his references to the purported materiality of the mass media's ideological processes. Far from denying the physicality of the dematerialized artwork and from placing its use of language on an ideal plane, Masotta insists instead on the material quality of ideology, but only up to a point. For Masotta, media art is more material or tangible not because it deals with ideology in its material instances, nor because in its characteristic lack of beauty it retreats from symbolization as such.

Referring to "what is perceived" in the media artwork, Masotta is purposefully elusive about what he means by "beauty," that is, whether it refers to the formal qualities of a given advertisement, or whether what he has in mind is something closer to the appearance of the media artwork more broadly speaking. This nondistinction is made all the more suggestive by Masotta's attempt to clarify what he means by media art's lack of "beauty" in direct reference to *El mensaje fantasma*: "What is perceived [in the mass media work] has more to do with certain effects of intelligibility that are obtained through the 'transformations' of the mass media's habitual structures."[78] Masotta appears to suggest here that no line can be drawn between the work's sensual qualities and the effect of shocking the viewer out of his or her spontaneous

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[76] Ibid., 260n8.
[77] Ibid.

perception of reality, forcing him or her as it were to "see" ideology in the media art object itself.

At the same time, it is for this reason that *El mensaje fantasma* resists fully complying with Barthes's framework for articulating art's stake in ideology critique. What we are made to see is the condition, if not the effect, of intelligibility. In "Contra el happening" (Against the Happening), Jacoby references Barthes's *Mythologies* in calling for media art to turn the naturalized use of meaning in the mass media against itself.[79] Working upon a pregiven language of signs or forms, myth, for Barthes, functions through a selection and configuration of the meanings of individual signs. Myth, according to Barthes, makes the relationship between the composite form and the contingent meaning assigned to it appear naturally given and inseparable. The mythologist's task therefore is to separate signs and meanings, analyzing the logic by which they were assigned and showing in the process how there is no necessary relationship between form and meaning.[80]

What is striking about *El mensaje fantasma* is the fact that it structurally forecloses meaning with its own self-referential presence, signaling nothing other than its own act of signification. *El helicóptero* allows us to see how a series of binary oppositions (poor vs. wealthy, land vs. air, etc.) become woven together into a supposedly meaningful narrative with the differential of the helicopter at its center; *El mensaje fantasma*, by contrast, takes this difference as its focus, rendering positive the structural lack at the center of *El helicóptero*. It makes us "see" the absent cause, not as the presupposition of a phantasmal stain peeking through reality, but rather as the nonsensical presentation of what must, but in this case cannot, be presupposed in order to produce "intelligibility." What we see is the underpinning of ideological capture in the brute materiality of its contingence.

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Jacoby, "Contra el happening," 126.

As I will argue in the following sections, the avant-garde's increasingly heightened discussions about the nature of art and its role in political struggle do not represent a break with the Media Art Group's redefinition of the avant-garde in meaning and its material support. Rather, the discussion about art's efficacy and its tricky relationship to the so-called "aesthetic language of violence" represents a continuation and deepening of the Media Art Group's inquiries.

After Pop and After

Masotta's lecture series on the anti-happening and the publication of *Happenings*, the Media Art Group's anthology of essays and manifestoes, overlap chronologically with the stirrings of rebellion against what Longoni and Mestman refer to as the circuit of modernizing art institutions, the Di Tella in particular. This is what Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman detail as the "itinerary of '68," the subtitle to their comprehensive study of the incipient avant-garde scene, extending from "the Di Tella to Tucumán Arde."

Following Longoni and Mestman's history, the *porteño* itinerary of '68 actually begins in Rosario in 1965 with the constitution of the *Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia* [Avant-Garde Art Group], an event that combined the exhibition of collages and assemblages in an established commercial gallery with a series self-organized interventions in a public space.[81] The Group also distributed its first manifesto, "*A propósito de la cultura mermelada*," in the form of a protest pamphlet criticizing the academicism of contemporary art in Rosario's institutions.[82] Other precedents include Romero Brest's exclusion of León Ferrari's four-piece installation, *La civilización occidental y cristiana* (Figure 1.10), from the Di Tella's *Premio Nacional* exhibit, later known as *Experiencias*. Ferrari's piece is most notably remembered as a protest against the

[80] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109, 124, 128.
[81] Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* 70.

Vietnam War in which a miniature plaster crucifix adorns the front of a six-foot tall U.S. bomber

plane, a reproduction of the kind being used in Southeast Asia.[83] Ferrari responded publicly,

reaffirming the political over artistic qualities of the work, in what would become a habitual

gesture over the next several years.[84] The *Bienal Paralela* [Parallel Biennial] of 1966 similarly

brought together young, experimental artists from Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Córdoba in order

to protest the *III Bienal Americana de Arte*, sponsored by the American-owned Kaiser Industries

since 1962.[85] Among the alternative works performed, *En el mundo hay salida para todos* [In the

World there's a Place/ Exit for everyone] prefigures Graciela Carnevale's 1968 work in the *Ciclo

de Arte Experimental*. Both works called together a group of spectators in anticipation of a

happening only to reveal that the spectator-participants' forced enclosure in the gallery was itself

the event.[86] The events beginning in April of 1968 form a more rapid sequence of increasingly

polemic interventions and protests against the circuit of modern art institutions and prizes in the

capital city.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 88.

[84] Romero Brest requested that Ferrari remove the plane and crucifix, the installation's largest piece, on religious and political rather than artistic grounds: the delicate [geopolitical] "situation" of the country and the likelihood of offending religious sensibilities (Ibid., 89). While the same piece created a firestorm of controversy and censorship in Ferrari's 2004-05 retrospective in the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, it is also worthy to note that Ferrari had been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship some ten years earlier in 1995 for a project entitled "Sexo y violencia en la iconografía cristiana" ["Sex and Violence in Christian Iconography"]. See Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guiarães' Chronology in *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangeled Alphabets* as well as Giunta's edition of documents from the Centro Cultural Recoleta controversy, *El caso Ferrari*.

[85] Founded by Henry Kaiser, a German-born, American industrialist, Kaiser Industries made its fortune fabricating U.S. army vehicles during the Second World War. In Argentina, eventually accompanied by his son, Edward, Kaiser Industries of Argentina (IKA) functioned as a mixed private and public company in collaboration with Argentina's *Industrias Aeronáuticas y Mecánicas del Estado* [State Aeronautic and Mechanical Industries] (IAME) since the 1930s. Its increased presence in the growing Cordovan industrial belt, however, dates to the policies of the second Peronist administration that encouraged foreign industry to establish itself in Argentina (Rocca, *Arte, modernización y guerra fría*, 51). Curiously, then, it was a foreign-owned company in a relationship ultimately benefitting it, not long-term economic development in Argentina, that would become the face of middle class aspirations of personal as well as national progress and modernization exemplary of the kind of state-imposed cultural hegemony characterizing Latin American popular front politics during the mid-twentieth century. As IKA diversified its partners among other private corporations, it became a more present cultural edifice in Córdoba, sponsoring first a series of annual salons of national painting between 1958 and 1963 and then the Biennial itself for the first of three

times in 1962 as a means of corporate self-promotion (Ibid., 54). As María Cristina Rocca has similarly noted, the 1966 Biennial incorporated technological art in particular as a means of corporate self-promotion.

[86] Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* 145.
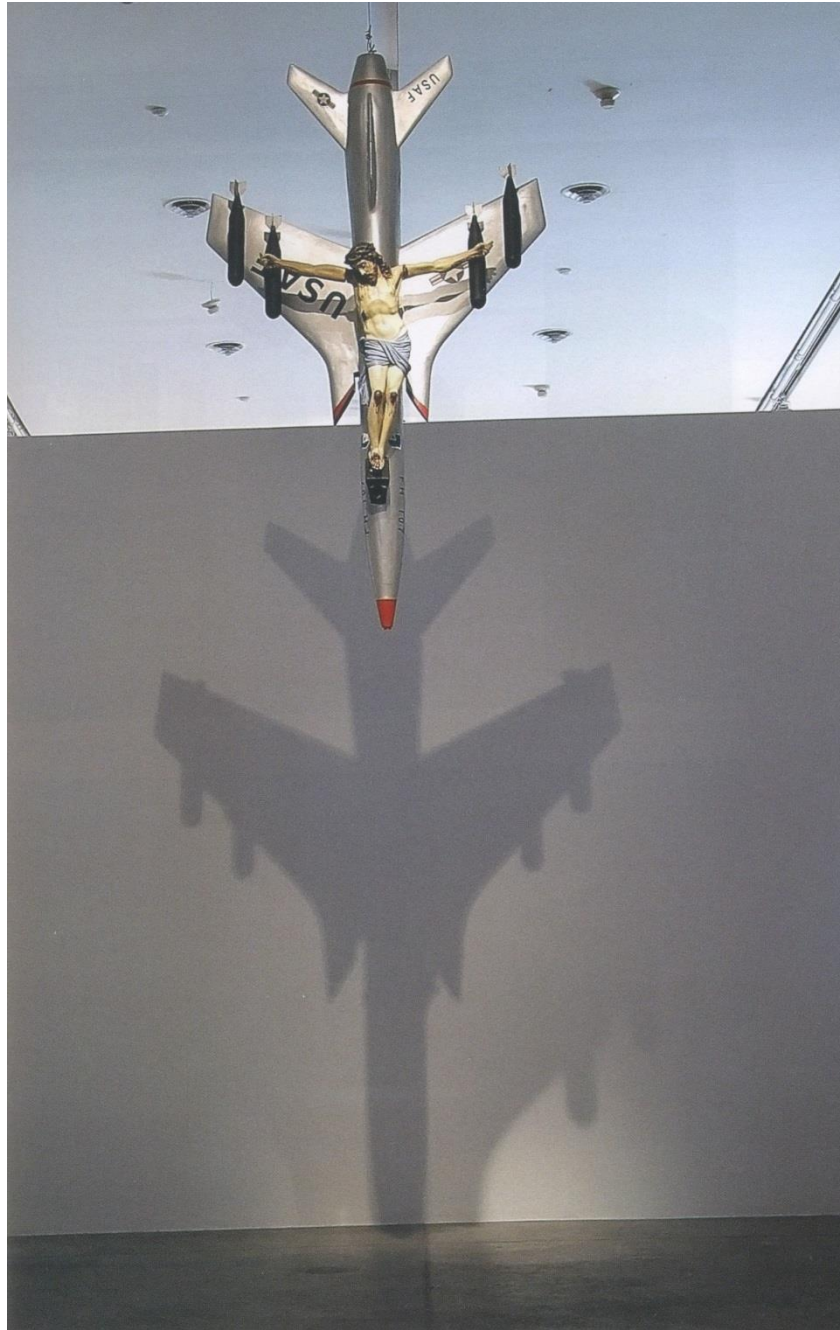
Figure 1.10 León Ferrari, *La civilización occidental y cristiana*, 1965.
Andrea Giunta*, El caso Ferrari*, p. 361.
© 2008 Ediciones Licopodio, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.11 Graciela Carnevale, *En el mundo hay salida para todos*, 1968.
Audience trapped inside the exhibition space and tearing the posters off of the walls.
Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a' Tucumán Arde,'* p. 153.
© 2008 Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.12 Eduardo Favario, Untitled, 1968.
The closed exhibition space of the Ciclo *de Arte Experimental*, used as the starting point for audience members'
walk through the streets, concluding in the Librería Signo.
Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a 'Tucumán Arde,'* p. 153.
© 2008 Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.13 Eduardo Ruano, Untitled (Fuera yanquis de Vietnam), 1968. Shattered glass following the artist's
"attack" against the Kennedy portrait at the Premio Very Estimar.
Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a 'Tucumán Arde,'* p. 99.
© 2008 Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.14 Roberto Plate, Untitled (Baño), 1968. Men's and women's bathroom doors after the work was closed by police at *Experiencias 68*.
Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde,* p. 114
© 2008 Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.15 Margarita Paksa, *Comunicaciones*, 1968. Spectators listen to the piece's recorded soundtrack of amorous sounds (left); Paksa and her partner leave their imprints in the sand as part of the work's construction (right).
Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a' Tucumán Arde,'* p. 111.
© 2008 Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.16 Margarita Paksa, *Comunicaciones*, 1968. Spectators listen to the piece's recorded soundtrack of amorous sounds (left); Paksa and her partner leave their imprints in the sand as part of the work's construction (right).
Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a' Tucumán Arde,'* p. 111.
© 2008 Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

For the Museum of Modern Art's *Ver y Estimar* prize exhibition, Eduardo Ruano staged the

mock-up of a glass-encased photo of John F. Kennedy, similar to one found in the Lincoln

Library, next to a lead brick. During the exhibit's opening ceremony, Ruano completed the piece

by throwing stones at the glass case and yelling anti-imperialist slogans.[87] Pablo Suárez joined

Ruano, now banned by Romero Brest from the Di Tella's *Experiencias 68* exhibit. Mounted later

the same month, *Experiencias 68* was an annual group show and prize competition for young

artists that had become an important marker for the latest trends within contemporary art. Suárez

distributed copies of his letter of withdrawal from the exhibition to Romero Brest from a table

across the street from the Di Tella. In the letter, Suárez announced his desire to bring art closer to

the popular revolution and the critical caducity of art produced within the walls of the institution.

Similar but more active assaults followed within the next few months at a conference by Romero

Brest at the *Amigos del Arte* [Friends of Art] organization in Rosario and at the French

Embassy's *Premio Braque* [Braque Prize] at the Museo de Bellas Artes [Museum of Fine Arts]

in Buenos Aires. Within the flux of anti-institutional rebellions, the events at the *Premio Braque*

proved especially incendiary because of the explicit claim to censor solicitations deemed

inappropriate.[88] When the attempt of several artists to initiate a boycott of the prize failed

because of fissures within the group, they intervened directly into the opening ceremony. The

artists launched rotten eggs and distributed protest flyers attesting to the "rotting" [*podredumbre*]

of plastic artists (including themselves) because of the ideological and political conditions under

which the French government sponsored the prize.[89] Police quickly intervened; protestors were

arrested and received prison sentences of 30 days each.[90]

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[87] Ibid., 96.
[88] Ibid., 124.
[89] Ibid., 128.
[90] Ibid., 129.

Longoni and Mestman's history stresses the double movement by which politicized art was effectively to have broken from its institutional restraints.[91] On one hand, the more political radicalization of the left led to direct "attacks," as Ruano would call his, on the institutions and figures most closely associated with the "modernization" of post-Peronist art in Argentina. On the other, whether sponsored by these institutions or not, the exhibitions tended toward their own annihilation, inviting censorship from the art world and directly from the police. Works included in *Experiencias 68*, such as Jacoby's *Mensaje en el Di Tella* [Message in the Di Tella], Margarita Paksa's *Comunicaciones* [Communications], and Oscar Bony's *La familia obrera*, made direct and critical reference to imperialism in Vietnam, sexual enjoyment, and the class struggle in Argentina.

Despite the incidents of censorship and boycott leading up to the exhibition, related in part to the authoritarian political climate, the show nonetheless included ideologically provocative works that escaped censorship from both the institution and the state. Still, the exhibition's censure was far more contingent. Police violently closed *Experiencias 68* when graffiti critical of the Onganía regime was discovered on the walls of Roberto Plate's *Baño* [Bathroom]. Plate had installed simulacra of a men's and ladies' public bathroom in the Di Tella gallery. In the written justification of his work submitted to the prize jury, he explained that he had hoped to create a refuge intimate enough for the public to produce "acts of discharge at the emotional level."[92] Despite Plate's facetious intentions for the work, it did not explicitly invite political graffiti. In fact, *Baño* can also be viewed in the context of Plate's submission to the Museum of Modern Art's *Ver y Estimar* prize, in which the artist installed fake elevators in the museum, altering and highlighting the gallery space itself and the spectator's naturalized

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[91] Remarking on Ruano's actions at the *Premio Ver y Estimar*, Longoni and Mestman recall that Ruano's piece was directed both to American foreign policy and "that which Peter Bürger calls the institution of art" (Ibid., 98).

relationship to it in a gesture more characteristic of conceptualist institutional critique than the direct collapse of art into politics.[93] In the *Ciclo de Arte Experimental* [Experimental Art Cycle], partially sponsored but not hosted by the Di Tella, most of the works focused critically on the physical space of the institution and the normalized role of the spectator. Eduardo Favario's piece, however, forced spectators to effectively constitute a public march as they unexpectedly moved from one exhibition space to another; Rodolfo Eizalde and Emilio Ghilioni staged an unannounced street brawl with the aim of obligating spectators to intervene in order to break it up.[94] As mentioned above, Graciela Carnevale's *Enclosure*, similar to *En el mundo hay salida para todos*, staged a situation in which spectators would feel themselves "violently obligated" to intervene.[95] While Carnevale had expected the audience members trapped inside the gallery to break the glass storefront and free themselves, help inadvertently came from outside, sparking a real street brawl to be quickly broken up by the police. The fights and protests staged in the street or aimed at institutions like the Di Tella had become "real" reasons for the immediate repression of the state. As we will see, the vague conjunction of art and politics in Longoni and Mestman's affirmative characterization of the avant-garde thus takes for granted an implicit distinction between the symbolic realm of critical, artistic and ideological intervention and the more contingent actions that provoked police repression.[96] Their examples, however, belie Longoni and Mestman's reading by placing a more subtle emphasis on the relation between the negative place of the truth of social contradiction and the critical form it might take.

Longoni and Mestman's narrative of the avant-garde's trajectory proposes a correlation

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[92] Cited in Ibid., 113-115.
[93] Ibid., 113.
[94] Ibid., 149-50.
[95] Reproduced in Ibid., 152.
[96] It is interesting to note that the symbolic nature of many of the works mentioned only devolve into the "real" of violent action when considered from the point of view of the state. It is because of the excessive and blatant force of

between artistic interventions aimed against the institution of art, the abandonment of artistic practice, and political radicalization. This combination can at times appear as a normative description for contemporary artists based on the experiences of the late 60s. Without wishing to diminish the utopian character of the moment Longoni and Mestman highlight, I would like to explore the extent to which two texts produced at this same moment build upon the relationship of medium, form, and truth implicit in the works and manifesto of the Media Art Group.

María Teresa Gramuglio and Nicolás Rosas' declaration for the Rosario exhibit of *Tucumán Arde* makes numerous references to art and aesthetic experience as a "collective and violent act destroying the bourgeois myth of the new forms of art."[97] As Gramuglio and Rosas write, "Revolutionary art…presents itself as a partial form of reality that integrates itself into total reality, destroying the idealistic separation between the work and the world as it maintains a truthful transformation of the social structures – that is to say, it is a *transformative art*.[98] The change to be noted concerns what Gramuglio and Rosa consider to be the insufficiency of ideology critique for the political urgency of the times. Strangely, though, as the manifesto describes the project, *Tucumán Arde* was nothing but an "informational circuit" meant "to demonstrate the distortion" that their activities suffered in Tucumán at the hands of "a mass media that holds official power along with the bourgeois class."[99] Gramuglio and Rosas seem to place distance between *Tucumán Arde's* pretenses and the work of the Media Art Group: "the necessity of creating not only a relation between the work of art and the mass media, but an artistic object capable, on its own, to produce modifications as effective as a political act."[100]

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the state in these situations that art and radical politics can appear to mingle so indistinctly together, blurring the ideological and material, anti-institutional gestures of the artists that sparked them.

[97] Gramuglio and Rosas, "Tucumán Burns," 77.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 78, 79.
[100] Ibid., 67.

However, their "total work of art" differs only slightly in intensity from the dematerialized form and overall aims of the Media Art Group. Gramuglio and Rosas describe *Tucumán Arde* as an "informational circuit" whose aim was to "promote a de-alienation of the mass-media image of the Tucumán reality" and whose "high point" was to have been the final, public discovery of the "true" information about Tucumán – qualitative and quantitative reports, video-taped interviews with residents, etc. The avant-garde's supposed "suicide," as the curator Patricia Rizzo describes it, was thus less a leap into total annihilation or destruction than the call to intensify the stakes of Barthesian de-mythification. Still squarely within the same parameters of ideology critique that guided the Media Art Group, the issue for Gramuglio and Rosas was not the extent to which the naturalization of ideology occured, but rather the effective *form* of response to it: how to mythologize myth in turn; how to "conspire" against the state and capitalist class' "conspiracy" in a more effective form. The *Tucumán Arde* declaration suggests the creation of a different kind of "artistic object," one "capable of producing modifications as effective as a political act" with an emphasis on the immanent materiality and object-like nature of this statement. The key here is not to mistake this call to the immanence of the artistic object either as a recession into the traditional art object or as an affirmation of a total work of art. On the contrary, if there is something singular in *Tucumán Arde* as the most representative and most often cited work of the Di Tella avant-garde, it is the call for art not only to reveal but also to give form to truth in a novel and more effective way.

The Material Support of Rebellion

We can observe a similar emphasis in the artist León Ferrari's presentation at the *Primer Encuentro Nacional de Artistas de Vanguardia* [First National Meeting of Avant-Garde Art], a colloquium formed by a number of young artists working in and around the Di Tella held in

Rosario in August 1968.[101] The meeting followed immediately upon the police closures of the

Experiencias '68 in the Di Tella and the *Ciclo de Arte Experimental Rosario 68*, sponsored by

the Di Tella in another space. In general terms, the meeting questioned and called for new

definitions of avant-garde art in relation to ideology, political militancy, the role of the artist,

formal innovation, and the institution of art. According to Longoni and Mestman, the question of

the efficacy of the artwork became paramount, a node relating the broadly defined topics of art

and politics stated above.[102] Though differing slightly in tone, the presentations by artists

including Ricardo Carreira, Juan Pablo Renzi, and León Ferrari placed their programmatic

emphasis on how the work of art could express the "dialectic and creative confluence" between

formal investigation and a militant, ideological stance.[103] If we take Renzi as exemplary, the

artists defined themselves against the presuppositions of communist artists like Ricardo Carpani,

on one hand, and against what Renzi at the time referred to as the art world and its "mechanisms

of prestige" for co-opting socially engaged works.[104] The vagueness of "efficacy" thus refocused

the avant-garde's aesthetic and "political," or critical, program onto the function expected of the

artwork itself for opposite reasons. On one hand, the declared political militancy of the artist and

the use of the work as a vehicle for that militancy to the detriment of formal concerns were seen

as critically insufficient. On the other, the increasingly rapid and diverse devices of artistic

rupture had similarly come to reinforce the proximity between the institutions and the market.[105]

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[101] The colloquium took place in the Centro de Estudios de Filosofía y Ciencias del Hombre, where professors had been expelled or voluntarily exiled from the university during the Onganía military dictatorship beginning in June 1966 (Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* 157).

[102] Ibid., 162.

[103] Cited in Ibid., 160.

[104] Cited in Ibid., 166.

[105] Ibid., 166, 168. The question arises again of giving a theoretical account of the Di Tella's imminent financial and social institutional collapse in 1969. While I have argued that the Di Tella operated, both economically and symbolically, according to a logic of commodification perhaps ahead of its time economically, there is also a certain specificity to the way in which postmodern cultural strategies comingle with the Romero Brest's project to modernize Argentinean art in the eyes of the world. By contrast, the internationally recognized Centro de Arte y

Longoni and Mestman of course acknowledge these two broadly defined targets against

which the avant-garde defined itself. The authors' framing of the problematic "crux" of efficacy,

however, remains uncritically close to the urgent tenor and immediate political context of the

artists themselves: "The question of the efficacy of the work is, then, one of the great cruxes of

the debate: How can art effectively contribute something to the revolutionary process under

way?" In Renzi's words, efficacy comes down to "a kind of work that produces effects similar to

those of a political act."[106] For Ferrari, "art would be neither beauty nor novelty; art will be

efficacy and perturbation. The accomplished work of art would be one which, within the artist's

own ambit, has the same impact as a terrorist in attack in a country in the process of

liberation."[107] While Longoni and Mestman acknowledge the use of the language of political

violence to reaffirm the artists' revolutionary contribution through art, the authors nonetheless

emphasize that the artists' "allusions to the armed struggle are not only metaphorical."[108]

Longoni and Mestman then go on to quote several phrases from Renzi's, Carreira's and Ferrari's

speeches that allude to future social change as dependent on popular armed struggle and the

willingness of ever greater numbers of men and women to die for their cause.[109] Longoni and

Mestman then affirm: "It is not only about political definitions but also an artistic program. In

addition to the metaphor of the work as a terrorist attack, Renzi talks explicitly about the

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Comunicación [Center for Art and Communication], directed by the businessman Jorge Glusberg, opened its doors
in 1969, and established itself and its artists as active forces in the international exhibition of conceptual and
technological art throughout the political repression of the 1970s and early 80s. For an account of the individual
success of Argentinean artists in New York in particular, see Rodrigo Alonso's "Imán: Nueva York" and Carla
Stellweg's "'Magnet – New York': Conceptual, Performance, Environmental, and Installation Art by Latin
American Artists in New York." Both essays refer to the 1964 exhibition by the same title, held at the Bonino
Gallery and sponsored by the Inter-American Foundation for the Arts.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

'violence of aesthetic language.'"[110] The critics then resume their argument, now defining efficacy as "simultaneously political and artistic," though always enunciated from within the symbolic realm or "specificity" afforded by art.[111]

Longoni and Mestman are correct in appropriating what is likely a purposeful ambiguity in Renzi's reference to "violence as an aesthetic language" among his presentation's five concluding propositions for the avant-garde.[112] It thus remains productively unclear as to whether Renzi refers to presentation or representation as part of art's new "aesthetic language." In Longoni and Mestman's account of Renzi's proposal, this ambiguity leads them to assume an overly facile understanding of what the juxtaposition of critical art and militant politics might imply. While Longoni and Mestman never articulate it as such, they imply, via Renzi, that the avant-garde's position would be one of constantly gesturing towards the annihilation of its symbolic space without ever completely renouncing this space as such. The transformation of the work of art would thus imply inhabiting the ambiguity of "violence as aesthetic language" by constantly transgressing a symbolic limit reinforced by the very gesture of transgression itself.

As we have already alluded to, Ferrari's intervention at the meeting was similar in both tone and content. In relation to Renzi's "violence as aesthetic language," Ferrari's contribution stands out for its focus on the material medium of future avant-garde art. Where Renzi talks about the aesthetic language of violence in metaphoric terms, Ferrari takes his proposition literally:

> If we consider the work of art as an organization of aesthetic materials selected by its
> author and realized according to rules invented by or borrowed by the author, we can

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[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.

prove that what the avant-garde has done is to constantly broaden the list of primary

materials usable in art and to constantly reinvent the laws that organize them. That is how

rags, cans, "*lo cursi*," light, sound, time, the environment where a work is exhibited, the

mass media, self-destruction, action, etc. got added to oil paint and bronze. But by

amplifying the list, they forgot or rejected one of the most important aesthetic materials:

the meanings. When some theorists affirm that ideology is art's antibody or that

meanings are irrelevant to the judgment of the work, and when some artists affirm that it

is not possible to mix politics with art, they are really affirming that the contents, or at

least the political contents, are not aesthetic materials but rather anaesthetic or anti-

aesthetic. The avant-garde obeyed those principles as if they had been ordered to do so:

of all colors you shall not use yellow. Forgetting that there is absolutely nothing that

cannot be used to make art and that those who affirm that red, time, meaning, politics, are

not compatible with art, are not aesthetic material, don't know what the avant-garde is.[113]

(Ferrari 26)

Ferrari's focus on the medium of avant-garde art after or in the midst of dematerialization opens

a way towards understanding the Argentinean avant-garde's critical relationship to

conceptualism. "Politics," like meaning, is described as a medium with a tangibly material

presence. Ferrari does not compare meaning and politics to artistic style but rather lists it directly

as one of its material supports. Ferrari's cheeky list of artistic materials can thus be seen to build

upon the proposition, rather than supposition, of meaning glimpsed in Masotta's *El mensaje*

fantasma.

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[112] The other four place emphasis on redefining art's capacity for critical intervention by leaving the institutional circuit and making works respond to the ideological and market forces that exceed the strict confines of galleries and museums.

[113] Ferrari, *Prosa política*, 26.

In the passage above, Ferrari plays off the double genitive of the talk's title, "the art of meanings" referring both to an art made of meaning, which Ferrari uses interchangeably with "politics" and "ideology," and to the craft or technique of making an avant-garde art capable of overcoming the market's acceptance of formally transgressive gestures. This second sense of "the art of meanings" implies an ability to make its political stance manifest in its context and immediately impactful on its viewer. And yet, as Ferrari states a few lines below, "newspapers are [also] full of meanings that people read with indifference."[114] The work of the artist will thus "consist of organizing those meanings with other elements in a work that have the greatest efficacy for transmitting, revealing, and signaling them."[115] Ferrari does not advocate either for straightforward communication or for the collapse of art into political praxis. Rather, he insists on transposing phantasmal meaning into an immanent material support.

We can accordingly place the generative nature of Ferrari's ambiguity in relation to Osborne's definition of conceptualism. For Osborne, conceptualism's critical potential is to be found in its openness to contingent, socio-historic content proffered by the inevitable *schein*, or sensible appearance of its material support. In light of Osborne's definition, Ferrari's vague, slippery assertion of ideology and meaning as the material media of art begs further consideration. While recognizing the suggestive ambiguity in Ferrari's proposal, I would like to encourage reading his ambiguous use of meaning both as the work's ultimate goal (in construction) and as its material medium (in their coincidence). In other words, in establishing the Argentinean avant-garde's claim on politics, we reconnect it to the impetus of the Media Art Group in its search for a form adequate to the truth it sought to reveal and read the coincidence

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[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.

of meaning and material medium back into this slightly earlier endeavor.[116]

Ferrari himself provides a key to articulating the relationship between material medium and meaning within the framework of art's critique of ideology in his fleeting reference to Luis Felipe Noé's *Antiestética* (1965). In the paragraph immediately following the passage quoted above, we read: "Clear meanings, social commitments, ideologies, thus constituted what Noé would call the most durable and unmovable anti-aesthetics."[117] Noé was a young Argentinean plastic artist most closely associated with neo-figurative painting who worked in New York at the time. His critical essay, *Antiestética*, calls for a revision of avant-garde art along the same lines as Ferrari. Noé's one-word "*antiestética*," is not, as we might expect, a prescription for the dematerialization of art nor for any other formal stylistic change. As the author states repeatedly, the antiaesthetic is the rejection of the forms that preceded it only insofar as it is also the search for a way to articulate the relationship between the artist and the "world" at a given moment.[118] The work of art must then be defined through this process of search and contingent expression rather than as the end result of it. Though Noé never says so explicitly, we are also led to understand that this search or process of understanding connotes a certain anti-representational force that can be actualized at certain moments in an intelligible form. The importance of proposing the "antiestética" when he does is that at his present moment all ideals, both formal and social, have entered into crisis.[119] The artist, always in advance of his time, as Noé insists, is

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[116] Ferrari refers to the work of the Media Art Group in "El arte de los significados" as "one of the most valuable antecedents of the current avant-garde" in its use of the mass media and intentions to "act" directly "upon the spectator" (Ibid., 24). While writing, in both its material and semantic functions, would continue to play an important part in Ferrari's body of work, this work did not attempt to intervene directly into the mass media in the same way as the Media Art Group or the *Tucumán Arde* project. Despite this discrepancy, the focus of our discussion here is on challenging the established narrative about the failure of the 1960s avant-garde as a short-lived collective movement. For a history of Ferrari's work, see the chronology, as well as the contribution by Andrea Giunta, "León Ferrari: A Language Rhapsody" in *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets*.
[117] Ibid., 26.
[118] Noé, *Antiestética*, 61.
[119] Ibid., 83, 147.

thus called upon not to create, but to "reveal images" of the unspoken and collective wishes of the moment. The extent to which we should understand these wishes as already formulated within something like a collective political unconscious is complicated by an exceptionally structural moment within Noé's explanation of the artist's mission of "revelation":

> In this sense the process of revealing images is inexorable. When an artist loses his opportunity another takes it. But there are images that can only be reached from a certain perspective...Art is not an expressive work of individuals, but rather of the relations of those individuals called artists with the surrounding. The surrounding expresses itself through the relations between them. And the surroundings are not the objects in themselves, but everything that conditions the things in themselves, the structure of an epoch.[120]

In this passage, Noé clarifies that art is not to be understood as the original and individual expression of the artist's intention.[121] In revealing the invisible but determinant forces in an already existing image, the artist works on a given society's "spontaneous illusions."[122] Furthermore, revealing rather than creating an already existing image allows us to glimpse not objective reality itself but that which conditions the appearance of objects for a given age. In striving to paint these conditions, Noé offers us something akin to Althusser's definition of determinate absence in the case of painting:

> I do not mean – it would be *meaningless* – that it is possible to 'paint' 'living conditions,'

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[120] Ibid., 35.

[121] In decentering the individual intentions of the artist towards the social relations that produce the ideological imaginary on which the artist works, Pierre Macherey's phrasing is very similar to Noé's:

> Now, art is not man's creation, it is a product (and the producer is not a subject centered in his creation, he is an element in a situation or a system): different – in being a product – from religion, which has chosen its dwelling among all the spontaneous illusions of spontaneity, which is certainly a kind of creation...If man creates man, the artist produces works, in determinate conditions; he does not work on himself but on that which escapes him in so many ways, and never belongs to him until after the event (Macherey 67-68 cited in Montag, *Louis Althusser,* 82).

to paint social relations, to paint the relations of production or the forms of the class

struggle in a given society. But it is possible, through their objects, to 'paint' visible

connections that depict by their disposition, the *determinate absence* that governs them.

The structure which controls the concrete existence of men, i.e., which informs the lived

ideology of the relations between men and objects and between objects and men, this

structure, *as a structure*, can never be depicted in presence, *in person*, positively, in

relief, but only by traces and effects, negatively, by indices of absence, in *intaglio*.[123]

Through his experience with the Italian expressionist painter Leonardo Cremonini, Althusser

theorizes the symptomal reading by which we decipher the underlying silences of a given

structure there where it fails to symbolize them adequately, where it cannot but prove itself blind

to its own historic determinations or mediation. In *Reading Capital* (1965), we are given a more

technical definition, notably more laden with the visual metaphors of speculative philosophy

than the essay on painting. Referring to the determinate absence of the "visible field," Althusser

writes:

These new objects and problems are invisible in the field of the existing theory, because

they are not objects of this theory, because they are forbidden by it...They are invisible

because they are rejected in principle, repressed from the field of the visible: and that is

why their fleeting presence in the field when it does occur (in very peculiar and

symptomatic circumstances) goes unperceived, and becomes literally an undivulgeable

absence since the whole function is not to see them. Here again, the invisible is no more a

function of the subject's sighting than is the visible: the invisible is the darkness, the

blinded eye of the theoretical problematic's self-reflection when it scans its non-objects,

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[122] Cited in Ibid.
[123] Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," 162.

its non-problems, without seeing them, in order not to look at them.[124]

What we cannot see is precisely where we, as theorists, are materially – historically, and literally,

physically – blinded from within, bound to the social and physical, organic location as the

condition of possibility of the place from which we purport to see objective reality. As such, the

invisible is always invisible in relation to what a problematic takes as true. The invisible always

constitutes an internal exclusion with respect to the visible; the "fleeting presence" of its absence

can only appear as symptomatic, a strange and perturbing failure internal to a given problematic

through an historical and structural "metamorphosis in the gaze."[125] Perhaps in the symptomatic

place of Hegelian mediation, Warren Montag has noted the extent to which Althusser borrows

psychoanalytic concepts when the disorder of the text cannot be "explained away," but points out

"why it [the text] is what it is in its very disorder."[126] To identify and explain the text's

contradictions is to "understand the history of which they are a part."[127]

Montag's suggestion bears on a more significant difference between the way Althusser

and Lacan treat the symbolization of cause. Lacanian psychoanalysis attributes the phantasmal

presence of a structure's determinate absence to an operation of previous alienation and

misrecognition that inevitably implies a subject. Through the role of the fantasy structure

produced in this process of symbolic capture, psychoanalysis insists that even contradiction or

lack is already mediated, to an extent, by its imaginary overcoding within the unconscious

fantasy. Lacan suggestively refers to this as the logic by which desire sustains the divided and

dividing *jouissance* of the drive in the "misrecognized" relation between the division of the

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[124] Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 25-26.
[125] Ibid., 27.
[126] Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 83.
[127] Ibid.

subject and the imaginary object that might ultimately rend this division.[128] In other words, the subject, constitutively alienated in a symbolic order that eroticizes the subject's lack of ontological guarantee, sustains itself and/ as desire by seeking out those love objects capable of confounding the place of lack or *jouissance* with the (retroactively constituted) imaginary object that could fulfill this enjoyment. The introduction of an erotically charged form of symbolic alienation should, of course, not be too quickly assumed in Althusser's version of historical misrecognition. However, even if Lacan and Althusser differ on the reason for which structural cause is veiled, they nonetheless share a certain presumption about the interpretive operation through which the phantasmal presence of the cause reveals itself.

When Pierre Macherey, Althusser's early student and contemporary, insists on the social production of the text against the humanist ideology of individual creation, Lacan insists on man's confection of the object (of art) ex-nihilo. Lacan's structural approach to the operation of sublimation asks "what man does when he makes the signifier" or how it is that a particular age constitutes and is symptomatically constituted by the Thing, the simultaneously real lack at its center and the imaginary possibility of phallic plenitude sustained by the fantasy. Lacan defines sublimation in its effects as "an object, insofar as it is a created object, [that] may fill the function that enables it not to avoid the Thing as signifier but to represent it."[129] Representing the Thing, though, amounts to a definitively impossible task; it really does not exist and the positing of its very existence is an effect of the subject's ineluctable entanglement in a symbolic order that creates the demand for the plenitude of this supposedly lost object in the first place.[130] Thus, the very structure by which the Thing is posited allows for its symbolic representation such that it

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[128] Lacan, "On Freud's 'Trieb' and the Psychoanalyst's Desire," 724.
[129] Lacan, *Ethics of Psychanalysis,* 119.
[130] In Lacan's words, "The object is, by nature, a refound object. That it was lost is a consequence of that – but after the fact. It is thus refound without our knowing, except through the refinding, that it was ever lost" (Ibid., 118).

can only ever be approached at the level of appearance except in moments of symptomatic

exception or crisis. "And that [the Thing's representation in the symbolic] is the second

characteristic of the Thing as veiled; it is by nature, in the refinding of the object, represented by

something else."[131] Sublimation thus points to the substitutive operation by which the phallic

economy of desire and signification sustains itself. It is always apt to fail insofar as it can never

fully overcome or satisfy the drive.[132] In fact, failure is the modus operandi of representation in

the relationship between the field of signifiers/ objects and the total emptiness and fullness they

are charged with representing. The historical object that has been "raised to the level of the

Thing" cannot help but multiply and mutate in its mission to "encircle and render [the Thing]

both present and absent."[133]

As we have seen, the psychoanalytic model of reading the absent presence of the cause in

its effects implies an additional level of determination through the repressed structure of the

fantasy. Though never arbitrary, the level of symbolic representation through which the cause

will make its phantasmal presence legible always operates by way of substitution or metaphor.

As glossed above, in the "refinding of the object" the Thing "is...by nature represented by

something else."[134] The extent to which a work of art is able to estrange its reader or spectator

depends on the artist's ability to capture this constitutive potential for the metaphoric operation

to fail, allowing the absent cause to be glimpsed by way of some interruption or disfiguration at

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Whereas, in Lacan's estimation, Freud proposes a satisfaction of the drive in the de-eroticized symbolic
endeavors – art, science, etc. – Lacan insists on the constitutive destabilization of the symbolic by *jouissance* in the
process of sublimation, such that the fantasmal evocation of the unrepresentable Thing already speaks to the failure
of the drive to be satisfied, whether in the symbolic, or, as in Freud's case, in the imaginary recognition such
symbolic endeavors bring.
[133] Ibid., 141. Lacan's noteworthy and, we might add, avant-garde artist is he who intuits this constitutively failed
relationship to the Thing in representation and can give account of it without claiming mastery over the failure itself:
"The relation of the artist to the time in which he appears is always a contradictory one. It is against the current, in
opposition to reigning norms – including, for example, political norms, or indeed, systems of thought – that art
attempts to operate its miracle once more." (Ibid., 142). Lacan's artist would be able to analyze the structural

the symbolic level.

Lacan's example of anamorphosis similarly demonstrates the inevitable failure of representation by staging the subject's capture in the structures of desire and *jouissance*. The anamorphotic stain pictures the subject's annihilation as already fixed, captured in the Other's gaze.[135] The effect of anamorphosis serves as an explicit example of the baiting or arousal of desire by which pictures interpellate their spectators. Paintings do not solicit the spectator's gaze directly, but rather lure him into the gaze of the Other by promising the possibility of phallic meaning or fullness behind appearance. "The *tromp-l'oeil* of painting pretends to be something other than it is" in that it pretends to be something other than mere appearance.[136] Paintings, as Lacan describes them, play with appearances to the extent that, for the desiring viewer, the appearances suppose something, some substance behind them. In this sense, the *tromp- l'oeil* instantiates the metaphoric structure of neurotic desire, promising the assumed possibility of phallic *jouissance* beyond and through its substitutive veil. Enacting the symbolic limits through which desire produces only pleasurable amounts of *jouissance*, the pleasure of this operation depends on the mediation of the screen or picture, by which the subject remains separated from the object of desire through the substitutive allusion of what that object might be. Within this same structure of substitution, the anamorphotic stain attempts to simultaneously image and denude the object cause that propels the seduction of the *tromp-l'oeil*.[137] The subject as this impossible object shines through in the anamorphotic stain/ skull; it is that which is not beyond appearance.

Charles Shepherdson remarks on this substitutive operation of symbolization and the

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coordinates of his own era somehow in advance of or beyond his own social and historical conditions.
[134] Ibid., 118.
[135] Ibid., 92.
[136] Ibid., 112.

production of a "residual" *jouissance* that simultaneously supports and de-stabilizes it.

According to Shepherdson, the paternal metaphor serves as a symbolic reference for the desire of

the mother, substituting itself as an answer as to the object that might satisfy the Other's desire or

lack. In the process of subjectivation, this retroactively created object causes overlaps with the

place of the subject's symbolic identification.[138] In moving from Lacan's discussion of

sublimation to that of anamorphosis with respect to the symbolization of cause, it is important to

emphasize the continuation between the two in the mutually constitutive relationship between

desire and drive, or symbolization and cause. This continuity concerns Noé's proposal insofar as

the latter speaks to a situation in which the substitutive function of the symbolic has ceased to act

as an effective mediator of the imaginary object.

What Noé refers to as the artist's surrounding, or the ideological mediation that

conditions appearance, should thus be contrasted to the brief trajectory traced from Althusser's

essay on Cremonini to Lacan's comments on anamorphosis. The dominant example of North

American pop art in the work of Clas Oldenburg in the second half of *Antiestética* speaks to a

method of symptomal reading in reverse that rejects the defamiliarization implicit in the

examples of both Cremonini and anamorphosis. Evoking the image of Oldenburg's flaccid,

inflatable sculptures of quotidian objects of American culture in the 1950s and 60s, Noé affirms

that the specificity of Oldenburg's project consists in not changing anything at the formal level.

According to Noé, Oldenburg neither alters the objects he reproduces – telephones, lipsticks,

toilets, etc. – nor denies the formal pleasure they might happen to elicit. In a brilliantly

paradoxical reading of the American pop artist, Noé insists that Oldenburg does not simply

present things as they appear, even if he seems to do so. Oldenburg's point is not to imbue the

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[137] Ibid., 106.
[138] Shepherdson, *Vital Signs*, 150; Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 272.

quotidian object with a level of formal sophistication the ordinary viewer did not know it had nor to completely nihilize the symbolic space of art. Rather, Noé asserts, the pop artist always seeks to transcend the reality he reproduces: "Oldemburg [sic], for example, in his most recent works, takes a form, a public telephone, and makes it exactly the same as it is. Except that he makes it in another material, in a less rigid, deflatable material."[139] Here, Noé, explains, resides its "magic": "in apparently not modifying anything."[140] Most notable is that for Noé, Oldenburg's objects, despite their hyperbolic size and altered texture, are not meant to estrange or deceive the viewer. Oldenburg's sumptuous mass cultural reproductions are a lure without a veil. The objects are chosen for their social value, the charged associations they evoke for a certain viewer: "The selection of these elements is fundamental: the hamburger, ice cream or things from *la vida confort.*"[141] Oldenburg's hyperbolic reproductions of quotidian objects of post-War consumer culture seduce the viewer without any suggestion of absence. They embody the American way of life, a culturally coated dream of class ascendance at a moment when social values have become unmoored.

Oldenburg's work effects its critique without recourse to those double valences and distortions while the symptomal reading seeks to reveal structural cause. For Noé, however, this art does exemplify the way art should reveal what conditions appearances. In this sense, pop art elides the representation of the popular classes; such portrayals, whether folkloric or social realist, are inevitably painted according to the formal and social hierarchy of the hegemonic class. "Here in pop art, on the other hand," Noé affirms, "what remains is the form of popular vision."[142] Furthermore, we might add, this "form of popular vision" does not merely remain;

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[139] Noé, *Antiestética*, 161.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., 155.
[142] Ibid., 157.

pop art institutes it in the slight change in perspective between the original object and its re-presentation, in the change that occurs in "apparently not modifying anything."[143] The apparent contradictoriness of Noé's reference to popular vision is, of course, that it assumes a distinctively "popular" ideology precisely where pop art would seem to signal a process of homogenizing conflicting class ideologies in the unitary form and perspective of mass culture. In a more skeptical tone, we could even suggest that though pop art would seem to constitute itself in and through this popular point of view, it is really aimed at an enlightened, wealthy audience. What pop art would seek, then, is the estranging effect of the *vanitas* for late twentieth century Americans: that they, too, are aspirational, that the process of modernization is not so far behind them, that the ironic veneer of kitsch depends on the efficacy of a fiction about class arrival. Such a cynical reading, though, detracts from the perspicacity of Noé's more immediately paradoxical theory. Noé suggests the parameters for an art whose political "efficacy," in Ferrari and Renzi's language, would reject the operation of defamiliarization. For Noé, the gaze or cause of a given symbolic structure remains immanent to the popular imaginary it takes.[144]

La familia obrera as Artifice

Bony's *La familia obrera* (Figure 1.16), performed at the Di Tella's *Experiencias '68* exhibit and later circulated as a series of photographs, captures the coincidence of real cause and imaginary consistency in keeping with the spirit of Noé's "*antiestética*" and the particular way that Masotta envisioned art's dematerialization. In the performance of *La familia obrera*, three actors sit atop a pedestal composed of two different covered platforms. Though photographic

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[143] Ibid., 161.
[144] Lacan defines the gaze as the illusory place within the fantasy scene at which the subject confuses his failing or split nature with its point of vanishing (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 83). As the place of the subject himself – "in the final resort our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see" – the gaze is the place from which the subject is determined as desiring and thus limited in his capacity for self-representation (Ibid., 75, 83). As "the underside of consciousness," the place of desiring lack in which the subject is anchored in the

registers of the performance vary, in the most widely circulated print the family's father takes his place on top, his wife and son seated at his feet on the lower block.[145] Bony also placed a sign on the lower platform noting the identity and salary paid to the performers: "Luis Ricardo Rodríguez, machinist by profession, receives twice what he earns at his job for remaining on exhibition with his wife and son for the duration of the show." Despite what appears to be different actors in necessarily varied positions, Bony would identify the performers by name as Luis Ricardo Rodríguez, Elena Quiroga and Máximo Rodríguez Quiroga.[146] As in Bony's earlier installation, *Local y su descripción* (1967), *La familia obrera* again included a tape of household sounds.[147]

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symbolic Other, Lacan nonetheless asks how we might "try to imagine it" (Ibid., 83). Using the camera lucida en reverse, we are given a distortion rather than a restoration of the original image on the projected canvas.
[145] Herrera, "Arte y realidad," 174.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Herrera, "Arte y realidad," 174.

Figure 1.16 Oscar Bony, *La familia obrera*, 1968.
Oscar Bony, *Oscar Bony, el mago. Obras 1965-2001*, p.77.
© 2007 MALBA Fundación Constantini, Buenos Aires.

Figure 1.17 Alberto Greco, *Vivo-Ditos*, 1963. Shot in Piedralaves, Spain.
Deborah Cullen, ed. *Arte no es vida*, p. 86.
© 2008 El Museo del Barrio, New York.

Figure 1.18 Alberto Greco, *Vivo-Ditos*, 1963. Shot in Piedralaves, Spain.
Deborah Cullen, ed. *Arte no es vida*, p. 86.
© 2008 El Museo del Barrio, New York.

Figure 1.19 Oscar Bony, *La familia obrera*, 1968. Photograph of spectators and performers at Experiencias 68.
Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* p. 108
© 2008 Eudeba, Buenos Aires.

La familia obrera has been praised and criticized from a variety of opposing perspectives revolving around the status of the work as art. At the time of the exhibition, the commercial magazine *Análisis* reported that the spectacle "transformed the spectator into a participant, revealing to him his brotherhood with a willfully forgotten social sector and imposing upon him a similar humiliation by looking at those beings paid to be looked at."[148] Despite the ambition of the work, the reviewer goes on to state that in the context of an exhibition in which the new is the "fundamental quality," one had to admit that Alberto Greco and Oscar Masotta had preceded Bony by several years.[149] Before returning to Greco's work, which Luis Camnizter and Ana Longoni understandably identify as one of Bony's antecedents and possible influences, it is worth contrasting the *Análisis* review with that of *Primera Plana*. While *Análisis* ultimately places Bony's gesture in relation to the works of Greco and Masotta, *Primer Plana* does the opposite. The introduction of real, salaried workers paid to be looked at was the last and inevitable step in what the review refers to as "the agonic trance; a card trick that abominates the aesthetic at the risk of spending the rest of its time exposed to the elements in a no-man's land that the plastic arts will not lay claim to and that not even the spectacle – thanks to happenings – will be able to recognize as its own."[150] While the *Análisis* review claims that Bony's gesture is insufficient as avant-garde art but commendable as a kind of ethical challenge to its spectators, *Primera Plana* insists that the work signals the end of art's symbolic practice altogether. Patricia Rizzo, the curator responsible for re-mounting the exhibition at the *Fundación Proa* in 1998, similarly refers to the "collective suicide" of the avant-garde following the censorship of *Experiencias 68*. This is a sentiment that even Bony himself entertained, with some self-critical distance, in retiring from the art world between 1968 and 1977 before the horizon of what he

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[148] Cited in Giraudo, "Cronología biográfica," 209.
[149] Ibid.

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calls an "impossible utopia."[151]

In their discussions of *La familia obrera*, Longoni and Herrera similarly take up this second line of reasoning in signaling toward a beyond of symbolization. According to Longoni, Bony's performance piece follows in a slightly longer genealogy of Argentinean action art characterized by "the unclear limits between artistic action and political action," the use of contested collective space, and the employment of "provocation" as a way of implicating an involuntary audience in the action.[152] Furthermore, the connection Longoni suggests between *La familia obrera* and Masotta and Greco's works echoes the *Análisis* review. Longoni refers to Greco's *Vivo-dito* [Living-Finger] pieces (Figurea 1.17 and 1.18) as ephemeral and apparently spontaneous acts with quotidian objects, landscapes, and non-professional participants labeled and then photographed as art. It is curious, then, that Longoni characterizes Greco's *Vivo-ditos* as promoting "in an obvious way, the transition from work to gesture, from object to action" in what she suggests to be a kind of inverted readymade.[153] Indeed, Longoni defines Duchamp's readymades according to the shock value of introducing a quotidian object into the space of fine art and questioning the values, technique, media, etc. by which art is defined. She quotes Greco in writing that "the artist will no longer show with a painting but rather with his or her finger."[154] According to Longoni, unlike readymades, the *Vivo-ditos* go out into the street in order to point to the art already present in daily life. Longoni's interpretation is surprising insofar as Greco does not exactly invert the logic of the readymade but emphasizes this same logic twice over, labeling his objects and human photographic subjects as art in the street and then reinserting the entire work into the art institutional context once again.

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[150] Cited in Ibid.
[151] Rizzo, Terán and Fragasso, *Instituto Di Tella*, 34; Bony cited in García Navarro, "Bony el polémico," np.
[152] Longoni, "Action Art in Argentina from 1960," 85.
[153] Ibid., 86.

In a similar vein to Longoni, Herrera has also discussed *La familia obrera* as a readymade. For Herrera, whereas Bony's more characteristically conceptualist works had insisted on the discontinuity between signifier and signified, "*La familia obrera*['s] flagrant presence 'breaks' this discontinuity, making the 'live' 'object' present itself."[155] And yet, despite the "flagrant presence" of the very particular, live, semantically charged *La familia obrera*, Herrera goes on to read the work along the very same lines of the readymade already present and even exaggerated in the previous year's works. On one hand, she quotes a personal interview with Bony in 1993 in which he states that the people were not the work; the work, rather, was the sign communicating that they had been paid twice their normal salaries for participating in the piece. In Herrera's words, "the 'object' had to be present in order to 'support' the sign."[156]

On the other hand, Herrera goes on to cite another interview Bony gave in 1993 in which the artist states that he wanted both to make his work as self-reflexive and connected to social reality as possible.[157] For that reason, Herrera concludes, Bony "took the material for his work directly from social reality, legitimizing it as an artistic object by introducing it into the environment of the Di Tella."[158] Herrera thus presents two suggestively contradictory readings of the same work. First, *La familia obrera* presents a rupture with Bony's earlier work because of its "flagrant presence" as nothing less than a working-class family in the midst the political radicalization of the Peronist working class syndical organization and the larger, more epochal fragmentation of the skilled and industrial working class. The work thus captures the spirit of the ready-made by standing at the limit between "art" and "reality."[159] Second, *La familia obrera*

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[154] Ibid.
[155] Herrera, "Arte y realidad," 179.
[156] Ibid.,181.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., 179.

operates along the more familiar paths of the readymade and its conceptualist appropriation by actually constituting the family through the sign that labels it; the work's commentary on the artificiality of art and its institutions reveals itself through a linguistic operation based on the arbitrary character of naming as such. What matters, then, is the way in which the label reveals the "*mechanisms that produce artisticness* [sic]" and the estranging reaction that this revelation produces in the spectator.[160] In this way, the living family becomes a mere physical support for a semiotic operation.[161] This second possibility in Herrera's reading places us squarely within the conceptualist reception of Duchamp's legacy so dominant for Anglo-American artists and critics.

Returning to our initial anchor in Osborne's critique, the charged semantic content of the working class family would speak to the way the conceptualist work's inevitable physical support opens itself to historical contingent meaning-making and critique. Both the work and Herrera's ambivalent reading of it nonetheless add a certain complexity to Osborne's schema, one which, we might add, Herrera already contemplates by suggesting that, as a readymade, *La familia obrera* reflects on its own status through its use of signage while exposing the relations of power at the heart of the capitalist system.[162] For Herrera, the work succeeds in shocking viewers on two different levels: it signals the arbitrary, institutional mechanism of naming by which art becomes art and it presents a polyvalent object – the well-dressed family – that implies a Christian iconicity that resists any facile identification of the three as workers. As we have already seen, however, Herrera sabotages the neatness of her interpretation by too quickly equating "reality" – something like the naturalized correspondence between a thing and its name

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[160] Ibid.,181.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid., 182.

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as perceived in everyday life – with the work's "flagrant presence."[163] As already glimpsed in

Greco's *Vivo-dito* series, *La familia obrera* defies Herrera's attempt at categorizing it in relation

to two of conceptualism's most central characteristics: the readymade's incorporation of non-

traditional objects and the degradation of physical medium as mere support. Both of these

obstacles revolve around the use of the working-class family as aesthetic object and medium: as

labor commodity, on one hand, and as a mythical presentation of an embattled working class, on

the other.

Following Longoni's genealogy of action art, Bony's piece is perhaps most similar to

Masotta's *Para inducir al espíritu de la imagen* [To Induce the Spirit of the Image]. Mounted at

the Di Tella in November 1966, *Para inducir...*was based on a performance piece by the North

American composer and Fluxus artist La Monte Young, who Masotta had seen at St. Francis

College in downtown Brooklyn the previous year. As Masotta describes it, Young's piece was

meant to detach the sense of hearing from the others. Spectators watched the five performers,

who were seated, one in a yoga position, all dressed in what was "surely Oriental clothing."[164]

While one played the violin, the other four accompanied him in unison, articulating what

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[163] Ibid.,179. Herrera posits the disquieting presence of *La familia obrera*'s human objects against Roland Barthes' notion of discontinuity, which Masotta adapts for his discussion of art in one of his essay contributions to *Happenings* (1967) in what Rosalind Krauss might call the post-medium condition. In "Literature and Discontinuity," Barthes likens the effects of the fragmentary novel to those of the shifting relationship between signifier and signified within a structural linguistic schema. Masotta, in turn, suggests the same about artistic media: the found objects Rauschenberg's combines and the use of recent technology and the mass media serve to challenge to any assumption of an artworks' divine creation or imaginary totality. Judging from Herrera's descriptions of the performance, she seems to be describing one of the most widely spread photographs of the work rather than recalling the performance itself. Curiously, as both a presence in the gallery and as a photograph, *La familia obrera* "breaks with discontinuity," implying that it appears as totalizing and impermeable where the modernist spectator expects meaning to be constituted through the negative relation between signifiers. As Longoni notes in her preliminary study to Masotta's writings on art, Masotta also borrows "discontinuity" from a work by the artist Raúl Escari, a fellow collaborator in the Media Art Group. In *Entre en discontinuidad* [Enter discontinuity], the artist posted flyers featuring second-person technical descriptions of a series of street corners. The signs, according to the artist, did not point out anything that the participant could not already have observed. As Escari describes it, the effect desired has less to do with content communicated in the flyers' descriptions than with the subtle change of perception effected by the added experience of reading (Longoni, "Estudio preliminar," 74). According to Escari, the combination of the description and its real-life referent is meant to make the spectator "take distance, to distance himself mentally and thus provoke a slight effect of estrangement" (75).

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Masotta describes as a "continuous, guttural sound."[165]

Dismissing what he considers to be Young's strange and orientalist approach to Zen Buddhism, Masotta describes both his original plans for the work's reproduction and its final result some five months after the June 1966 military coup. Among the many details Masotta alters – for example, instead of five seated performers, thirty or forty standing actors crowded onto a platform, and instead of detaching the sense of sound, detaching that of sight by bathing his motley crew in light – Masotta's interest in the look and conditions of the performers is most suggestive. Rather than hire Zen-like performance artists, Masotta recounts how it occurred to him to recruit his performers from among the "lumpen" proletariat of downtown Buenos Aires not far from the location of the Di Tella: "shoeshine boys or beggars, defective people, a psychotic from the hospice, an impressive looking beggar woman" whose tattered designer clothes and bronzed complexion, Masotta details, capture "the perfect image of a person with a certain economic status who had suffered a rapid and disastrous fall."[166] In his initial plan for the work, Masotta recounts that he would have gone out to the street to find his performers, paying them in advance of their work.[167] In the version that would eventually be executed, Masotta notes that instead of "people of lumpen extraction, [he] would use actors...though this did not involve much of a compromise nor any great debt to imposture to the detriment of reality."[168] Instead of paying beggars on the street, he hired a set of actors from a casting agency for extras whose especially decadent aspect he had noted. Masotta eventually decided on the sum of 600 pesos per day per actor, 200 hundred more than each would have earned at his or her normal

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[164] Masotta, "Yo comití un happening," 298-99.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid., 303.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid., 307. "*En lugar de personas de extracción lumpen, utilizaría actores. Pero ustedes verán, no era transigir demasiado, ni pagar tributo a la impostación en detrimento de la realidad*" (Ibid.).

"day job" as flea market and pawnshop salesmen in the city's popular neighborhoods. The actors would stand still against a gallery wall and be stared at by an audience for an hour at a time.[169] Masotta asked the actors to "dress as poor people," though some insisted on making themselves up as if to assume their professions as actors. As spectators entered the room, Masotta would distribute the actors' pay stubs, and then introduce the action by informing the audience of the actors' meager remuneration.[170] When approached about the piece by his "annoyed leftist friends," Masotta recounts his response: "My happening was nothing but 'an explicit act of social sadism.'"[171]

Bony characterized his intent in *La familia obrera* in similar terms: "The work is founded on ethics and I assume the role of torturer."[172] In the same 1993 interview, Bony qualified his declaration, stating, "that the work is founded on ethics is obvious in the sense that it makes me uncomfortable to make fools of them."[173] Masotta and Bony's posterior efforts to frame their works in terms of an ethical challenge both attempt to respond to critics on the intellectual and artistic left who questioned the political impetus behind the works.[174] Their responses also share the appeal to some notion of an ethical challenge or unhappy consciousness, which, in both cases, traces a triangulation between author, artistic object, and audience. Both artists seem to imply that through the peculiarly perverse logic of staging, the performances were meant to reveal a kind of "social sadism," operational but naturalized in everyday social relations. What is more, both artists suggest that the structure they sought to uncover is one in which they themselves were implicated. Recalling Lacan's often quoted anecdote about his real life

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[169] Ibid., 309.
[170] Ibid., 311.
[171] Ibid., 312.
[172] Bony cited in Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde,"* 109.
[173] Bony cited in Ibid., n 30.

experience of the gaze – you see the sardine can but it doesn't see you – the lumpen actors and "working class family," like Lacan's fisherman, function as something like the stain in the eye of their spectators. Indeed, in the different shots of Bony's performance, the family seems surprisingly self-absorbed and unconcerned with its spectators despite the stares and physical proximity of the latter. The self-accusatory nature of the artists' statements brings the structure of Lacan's anecdote into relief: the working class family or the decadent downtown vendors embody the lacking and phantasmatically overcoded place around which their desires cluster insofar as the artist assumes this spectacle as his offering to the audience. According to Masotta and Bony's readings, then, the works appear similar to the symptomal reading of pop art that Noé seems to reject. The works are not *really* about social class and its contingent, historical appearance, but the sadistic structure that underlies them, assuming that structural lack and determinate content can be separated.

Before pursuing this point further, it is worth noting that this somewhat personalized, psychic rendering of shame and enjoyment captures only one aspect of Masotta and Bony's works. As Bony notes in a 1998 interview, another of the subversive intentions behind the *La familia obrera* was to redirect the Di Tella's funds, a considerable portion of which came from the Rockefeller Foundation: "to use the money of one of the greatest exponents of world capitalism in order to expose/ exhibit an icon of the class enemy."[175] In a more sociological tone, Bony again suggests that the critical character of the work had to do not only with reappropriating the exhibition's funds but also with the way he sought to "bring art to the

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[174] Longoni and Mestman cite the cases of the artists Eduardo Ruano and Rubén Naranjo, both of whom took issue with *La familia obrera* for humiliating the family. Naranjo even cited the incident as the reason for distancing himself from the Di Tella (Ibid., n29).
[175] Bony cited in García Navarro, "Bony el polémico," np.

masses."[176] Rather than diffusing bourgeois notions of high, modernist or folkloric art to the

people, Bony chose to bring a "module" of the people to the Di Tella's bourgeois audience. In

Giunta's words, "The audience [Bony] was interpellating was not the people. Bony was

exhibiting a "module" of the masses within the institution of art ... Bony's cynicism was based

on a pragmatic observation: for the same salary or, even better, for double, an industrial worker

could do another job. The situation of the exhibition was subsumed by that of the wage

earner."[177] Somewhat in keeping with Bony's intentions to estrange the institutional and class

conditions of art, Giunta also adds a related but separate issue. Bony exhibits "the people" at the

same times as he "exposes" them as wage earners.

John Roberts' reading of the readymade emphasizes the extent to which the readymade's

critical potential, recalling Herrera's description of *La familia obrera*, lies in the way that it

"presents productive labor as artistic labor," an operation that "carries with it a shock effect that

cannot be routinely aestheticized."[178] Extending the dominant criticism of Duchamp's

readymades vis-à-vis the consumption of commodities to their production, Roberts argues that

the readymade's logic becomes especially relevant for theorizing socially critical artistic practice

in relation to the dominance of intellectual over manual labor in the most advanced forms of

capitalism. As an art commodity transmuted without any "physical manipulation to its form," the

readymade captures the value form of productive intellectual labor:

> As a commodity which has passed out of one circuit of consumption into another circuit,
>
> the readymade extends the life of the commodity's metamorphosis. So, just as the
>
> commodity in the process of exchange changes its substance [labor], the commodity-as-
>
> readymade takes on a new identity. In this Duchamp's unassisted readymades extend the

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[176] Bony cited in Libedinski, "Tres décadas después, el Di Tella sigue despertando controversia," np.

[177] Giunta, "Una estética de la discontinuidad," 27.

commodity process of circulation. But, with the passage of the readymade-commodity

into art another and 'miraculous' metamorphosis takes place: the readymade brings forth

the commodity's *own function*...By transforming a reproducible non-art object into an

unreproducible art object in the form of a reproducible art object, the logical relations of

artistic labor and productive labor are exposed and inverted. A kind of commodity-

madness is installed.[179]

Not only is the readymade not subtracted from the production and mutation of exchange value

but the fact that it does so with no physical manipulation to its form highlights the indiscernible

appearance of artistic and intellectual labor. Roberts' point, though, is not that the readymade

and its conceptual inheritors have become completely subsumed by the law of value such that

discussions of their artistic merit must be deemed irrelevant. Rather, what Roberts' refers to as

the "shock effect," "the disruptive presence of productive labor in the sphere of aesthetic

judgment," depends on art's potential for collective aesthetic transformation insofar as artistic

labor is never fully submitted to the law of value.[180] This is so even if art's techniques become

mimetic with dematerialized productive labor.[181] Moreover, the readymade stands at the crux of

the commodity form of labor and what Roberts calls "artistic subjectivity." When thought of in

terms of productive labor, the readymade maintains its "disruptive presence" inasmuch as human

labor is the one kind of commodity that can refuse its transformation and exchange.

Both *La familia obrera* and *Para inducir…* could be said to redouble the estranging

presence of productive labor by staging the readymade as a form of wage labor with no tangible,

intermediate product in between it and the monetary value and more ethereal prestige it

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[178] Roberts, *Intangibles of Form*, 45.
[179] Ibid., 33.
[180] Ibid., 45, n 26.
[181] Ibid.

produces. For Herrera, what qualifies Bony's piece as a readymade is its central use of signage. The same is true for Masotta, who quite literally makes a show of distributing the actors' pay stubs in front of the audience as a kind of prologue to the performance. There is, nonetheless, an important contrast to be captured between the two works, which presents a challenge to the aesthetic implications of Roberts' theory. While never completely subsumed into the law of value that rules over the rest of productive labor, art nevertheless functions as its own kind of commodity, revealing the metamorphic operation of commodity exchange in the process. It is only by immersing itself fully into the value form of a given historical moment, rather than subtracting itself from this form, that the critical, potentially collective, political importance of art lies. Why not extend this same mimetic logic of resistance to the ideological operations at work in the pieces themselves? The question that Masotta and Bony pose to Roberts, in this sense, is whether the mode of ideology critique presumed in asserting the disquieting presence of productive labor is not also subject to the symbolic organization of labor in late capitalism.

Masotta takes pains to advert the reader to the very specific look and social extraction of his performers and to the fact that he was forced to substitute beggars and shoe shine boys for actors to effectively stage beggars and shoe shine boys. The point of distributing the actors' pay stubs during the performance was thus not only to drive home the idea that the actors were really wage laborers, but also to portray them as actors staging their own identities as poor and precariously employed workers. *La familia obrera* does this more directly both by claiming that the performers are not actors and by revealing the well-dressed, literate family as workers. As in *Para inducir...*, the impact of Bony's piece revolves around the use of the sign, which, by proclaiming the identity of the three, also suggests the possibility that they are not what they claim to be. At the same time, the content of the sign – conveying that they are a working class

family being remunerated for their time – turns this same doubt to its advantage. The sign plays on the possible contradiction that the happy trio, laden with the connotations of Christian iconography – the suggestion of the holy family, the triangular shape of the pieta, the presence of the book resting on the son's lap at the geometrical center of the composition with his parents looking along – and the bourgeois modernity of the nuclear family, might also and at the same time be workers. The piece's shock effect, following Roberts and Bony and his critics, can, on the one hand, be thought of as double. The three are actually selling their labor in the gallery, reframing what Herrera finds to be their "disrupting presence."[182] They are also "at work" at the ideological level of reproduction such that their paychecks and the taped ambience of domestic sounds in the background serve to highlight one another. If we concede the family's salary as actors to what Roberts considers art's law of value, staging them as wage laborers, regardless of whether they ever really perceived this money or not, emphasizes both workplace and family as two of Althusser's ideological state apparatuses; Bony thereby signals the extent to which the dominant ideology reproduces itself and its subjects in a homogeneous way, far beyond the walls of the factory itself. On the other hand, the larger contrast between *La familia obrera* and *Para inducir...* lies in the possibility that *La familia obrera* operates at an abstract, structural level, revealing wage labor and/ or the work of ideology through the immanence of its contingent, historical content to this register. At the political and economic heights of 1968 – the General Confederation of Work had split in March of 1968 between the old guard Peronist bureaucracy and the incipient radical left from within the movement's base while the Onganía dictatorship had similarly radicalized the economic liberalization of the Argentinean economy begun during the second half of Perón's administration – *La familia obrera* appears somewhat uncanny. It refuses to estrange us. Its "brute" and "disquieting" presence as a performance piece; its

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[182] Ibid., 45.

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iconographic resonances with the Peronist promise of middle class arrival and leisure time; and its perfect composition, impermeable to symptomatic distortions that might allow its supporting gaze to shine through, cannot be separated. They would be senseless were it not for the sign that tells us what it is, yet also irreducible to the symbolic play of correspondence and deception between signifier and signified.

It is in this simultaneously roundabout yet direct way that *La familia obrera* captures the political "efficacy" so often ascribed to the Barthesian and Brechtian stance of the Media Art Group and its more radicalized inheritors in works like *Tucumán Arde*. Within English-language criticism, Mari-Carmen Ramírez's influential essays on Latin American conceptualism and the Media Art Group have gone far to perpetuate the reductive but intriguing interpretation that posits ideology as the material medium of conceptual art for the Argentinean avant-garde. Like Herrera, Giunta, Camnitzer, Kac, and Osborne, Ramírez claims to cite this very peculiar formulation from Jacoby's submission to *Experiencias 68*, *Mensaje…*, discussed above. While the text most often reproduced makes no mention of artistic medium, Ramírez's readis noning etheless suggestive. Recalling Masotta's idiosyncratic distinction between material, medium, and object in media art, Ramírez confuses the three such that the material or theme of Argentine conceptualism is deemed "political"; its physical, artistic medium is the same as its object, i.e., ideology. Ramírez's confusing use of the word "ideology" might lead us to believe that she refers to a distorted representation of reality as the aesthetic object into which the Media Art Group intervenes. As discussed above, Masotta's appropriation of the mass media turns the media work into its objective of transforming the public's naturalized relationship to meaning. While Masotta's media – commercial print and television – remain physical, they are chosen because of the way they affect the spectator's overdetermined, imaginary perception of and

relationship to reality. Ramírez's characterization thus interests us for the way it suggests that this imaginary relation also remains physically immanent to the media work's negative relation to its subject-spectator.

At the same time, Ramírez's "political" take on dematerialization is meant to distinguish Latin American conceptualism from its British and North American peers. This contrast is most striking in Rosalind Krauss' characterization of post-conceptual art of the 1970s. In "Notes on the Index: Parts I and II" (1976 and 1977 respectively), Krauss characterizes conceptualism's post-medium inheritors – videos, performances, and mixed-media installation works that defy the medium specificity that might have lent them identity under an earlier, if reductive, version of the Greenberg's modernism – according to the logic of indexical presentation that Charles Sanders Pearce famously associated with the medium of photography. Krauss posits that photographic indexicality "informs the sensibility of a large number of contemporary artists" insofar as the index is meaningless.[183] As a sign, the index is semantically 'empty,' its signification a function of only this one instance, "guaranteed by the existential presence of just this object."[184] Within an art historical context, this shift signals the "conversion of the pictorial and sculptural codes into that of the photographic message without a code."[185] From there, Krauss refers to the necessity of the "caption," a more grammatically intelligible kind of text incorporated into the work, as "a surfeit of written information [added] to the depleted power of the painted sign."[186] With pictorial and sculptural conventions cast aside, the grammatical text is meant to supplement meaning, as in the case of *La famila obrera*. The broader implication is that the insufficiency of symbolic representation may be informing social sensibilities beyond the

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[183] Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," 206.
[184] Ibid., 219.
[185] Ibid., 218.
[186] Ibid., 219.

realms of the traditional media of painting and sculpture. Krauss previews two of the consequences of this shift in the senselessness of the index. Glossing Barthes, Krauss affirms that truth, or the "verifiability of what is represented," becomes a matter of the present, physical inscription of evidence rather than a logical conclusion to be proven. Moreover, in remaining immanent to its literal inscription, the truth to which this "evidence" speaks cannot lay claim to truth beyond the singular and isolated having-been-there of its material inscription. The breakdown in pictorial and sculptural convention thus also implies the broader decadence of any individual work to participate in a socially recognizable form of signification.

It is here that *La familia obrera* returns to the Media Art Group's mission to denaturalize myth and define art's dematerialization only to torque it at its weakest point. Rather than casting *La familia obrera* as a departure from the critical ideological work of the Media Art Group, I have argued that it, along with the Gramuglio and Rosas' *Tucumán Arde manifesto*, Noé's *Antiestética*, and Ferrari and Renzi's contributions to the *Primer encuentro de artistas de vanguardia* –programmatic texts that interrogate the relationship between the plastic arts to militant politics – do not abandon, but rather extend the Media Art Group's work of ideology critique in undertaking the search for truth at the level of appearance. Jacoby's phenomenological definition of dematerialization – a work of art that disappears at the moment of its realization – similarly allowed us to reframe the tense relationship between the "dematerialized" operations of critique and their material support, particularly, as in Ferrari's case, where a work's political "efficacy" depends on the purposeful rhetorical confusion between political meaning and the work of art's material stuff.

La familia obrera assumes the critical task of creating meaning there where Krauss points to a breakdown in the symbolic fabric of the social link. In this sense, *La familia obrera*'s takes

its cue from Lacan's twenty-third seminar on the *sinthome*, one that, like our earlier references to

the relationship of cause to symbolization, takes art as its focus, in this case, the work of James

Joyce. In Lacan's late reformulation of the neurotic symptom, the psychotic subject creates his

own substitute for symbolic inscription and its imaginary guarantee of sense by crafting his own

master signifier out of *jouissance*. The subject's cause of desire is, in this sense, not supposed in

its absence, but rather proposed in its presence as what lends the subject a certain imaginary

consistency. Two aspects of the *sinthome* are worth noting in the context of our discussion: (1)

the immanent relationship of form to content it implies in contrast to that of sublimation; and (2)

the extent to which its particular way of inscribing cause at the level of seeming continues to

suggest a possibility for critique and interpretation. [187]

Lacan exemplifies the relationship of cause to consistency through reference to the

savoir-faire of the artisan a number of times: "It was not God who consumed this thing we call

the Universe. It is attributed to God what is the business of the artist, whose first model, as

everyone knows, is the potter."[188] Referring to the symbolic's negative inscription on the subject,

Lacan implies a reformulation of the vase as a fable of man's first creative use of the signifier.

The vase, like the symbolic, is a man-made artifice that "creates the void and thereby introduces

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[187] Based on the psychotic structure of symbolic forclusion, Jacques Alain Miller has often emphasized that Lacan's late formulation of the *sinthome* represents a stark departure from his earlier emphases on the grammatical articulation of truth, often exemplified through revisions of Freud's relationship to the hysteric. According to this interpretation, the truth of lack and webs of *jouissance* to be articulated through the signifiers of unconscious speech (within the context of analysis) take a backseat to the inarticulate bearer of *jouissance* in the letter of the body, now conceived of in the logical "language" of mathematical formalization. As Miller writes, "This is not the 'it is written' as in the 'it speaks,' but as in 'it functions'" (Miller, "Detaches Pieces (II)," 32). For Miller, Lacan's formulation of the *sinthome* represents the culmination of a longer theoretical interrogation of a discourse that was not of the semblant, such that analysis finds its ultimate obstacle in an unanalyzable and "unaccountable" *joussiance* that is neither true nor signifiable (Ibid., 39). In relation to Seminar 23 specifically, Miller's insistence on an unanalyzable jouissance beyond the semblance of the signifier and the dialectical process of analysis seems to skew some of Lacan's subtly in insisting on the artifice constitutive of the *sinthome* and the extent to which its fragile guarantee of sense is sustained by what Lacan refers to as its function at the level of appearance.
[188] Lacan, *El sinthome,* 62.

the possibility of filling it."[189] The vase gives form to nothing, to the *nihil* at its center, just as the symbolic – the space between the cut of the symbolic and the chain of signifiers –introduces *nihil* and the forms with which to represent it. In contrast to the figure of the vase, in Lacan's discussion of creation ex-nihilo, the potter makes no separation between S1 and S2, negative symbolic inscription and unconscious knowledge as that which lends it form. What he crafts is rather a simulacrum of symbolic inscription that, in contrast to the case of sublimation, does not lend an objective form to a pre-existing desire/lack, but rather produces its object cause in a way inseparable from its form.

In contrasting the relationship of form and content in Lacan's example of courtly love poetry, cited above, with his later discussions of love, Adrian Johnston provides a very helpful way of framing the relationship of symptom and *sinthome* as it concerns the representation of cause. Johnston describes the case of courtly love poetry as one in which the formal structure of lack and desire remains "permanently divorced" from those objects of desire forced into it as temporary place holders of lack and phantasmal fullness.[190] Indeed, phallic desire feeds on the gap between form and content insofar as no one particular trait qualifies any of the Thing's substitutes as better than another. By contrast, love, which involves a suspension of this structure, means making nothing out of something.[191] Love collapses the distinction between form and content, desire and object, such that "the void must directly embody itself in a singular incarnation."[192] Returning to the contrast between the vase of sublimation and the potter of the *sinthome*, it is worth noting how it is that the *sinthome* arrives at a similar conclusion by opposite

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[189] Lacan, *Ethics,* 120.
[190] Johnston, "Nothing is Not Always No-One," 80.
[191] Ibid., 79. The beloved no longer functions as another Thing substitute with a series of definable characteristics. Instead "becoming nothing," means being appreciated without being reducible to any given criteria for desirability and, at the same time, irreducible to lacking desire itself.
[192] Ibid., 80.

means. Rather than turning something (a substitutable/ substitutive object with a series of defined predicates) into nothing (a "pure" object of desire without predicates), the potter makes something (his own object cause) out of nothing (the barring of meaning, sexual non-rapport, etc.).

Perhaps the most important difference in how one arrives at this singular object of desire concerns the status of interpretation and knowledge about the subject's structural cause. Lacan highlights the distinction between the retroactive construction of meaning around this truth in the course analysis and singularity of the uninterpretable *sinthome* in his contrast of history to myth: "One must pass through this decided garbage in order to perhaps re-find something of the order of the real...There is the ruse of history. History is the greatest phantasm of all, if one can say that. Behind the history of the facts that interest historians, there is myth."[193] The empirical facts of history are subordinate to the logic of the fantasy and the temporality of its analytical reconstruction, both for the grand history of historians and for the personal, psychic history of the analysand. Lacan's comments about the analyst's discourse arise out of a discussion of the linguistic copula, a word that links subject and predicate. The analysand is able to assume (himself) as garbage, lack, etc., insofar as the analyst simulates for the analysand the latter's cause of desire. In doing so, Lacan suggests, the analyst's discourse illuminates the extent to which the copula of being operates metaphorically, substituting the masking effect of the signifier in the place of nothing. It is here where we capture the specificity of the *sinthome*. Joyce's *sinthome* functions as simulation in lieu of the fictional deception of the analytic relationship: "Joyce did not know he was constructing a *sinthome*, I mean that he was simulating it. He wasn't conscious of it. And for that reason [it/he] is pure artifice, a man of know-how,

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[193] Lacan, *El sinthome*, 122.

which is also called an artist."[194] Whereas the artists of sublimation and anamorphosis capture the cause's constitutive support and de-stabilization of the symbolic, the artist-artificer of the *sinthome* presents a model of representation in which symbolic failure is already presumed. The *sinthome* thus makes no distinction between content and form; its solid, mythic elaboration in the imaginary simulates the production of meaning just as Lacan's topological formalization rests on the "nodal appearance" of subjective guarantee in the real by showing, though not proving, the "verifiability of cause."[195]

For Krauss' index, by contrast, the "verifiability of what is represented" depends exclusively on the meaningless and self-referential immanence of its physical mark. Krauss' epochal, art historical diagnosis appears so grim not because it affirms a kind of determination that is proposed, rather than supposed, but rather because it describes a situation in which determination has been abandoned altogether. *La familia obrera* contemplates the stakes of this historical and methodological problem somewhere between Foster's textually based practice of symptomal reading and the absolute immanence of Krauss' index. *La familia obrera* has a consistency born of the mutual dependence between its visual qualities and the semantic content attached to them. In the spirit of Lacan's comments on *Finnegan's Wake*, *La familia obrera* has a mythic, dreamlike tone that "slips, slips, slips" towards the expression of a "collective unconscious" in the self-declarative reality it puts forth.[196] This, writes Lacan, is such that "nothing can be done to analyze it"; as both imaginary myth and real mathematical formulation, the *sinthome* incarnates the obstacle to knowledge.[197]

As a formulation that gives body to a series of psychic and social phenomena related to

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[194] Ibid., 116.
[195] Ibid., 109.
[196] Ibid., 123.
[197] Ibid., 38, 163.

the collapse of symbolic authority, the *sinthome* has been criticized as a problematic *problèmatique*. As the inscription of a subjective structure in both form and content, the *sinthome*'s formalization gives body to the waning of symbolic efficiency and the disaggregation of the social link as a *problèmatique*. Žižek captures this notion in what he calls the decline of symbolic efficiency: "So when, toady, one speaks of the decline of paternal authority, it is...the father of the uncompromising 'No!' who is effectively in retreat; in the absence of his prohibitory No!, new forms of the phantasmic harmony between the symbolic order and *jouissance* can thrive again."[198]

Lacan's formalization of the *sinthome* intervenes, in this sense, into the failure of symbolic fictions to legitimize the ultimately irrational authority they represent. Lacan's formulation, however, is neither radical nor arbitrary in its shift from neurotic to psychotic typology used to exemplify the process of analysis and its obstacles. Rather, the psychotic's perception of the Other's *jouissance* to the exclusion of its symbolic effectiveness stands as the truth of the paternal metaphor. The symptomal compromise of sublimation has come to show its true colors such that Lacan declares the Name of the Father to be reducible to a symptom.[199] What has failed, in a sense, is the efficacy of the symbolic's substitutive or metaphoric function where it was to have placed a space of mediation between the Other's irrational *jouissance* and its oppressive, imaginary stand-ins. This failure concerns the legitimacy and authority by which meaning imposes itself, not the capacity for grammatical articulation, as Krauss' reading might

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[198] Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 389. As the incarnation of the subject's obstacle to (unconscious) knowledge, Žižek criticizes the practical, analytical, and heuristic theoretical validity of the *sinthome*. By precluding the possibility of structural change, it proves mimetical with the dynamics of knowledge, authority, and enjoyment already at work in social reproduction at the subjective level. Žižek's point is to challenge the notion that there might be no radical third "way out" between the liberal realm of rational discourse (the infinite chain of signifiers) and the purely functional non-knowledge of jouissance. It is also to challenge the way in which the sinthome's instantiation of truth as cause always remains a singular one, precluding the possibility of a universal place for truth. In the *sinthome*'s place, Žižek turns to the analyst's discourse, in which the horrifying content of the object cause is revealed as pure appearance.

lead us to believe.

If *La familia obrera* can be said to realize the critical intent of the Media Art Group, it does so by transforming the nature of the relationship between representation and its determinants. The Media Art Group allows us to glimpse this transformation by first positing ideology critique as the task of avant-garde art in the age of mass consumption and then by pointing to ideology's simultaneously material and sublime support in the subject. As such, Masotta and the Media Art Group force us to "see" ideology as the inseparable inscription of subtractive cause and mythic content. They ask us to assume the task of the avant-garde in order to theorize that very effect.

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[199] Lacan, *Seminario*, 23.

CHAPTER 2

To Reconcile Art and the People: Octavio Paz and the Groups Movement[1]

Introduction

Octavio Paz's essays on Marcel Duchamp, written between 1966 and 1973, and the

Groups movement, a conglomeration of autonomous, experimental, and socially engaged artists'

collectives, based principally in Mexico City during the late 1970s, present two ways of

considering the relationship between art's de-materialization on one hand, and its socialization,

on the other. The reason for juxtaposing the two and doing so within a specifically national

framework becomes clearer in light of a phrase that Guillaume Apollinaire used to describe

Duchamp in *The Cubist Painters* (1913): "Perhaps it will be the task of an artist as detached from

aesthetic preoccupations and as intent on the energetic as Marcel Duchamp, to reconcile art and

the people."[2] While Duchamp pays little importance to the phrase, it runs as a leitmotif

throughout Paz's writings on modern art from the 1950s to the 1970s, marking what the poet

sees as the possibility of positing art's social function anew.[3] According to Paz, Duchamp's

critique of the "retinal" tradition of modern painting actualizes the attempt to fuse art and life

that begins with German romanticism and continues through the work of the historic avant-

gardes and the influence of surrealism on the poet himself. For Paz, Duchamp thus renews art's

heterogeneous, ethical role in founding the collective beyond both bourgeois aestheticism and

the nationalist cultural project of the Mexican state.

The Groups, by contrast, approach the question of art's socialization as a symptomatic

point within the state's hegemonic project. The Groups questioned the formal and institutional

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[1] Excerpts from this chapter have appeared in Benezra "Introduction to Felipe Ehrenberg's "In Search of a Model for Life."
[2] Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, 48.
[3] Cabanne and Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 37.

norms of modernism in the practical and theoretical search for a leftist aesthetics, perhaps the

most significant effort of this kind in the Mexican context of the period. They reacted against the

institutionalization and academicism of both the Mexican School of Painting and the purported

social autonomy and interiority promoted by the Generation of Rupture, in the wake of the

repression of the 1968 student and worker protests. In a 1977 statement, the Grupo Proceso

Pentágono [Pentagon Trial Group], for example, affirmed that its collective approach to artwork

emerged in its earliest days to "confront the bureaucratic state apparatus that administers culture

and the elitist mafias who consciously or unconsciously reproduce the dominant ideology in this

field."[4]

    While Proceso Pentágono's statement is representative of the Groups' critical position, its

preference for the kinds of installation art and institutional critique typical of North American

conceptualism does not necessarily characterize the work of the movement as a whole.[5] The

Groups differed both in their specific political alignments and in the kinds of work they

produced, which included popular graphics, murals, mail art, installation, journalistic prose,

photography, performance, social and aesthetic theory, and artistic workshops with marginal

communities. In spite of these differences, the Groups as a whole rejected the institutional circuit

of prestige of the state-sponsored National Fine Arts Institute, the increasingly international

commercial art world and the emerging complicity between the two. The Groups can similarly

be characterized by their self-identification as "cultural workers," their interest in establishing an

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[4] Fink et. al., "Grupo Proceso Pentágono, 318. The "elitist mafias" refer to the group of liberal artists and intellectuals known as "la mafia" and associated with the modernist Rupture movement who dominated Mexico City's small commercial gallery scene and the supra-national Cold War exchanges maneuvered by the Cuban curator José Gómez Sirce under the auspices of the Organization of American States in the 1940s and 50s. See Fox, *Making Art Panamerican*, 163-75.

[5] Gallo, "The Mexican Pentagon: Adventures in Collectivism during the 1970s," 186. Rubén Gallo compares Proceso Pentágono's aesthetic choices and denunciation of the Mexican state's dirty war of the 1970s to Hans Haacke's *Solomon R. Guggenheim Board of Trustees* (1974) and *Shapolsky, et al* (1971), that exposed the financial investments and right-wing political connections of museum trustees.

artistic circuit outside of official norms and institutions and their attempt to redress the repressive and ineffective mechanisms of the state in its coercive and educational functions.

Paz's return to Duchamp encounters the Groups around the question of the art object's dissolution at the limit between its socialization and politicization. For both Paz and the Groups, the withering away or attack against the purported social autonomy and medium-centered definition of modernism invited a reconsideration of art's material status and social function. Both Paz and the Groups think the emergence and necessity of art's de-materialization or non-object status in relation to its socialization. Where Paz understands art's socialization as the potential for non-objective art to realize instances of poetic communion outside of social and historical strictures, the Groups unfold the cultural and historic determinations of both interventions.

In what follows, I will suggest that the de-materialization and socialization of art meet around the figure of self-regulation. In Paz's case, we find this image in the self-sustaining libidinal economy of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23). While not immanent to the Groups in a textual or visual sense, the figure and problem of self-regulation determined the political potential of their intervention inasmuch as it was tied to the socialization of both art and artistic labor. It is in this sense that I suggest reading the Groups as situated symptomatically in relation to what Antonio Gramsci termed "self-regulated society." If in one instance Gramsci uses the term to refer more or less directly to communism, he also discusses its importance in relation to his notion of the integral state. Where the integral state names the state's political-juridical and ethical-social functions as characteristic of the bourgeois class state, "self-regulated society" would name the movement by which political society or the state becomes mobilized as the vanishing mediator by which civil society assumes consciousness

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of its own contradictions.[6] In other words, it marks the passage from the realm of the social and economic to that of the political through the transformation of both. In attempting at once to actualize and redress the national populism of the Mexican state, the Groups embodied an internal transmutation in the function of art's socialization at the edge of the socio-economic and the political. Rather than anticipating the contemporary subsumption of creative work under capitalism the Groups cut across the overlap of the de-materialization of art and labor through the mediating form of their organization.

In posing the question of art's socialization in these terms, I am interested in asking how the Groups and their context problematize the socialization of artistic labor and its potential for emancipation under the contemporary conditions of capital. Social, activist and participatory art, which is often defined by the difficulty of distinguishing it from the other forms social forms, has received much critical attention in recent years. It has been characterized as immanently emancipatory, social utopian or bleakly instrumental for the ideology of self-administration promoted by neo-liberal states. Interrogating socialization in this framework thus also represents an effort to ask whether the politicization and critical reception of the Groups might not extend beyond these normative and empirical parameters.

In what follows, I will turn first to a brief discussion of socialization in the process of the real subsumption of labor, or the restructuring of social relations according to the needs of capitalist valorization. In addition to providing a working definition of the term, it will also allow us to highlight the figure of self-productivity that emerges in Paz's reading of Duchamp in the subsequent section. Here, I will highlight how, through this figure of self-regulating eroticism, Paz's attempt to conjugate art's socialization and de-materialization actually opens onto an impasse—dematerialized art cannot be at once art and social—which, if difficult to

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[6] Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, 190.

conceptualize and name, nonetheless exercises a certain effect. I attempt to delineate the

historical and institutional coordinates of this effect in the context of the post-Revolutionary state

in the following section through the example of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters

and Sculptors, which can be considered as an important precedent for the Groups and an

illustration of how the socialization of artistic labor must be considered in relation to both

commodity form and the politics of its context. I then focus on how the Groups posited the

nature of their work in relation to the organizational form of the collective and, at the same time,

in relation to the legacy of art's socialization in its national context. By examining statements

and works by several collectives and individuals, including Felipe Ehrenberg, the Front of

Mexican Cultural Workers, the Grupo Germinal and the No-Grupo, I underline how the Groups

movement thought the potential politicization of socialized labor through the mediating form of

the artists' collective.

Real Subsumption

Many contemporary critical discussions of immaterial labor take as their point of

departure Marx's discussion of subsumption. The term refers to the transformation of the

technology, processes and the social relations of production in the expansion and intensification

of capitalism. While in formal subsumption, capitalism assumes and abstracts existing forms of

labor, technology and social relations, real submsumption emerges as a qualitative twist

produced by quantitative expansion of the scale of production. It is marked by material changes

in technology that demand the collectivization and division of labor and that also affect the

measure by which surplus value is extracted:

> This entire development of the productive forces of *socialized labor* (in contrast to the
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> more or less isolated labor of individuals), and together with the use of science (the

general product of social development), in the *immediate process of production*, takes the

form of the productive power of capital. It does not appear as the productive power of

labor, or even of that part of it that is identical with capital. And least of all does it appear

as the productive power either of the individual worker or of the workers joined together

in the process of production. The mystification implicit in the relations of capital as a

whole is greatly intensified here, far beyond the point it could have reached in the merely

formal subsumption of labor under capital.[7]

As this passage alludes to, real subsumption refers to a "specifically capitalist mode of

production" in which productive labor is defined as the means by which surplus value creates

more surplus value. The mystification Marx alludes to concerns the way in which this process

appears as if wholly autonomous from labor:

Here it is not the worker who makes us of the means of production, but the means of

production that make use of the worker. Living labor does not realize itself in objective

labor which thereby becomes its objective organ, but instead objective labor maintains

and fortifies itself by drawing off living labor; it is thus that it becomes *value valorizing

itself*, *capital*, and functions as such.[8]

The point is not only that the immediate, sensuous product of labor can be assigned an abstract

value, but rather that the worker appears to himself as the instrument of the process of capital's

seemingly autonomous of self-production. The living labor of the worker (as opposed to the

ossified labor crystallized in the machine) appears as if produced by the seemingly headless,

circular whirl of capital. In other words, the worker perceives his own labor in the immediate

form that results of the process of production, mistaking how capital had posited this doubly

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[7] Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 1024. Author's emphasis.

abstracted labor as its presupposition.

We find a similar image in the *Grundrisse* used to describe how, through the advancement of technology capital gradually appropriates labor, reducing the need for living labor and at the same time supposedly upending the source of capitalist valorization: "The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker's consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power."[9] While in its immediacy, the machine now confronts the worker as capital, it is the general social knowledge crystallized in the machine that is in fact mediating labor or mediating between labor and the social body it produces. The full development of capitalism should produce its own demise through the full socialization of labor, wherein the general social knowledge that produces technology also serves as the "foundation-stone of production and of wealth."[10] Contemporary critical returns to the question of real subsumption and the socialization of labor have to do, in part, with explaining how the realization of this process beyond the realm of social knowledge as machinery or fixed capital, i.e., as immaterial labor, has only further revolutionized and entrenched capitalist social relations by seeming to have fully inverted the places of dead and living labor in the mediation of the social. This is the case even as the kinds of intellectual and affective work it valorizes would seem to exceed capitalism's own rules of measure.

Octavio Paz's reading of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (Large Glass) (1915-1923) (Figure 2.1) and *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas) (1946-66) (Figures 2.2 and 2.3) takes up this

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[8] Ibid., 988. See Chapter Three of Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital*, for a reading of this and the following passage from *Grundrisse*.
[9] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 705.
[10] Ibid., 705.

figure of self-production through its symbolic interpretation of the amorous missed encounter between the autonomic bride and her bachelors. In light of the process by which "capital absorbs labor into itself—"as though its body were by love possessed," Paz's attempt to return art to its earlier, ethical function both stages and obscures the process of labor's socialization.[11] For Paz, it is not the humorous irony of the mechanical malfunction that characterizes *The Bride*, but rather the extent to which its fractured mechanical love story transcends this critique, raising the bride and her suitors to the sublime sphere of myth where a community might take hold outside of history. Where art becomes both mythical and social, it appears to the reader, as to labor, as a self-sustaining machine that produces its spectators as its objects. By transforming *The Bride*'s mechanical non-rapport into mythical love, Paz's reading sketches an image of the self-mediation of socialized labor, precisely where it attempts to delineate an autonomous ethical sphere in the place of the modern art object.

Paz and Duchamp

Set in a pantheon of other modernist writers and poets including Mallarmé and Joyce, Duchamp's work acts as the reversal of modernism's critical or negative attitude broadly speaking. As the instantiation of an underground current of mythical thought running both through and alongside modern Western history and philosophy, Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (Large Glass) and *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas) pose the possibility of reuniting the ethical and aesthetic functions of art torn asunder by secularization and rationalism, a process made all the more complex by the missed encounters between political and poetic romanticism in Latin America, according to Paz, reading that in some sense always color the poet's excurses on the relationship between history and poetics. For Paz, the de-materialization of the art object in

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[11] Ibid., 704. Marx borrows the last line from Goethe's *Faust*.

favor of the communion to which it might give rise thus extends the Romantic poetic tradition at the same time that it announces the form of poetic encounter capable of opening a fleeting space within the technification and temporal homogeneity of the present moment.
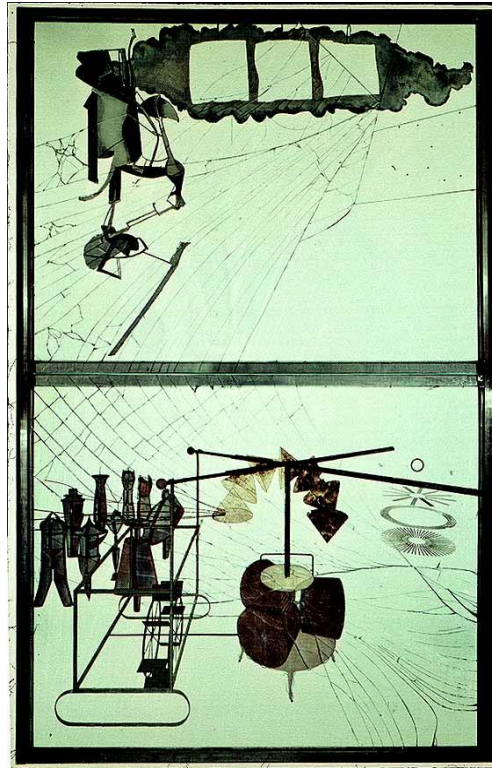
Figure 2.1 Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (Large Glass), 1915-1923
<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/54149.html>

Figure 2.2　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**Figure 2.3**
Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage*
(Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas), 1946-66
<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/65633.html>

Paz develops the relationship between history and poetics at greatest length in *El arco y la lira* (The Bow and the Lyre) (1955) and its epilogue, "Los signos en rotación" (Signs in Rotation) (1967). According to Paz, inasmuch as the poem exists outside of and before the linear progression of history, its incarnation is nonetheless "determinate and historical."[12] Poetry acts as the channel by which the mundane and historical reaches the absolute. The confusion arises when Paz places this scheme into its different historical facets, most importantly, the attempt of German Romanticism to reunite poetry with its pre-modern social function or to view the poem as the conduit between human liberty and the sacred and, as such, as the foundation of community.[13] Paz's account of poetry's relationship to history is not only enunciated from within the conditions of modernity, but the ethical coordinates of Romantic aesthetic. What begins as the self-defeating Romantic attempt to re-create the communal experience of the sacred, becomes the ground from which Paz defines poetry as such—the suspension of the linear time of history through the contingent images of a determinate moment—so that even subsequent forms of this communion become just one more instance of poetry's interruption of history. The history of aesthetic, but also of historical and epistemic ruptures, is thus reduced to poetry's own search for signification, in which poetic creation must continue because it is never quite able to reconcile itself with its own extra-linguistic and extra-artistic signified. By refusing any critical distance from his own historical position, Paz's account renders art's always exterior, social ambitions a-historical.

Paz argues that Duchamp is conditioned both by the Romantic search for communion and the critical attitude of modernism inasmuch as he makes an art about painting that is at the same time able to endow the spectator with a participative experience. Paz characterizes the specificity

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[12] Paz, *El arco y la lira*, 189.
[13] Paz, *Los hijos del limo*, 67.

of Duchamp's post-retinal artwork, like Mallarmé's poetry, by its self-reflexivity, its full embrace of both the individual myths of the Romantic poets and the irony and negativity that blocked any realization of the romantics' heterogeneous social and spiritual ambitions for the aesthetic. Despite this formidable achievement, Duchamp's work cannot act back upon its formal, artistic or socio-historic determinants within Paz's parameters. As the only non-poet in Paz's modern-postmodern critical repertoire, Duchamp occupies the exceptional and illustrative position of simultaneously trumping and acquiescing to the romantic division of the arts. Paz's Duchamp accedes to the realm of poetry only by having internalized and criticized the localized inheritance of perspectival painting and modernist medium specificity, achieving an art that reveals and reflects on the idea, or rather, the spiritual and ideological void that defines modernity for the poet.

In Paz's essays, Romanticism's self-defeating search for communion becomes the ontological, rather than historical, condition for all of the art that succeeds it, just as the alienation and technification of the present moment reveals the ultimately supra-historical, ethical function of poetry as its only space of earthly transcendence. Paz's Romanticism thus precludes any operation by which art might break with or reflect upon its own form; it also precludes any determinant relation between art and historical necessity. Duchamp's capacity to synthesize Romanticism's two contradictory poles of communion and politics turns out to be a footnote to the artist's overriding ability to instantiate the poetic in this sense. According to Paz, Duchamp proves exemplary of modern aesthetic experience to the extent that his work ultimately subordinates the contingent, historical references that run through it—photography, mass urban culture, popular scientific discourse, the Napoleonic standardization of weights and measures,

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etc. —to the universal and timeless figures and morphology of myth.[14] According to Paz, Duchamp does not only not break with or overcome Romanticism; rather, his very ability to critique the modern artistic tradition marks his arrival to the extra-historical realm where poetic experience instantiates both the determinate content and communal effects of pre-Christian myth. In the interim, the political pole of the revolutionary-religious dyad Romantic poetry was to have bridged, falls away, or rather, is precluded, because it has been realized in the extant forms of twentieth century socialism and liberal capitalism in Paz's reading.

Jacques Rancière's theoretical development on the aesthetic regime of the art, which roughly coincides with German Romanticism, will allow us to better situate Paz's project. He describes the "original scene" of the aesthetic regime as one in which "art is art to the extent that it is something else than art."[15] Distinguishing the aesthetic regime of sensibility from aestheticism's doctrine of art for art's sake, Rancière paints an alternative trajectory from the late eighteenth century to the present, showing how contemporary debates about the relationship between art and everyday culture present a continuation and reformulation of Romantic definitions of art, rather than a break with them. Beginning with Schiller, Rancière thus argues that what is at stake is not the autonomy of the work of art, but rather the autonomy of experience that the artwork may provide insofar as it is not a work of art. Referencing the Greek statue Judo Ludovisi, cited in Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, the figure's self-containment and freedom from duties captures the image of a community in which art, life and politics remain undivided.

Paz demonstrates and reconfigures the aesthetic regime to the extent that we understand it

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[14] Contingency itself, both a concept and a practice central to the components of the *Large Glass* and the works Duchamp produced in the course of its development, becomes another figure becomes itself an idealized figure rather than an actual force within the work. On the place of contingency in the *Large Glass*, see Molderings' comprehensive study *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*.

as one defined by its search for the fusion of art, religion and politics it locates in earlier periods. Paz is interested in constituting a new collective ethos and of "creating an equivalent of ancient mythology" outside of the mechanism of the state, as Rancière describes the project of German Idealism. Paz does not, however, believe in the edifying effects of art. Rather, when Paz claims that Duchamp makes an art that is "public" but not necessarily "popular," he is reacting against the ethical function of the Mexican state in its own *sui generis* historical combinations, and proposing a highly atomized or communally anachronistic social sphere. Though ultimately problematic, Paz's interest in making eroticism the basis of art's heteronomy modifies both the stakes of didacticism and the kind of common sense one expects art to produce. It is perhaps most relevant for considering how Paz approaches the de-materialization of the visual arts in relation to art's self-reflexivity and to the rationalization and homogenization of social life.

Paz not only renews the myths and philosophies of earlier periods, he also interprets the end of art's sensuality as marking less a linear limit than the collective recognition of an internal suppression of mythical thought. Even in his essays, resisting this homogenization sets its task as one of re-enchantment, rather than critique. It is in this sense, as well as in Paz's eroticization of aesthetic education, that the self-sustaining figure of the Juno Ludovisi is transferred onto the archetypical female figures of myth and then back onto Duchamp's modern and ironic work. Despite placing Paz within a history of thought trying to reconcile art and life or, in Paz's case, art and the people, the purported freedom of form from material constraints presented by Duchamp's work becomes an obstacle, rather than an example ripe for renewal in Paz's project. In other words, the de-materialization of the object, together with the over-determination of social art within the context of the post-Revolutionary state, pose a challenge to any facile adaption of his appreciation of Duchamp to Rancière's description.

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[15] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes," 137.

Paz's interest in Duchamp revolves around the rejection of "retinal" painting in favor of an art based on linguistic associations and ideas. Duchamp responds to a question by Cabanne about the origin of his "antiretinal attitude": "Since Courbet, it's been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone's error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral…our whole country is retinal, except for the Surrealizsts, who tried to go outside somewhat. And still, they didn't go so far!"[16] Paz interprets Duchamp's refusal of the sensuous qualities of painterly work as indicative of the realization of art's ethical ends. "Art fused with life," Paz writes with respect to Duchamp, "is socialized art, neither social nor socialist art, nor much less an activity dedicated to the production of beautiful or simply decorative objects."[17]

 While art can no longer define itself through its material support, it nonetheless remains irreducible to a purely philosophical proposition, moving instead between appearance and presence, contemplation and communion. What Paz's study of Duchamp reveals, however, is that the seemingly intuitive coalescence between art's liberation from modernist norms and its incorporation of the heteronymous social functions it had once sacrificed, becomes impossible to articulate. Rather than facilitating this relationship, Duchamp's challenge to art's traditional supports actually underlines the contradictions of Paz's anti-aestheticism. De-materialized art must remain art, even nominally, in order to distinguish its gesture. This puts Paz at pains to show how Duchamp's works transcend the merely negative, nominalist gesture we associate with the readymade.[18] He must show both how they instantiate the communion promised and how this experience is derived from the works' experimental and self-critical attitude. Rather

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[16] Cabanne and Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 43.
[17] Paz, *Apariencia desnuda*, 100.
[18] Ibid., 35. "Duchamp's act," Paz comments, "tears the object from its meaning and makes its name into an empty skin."

than seeking the negation of modernist negation within Duchamp's humorous, but also poetic incorporation of heteronymous references and materials, Paz locates them in the determinate content and morphology of myth through the purportedly female figures illustrated in *The Bride* and *Given*. Woman is split between the supreme realm of the idea, the realm from which all other phenomena arise, and the more banal libidinal economy in which she is cast as an object of desire unattainable because of her own autonomous, self-satisfying enjoyment.

Paz's *Apariencia desnuda* includes two essays published at different moments and then subsequently revised on multiple occasions. The earlier of the two, "El Castillo de la pureza,[19]" whose title, Paz reminds us, was borrowed from Mallarmé's *Igitur*, was written in 1966 and published for the first time in 1968 as one of the components in the *libro-maleta* (book-suitcase) titled *Marcel Duchamp* and designed by the visual artist Vicente Rojo (Figure 2.5). According to Paz, the *libro-maleta* contained a bound copy of *of El castillo de la pureza*, a selection of texts by Duchamp, three color laminates of Duchamp's paintings, a transparent, plastic laminate reproduction of the *The Bride,* an envelope with nine reproductions of readymades a hand-written text by Duchamp, and a cardboard cut-out bust of the artist's head. Paz and Rojo's collaboration was a copy of Duchamp's own *Box in a Valise* (1935-41) (Figure 2.4), a leather suitcase containing miniature replicas and color reproductions of Duchamp's works, including a celluloid drawing of *The Large Glass*.[20] "Water Always Writes in * Plural" was commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art's 1973 Duchamp retrospective; Paz revised and expanded this second essay dedicated to *Given* and its relationship to *The Bride* for the publication of *Apariencia desnuda* in 1976 and then again, in a second edition, in 1978,

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[19] Ibid., 64.

[20] Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 59-60. Duchamp's biographer, Calvin Tomkins notes that the project of assembling Duchamp's *Boxes* remained largely unfinished. By 1964, Duchamp's step-daughter was assembling them at a rate of thirty per year.

the same year that Paz's brief catalog essay also appeared in *diacritics*.

Figure 2.4 *Marcel Duchamp, Box in a Valise*, 1935-41
<http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=80890>

Figure 2.5 Octavio Paz and Vicente Rojo, *Marcel Duchamp*, 1968.
Olivier Debroise, *La era de la discrepancia: arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997*, p. 135.
© 2007 by UNAM/ Turner, Ciudad de México.
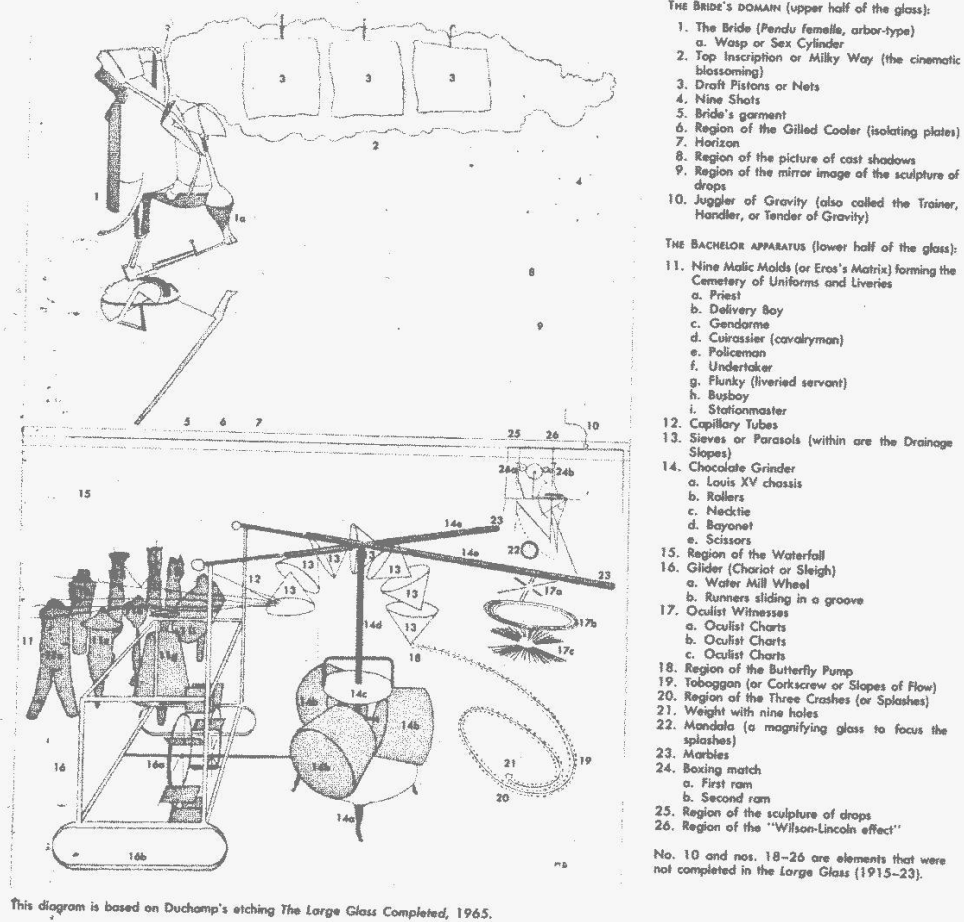
Figure 2.6 Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-1923.
Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 64.
© 1973 by The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

CINEMATIC BLOSSOMING   HALO OF THE BRIDE   TITLE   TOP INSCRIPTION   MILKY WAY

Alphabetic units

1   2   3

LETTER BOX
(ALPHABET)

DRAFT PISTONS   TRIPLE CIPHER   NETS   govern alphabet and terms of the Pendu femelle's commands

gives birth to 2nd blossoming

BRIDE
ARBOR-TYPE
STEAM ENGINE
SKELETON
PENDU FEMELLE
VIRGIN

WASP
SEX CYLINDER

controls atmospheric pressure
secretes love gasoline from dew (by osmosis)
controls spark of desire magneto

SHOTS
PULLS

CAGE   contains filament material

filament material to Handler

MOTOR WITH
QUITE FEEBLE CYLINDERS

controls arbor-type

mirror image of splash

RESERVOIR   DESIRE-MAGNETO   emits artificial sparks

of love gasoline

HANDLER
TRAINER OF GRAVITY
JUGGLER

BRIDE'S CLOTHES   HORIZON

GILLED COOLER   ISOLATING PLATES   WILSON LINCOLN SYSTEM   BOXING MATCH
geared system

Bachelors transmit commands by electric process

SCISSORS   control splash

ARCHITECTONIC BASE FOR THE BRIDE

PARASOLS   DRAINAGE SLOPES   SIEVES

OCULIST CHARTS
OCULIST WITNESSES

CAPILLARY TUBES

solidify and cut illuminating gas into spangles

spangles converted into liquid scattered suspension

CEMETERY OF UNIFORMS AND LIVERIES
MALIC MOULDS
EROS' MATRIX

mould illuminating gas

WATERFALL

PUMP

CHUTE   WEIGHT WITH HOLES

Priest
Department-store delivery boy
Gendarme
Cuirassier
Policeman
Undertaker
Flunkey
Busboy
Station-master

CHARIOT
SLEIGH
SLIDE
GLIDER

recites litanies

opens scissors

CHAIN

WATER WHEEL
MILL

hear litanies

fall of bottle operates slide

CHOCOLATE MACHINE
CHOCOLATE GRINDER

Bayonet
Necktie
Rollers
Louis XV chassis

PLANES OF FLOW
SPLASH
FALLS
DINS
CRASHES

Key to the Large Glass

RUNNERS

BOTTLE

of variable density

Figure 2.7 Diagram of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1973.
Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 20-21.
© 1973 by Da Capo, New York.

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Figure 2.8 Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World*, 1866
<http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-
focus/search.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=2406>

Figure 2.9 André Masson, *Terre érotique*, 1955
Michael Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp*, p.114.
©2009 Yale University Press

The *Bride* is made of two large, rectangular glass panes, approximately 109 by 64 inches,

contained by a wooden and steel frame. The two panes contain some twenty elements figured in

various media, including oil paint, varnish, lead foil, lead wire and dust. Coming together over the course of almost ten years, the elements in the Large Glass began as preparatory sketches, paintings and experiments with chance and different reproductive techniques and materials. [21] Duchamp left the piece "definitively unfinished" in 1923, publishing the accompanying notes collected in the *Green Box* only in 1934.

Paz's explanation of the bride and bachelor machines follows and expands upon those of André Breton (1934), Robert Lebel (1958) and Richard Hamilton (1960). Paz describes the Bride, or *Pendu Femelle* (female hanged body) as "an ideal reality, a symbol manifested in mechanical forms that also produces symbols."[22] The Bride's desire is powered by her own substance called "automobiline," which she stores in the wasp or sex cylinder below. Below the wasp we find a gas tank and a motor with weak cylinders, as well as a needle. When the needle spits air out onto the middle portion of the top glass panel where a cage with the Bride's desirous filament should be, the warm air awakens the three scoreboard-like draft pistons that then alert the bachelor machine below, even though the bride's flesh-colored Milky Way has already blossomed. The Malic Molds inflate with a gas whose origin, according to Paz, is unknown, or

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[21] Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*, 37. André Breton, "The Lighthouse of the Bride," 92. The oculist witnesses were pencil sketches on the reverse of carbon paper while the chocolate grinder was painted and then repainted again using thread. As Henry Molderings has noted, thread figured prominently in Duchamp's attempts to incorporate contingency into the artistic process by traversing a certain rationalist history back from Napoleaonic standard measures to the origins and scientific methods of perspectival drawing that used string to reproduce the rays of vision that would traverse the picture plane. The same may be true for the draft pistons or three squares that hang from the cloud-like horizontal "milky way" that represents the bride's "blossoming" and transmit her commands to the region below. To find their shape, Duchamp placed a gauze net in a window and photographed it as the wind blew and used this as the model for their drawing on glass. Rather than using the grid to depict the scene beyond the window or frame, Duchamp reproduced the movement of the grid-like veil mechanically and then manually. The nine shots just below and to the right of the Milky Way were produced by shooting a matchstick covered in paint at the glass and letting it puncture it. The capillary tubes connecting the nine male molds to the sieves are reminiscent of the form of Duchamp's standard stoppages, or the line that results from dropping a meter of string from one meter of height. Molly Nesbit has noted the dominance and gendered division of technical drawing in the French Third Republic suggesting a possible genealogy for Duchamp's use of technical, rather than perspectival representations. Helping to feed the early buzz that anticipated the Large Glass' debut, according to Tomkins, Man Ray photographed the "breeding of dust" in the region of the nine sieves in 1920.

[22] Paz, *Apariencia desnuda*, 46.

waiting to be found in *Given*. When the Malic Molds hear the litanies of the bachelor machine being played by the glider, which is powered by the fall of a bottle of Benedictine water, they release this gas into the capillary tubes and then from there into the sieves, where it becomes an explosive fluid. The explosive droplets shoot out, but their path is interrupted by the scissors, who redirect them to the oculist witnesses. The oculist witnesses throw them up towards the region of the nine shots, where they arrive only in mirrored form.

Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas) is a life-size tableau installed in a darkened gallery of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It features a partially visible plaster female nude holding a gas lamp with her long, outstretched left arm. The mannequin lies upon a pile of dried leaves and twigs set in front of a panoramic forest landscape, made of color photographic prints Duchamp took of the scenery near a vacation spot in Bellevue, Switzerland.[23] Nestled within the landscape to the right of the gas lamp a tiny kinetic waterfall gives the illusion of movement achieved by threading a translucent, molded piece of hardened glue through a hole in the wooden scenery and revolving a small motor-powered disc in front of a light bulb, all housed in a "Peeke Frean's cookie tin."[24] The entire scene, which occurs "below" or in front of a bright blue sky, is lit by a complex museum lighting system. The foreground of the diorama is framed by bricks. The entire scene remains behind a weathered, wooden Spanish Catalonian barn door Duchamp had dismantled and shipped back to his studio in New York. It can only be seen by approaching two eye holes that have been drilled into the doors and that organize the spectator's field of vision, situating what would be the end point of visual pyramid in the mannequin's genitals. The tableau's

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[23] Taylor, "The Genesis, Construction, Installation, and Legacy of a Secret Masterwork," 94. According to Michael Taylor, photographic evidence reveals that Duchamp likely modeled the mannequin's hand on that of his partner Teeny Duchamp, while the rest of its body had been modeled on the diminutive Maria Martins, Duchamp's earlier girlfriend in the late 40s.

interior lighting controls are set to turn themselves off for several seconds every few minutes.

Duchamp famously worked on *Given* with some secrecy over the course of twenty years (1946-66). It was not displayed publicly until the summer of 1969 in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, after being dismantled and moved from Duchamp's East Village studio following his death in October 1968. Like the Large Glass, Duchamp included a detailed *Manual of Instructions* with it. Though the artist is famed to have retired from the art world after 1946, he worked on preparatory molds, sketches, collages and arrangements of *Given*'s optical illusions throughout the period, especially in its early years. As Paz and many others have noted, Duchamp mentions *Given*'s title in the notes for the Green Box and relates to Cabanne in their interviews that he borrowed the phrase from one nailed to Paris apartment buildings at the turn of the century, advertising "water and gas on all floors."[25] Duchamp's more esoteric critics, including Paz, have suggested that the waterfall and gas light supply the missing elements needed to power the Bride machine and that the tableau presents the frustrated ecstasy of the Bride. Historians have also suggested closer artistic genealogies, for example, two major Surrealism exhibitions in which Duchamp exhibited and that he also helped to organize. Duchamp's *With My Tongue in My Cheek* and *Emergency Box* (1959) both experimented with plaster molds and eroticized and tactile mannequins and images. The most notable association is with Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866), which presents almost identical subject matter in realistic painted detail, oriented in mirror image to the mannequin in *Given*.[26] Duchamp was likely to have seen the painting in the home of its owners, Jacques and Sylvia Lacan, in 1958, when Duchamp was

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[24] Ibid.,114.
[25] A reproduction of the sign decorates the cover of the deluxe edition of Robert Lebel's study of Marcel Duchamp from 1958.
[26] Taylor, "Genesis," 111.

invited to dinner.[27] As Paz notes, Duchamp, who famously criticized Courbet's painterliness, likely took inspiration from the implication of woman and nature in his landscapes, a trope reproduced in the female nude that decorates the cover André Masson painted to veil *The Origin of the World* at Sylvia Lacan's request.

While Bretón and Lebel's interpretations of the *Green Box* end at the comical and pathetic narrative of the Large Glass' mechanized missed encounter, Paz takes this as his starting point. According to Paz, *The Bride* is a comical rendering of love set in mechanical terms and, in a second moment, a criticism of that criticism, returning us to a mythic plane not without a certain "horror of indifference."[28] This double critique holds to the extent that it also reintroduces an eroticism supposedly eclipsed by retinal painting between the sacred and the profane. The Bride is at once a self-enjoying object of desire that solicits the gaze and the appearance or instantiation of the idea:

> What is most notable is the circular character of the operation: everything is born from the virgin and everything returns to her. This last aspect contains a paradox: the Bride is condemned to be a virgin. The erotic machinery she puts into gear is entirely imaginary, both because her men have no reality of their own and because the only reality she knows and that knows her is a reflection: the projection of her Desiring Motor. The outflows she receives are hers, at a distance, sieved by an idiotic mechanical apparatus. In no moment does the Bride enter into relation with true masculine reality or with real reality: between her and the world the imaginary machinery that her Motor projects, interposes itself.[29]

Paz's critique is first that the Bride enjoys the fruits of her own idiotic machinery and second, that this enjoyment is not genuine because she attains it without the help of the Malic Molds.

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[27] Ibid., 114.
[28] Paz, *Apariencia desnuda*, 85.

What is missing from Duchamp's version of myth is "the hero (the lover) who breaks the masculine circle, burns the livery or uniform, crosses the zone of gravity, conquers the Bride and liberates her from her prison by tearing her virginity."[30] If what the Bride needs is a good man, the fact that she doesn't have one places her within a set of other classical female divinities: the Bengalese Kali, "incessant energy" and destruction, "butchery, sexuality, propagation and spiritual contemplation" and the Roman Diana, who demands to become the object of Other's gaze in order to enjoy, or be enjoyed: "The analogy with the works of Duchamp," Paz writes, "could not be more complete: the Nine Malic Molds of the Large Glass, inflate by gas, and the phallic lamp that sustains the girl [in *Given*] are the artifices of the Bride to enjoy herself, see herself and know herself."[31]

We might recall how Paz argues that both the *Large Glass* and *Given* invite the spectator into a dyadic and ultimately circular relationship of seeing and being seen. It is in this way that the looking internal to the *Large Glass* in the figure of the Oculist Witnesses, redoubles in the work's relationship to the spectator. In what Paz calls the *Bride*'s myth of criticism, Duchamp's work, like that of Mallarmé and Joyce, takes part in a "ritual of absence" by instantiating modernity's purely negative gesture through an encounter that Paz nonetheless deems poetic.[32] *The Bride* thus becomes in Paz's words, the "involuntary representation of the only myth-idea in modern Western civilization: critique."[33] He locates this operation in and through the transparency of its glass. We, the spectators, Paz writes, "cannot see [the bride] without seeing ourselves" inasmuch as the spectator finds himself both doubled in the Glass' paintings—the "oculist witnesses" in the upper left-hand portion of the bottom half — and literally reflected in

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[29] Ibid., 78.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 137.
[32] Ibid., 92.

the glass.[34]

The more explicitly voyeuristic relationship between woman and spectator in *Given*

simultaneously reduces Paz's schema to its most inert materiality and transcendent immateriality.

The neatly formal operations of Duchamp's modernism and the mutual, dyadic relationship it

entails with the viewer find their obstacle in the eroticism of poetic communion as Paz describes

it. As Jean Claire has argued, Duchamp literalizes the tenants of classical perspective painting in

the *Large Glass* by transforming the work into a window and thereby eliminating the mediating

material surface. In the case of *Given*, the vertical plane that intersects the visual pyramid

connecting the image on the retina to its origin in the ray of light, is a brick wall with two peep

holes. Just as the diorama of the splayed nude model cannot be realized except by peering

through the holes, the vanishing point is the labia of the plaster model. Rosalind Krauss invokes

Jean-François Lyotard's reading, in this sense, to argue for the physical embodiment of the

spectator's visual apparatus and its parity with the dark interior of its object, such that "the

viewing point and vanishing point are symmetrical." [35] As Lyotard goes on to write, "If it is true

that the latter is the vulva, then the vulva is the specular image of the voyeur-eyes; or: When

these eyes think they see a vulva, they are seeing themselves. A cunt is he who sees."[36]

Lyotard refers to *Given*'s organization of the physical apparatus of seeing, a point Krauss

borrows in order to show the intervention of the Other in the constitution of Duchamp's

eroticization of vision. Lyotard's final phrase, "a cunt is he who sees," is also inadvertently

indicative of what Lacan describes as the voyeur's proposition to appear to himself as a "dark

fetish":

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[33] Ibid., 162.
[34] Ibid., 93.
[35] Krauss, "Where's Poppa," 436-7. Lyotard, *Duchamp's Transformers*, 185.
[36] Ibid.

In the fulfillment of his act, of his ritual —because it's about the kind of human action in which we find all of the structures of ritual—, what the agent of sadist desire does not know is what he is looking for, and what he is looking for is to make himself appear…as pure object, a black fetish.[37]

In pointing to the enjoyment of the visual organ by the Other burrowing through the shock value of Lyotard and Duchamp's literality, Lacan's definition of sadistic desire offsets the more banal and neurotic fantasy that shapes the role of the erotic in modern poetic experience for Paz. Where the dumb materiality and literal eroticism of the girl in *Given* announces "the idea transformed into presence," the moment of communion only promised in the Large Glass, Paz declares that art's communion can only be reached in the contemplation of the beloved and its sublimation as art, as Paz cites through the example of the medieval poetry of courtly love. That the Bride only ever receives the mirror image of the bachelors' droplets serves to illustrate the condition of modern poetic experience in two senses. According to Paz, the being of the Bride, like that of Diana, is defined by the auto-erotic circularity of her enjoyment. The purported eroticism of this situation lies in the extent to which the structure of both the artwork and the myth preclude their genital satisfaction, leading instead to a protracted game of visual concupiscence in which the Bride or goddess only wishes to be the object of desire for her onlooker. By taking to its literal, physical extreme the operation of mutual reflection Paz derives from Duchamp, Lyotard's seeing cunt highlights the extent to which it is the voyeur who is the object cause of his own desire as this obscure fetish for the *jouissance* of an Other. Moreover, he is so only in the specificity of the scenario, requiring that erotic charge of any work be considered in the material singularity of its elements, if not in the structure of their arrangement. If Paz, in some sense, outlines this scenario, he also quickly returns us to the vertiginous whirl of

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[37] Lacan, *La angustia*, 118.

the "hinge," a term he borrows from Duchamp's writings to denote the instantiation of the idea or apparition into its varied appearances: "unit that bifurcates, duality that pursues unity in order to bifurcate again; in [Eros and Diana] Eros becomes speculative."[38] The constant search for poetic form elides the predicament set forth in Duchamp's ethical renewal of art: the spectator can enjoy art as object, within the masculine economy Paz organizes, but he cannot at the same time enjoy it as idea. Like the extended space Paz dedicates to only these two of Duchamp's works, the number of mythical and artistic names and structures invoked over the course of his study signals the difficulty of naming the non-relation between "art and the people" that Paz simultaneously traces. In the following sections, I will suggest that the Groups, perhaps inadvertently, both name and intervene in this place of non-rapport between art and the social.

The Syndicate of Technical Workers, Artists and Painters and its Antinomies

The Groups inherited a leftist tradition of artists' collectives and fronts that determined to different degrees by the contradictions of the Mexican state's hegemonic project. In one sense, the Groups were directly implicated in the social and political aspects of the outcome of this project. The group El Colectivo, for example, worked with one of the most politically active, autonomous unions, the Syndicate of National Autonomous University Workers (STEUNAM). When the reform of the country's electoral system took effect in the early 80s—a move that ultimately strengthened the Institutional Revolutionary Party's rule—, consolidating the left, El Colectivo's relationship to the socialist left led to a rift with the more militant Communist members of the Frente de Mexicano de Trabajadores de la Cultura (Front of Mexican Cultural Workers), who opposed the left's incorporation into state politics. In another, less direct sense, many of the Groups, including El Colectivo, described their work as one of solidarity with social and political struggles at the grassroots level. The Groups often understood such efforts as a way

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[38] Ibid., 138.

of redressing the failures of the state and the left to effectively incorporate and represent the masses. Alberto Híjar Serrano, an aesthetics theory professor at the National Autonomous University (UNAM) who formed the group Taller de Arte e Ideología (Art and Ideology Workshop) with his students and played a vocal role in the Frente, has portrayed the Groups, in this regard, as the continuation of Mexico's twentieth-century tradition of leftist artists' collectives. While this assertion may be true, the Groups' politicization also transcends this genealogy.

To the extent that the Groups inherit this legacy, they also inherit the obstacles to class hegemony from both above and below: on one hand, the populist rhetoric of the state's cultural and educational attempts at forming the social consensus it presumed, and on the other, the capacity of the state's political apparatus to incorporate and pacify any organized attempt at opposition, whether in the form of a workers' syndicate or political party. While muralism eventually came to be read as the founding gesture of state hegemony, artists' syndicates often played a symptomatic role in the relationship between the revolutionary state and the organized left by acting out this relationship on the scene of non-productive labor.

The difficulty of situating the Groups within this legacy is also its unrealized potential for contemporary critical work. The Groups reveal the extent to which the artists' collectives of the first half of the twentieth century were over-determined by the political form of the state. Simultaneously, they give account, whether intentionally or not, of the capitalist subsumption of labor that determines their efficacy, as both political actors and as shadow play that rehearses the relationship between social organization and politics. They bear witness to a metamorphosis in the meaning of art's socialization, from one of education and ideological reproduction to another in which creativity and collaboration mark the most advanced forms of productive work, making

socialization both the process and product. At the same time that the Groups form part of this more global, economic change, they also inherit muralism's particular articulation or disarticulation between the collectivization and situation of artistic work within the social relations of production, on one hand, and its simultaneous fidelity to a romantic notion of the emancipatory function of art's sensuous qualities.

The question of how the de-materialization of art may interrupt or at least differentiate itself from the process of capital's self-valorization traverses, rather than avoids, the overdetermination of the Groups' collective form by the state or political society. The Groups underline the extent to which the political subject of socialized labor—what Paolo Virno, after Marx, calls the general intellect or abstract thinking mass—does not follow the political-economic dominion of the state in linear fashion and thus cannot be adopted as a normative goal. For Virno, the post-Fordist regime of accumulation displaces the institutions of the state onto the microscopic collectives of the "non-stately public sphere," such that these new institutions are simultaneously "the main productive force and a principle of republican organization."[39] By tracing the Groups' complex relationship to earlier artists' collectives of the post-Revolutionary period and the increasingly complex institutional sphere of art in the 1950s and 60s, I will argue that while the Groups' politicization of art must be understood in this context, it is nonetheless not reducible to it. The Groups' were not in and of themselves "political"; rather, they suggested the mediation of their organizational form as the potential site of their intervention.

Led by President Alvaro Obregón the government that assumed power in 1920 following the end of the Mexican Revolution undertook a broad educational and cultural mission destined to constitute Mexico's "social culture" and "national spirit."[40] As the director of the Secretary of

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[39] Penzin and Virno,"The Soviets of the Multitude," 85, 87.

[40] Monsiváis, "Notas sobre la cultura mexicana en el siglo XX," 348.

Public Education, José Vasconcelos developed a nation-wide educational and cultural campaign to combat illiteracy and inculcate the mostly indigenous population in universal and "national" culture through the widespread establishment of rural schools and the diffusion and promotion of the arts, both within Mexico and across the continent.[41] As part of this campaign, muralism was supposed to generate and actualize Mexican culture: to recuperate indigenous craft techniques and materials and at the same time to project national, social history of a collective in the future anterior. According to Diego Rivera, muralism was supposed to "condense [the people's] struggles and aspirations and at the same time transmit a synthesis of their desires back to those same masses so that it might help them to organize their consciousness and their social organization."[42]

The murals commissioned by Vasconcelos and the Secretary of Public Education formed part of the post-revolutionary state's larger hegemonic project. Following Antonio Gramsci, muralism can be considered to form part of the ethical mission of the state, which he defines as follows: "…Every state is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level…which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes."[43] As his explicators have observed, Gramsci theorizes Hegel's idealist notion of the state by understanding its historical, rather than metaphysical determination. Gramsci thus comprehends what Hegel terms the "actuality of the ethical ideal," as the historically specific and particular outcome of bourgeois class hegemony.[44] He elaborates on Marx's critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* by positing the state as the political form of bourgeois civil society. For

[41] Ibid., 346-47.
[42] Ibid., 351.
[43] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 258.
[44] Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, 180.

Gramsci, political society names the movement by which a particular class posits its economic, corporate interests as universal and thus valid for the whole of society.[45] While, according to Gramsci, political society condenses its social dominance through the institutions of the state, it is also the case that these institutions play a role in guaranteeing the consent they presume.

Like the new state's cultural and educational campaigns, the muralists' syndicate grew out of the efforts at cultural diffusion initiated by the more visionary members of Mexico's young, humanist intelligentsia. The Ateneo Mexicano de la Juventud (Mexican Youth Athenaeum), active during the last years of the Porfiriato, shared some of the same members as the Sociedad de Conferencias y Conciertos (Society of Conferences and Concernts) and the Universidad Popular (Popular University), beginning in 1916, in order to organize national cultural centers for students and workers.[46] The Universidad Popular became part of the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) (Mexican Regional Workers' Confederation) in 1918 before being incorporated directly into the state in 1920 as the Departamento de Extensión Universitaria, counting Diego Rivera, Lombardo Toledano, Daniel Cosío Villegas and Pedro Henríquez Ureña among its ranks. Like José Clemente Orozco, Rivera also formed part of the Grupo Solidario del Movimiento Obrero (Solidarity Group with the Worker's Movement), an organization led by Toledano and meant to bring the intellectuals and artists of the Secretary of Education closer to the members of the CROM, the biggest labor union of the 1920s and also the one most closely controlled by the state.[47]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Quintanilla, *Liga de Artistas y Escritores Revolucionarios*, 11. Against the grain of liberal historiography, Horacio Legrás has argued that some members of the Ateneno foresaw the necessity of making the elite, humanist study of culture characteristic of their group and of *arielismo* more generally, into the educational work of hegemony for the supposedly bourgeois state to come. Legrás sees this mission, as articulated before the Revolution by José Vasconcelos and Pedro Henríquez Ureña, as an anticipation of what Gramsci defined or re-defined as the ethical (class) state. See Legrás, "El Ateneo y los orígenes del estado ético en México."

[47] Ibid., 13.

The better known Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores (Syndicate of

Technical Workers, Paitners and Sculptors) took form alongside the first murals in the Escuela

Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School), as well as Rivera's disassociation from

CROM and his entrance into the Mexican Communist Party.[48] The Syndicate's manifesto, issued

in December 1923 and published six months later in its newspaper *El machete*, appealed to

soldiers, peasants and workers on one hand, and to revolutionary intellectuals, on the other, to

join in support of the revolutionary and the nationalist goals of the government. It identified the

popular and particularly indigenous roots of beauty and declared its aesthetic aim as that of

socializing artistic expression and destroying bourgeois individualism. It also marked its present

as a "moment of transition from a decrepit to a new order" in which "the creators of beauty must

invest their efforts in the aim of materializing an art valuable to the people…to create something

of beauty for all, beauty that enlightens and stirs to struggle".[49] *While El machete* became and

remained the organ of the Mexican Communist Party until 1939, the Sindicato was short-lived,

gaining strength around ideological battles between Rivera and Vasconcelos over the content of

the murals of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Public Education), but dissolving

soon after when the subsequent presidential administration of Plutarco Elías Calles (1928-32)

threatened to cease mural commissions if artists did not abandon the inclusion of Communist

slogans.[50]

Regarding the contradictions and shortcomings of the Syndicate, José Clemente Orozco

later commented that *El machete* was both unaffordable and inaccessible for most workers

because of the cultural and intellectual level it assumed of its reader. David Alfaro Siqueiros,

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[48] Taibo II, *Bolshevikis*, 201-202.
[49] "Manifesto of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors," 320.

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who wrote the manifesto and served as the syndicate's secretary, also critiqued its material

failures to implement a collective labor process and to create an art capable of "stirring" or

capturing, rather than only representing its subjects ideologically. [51] Siqueiros' critique speaks to

the uncomfortable juxtaposition of beauty and collectivization in the Syndicate's manifesto.

According to Siqueiros, while the syndicate talked about producing works "equivalent—in their

agitative essence—to a good conference on the Marxist dialectic and to impulsive discourses in

proletariat meetings," their practice fell into the static representation of "picturesque" elements.

The Syndicate maintained a traditional hierarchal gremial structure and division between creative

and purely physical labor at the same time that it proved incapable of matching its techniques

and materials to the most advanced forms of industrial and cinematographic production, a failure

that might have actually allowed it to succeed in capturing its mass spectator.[52] Contemporary

historian Paco Ignacio Taibo II glibly notes that in 1923 the Communist Party discovered that if

had not developed any influence in any manufacturing unions of the Valley of Mexico it at least

had a hand in the syndicate of painters and sculptors.[53]

Siqueiros and Taibo II's critiques of the Syndicate point to a relation of subordination, if

not conflict, between the ideological function of art in the construction of a people and the

materialist gesture of defining revolutionary art, at the same time, by its approach to manual and

heteronymous non-artistic labor. With respect to Taibo II's remark, if artists' syndicates were

directly implicated as organic intellectuals, they also served as measuring sticks for the success

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[50] Quintanilla, *Liga*, 15. Taibo II, *Bolshevikis*, 369, n11. Tabio II notes that while all of the members uniformly professed allegiance to the Third International in the Syndicate's initial meeting in 1922, none but a few were members of the Communist Party.

[51] Siqueiros, *Fundación del muralismo mexicano*, 82. In Siqueiros' words, "In the work of conceiving and edifying our works only we, the masters, had a hand. No previous collective discussion anticipated the final conception. No collectively linked self-critique followed the construction of our work. No pre-final self-critique was ever realized among us. And this did not stop happening because of the incapacity of our collaborators, but because we did absolutely nothing to facilitate the exercise of collective production."

[52] Ibid., 88.

or failure of the Party in attracting industrial labor unions. The PCM's political inefficacy can be measured by its pendulum swing between failed attempts at creating a united front with socialist and anarcho-syndical organizations and, at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, its capacity to alienate leftist, nationalist syndicalism as it scuttled between reformism and radicalism. Throughout, the PCM's most faithful allegiance was found among unions of intellectuals, artists and teachers.[54]

As both foundational and exemplary, Paz's re-definition of social art is meant as a criticism of the inefficacy and futility of all attempts at social hegemony either from above or below. It would be reductive, however, to indulge either in Paz's ontology of Mexican history or the more banal critique of the Mexican state's ability to co-opt the left because of its corporatist structure.

The Syndicate presents a more compelling problem. On one hand, it attempted to remove the social division between manual and creative labor in its practice and to declare its members on par with all other kinds of technical workers. The suggestion implied in this assertion is that the Syndicate's horizontal, collaborative organization could serve as a model for other kinds of workers to challenge the capitalist expropriation of their labor. On the other, it retained a romantic notion of the liberating function of beauty. The muralists of the Syndicate thus appear to displace the materialist definition of art's social function, implied in the gesture of collectivization and the real and nominal proletarianization of artistic work, onto a purely ethical

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[53] Taibo II, *Bolshevikis*, 204.

[54] Quintanilla, *Liga*, 38-39. Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Mexico*, 48. The Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists) (LEAR) exemplifies this trend. Formed during the PCM's clandestine period, coinciding with the apex of syndical radicalism, it became the face of the Popular Front, absorbing artists it initially denounced as bourgeois and individualist and aligning itself with the populist administration of Lázaro Cárdenas. The LEAR is perhaps best known for organizing a delegation Second International Conference in Defense of Culture in support of the Spanish republic in 1937. If the LEAR is any indication, the collectivization of artistic labor is able to maintain its link to art's autonomous-heteronymous ethical

plane.

Siqueiros came closest to proposing a theory of artistic practice capable of overcoming this division. Implicit in his criticism of muralism's involution towards the picturesque, was the presumption that murals needed to capture the masses ideologically.[55] Moreover, he suggested that they could only do so by incorporating the latest reproductive media and industrial techniques and materials into a collaborative model capable of facilitating the exchange of expertise and the coordination of specialized tasks.[56] According to John Roberts, Siqueiros' praxis would exemplify art's emancipatory potential insofar as it modeled a form of emancipated labor conscientious that simultaneously incorporated productive workers directly into the social division of work.[57] Though anecdotal, it may be worth noting that Siqueiros was never able to realize this practice consistently in Mexico. He came closest in the execution of murals in Buenos Aires and Los Angeles during the "clandestine" period in which the state withdrew support for left-leaning muralism in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By contrast, Siqueiros' *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, a mural designed for the Mexican Electricists' Syndicate (1939-40), which attempted to adapt Sergei Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage to the viewer's dynamic position within the space of the union hall, was completed by Siqueiros' assistant amidst conflicts with his subordinates.[58]

The thorny problem of politics within the Mexican context of state nationalism

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function within the conditions of the Popular Front. Historian Barry Carr similarly notes the zigzag of the PCM between extreme opposition and total acquiescence to the state over the course of the Cárdenas administration.

[55] Siqueiros coins the phrase "dynamic classicism" to describe his theory of monumental art in "No hay más ruta que la nuestra."

[56] Ramírez, "Teoría y práctica de la plástica del movimiento en Siqueiros," 78. Siqueiros explains these assertions in "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva," a talk he delivered in 1932 at the John Reed Club in Los Angeles. According to Ramírez, Siqueiros' notions of "plástica filmica," which he introduced in his 1933 talk "¿Qué es 'Ejercicio plástico' y cómo se hizo?," were influenced by Sergei Eisenstein. The two met while Eisenstein was filming *Qué viva México*.

[57] See chapter 7 of *The Intangibilities of Form* in particular.

[58] Jolly, "Siqueiros' Communist Proposition for Mexican Muralism."

complicated the direct execution of art's liberating potential in the sphere of labor alone, just as it complicates any attempt to recuperate this gesture in isolation from its over-determination by the idiosyncratic forms of the state. While the Mexican state in no sense exercised sovereignty over the whole of its territory nor eradicated the anarchist left within the relatively limited ambit of industrial labor, the national-popular model of hegemony was nonetheless capable of short-circuiting the Syndicate's more radical, historical aims. As I will examine in more detail in the following section, despite its supposed deviation from European models of bourgeois class hegemony, the state's form of ideological capture proved successful in determining muralism's attempt at establishing a proletarian hegemony from below.

Mexican art critic Ida Rodríguez Prampolini summarized this dilemma in an affirmative tone in an essay from 1964 titled "Dos conceptos de arte revolucionario" (Two Concepts of Revolutionary Art). Rodríguez Prampolini notes that, in contrast to the Soviet art of the 1920s, "the dramatic and tragic work of the Mexicans…did not imply in the least…the abolition of the profession of 'artist' nor much less the extinction of art as such."[59] The lesson she draws *a propos* the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors specifically is that despite the shared proposition for art's socialization in both post-Revolutionary scenarios, the urgency of founding Mexican nationhood anew required the maintenance of a romantic approach to art. If Rodríguez Prampolini over-writes the muralists' ambitions to abolish individual authorship and place their work within the social relations of labor, at least rhetorically, her comparison nevertheless illustrates the need to consider both the ethical form and nationalist content of the state project in coming to an understanding of what a politicized collective art might look like in the case of the Groups.

John Roberts' substantial contributions to the recommencement of Marxist aesthetic

theory can also be situated as one pole of the antinomies of East-West divide between art's material and ethical functions. As mentioned above, Roberts aims to contest the way in which Adorno's notion of artistic autonomy depends on the irreproducibility of modernist forms that thereby evade the abstraction of capitalist social relations. By contrast, Roberts suggests that art's critical historical capacity is to be found in the extent to which it embraces value form, or the crystallization of capitalist social relations in their abstract form from its privileged place outside of the laws of value. Rather than locating art's critical autonomy in the sensuousness of the finished artwork, Roberts finds it instead in the extent to which artwork exposes the abstraction of heteronymous, productive labor in the phenomenal gap it opens up within the appearance of the commodity-art piece as simultaneously the immediate, material product of labor and the embodiment of an abstract value. Herein lies the shock effect of Duchamp's readymade, according to Roberts.[60] Art's objective exclusion from the law of value, combined with its ability to ape the look of the commodity, are charged with producing its ability to de-alienate the worker.

Where the readymade operates this effect at a distance (and against the grain of its author-producer), Roberts locates a more direct, if truncated, attempt to conjoin artistic and productive labor in the example of early Soviet Productivism. He privileges the figure of Soviet Productivitist theorist Boris Arvatov, for whom art would dissolve into factory work as productive labor became infused with art: "By dissolving the artist into various hybrid art-identities (artist-engineer, artist-designer, artist-educator, artist-constructor, artist-worker), the artistic "laboratory" functions as a prefiguration of non-alienated labor, and the breakdown of the

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[59] Rodríguez Prampolini, *Una década de crítica de arte*, 26.
[60] See the introduction and chapter one of Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*.

divide between manual and intellectual labor."[61] According to Roberts, the historical limit to such attempts was Productivism's blindness to value-form, that is, to the way in which the infusion of creativity into work could easily be coopted by capital, as was the case with Soviet industrial modernization.

Despite the historical processes and theoretical shortcomings that curtailed this early avant-garde collectivism, Roberts nevertheless insists that the "model of collective collaboration" has "acted as a point of transmission between the early avant-garde and the art of today."[62]The difficulty of substantiating this claim arises from the technology that has contributed to capitalism's own process of socializing labor in the interim. The material processes of post-Fordist labor can be characterized at once by the sharper stratification of technical skill, on one hand, and, on the other, the non-specialization of a larger swath of jobs based on some form of non-manual, collaborative work. The limits to the de-familiarizing function of juxtaposing productive and non-productive labor, as in Roberts' reading of the ready-made, become apparent in the contemporary period. The ambitions of artists' collectives to dissolve their activities directly into the social reveal how this gesture is the only thing separating art from capitalist social relations of production. If, on one hand, post-autonomist theorists like Virno embrace this dissolution by ignoring its complicity with capitalist property relations—a term Roberts identifies but fails to qualify in light of the new regime of accumulation he identifies—on the flip side, artists' negation of their activity as art almost inevitably becomes art, but only in a cynical, commercial form. Conversely, when such collectives launch political critiques beyond the realm of art, they do so lacking any effective critique of capitalism in its contemporary guise. The political actions of contemporary artists' groups thus cannot be

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[61] Roberts, "Collaboration as a Problem of Art's Cultural Form," 558.
[62] Ibid., 559.

discerned from the activities of other social organizations. Roberts comes to the conclusion that in order for socialized art to launch its critique against capitalist subsumption, it must "defend itself as art" in order to distinguish and then reunite artistic and social technique.[63]

Returning to the antinomies of Soviet and Mexican revolutionary art, we can see how art's autonomous-heteronymous distinction from labor in the service of national popular hegemony, as Rodríguez Prampolini suggests, returns as art's nominal self-designation within the realm of capitalist social relations in Roberts' theory. Whereas the readymade was potentially able to induce its subjective shock effects by playing on the non-coincidence of the commodity's use and exchange values at the level of appearance, contemporary collectives must willfully assert themselves as artistic in order to mark the same distinction.

Despite these obstacles, Roberts' theory remains important because it insists on art's ultimate horizon as that of social and political emancipation. The question thus becomes first, how to conceive of the "appearance of aesthetic labor in the realm of heteronymous labor" when both become immanent to the process of labor's socialization and, second, how to do so outside of the ideal or idealized historical and political conditions of the first years of the Soviet Revolution, that is, to read the existent political and historical determinations of socialized art with an eye towards their inexistence. The Groups offer one way to approach this task. Their attempt to situate their own "cultural work" within the "aesthetic-ideological plane of social relations," gives account of the value form and material processes of post-Fordist accumulation at the same time that it does so through the inherited forms—cultural fronts, murals, graphics — of art's socialization within the Mexican hegemonic state project.[64]

Popular Fiction

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[63] Ibid., 564.
[64] Frente Mexicano de Trabajadores de la Cultura, "Declaración y Reglamento," 383.

Mexico's national popular project was inherently contradictory. Given the lack of an industrial bourgeoisie large and homogeneous enough to create social consensus prior to the Revolution, the state needed to realize bourgeois class hegemony already in power through a doubly fictitious movement: it had to claim the transparency and legitimacy of its political institutions as the expression of a populist will at the same time that it had to constitute a national people by propagating the bourgeois-democratic nature of these same institutions. Whereas Gramsci deduces a definition of hegemony by which a particular class asserts the fictitious universality of its interests, "such that its own ends are the ends of the State," the Mexican state had to project the fiction of such a class and its political forms together in order to constitute the class alliance it needed to govern. The confection of a unified, single party at the national level became the simultaneously coercive and "ethical" conduit of this alliance beginning with the formation of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario in 1929.

In the sublimated religious language of Vasconcelos and the young intelligentsia of the state's new cultural and educational institutions, the work of hegemony was often described as an evangelical mission. Daniel Cosío Villegas, an early functionary and then vocal, liberal critic of the Mexican state, described Vasconcelos' educational projects "as a religious, apostolic mission that projected itself to the furthest corners of the country bringing with it the good news that the nation will rise from its lethargy and walk."[65] If Cosío Villegas' words faithfully reflect the religious inflections of Vasconcelos' rhetoric, his irony is meant to signal the failed and truncated educational project of what historian Enrique Krauze, a generation or so later, referred to as the cultural *caudillos* of the early revolutionary state. Krauze appropriates this phrase from Vasconcelos to refer to the artificial and ineffective transplantation of the pre-Revolutionary liberal ideals of aesthetic education onto the post-Revolutionary state's construction of political

legitimacy. Krauze gives account of how young members of the Porfirian-era civil association of the Ateneo Mexicano de la Juventud (Mexican Youth Athenaeum), including Vasconcelos, came into the direct service of the state's ideological project after 1920. Written in the 1970s, Krauze's effective advocacy for the immateriality and purported autonomy of intellectual labor forms part of a longer-standing liberal critique of the state dating the post-War period. As we will see shortly, this critique coincided with, and was perhaps over-determined by, the state's simultaneous ossification of the "revolutionary tradition" in the consolidation of single party rule and its promotion of a more modern and cosmopolitan national image articulated within the visual arts through the promotion of international competitions and abstract easel painting.

Despite Paz's employment by the Mexican diplomatic service from the early 40s until his resignation in 1968, his phenomenology of Mexican nationalism in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) (The Labyrinth of Solitude) came to crystallize the liberal critique of the state. Indeed, Paz's discussion of the post-Revolutionary period centers on the question of the intelligentsia. In one sense, Paz defines intellectuals by the immaterial and critical nature of their work; whereas in the United States or Europe their social autonomy allows intellectuals to specialize in "criticism," in Mexico, they specialize in "political action." In another, Paz's criticism of the intellectual cum functionary constitutes one more face of Mexico's alienation and persistent historic search for the coincidence of "substance and form," in the poet's words. For Paz, the contradictions of the state's educational mission are most dramatic during the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), a period that marked the height of populist politics through the implementation of agrarian and educational reform and advocacy on the part of labor. Paz comments on the founding of the National Autonomous University in 1929, citing the state's

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[65] Cosío Villegas, "La crisis de México," cited in Krauze, *Caudillos culturales en la revolución mexicana*, 101.

claim to impart a socialist education.[66] In a rhetorical move that Paz repeats in his criticism of the cultural nationalism of muralism, he notes the state's hypocritical claims to promote socialism despite the subaltern status of the working class. His real criticism, however, touches on the inability of the Mexican state to effectively create the kind of consensus it presumed: Paz argues that the state's institutions failed to "establish the bases of the nation as colonial Catholicism had."[67] He goes on to explain that "owing to the universal character of Catholic religion, which was a religion for everyone and especially the disinherited and orphaned, colonial society was able to achieve order for a brief moment."[68] Where the revolutionary class state fails in the task of universalization, Paz displaces, rather than discounts, the state's excessively corporate political form onto the idealized universalism of the colonial Church.

Paz's historical displacement appears as a negation in José Revuelta's critique of the "ideological myth" of the Mexican School of Painting. To the extent that the Mexican Revolution was a bourgeois revolution without a bourgeoisie, the latter realized itself as a class only in the socialist revolutionary state.[69] Arnaldo Córdova further codifies the absent presence that persists in Revueltas: "the official existence of the party, sustained by the state's domination over individuals and organizations, imposed the populist fiction of a government and a state that proceeded from an entirely popular party."[70] They point to an image of hegemony –a kind of hegemony without hegemony – that defines itself as either lacking the forms of mediation necessary to fulfill its task – "a populist fiction" – or lacking the class hegemony to actualize the political form it presupposes – a bourgeois revolution without a bourgeoisie. Not-hegemony is irreducible, in this sense, to mere coercion. Córdova and Revueltas' point is not that there was

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[66] Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, 168.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 180.
[69] Revueltas, *Cuestionamientos e intenciones*, 259-60.

only a coercive apparatus, but rather, that in its historical dissonance from the concept of class hegemony the Mexican integral state nonetheless produced some material effect. Given that the state arose neither as the formal product of existing class hegemony nor was it successful in presupposing this level of social consensus, not-hegemony reflects the imaginary but nonetheless effective function of the state's purportedly symbolic institutions.

Art historical narratives tend to assume the commonplace liberal critiques of cultural nationalism in the 1950s and 60s within a teleological trajectory leading to the rupture with both the aesthetics of cultural nationalism and the state understood as a juridical and administrative apparatus. In contrast to such accounts, Córdova and Revueltas' critiques signal the extent to which Paz's liberal ethics of socialization mark the negative force and historical disjointedness of the state's hegemonic project beyond the more commonplace critique that the socialist key of Mexican nationalism belied the class interests it pursued. Revueltas' nation by negation thus articulates the obverse side of the linear art historical narrative that posits Paz's critique of cultural nationalism, like the cultural rupture of 68, as a necessary step in the path towards the supposed autonomy of both art and its institutions.

We can better frame the potentially political and historical nature of the Groups' intervention by keeping in mind both the uneven development of Mexican hegemony and the conflation of the state in its administrative and ethical functions in the institutional events and art historical narratives that serve as the background for the Groups' emergence and reception in the present.

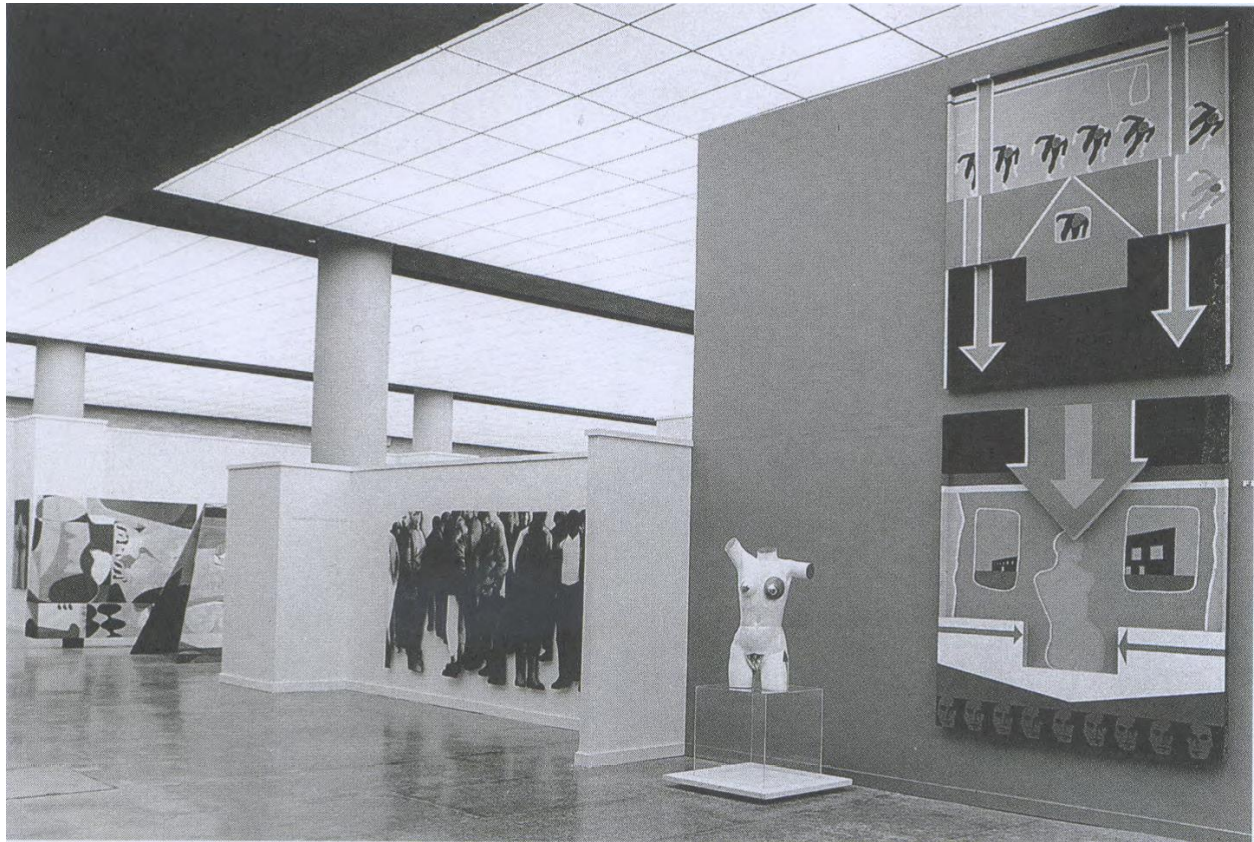[70] Córdova, *La formación del poder político en México*, 40.

Figure 2.10 Arnaldo Coen, *Torso*; Felipe Ehrenberg, *La caída*; Felipe Ehrenberg, *Arte conceptual*, 1968.
Olivier Debroise, *La era de la discrepancia: arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997*, p. 79.
© 2007 by UNAM/ Turner, Ciudad de México.

The Emergence of the Groups

Grupo Proceso Pentágono's claim to reject the bureaucratic state cultural apparatuses and the elitist mafias of liberal intellectuals should be regarded as indicative of the imbrication of the official and commercial art worlds by the mid-1960s. The apex of the state's institutional support for the arts under the presidential administration of Miguel Alemán (1946-52), including the establishment of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura and the Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, coincided with the ossification of the Revolution within official state discourse. If the Obregón administration contrasted its own legitimacy with the purely material violence of the Revolution, under the subsequent presidencies of Calles and Cárdenas, the Revolution was projected as the antecedent of its future realization in the state's purportedly institutional regime and achieved through an endless series of policies and reforms.[71] According to historians Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, the institutionalization of the Revolution appeared as an inheritance rather than a goal for the future by the time of the foundation of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in 1946 and the explicit political and commercial alliance of Mexico with the U.S., a fact that would prove significant for the growth of Mexican industry over the twenty-year post-War period known as the "Mexican Miracle."[72]

Art historians Shifra Goldman and Rita Eder have signaled the many temporal disjunctions and overlaps that characterized the 1950s and 60s. Goldman notes how the retreat of the state's support for nationalist culture in the modalities and tastes that governed its patronage of the visual arts by the 1950s coincided with a larger shift in the place of popular imagery in the national image the state promoted. Where Goldman locates the cause of this ideological change

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[71] Aguilar Camín and Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution*, 160-61.
[72] Ibid., 161, 164-65.

in the alliance of the national bourgeoisie with international capital, thus affirming an embrace of the non-national at all levels, the economic growth of the 1950s and 60s was the product of a policy of import substitution and protectionism that allowed manufactured exports to exceed agricultural ones at the same time that it encouraged direct foreign investment. The exemplary case of the auto industry in this regard was also significant for articulating the mutual aid lent between state institutions, private galleries and a new genre of national and international, corporately sponsored collections and exhibitions, as in the case of General Motors' collection of Mexican drawings and prints and the art exhibitions held by the Ford Motor Company at their plants.

The critiques launched against the Mexican School of painting, often pointing to the internal contradictions and inefficacy of the nationalist cultural project, remained in tension with official institutional tastes only for a short time. While the INBA's salons remained highly academic in the artistic norms they privileged, it is also the case that the national quarrel between the Mexican School and the Generation of Rupture was resolved at the supra-national level through Mexico's participation in a growing number of international biennials and art fairs. Events like the Primera Bienal Interamericana de Pintura y Grabado of 1958 or Confrontaciones 66, both held at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, helped to create a domestic commercial audience for modern art in the cosmopolitan shadow of such collaborations.

Despite the Groups' anti-institutional rhetoric, their frequent appearances in commercial galleries and state-sponsored events and institutions make them difficult to situate in relation to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, as discussed in the previous chapter. This difficulty is as much the product of the exceptionality of Mexico's institutionalized revolutionary state and its project of cultural nationalism as it a reaction to the institutional context of artistic

experimentalism in the 1970s, characterized by the slow but definite acceptance of artistic experimentalism often at the cost of its socially critical edge. In the preceding chapter we pointed to how the Di Tella avant-garde rebelled against the "modernization" of art through the market and mass media in order to complicate dominant critical assumptions about art's social autonomy à la Bürger. In addition to the question of Mexican art's contemporaneity with its international peers and the complex mix of commercial galleries and supranational competitions that also make up the institutional landscape, the articulation of the Groups as an avant-garde also underlines the complexity of defining this phenomenon with respect to the transmutation of the state's cultural institutions and official discourse given the continued dominance they exercised in the artistic and political spheres. Just as the problems of ideological mediation posed by the Media Art Group and their successors implied a self-critical stance and, at the same time, their symptomatic point of intervention, the Groups' internalized and challenged the nature of the institution at the limit between civil and political society over a similarly shifting economic terrain. The Groups' emphasis on the social form that traverses their potential political status as labor thus disrupts rigid art historiographic periodization that places the Groups within a teleology leading from state to market, or that praises corporatism for its own sake.

Figure 2.11 César Espinosa, *El Circuito Interno*, 1977-78.
Cristina Híjar, *Siete grupos de artistas visuales de los setenta. Testimonios y documentos*, p. 125.
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Figure 2.12 FMTC, "Principios-reglamento," 1982.
Cristina Híjar, *Siete grupos de artistas visuales de los setenta. Testimonios y documentos*, p. 152.
© 2008 by Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Xochimilco, Conaculta/ INBA, Ciudad de México.

Figure 2.13 FMTC, "Principios-reglamento," 1982.
(Photo of protest banner painted by Grupo Germinal)
Cristina Híjar, *Siete grupos de artistas visuales de los setenta. Testimonios y documentos*, p. 153.
© 2008 by Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Xochimilco, Conaculta/ INBA, Ciudad de México.

Figure 2.14 PP, *1929: Proceso*, 1979.
Cristina Híjar, *Siete grupos de artistas visuales de los setenta. Testimonios y documentos*, p. 114.
© 2008 by Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Xochimilco, Conaculta/ INBA, Ciudad de México.

The work of many of the Groups did, of course, precede or coincide with the 1968 protests and their repression. Grupo 65 (later Grupo Mira), for example, designed graphics for the student movement while Grupo TAI (Taller de Arte e Ideología) (Art and Ideology Workshop) grew out of Alberto Híjar Serrano's aesthetics lectures at the UNAM over the course of the 1970s. Tepito Arte Acá (Tepito Art Here), formed in 1972, is often acknowledged as one of the earliest artists' collectives of this moment. It undertook street murals with community members and arts workshops and also published a newspaper *El ñero*.[73] Three of the four members of Grupo Proceso Pentágono participated in several gallery shows in Mexico City in the early 70s in addition to the group show *El arte conceptual frente al problema latinoamericano* (Conceptual Art Against the Latin American Problem), sponsored by the Argentinean Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Center for Art and Communication) at the Museo Universitario de Ciencas y Arte (University Museum of Science and Art) in 1974. Though geared towards the exhibition of individual artists, the Salón Independiente (Independent Salon) (Figure 2.10), which organized three successive times beginning between 1968 and 1970, also marked one of the first major breaks with official state exhibitions. The first Salón Independiente emerged as a form of resistance to the Salón Solar, which formed part of a campaign of national self-promotion in anticipation of the upcoming Olympic Games in October 1968. The refusal to participate formed part of a growing resistance among young artists to the kinds of works selected for international circulation in commercial forums like Documenta and the Venice and Sao Paulo Biennials. In addition to fostering an atmosphere of collaboration and experimentation among participants over the course of its preparation, The Salón Independiente's third and final instantiation in 1970 featured works by Felipe Ehrenberg, who would play in an important role in Grupo Proceso Pentágono and the Frente Mexicano de

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[73] For a summary of some of the Groups' activities in English, see Goldman, "Elite Artists and Popular Audiences."

Trabajadores de la Cultura (Mexican Front of Cultural Workers) and Hersúa (Jesús Hernández Suárez), one of the founding members of the No-Grupo.[74] The Groups officially cohered as a movement, however, only in 1977 in response to an invitation by the sculptor Helen Escobedo, then curator of the Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte (University Museum of Arts and Sciences), for the Mexican pavilion of the X Paris Youth Biennial.

Spurred on by the Biennial's censorship of works that referenced the continent's military dictatorships, a number of groups formed the Frente Mexicano de Trabajadores de la Cultura (Mexican Front of Cultural Workers) in 1978 on the anniversary of the II Declaration of Havana and the last Sandinista offensive. The Front declared its mission as one of solidarity with proletarian and democratic struggles and of advancing collective forms of ideological-aesthetic and theoretical work that would challenge dominant cultural and political forms and move towards taking possession of the means of production, reproduction and circulation of their own work.[75] The Front also organized three exhibitions, *Muros frente a muros* (Walls against Walls) (1978), *América en la mira* (America in Sight) (1978) and *Arte y luchas populares en América Latina* (Art and Popular Struggles in Latin America) (1979) in which it attempted to build upon and update the languages of muralism, popular graphics, and agitprop.[76]

The Front assumes the highly structured form of earlier artists' collectives like the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptor or the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists but without any uniform party affiliation. Defining cultural work as forms of "direct

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[74] García de Germenos, "The Salón Independiente: A New Reading," 49-57.

[75] Frente Mexicano de Trabajadores de la Cultura, "Declaración y Reglamento," 383.

[76] The line separating what is official and what is unofficial in the Mexican context is difficult to draw. The prominent critics Ida Rodríguez Prampolini and Rita Eder, helped to curate *América en la mira*, while *Arte y luchas populares…* was mounted in the Museum of Science and Art on the campus of the National Autonomous University in Mexico City under the directorship of the sculptor Helen Escobedo. Escobedo was responsible for the prominent presence of Jorge Glusberg and the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Center for Art and Communication), in many ways the Argentinean successor to the Di Tella Center for Visual Arts, in the imaginary and collaborations of some

and indirect" intervention into the "ideological-aesthetic plane of social relations," the Front

displaces the art in the name of "culture" and, in contrast to the Syndicate, defines "cultural

work" as "textual, plastic, theatrical and musical production in addition to the non-specialized

transformation of social meanings."[77] Like the Groups movement as a whole, the Front occupies

a transitional or anachronistic social-political form, at the same time that it empties this form of

its traditionally organized social or political role. Moreover, it adapts the contradictory

proletarianization of art discussed in the case of the Syndicate of the 1920s by assuming that

non-specialized intellectual work has made itself indistinguishable from art on the cultural plane.

In response to Roberts' dilemma of defining the parameters of art's critical intervention

within these conditions, I would like to suggest that the Groups assume this problem by asserting

their organizational form as determined by the socialization of labor and the idiosyncratic

political forms of the Mexican hegemonic project. With respect to Roberts, the Groups critical

intervention resides in reclaiming the slight space of appearance by asserting their work, not as

art, but rather as collective. Their response to the capitalist socialization of labor was coded, in

this sense, in the determinant vernacular of the Mexican ethical state.

Gramsci's notion of "self-regulated society" allows us to conceptualize the Group's

politicization as one that traverses the figure of capital's self-valorization through its particular,

national context. Gramsci uses the term in two moments. In one, it refers to communism in terms

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of the Groups. She would also later serve as one of the most progressive directors of the Museum of Modern Art, opened in 1964 under the auspices of the National Institute of Fine Arts.

[77] Frente Mexicano de Trabajadores de la Cultura, "Declaración y Reglamento," 383. While to some degree all of the groups involved in the Front assumed the equality of art and other forms of culture and communication, they differed in their views about the relationship between art and social action. Víctor Muñoz, one of the founding members of Grupo Proceso Pentágono, has remarked on how he and the other members of his collective considered solidarity work with the growing and radicalized syndical movement in Mexico as separate from the work of the group. For other groups that also formed part of the Frente, including Germinal and the Taller de Investigación Plástica (Plastic Research Workshop), social and educational work with marginal communities was the focus of their cultural production. See Híjar and Muñoz, "Proceso Pentágono," 69.

of "the coming of a self-regulated society."[78] In the other, Gramsci maintains this meaning at the same time that he makes his operation of re-appropriation more explicit: "As long as the class-State exists then regulated society cannot exist, other than metaphorically—i.e. only in the sense that the class-State too is a regulated society."[79]The apparent contradiction in this statement is highly suggestive for thinking about the potential politicization of socialized labor. In the passages that follow on the class state, Gramsci opposes self-regulate society to its fascist, corporatist and liberal interpretations. Gramsci's words, "the confusion of class-State and regulated society is peculiar to the middle classes and petty intellectuals, who would be glad of any regularization that would prevent sharp struggles and upheavals." [80] Against this image of self-regulation as social corporatism, Gramsci similarly subverts the liberal conception of the state as night watchman, according to which the state's function is limited to that of a juridical apparatus overseeing the free market. [81] He insists, instead, that the fantasy scenario of the night watchman can only be actualized in the communist conquest of the state. In obfuscating the operation of class hegemony, the ideology of self-regulation serves to obfuscate the internal division of the social and its politicization. The counter-intuitive force of Gramsci's word choice resides in the way that, according to his definition, self-regulated society resists being reduced to the operation of autonomic self-reproduction as either a purely political or purely socioeconomic phenomenon. Where, for Gramsci, it is the role of the party to facilitate the movement from the realm of socio-economic corporatism to the occupation and destruction of bourgeois political forms, the resonance of the term with socialized production allows of contemporary artists' collectives allows us to think of the Groups movement as marking its intervention in this

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[78] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 382.
[79] Ibid., 257.
[80] Ibid., 258.
[81] Ibid., 263.

metaphorical space. My point is not that such micro collectives should stand in for the party according to Gramsci, but rather that they become operative in place of its inexistence

In January 1980 critic Carla Stellweg compiled and published the transcription of testimonial histories and declarations made by a number of Groups at a public sponsored by the magazine for the purpose of documenting the movement and its history. Many of the testimonies emphasize the aim of creating an artistic economy outside of commercial and official circuits and ceding individual authorship to collaboration. Many also refer to the fractured or truncated legacy of muralism in its attempt to promote the collective authorship and patrimony of art and in its incapacity to fulfill the educative and transformative function assigned to it.

This position is particularly striking in the declarations of the Taller de Investigación Plástica (Plastic Research Workshop) (TIP) and the Grupo Germinal, both of whose work was largely centered on community-based public artwork. The members of TIP posit their collective work in opposition to the muralism of the past, affirming that by actively incorporating community members into the process, they will achieve "the identification of the community with the finished work," thus creating "an authentically popular work of art."[82] At the same time that TIP understands its work one of cultural transformation and integration into the people, art, aesthetic education persists, though in the concreteness of practice. They include a self-critique in which they retract their search for a "new realism" inasmuch as the sophistication of its artistic language was directed at the "(abstract) consciousness of the people."[83]

Like TIP, Germinal defines its "cultural work" in opposition to what it identifies as the complementary poles of aestheticism and "art for the people" within the history of bourgeois art. In Germinal's words "both thus negate the possibilities of popular creativity and

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[82] Taller de Investigación Plástica, "Taller de Investigación Plástica," 28.
[83]Ibid., 28-29.

communication."[84] Beyond its apologies for the heteronymous imposition of social realism,

Germinal's statement is notable for its equivocation between the necessity of facilitating a form

of aesthetic expression proper to the masses and the de-aestheticized character of its work: "The

collectivization of cultural producers is not a spontaneous fact, but rather an event which

responds, in different ways, to historical and social conditions more than to aesthetic needs

circumscribed exclusively in the field of art."[85] Tracing its roots to the Syndicate of Technical

Workers, Painters and Sculptors, the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists and the

Popular Graphic Workshop, art's social role arises not as concomitant, but rather in apparent

contradiction with the existence of the artists' collective as an organization whose critical

capacity is directly social in character: "The organic link with popular movements cannot

articulate itself though the personal or sectarian participation of a single individual or group or

by inserting social content into bourgeois works of art. On the contrary, it should tend towards

the integral organization of different cultural collectives in order to respond in a real and

effective manner."[86] The authors go on to cite the Front of Mexican Cultural Workers as the

vehicle for their social organization and theoretical and practical self-education. Germinal's

response is so striking because even as aesthetics and collectivism change places, art and the

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[84] Germinal, "Germinal," 31.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
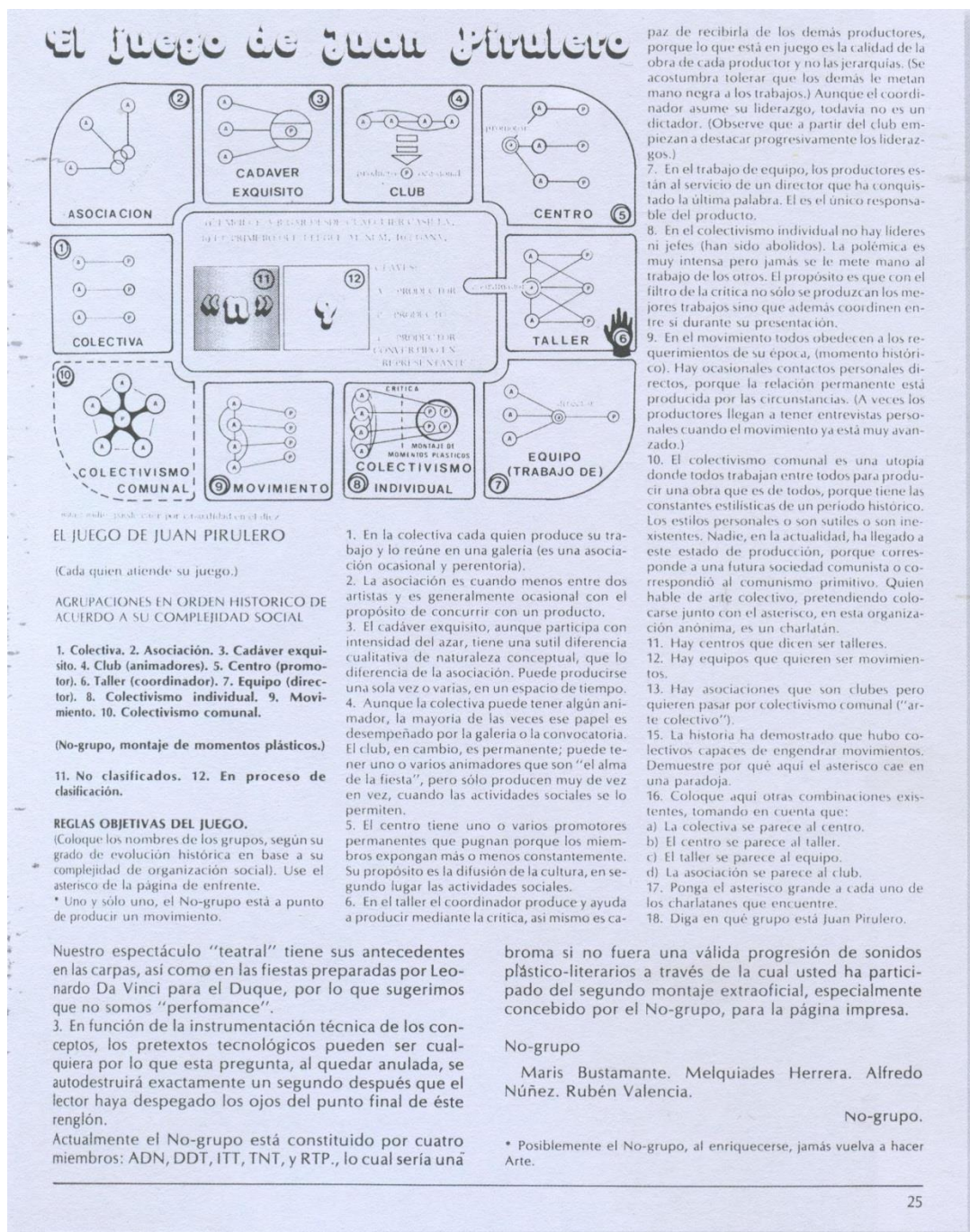
Figure 2.15 No-Grupo, "Intervención editorial en *Revista Artes Visuales* no 23, enero 1980," 1980.
Sol Henaro, *No-grupo. Un zangoloteo al corsé artístico*, p. 122.
© 2011 by Museo de Arte Moderno, Ciudad de México.

Figure 2.16 *La Lonchera*, 1978.
Sol Henaro, *No-grupo. Un zangoloteo al corsé artístico*, p. 60.
© 2011 by Museo de Arte Moderno, Ciudad de México.
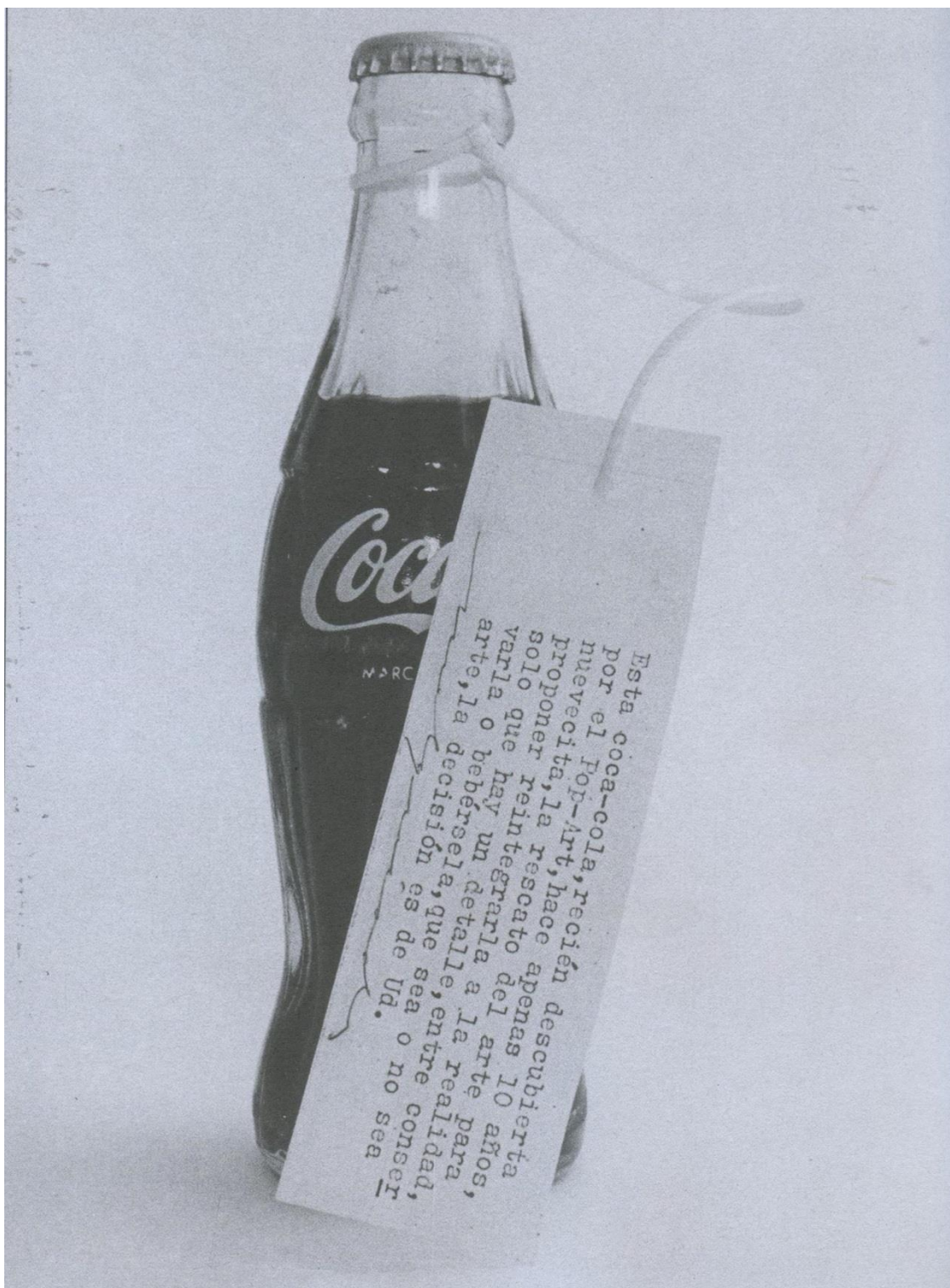
Figure 2.17 Melquiades Herrera, "Esta coca-cola, recién descubierta por el Pop-Art...," 1979.
Sol Henaro, *No-grupo. Un zangoloteo al corsé artístico*, p. 54.
© 2011 by Museo de Arte Moderno, Ciudad de México.

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people find themselves at the farthest remove in their most intimate conjugation. When asked about the principal characteristics of the production, distribution and consumption of their work as a group, they respond that that the character of their work as a group "attempts to be the same as the manifestations of popular culture: produced, circulated and consumed by the people, as in the case of posters, stencils, Monotypes and banners…"[87] In a manner fitting to its name, Germinal's statement continually bifurcates and mirrors its collective organization from that of "the people" or the social organizations of popular struggles: the Front functions as a party without a base while "the people" realize their aesthetic potential in a self-enclosed circuit, save for the fact that their self-expression is mediated by the "germ" of its cultural collaborators. Germinal thus articulates two separate notions of self-regulated society, though neither in the sense Gramsi might have intended.

The No-Grupo adopts a playful, and characteristically cynical self-definition underlines the implicitly de-politicized understanding of collectivism at work in Germinal's assessment, stating in the first line of their response that "The No-Grupo is a civil society, in which there exist no hierarchies; [they] coalesce around the purpose of acquiring the prestige and recognition that might serve as a spring board to usufruct the charms that the market offers." Read in light of TIP and Germinal's statements, the No-Grupo not only implies that they, just like more doctrinaire groups, are in fact self-regulating societies in the metaphorical sense. Rather, their more cynical assertion is that they are all playing the role accorded to them, as implied by "El juego de Juan Pirulero" (The Game of Juan Pirulero) (Figure 2.15) , whose title they borrow from a children's song meant to be sung or played in a group. The refrain states that each one must do his part; when the collective refrain stops, an individual child repeats the melody on his or her instrument.

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[87] Ibid.

The No-Grupo's illustration lays out schematics for ten different kinds of artists'

collectives, numbered in ascending order according to their social complexity, based on the

relationship between individual producers and the collective products, ranging from the

collective, to the "exquisite corpse" to communal collectivism. It invites players, implicitly, the

other Groups, to place their names on the square that represents them and to place the asterisk on

any self-definition deemed the work of a "charlatan." The No-Grupo declares that any group that

purports to have achieved communal collectivism, the most complex of all organizations, must

be fraudulent —conceivably most of the Groups— since the state of homogeneity or corporatism

it assumes can only be realized in a state of future or primitive communism. The No-Grupo

places itself at number eight, "individual collectivism," as Maris Bustamante has often signaled

in interviews, in which each artist produces his or her own work under his or her own name.

Mixed in amidst the group's cynical humor is a wily understanding of artistic production

under the conditions of real subsumption: "we seek celebrity through the creation of a product,

close to our economic sensibilities, which, because of its revolutionary sensibilities, will generate

greater income that might make possible the growing self-financing of a work that is ever more

vigorous and in constant expansion."[88] It is in this light that we can understand the No-Grupo's

many plays on the commodity status of de-materialized art, even when intended as a form of

critique.

Refusing to participate in the INBA's First Salon of Experimentation, where the Groups

that did participate found themselves relegated to a marginal corner of the National Auditorium,

the No-Grupo intervened nonetheless. On the day of the Salon's inauguration, the No-Grupo

distributed *La lonchera* (The Lunchbox) (Figures 2.16 and 2.17), readymade for consumption.[89]

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[88] No-Grupo, "No-Grupo," 24.
[89] Bustamante, "Non-objective Arts in Mexico 1963-83," 251.

It contained a Coca-Cola bottle with a tag stating that it could be maintained in its integrity as art or drunk and put back into mass circulation, a print image of Marcel Duchamp with sweets in his mouth; a photograph of a cow with powdered milk, and a cake with a bag full of prints of tiny mouths saying "art is because you said so."[90] The lunchbox was accompanied by a text criticizing the INBA's minimal sponsorship of new artistic projects, which had created a milieu in which artists were fighting over very little.[91] *La lonchera* is an astute play on the poverty of the materials of the readymade (and its nutritional properties as a meal). It's larger implication, though, is that its status as art and the No-Grupo's value as artists, does not depend on the abstraction of its individual works as commodities—consuming the coke is not necessarily productive for capital— but on the prestige, fame and wealth that the National Institute of Fine Arts withheld from what was still considered experimental art.

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[90] Ibid., 253.
[91] Ibid.

Figure 2.18 Felipe Ehrenberg, *Garbage Walk*, 1971.
Olivier Debroise, *La era de la discrepancia: arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997*, p. 170.
© 2007 by UNAM/ Turner, Ciudad de México.

Figure 2.19 Felipe Ehrenberg, *Garbage Walk*, 1971.
Olivier Debroise, *La era de la discrepancia: arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997*, p. 170.
© 2007 by UNAM/ Turner, Ciudad de México

Where the No-Grupo cedes its productive capacities to the market, Felipe Ehernberg's *La Poubelle* (1970) (The Garbage Bin), approaches the questions of valorization and de-materialization from the side of labor. *La Poubelle* is an early precedent of the collective artwork Ehrengerg produced with Austrian artist Richard Kriesche and Mexican photographer Rodolfo Alcaraz as part of the Taller Polígono (Polygon Workshop) while living in political exile in England. The video work documents the growing piles of garbage on London's streets during one of the UK's many garbage collectors' strikes over the course of the following decade.

The video features two voices in off, Eherngerg and Kriesche, interspersed with found video footage and documentation of the growing piles of garbage dotting the streets. The two exchange speculations about the relationship between art and garbage. The work suggests, at least initially, that art and garbage share the status of refuse in both their lack of social utility and their ambivalently sublime appeal. Purportedly explaining the purpose of the film, the artists remark that they are not writing a book, but rather "making a package" since packaging is what creates rubbish; while up until now we have packaged utilitarian things like "tools" "commodities" and "food," the authors propose that they are "packaging an idea." If the film questions the purported exteriority of both art and garbage to society, it also implies the potential for a celebratory destruction of value in the subjects it takes up. Insofar as art is an historical category, as the narrators suggest further on, they, by contrast, want to partake in "creation," a process which, like the decay they document, is "organic" in nature. In what Ehrenberg described decades later as an act of "public service," the three artists eventually decided to leave the documentation gathered at the disposition of gallery visitors where the three remained

present every day from nine to five.[92] The film was displayed following the opening of the

exhibit *The 7th Day Chicken*, in which the artists auctioned off miniature garbage bags filled

with packaged food from the supermarket. The end and posthumous life of the film, however,

complicate the theory it expounds over the better part of 16 minutes. The film ends with footage

of police and bulldozers spraying and moving urban fields of garbage bags together with the

question of how to translate the end of the strike.

In an essay titled "In Search of a Model for Life" appended to the 1982 retrospective of

the Groups *De los grupos los individuos* at the Museo Carrillo Gil in Mexico City, Ehrenberg

reflected on what we might interpret as the Group's response to *La Poubelle*'s question:

> In the diversity of proposals made by the different groups during the seventies, we can
>
> find numerous, highly valuable contributions to contemporary art. There is, for example,
>
> the "turn" that is offered in a natural way to the old ally of postmodernism, or the clear
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> propositions made – this is the *work* – to rearm the aesthetic jigsaw puzzle whose
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> configuration was based upon the institutionalized, transnational commercialization of
>
> the artistic product. What is most moving, nevertheless, is that in the accumulated
>
> inventory of collectively developed concepts, we can find the seeds of larger ideas that
>
> transcend the world of the visual arts. These ideas are related to projects that span the
>
> ejido, the kibbutz, the koljz, and the cooperatives of production and distribution, and they
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> underlie universal concerns about education, culture, and social welfare.[93]

We should be careful not to separate the "turn" to postmodernism and the aesthetic propositions

made, like Ehrenberg's own, in relation to experimentalism in the international market, from the

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[92] Benítez, "Reconstruir el vacío y recuperar el espacio: Ehrenberg conceptual," 24. The film was displayed following the opening of the exhibit The 7th Day Chicken, in which the artists auctioned off miniature garbage bags filled with packaged food from the supermarket.
[93] Ehrenberg, "In Search of a Model for Life," 127-28.

more "moving" gesture of socialized work as some historians of the Groups would hold. Rather, Ehrenberg suggests that if art's socialization implies the inextricability of process and product and both from the most advanced forms of productive labor, we must seek, rather than presume, the Groups' politicization in this form. In Ehrenberg's words, "there is work."

CHAPTER 3

Cybersyn: A Revolution in Style

Introduction

The project known as *Cybersyn* was a mostly truncated attempt to implement a real-time information system into the nationalized industries of Salvador Allende Gossen's Popular Unity administration (1970-73). A neologism that combines the words "cybernetics" and "synergy," Cybersyn was the brainchild of the British civil engineer Stafford Beer, a veteran of World War II operations research and often considered the founder of cybernetic management. Though never put to use, the project's emblematic interface was the work of the German Ulm-trained designer Gui Bonsiepe and the Grupo de Diseño he headed as part of the INTEC or National Technical Institute.

Cybersyn was to radically alter the bureaucratic chain of command within the growing number and variety of industries now controlled by the CORFO (*Corporación de Fomento de la Producción*) or Chilean Economic Development Agency as part of the social sector of the economy. Against many recent commentators who have celebrated Cybersyn for its politically progressive or precocious use of technology, I will argue that Cybersyn's critical value lies in the way it illuminates the emergence of late capitalism, understood here as a shift in the constitution and control of the subject. More specifically, I will suggest that Cybersyn proposed a radical redefinition of both the nature and distribution of knowledge and authority in the workplace by making the stylization of management central to this task.

Figure 3.1 Gui Bonsiepe, Cybersyn Operations Room
<http://www.cybersyn.cl/castellano/cybersyn/index.html>

Contemporary architectural historians including Reinhold Martin and John Harwood have signaled the extent to which the purportedly superstructural elements of industrial design entered into a mutually determinant relationship with the material processes of the most advanced forms of production in the decades following World War II.[1] At a moment in which the administration of logistical organization could be considered among the most advanced techniques of automated production, the design of interfaces or surfaces both joining and separating humans from machines came to play an integral role in determining the material processes of labor and its control. Such scholarship thus generatively suggests the mutual determination of design and production, the cultural and the economic. Extending this proposition one step further, I will try to show how Cybersyn allows us to grasp this trend at the level of the subject's double-edged constitution and control within the realm of production.

One of the questions that I would like to explore here is how style becomes operational both through and beyond the appearance of the Operations Room interface. Adopting my use of the term from Jacques Lacan, we can define style as marking a subjective position by its relation to the real. In relation to the look of the interface, I would like to argue that this conception of style moves through but also beyond the dialectic of drive and desire one might find in the way the Operations Room captures its subjects as a picture. As we will see in greater detail below, Lacan suggests something of this notion of style when he remarks, in his development on the social link or discourse and its inscription, that the putting to work of enjoyment is what "gives the master's discourse its capitalist style." [2] Lacan states in the same seminar that "perhaps it's from the analyst's discourse that there can emerge another style of the master signifier."[3] Style, in this sense, concerns the way the real or impossible is embodied and the effects that this formal

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[1] John Harwood, *The Interface*, 10-11, 122-36. Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex*, 85-121.
[2] Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 168.

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intervention brings about. Lacan suggests that writing is the privileged material support for the drive inasmuch as writing concerns the ethical and collective stakes of transmitting an unconscious savoir at the internal limit of what can be signified in a given society. In his attempt to use and think writing as a support for the subject at once literal and overdetermined by language, Lacan's developments provide a framework for historicizing the form of subjectivation implied by Cybersyn.

Bound up with the production of the subject and its formalization, style thus points us in two important directions for positing the ways in which Cybersyn critically anticipates and intervenes into the horizon of its contemporary reception. It is a horizon both articulated and acted upon within the framework of what Fredric Jameson termed the cultural logic of late capitalism.[4] As Jameson argues, postmodernism is a theoretical concept complicit and commensurate with the culturalization of the economic and vice versa. It is a term that tries to historicize the experience of late capitalism in its effects if only to fail in the attempt, i.e., to give account of the extent to which contemporary cultural phenomena all but preclude any such critical distance. The specifically cultural logic of postmodernism is thus defined by the redoubled effects of financial circulation and consumption upon the realm of production.

Similarly, where Jameson notes the reifying effects of real subsumption upon cultural form and its critique, Marxist philosophers emerging from the Italian workerist tradition argue that the purported collapse of production and consumption can be grasped from the perspective of the valorization and control of subjectivity. Maurizio Lazzarato states, for example, that the de-materialization of labor as the most advanced form of capitalist production "produces first and foremost a social relation," meaning that "it produces not only commodities, but also the

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[3] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 176.
[4] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xi-xv.

capitalist relation."[5] Immaterial labor, in Lazzarato's words, "creates and modifies the forms and conditions of communication, which in turn acts as the interface…between production and consumption."[6] From the perspective of production, so-called cognitive or communicative capitalism makes economically productive or valorizable forms of knowledge and socialization hitherto considered the by-products of productive labor and the discipline imposed to maintain it. To echo Lazzarato, "the post-Taylorist mode of production is defined precisely by putting subjectivity to work."[7]

In Cybersyn's case, style encompasses both the changes to the material forms of labor Beer attempted to effect – a new style of management that Beer considered inherently democratizing in its productive and communicative efficiency – and the subject implied in this process. As I will argue, while style plays a part in this shift, it is neither wholly complicit with the regime of immaterial labor nor wholly indicative of the abstraction that sustains it. As a term or concept, it sustains the interface both joining and separating the pure productivity of the subject from within. As a term that bridges Cybersyn's managerial and aesthetic components, it also allows us to capture how the project, when seen from both of these perspectives, consummates a certain trajectory of post-War European industrial design realized in the Ulm School of Design, where Bonsiepe was trained. Often framed as a post-War, West German Bauhaus, the Ulm School is notable for the ways its professors, among them Swiss sculptor Max Bill and Argentinean painter Tomás Maldonado, sought to reimagine the methods and relevance of industrial design for the automation and de-materialization of industrial production. The theoretical debate that emerged between Bill and Maldonado – and which, together with other, material concerns, led to the School's closure in 1968 – concerned the relationship of

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[5] Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 143.
[6] Ibid.

engineering to aesthetics, or function and form. If the backdrop to these debates were the kinds

of changes to the material forms of labor and the social relations of production Cybersyn

exemplifies, their horizon was that of the avant-garde's attempt to overcome the alienation of

work and life under capitalism. If both Cybersyn and its use of "style" point to the fine line

separating these two realms, they also signal the way the sublation of this conflict occurs both

historically and geographically, tracing late capitalist social relations in advance of the

technological infrastructure and expertise that would have made them possible.

In what follows, I will argue that Cybersyn entails a relation between art, technology and

labor that hinges on the form of subjectivation proper to late capitalism. I will situate the project

at the crux of two intertwined trajectories: Post-War industrial design and the cybernetic

automation of the factory during the same period. After briefly sketching the historical context of

the Popular Unity and the role of the social sector of the economy therein, I will turn to the ways

Beer's logistical schema, known as the Viable System Model, articulates the relationship

between the topology of corporate organization and the self-reproduction of the worker. Far from

evading or overcoming the subject of representation, as some contemporary scholars of

cybernetic history would claim, I will argue, to the contrary, that Beer's schema allows us to

glimpse the subjective capture of the worker and to trace the contours of the social link that

emerges as a consequence of the style or stylization of management. I decipher the intertwining

of the Viable System Model's graphic presentation and the limit to knowledge it represents for

the management of the workforce by suggesting Lacan's treatment of the social link and its

written transmission as obverse to the one we find in Beer's schema. To the extent that Lacan's

approach to writing allows us to grasp the infrastructural place of style in Beer's organization of

the factory, it also lays the historical and formal groundwork for understanding the Operations

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[7] Ibid.

Room's place in the development of both industrial design and the avant-garde.

Placing Cybersyn's interface in the trajectory of post-War industrial design, I will focus specifically on the polemics between the Ulm School's founding director, Swiss sculptor Max Bill, and Bonsiepe's professor, Argentinean concrete painter and theorist Tomás Maldonado, around the role of form amidst the cooptation of functionalist design by the market. Far from realizing the fusion of art and life or the transformation of alienated labor once attempted by the historic avant-gardes, Cybersyn at once illuminates and intensifies the impasses of such attempts from its privileged position at the peripheries of capital. Moreover, I will suggest that Cybersyn does so by making style the infrastructural motor of automated labor. I will then conclude by focusing on one example of Cybersyn's contemporary recuperation in the work of Catalina Ossa and Enrique Rivera's 2007 interactive installation *Multinode_Metagame*. To the extent that *Multinode_Metagame* reproduces a problematic form of abstraction through the labor of the spectator, I will argue that the function of style within Cybersyn and its trajectory also opens such contemporary forms of value production to the possibility of critique beyond the realm of cultural reification they might presume at first glance.

La vía chilena al socialismo

In order to grasp the economic and subjective effects of late capitalism at a global level, we must begin with the national context of the so-called *vía chilena al socialismo* or Chilean Path to Socialism, a phrase coined and hotly contested during Allende's administration.[8] The Popular Unity was a political coalition of the Movimiento de Acción Popular Unida (Popular Unity Action Movement), the Izquierda Cristiana (Christian Left), and the Socialist, Communist and Radical parties formed in 1969. It won the presidential election of 1970 by a plurality of votes, requiring congressional approval of Allende's victory. The Popular Unity was continually

plagued by worsening obstacles to its political legitimacy despite electoral victories in congress

in 1973. In historical terms, the Popular Unity project continued and, indeed, culminated the

popular front politics of the Chilean left of the 1940s, aiming at once to form the class alliance

necessary to govern and to radicalize the nationalist development policies of the previous

decades as part of the country's unique "path towards socialism."

The Popular Unity sought to achieve the socialization of the means of production, the

administration of the state by workers, and a renewal of cultural values of solidarity.[9] Defined

against the twentieth century's earlier experiences of socialism, the specificity of the Chilean

path was to be found in the pacific and gradual nature of the transition it proposed and the extent

to which this transition was to work through and transform the country's existing bourgeois,

democratic political institutions.[10] The socialization, or nationalization, of industry in which

Cybersyn would have participated was the most dominant part of the Popular Unity's program,

in part because it was one of the only areas in which the government could effect change through

a residual legal loophole, allowing expropriation to sidestep the approval of Congress.

In attempting a critical reading of Cybersyn and its recent cultural reception, it is

important to keep in mind the role that the social sector of the economy played for the Popular

Unity. Against the immediacy of recent histories that claim Cybersyn placed cybernetics in the

service of socialism, we must recall that Chile's uniquely institutional, democratic path to

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[8] Manuel Antonio Garretón, "La vía chilena al socialismo: elementos de una definición," 184-92.

[9] Barbara Stallings, *Class Conflict and Economic Development in Chile*, 126, 129. The UP's internal economic reforms can be divided into two broad categories of agrarian reform, expropriating the property of large landowners and replacing it with a cooperative system of work, and the growth of the state-owned or Social Area of the economy in major industries such as mining , energy, communications, transportation, and wholesale distribution. The UP's program intended to raise wages, extend social services, assure basic housing and nutritional needs, reform the structure of collective bargaining, and implement a more democratic structure for worker participation in state-controlled factories.

[10] Garretón, "La vía chilena al socialismo," 186.

socialism was fraught with internal ideological contradictions and practical political obstacles.[11]

The Left doubted the economic efficacy of import substitution and the political potential of

parliamentary democracy to transform the institutions of the state while conservative opposition

in Congress and U.S. economic embargoes further destabilized the ability of the Popular Unity to

govern, leading to a political catch 22: the legitimacy of Allende's government and thus its

ability to occupy and transform the institutions of the state depended on the popular

mobilizations and expropriations that simultaneously transcended and threatened those same

institutions. Nationalization, in other words, was not the endgame of the Popular Unity

government. Rather, it was a tool in the political transformation of the state and, because of

congressional opposition, one of the few elements of the Popular Unity platform that Allende

could realize in the short term.

Any contemporary return to the cultural experiments or imaginary of the Popular Unity in

the name of socialism must, in a broad sense, account for the political complexities of Chile's

institutional path to socialism. With regard to Cybersyn, more specifically, it must also reflect on

the historical changes to the social relations of production articulated, even if fragmentarily,

within the Popular Unity's socialist road or transition to communism. Cybersyn's logistical

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[11] Eden Medina and Alejandro Crispiani have written the most comprehensive histories of Cybersyn in the respective fields of technology history and architecture and design. See Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries* and Alejandro Crisipiani, *Objetos para transformar el mundo*. Medina and Crispiani's works form part of a broader cultural recuperation of the Popular Unity: See for, example, David Maulen de los Reyes, "Nodo construct: una formulación sudamericana del concepto de interfase". Hugo Palmarola Sagredo, "Productos y socialismo: diseño industrial estatal en Chile". As is the case with Palmarola Sagredo, Cybersyn is most often cited in the context of the Gui Bonsiepe's work as an industrial designer for Chile's INTEC (National Technical Institute) beginning in 1968. The most detailed treatment of this topic can be found in chapter VIII of Crispiani, *Objetos para transformar el mundo*. Bonsiepe also worked on the signage for the monumental UNCTAD III building, completed in 275 days to house the UN's Third Conference on Trade and Development in 1972 and, after a rather torturous existence, re-inaugurated as the Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral in 2011. See Maulen de los Reyes, "Proyecto Edificio UNCTAD III: Santiago de Chile (junio 1971- abril 1972)," 72-92. Camilo Trumper, "*A ganar la calle:*" The Politics of Public Space and Public Art in Santiago Chile, 1970-1973," 70-131. Paulina Varas Alarcón and José Llano Loyola Llano, *275 días: sitio, tiempo, contexto y afecciones específicas*. For an overview of the influence of the HfG Ulm in Latin America, see also Silvia Fernández, "The Origins of Design Education in Latin America: from hfg Ulm to Globalization," 3-19.

model for the firm thus allows us to glimpse the social link produced by the cybernetic administration of organization that defined the most advanced forms of production at the time.

The Viable System Model

As a system created to rationalize production within the social sector of the economy, Cybersyn was a based on a logistical schema of recursively self-organizing and autonomous parts meant to regulate the making of decisions.

Known as the Viable System Model, Cybersyn's logistical schema was based on the perceived way in which biological systems remain viable, i.e, regulate and reproduce themselves in relation to internal and external changes in their environments. In Beer's words, the purpose of a viable system is "what it does."[12] The Viable System's semi-autonomous and recursive "systems" were meant, in the words of contemporary sociologist Andrew Pickering, to engage "directly, performatively and non-representationally" with each other and the outside environment, avoiding what Pickering refers to as the modern "detour through knowledge."[13]

Devoid of any semantic value, the Viable System Model uses, rather than stores or represents, knowledge, such that knowledge functions not as an end in itself but as a guide for the future performance of the firm.[14] By purporting to separate knowledge from the hierarchy of authority and subordinating it to the survival and self-reproduction of the firm as a whole, Cybersyn sought to replace the traditional executive level of management and its board room environs with a new system and site for meta-systemic planning. This new level of management would mediate between operations data, strategic planning and the outside world, effectively transforming both the face and function of authority within the firm in what Beer refers to as a "new style of management."

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[12] Stafford Beer, *The Heart of Enterprise*, 113
[13] Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 21, 25.

Before continuing, it might be helpful to mention a few basic premises of the field of

cybernetics that Beer inherited. American mathematician Norbert Weiner famously defined

cybernetics as "the science of control and communication in the animal and the machine," the

subtitle to his *Cybernetics* of 1948. Contemporary critics including Katherine Hayles and
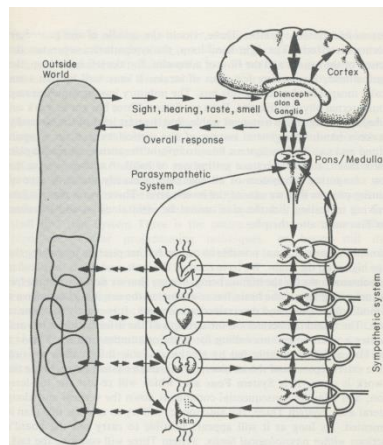
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[14] Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 25.

Figure 3.2 Stafford Beer, Viable System Model as pictured via analogy to the human nervous system
Stafford Beer, *The Brain of the Firm*, p.131
©1981 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Chichester

Rienhold Martin have rightly observed the liberal humanist aims of Weiner's project in recomposing a vision of social organicism following the Second World War. In this sense, cybernetics borrowed Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's theory of mathematical communication, in other words, the successful or unsuccessful transmission of information between systems as the common logic uniting nature and society. If natural systems tended toward entropy, or, in Weiner's words, "to degrade the organized and destroy the meaningful," information could be defined as a measure of organization or improbable resistance of a system to disorder.[15] The effective use of information in order to determine the subsequent iteration of an organism's reaction to its environment would thus also come to define the control of entropy or the homeostatic maintenance of an organism. The conservation of biological organisms, the same as social "systems," depended on the decisions and reactions based on the filtration of such information. As Hayles suggests, the field of cybernetics thus emerged during the first two decades of the post-War period as a conversation between the operations of communication and control, on one hand, and the processing of binary code as understood through analogy to the human nervous system, on the other.[16]

Beer's Viable System Model displaces the cybernetic organization of the social to the ambit of labor by bridging two approaches to the relationship between the organism and its environment. The Viable System model emerges from Beer's earlier research into the homeostasis and behavior of living systems, experiments and hypotheses often geared towards harnessing the ways even the simplest organisms effectively processed and acted upon information in the taking of highly complex decisions in analog robotic systems. Despite its apparent rigidity, however, Beer's model denotes less a static or prescriptive structure than the

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[15] Norbert Weiner, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 17.

continuous and circular production of each of the system's parts according to the logic of the

whole. At the level of its graphic expression, the Viable System Model also shares cybernetics'

broader affinity for the presentation of informational patterns as a key element in the science of

organization.

As a viable system, the corporation thus produces and reproduces itself *as if* it were a

living organism. In his history of early British cybernetics, the sociologist of science Andrew

Pickering praises this latter aspect of the Viable System Model as expressed in Beer's *The Brain*

of the Firm, the first work of a trilogy on the Viable System Model for management based on his

plans and utopian passion for *Cybersyn*. Beer looks to nature and, more specifically, to a non-

cognitive model of the human brain and nervous system as the source for Viable System Model:

"In the VSM, then, Beer's strategy was to transplant the organic into the social, but not as

literally as before [when Beer had actually made small ecosystems themselves the agent of

cybernetic machines]. The firm would no longer contain trained mice or Daphnia at its heart;

instead, information flows and processing would be laid out as a diagram of human bodily flows

and transformations."[17] Often against the scientific training and pretenses of earlier cyberneticists

like Ross Ashby, on whose homeostatic model Beer based the Viable System Model, Pickering

celebrates what he calls the pre-modern, performative ontology of early cybernetics. For

Pickering, cybernetics functions as the historic response to Lacan's university discourse: a social

link sustained by the scientific pretense to full self-representation through knowledge.

Pickering's affirmative stance on the transposition of the biological into the social echoes

his broader call for science to adopt a performative paradigm in which scientific observation not

only symbolizes and accumulates knowledge about natural and physical phenomena but also acts

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[16] Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 7, 87-88.
[17] Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 244.

as a material force among them. However, in making the leap from the analogy of the machine in his earlier work to the living organism in his account of cybernetics, Pickering implicitly reproduces Beer's fascination with Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis. Derived from the observation of biological systems, autopoiesis implies that living organisms organize themselves systemically, meaning that each element produces and is produced by the operations that define organism as a whole.[18] Systems come into contact with other systems spontaneously and contingently, such that they are determined in and by their own self-production; changes to the structure or internal relation of components of a system only come about as a result the organism's dynamics. Neither the given structure or particular internal relations of a living system nor its initial state can predict its future patterns of organization. The fact that Maturana and Varela's descriptive theory of genesis depends on a third-party observer to note recurring patterns of interactions between systems is complicated by the argument that human cognition is itself autopoietic, lacking any external point from which to guarantee the objectivity of what it observes.

What is most suggestive about the conceptual proximity of Beer's Viable System Model to Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis is the way in which this epistemological impasse figures into the ontological schema of the Viable System Model.[19] If "knowing is doing," according to Maturana and Varela's aphorism for the recursively embedded nature of cognition, the question for cybernetic management becomes by what means does Beer supplement this

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[18] Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *De máquinas y seres vivos*, 23.

[19] Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries*, 166, 200. Beer formed a study group called the Group of 14 with a small number of Chilean engineers in which they read cybernetic theory. Beer invited Maturana and Varela, as well as Heinz von Foster, who traveled to Chile in 1972, to speak to the group. Beer notes his affinity to Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis in the preface he wrote to the English translation of their 1973 book *De máquinas y seres vivos…* While the influence or confluence between Maturana, Varela and Beer can be noted in the Viable System Model, Medina has also noted Beer's attempts to translate the self-production of biological systems into social terms in Beer's contemporaneous attempts to design cybernetic models to manage the growing radicalization of Chilean politics and class warfare more broadly.

external guarantee. It is useful to recall here how, in the two decades before embarking on the *Cybersyn* project and formalizing the Viable System Model, Beer actually experimented with biological computing. He designed homeostatic machines with microscopic ecosystems at their helm, assuming the transferable obscurity of one ultracomplex system to another.[20] Though this same notion of transferability runs throughout other cyberneticits' attempts to create machines analogous to the biological, Beer's interest in harnessing the complex dynamic organization of microbial systems as the agents of such machines also presents an important difference both from his predecessors and from the autopoietic, biological grounding of cognition for Maturana and Varela. In the interstices of Beer's theory of cybernetic management, knowing never becomes wholly commensurate with doing, even or especially when the supposedly non-symbolizable knowledge of systematic dynamics is embodied by the lowliest forms of life. Beer is able to substitute one ultracomplex system for another because he endows ultracomplexity itself with a transcendent and almost mystical power in its resistance to scientific formalization. In other words, the recursive character of nature redoubles as this guarantee.

In Beer's 1965 essay, "Cybernetics and the Knowledge of God," cybernetics steps in at the inner limit of cognition, adding a new twist to the notion of cognition as embedded recursively within biological autopoiesis. Beer begins with a discussion of the "limit on understanding": "The brain, which processes all the input information received from the senses, is a strictly finite sort of computer."[21] Indeed, man comes to "suffer," in Beer's words, because of these limitations to his understanding and expression in language. Faced with the seemingly

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[20] Stafford Beer, *Cybernetics and Management*, 52. Beer defines ultracomplex systems de facto by how they do indeed respond to internal and external changes in a way too complex to fully predict or explain inasmuch as they evade simple cause and effect analysis. Beer takes up Ross Ashby's law of requisite variety, by which he means the design of a system and interface must be endowed with as much flexibility as its environmental variables are with variety.

[21] Stafford Beer, "Cybernetics and the Knowledge of God," 294.

impossible scientific and epistemological task of asking how we know, cybernetics steps in.[22]

However, cybernetics does not address this question about the filters and codes through which we know, but rather provides a meta-systematic answer in its place. As a recursive theory of systems, cybernetics is the embodiment of the limit to cognition insofar as it allows man to see himself as a "subsystem in a microcosm of a total system."[23]

Within the schematic language of electrical engineering, the black box stands in for the apparently inexplicable behavior of a factory system in relation to itself and to its external environment.

> Always the system is inaccessible; sometimes literally, because of an inadequate
>
> technology; sometimes figuratively, in a relatively low intelligence; sometimes by mere
>
> default, as when the radio set remains a black box to someone who could perfectly well
>
> understand its connections and modus operandi if he took the trouble. All that cybernetics
>
> does with this familiar object of the Box is set it up to describe an *absolutely* inaccessible
>
> system. The brain provides a good example.[24]

As Beer goes on to explain, the brain, at least as it was understood at the time, was an apt example of such a mediator of complexity not only because of its apparent capacity to process and abstract infinite permutations of information but more importantly, because as "a natural system," the brain "*teaches itself* these rules, without even recognizing what they are."[25] Beer adds that the ability of the human brain to quickly distinguish patterns among an infinite number of variables around it and, in this way, allow its bearer to adapt to its surroundings "does not come about from the application of formal rules, nor yet from intelligent cooperation. It arises

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[22] Ibid., 295.
[23] Ibid., 302.
[24] Beer, *Cybernetics and Management*, 52.
[25] Ibid., 57.

naturally, as the result of the interaction of the parts of the random system – because these [parts] have information (at an unconscious level), and feedback. It is the aim of industrial cybernetics to harness this ability of a system to teach itself optimum behavior."[26] Beer's earlier comments on the model of the brain's adaptability raise the question of how to denote such a self-producing process, or, perhaps more precisely, what role the action of such inscription acquires within its own process. In applying these principles of self-production to the Viable System Model, one is left to wonder about the formative, if not normative, role the model itself plays in the control of the workforce.

Before any further discussion of the functional excess of such presentations, let us flesh out the organizational intent of the Viable System. As we can see from the image of the Viable System Model (Figure 3.2), Beer described each system's function through analogy to the human nervous system. Beer likens Systems One through Three (shop-floor production to operations management) to the operations of the body's internal organs and autonomic nervous system: the organs or different workshops at System One connected through the parasympathetic nervous system, or System Two, to each other and the brain stem, or operations management, at System Three. System Four, which we see represented in this schema as the diencephalon and ganglia, the brain's synapses, does the work of meta-systems management, future planning and interaction with the external world. Beer similarly re-imagined the nature of the executive level as the cerebral cortex or System Five. Described as a multi-node or a diverse set of actors dispersed in space, Beer's conception of executive authority is equally noteworthy for the way it diffuses authority as for the way it re-articulates authority's relationship to knowledge. According to Beer, System Five functions in order to make decisions whose complexity has been successively filtered by the preceding systems, to close the firm as a whole in relation to others,

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[26] Ibid., 57.

and to act as the symbolic figurehead representing the enterprise both to its employees and to other companies and government agencies. Despite System Five's analogous role to the cerebral cortex's cognitive functions of information processing, Beer comments that our comprehension of System Five is "difficult and its nature mysterious."[27]

The curiosity of System Five lies in the extent to which its authority is usurped by the nature of computer automation as much as it is by the dominance and character of logistical organization implied therein. This is so both for the residual hierarchy it maintains between the firm's different systems and for the one it redefines between knowledge and authority. Cybersyn's logistical model thus presents us with a generative ambiguity for understanding the formal contours of the late capitalist social link. In one sense, Beer's executive very much encapsulates the logic of what Lacan might understand as the master's discourse: his ultimate authority is in a sense vacuous in content and completely conditional upon the working knowledge of his subordinates. One could alternatively surmise, however, that Cybersyn's model is characterized by the contradictory diffusion and horizontality of authority, on one hand, and the more traditional, vertical subordination of the shop-room floor to meta-systemic planning and control, on the other.

Beer's vacillation with respect to System Five suggests that the social link produced in this process places the new technocracy of meta-systemic planning at its helm. System Four's task of meta-systems management and future planning not only filters data between daily operations and the executive board room but also folds the latter into its own function. This occurs through a double movement. On one hand, the traditional chain of command is fragmented with the traditional executive being reduced to its two principal functions: he is a symbolic figurehead and an almost autonomic decision-maker whose knowledge has been at

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[27] Stafford Beer, *The Heart of Enterprise*, 264

once diffused throughout the company and condensed in the meta-systems management of System Four. The Viable System Model can, in this sense, be thought to transpose Beer's earlier experiments in biological computing inasmuch as it bypasses the symbolization of natural processes and attempts to capture and denote their effects at the level of their graphic inscription. As a model for the control of an alienated workforce, it is thus notable how Beer's schema circumvents the accumulation and articulation of abstract knowledge for its own sake and instead grafts the supposedly autonomic and operational use of this knowledge, beyond the realm of representation, onto the organization of organization itself. As both a physical site—the Operations Room—and a position within the Viable System Model, technocratic administration displaces the stupid decisionism of the executive and the bureaucratic authority of the university.

While Beer's plan assumed that these five systems would repeat recursively down to the cellular level of the worker, they also corresponded pragmatically to five different infrastructural or seemingly infrastructural components of the project. When Beer visited Santiago in November 1971, he presented two papers: a conceptual model of the viable system for real time calculation of the social economy and a strategic plan to be implemented by March 1972. The more concrete components of Cybersyn to be executed according to the viable system model were the following: Cybernet, a telecommunications network that linked all of the nationalized factories from all over the country through telex machines, originally installed for the tracking of satellites (System One); Cyberstride, a software program meant to collect, interpret and feedback operations data and necessary changes to it based on short-term forecasts (Systems Two and Three); CHECO (Chilean Economy), a software for long-term industrial planning (System Four); and the operations room, an "environment for decision" "that would replace the traditional 'boardroom' style management" and which, if successful at the executive level, would come to

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be implemented at all of the "level fours," recursively reproduced at each level "as well as in total industry and the running of the state itself (Systems Four and Five)."[28]

None but the already existing network of telex machines was ever successfully implemented. Engineering consultants from the British firm Arthur Anderson collaborated with their Chilean peers in creating the Cyberstride software. While it was able to account for some thirty industries, it was never able to take account of the entire volume of factories and industries — two-thirds of the national economy—nor was it ever able to reach the goal of processing data in real time, as the government computer it was destined for was also used for a number of other purposes, creating a delay of one or two days between receiving data from different enterprises and coordinating a response to it.[29] CHECO, which was supposed to map the activity of the entire economy and project production over time, was impeded by a lack of up-to-date economic data from the nation's industries on which to design a model for future performance. Cybersyn similarly encountered social obstacles both among the top officials of the CORFO or state development agency and among the ranks of factory managers. While most CORFO functionaries remained ignorant of the scope of the project, the agency failed to integrate Beer's model into its future plans, a reticence born out of engrained logistical practices, but also out of leftist opposition that the centralization of enterprises according to Beer's model would usurp power from workers' autonomy in cooperatively controlled factories.[30] On the factory floor, politically appointed managers known as *interventores* distributed among the political parties of the Popular Unity functioned to oppose both workers' autonomy and the socialization of work under Beer's plan for state-run capitalism.[31] The Operations Room, which did not escape the

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[28] Beer, *Brain of the Firm*, 254.
[29] Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries*, 103.
[30] Ibid., 190.
[31] Eden Medina, "The State Machine: Politics, Ideology, and Computation in Chile," 216-17.

confluence of such technical and social contradictions, was constructed and stored in the interior

patio of a downtown office building until three days before the September 11 military coup when

it was moved to the presidential palace.[32]

Envisioned as a World War II decision room and a British gentleman's club, the

Operations Room was also meant to serve as an emblem of the efficient modernity promised by

Chile's state-run capitalism.[33] The room's polypropylene plastic swivel chairs shared both the

design and material used for the more quotidian, utilitarian objects that Gui Bonsiepe produced

for the INTEC.[34] Configured in a hexagon, five of the six walls were meant to contain projection

screens with large, simplified, graphic representations of data, a model of the Viable System

itself, and a magnetic, canvas covered wall on which icons representing different elements of the

Chilean economy could be arranged.[35] The room also held seven chairs – an intentionally odd

number meant for democratic voting – in an inward facing circle equipped with five knobs or, in

Beer's chauvinistic words, "big hand buttons" "that could be **thumped**" in the projection of

data.[36] The knobs took the place of both keyboards and secretaries or, in Beer's words, "the girl

between themselves and the machinery."[37] Just as keyboards and female intermediaries were

banned, so too was paper from Beer's "thinking shop."[38]

Though the room was supposed to serve as an emblem of cybernetic management for

those involved and, more broadly, as a symbolic of "socialist modernity," much like the

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[32] Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries*, 118.

[33] Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries*, 115 and Beer, *Brain of the Firm*, 270, 194. Though Beer states explicitly that the Operations Room was meant to serve as the prototype of a room for use by workers' committees and "not a *sanctum sanctorum* for a government elite," he also describes its specific and immediate function as both an official meeting place for senior executives and an unofficial clubroom for their leisure.

[34] Palmarola Sagredo notes, for example, that Eero Saarinen's Tulip Chair and the commando armchair from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) served as inspiration for the Operations Room. See Hugo Palmarola Sagredo, "El diseño industrial estatal en Chile," gui_bonsiepe (blog) August 9, 2012.

[35] Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries*, 118-121.

[36] Author's emphasis, Beer, *Brain of the Firm,* 270.

[37] Stafford Beer, *Platform for Change*, 449.

implementation of the project, it was plagued by technological limitations and engrained social

practices. The large buttons on the commando-style chairs were meant to allow for the individual

and democratic control of the room's users to monitor the purportedly real-time data displayed

on a series of "datafeed" screens akin to a flat panel display.[39] What they actually controlled

were the position of the slide carousel and retro-projectors hidden behind the screens.[40] Just as

the "datafeeds" really acrylic screens encased in fiberglass cabinets and regulated by mechanical

projectors, the graphic models and flow charts of individual industries hand-designed and

photographed on the spot before being projected. Thus, while secretaries were banned, a band of

four female graphic design students of Bonsiepe's from the Catholic University were to stand at

the ready in order to draw each of the time-sensitive charts by hand and then photograph them as

slides, all in the rooms adjacent or just behind the room's hexagonal walls.[41]

The unintended humor that comes through both in the seemingly unnecessary detail

devoted to the Operations Room in Beer's explanations of the application of the Viable System

Model and in historians' reconstructions of its implementation has much to do with the

abundance of decorative details that extend well beyond the functional, technological capacities

of the room. Moreover, such decorative excess would seem to transform the objective function at

stake: there where technological infrastructure and home-grown technical expertise were lacking,

Cybersyn would thus model Chile's socialist modernity as mere appearance. As a way of

legitimizing the project among government employees and factory managers, the Operations

Room would not only promise this future as imminent but also realize the transformation it

[38] Beer, *Brain of the Firm*, 194.
[39] Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries*, 116.
[40] Ibid., 118.
[41] Ibid., 124-25. It is also worth noting that while Bonsiepe's graphic design students were all women, the actual Grupo de Diseño responsible for the design of the Operations Room and for the other industrial design projects most closely associated with utopianism of the Popular Unity, was drawn from engineering students from the Universidad de Chile who were all men.

promises by other means. The modernization of Chilean industry would be this superficial branding of modernization. Cybersyn would thus seem to signal a form of postmodern reification *avant la lettre*. In this same sense, we might also surmise that the Viable System Model exemplifies the self-production and control of the workforce through a softening of vertical authority so that the new style of management embodied in the Operations Room would effectively render authority a "mere" question of style or, conversely, the smooth, high-tech semblance of horizontality really masking a repressive form of control for the expropriation of cooperative labor and knowledge. While all of this may be certain, the Viable System Model is far more insidious. The more integral question the Operations Room poses is not how style masks the form of repression at work but rather how it transforms the structure of this repression; how it makes the subjectivation of the workforce directly productive as the operator of this "new style of management."

In returning to our discussion of the Viable System Model and its graphic inscription, I would suggest that it is in the constitutive supplement that the graphic presentation of the model provides where style takes effect. Beer's description of the Operations Room reinforces the residual, if not integral, hierarchy, as well as the division between manual and intellectual labor evident in the Viable System Model. We might recall how the Operations Room — "the brain" of the firm – was supposed to include both real-time data and a graphic reminder of the Viable System Model. As the testimony of workers and shop-floor managers at the time attest, the need to reinforce the model responds to the difficulty of its implementation. To the extent that engrained forms of hierarchy and socialization, party politics, clientelism, etc. presented obstacles to the function and intensification of capitalism, the import and imposition of the Beer's model increased accordingly. Its function of merely recording the dynamic self-

reproduction of the organism became that of giving form to that system itself. As the inscription of a certain extimate limit to knowledge, we can suggest that the graphic presentation of the Viable System Model effected the self-reproduction of the social relations of labor whose smooth functioning it was meant to record.

If, in this sense, the Viable System Model maintains and, we might argue, reinforces the repressive production of the workforce under a different guise, we should also note the specific relation of knowledge and authority implied in this operation .The Viable System Model's purported detour through knowledge, to return to Pickering's words above, does not necessarily suggest an emancipation from the modern subject of representation but rather an historically specific torsion internal to this construct. To the extent that this torsion places the self-production of the worker at the head of this social link, I would suggest that Cybersyn accomplishes this feat through the constitutive excess of style that we find in the Operations Room, the firm's "environment for decision" and the site for meta-systems management. If Beer's "new style of management" proposes a reorganization of the labor process, its efficacy lies in the way it takes effect through a very specific understanding of style as inseparable from the self-production of the worker. Neither the visual inscription of the Viable System Model nor its operation goals can be siphoned off from the aesthetic preoccupations filtered down from the Ulm School to Bonsiepe's Operations Room.

Contrary to Pickering's affirmative account of Cybersyn, Lacan's theory of the four discourses allows us to take a dialectical approach to Cybersyn's ontological and epistemological dimensions at the point at which knowledge, redefined, becomes inscribed as operational to the constitution and control of the workforce. In other words, the discourses allow us to historicize the form of subjectivation suggested by the Viable System Model by seeking its social effects at

the level of their graphic inscription. The discourses propose a dynamic structural understanding

of the social as articulated by the relationship between agency, work, truth and production. With

regard to Cybersyn, they allow us to grasp the ways in which the configuration and re-definition

of knowledge and authority in relation to the material forms of labor at a given moment take

effect through *jouissance*, in other words, at the place of the subject's capture in the symbolic

order both both through the body and the social overdetermination of the way it enjoys.

While the operations of *jouissance* upon the body are very much excluded from

cybernetics and even cybernetic approaches to signification in Lacan, my objective in the

following discussion is not to only argue that the unconscious insists through the particular kind

of sexual enjoyment introduced by language. Rather, the larger point that interests me is how this

insistence molds Cybersyn's social dynamics and at the same time allows us the distance

necessary to historicize them. The motivation that lies behind this somewhat lengthy detour

through the discourses and their written inscription is twofold: in embodying the import of

aesthetics beyond the realm of art, Cybersyn's production of subjectivity is subject to

historicization. In continually remapping the functions and positions of work and enjoyment in

this process of sublimation, Lacan's theory of the discourses and the place of writing therein

allow us to historicize the directly productive nature of style in Cybersyn.

Briefly, Lacan defines the discourses as different configurations of the social link, or a

series of apparatuses that inscribe four different subjective positions. Defined as "a discourse

without speech," though one that is determined by language, the social links of the master,

university, hysteric and analyst respectively embody four subjective approximations to the real

of the social's incompletion, or the impossible *jouissance* of the Other.[42] Such subjective

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[42] Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 12. See also Slavoj Žižek, "Four Discourses, Four Subjects," 75.

positions are at the same time the effect of the way each of the discourses' fixed positions of agency, work, truth and production are alternatively occupied by the master signifier (S1), knowledge (S2), the subject ($) and the object cause of desire (a). One of the most notable features of Lacan's 1969-70 seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, is the way it poses the subjective positions and forms of knowledge produced in and by the psychoanalytic clinic against those of the pre-modern philosophy and authority of the master's discourse and the modern academic knowledge and bureaucratic administration of the university. The relationship sustained with impossibility in the discourses of the hysteric and analyst thus serves as the graphic and logical obverse of the social links of the university and master respectively.

Lacan's development of the discourses is of particular interest both because of their attempt to treat the social link along loosely historical lines and because of the historicity implicit in their written transmission. Lacan begins his definition of the discourses with an explanation of the onto-genesis of the subject in relation to the signifier, or the conditions under which we must consider the path to self-knowledge for the subject of desire: "Knowledge initially arises at the moment at which S1 comes to represent something, through its intervention in the field defined, at the point we have come to, as an already structured field of knowledge. And the subject is its supposition…insofar as the subject represents the specific trait of being distinguished from the living individual."[43] The emergence of knowledge, and thus of the subject as its supposition, also gives rise to the repetitive *jouissance* that blocks the path to any full realization of knowledge. We might similarly gloss Lacan's statement above as defining the subject by the intervention of a "specific trait" of the Other. It is a mark that is neither knowing nor specific, but rather the contingent and meaningless letter that lays the ground for the subject's potential accession to the symbolic.

The Four Discourses: Production and Style

$$
\begin{array}{llll}
\underline{S_1 \rightarrow S_2} & \underline{S_2 \rightarrow a} & \underline{\$ \rightarrow S_1} & \underline{a \rightarrow \$} \\
\$ \quad\;\; a & S_1 \quad\;\; \$ & a \quad\;\; S_2 & S_2 \quad\; S_1 \\
\text{Master} & \text{University} & \text{Hysteric} & \text{Analyst}
\end{array}
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Figure 3.3 Lacan's formula for the four discourses

Freud uses the term "unary trait" in the seventh chapter of *Group Psychology*, "Identification," in terms of an early dyadic and minimal identification between the subject and a love-object or a partial personal trait its place. Significantly, Freud also associates this form of identification with the doing and undoing of the social link anchored by the hysterical symptom. Lacan discusses the unary trait at greatest length upon introducing the term in his ninth seminar on Identification. While Lacan's treatment of the unary trait allows us to see how the object quality of the trait in Freud pertains to a metonymic, pre-symbolic logic, it also signals the paradoxical and transitional nature of the unary trait: that of a senseless and repetitive material inscription upon which the properly symbolic use of language is able to create imaginary meaning. [44]

Lacan discusses the unary trait at different moments throughout his development on discourses in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, perhaps most notably in the analogy between surplus *jouissance* as a loss or excess produced by the speaking being and the notion of entropy. Contrary to Weiner's definition of information as the measure of organization, knowledge as a means of *jouisssance*, a function of knowledge first revealed by the hysterical symptom in the clinic, serves to distill the object cause sustaining the dialectic of desire from the signifier that

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[43] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 13.
[44] For an efficient description and distinction between the "letter," "unary trait" and "signifier" see Tom Eyers "The

represents the subject: "This knowledge here reveals its roots in the fact that in repetition, and in the form of the unary trait to begin with, it is found to be the means of *jouissance*."[45] Lacan adds, moreover, that "writing is the same knowledge that is at work when it is a question of measuring the effect of repetition in the analytic clinic."[46]These comments help to contrast the writing of enjoyment as the internal limit to the symbolic from the inscription of self-production in the Viable System Model. Lacan insinuates as much when he refers to entropy as a physical phenomenon only discernible as a result of modern physics having overlaid the "apparatus of signifiers over the physical world."[47] Beer's model "detours" or attempts to move beyond this articulable knowledge towards a purely operational at once denoted and guaranteed at the level of the graph. Whereas the "knowledge of God," for Beer, only becomes immanent in writing, Lacan's formalization of enjoyment through the use of mathemes and graphs attempts to transmit a limit to scientific knowledge already immanent to the body, if also and at the same time overdetermined by the social.

For the purposes of the present discussion, we should pay attention to how the literality or "litterality" of the letter, whether the matheme or the symptom ciphered in the body, as a writing of the real for Lacan, contrasts both with Lacan's understanding of the signifier and with the function of writing we have seen in the self-organization of the Viable System. Lacan suggests that we understand the letter as the meaningless material support of the signifier in the course of the subject's accession to the symbolic. Whereas the signifier always implies a relation in the chain of other signifiers wherein the subject is both represented and elided, the letter, Lacan writes, designates "the material medium [support] that concrete discourse borrows from

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'Signifier-in-Relation,' the 'Signifier-in-Isolation' and the Concept of the 'Real' in Lacan," 56-70.
[45] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 48.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 49.

language."[48] As his explicators have pointed out, Lacan further clarifies this early definition of the letter in his seminar on psychosis. The imaginary meaning that a subject's "successful" alienation in the symbolic produces presupposes a logically anterior status of the letter in the unconscious in which meaning and literality coincide and in which the space for the neurotic subject has not yet been fully bored into the real.[49] Just as the letter logically precedes and at the same time insists beyond what can be symbolized within a given social order, the mathematical writing that populates Lacan's later seminars would allow for the transmission of the real by alluding to the imaginary resonances of articulated knowledge. In a much broader sense, Lacan's recourse to a form of mathematical formalization posed as the effect of language concerns the extent to which he assumes the transmission of unconscious knowledge and the intervention of psychoanalysis on the epistemological stage as limited internally by the real of enjoyment. Much more aligned with the analyst's act than his enunciation, the discourses do not purport to have created the knowledge they expound but rather to have formalized an already existing field of knowledge and practice precisely at the point of the internal limit to its articulation.

In their attempt to intervene at the crux of *savoir-faire* and its formalization and also between the work of signification and the act that might instantiate a new social order, the discourses are unique for the way they bring the alienation of working knowledge into dialogue with the ethical distinction between action (or work) and act. Over the course of *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan places the subject of desire into a loose adaptation of the master-slave dialectic from the self-consciousness section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the master's discourse, the slave, represented here as the field of signifiers (S2), yields not his work but rather

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[48] Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," 413.
[49] Ibid., 424-25. Lacan takes the example of Freud's insistence on the image's value as a signifier in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, such that no inherent meaning can be found in the determinate content of a single element.

his know-how and means to enjoyment to the master (S1) in exchange for a palliative protection

from death or the effects of the drive. The slave receives in return what he has lost in fragmented

form: surplus *jouissance* (a) a kind of unknowing enjoyment separated from knowledge.[50] The

"scansion of knowledge by the signifier" produces this dumb, fragmentary *jouissance* as a by-

product at the same time as the Other already begins to canalize this productivity. The master's

discourse produces enjoyment not only as excess but also as abstraction, much as surplus value,

on which Lacan plays, only emerges by presupposing value in the same operation.

While surplus *jouissance* serves as a mere by-product of domination in the master's

discourse, we can also see how the accumulation of knowledge and money that defines the

university discourse emerges from within it. Likened by analogy to the era of German university

reform and industrial capitalism, the university discourse calibrates this same surplus enjoyment

and puts it to work.[51] The university discourse intensifies the dynamics of "spoliation" and

formalization already at play in the master's discourse by further cleaving knowledge from work:

"Once a higher level has been passed," Lacan states, "surplus *jouissance* is no longer surplus

jouissance but is inscribed simply as a value to be inscribed in or deducted from the totality of

whatever it is that is accumulating—what is accumulating from out of an essentially transformed

nature." Glossing this passage, Zupančič notes that in passing from the repressed place of by-

product to that of work, we witness a qualitative change in *jouissance*: "In this passage from the

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Where Freud' uses the example of the hieroglyph to show the arbitrary association of meaning and image, Lacan signals instead that something of the symbol persists in the signifier's quality as letter in the unconscious.

[50] Alenka Zupančič, "When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value," 162-63.

[51] Mladen Dolar "Hegel as the Other Side of Psychoanalysis," 136. In analyzing the distinct subjective positions Hegel comes to fill in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Dolar notes that Hegel's placement at the inauguration of the modern university coincides with the assent of capitalism as the ruling discourse after the French Revolution: "Capitalism is instantiated in conjunction with the university discourse, its twin and double. Couldn't one see in Hegel precisely the figure of the transition from the revolution to the capitalist normalization, where knowledge appears precisely as the ideal medium of both?" Dolar references the Paris protests of May 1968 - the backdrop to Lacan's seminar - as the perfect example of the university's capacity to welcome and then normalize subversive forms of knowledge.

level below to the level above, *jouissance* changes in nature, and Lacan goes so far as to call it now "an imitation surplus *joussiance"* (or "a semblance surplus *jouissance*.)"[52] Zupančič's gloss, which follows Lacan to the letter, serves to underline the experience of enjoyment possible within the kind of alienation wrought by capitalism, and, in particular, within the contemporary consumer society Lacan alludes to in the following paragraph.

The university discourse effects a concomitant change in the nature of work, divorcing it both from knowledge and from its inventive capacities for giving body to the real. This allows us to interpret Lacan's subsequent remarks about the homogeneity of goods in consumer society as signaling the only outlet for such invention. The key point here is that we not treat the formalization and valorization of *savoir-faire* as analogical to the experience of enjoyment under such conditions but rather that we understand the discourses as really binding the social relations of production at both the objective and subjective levels.

It is in this light that we can understand the symptomatic response of the hysteric as the product and, at the same time, the support for the university discourse. What Lacan characterizes as the hysteric's refusal to work can be understood at the level of the fantasy (a <>S2); rather than selling her labor as commodity, her position is defined as that of the one sublime object subtracted from it. Similarly, in decrying the inability of the father to live up to his purported role as creator, the hysteric's discourse shows how this demand precludes work from providing any kind of satisfaction for the drive, however fleeting, at the same time as it arises from that same condition. The signifiers that occupy the positions of work and production or of the Other and of enjoyment in the social link of the hysteric (S1/ S2) signal the splitting of the work of the Other into that of transcendental creation — an intervention that might arise as if from beyond the established field of knowledge — and the production of knowledge that might serve as its

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[52] Ibid., 170-71.

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substitute.[53]

The hysteric's symptom marks the inherently failed nature of sublimation when thought of as a compensatory measure or normative social channel for the drive capable of diverting it from its sexual aim. In "On Narcissism" (1914), Freud defines sublimation as a process in which the instinct directs itself "towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction…[in which] the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality."[54] In contrasting sublimation with the adoption of an ego ideal, Freud adds that whereas the ego ideal "heightens the demands of the ego," sublimation provides "a way out" of such repression.[55] Freud is far more skeptical about this possibility in "Civilization and its Discontents" (1930). He writes that the purportedly palliative function of sublimation in works of art, for example, is limited to a privileged few gifted with such a disposition. At the same time that these joys become ever more rarified, their ability to satiate the drive similarly fails to "convulse our physical being" in the way that cruder sexual satisfactions do.[56] Quantitatively, very few people are talented enough to "arm" themselves against their misery; qualitatively, even those disposed to artistic and scientific creation remain unable to stave off the suffering imposed by the superego.

Freud reshapes this same contradiction in the footnote that accompanies these remarks concerning work as substitutive satisfaction. He notes again that the majority of people, who are devoid of special talent or intelligence, must dedicate themselves to "ordinary professional work" at the same time that he ambivalently reminds us that no other activity can so firmly lend the subject existence in society. "And yet," Freud adds, "as a path to happiness, work is not

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[53] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 95. In assigning the father the role of master in the hysteric's discourse, "this implies that in the word 'father' there is something that is always in fact potentially creating. And it is in relation to this fact that, in the symbolic field, it must be observed that it is the father, insofar as he plays this pivotal, major role, this master role in the hysteric's discourse, that, from this angle of the power of creation, sustains his position in relation to the woman, even as he is out of action".
[54] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," 94.
[55] Ibid., p. 95

highly prized by men. They do not strive after it as they do after other possibilities of satisfaction. The great majority of people only work under the stress of necessity, and this natural human aversion to work raises most difficult social problems".[57] The impossibility of satisfying or ameliorating the drive either by demographic quantity or physical quality, through work or the aversion to work, comes to define the condition of civilization or culture. In relation to Freud's earlier definition, both idealization as a process in the service of the superego and sublimation as the purported escape from it fail to quell the drive.

In Lacan's reformulation of sublimation, it is precisely this neither/ nor scenario that defines the binding of the drive. The "way out" of such repression through sublimation, as Lacan redefines it, bears both on the kind of experience offered by a given object—a "rendering visible" of the real rather than the ideal of a determined social link— and on the status of work that might confect such an object.[58] Glossing Freud's footnote above, Joan Copjec has noted that "by rethinking the notion of work through that of pleasure, Freud opens Aristotle's distinction between the act, in all its rarity, and mere action to a redefinition in which what matters is the kind of relation each maintains toward sexual enjoyment."[59] Whereas the act purports to radically transform the subject's position with respect to the *jouissance* of the Other, work or action persists—literally drags on repetitively —in service to it.

We find the beginnings of this reformulation of work in Lacan's treatment of the discourse of the hysteric. Recalling Freud's malaise, what Lacan eventually refers to as the possibility for the analytic act to "strike" against culture begins with the *savoir* that emerges from the hysteric's symptom. Lacan notes that "work begins" with the hysteric's discourse or

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[56] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," 79-80.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Joan Copjec, "Pure Pleasure," 9.
[59] Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's no Woman*, 45.

with the hystericization of the analysand's speech: "It is with knowledge as a means of *jouissance* that work that has a meaning, an obscure meaning, is produced."[60] If the hysteric's discourse initiates psychoanalysis as praxis, the university discourse also finds its support on the flip side of this same passage. Lacan points to the apparent symmetry of the hysteric and university discourses: the split between knowledge and mastery in the university discourse produces or reproduces this same division in the subject while the hysteric, in desiring a master not himself submitted to castration, naturalizes this very phenomenon at the same time that she produces its substitute through an articulated knowledge about sexual difference.

Lacan's discussion of Freud's case study of Dora in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* is exemplary in this regard. If in one sense Dora's efforts to denude and also to embody her father's castration ultimately uphold the symbolic order she purportedly refuses, they succeed in doing so by finding a substitute for the lacking father in the book itself, that is, in a knowledge about truth. The hysteric's discourse produces the master signifier of the university by carrying out the kind of symbolic operation proper to modern science: Dora's encyclopedic reference to the female reproductive organs allows her to naturalize sexual difference and, in so doing, submit it to a metaphorical operation of symbolization. If this imaginary guarantee in knowledge acts as a support for the university discourse, the social link initiated by the transference also points to the internal limits of this arrangement. It is not knowledge about truth that points to a "way out" of the repressive field of the Other, but rather the "function of knowledge in terms of truth" beyond this metaphorical relationship, one of the definitions Lacan offers of the analytic act. [61]

What Lacan notes as the beginning of work is actually to be found, then, in the resistance to work that characterizes the hysteric's brand of alienation. The obscure meaning Lacan

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[60] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 51.
[61] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 53.

references should not be understood as commensurate with the field of knowledge about biological sexuation, in other words, a joy for learning as a form of socially acceptable activity or substitution for the sexual aims of the drive. On the contrary, this obscure meaning is to be found in the signifying work of the symptom; its truth — the hysteric's identification with her father's impotence — is that even as a captain of industry, the capitalist father is not the agent of the Other's *jouissance*. The point is that the work of the hysteric does not begin at the level of articulated knowledge or of the signifier, but rather in the letter of the body embedded in its interstices, the obscure meaning that resonates as an effect of discourse. In asserting that work begins where knowledge about the truth is produced as a means of *jouissance*, we should place the emphasis on "produced." In finding a father who is not the agent of *jouissance* and at the same time seeking a master who does not work for the Other, the hysteric's discourse displaces the work of *savoir* from the site of the Other to that of *jouissance* such that no distinction can be drawn between the instance that works and the result produced as an effect of this process.

The discourse of the hysteric signals but does not fully assume the subjective position implied by this change in the status of the letter. The analyst's discourse, by contrast, implies the assumption of discourse as a structure at once determined by and embedded within the hollows of the symbolic. Lacan thus contrasts the hysteric's desire for a master in placing the father as the operator of her symbolic economy with the effects of the "real father," which he refers to as the "structural operator of castration."[62] The symbolic function of the father prohibiting *jouissance* functions beyond the logic of exception only when the agent or operator of this law also embodies the prohibited as impossibility. In this context, Lacan refers to an example from *The Interpretation of Dreams* in which Freud's patient relays the dream of a conversation with the

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[62] Ibid., 123.

patient's dead father in which "he had really died, only he did not know it."[63] Contrary to the

mythic father of the horde whose death sustains the perverse legitimacy of social order in *Totem*

and Taboo, this brief citation diagrams the place of the dead father as that of *jouissance* itself.

Rather than serve as an exception to the law, the father's function is represented here as one

which divides or sustains the internal division of the symbolic. Lacan quotes or paraphrases only

the last line of this italicized speech in Freud's account in order to emphasize that there is a non-

knowing proper to the real father that is communicated only as the effect of language. The

castration that the paternal operator carries out is thus not defined by the enunciation of a

prohibition but by the embodiment of this logical impossibility within a given field of

signification. Similarly, we can understand the structural operator both of and in the real as that

of a subject who assumes being operated by language. Lacan's revision of the Oedipus complex

thus distinguishes two operations of the paternal function as linked to the act of naming: that

which treats the symbolic prohibition of *jouissance* within the social as the mythic guarantee of

its existence just beyond the bounds of the signifier and that which sustains *jouissance* as the

internal division of the social order. While Lacan's distinction can be read as a reflection on the

ethics of fatherhood, it also poses the social stakes of work and production in relation to the

transmission of unconscious knowledge particular to the transference. Lacan suggests that it is

the real father, who is himself used by the *jouissance* of language ($), rather than the articulated

network of signifiers (S2) that carries out the work under transference.[64]

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[63]Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 420.

[64] Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One in*, 17-18. Zupančič provides a lucid description of the work of the drive as a work upon the Other in the transference. While for the transference to work the subject must suppose herself in the Other and thus also the *savoir* of the analyst, the analyst, as Zupančič points out, "is not…the authority that simply refers the subject back to herself, pointing out how she is herself responsible for the what is so systematically 'happening' to her." Contrary to the notion that the analyst might be effective in precipitating such insight into how one's own actions cause effects in the social link, "this insight of knowledge is not enough; the work of analysis is also needed, the work that is not simply the work of analyzing (things), but much more the work of repetition, the work of 'entropy.'" If the transference allows signifying knowledge to become a means of *jouissance*, it is not

If Lacan thus implies a relation between the function of the father and that of the analyst it is in the fact that both include a certain function of ignorance. The operative function of the analyst, in contrast to the structural place of the father, however, is not ultimately to sustain the desire of the analysand but rather to facilitate the production of an act, or agency, of the impossible.[65] The new or more precisely "new style of a master signifier" that the social link of analysis may produce is thus not meant to uphold the structurally lacking nature of the Other, but to destroy it, to solicit the truth of the Other's inconsistency or, more radically still, its persistence as symptom.[66]

This is precisely the way in which Lacan describes James Joyce's "Hellenization" of the English language: "he wrote in English in such a way that the English language no longer exists."[67] By inscribing the phonic enjoyment of language in writing, Lacan argues, Joyce was able to invent an artificial guarantee of signification in lieu of the paternal signifier. Outside of the properly metaphorical nature of signification, Lacan argues that Joyce's writing is able to produce the effects of signification at the level of the letter.

The production or producing of *jouissance* in Joyce's writing fulfills a function comparable and, yet, at the same time, opposed to the one we find in the hysteric's discourse in the ways each puts the real of language to work. Whereas the hysteric's discourse produces a symbolic body or *savoir* as a means of *jouissance*, Joyce's use of language is able to symbolize the subject's relation to an integral body through a kind *savoir-faire* that proves inseparable from production; that is, it articulates itself through a *jouissance* that tears that same body asunder. In

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signifying knowledge, but rather the repetitive insistence of the drive that allows this incursion into the Other to take place.
[65] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 181. On the relation of the paternal function and the conclusion of analysis, see François Sauvagnat, "Fatherhood and Naming in J. Lacan's Works."
[66] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 176.
[67] Jacques Lacan, *El sinthome*, 11.

treating the symbolic as an effect of writing, Joyce's *sinthome* reveals the symbolic in its purely

operational function. Bypassing the inter-subjective and function of the signifier as that which

represents a subject to another signifier, Joyce is able to achieve the artifice of an ego by

approaching words as fragmented, literal inscriptions of the real.

Lacan comments on the way in which Joyce inhabits the inexistence of English, or the

way in which Joyce equates the language of empire with language as such. Joyce uses language

like one "unemployed" by the unconscious because he does not relate to it at the symbolic level

of lack but through its literal fragmentation in the real; much the way he knows Gaelic as a

language "wiped from the map," recurring to it "enough to orient oneself but not much more":

> Joyce said that Ireland had a lord and a lady, the lord was the British Empire and the lady
>
> was the Holy Catholic Church, apostolic and Roman, being both the same type of
>
> affliction. This is precisely what we observe in what makes Joyce the symptom, the pure
>
> symptom of that which is the relation to language, to the extent that we reduce [language]
>
> to the symptom – to wit, to what it has as its effect when this effect is not analyzed—I
>
> would add, that we prohibit ourselves from playing with any of the equivocations that
>
> would move any unconscious.[68]

In lieu of the equivocations permitted by metaphorical speech, Lacan goes on to comment that

only enjoyment can be distilled from Joyce's use of language. Moreover, inasmuch as this use of

language as an assemblage of fragments of the real is what binds Joyce as a subject to the social

link, it is also what speaks to the contingent material enjoyment that serves as its guarantee. The

letter of the body that anchors the hysteric's discourse motivates Lacan to pose a similar

question, that is, whether it is not the symptom that acts as the agent of any social link.[69]

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[68] Jacques Lacan, "Joyce el síntoma," 164.
[69] Lacan, *The Other Side*, 43.

Whereas the hysteric's symptom serves as a ciphered message to the Other, Joyce's language, made of the enjoyment that divides the Other, embodies the real without seeking any recognition in its division. What Joyce produces is his own proper name, a singular embodiment of *jouissance* as symptom.

Much as the hysteric's symptom brings into question the nature of the mater signifier, Joyce-the-*sinthome* illuminates the stakes of sublimation for the social link as such. Remarking on Joyce's first published book of poetry, Lacan notes that the symptom is that which conditions the author's use of *la langue*, or the enjoyment within language. He goes on to say, however, that "in a certain way, Joyce elevates [the symptom] to the potency of language, without any of it being analyzable."[70] Lacan evokes his own definition of sublimation as raising the object to the dignity of the Thing such that in Joyce's singular use of language sublimation becomes synonymous with the *jouissance* to which it gives body. If Lacan's reframing of sublimation suggests the symptom at the root of the new social link an act might confect, it does so to the extent that both fulfill a function "that doesn't ask anything of anyone," that seek no recognition in the Other.[71] In considering the *sinthome* as a model of sublimation, we should neither suppose it as an ideal substitute for the social link in its poetic and impenetrable singularity nor reduce Joyce's gesture to underlining the immanent materiality of bodies and language. On the contrary, Joyce's *sinthome* is endowed with a *connaisssance* about the imaginary nature of meaning in a given historical context, a fact inherent in the inseparability of form and matter that the *sinthome* posits as writing.

Dominick Hoens and Ed Pluth explain the *sinthome* as a form of *jouissance* or enjoyment-in-meaning that, while having no meaning and containing no truth, nonetheless

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[70] Lacan, "Joyce, el síntoma," 164.
[71] Lacan, *Ethics*, 114.

produces meanings: "The *sinthome* is an enjoyment-in-meaning…in the following sense: as a production of meaning, the *sinthome* is not concerned with the meanings produced, but with the activity of production itself."[72] Our earlier discussion of the *sinthome* as exemplified by Oscar Bony's *La familia obrera* [The Working-Class Family] focused precisely on the *sinthome*'s capacity for imaginary evocation and the obstacles to critical cultural analysis it poses when thought of as a form of sublimation. By contrast, Hoens and Pluth's explanation brings into focus the stakes of the present conversation from a slightly different angle. Lacan's allusion to Joyce's elevation of the symptom to the potential of language should remind us of his earlier definition of sublimation as raising the object to the dignity of the Thing. Whereas Lacan describes the symbolic nature of the drives' expression in the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* as "a creationist sublimation," we might consider Joyce's as a productivist one.[73] With the same immanent division of the symbolic at stake in both accounts, Lacan's development on the *sinthome* as a modality of sublimation illuminates the extent to which the problem of form is also a problem of production. Perhaps more accurately, we should suggest that rather than the two becoming absolutely commensurate, the critical value of the *sinthome* lies in its insertion of some subtle difference between these two. The figure of Joyce-the-*sinthome* resists reduction either to the psychotic's fugue from the state machine as the body without organs or into its recapture as the productive motor of the real subsumption of labor as the organ without a body.

This thin but important space becomes clearest in the effects and concept of style at work in Joyce's writing. In both the theory of the discourses and Lacan's exemplification of Joyce's *sinthome*, style marks the subject's position with respect to the real that produces the social link. Lacan's 1966 overture to his *Écrits* introduces style as linked to writing in the context of

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[72] Dominick Hoens and Ed Pluth, "The *sinthome*: A New Way of Writing an Old Problem?," 11.
[73] Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's no Woman*, 31.

subjectivation. Quoting Georges Buffon, Lacan notes that "the style is the man himself" insofar as we understand the subject as determined by the senseless incursion and insistence of the letter arriving from the Other in the unconscious.[74] Here, as elsewhere, Lacan plays purposefully on the mundane and technical senses of style and its relation to the specificity of the letter. In justifying his own editorial decision to place his essay on Poe's "Purloined Letter" out of chronological order at the beginning of the collection, he writes, that he is "offering the reader an easy entryway into [his] style." Lacan's characteristically elliptical articulation not only points to the structure of truth as fiction but also reaches the material, phonic enjoyment of the letter as its limit. More accurately, we might suggest that instead of marking the word choice or cadence of his prose in and of itself, style instead designates the subject's relationship to the real of language, producing and, in this sense, also internal to these effects. [75]

Apropos the definition of style as that which is made by the insistence of the letter in the unconscious, Lacan defines Joyce's writing as coming from somewhere other than the signifier. In place of the surplus *jouissance* that takes body as a result of the insistence of the unary trait, Joyce's writing supplements this lack of lack. Joyce's style, insofar as it marks his relationship to the real of language, is what allows him to metaphorize a relationship to his body. Lacan cites a passage, in this regard, from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which the author relates an anecdote about being beaten, after which, upon asking himself why he did not resent it, writes that "the whole ordeal slips off like a skin."[76] Joyce's *sinthome* consists precisely in this ability

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[74]Jacques Lacan, overture to *Écrits*, 3-4.

[75] Jacques Lacan, *El seminario de Jacques Lacan Libro 18*: *de un discurso que no fuera del semblante*, 28. The same is true in the social, rather than purely literary or textual functions of symbolic. In his eighteenth seminar *Of a Discourse that Were not of the Semblant*, Lacan plays on the double connotation of both style and discourse when he refers to the analyst's "discourse" as that "which in any case has nothing to do with the style of what Freud designates as the discourse of the leader." Just as discourse can be understood here both as the public prose of the leader and the structure of the social link in the real, style refers both to the imaginary effects of speech and to the structural position one occupies with respect to the real producing it.

[76] Lacan, *El sinthome*, 146.

to generate a relation to his body by substituting language where the unifying function of the ego is lacking. Rather than noting the power of the metaphoric language that in some sense speaks Joyce as its object, we should instead underscore how the symbolic serves as the by-product of this procedure. In one sense, Joyce's use of language—his style in the more mundane sense of the term – helps to reveal the real dividing the Other, pointing to the arbitrariness of the meaning it generates. In another, perhaps more relevant sense, Joyce's writing also and strips language down to the purely operative function of metaphor.

On "the other side" of the Viable System Model's graphic presentation of operational knowledge, purportedly beyond the bounds of the signifier, Joyce's writing inscribes the operation of structure. Style as defined through Joyce, then, is not reducible to the "mere" semblance of authority, the masquerade of the paternal function, but rather marks a subjective position in the real. Joyce's graphic, if not quite dialectical, relationship to the pure productivity of the drive thus allows us a similarly minimal space from which to understand how style becomes operative in Cybersyn not only in the capture of the subject in a dialectic of desire but also at a point of suture and emancipation beyond the bounds of a phallic economy of signification.

The Ulm School of Design

While Bonsiepe and his INTEC team occupy precious little space in Beer's extensive accounts of Cybersyn, their unique role in the trajectory of the Hochschule für Gestaltung or Ulm School of Design is no less significant for understanding and historicizing the Operation Room's relationship to cybernetic techniques of controlling labor. The question that plagued the Ulm School from its inauguration in 1953 until its closure in 1968 was how industrial design might fully embrace the most advanced forms of industrial production and at the same time

remain critical of them.[77] This problem came to a head around the question of functionalist design or, more specifically, how mass produced objects could revolutionize the everyday lives of their users through the integral relation of form and function and, at the same time, resist the cooptation of that form by the market.

In response to this crisis, Bonsiepe, like his Ulm professor, Argentinean painter and designer Tomás Maldonado, turned from the object to the interface.[78] They attempted to shift the focus of industrial design and its potentially progressive horizon from the confection of individual consumer products to the design of communications systems and the organization of collaborative, project-based engineering. We can best understand Bonsiepe and Maldonado's perspective by contrasting it with that of the founding director of the Ulm School, Swiss sculptor Max Bill.

In Bill's words, "The founders of the Ulm School believe art to be the highest expression of human life and their aim is therefore to help in turning life into a work of art."[79] Bill envisioned the aestheticization of the everyday through an ethereal quality he called "good form." Good form, for Bill, refers to an aesthetic quality that arises organically from the "harmonious" fusion of an object's distinct functions. Neither in excess of nor subordinated to a product's technical function, good form fulfills its own function of forging a new visual and material culture. The problem for Maldonado, who joined the Ulm faculty in 1956 as an acolyte of Bill's, was what to do with the form of functionalist design once it had become a style in and of itself, in other words, now that it could be co-opted piecemeal by the market.

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[77] For two succinct histories of this ideological crisis, see Paul Betts, "Science, Semiotics and Society: The Ulm Hochschule für Gestaltung in Retrospect," 67-82 and Kenneth Frampton, "Apropos Ulm: Curriculum and Critical Theory," 17-37.

[78] Bonsiepe comments on the transition from object to interface in the Chilean context in particular in Hugo Palmarola, "Entrevista a Gui Bonsiepe," 54-56.

[79] Max Bill, "The Bauhaus Idea from Weimar to Ulm," 32.

In his 1955 book on Max Bill, Maldonado similarly confronted the incorporation of functionalism as one style among others into the market. Functionalism's rejection of unnecessary decoration in the varied faces of its inheritance– what came to be known as the "non-stylism" of the De Stijl and Bauhaus – had been subsumed by American commercial "styling," an approach to planned obsolescence first undertaken by General Motors in response to the crisis of capital accumulation in the 1930s. Styling was geared towards increasing the demand for more varied consumer goods, a practice developed through the incorporation and essential modification of the notion of streamlined functionalist design.[80] Leaving only its streamlined wrapping, automotive design incorporated styling as a look and mutable sign of modernity that would itself come to influence the design of unrelated objects and buildings.[81]

We can note the significant change in Maldonado's position in the essay "Design education" from the mid-1960s: "Industrial design is an activity whose ultimate aim is to determine the formal properties of the objects produced by industry. By 'formal properties' we should not understand the external features, but rather those structural and functional relations which convert an object into a coherent unity from the point of view of both producer and user."[82] Maldonado continues to understand the object's formal qualities in terms of the "coordination and integration of all of the factors – functional, cultural, technological, and economic – participating in the formative process."[83] The characteristic quality of the design "object," however, has shifted from that of the quotidian household item in its immediacy to that of the cybernetic automation of production with its corresponding emphasis on organization. As Maldonado stated in his lecture at the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels: "Industrial design is not an

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[80] Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex*, 128.
[81] Ibid., 131.
[82] Tomás Maldonado, "Design Education," 133.
[83] Ibid.

art nor is the designer necessarily an artist."[84]

Maldonado's pithy definition forms part of a longer argument against British architectural theorist Reyner Banham's notion of styling as a popular art. Accusing the partisans of "good" or "functionalist" design of elitist neo-academicism, Banham instead argued that styling had become the popular art of the industrial age. Placing iconography and recognizability before function, Banham argued that the form of a car's body should be as transitory as the technology inside it. Maldonado criticizes Banham's blindness to the ways in which styling and "good design" had come to form "two sides of the same coin: the idea that the aesthetic factor is basic to the creation of the product, that is, industrial design as art."[85] Where Banham foreshadows the seduction of an economy of object-signs almost fully autonomous from their utility, Maldonado points instead to the way in which industrial design must become integral to what he calls "the nerve centers of our industrial civilization."[86] If the Fordist rationalization of production demanded that the industrial designer assume the role of constructor and styling that of the popular artist, Maldonado claims that the automation of the factory demands the designer become a coordinator of other specialists.[87]

Closer to home, we can also understand Maldonado's position in the late 1950s and 60s as a response to his own work as a concretist painter and member of the short-lived group of visual artists and poets known as the *Asociación Arte Concreto Invención* in Buenos Aires in 1946. The Inventionist Manifesto, signed on the occasion of the *Asociación*'s first and only

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[84] Maldonado, "New Developments in Industry and the Training of Designers," 176.
[85] Ibid., 176.
[86] Ibid., 180.
[87] Ibid., 177. It is worth noting the extent to which Banham and Maldonado point to the waning social and spiritual relevance of art, at least as it had been understood by earlier avant-gardist attempts to transform factory labor or everyday life. If Banham points to the populism of the market itself, Maldonado's description of the designer as coordinator recalls the much earlier claims of Soviet Productivists in the 1920s who took constructivist experimentalism to its logical end by proposing the artist as engineer. For an excellent consideration of the blindness of Soviet Productivism to value form as well as its repercussions for the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s,

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exhibition, declared the intention of its members to overcome the "illusory images" of an alienated world by intervening at the level of its plastic constructs.[88] However, as art historian María Amalia García has noted, in the interim of the 1950s in Argentina, Inventionism's union of art and design in the name of social change had been split once again into its respective fields. Concrete art was quickly becoming the dominant language in applied design curricula while abstract art unfolded into a widening gamut of variations.[89] If Maldonado's turn from concrete objects to information systems belies the aesthetic possibilities of resisting capitalism, his shift from concrete objects to communications systems never fully displaces or sublimates these aesthetic concerns.

In his account of the Ulm School's model in the periphery, Bonsiepe reaffirms Maldonado's position, stating "it was no longer a matter of adding art on to industry as a civilizing element from the outside – the basic fallacy underlying the 'decorative arts' – but of developing the possibilities of formal creation inherent in industry itself."[90] If, in this 1987 account, Bonsiepe transposes the question of form from the household product to "industry itself," in a similar history from 2003 the designer shifts the question of form to that of culture: "HfG Ulm accepted industry as a substrate of contemporary society and saw industry and technology as cultural phenomena (material and not only superstructural phenomena)."[91] Both Maldonado and Bonsiepe perceived that the dynamics of design and capitalism from the 1930s onward made it impossible to recuperate the harmony of form and function once proposed by Bill. Whereas Maldonado proposed design's retreat from form into the infrastructure of

see John Roberts, "Productivism and its Contradictions," 527-36.

[88] Bayley, Edgar, Antonio Caraduje, Simón Contreras, Manuel O. Espinosa, Alfredo Hlito, Enio Iommi, Obdulio Landi, Raúl Lozza, Rembrandt Van Dyck Lozza, Tomás Maldonado, Alberto Molenberg, Primaldo Mónaco, Oscar Núñez, Lidy Prati, Jorge Souza, Matilde Werbin, "[La era artística de la ficción representativa toca su fin]."

[89] María Amalia García, *El arte abstracto*, 215.

[90] Gui Bonsiepe, "The Ulm Model in the Periphery," 266.

[91] Gui Bonsiepe, "Sobre la relevancia," 23.

increasingly immaterial labor processes, Bonsiepe re-articulates the question of form, now as logistics, now as culture, for a more advanced moment of capitalist production. Severed forever from its purportedly harmonious relation with the object's function, the key point to grasp is that style is neither eliminated nor sublimated in this dynamic triangulation. Rather, it returns in Ulm, as in Chile, as both lack and excess in the subjectivation of the workforce itself.

The material processes of production and the question of aesthetic form come together, in some ways, in Bonsiepe's approach to the interface. In a talk from 1992, Bonsiepe frames the interface as that which bridges three "heterogeneous areas" of a body, a purposeful action, and an artifact or piece of "information in the act of communication."[92]Speaking both to the past and future of industrial design for the digital age, Bonsiepe insists that "the interface goes beyond the duality of material/ immaterial, it covers what they have in common."[93]In the vein of more recent interventions in the field of new media studies, Bonsiepe was already keen to point out that industrial design's necessary investment in communications systems need not necessarily fall back into a division of form and matter or subject and technological object.[94] Where the interface here takes on ontological proportions over and against what Bonsiepe considered to be the reductively cosmetic task presumed of industrial designers, the designer's reflections closer to the time of Cybersyn include a much closer eye to the place of the designer in the production process.

As I have shown through a sample of Bonsiepe and Maldonado's writings from the 1950s and 60s, implied in the change in the object of design was also a shift and redefinition of design in relation to the technical tasks of production. Influenced by the British Design Methods

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[92] Gui Bonsiepe, *Interface*, 29.
[93] Ibid.

movements of the same era, Bonsiepe and Maldonado sought a rational method to integrate

design into engineering, what the two designers refer to as the "metodo progettuale."[95] In

Bonsiepe writings from the 1960s and 70s, the *metodo progettuale* implies understanding

industrial design as a method of operation beyond the spiritual concerns of design's forbearers,

as we have seen. In his essayistic history of industrial design from 1977, Maldonado points to the

impasse bridging the younger and older Bonsiepe, defining design "projecting" in the following

terms:

> According to this definition, designing [projecting] form means coordinating, integrating
>
> and articulating all of those factors which, in one way or another, participate in the
>
> constitutive process of a product's form. And with this we refer precisely to the factors
>
> relevant to use, fruition and individual or social consumption of the product…as to those
>
> factors that refer to its production (technical-economic, technical-constructive, technical-
>
> systematic, technical-productive and technical-distributive).[96]

Along the same lines as Bonsiepe's work in Chile, Maldonado goes on to clarify that this process

must, at the same time, adapt itself to the forces of production within a given society in order to

be effective. Maldonado implies that this method and its definition are the product of an

historical change in production. According to Maldonado, the differentiation of the serialized

industrial production of the Fordist assembly line required a new definition of design, since the

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[94] Alexander Galloway takes as the point of departure from his recent collection of essays *The Interface Effect* a critique of the late (and early) media theorist Friedrich Kittler. Galloway argues along similar lines that the interface be thought of as a form of non-dialectical mediation beyond the divide between hardware and software.

[95] Bonsiepe is most often cited, at least within the context of histories of Latin American design or of design in the global periphery, for his practice and theorization of design as a pathway to alternative economic development in the Third World. His approach, at best and at worst pragmatic, is noteworthy for strongly resisting calls to the folkloric or the telluric and insisting instead on the economic need to integrate design and engineering in the service of adapting heavy machinery and communications technology to the local needs of a given country. Rather than a transfer of technology, it concerned, in the last instance, a transfer of technique, both mechanical-digital and social. Bonsiepe discusses many of these points in the articles and talks collected in Gui Bonsiepe, *Diseño industrial*, 67, 122-23.

traditionally aesthetic ambit of the industrial designer failed to take account of the technical

process of production. Complicating his earlier stance against Bill and Banham, Maldonado

suggests in this later account that if industrial design had been considered to mediate between art

and objectified technique, the same historical forces that necessitated the articulation of the

metodo progettuale also required a re-definition of the term "design" and its connotations, as

implicit in Maldonado's recourse to the Spanish and Italian rather than the Latin-English

translation. Defining industrial design as "the 'proyectación' of industrially manufactured

objects," Maldonado clarifies that while "diseño industrial" is an importation from English and

German, its Latin root in the word "designare," meaning to delimit, trace or indicate, is itself the

assumption of a sixteenth-century Italian debate that established the pre-eminence of drawing as

an expression of artistic genius.[97]

The sixteenth-century Florentine debates Maldonado references concerned the place of

"*disegno*" in relation to the hierarchy of painting, sculpture and architecture, themselves

subsumed within an Aristotelian discussion about the highest rational potential of the purportedly

lowest art forms.[98] The Florentine artist and writer Giorgio Vasari offers a definition of *disegno*

in a supplement to the second edition of *The Lives of the Artists* written amidst and as a response

to the debates of summer 1564*:*

> Because design, the father of our three arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting,
>
> proceeding from the intellect, derives from many things a universal judgment, like a form
>
> or idea of all things in nature –which nature is most consistent in its measures – it

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[96] Tomás Maldonado, *El diseño industrial reconsiderado*, 12.
[97] Ibid., 9.
[98] The debates, known as the *paragone* disputes, concerned the relationship between the arts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Maldonado presumably refers to those that arose more specifically around Benedetto Varchi's lectures at the Florentine literary academy in 1547, whose publication included the solicited opinions of seven prominent artists on the relationship between painting and sculpture. See Robert Williams, *Art, Theory and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, 36.

happens that not only in human bodies and those of animals, but in plants as well and buildings and sculptures and paintings, it [design] understands the proportion that the whole has to its parts and the parts to one another and to the whole. And because from this there arises a certain notion and judgment which forms in the mind that which, when expressed with the hands, is called design, one may conclude that this design is nothing other than the visible expression and declaration of that notion of the mind, or of that which others have imagined in their minds or given shape to in their idea.[99]

According to art historian Robert Williams, Varasari's incorporation of Platonic notions of form and mathematical proportion within the definition of *disegno* as a faculty of judgment was intentional. In the example that succeeds the passage above, Vasari implies that the faculty for design means being able to reconstruct the proportions of the whole of the lion from the stone carving of just a claw. The ability to reconstruct this mental image requires the artist to have both a specific grasp of numerical proportion and a much more general and diverse knowledge of the natural world.[100] Moreover, if *disegno* thus subsumes architecture and the different visual arts within this overarching category of reasoning, Vasari's definition carries with it both the unity of the visual arts and their ethical implications of judgment. It is in this sense that Maldonado's etymological note addresses Cybersyn's aesthetic stakes in its attempt to re-establish the coordinates for a new fusion of technique and art for an increasingly de-materialized process of production. On one hand, the *metodo progettuale* implies a certain rational unity underlying the technical and decorative processes of industrial design. On the other, Maldonado's introduction poses how the material processes of labor also become aestheticized through "design," defined both as a faculty for the act and its graphic inscription as drawing. This discussion pertains to

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[99] Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, 205.

Cybersyn in that the Viable System Model can be considered an advancement in the forces of production, the efficacy of whose specifically socio-technical brand of innovation rests on the graphic presentation of organization. In other words, Cybersyn signals the specific historical stakes at play in the relationship between design and aesthetics Maldonado suggests.

French economist Benjamin Coriat provides us with a helpful heuristic schema for approaching the stylization of management in relation to the material forms of labor implied by the automation of the post-War factory. According to Coriat, the automation of capitalist production in the post-War period can be divided into four successive phases: the mechanization of certain operations previously performed by workers into the linear, Fordist assembly line; the re-organization of the linear process into smaller groups charged with a more variable number and flexible rhythm of tasks; the "informatization" of the management of production; and finally the logistic revolution in planning and organization most closely associated with Toyota's Kan-Ban structure of production, in which the most advanced and significant changes to production occur at the level of the coordination and optimization of tasks and the abstraction and interpretation of operations data. In explaining the ways post-War production adapted itself to a new volatility and variety of demand, Coriat emphasizes the extent to which the organization of work far surpassed the importance of technological advances in the most advanced mode of production. At the same time, just as the technical manipulation of organizational methods had become the dominant form of factory work by the 1980s, the cooperation between technocrats, or "production technicians," and operations managers risen from the ranks of manual workers had become the "true spinal column of the new organization of production."[101] Moreover, as Coriat observes, the increasing complexity of technical administration similarly translates into

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[100] Williams, *Art, Theory and Culture,* 43.
[101] Benjamin Coriat, *El taller y el robot*, 197.

the almost permanent proliferation of modes of representing such organizational patterns.[102]

While still maintaining a definite hierarchy in the division between daily operations and planning, Cybersyn's most advanced incursion into production and management occur in the administration and representation of organization itself. From a slightly different perspective, architectural historian Reinhold Martin has recently argued that the crossing of cybernetics, design and social control – what Martin terms the organization complex – sits at the heart of this same phenomenon. If, for Coriat, this new technocracy constantly searches for better modes of representing its own operations for the purposes of diagnostics and adjustment, Martin emphasizes how the search for a common visual language between art and technology in the service of logistics served as the glue holding the disperse discourses of the organizational complex together. In Martin's words, these were "representations that declared victory over representation itself."[103]

Beer's "new style of management," as it was captured in the Operations Room, thus responds to the metropolitan crisis of industrial design by transposing the problem of style from the realm of commodity circulation to that of production. With its seemingly capricious physical elements – low-tech light boxes and plastic orange and white chairs–, the Operations Room embodies Cybersyn's reconfiguration of authority through the *Schein* or appearance of its aesthetic elements. More importantly, the Operations Room signals the extent to which these aesthetic elements become functional in the production of the subject herself.

Cybersyn's recent reception within the realm of "art and technology" illustrates the extent to which, according to Lazzarato, immaterial labor acts as the interface determining the forms and apparatuses through which consumption becomes economically productive. Between

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[102] Ibid., 198.
[103] Martin, *The Organizational Complex*, 9.

October 2007 and February 2009, the Documentation Center of the recently inaugurated *Centro Cultural Palacio la Moneda* (Moneda Palace Cultural Center) in Santiago de Chile displayed the net-based and archival installation, *Multinode_Metagame*. A clone of the installation could be found simultaneously in the ZKM Media Museum in Karslruhe, Germany as part an ongoing exhibit called *You_ser, the Century of the Consumer*, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the German museum's contribution to exhibiting participatory, net-based art. Produced by the Chilean artists Catalina Ossa and Enrique Rivera, the installation was the realization of more than a year of technical collaboration and archival research on Cybersyn.[104]

    Mutinode_Metagame included a copy of Stafford Beer's *The Brain of the Firm*, one of

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[104] The CCPM is a multi-tiered cultural complex below the southern portion of the *Plaza de la Ciudadanía* (Citizenship Square), located just south of the presidential palace in Santiago de Chile. It was inaugurated in February 2006 during the last months of the administration of Socialist Party President Ricardo Lagos. The building measures 7,200 square meters and includes three subterranean levels that house the national cinema, two exhibition spaces, a library, and a central hall, as well a number of commercial and administrative spaces. See Juan G. Ayala Veloso, *Crónica de una mirada*, 27. As the first Socialist president since Salvador Allende, Lagos' administration is famous for privatizing public resources and effecting neo-liberal trade agreements. Though unintended, the CCPM is perhaps no less significant a monument to the cultural logic of late capitalism, posing as the cultural infrastructure of the state. For a brief overview of the neoliberal macroeconomic policies of Chile's coalition of center-left parties, known as the *Concertación de partidos por la democracia* (Concert of Parties for Democracy), see *Gobierno de Lagos: balance crítico*.

Figure 3.4 Catalina Ossa and Enrique Rivera
Multinode_Metagame (2007)
Installation in the Centro de Documentación of the Centro Cultural Palacio La Moneda
Cybersyn: sinergía cibernética 1970-1973, np.
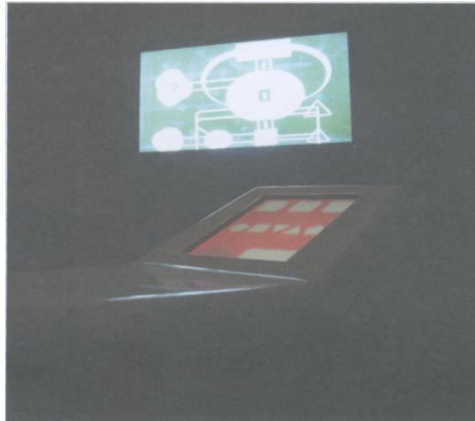© Santiago: Ocho Libros, 2008

Figure 3.5 Catalina Ossa and Enrique Rivera
Multinode_Metagame (2007)
Detail of the chair armrest of the reconstructed Operations Room
Cybersyn: sinergía cibernética 1970-1973, np.
© Santiago: Ocho Libros, 2008

two volumes dedicated to the Cybersyn; a video of a talk, "On Cybernetics," from December 1973, in which Beer reflects on his engineering experience in Chile; an electronic flipbook of Beer's archival papers on the project; a selection of original documents displayed in a glass vitrine; a mechanical slide projector showing photographs of the participants as well as some of the graphic charts designed for the project; and a reproduction of one of the fiberglass chairs from Cybersyn's Operations Room seated in front of a 3-D digital image of the Operations Room. The installation also contained a digital platform that allowed participants in both countries to collaborate simultaneously on a digital drawing and to make short video recordings about their experiences, which would then be used on the website created for the project.[105]

Seated individually and invited into a game of seemingly non-instrumental creativity, *Multinode_Metagame* would have the participant believe that he or she is at once not working and working for him or herself as the executive of the firm. The bond between art and technology that we glimpsed in the purposely self-defeating representation of organization of an earlier moment is here naturalized in the simultaneous production and consumption demanded of the spectator. To paraphrase philosophers Eric Alliez and Michel Feher, if the Fordist regime of labor painted abstraction as the individual's willed submission to an external regime, post-Fordism, by contrast, produces its subject-workers to act at once as individual entrepreneurs and as fully identified with the corporation as a whole. Workers are asked to be the corporation, identifying, in Alliez and Feher's words, with the luster of capital as such. The subsumption of subjective production under capital would seem to go hand in hand with an ever more insidious form of social control.[106]

In many ways, *Multinode_Metagame* could be read as embodying the truth and logical

[105] Ariel Bustamante, "Technical Challenges and Aesthetic Strategies for Cybersyn 2007," 85-86.
[106] Eric Alliez and Michel Feher, "The Luster of Capital," 314-359.

outcome of Cybersyn's truncated articulation of industrial design with the material processes of labor. Ossa and Rivera's hybrid project would, in this sense, seem to underline the extent to which the infrastructural becomes cultural in late capitalism. From a slightly different perspective, *Multinode_Metagame* similarly calls attention to the intensification of capitalist production such that the labor of consumption or spectatorship it invites could be interpreted as marking the end point of a trajectory of which Cybersyn also formed part. Inasmuch as Cybersyn marks a shift in emphasis from the design of everyday consumer products to the engineering of communications systems, the project also testifies to a simultaneous shift from the production of commodities to the production of subjectivity, as Alliez and Feher suggest above. To the extent that *Multinode_Metagame* confronts us with the directly productive nature of subjectivation, Cybersyn's insistence on the functionalization of style both anticipates and potentially interrupts the subsumption of labor as culture.

By shifting the organizational matrix linking art and technology to the site of production, Cybersyn overlays the logistical push to go beyond representation with the stylization or production of subjectivity bound by its graphic inscription. Contrary to Martin's reading, however, I have argued that as an inscription of impossibility, the graphic presentation of logistics for Cybersyn sutures as much as it threatens to upend the social link it designs. If style marks the uncomfortable synthesis of form and function in the interface, its formalization also insists as the quasi-material support that differentiates the social and the economic over and against the luster of capital.

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