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Not long ago I stood with a friend next to an art work made of four wood beams laid in a long rectangle, with a mirror set behind each corner so as to reflect the others. My friend, a conceptual artist, and I talked about the minimalist basis of such work: its reception by critics then, its elaboration by artists later, its significance for practitioners today, all of which are concerns of this book as well. Taken by our talk, we hardly noticed his little girl as she played on the beams. But then, signaled by her mother, we looked up to see her pass through the looking glass. Into the hall of mirrors, the *mise-en-abîme* of beams, she moved farther and farther from us, and as she passed into the distance, she passed into the past as well.

Yet suddenly there she was right behind us: all she had done was skip along the beams around the room. And there we were, a critic and an artist informed in contemporary art, taken to school by a six-year-old, our theory no match for her practice. For her playing of the piece conveyed not only specific concerns of minimalist work—the tensions among the spaces we feel, the images we see, and the forms we know—but also general shifts in art over the last three decades—new interventions into space, different constructions of viewing, and expanded definitions of art. Her performance became allegorical as well, for she described a paradoxical figure *in space*, a recession that is also a
return, that evoked for me the paradoxical figure in time described by the avant-
arde. For even as the avant-garde recedes into the past, it also returns from the
future, repositioned by innovative art in the present. This strange temporality,
lost in stories of twentieth-century art, is a principal subject of this book.

Partial in interests (I am silent about many events) and parochial in ex-
amples (I remain a critic based in New York), this book is not a history: it
focuses on several models of art and theory over the last three decades alone.
Yet neither does it celebrate the false pluralism of the posthistorical museum,
market, and academy in which anything goes (as long as accepted forms pre-
dominate). On the contrary, it insists that specific genealogies of innovative art
and theory exist over this time, and it traces these genealogies through signal
transformations. Crucial here is the relation between turns in critical models and
returns of historical practices (broached in chapter 1): how does a reconnection
with a past practice support a disconnection from a present practice and/or a
development of a new one? No question is more important for the neo-avant-
garde addressed in this book—that is, art since 1960 that refashions avant-garde
devices (e.g., the constructivist analysis of the object, the photomontage refun-
tioning of the image, the readymade critique of the exhibition) to contempo-
rary ends.

The question of historical returns is old in art history; indeed, in the form
of the renaissance of classical antiquity, it is foundational. Concerned to com-
prehend diverse cultures in a single narrative, the Hegelian founders of the aca-
demic discipline represented these returns as dialectical moves that advanced
the story of Western art, and they offered appropriate figures for this historical
narrative (thus Alois Riegl proposed that art advances as a screw turns, while
Heinrich Wölflin offered the related image of a spiral). Despite appearances,
this notion of a dialectic was not rejected in modernism; at least in the Anglo-
American formalist account, it was continued, in part, by other means. "Mod-
ernism has never meant anything like a break with the past," Clement
Greenberg proclaimed in 1961, at the opening of the period that concerns me
here; and in 1965 Michael Fried was explicit: "a dialectic of modernism has
been at work in the visual arts for more than a century now."

To be sure, these critics stressed the categorical being of visual art à la
Kant, but they did so to preserve its historical life à la Hegel: art was urged to
stick to its space, "its area of competence," so that it might survive, even thrive,
in time, and so "maintain past standards of excellence." Thus was formal mod-
ernism plotted along a temporal, diachronic, or vertical axis; in this respect it
opposed an avant-gardist modernism that did intend "a break with the past"—
that, concerned to extend the area of artistic competence, favored a spatial,
synchronic, or horizontal axis. A chief merit of the neo-avant-garde addressed
in this book is that it sought to keep these two axes in critical coordination.
Like the late-modernist painting and sculpture advocated by formalist critics, it
worked through its ambitious antecedents, and so sustained the vertical axis or
historical dimension of art. At the same time it turned to past paradigms to open
up present possibilities, and so developed the horizontal axis or social dimension
of art as well.

Today the address of many ambitious practices is different. Sometimes the
vertical axis is neglected in favor of the horizontal axis, and often the coordina-
tion of the two seems broken. In a way this problem may stem from the neo-
 avant-garde as well, in its implicit shift from a disciplinary criterion of quality,
judged in relation to artistic standards of the past, to an avant-gardist value of
interest, provoked through a testing of cultural limits in the present; for with
this implicit shift (discussed in chapter 2) came a partial move from intrinsic
forms of art to discursive problems around art. Yet the early neo-avant-garde
alone did not effect this putative change from "a historical succession of tech-
niques and styles" to "a simultaneity of the radically disparate." Only with the
ethnographic turn in contemporary art and theory, I argue in chapter 6, is the
turn from medium-specific elaborations to debate-specific projects so
pronounced.

For the most part this horizontal expansion is welcome, for it has involved
art and theory in sites and audiences long removed from them, and it has
opened up other vertical axes, other historical dimensions, for creative work.
Yet this move also prompts questions. First, there is the question of value in-
vested in the canons of twentieth-century art. This value is not set: there is
always formal invention to be redeployed, social meaning to be resignified, cultural capital to be reinvested. Simply to surrender this value is a great mistake, aesthetically and strategically. Second, there is the question of expertise, which also should not be dismissed as elitist. In this regard the horizontal expansion of art has placed an enormous burden on artists and viewers alike: as one moves from project to project, one must learn the discursive breadth as well as the historical depth of many different representations—like an anthropologist who enters a new culture with each new exhibition. This is very difficult (even for critics who do little else), and this difficulty may hinder consensus about the necessity of art, let alone conversation about the criteria of significant art. As different interpretive communities shout past each other or fall into silence, reactionary know-nothings can seize the public forum on contemporary art—which they have done to condemn it.

A primary concern of this book, then, is the coordination of diachronic (or historical) and synchronic (or social) axes in art and theory. Out of this concern come the two notions that govern the stories that I tell (in chapters 1 and 7 in particular). The first is the notion of *parallax*, which involves the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer. This figure underscores both that our framings of the past depend on our positions in the present and that these positions are defined through such framings. It also shifts the terms of these definitions away from a logic of avant-gardist transgression toward a model of deconstructive (displacement, which is far more appropriate to contemporary practices (where the turn from interstitial "text" to institutional "frame" is pronounced). The reflectivity of the viewer inscribed in the notion of parallax is also advanced in the other notion fundamental to this book: deferred action. In Freud an event is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it retroactively, in deferred action. Here I propose that the significance of avant-garde events is produced in an analogous way, through a complex relay of anticipation and reconstruction.

Taken together, then, the notions of parallax and deferred action refashion the cliché not only of the neo-avant-garde as merely redundant of the historical avant-garde, but also of the postmodern as only belated in relation to the modern. In so doing I hope that they nuance our accounts of aesthetic shifts and historical breaks as well. Finally, if this model of *revision* can contribute any symbolic resistance to the work of *revision* so pervasive in culture and politics today—that is, the reactionary undoing of the progressive transformations of the century—so much the better.

This book traces a few genealogies of art and theory since 1960, but it does so to approach *actuality*: what produces a present as different, and how does a present focus a past in turn? This question also involves the relation of critical to historical work, and here no one escapes the present, not even art historians. Historical insight does not depend on contemporary advocacy, but an engagement in the present, whether artistic, theoretical, and/or political, seems requisite. Certainly innovative historians of modern art have long tended to be incisive critics of contemporary practices as well, and this parallactic view has often led to other criteria for both objects of study.

I advance this point not to insinuate my name but to remark my difference. Prominent art historians like Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and T. J. Clark differ in method and motive, but they share a deep conviction in modernist art, and this conviction is somehow foundational. Critics formed in my milieu are more ambivalent about this art, not only because we received it as an official culture, but because we were initiated by practitioners that wished to break with its dominant models. So, too, the anxiety of influence that flowed from Pablo Picasso through the milieu of Jackson Pollock to ambitious artists in the 1960s had eased for us; one sign of our difference (for our predecessors, no doubt, of our decadence) is that the angel with whom we wrestled was Marcel Duchamp by way of Andy Warhol, more than Picasso by way of Pollock. Moreover, both these Oedipal narratives had passed through the crucible of feminism, which changed them profoundly. Thus a critic like me invested in the minimalist genealogy of art must differ from one invoked by abstract expressionism: not indifferent to modernist art, he or she will not be entirely convinced by it either. Indeed, I argue in chapter 2, this point of initiation may position the critic on a crux of modernist art, and so lead him or her to attend to its contradictions more than to its triumphs.
Like others in my milieu, then, I have some distance on modernist art, but I have little on critical theory. In particular I have little distance on the semiotic turn that refashioned much art and criticism on the model of the text in the middle to late 1970s (discussed in chapter 3), for I developed as a critic during this time, when theoretical production became as important as artistic production. (To many of us it was more provocative, innovative, urgent—but then there was no real contest between, say, the texts of Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida and new-image painting or pop-historicist architecture.) Nevertheless, when it comes to critical theory, I have the interest of a second-generation initiate, not the zeal of a first-generation convert. With this slight distance I attempt to treat critical theory not only as a conceptual tool but as a symbolic, even symptomatic form.

Two retrospective intuitions might be ventured here. Since the middle 1970s critical theory has served as a secret continuation of modernism by other means: after the decline of late-modernist painting and sculpture, it occupied the position of high art, at least to the extent that it retained such values as difficulty and distinction after they had receded from artistic form. So, too, critical theory has served as a secret continuation of the avant-garde by other means: after the climax of the 1968 revolts, it also occupied the position of cultural politics, at least to the extent that radical rhetoric compensated a little for lost activism (in this respect critical theory is a neo-avant-garde in its own right). This double secret service—as a high-art surrogate and an avant-garde substitute—has attracted many different followers.

One way in which I treat critical theory as a historical object is to attend to its synchronic connections with advanced art. Since the 1960s the two have shared at least three areas of investigation: the structure of the sign, the constitution of the subject, and the siting of the institution (e.g., not only the roles of the museum and the academy but also the locations of art and theory). This book is concerned with these general areas, but it focuses on specific relations, such as the rapport between the minimalist genealogy of art and the phenomenological concern with the body on the one hand and the structuralist analysis of the sign on the other (discussed in chapter 2), or the affinity between the pop genealogy of art and the psychoanalytic account of visuality developed by Jacques Lacan around the same time (discussed in chapter 5). It also concentrates on particular moments when art and theory are repositioned by other forces: for example, when site-specific installations or photo-text collages replicate the very effects that they otherwise resist, the fragmentation of the commodity-sign (chapter 3); or when a critical method like deconstruction is turned into a cynical gambit of art-world positioning (chapter 4).

Whether one regards such moments as total failures or as partial exposures, they do raise the question of the criticality of contemporary art and theory (the historical development of this value is discussed in chapters 1 and 7). I have already pointed to a few aspects of the current crisis, such as the relative inattention to the historicity of art and a near eclipse of contestatory spaces. But these laments about a loss of historical purchase and critical distance are old refrains, and sometimes they express little more than the anxiety of the critic about a loss of function and power. Yet this does not make them misbegotten or narcissistic. What is the place of criticism in a visual culture that is evermore administered—from an art world dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever? And what is the place of criticism in a political culture that is evermore affirmative—especially in the midst of culture wars that prompt the right to threaten love it or leave it and the left to wonder where am I in this picture? Of course this very situation makes the old services of criticism evermore urgent as well—to question a political-economic status quo committed to its own reproduction and profit above all else, and to mediate between cultural groups that, deprived of a public sphere for open debate, can only appear sectarian. But to note the needs is not to improve the conditions.

Several factors hinder art criticism in particular. Neither advocated by the museum nor tolerated by the market, some critics have withdrawn to the academy, while others have joined the administration of the culture industry—the media, fashion, and so on. This is not a moral judgment: even within the time
spanned by this book the few spaces once allowed for art criticism have narrowed dramatically, and critics have followed artists forced to exchange critical practice for economic survival. A double switch in these positions has not helped: as some artists abandoned critical practices, others adopted theoretical positions as if they were readymade critiques, and some theorists embraced artistic postures just as naively.16 If the artists hoped to be elevated by theory, the theorists looked to be grounded in art; but often these two projections advanced two misconceptions: that art is not theoretical, not productive of critical concepts, in its own right; and that theory is only supplemental, to be applied or not as one sees fit. As a result there may be little formal difference between the illustration of commodity aesthetics in art of the late 1980s, say, and the illustration of gender politics in art of the early 1990s. Often in the cynicism of the first and in the voluntarism of the second, work on form is neglected—in the first as futile, in the second as secondary. And sometimes these misconceptions—that art is not theoretical and/or political in its own terms, that theory is ornamental and politics external—disable theoretical and political art, and do so in the name of each.

This is not to save theory from artists or art from politics; nor is it to aid the theory-bashing of the media or the witch-hunting of the right. (Sometimes theory is burdened linguistically and irresponsible politically, but that hardly means, as the New York Times has it, that art criticism is so much jargon.) On the contrary, it is to insist that critical theory is imminent to innovative art, and that the relative autonomy of the aesthetic can be a critical resource. For these reasons I argue against a premature dismissal of the avant-garde. As I note in chapter 1, the avant-garde is obviously problematic (it can be hermetic, elitist, and so on); yet, recoded in terms of resistant and/or alternative articulations of the artistic and the political, it remains a construct that the left surrenders at its own loss. The avant-garde has no patent on criticality, of course, but a commitment to such practices does not exclude a commitment to others as well.

To demand this multiple focus does add to the burden on progressive art and criticism, and the situation in art and academy is hardly supportive. In both worlds a political backlash has manipulated an economic downturn to produce a reactive climate in which the dominant call is a conservative cutback to authoritative (often authoritarian) traditions.17 The great threat to art and academy, we are told, comes from miscreant artists and tenured radicals; but subsidized reactionaries tell us so, and these ideologues of conservative foundations have done the real damage, as public faith in art and academy is eroded through such fantasies of the artist and the academic. This is hardly a state secret: thus far the right has dictated the culture wars and dominated the public imaging of art and academy, as the layman is led to associate the first with pornography, the second with indoctrination, and both with a waste of taxpayer money. Such are the deserts of the rightist campaign: while the left talked about the political importance of culture, the right paraded it. Its philosophers have succeeded where readers of Marx have not—they have transformed the world, and it will take a great struggle to transform it otherwise.

It may be petty to worry about art and academic worlds when cooperative state and social contract alike are trashed. Yet important battles are waged here too: the attacks on affirmative action and multicultural initiatives, on public funding and political correctness (a classic instance of a leftist critique turned into a rightist weapon). The revolution of the rich also shows its true colors in these worlds, for our current rulers have revealed a new disregard not only for social compensation but for cultural support (at least the old rich had the good grace to be arriviste). Finally, however, there is this fundamental stake in art and academy: the preservation, in an administered, affirmative culture, of spaces for critical debate and alternative vision.

Again, to (re)claim such spaces is not easy. On the one hand, it is a labor of disarticulation: to redefine cultural terms and recapture political positions. (Here one must dispel the reactionary fantasies of art and academy as well as disentangle leftist critiques of such institutions from rightist attacks.) On the other hand, it is a labor of articulation: to mediate content and form, specific signifiers and institutional frames. This is a difficult task but not an impossible one; I address some practices that succeeded, however provisionally, in such (dis)articulations. One beginning is to recover critical practices interrupted by
the neoconservative coup of the 1980s—which is precisely what some young artists, critics, and historians do today. This book is my contribution to this work.14

Chapter 1 prepares my discussion of critical models in art and theory since 1960 through a new articulation of historical and neo-avant-gardes. Chapter 2 presents minimalist art as a crux in this relation in the 1960s. Chapter 3 discusses the subsequent reformulation of the work of art as text in the 1970s. And chapter 4 recounts the eventual meltdown of this textual model in a pervasive conventionalism of the image in the 1980s. In chapters 5 and 6 two contemporary reactions to this double inflation of text and image are examined: a turn to the real as evoked through the violated body and/or the traumatic subject, and a turn to the referent as grounded in a given identity and/or a sited community. Finally, chapter 7 (which is more epilogue than conclusion) extends my discussion to three discourses crucial to art and theory over this time: the critique of the subject, the negotiation of the cultural other, and the role of technology. The chapters tell connected stories (to me it is very important to regain the efficacy of such narratives), but they need not be read consecutively.

I dedicate this book to three people who have kept critical spaces open for me: Thatcher Bailey, founder of Bay Press; Charles Wright, director of the Dia Art Center from 1986 to 1994; and Ron Clark, head of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. I grew up with Thatcher and Charlie in Seattle, and they supported me as a critic in New York—Thatcher as a publisher, Charlie as a sponsor, and both as friends for years. In the same spirit I want to thank other old friends (Andrew Price, John Teal, Rolfe Watson, and Bob Strong) and family (Jody, Andy, and Becca). Over a decade ago Ron Clark invited me to the Whitney Program, where I was director of critical and curatorial studies when this book was conceived. Our seminars with Mary Kelly remain important to me, and I extend my thanks to all participants in the program over the years. For intellectual community I am indebted to my friends at October: Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Denis Hollier, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Mignon Nixon; as well as at Cornell: David Bartrick, Susan Buck-Morss, Mark Seltzer, and Geoff Waite. (I am grateful to other friends as well, especially Michel Feher, Eric Santner, and Howard Singerman—too many to list.) Parts of this book were written at the Cornell Society for the Humanities, and I thank its directors, Jonathan Culler and Dominick LaCapra. Finally, I am indebted to Carolyn Anderson, Peter Brunt, Miwon Kwon, Helen Molesworth, Charles Reeve, Lawrence Shapiro, Blake Stimson, and Frazer Ward; they have taught me as much I have taught them. The same is true in other ways of Sandy, Tait, and Thatcher.

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