

The Art of Exhibition

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DOUGLAS CRIMP

. . . *documenta 7*. Not a bad name because it suggests an attractive tradition of taste and discrimination. It is no doubt an honorable name. Therefore it may be followed by a subtitle as in those novels of long ago: *In which our heroes after a long and strenuous voyage through sinister valleys and dark forests finally arrive in the English Garden, and at the gate of a splendid palace.*¹

So writes Artistic Director Rudi Fuchs in his introduction to the catalogue for the Documenta exhibition of 1982. What one actually encountered, however, at the gate of the splendid palace, the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, were not heroes at all, but rather a junky-looking construction workers' trailer displaying various objects for sale. The status of these things—whether works of art or merely souvenirs—was not immediately apparent. Among the T-shirts, multiples, and other wares to be found here and at other stands throughout the English garden were sheets of stationery whose upper and lower margins were printed with statements set in small typeface. At the top of one sheet, for example, one could read the following:

If it is not met with respectful seriousness, the work of art will hardly or not at all be able to stand its ground in the environment: the world around it, customs and architecture, politics and cooking—they all have become hard and brutal. In constant noise one can easily miss hearing the soft sounds of Apollo's lyre. Art is gentle and discreet, she aims for depth and passion, clarity and warmth.

On the lower margin of the same sheet the source of this astonishing claim was given: "Excerpts from a letter to the participating artists by the Director of Documenta 7, R. H. Fuchs, edited and published by Louise Lawler."

* An earlier version of this essay was presented as a lecture in a series entitled "Situation de l'art contemporain à travers les grandes manifestations internationales," at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, on May 7, 1984.

1. Rudi Fuchs, "Introduction," in *Documenta 7*, Kassel, 1982, vol. 1, p. xv.

Not officially invited to participate in Documenta, Lawler was not a recipient of the letter from which her stationery quotes. She was, however, represented in the show in this marginal way through a subterfuge. Jenny Holzer, who had been invited, presented as part of her contribution a collaborative venture with Fashion Moda, the alternative gallery situated in the South Bronx. That is to say, Fashion Moda is located in the very heart of an environment that is hard and brutal indeed, the most notorious black and Hispanic slum in the United States; and it is there, not to stand its ground against its environment, but rather to engage with it constructively.

Though Lawler had not received Fuchs's letter, she had been interested to read it, as many of us had, for it had become the focus of art-world gossip about the forthcoming major contemporary art event. With its absurd title—"Documenta 7: A Story"—and its equally absurd opening sentence—"How can I describe the exhibition to you: the exhibition which floats in my mind like a star?"—this letter revealed Fuchs's fundamentally contradictory perspective. On the one hand, he claimed that he would restore to art its precious autonomy, while on the other hand, he made no secret his desire to manipulate the individual works of art in conformity with his inflated self-image as the master artist of the exhibition. Whether the artists intended it or not, Fuchs would insure that their works would in no way reflect upon their environment: the world around them, customs and architecture, politics and cooking.

I, too, had read the letter, circulated in the spring of 1982, and it made me curious to attend the press conference Fuchs was to give at Goethe House in New York as part of the promotional campaign for this most costly of international art exhibitions. I fully expected Fuchs to confirm there the rumors that his exhibition would constitute a complete return to conventional modes of painting and sculpture, thereby breaking with the earlier Documentas' inclusion of experimental work in other mediums such as video and performance, as well as of practices that openly criticized institutionalized forms of both production and reception. This, of course, Fuchs did, as he showed slide after slide of paintings and sculptures, mostly in the neoexpressionist style that had already come to dominate the art market in New York and elsewhere in the Western world. What I had not expected from the press conference, though, was that at least half of the artistic director's presentation would be not about art works but about work in progress to ready the exhibition spaces for the installation. "I feel," he said, "that the time one can show contemporary art in makeshift spaces, converted factories and so on, is over. Art is a noble achievement and it should be handled with dignity and respect. Therefore we have finally built real walls."²

2. Quoted in Coosje van Bruggen, "In the Mist Things Appear Larger," in *Documenta 7*, vol. II, p. ix.

And it was these walls, together with the lighting design and other details of museological endeavor, that he took great pains to present to his listeners.³

In his preface to Documenta's catalogue Fuchs succinctly summarized his art of exhibition. "We practice this wonderful craft," he wrote, "we construct an exhibition after having made rooms for this exhibition. In the meantime artists attempt to do their best, as it should be."⁴ Everything as it should be: the artistic director builds his walls—permanent now, since there will be no return to that time when temporary structures would suffice or even be necessary to meet the unconventional demands of unconventional art practices—and in the meantime the artists apply themselves to the creation of works of art appropriate to this hallowed setting.

No wonder, then, that the status of those objects in the Fashion Moda pavilions remains in question. Louise Lawler's stationery, Jenny Holzer's posters of streetwise provocations, the knickknacks produced by members of Colab, Christy Rupp's T-shirts silkscreened with the image of an attacking rat—whatever else these things may be, they are certainly not appropriate to the sacred precincts of art as reaffirmed by Rudi Fuchs. For these are deliberately marginal practices, works manufactured cheap and sold cheap, quite unlike the paintings and sculptures within the museum buildings, whose real but disguised condition is that of the international market for art, dominated increasingly by corporate speculation. Moreover, the Fashion Moda works intentionally confront, rather than deny, dissemble, or mystify the social bases of their production and circulation. Take, for example, Christy Rupp's rat image.

Rupp and I live in the same building in lower Manhattan, just a few blocks south of City Hall, where the most reactionary mayor in New York's recent history delivers the city over to powerful real estate developers while city services decline and our poorer citizens are further marginalized. The combination of the Reagan administration's cuts in federal programs to aid the poor and New York's cynically manipulated housing shortage has resulted in a reported 30,000 homeless people now living on the streets of the city.⁵ The hard and

3. At one point, Fuchs showed a slide of a patch of white paint on a portion of a newly constructed wall. This, he said, was the color of whitewash he had chosen. The audience laughed, assuming that Fuchs was indulging in a moment of self-parody, but Fuchs became indignant at the laughter. For far too long, he argued, art has been subjected to the affront of walls carelessly covered with acrylic-base paints. A chemical concoction, acrylic paint evidently represented for Fuchs yet another aspect of that unnatural environment which in its hardness and brutality conspired to drown out the soft sound of Apollo's lyre.

4. Rudi Fuchs, "Forward," in *Documenta 7*, vol. II, p. vii.

5. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported on May 1, 1984, that there were an estimated 28,000–30,000 homeless people in New York City. A spokesman for the Community of Creative Nonviolence, a private nonprofit group that works with the homeless, said, however, that the official government statistics were "utterly ridiculous," that the Reagan administration was vastly underestimating the scope of the problem for political reasons. Estimates of the number of homeless nationwide by nongovernment antipoverty groups are often ten



Christy Rupp. Rat Patrol. 1979.

brutal conditions of these people's lives can be imagined by observing the few of them who spend every evening in the alleyway behind our building competing with rats for the garbage left there by McDonald's and Burger King. Mayor Koch was publicly embarrassed in the spring of 1979, when the media reported the story of a neighborhood office worker attacked by these rats as she left work. Such an event would certainly have been routine had it happened in one of the city's ghetto districts, but in this case the Health Department was called in, and their findings were rather sensational: the vacant lot adjoining the alleyway contained thirty-two tons of garbage and was home to an estimated 4,000 rodents.⁶ But they also found something else, even more difficult to explain to the public. Pasted to the temporary wall barricading the vacant lot from the street were pictures of a huge, sinister attacking rat, reproductions of a photograph from

times the government's figures of 250,000–350,000. Cf. Robert Pear, "Homeless in U.S. Put at 250,000, Far Less Than Previous Estimates," *New York Times*, May 2, 1984, p. A1.

6. See Andy Soltis and Chris Oliver, "Super Rats: They Never Say Die," *New York Post*, May 12, 1979, p. 6, in which an official of the Health Department's Pest Control Bureau is reported as saying, "You go into the South Bronx and this happens on an ongoing basis. It was highlighted here because of the woman who was bitten."

the Health Department's own files. And these pictures were not only there but everywhere else in the vicinity where the city's usual accumulations of rotting garbage might indeed attract rats. It was as if a Health Department guerrilla action had posted advance warnings of the incident that had now taken place. The coincidence of scandalous event and the pictures which seemed to foretell it was an aspect of the story the news media were eager to report, and so they tracked down the guerrilla herself, Christy Rupp. But who was this woman? Interviewed on TV, she clearly knew a considerable amount about the city's rat problems, more even than the bureaucrats from the Health Department. Why, then, did she call herself an artist? and why did she refer to those ugly pictures as her art? Surely a photograph of a rat borrowed from Health Department files and mechanically reproduced is not a creation of artistic imagination; it has no claim to universality; it would be unthinkable to see the picture on exhibition in a museum.

But that, of course, is part of its point. Rupp's *Rat Patrol*, as she called her activity, is one of those art practices, now fairly numerous, that makes no concessions to the institutions of exhibition, even deliberately confounds them. As a result, it cannot be understood by most people as art, for it is only the exhibition institutions that can, at this historical juncture, fully legitimate any practice as art. Our understanding of this fact has been intensified recently because, since the late '60s, it has been the subject of much of the most important work by artists themselves. And it is precisely this understanding that Rudi Fuchs sought to suppress through his exhibition strategies and rhetoric at Documenta 7. One can only assume that his attempts were fully calculated, since Fuchs, in his capacity as director of the van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, had been one of the foremost proponents of art which revealed or criticized the conditions imposed on art by its modes of exhibition, or of art which broke with the notion of aesthetic autonomy by directly confronting social reality.

Needless to say, Fuchs was not entirely successful at Documenta in imposing his new view of art as merely gentle and discreet, standing its ground against the environment. Because he worked with four other curators, he was forced to include a number of artists who took it as their responsibility to unmask his art of exhibition. Thus at the approach to the Fridericianum in Kassel one was confronted with various disruptions of the decorum that Fuchs had wanted to insure. I have already mentioned the Fashion Moda stand, which the curator in charge of the American selection, Coosje van Bruggen, had insisted on accepting. Even more provocative perhaps was the work of Daniel Buren. This consisted of pennants of Buren's familiar striped material strung from high poles, which also carried loud speakers. From these were broadcast fragments of musical compositions in chronological order by composers ranging from Lully through Mozart and Beethoven to Verdi and Scott Joplin. The music was periodically interrupted by recitations of color names in fourteen languages. Buren thereby created at the entrance to the exhibition an atmo-



Daniel Buren. *Les Guirlandes at Documenta 7, with Johann August Nahl's Monument to Frederick II in foreground.* (Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren.)

sphere that the critic Benjamin Buchloh described as “appropriate to a fun fair or the grand opening of a gas station.”⁷ Such an atmosphere is considerably more suitable to the self-promotion of the state of Hesse and the festive gathering of the international art community than would have been Fuchs’s wished-for air of reverence. Moreover, Buren simultaneously parodied the show’s simplistic notions of history (one volume of the catalogue, for example, arranged the entrants according to their birth dates) and of nationalism, a category newly revived to foster stronger market competition.

Inside the three museum buildings, the Fridericianum, the Orangerie, and the Neue Galerie, Fuchs willfully distributed works by any one artist throughout the galleries so that they would appear in perversely unlikely juxtaposition with works by various other artists. The result was to deny difference, dissemble meaning, and reduce everything to a potpourri of random style, although Fuchs liked to speak of this strategy as effecting dialogues between artists. The genuine significance of these groupings, however, was more accurately captured in Lawrence Wiener’s phrase printed on the Fridericianum’s frieze: “Viele farbige Dinge nebeneinander angeordnet bilden eine Reihe vieler farbiger Dinge.” Translated for the wrapper which bound together the two hefty volume’s of the show’s catalogue, the statement reads in English: “Many colored objects placed side by side to form a row of many colored objects.”

Within the precincts of the museum buildings it was considerably more difficult for artists to force an awareness of Fuchs’s tactics. One work, however, strongly countered Fuchs’s program to override art’s involvement with significant public issues. This was Hans Haacke’s *Oelgemaelde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers*, relegated to the Neue Galerie rather than given pride of place in the Fridericianum. Haacke’s work consisted of a confrontation: on one wall was a meticulously painted oil portrait of President Reagan; on the opposite wall was a gigantic photomural of a peace demonstration. The portrait was surrounded by the museological devices traditionally used to enhance the art work’s aura, to designate the work of art as separate, apart, inhabiting a world unto itself, in conformity with Fuchs’s doctrine. Contained within its gold frame, illuminated in its own special glow by a small picture lamp, provided with a discreet wall label, protected by a velvet rope strung between two stanchions, the painting was kept, like the *Mona Lisa*, a safe distance from the admiring viewer. With this parodying of museological paraphernalia Haacke paid tribute to Broodthaers’s museum fictions of the early ’70s while simultaneously mocking Fuchs’s desire to elevate and safeguard his masterpieces. From this little shrine of high art a red carpet led underfoot to the facing wall, where Haacke installed an en-

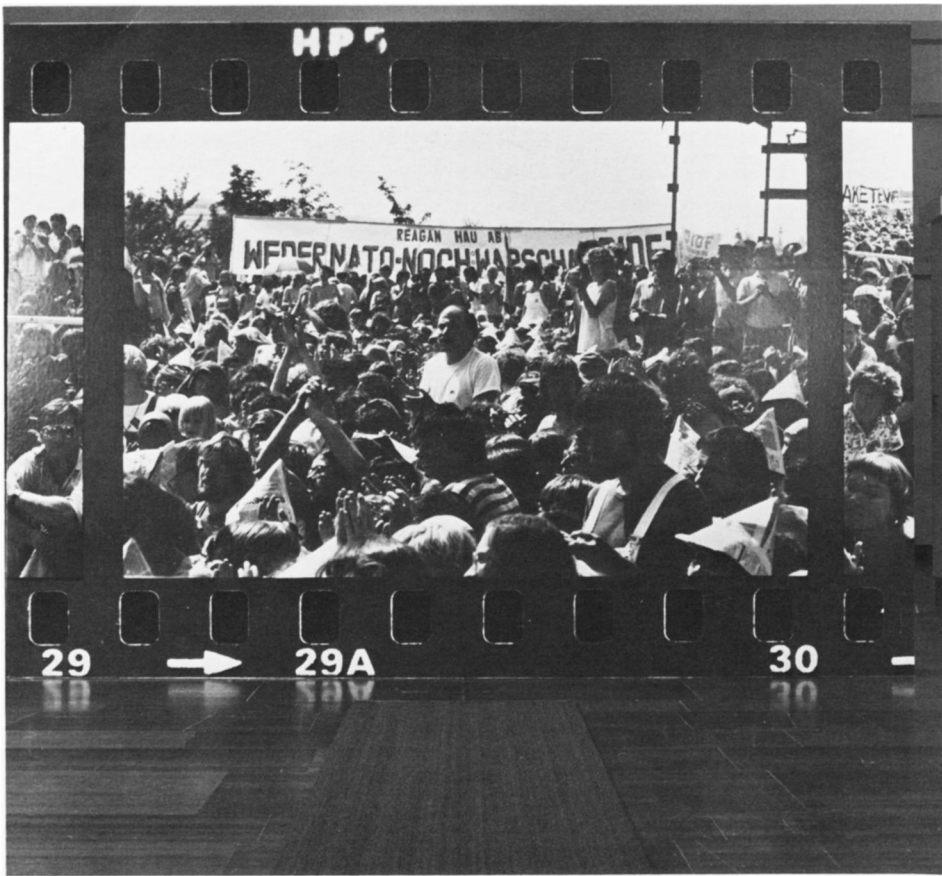
7. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Documenta 7: A Dictionary of Received Ideas,” *October*, no. 22 (Fall 1982), p. 112. I am indebted to Buchloh’s review for clarification of many of the issues of Documenta 7 discussed in this essay.



Hans Haacke. Oelgemaelde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers. 1982.

larged photograph taken in Bonn just one week before the official opening of Documenta. This photo was shot at a demonstration, the largest held thus far in postwar Germany, to protest Reagan's arrival to lobby support in the Bundestag for deployment of American cruise and Pershing 2 missiles on German soil.

In its high degree of specificity, Haacke's work was able to do what the vast majority of paintings and sculptures in the exhibition could not. Not only did Haacke insert into this context a reminder of the real historical conditions which we now face, but he also reflected upon the relevant terms of current aesthetic debate. If not for Haacke's work, one would hardly have known that photography has recently become an important medium for artists attempting to resist the hegemony of the traditional beaux arts, that Walter Benjamin's classic essay on mechanical reproduction has become central to critical theories of contemporary visual culture. Nor would one have understood that this debate also encompasses a critique of the museum institution in its function of preserving the auratic status of art that was Benjamin's main target. All we learn of



this from Fuchs is that “our culture suffers from an illusion of the media,” and that this is something to be overcome by the exhibition enterprise.⁸

But what is more important than these debates, Haacke’s *Oelgemaelde* suggested to the viewer that the relevant history of the town of Kassel was nearer to us than the one to which Documenta’s artistic director constantly made reference. Fuchs sought to locate his Documenta within the grand tradition of the eighteenth century, when the aristocrats of Hesse-Kassel built their splendid palace, one of the first museum buildings in Europe. The official postcard of Documenta 7 was a photograph of the neoclassical statue of the Landgrave Frederick II by Johann August Nahl, which stands in front of the Museum Fridericianum; in addition, each volume of the catalogue carries on its cover a photograph of one of the allegorical sculptures adorning the pediment of the museum, not surprisingly those representing the old beaux-arts categories of painting and sculpture.

8. Fuchs, “Forward,” p. vii.

Kassel has, however, as I have stated, a recent history that is far more relevant. If Fuchs had to build walls within the museum it was because the original ones had been destroyed by the Allied bombings of World War II. Kassel, once at the very center of Germany, was one of Hitler's strategic ammunition depots. But Kassel no longer lies at the center of Germany; it is now only a few miles from the border of that other Germany to the east. Haacke's work, then, might have evoked for Documenta's visitors not Kassel's glorious eighteenth-century past, but its precarious present, at a time when the tensions of the cold war have been dangerously escalated once again. Perhaps it is this hard and brutal fact above all that Fuchs would have us forget as we are lulled by the soft sounds of Apollo's lyre.

*

Fuchs's desire to reaffirm the autonomy of art against the incursion of urgent historical facts was far more thoroughly realized in another international exhibition staged later in 1982, also in Germany. Appropriately titling their show *Zeitgeist*, the organizers, Norman Rosenthal and Christos Joachimides, were much bolder than Fuchs in their denial of the realities of the political climate and in their exclusion of any art that might unsettle the mystificatory tendencies which they presented as exemplary of the spirit of the times. Once again the exhibition was mounted in a historic museum building, the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin, now known as the Martin-Gropius-Bau, after its architect. Joachimides made reference to this building's history in the closing paragraph of his catalogue introduction:

When Mario Merz came to Berlin a number of months ago and visited the Martin Gropius Building to discuss his contribution to the exhibition, he quite spontaneously remarked, "Che bell Palazzo!" [Here we are, again, in front of a splendid palace.] On another occasion, Norman Rosenthal spoke of the tension between the interior and the exterior, between the reality and the memory that the building evokes. Outside, an environment of horror, made up of the German past and present. Inside, the triumph of autonomy, the architectural "Gesamtkunstwerk" which in masterly and sovereign manner banishes reality from the building by creating its own. Even the wounds which reality has inflicted on it are part of its beauty. That is also — ZEITGEIST: the place, *this* place, *these* artists, at *this* moment. For us the question is how does an autonomous work of art relate to the equally autonomous architecture and to the sum of memories which are present today.⁹

9. Christos Joachimides, "Achilles and Hector before the Walls of Troy," in *Zeitgeist*, New York, Braziller, 1983, p. 10.



Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin, c. 1946.

How indeed? But first, we might be a bit more specific about what those memories are and what that present reality is. The Martin-Gropius-Bau lay virtually in complete ruin after the war, since it was in direct proximity to the Gestapo headquarters, the SS office building, Ernst Sagebiel's Ministry of Aviation, and Albert Speer's Reichs Chancellery. Defended to the last, this administrative center of Nazi power came under the heaviest bombing and shelling of any area of the city. Throughout the period of reconstruction, the Kunstgewerbemuseum remained a neglected pile of rubble; not until the late '70s was restoration undertaken. Even now, much of the ornamentation is irreparably damaged. But perhaps even more relevant than these traces of shelling is the fact that one must enter the building from the rear, since the former front stands only a few yards from the Berlin Wall. This presumably is the environment of horror to which Rosenthal referred as he mused on the triumph of autonomy of this building and the works of art to be contained within it.

Had Rosenthal and Joachimides invited artists such as Hans Haacke to participate in *Zeitgeist*, their rhetorical question might have received some answers of real importance.¹⁰ For it is part of the stated program of Haacke's

10. This portion of the present essay was written prior to Haacke's work for the Neue Gesell-

enterprise, as well as that of other artists working with a similar approach, that the context of the exhibition dictates the nature of the intervention he will make. As Haacke put it, "The context in which a work is exhibited for the first time is a material for me like canvas and paint." This means, of course, that Haacke's work must relinquish its claim to autonomy and universality, as well as its status as an easily marketable commodity. And it is these latter aspects of art to which Rosenthal and Joachimides have shown themselves to be primarily devoted. Nevertheless, the idea of commissioning works specifically for the context of *Zeitgeist* did not entirely elude this pair. In order to give an impressive sense of uniformity to the grand atrium space of the museum, they asked eight of the participating artists each to paint especially for the exhibition four paintings with the dimensions of three by four meters. The artists dutifully complied, adjusting the size and format of their products to meet the demands of exhibition, just as a dress designer might alter the shape of one of his creations to suit the needs of an unusually portly client. The young American painter David Salle even took the daring step of foregoing his usual cryptic poetic titles and labeled his tailor-made creations *Zeitgeist Painting Nr. 1*, *Zeitgeist Painting Nr. 2*, *Zeitgeist Painting Nr. 3*, and *Zeitgeist Painting Nr. 4*. The prospective collectors would no doubt be very pleased to have acquired works thus stamped with the imprimatur of a prestigious international show.

For a description of the *zeitgeistig* art works, I will rely upon one of the American contributors to the catalogue, the eminent art historian Robert Rosenblum, whose agility in adapting to any new aesthetic fashion makes him especially qualified to speak for this one:

The ivory towers where artists of an earlier decade painstakingly calculated hairbreadth geometries, semiotic theories, and various visual and intellectual purities have been invaded by an international army of new artists who want to shake everything up with their self-consciously bad manners. Everywhere, a sense of liberating eruption can be felt, as if a turbulent world of myths, of memory, of molten, ragged shapes and hues had been released from beneath the repres-

schaft für Bildende Kunst in West Berlin, a work which fully confirms my speculation. *Breadth and Diversity of the Ludwig Brigade*, presented elsewhere in this issue of *October*, does indeed use as its starting point the proximity of the Berlin Wall to the place of exhibition, the Künstlerhaus Bethanien. And it therefore takes as its subject German-German relations, relations which have again been much in the news due to the proposed visit of Erich Honecker to Bonn this fall, and its postponement under Soviet pressure.

One more example of the way in which Rosenthal and Joachimides might have received real answers to their question: Last winter in the *Art & Ideology* exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, Allan Sekula showed *Sketch for a Geography Lesson*, a work consisting of photographs and accompanying text that, again, takes the effects of the renewal of cold war tensions in Germany as its subject, although in a manner quite different from Haacke's *Ölgemälde*.

sive restraints of the intellect which reigned over the most potent art of the last decade. The objective territory of formal lucidity, of the impersonal, static surfaces of photographic imagery has been toppled by earthquakes which seem both personal and collective, outbursts of the artists' own fantasies culled, however, from the most public range of experience, whether from mythology, history, or the vast inventory of earlier works of art that constantly assail the contemporary eye and mind in every conceivable place, from magazines and postcards to subway stations and middle-class interiors.

From this Pandora's Box, a never-ending stream of legendary creatures is emerging, populating these new canvases in the most unexpected ways. This attack upon the traditional iconoclasm of abstract art and the empirical assumptions of photographic imagery has aggressively absorbed the wildest range of beings taken from the Bible, from comic strips, from historical legend, from literary pantheons, from classical lore. An anthology of works by the artists represented here might include images, for example, not only of Jesus (Fetting), Pegasus (LeBrun), Brunnhilde (Kiefer), Orion (Garouste), Prometheus (Lüpertz), Victor Hugo (Schnabel), and Picasso (Borofsky), but also of Bugs Bunny (Salle), and Lucky Luke (Polke). The result is a visual Tower of Babel that mixes its cultures — high and low, contemporary and prehistoric, classical and Christian, legendary and historical — with an exuberant irreverence that mirrors closely the confusing glut of encyclopedic data that fills our shared visual environment and provides us with the material of dreams and art.¹¹

One could spend some time analyzing a text in which ivory towers are invaded by international armies, who then proceed to build, still within the ivory tower, a Tower of Babel; or again, a prose style whose vagaries of terminology can slide from "historical legend" to the binary opposition "legendary" versus "historical." It is, in any case, a peculiar view of history that sees one decade as ruled by an intellect that is called repressive and the next as liberated by an eruption of self-consciously bad manners. But this history is, after all, only *art* history, an institutionalized discipline of which Rosenblum is a reigning master. For him, the word *history* might well be replaced by *Zeitgeist*, for he can comprehend nothing more than changes in sensibility and style. Thus the art-historical shift that is chronicled by the exhibition *Zeitgeist* is merely another predictable swing of the pendulum of style from cool to hot, from abstract to figurative, from Apollonian to Dionysian. (We may note here that in this re-

11. Robert Rosenblum, "Thoughts on the Origins of 'Zeitgeist,'" in *Zeitgeist*, pp. 11–12.

gard Rudi Fuchs had confused his terms when he invoked the soft sounds of Apollo's lyre, for at Documenta, too, the dominant mode of painting was the shrill bombast of neoexpressionism.)

Rosenblum's history as *Zeitgeist* was corroborated in the exhibition catalogue by his colleague Hilton Kramer, who reduced it finally to a simple matter of changing tastes. Kramer had hit upon this novel idea that new art could be explained as a change in taste in trying to come to grips in his *New York Times* column with the work of Julian Schnabel and Malcolm Morley. Clearly pleased that he had found the solution to the dilemma, he decided to quote himself in his *Zeitgeist* essay:

Nothing is more incalculable in art—or more inevitable—than a genuine change in taste. . . . Although taste seems to operate by a sort of law of compensation, so that the denial of certain qualities in one period almost automatically prepares the ground for their triumphal return later, its timetable can never be accurately predicted. Its roots lie in something deeper and more mysterious than mere fashion. At the heart of every genuine change in taste there is, I suppose, a keen feeling of loss, an existential ache—a sense that something absolutely essential to the life of art has been allowed to fall into a state of unendurable atrophy. It is to the immediate repair of this perceived void that taste at its profoundest level addresses itself.¹²

Kramer goes on to explain that what had been lost from art during the '60s and '70s was poetry and fantasy, the drama of the self, the visionary and the irrational; these had been denied by the orthodoxies of pure, cerebral abstraction. Again, it is a question only of style and sensibility and the subject matter they can generate.

But what is left out of these descriptions of contemporary art? What is, in fact, repressed, denied? The hidden agenda of this version of recent history is the calculated exclusion of the truly significant developments of the art of the past two decades. By characterizing the art of this period as abstract, geometric, intellectual, the real terms of art practice are elided. Where do we read in these texts of the critique of the institutions of power which seek to limit the meaning and function of art to the purely aesthetic? Where is a discussion of the attempted

12. Hilton Kramer, "Signs of Passion," in *Zeitgeist*, p. 17. It is interesting that Kramer here speaks of changes in art as *compensatory* for a sense of loss inherent in a previous style, for it is precisely that sense of loss and its periodic *intensification* that Leo Steinberg proposed, in his "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public" (in *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972), as the very condition of innovation within modernism. It was with this contrast between, on the one hand, Steinberg's understanding of modernism and, on the other hand, Kramer's resentment of it that Annette Michelson began her review of Hilton Kramer's *The Age of the Avant-Garde*; see Michelson, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of the Public: a View from the New York Hilton," *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 1 (September 1974), pp. 68–70.

dissolution of the beaux-arts mediums and their replacement with modes of production which could better resist those institutions? Where do we find an analysis of work by feminists and minorities whose marginalization by the art institutions became a significant point of departure for the creation of alternative practices? Where do we find mention of those direct interventions by artists in their local social environments? Where, in short, in these essays can we learn of the political critique which has been the real thrust of our recent art?

The answer is, of course: nowhere. For Rosenblum and Kramer, for Rosenthal and Joachimides, and for Fuchs, politics is what art must deny. For them art is gentle and discreet, it is autonomous, and it exists in an ivory tower. Art is, after all, only a matter of taste. To this endeavor politics is a threat. But what of *their* politics? Is there only an *art* of exhibition? Is there not also a politics of exhibition? Is it not a politics that chooses as the symbol of an exhibition the statue of an eighteenth-century imperial ruler? that invites only one woman to participate in an exhibition of forty-three artists?¹³ Can we not recognize a politics that would limit a discussion of repression and liberation to matters of style? Is it not, assuredly, a politics that wants to confine art to a pure realm of the aesthetic?

Interestingly enough, Hilton Kramer's conversion to the aesthetic of neo-expressionism took place at about the same time that he underwent another, somewhat more concrete conversion. After sixteen years as art critic for the *New York Times*, arguably the most influential newspaper in America, Kramer resigned to found his own magazine. Generously financed by major conservative foundations, Kramer's *New Criterion* is now recognized, after two years of publication, as the principal intellectual organ of the Reagan administration's cultural policies. Under the guise of a return to established moral values and critical standards, these policies in fact include a defunding and further marginalization of all cultural activities seen as critical of the right-wing political agenda, and a gradual dismantling of government support for the arts and humanities, to be replaced by monies from the private sector. This latter term, a favorite of the present United States government, is best translated as corporate self-interest, which has already begun to tighten its grip on all aspects of American cultural activity, from television programming to art exhibitions. Kramer's efforts in this regard are well served by his publisher, Samuel Lipman, who sits on President Reagan's National Council on the Arts, the body that oversees the activities of the National Endowment for the Arts. The effectiveness of Kramer's new magazine may be discerned from the fact that within several months of his writing an article in the *New Criterion* condemning the Na-

13. These are the figures for the *Zeitgeist* exhibition. *A New Spirit in Painting*, an earlier show organized in London by Rosenthal and Joachimides, together with Nicolas Serota, contained work by thirty-eight artists, not one of whom was a woman.

tional Endowment's art critics fellowships, the Chairman of the Endowment announced their cancellation.¹⁴

It is within this context that we must see Kramer's claims of a high-minded neutrality on aesthetic issues, his abhorrence of the politicization of art. In an article in the *New Criterion* entitled "Turning Back the Clock: Art and Politics in 1984," Kramer violently attacked a number of recent exhibitions which attempted to deal with the issue of art and politics. His central argument was that any attempt to see the workings of ideology within the aesthetic is a totalitarian, even Stalinist position, which leads inevitably to an acquiescence in tyranny. But what is tyranny if not that form of government that seeks to silence all criticism of or opposition to its policies? And what is the aesthetic production most acceptable to tyranny if not that which either directly affirms the status quo or contents itself with solipsistic exercises in so-called self-expression? Kramer's own acquiescence in the tyrannical suppression of opposition is most evident in his essay's implicit call for the defunding of those exhibition venues showing political art, which he reminds his readers time and time again are recipients of public financial support; or in his questioning the suitability for academic positions of those politically committed art critics who acted as curators for the shows. But these McCarthyite insinuations are hidden behind a veil of supposedly disinterested concern for the maintenance of aesthetic standards. In Kramer's estimation, not only is it virtually inconceivable that political art could be of high aesthetic quality, but what is worse, this art appears intentionally to negate aesthetic discourse altogether. To prove his point, Kramer singled out Hans Haacke's contribution to one of the exhibitions organized under the auspices of Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America. Here is his discussion of Haacke's work:

In the show at the City University mall we were shown, among much else, a huge, square, unpainted box constructed of wood and

14. See Hilton Kramer, "Criticism Endowed: Reflections on a Debacle," *New Criterion*, vol. 2, no. 3 (November 1983), pp. 1-5. Kramer's argument consisted of an accusation of conflict of interest, wherein "at the core of the program there was certainly a nucleus of friends and professional colleagues who were assiduous in looking after each other's interests" (p. 3). This is Kramer's characterization of what is otherwise known as the peer-panel system of judging, in which members of the profession are asked to judge the work of their fellow critics. Needless to say, the result will be a certain degree of overlap among grantees and jurors over a period of years. It seems highly likely, however, that Kramer's real opposition to the critics fellowships stems from his perception that "a great many of them went as a matter of course to people who were opposed to just about every policy of the United States government except one that put money in their own pockets or the pockets of their friends and political associates" (p. 4).

Frank Hodsell, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, disavowed the influence of Kramer's article on the decision to cancel the fellowships. He did admit, though, that "doubts expressed by the National Council on the Arts" were a deciding factor, and it is said that Samuel Lipman personally provided each member of the Council with a copy of Kramer's article. See Grace Glueck, "Endowment Suspends Grants for Art Critics," *New York Times*, April 5, 1984, p. C16.

standing approximately eight feet high. On its upper side there were some small openings and further down some words stencilled in large letters. A parody of the Minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd, perhaps? Not at all. This was a solemn statement, and the words told us why: "Isolation Box As Used by U.S. Troops at Point Salines Prison Camp in Grenada." The creator of this inspired work was Hans Haacke, who was also represented in the "Art and Social Conscience" exhibition [this exhibition, also a target of Kramer's attack, was held at the Edith C. Blum Art Institute at Bard College] by a photographic lightbox poster attacking President Reagan. Such works are not only devoid of any discernible artistic quality, they are pretty much devoid of any discernible artistic existence. They cannot be experienced as art, and they are not intended to be. Yet where else but in an art exhibition would they be shown? Their purpose in being entered into the art context, however, is not only to score propaganda points but to undermine the very idea of art as a realm of aesthetic discourse. President Reagan and his policies may be the immediate object of attack, but the more fundamental one is the idea of art itself.¹⁵

But whose idea of art? Whose realm of aesthetic discourse? Whose artistic quality? Kramer speaks as if these were all decided matters, and that everyone would therefore agree that Haacke's work can be nothing other than propaganda, or, as was suggested in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, pornography.¹⁶ It seems to have escaped Kramer's attention that Haacke used the by now fully historical aesthetic strategy of appropriation in order to create a work of rigorous factual specificity. Haacke's *Isolation Box, Grenada* is a precise reconstruction of those used by the U.S. army only a few months before in blatant disregard of the Geneva Convention. As he read the description in the *New York Times* of the prison cells built expressly for the brutal humiliation of Grenadian and Cuban hostages,¹⁷ Haacke did not fail to note their resemblance to the "minimalist

15. Hilton Kramer, "Turning Back the Clock: Art and Politics in 1984," *New Criterion*, April 1984, p. 71.

16. "Artists for Old Grenada," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 1984, p. 32. The passage in question reads: "To our knowledge the CCNY [sic] exhibition has not been reviewed yet by a prominent New York art critic. Perhaps critics have noticed that a few blocks down 42nd Street one can see what's maybe America's greatest collection of obscenity and pornography, and that in this respect, the CCNY artists' interpretation of what the U.S. did in Grenada is in proper company." For a reply to the editorial by Hans Haacke and Thomas Woodruff, see "Letters," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 1984.

17. See David Shribman, "U.S. Conducts Grenada Camp for Questioning," *New York Times*, November 14, 1983, pp. A1, A7. The passages describing the isolation boxes read as follows: "Beyond the control gate and barbed wire, and between two clusters of tents, are the most prominent features of the camp, two rows of newly constructed wooden chambers, each measuring about eight feet by eight feet." "Beside [the interrogation booths], however, were 10 isolation booths, each with four small windows and a number of ventilation holes with a radius of half an

sculpture of Donald Judd,” and thus to recognize the possibility of appropriating that sculptural aesthetic for a work of contemporary political relevance. But presumably for Kramer it is an acquiescence in tyranny to reclaim an aesthetic position for the purpose of questioning a government that disregards international law to invade a tiny sovereign state, that mistakenly bombs a mental asylum and kills scores of innocent people, and that exercises total press censorship throughout the invasion.

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Hilton Kramer's failure to recognize the historical avant-garde strategy in Haacke's *Isolation Box, Grenada* is not simply governed by his desire to forestall the hard political questions that Haacke's work raises. Kramer's purpose is more sweeping: to suppress any discussion of the links between the artistic avant-garde and radical politics, and thus to claim for modern art a continuous, unproblematic aesthetic history that is entirely severed from episodes of political engagement. The lengths to which Kramer will go to fulfill this purpose can be determined by reading, in the same "Art and Politics" essay, his attack on one of the curators of the New Museum's *Art & Ideology* exhibition, the main target of Kramer's rage:

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, . . . who teaches art history at the State University of New York at Westbury, defends the propaganda materials he has selected for this exhibition by, among other things, attacking the late Alfred H. Barr, Jr., for his alleged failure to comprehend "the radical change that [modern] artists and theoreticians introduced into the history of aesthetic theory and production in the twentieth century." What this means, apparently, is that Alfred Barr would never have accepted Professor Buchloh's Marxist analysis of the history of modern art, which appears to be based on Louis Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy*. (Is this really what is taught as modern art history at SUNY Westbury? Alas, one can believe it.)¹⁸

I will not dwell upon, but simply call attention to these parenthetical remarks, should anyone doubt that Kramer's tactics now include red-baiting. More important in our context is the deliberate falsification achieved by the word *modern*, which Kramer has placed in brackets. To accuse Alfred Barr of failing to comprehend *modern* artists and theoreticians is something that even the most ex-

inch. Prisoners must enter these booths by crawling through a hatch that extends from the floor of the booths to about knee level."

18. Kramer, "Turning Back the Clock," p. 71.

tremist enemies of Barr's positions would be hesitant to do, and it is not at all what Buchloh did. Here is a fuller portion of the passage from which Kramer quoted:

When one of the founding fathers of American Modernism and the first director of the institution that taught the American Neo-avant-garde arrived in the Soviet Union in 1927 on a survey journey to take stock of international avant-garde activities for their possible import into the United States, he saw himself confronted with a situation of seemingly unmanageable conflicts. On the one hand, there was the extraordinary productivity of the modernist avant-garde in the Soviet Union (extraordinary by the numbers of its constituency, men and women, its modes of production, ranging from Malevich's late Suprematist work through the laboratory period of the Constructivists to the Lef Group and the Productivist Program, from Agit Prop-theater productions to avant-garde film production for mass audiences). On the other hand, there was the obvious general awareness among artists and cultural producers, critics and theorists that they were participating in a final transformation of the modernist aesthetic, which would irretrievably and irrevocably alter the conditions of production and reception as they had been inherited from bourgeois society and its institutions (from Kant's aesthetics and the modernist practices that had originated in them). Moreover, there was the growing fear that the process of that successful transformation might be aborted by the emergence of totalitarian repression from within the very system that had generated the foundations for a new socialist collective culture. Last of all and crucial, there was Alfred Barr's own disposition of interests and motivations of action within that situation: searching for the most advanced modernist avant-garde in a moment and place where that social group was just about to dismantle itself and its specialized activities in order to assume a new role and function in the newly-defined collective process of a social production of culture.

The reasons why Alfred Barr, one of the first "modern" art historians, then just about to discover and establish the modern avant-garde in the United States, was determined (in the literal sense) to fail in comprehending the radical change that those artists and theoreticians introduced into the history of aesthetic theory and production in the twentieth century, are obviously too complex to be dealt with in this context. . . .¹⁹

19. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Since Realism There Was . . . (On the Current Conditions of Factographic Art)," in *Art & Ideology*, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984,

In spite of the fact that Buchloh devoted a lengthy paragraph to detailing the special historical circumstances of *those* artists and theoreticians that Barr failed fully to comprehend (again, as Buchloh says, for historically specific, or determined reasons), Kramer substituted the general term *modern* for Buchloh's *those* — those productivists who were at that moment in the late '20s on the brink of dissolving the autonomous modernist mediums in favor of a collective social production.

I have quoted Buchloh's essay at length not only to demonstrate the insidious, falsifying tactics of Hilton Kramer's neoconservative criticism, but also because it is of particular pertinence to the contemporary art of exhibition. For it is precisely the desire to dissemble the history of disruptions of the modernist aesthetic development that constitutes the present program of the museum that Alfred Barr helped to found. It was Buchloh's point that the Museum of Modern Art had presented the history of modern art to the American public, and more particularly to the artists within that public, that never fully articulated the true avant-garde position. For that position included the development of cultural practices that would critically reveal the constricting institutionalization of art within modern bourgeois society. At the same time, those practices were intended to function socially outside that institutionalized system. At MOMA, however, both in its earlier period and still more today, the works of the Soviet avant-garde, of Duchamp, and of the German dada artists have been tamed. They are presented, insofar as it is possible, as if they were conventional masterpieces of fine art. The radical implications of this work have been distorted by the institution so as not to allow interference with its portrayal of modern art as a steady development of abstract and abstracting styles.

Although it is perfectly clear that the current installation of the MOMA collections is intended to present not merely individual objects of modern art but rather a *history* of those objects — "These collections tell the story of modern art," proclaims a recent MOMA press release — it is also clear that the justification for the false construction of that history is connoisseurship; MOMA's primary responsibility, as they apparently see it, is to provide the public with a direct experience of great works of art unburdened by the weight of history.²⁰ This rationale is, in fact, spelled out in the new museum installation at the entrance to the Alfred H. Barr Jr. Galleries. On the dedicatory plaque, Barr is quoted as once having defined his task as "the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity."²¹ To determine just how this con-

pp. 5–6. A slightly different version of this same discussion appears in Buchloh's essay "From Faktura to Factography," published in this issue of *October*. There Buchloh develops much further the precise circumstances to which Barr was witness on his journey to the Soviet Union, as well as later developments.

20. This contradiction is, of course, deeply embedded in the history of modern museology and is therefore far from unique to the Museum of Modern Art.

21. Hilton Kramer quotes Barr's connoisseurship goals approvingly in his "MOMA Reopened:



Installation of Soviet avant-garde works at the Museum of Modern Art, 1984. (Photo: Louise Lawler.)

noisseurship principle is exercised in the interests of a biased history would require a detailed analysis of, among other things, the relative weight and density given to particular artists and movements — of the prominence accorded Picasso and Matisse, for example, as opposed to, say, Duchamp and Malevich; of the special care taken with the installation of cubism as against that of the Soviet avant-garde, now relegated to a cluttered stair hall; of the decisions to exhibit certain works owned by the museum while others are banished to storage.

The Museum of Modern Art in the Postmodern Era," *New Criterion*, Summer 1984, p. 14. Indeed, his entire critique of the new MOMA installations and opening exhibition is based on what he sees as a failure of the current museum officials to exercise connoisseurship as fully and wisely as did Barr. For example, he condemns *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture* as "the most incredible mess the museum has ever given us," which is due to the fact that "of anything resembling connoisseurship or critical acumen there is not a trace" ("MOMA Reopened," p. 41).

There is, however, a less complex but far more effective means by which MOMA imposes a partisan view of the objects in its possession. This is the rigid division of modern art practices into separate departments within the institution. By distributing the work of the avant-garde to various departments—to Painting and Sculpture, Architecture and Design, Photography, Film, Prints and Illustrated Books—that is, by stringently enforcing what appears to be a natural parceling of objects according to medium, MOMA automatically constructs a formalist history of modernism. Because of this simple and seemingly neutral fact, the museum goer can have no sense of the significance of, to give just one example, Rodchenko's abandonment of painting in favor of photography. That Rodchenko saw painting as a vestige of an outmoded culture and photography as possibly instrumental in the creation of a new one—the very situation that Alfred Barr witnessed during the trip to the Soviet Union to which Buchloh referred—this history cannot be articulated through the consignment of Rodchenko's various works to different fiefdoms within the museum. As it is, one experiences Rodchenko merely as an artist who worked in more than one medium, which is to say, as versatile, like many “great” artists. Seen within the Department of Photography, Rodchenko might seem to be an artist who increased the formal possibilities of photography, but he cannot be understood as one who saw photography as having a far greater potential for social utility than painting, if for no other reason than that photography readily lent itself to a wider system of distribution. Mounted and framed as individual auratic works of art, Rodchenko's photographs cannot even convey this most simple historical fact. Such a misrepresentation of modernism, inherent in the very structure of MOMA, was to have particular consequences for postwar American art—the point of Buchloh's discussion of this issue in his essay for the *Art & Ideology* show—and it is those consequences in their fuller contradictions which we are now experiencing in the contemporary art of exhibition, a point to which I shall return.

Hilton Kramer's summary dismissal of Buchloh's analysis of Barr's encounter with the Soviet avant-garde, effected simply by labeling it Althusserian,²² can be more fully understood when placed alongside his own characterization of this crucial episode, one which transpired just before the founding of the museum in 1929. In a special issue of the *New Criterion* devoted entirely to an

22. Buchloh's discussion of this very specific moment in the history of modern art does not, in fact, refer to Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy*; rather his discussion of the contemporary politicized work of Allan Sekula and Fred Lonidier does. He notes, “If Althusser's argument is correct that the aesthetic constitutes itself only inside the ideological, what then is the nature of the practice of those artists who, as we are suggesting, are in fact trying to develop practice that is operative outside and inside the ideological apparatus? The first argument that will of course be leveled against this type of work is that it simply cannot be ‘art’ . . .” (“Since Realism There Was,” p. 8). This “first argument” is precisely the one Kramer used against Hans Haacke and the other political artists he attacked.

essay on the reopened museum, Kramer is again careful to separate aesthetics from politics:

[Barr] had been to Germany and Russia in the Twenties, and had been deeply impressed with the art—and with the ideas governing the art—which he studied there. These ideas were radical in more than an aesthetic sense—although they were certainly that. They were radical, or at least were thought to be at the time, in their social implications as well. At the Bauhaus in Germany and in the councils of the Russian avant-garde in the early years of the Revolution, the very conception of what art was or should be was altered under the influence of a powerful utopian ideology. As a result, the boundary separating fine art from industrial art was, if not completely abandoned by everyone concerned, at least very much questioned and undermined. Henceforth, from this radical perspective, there were to be no aesthetic hierarchies. A poster might be equal to a painting, a factory or a housing project as much to be esteemed as a great work of sculpture.

It is my impression that at no time in his life was Barr very much interested in politics. It was not, in any case, the political implications of this development that drew him to it. What deeply interested him were its aesthetic implications, and therefore, under his influence, what governed the museum's outlook from its earliest days was a vision that attempted to effect a kind of grand synthesis of modernist aesthetics and the technology of industrialism.²³

Whether or not Kramer fairly appraises Barr's political interest, he attributes to him an understanding of the aesthetics of the avant-garde that fully deradicalizes them, though Kramer persists in using the term *radical*.²⁴ It is by no means the case that the early avant-garde was simply interested in giving to "architecture, industrial design, photography, and film a kind of parity with painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts," to elevate work in other mediums "to the realm of fine art."²⁵ On the contrary, the true radicalism of the early avant-garde was its abandonment of the very notion of fine art in the interests of social production, which meant, for one thing, destroying easel painting as a form. The orig-

23. Kramer, "MOMA Reopened," p. 42.

24. Ironically, Kramer's version of Barr's encounter with the Soviet avant-garde is virtually identical to Buchloh's, even to the point of noting that Barr severed the art from the politics that motivated that art. The difference, of course, is that Buchloh shows that this separation resulted, precisely, in Barr's failure to comprehend "the radical change that those artists and theoreticians introduced," while Kramer simply repeats Barr's failure.

25. Kramer, "MOMA Reopened," p. 42.

*Entrance foyer of Architecture and Design Galleries,
Museum of Modern Art, 1984. (Photo: Louise Lawler.)*



inal avant-garde program did not consist of an aesthetics with social implications; it consisted of a politicized aesthetic, a socialist art.²⁶

Kramer is, however, quite correct in his discussion of the historical results of the deradicalization of the avant-garde: "The aesthetic that originated at the Bauhaus and other avant-garde groups has been stripped of its social ideology and turned into the reigning taste of the cultural marketplace."²⁷ Indeed, the work of the avant-garde, severed from its political setting and presented as fine art, could serve as examples for product design and advertising. As if to illustrate this process of transforming agitprop into advertising,²⁸ the entrance to

26. For a detailed discussion of this question, see Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography."

27. Kramer, "MOMA Reopened," pp. 42–43.

28. This process is, in fact, one of *re*transformation, since agitprop had originally transformed advertising techniques for political purposes. See Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," pp. 96–104.

MOMA's design galleries displays posters by members of the Soviet avant-garde juxtaposed with advertisements directly or indirectly influenced by them. Underneath Rodchenko's poster for the Theater of the Revolution is an ad for Martini designed by Alexei Brodovich, a Russian emigré who had clearly absorbed his design lessons early and directly. On the opposite wall Gustav Klucis and Sergei Senkin's agitprop "Let Us Carry Out the Plan of the Great Work" and El Lissitzky's "USSR Russische Ausstellung" announcement are hung next to a recent advertisement for Campari. To this deliberate blurring of important distinctions in use-value Kramer, of course, nods his approval, noting that in this regard MOMA has fulfilled its mission. But now that modernism has been fully assimilated into consumer culture, when we enter the current design department, "well, we suddenly find ourselves in something that looks vaguely reminiscent of Bloomingdale's furniture department," and so "it becomes more and more difficult to believe such an installation is necessary."²⁹ Mission accomplished, then, MOMA has come full circle. It can now get back to the business of art as it had been prior to Barr's "radical notion" of a broadened definition of aesthetic endeavor. "Today," Kramer concludes, "it is only as an institution specializing in high art that the new MOMA can claim to have a great and necessary purpose."³⁰

In this, the official neoconservative view of the current purposes of the museum, it is one of the consequences of the distortion of the historical avant-garde that the museum should abandon altogether its task of presenting any practices which do not conform to the traditional view of fine art, to return, that is, to the prerogatives of painting and sculpture. And indeed, the inaugural exhibition at the reopened Museum of Modern Art, entitled *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, did just that. Specifically citing Documenta and *Zeitgeist* as precedents for the show, Kynaston McShine, the curator responsible for the selection, claimed to have looked at "everything, everywhere" because "it was important to have work from a lot of different places and to introduce a large public to a great deal of current activity. I wanted it to be an international cross-section of what is going on."³¹ To limit "what is going on" to painting and sculpture, however, is to dissemble willfully the actual facts of artistic practice at this historical juncture. To look at "everything everywhere" and to see only painting and sculpture is to be blind—blind to every significant aesthetic endeavor to continue the work of the avant-garde. The scandal of the international survey—quite apart from its promiscuous inclusion of just about any trivial product of today's market culture and its chaotic, bargain-basement installation—is its refusal to take account of the wide variety of practices that

29. Kramer, "MOMA Reopened," pp. 43–44.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

31. Quoted in Michael Brenson, "A Living Artists Show at the Modern Museum," *New York Times*, April 21, 1984, p. 11.

question and propose an alternative to the hegemony of painting and sculpture. And the scandal is made all the more complete when one remembers that it was also Kynaston McShine who organized MOMA's last major international exhibition of contemporary art, the *Information* show of 1970, a broad survey of conceptual art and related developments. Like Rudi Fuchs, then, McShine cannot claim ignorance of that work of the late '60s that makes a return to painting and sculpture so historically problematic. Even within the absurd terms of McShine's stated principle of selection—that only those artists whose reputations were established after 1975 would be considered³²—we are given no reason whatsoever for the exclusion of all the artists whose work continues and deepens the tendencies shown in *Information*. The short introduction to the catalogue, unsigned but presumably written by McShine, slides around the problem with the following pathetic statement:

The exhibition does not encompass mediums other than painting and sculpture. However one cannot help but register the current tendency of painters and sculptors to cross the border into other disciplines such as photography, film, video, and even architecture. While these "crossovers" have become expected in recent years, less familiar to a general audience is the attraction to music and performance. Represented here are artists active not only in painting and sculpture but also in performance art. Inevitably, some of their theatrical concerns present themselves in their work, most often in a narrative or autobiographical form.³³

32. *Ibid.* Even this stated criterion is entirely belied by the exhibition of some thirty artists whose reputations were well established by the mid-'70s; five of the artists in the show are listed in the catalogue documentation as having had one-person exhibitions at MOMA before 1977.

An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, like *Zeigeist*, failed to take note of the achievements of women artists. Of 165 artists only fourteen were women. A protest demonstration staged by the Women's Caucus for Art failed to elicit any public response from the officials of the museum. This must be seen in contrast to the various demonstrations of the early '70s against unfair museum policies, when, at the very least, MOMA was responsive enough to enter into public dialogue over the grievances. But, of course, if women were very poorly represented in MOMA's reopening show, it is largely because women are centrally involved in the vanguard of alternative practices. To have admitted them would have been to acknowledge that traditional painting and sculpture are not the most important, and certainly not the only forms of current art practice.

33. "Introduction," in *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, p. 12. That this introductory essay is both unsigned and only two pages long makes one wonder just how seriously contemporary art is being considered at MOMA. McShine was quoted in the *Times* as saying, "The show is a sign of hope. It is a sign that contemporary art is being taken as seriously as it should be, a sign that the museum will restore the balance between contemporary art and art history that is part of what makes the place unique" (quoted in Brenson, p. 11). But if this is the case, why does the curator of the show feel no obligation to provide a critical discussion of the artists chosen and the issues addressed in the contemporary art exhibition? By contrast, the first *historical* show to open at the museum, *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art*, is accompanied by a two-volume catalogue containing nineteen lengthy essays by fifteen scholars and critics. Perhaps the answer is to be found in the final paragraph of the intro-

Embedded in a two-page compilation of clichés and banalities —

- The concerns expressed in the work are basic, universal.
- The artist as creator, dreamer, storyteller, narcissist, as the instrument of divine inspiration, is represented in many works.
- Inspiration ranges from underwater life to the structure of flora and fauna to the effects of light.
- . . . there is a liveliness in the current international art scene that stems from the freedom and diversity enjoyed by artists today.
- The artists demonstrate an integrity, imagination, and ambition that affirm the health of their profession. —

such a paragraph, in its deliberate weakness and vagueness, is designed to tell us nothing at all about the vociferous opposition that persists among current avant-garde practitioners to conventional painting and sculpture. By his choice of the term *crossover*, McShine once again resorts to the myth of artistic versatility to demean the significance of genuinely alternative and socially engaged art production. That the reactionary tradition represented in the international survey might be placed in jeopardy, shown to be historically bankrupt, by such production is completely ignored by McShine.

It is interesting in this regard to recall an interview given to *Artforum* ten years ago by William Rubin, then and now director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture. There Rubin stated what was at the time a fairly common view of contemporary aesthetic developments:

Perhaps, looking back 10 [which is to say now], 15, 30 years from now, it will appear that this modernist tradition really did come to an end within the last few years, as some critics suggest. If so, historians a century from now — whatever name they will give to the period we now call modern — will see it beginning shortly after the middle of the 19th century and ending in the 1960s. I'm not ruling this out; it may be the case, but I don't think so. Perhaps the dividing line will be seen as between those works which essentially continue an easel painting concept that grew up associated with bourgeois democratic life and was involved with the development of private collections as well as the museum concept — between this and, let us say, Earthworks, Conceptual works and related endeavors, which want another environment (or should want it) and, perhaps, another public.³⁴

duction to the international survey: "Those who see this exhibition will, one trusts, understand that art is about looking and not about reading or listening."

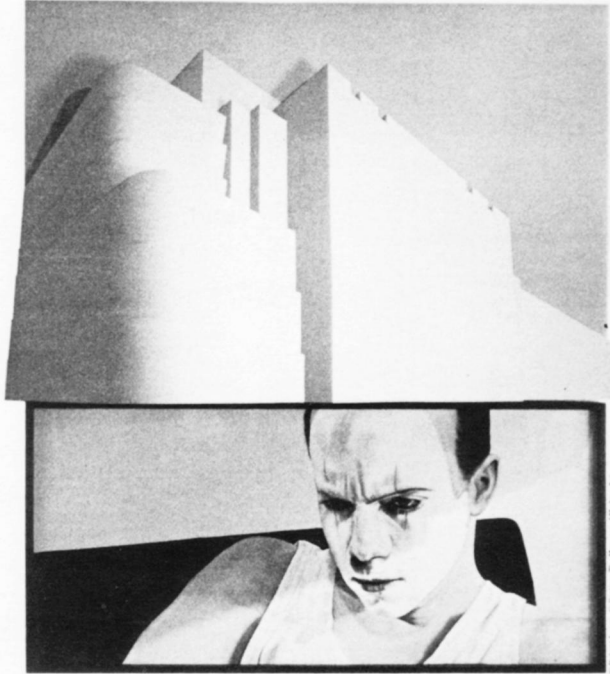
34. William Rubin, in Lawrence Alloway and John Coplans, "Talking with William Rubin: 'The Museum Concept Is Not Infinitely Expandable,'" *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 2 (October 1974),

Though Rubin states his own hesitation regarding the view he presents, he seems to have had a remarkably clear understanding of the actual facts of art history of the '60s and early '70s. It is therefore all the more astonishing that the museum department headed by Rubin should now mount an exhibition that unquestionably attempts to negate that understanding. What do Rubin and McShine believe transpired in the intervening decade? Were the endeavors that Rubin saw as having possibly created a rupture with modernism only "passing phenomena," as he suggested the coming years might tell? Judging not only from McShine's survey, but also from the installation of that part of the permanent collection comprising the art of the '60s and '70s, the answer must be in the affirmative, for there is no evidence of the "postmodern" art of which Rubin speaks. With the exception of a few works of minimal sculpture, there is no trace of the art of that period that led even Rubin to wonder if modern art, traditionally defined, had come to an end.

Yet anyone who has witnessed the art events of the past decade carefully might come to a very different conclusion. On the one hand, there has been an intensification of the critique of art's institutionalization, a deepening of the rupture with modernism. On the other hand, there has been a concerted effort to marginalize and suppress these facts and to reestablish the traditional fine arts categories by all conservative forces of society, from cultural bureaucracies to museum institutions, from corporate boardrooms to the marketplace for art. And this has been accomplished with the complicity of a new breed of entrepreneurial artists, utterly cynical in their disregard of both recent art history and present political reality. These newly heralded "geniuses" work for a parvenu class of collectors who want art with an insured resale value, which will at the same time fulfill their desire for mildly pornographic titillation, romantic cliché, easy reference to past "masterpieces," and good decor. The objects on view to celebrate the reopening of MOMA were made, with very few exceptions, to cater to this taste, to rest easily over the sofa in a Trump Tower living room or to languish in a bank vault while prices escalate. No wonder then that McShine ended his catalogue introduction with the very special hope "to encourage everyone to be in favor of the art of our time." Given what he has presented as the art of our time, his currying of our favor could hardly be at odds with that of the sponsors of the exhibition, the AT&T Corporation, who mounted a new advertising campaign to coincide with the show. "Some of the masterpieces of tomorrow are on exhibit today," reads the ad's banner headline, under which appears a reproduction of one of Robert Longo's recent glorifications of

p. 52. In this interview, Rubin attempts to defend the museum against the charge that it has become unresponsive to contemporary art. He insists that this art simply has no place in a museum, which he sees essentially as a temple of high art. This, of course, puts him in perfect accord with Kramer's position. What is never acknowledged, however, is that ignoring those forms of art that exceed the museum — whether the work of the historical avant-garde or that of the present — will necessarily give a distorted view of history.

SOME OF THE MASTERPIECES OF TOMORROW ARE ON EXHIBIT TODAY.



"AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY OF RECENT PAINTING AND SCULPTURE"
MAY 17-AUGUST 7

AT&T is sponsoring the exhibition that will open the newly expanded Museum of Modern Art.

The works on display for this modern art event, most produced within the last five years, have been selected from 16 countries around the world.

Among them may be some of tomorrow's classics. Come judge for yourself.

This exhibition is part of AT&T's continuing commitment to bring you great art and great artists.



THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, JUNE 3, 1984 17

*AT&T advertisement, New York Times Magazine,
June 3, 1984.*

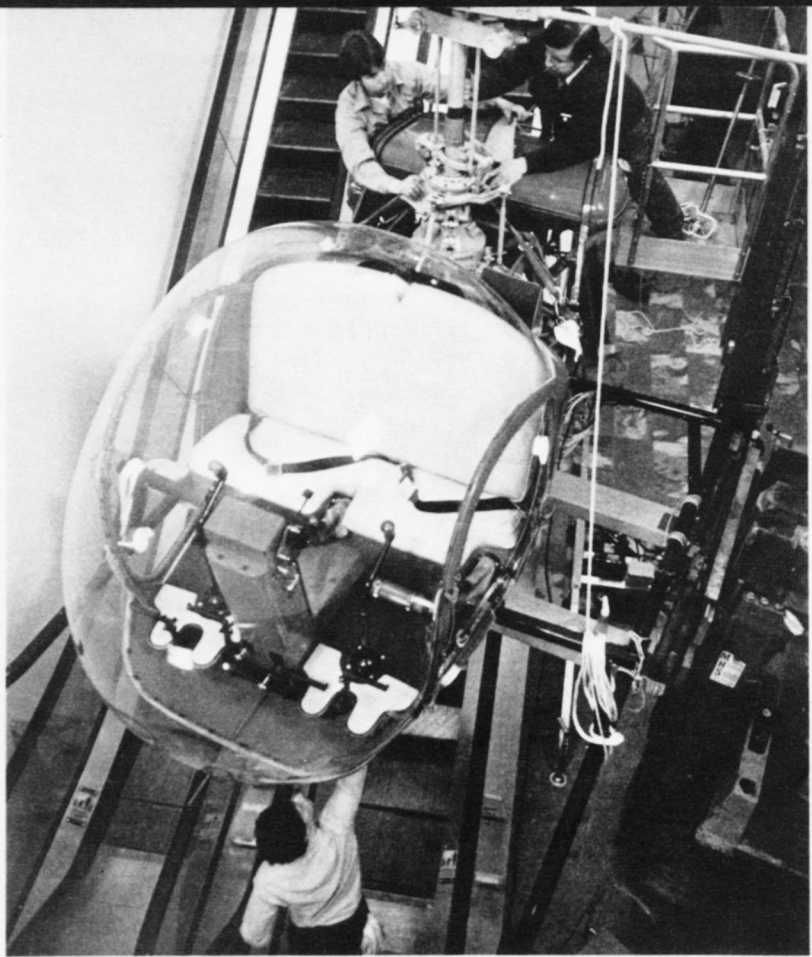
corporate style, now in MOMA's permanent collection. That corporate interests are in perfect accord with the art presented in MOMA's inaugural show is a point underscored in the catalogue preface written by the museum's director, whose long paragraph of praise and thanks to AT&T contains the following statement: "AT&T clearly recognizes that experiment and innovation, so highly prized in business and industry, must be equally valued and supported in the arts."³⁵

Experiment and innovation are prized in business and industry, of course, because they result in ever-expanding consumer markets and higher profits. That this is also the motive of the works presented in *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture* is hardly less obvious. But if the thousands of visitors who flocked to the newly reopened museum failed to grasp this fact, MOMA confronted them with a still more persuasive demonstration of the corporate view of art, something which Hilton Kramer referred to as "the most audacious *coup de théâtre* anyone has ever attempted at MOMA." Our first glimpse of this was in a full-page photograph that appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* above the caption "While celebrating its permanent collection of masterworks from the modernist period, the museum will continue to exhibit the new." The "new" in question, the *coup de théâtre* was shown being installed in the dramatic two-story space over the escalator leading to the design galleries; the "new" is a helicopter. Here is how a museum press release described the new acquisition:

A ubiquitous contemporary artifact, the Bell 47D-1 helicopter was acquired several months ago by the [Architecture and Design] Department, and will be suspended above visitors as they enter the fourth floor galleries. Utilitarian in appearance—it is the helicopter equivalent of the jeep—the model 47 went into production in 1947 and set an industry record by remaining in production for the next three decades. As an example of industrial mass production, it is, according to Department Director Arthur Drexler, "a peculiarly memorable object."

Just how memorable a helicopter may be was well illustrated last year in an exhibition at the Museo del Barrio presented in conjunction with Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America. The exhibition contained some fifty drawings by Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugee children living across the borders in Honduras and Nicaragua, and virtually every one of the drawings depicted this "ubiquitous contemporary artifact," ubiquitous indeed, since it is and has been the most essential instrument of counter-insurgency warfare

35. Richard E. Oldenburg, "Preface," in *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, p. 9.



While celebrating its permanent collection of masterworks from the modernist period, the museum will continue to exhibit the new.

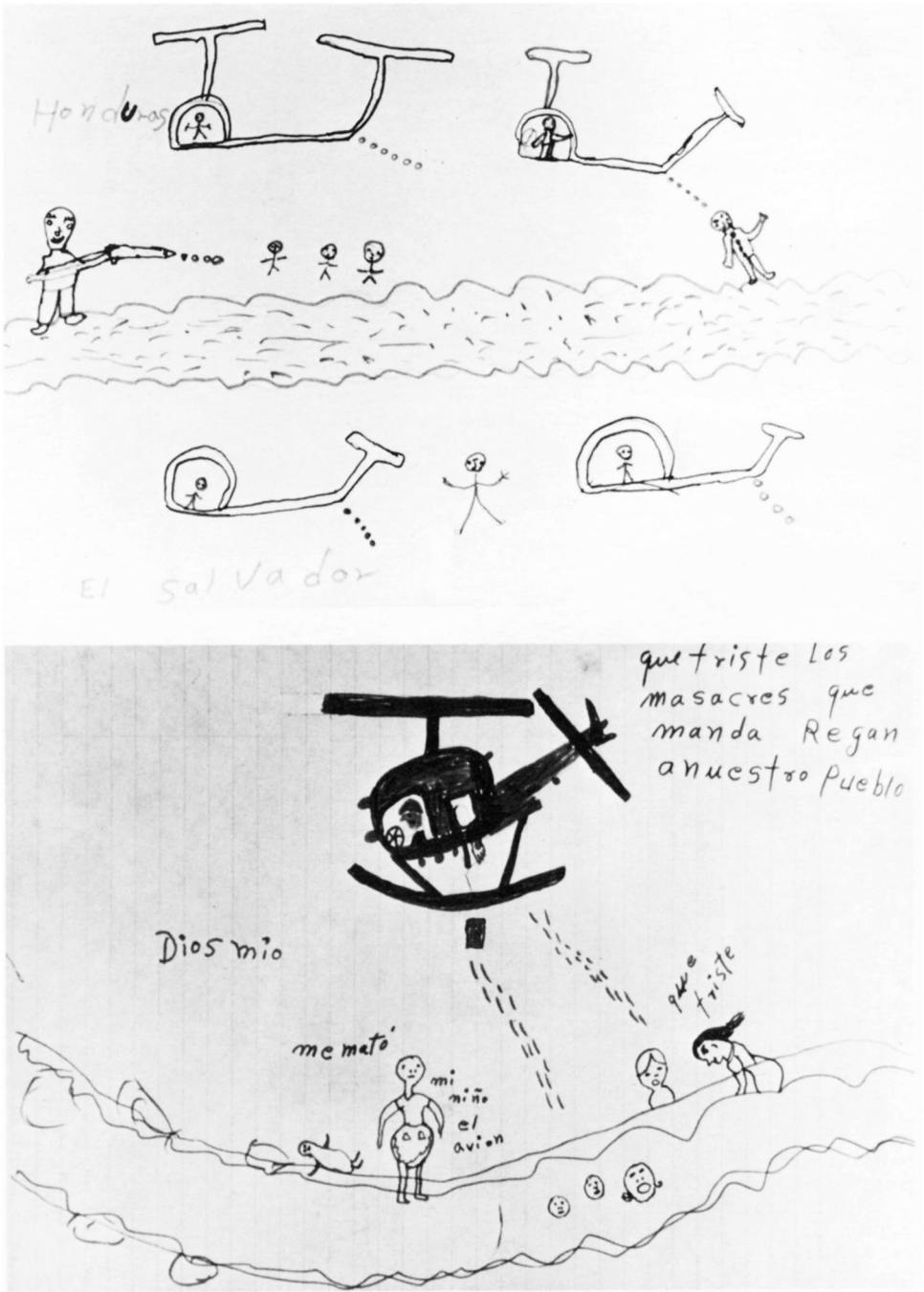
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Left: A B
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Illustration, New York Times Magazine, April 15, 1984.

Drawings by Salvadoran children in the Mesa Grande refugee camp, Honduras, shown in Children in Exile: Drawings by Refugee Children from Guatemala and El Salvador, El Museo del Barrio, January 10-31, 1984.



since the Korean War. Even Francis Ford Coppola did not fail to understand the sinister symbolic value of this “memorable object” in his highly mythologized portrayal of Americans in Vietnam. But symbols aside, the hard facts are that Bell helicopters are manufactured by the Fort Worth corporation Textron, a major defense contractor, which supplies the Bell and Huey model helicopters that are right now in use in El Salvador, Honduras (which means, of course, against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua), and Guatemala.³⁶ But because the contemporary art of exhibition has taught us to distinguish between the political and the aesthetic, a *New York Times* editorial entitled “Marvelous MOMA” was able to say of MOMA’s proud new art object:

A helicopter, suspended from the ceiling, hovers over an escalator in the Museum of Modern Art. . . . The chopper is bright green, bug-eyed and beautiful. We know that it is beautiful because MOMA showed us the way to look at the 20th century.³⁷

36. In September, the *New York Times* reported that the U.S. government was planning to double the number of combat helicopters in the Salvadoran force by the end of this year: “In the last few weeks, 10 new Hueys have been sent to El Salvador and 10 to 15 more are expected by the end of the year. . . . Under that schedule, the Salvadoran fleet will have increased to 49 from 24 within six months” (James LeMoine, “U.S. Is Bolstering Salvador Copters: Plans to Double Fleet by End of Year to Let Latins Use New Tactic on Rebels,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1984, p. A1). The article went on to say that “such helicopter attacks were the mainstay of American operations in Vietnam. If the Salvadoran Army masters the tactic, it will have made a considerable advance from the often militarily inept force that has been unable to contain rebel offensives in the last two years.”

Reporting for the *Nation* in October, Scott Wallace described the effects of American helicopters on the people of El Salvador: “Although U.S. officials deny that the helicopter-borne assault teams will be used to terrorize civilians who back the guerrillas, government forces are already rehearsing the tactic. On August 30, around the time the shipment of Hueys arrived, army units launched helicopter assaults on the townships of Las Vueltas and San José Las Flores in rebel-controlled zones of Chalatenango province.

“Journalists who arrived on the scene ten days later were told by local peasants that at least thirty-seven women, children and old people had been killed in the operation. According to the villagers, helicopters bearing Salvadoran troops, led by the U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion, stalked a group of several hundred peasants who were escorted by a small force of armed guerrillas. The peasants described their bewilderment and terror as they saw the helicopters land troops on hilltops all around them, cutting them off. When the soldiers closed in, some people panicked and plunged into the rapidly flowing Gualsinga River, where several drowned. Others were cut down by machine-gun fire or taken prisoner” (“Hueys in El Salvador: Preparing for a Stepped-Up War?” *Nation*, October 20, 1984, p. 337).

37. “Marvelous MOMA,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1984, Section 4, p. 22. I wish to thank Cara Ryan for pointing out this editorial and more generally for her advice and support during the writing of this essay.