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Avant-Garde and Theory: A Misunderstood Relation

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Abstract The relation of avant-garde artworks and theories is a hotly debated topic. It is often claimed that avant-garde works perform theoretical labor—either by formulating theoretical propositions in an artistic form or by eliciting theoretical insights from readers, viewers, or listeners. Other critics and philosophers have denied that avant-garde works play any substantial role in relation to theories; at most, they may serve as allusive flags around which communities that already possess a given theory might rally. Accepting the view that theories and avant-garde artworks are distinct types of discourse, I suggest that the critics who fully sever the link between theories and such artworks draw exaggerated conclusions from this initially valid distinction. I go on to outline three major functional relations between avant-garde artworks and theories: (1) theories play a key role in identifying events or objects as pertaining to "art" and not to other social or natural domains; (2) theories help shape the heuristics that artists employ in making artworks and that audiences use in trying to understand them; and (3) artworks may, with strong limitations, provide impetus for changes in theories. I then develop a sixfold taxonomy of symbolic relations between artworks and theories—that is, the variety of ways in which artworks may refer to theories. In order of their explicitness, these are iconographic correspondence, use of theories as thematic material, exemplification, direct allusion, formal allusion, and expressive use of theoretical diction. Finally, I consider the pedagogical problems raised by avant-garde works: the contexts in which audiences come to understand how to approach avant-garde works and the role of theories in the explicit and implicit pedagogies of the avant-garde.

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I

Lots of people, perhaps most, don't understand avant-garde artworks. In their perplexity before a painting with a goat's head sticking out of it, or a recording that seems to consist mostly of shrieks and vaguely erotic grunts, or a poem that seems to have been written either by a moron or some sort of highly intelligent space alien, they may feel outrage, contempt, or just indifference. A slightly more servile response—from the person who knows it is supposed to be art, but still doesn't get it—may be to fall back on a kind of low-level theory of the avant-garde: it's avant-garde, it's not supposed to mean anything. A more tutored response, perhaps shored up by literature or art history courses at the university, might be: the artist must be demonstrating a theory. None of these responses, I want to underscore, is foolish, but the last of our hypothetical art-consumers—the one who thinks a theory must be behind it all—is certainly more in tune with the tone of many of the current claims made by artists and by their publicists, apologists, and detractors alike.

There has also been a backlash on the part of some critics and philosophers, not necessarily opposed to the avant-garde as such, but rankled by the inflation of the term *theory*, which has become more an honorific label for everything from chance-generated poems to structuralist-materialist films than a specific mode of discursive or cognitive practice. In his recent article from the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, "Avant-Garde Art and the Problem of Theory," the film theorist and aesthetician Noël Carroll, for instance, provides a forceful and thorough argument against viewing works of avant-garde art as species of theorizing. Carroll takes up such claims in two forms, ultimately rejecting both as misguided and misleading. The first, and stronger, version of the claim presents avant-garde artworks as themselves engaged in the work of constructing or projecting theories. The second, weaker version of the avant-garde/theory argument postulates that avant-garde artworks do not explicitly formulate theories but nonetheless "elicit theoretical insights from spectators" (Carroll 1995: 7). Neither of these two versions, Carroll argues, holds up to critical scrutiny. By their very nature as ambiguous, enigmatic, and weakly discursive or nondiscursive, avant-garde works are unable to construct theories or perform their functions. Nor, he objects, do they play any substantive role in teaching spectators or readers about theories.

Several recent critics of American "Language Poetry"—a literary tendency characterized by a pugnaciously oppositional stance, a sense of group project, and textual difficulty analogous to that of earlier avant-garde movements—have also critically considered the role of theory in the

production and reception of the Language Poets' specifically poetic works. A standard position, encouraged by the poet-critics of the movement and by their most prestigious critical advocate, Marjorie Perloff (1985, 1990, 1998), suggests (with varying emphases on the elements of the mix) the unity of theory and practice in Language Poetry. In a 1981 interview with Tom Beckett, for example, poet Charles Bernstein (1986 [1981]: 397) ironically echoed Charles Olson's (1966 [1950]: 16) projective verse dictum that "form is never more than an extension of content" with his proclamation that, for Language Poets, "theory is never more than the extension of practice." Challenged by Beckett to answer the charge that the theoretical writings of the Language Poets seem more "alive" than the poetry, Bernstein (1986 [1981]: 402–3) responded by rejecting the distinction:

> A poetics can only be "alive" if its poetry is—and indeed I suspect, as Pound has argued, that the converse of that is equally true. If one of the things that has characterized my critical work is the use of writing methods basic to the practice of my own poetry, the dichotomy of quality you are setting up is all the more suspect. I'm used to hearing that the theory is not theory at all but only (?!) poetry—i.e. not systematic, not sufficiently explained. . . . To break the work down into two basic types seems to me not founded in actually reading the texts and tuning into the primary unity of them.

A similar view animates the critical strategies of Perloff, who adopts Bernstein's view of language writing as a kind of "paraliterary" third way that mediates the dichotomy of poetry and theory (on the notion of "paraliterature," see Krauss 1985 [1980] and Ulmer 1983). This conception of avant-garde literary discourse informs much of her criticism, but it is particularly central to her readings of Language Poetry from her original critical survey "The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties" (Perloff 1985: 215–38) to her specific discussions of Ron Silliman (Perloff 1990: 200–5) and Steve McCaffery (Perloff 1998: 264–89) in connection with the philosophy of Wittgenstein. While for Bernstein and Perloff, the argument for a "unity of theory and practice" has legitimated a flexible, pragmatic approach to the task of presenting Language Poetry to a wider audience, in less subtle hands it has petrified into a dogma and been passed along in a formulaic way. For instance, Jessica Prinz (1991: 174), in *Art Discourse / Discourse in Art*, takes this unity as a given: "Intent on undermining the distinction between language theory and poetic practice, many of the Language poets produce generic hybrids. With its incessant quotations and allusions to *Philosophical Investigations*, [McCaffery's] *Evoba* itself purposely confuses language theory and poetry." And as if a mere claim could settle the significance of this "purposeful confusion," she concludes

by quoting from correspondence with McCaffery, who is reported to remark epigrammatically that poetry "reimagines the project of Philosophy" (174).

This basic complex of arguments has found critics on several sides. The essays of Jerome McGann, Charles Altieri, and Jed Rasula in the volume *Politics and Poetic Value* (originally a 1987 issue of *Critical Inquiry*) all circle around the question of Language Poetry's self-reflexivity, its relation to theory, and its claims to political efficacy. McGann offered a fairly straightforward reiteration of the "unity" argument, finding Language Poetry's theoretical concerns to be articulated "poetically," whether in the poetry itself or in explicitly theoretical and critical works. In the former, the Language Poets are said to express concerns with narrativity, fragmentation, nonsense, and sociality, while in the latter, McGann (1987: 272) claims, they reject "interpretation" in favor of a kind of rewriting: "As often as not the 'commentary' will take the form of another poem or poetical excursus; or of an explanation of how some particular text 'works' (rather than what it 'means'); or . . . of a set of directions and procedures, a mini-course in how-to-write." In bypassing interpreted meaning and hence the mediatory role of traditional criticism, Language Poetry's hybrid theoretico-poetic discourse, in McGann's view, aims at direct efficacy in the social field. Altieri and Rasula both criticize McGann on this point, though from antithetical positions. Altieri (1987: 306) argues that McGann relies heavily on metaliterary abstractions and formal analogies to fill the gap left by interpretational engagement with the work: "If one refuses the mediating role for art and, with McGann, seeks more direct political authority, it is likely that one will end up with little more than a very thin formalism desperately proclaiming in theory the significance it cannot locate in the specific works." Rasula (1987: 320), in contrast, and singular among major critics, argues the opposite: "A textually fractured surface does not always clearly exhibit its theoretical superstructure. The robust critical and conceptual energies of Language Writers have been applied, by and large, outside the context of the poetry itself. Given the rigor of the theoretical work and its relevance as a direct stimulus to the poetry, this is an awkward lacuna." Insofar as Language Poetry has insisted on connecting theory and practice, in carrying through an independent, alternative mode of writing, theorizing, and criticizing poetry, it has a legitimate claim to political efficacy. In Rasula's (1987: 321) view, the problem is not too much theoretical writing to the detriment of poetic writing but, rather, a kind of residual embarrassment about seeing theory as integral to the overall practice of poetry: "It is apparent from the existing body of Language Writing that poetic praxis and theoretical exactitude have rarely been so intimately bound together

in American poetry. And here, in the structural integrity of this symbiosis, is the specific political dynamic of Language Writing. The writers themselves, by adhering to a clean separation of theory and practice, have regrettably followed a long tradition in which 'poetry' retains a kind of mystical primacy."

Of these two criticisms of the "unity of theory and practice" claim, it has been Altieri's arguments that have proven most influential, not Rasula's. Thus, in a review of Language Poetry writings, the British poet and critic Rod Mengham (1989: 115) identified a "theoretical saliency . . . at the heart of the 'Language' project and went on to suggest that the apparent hermeneutic openness of the Language Poem made it the perfect vehicle of a highly determinate, controlling context of theory. The Language Poem becomes, Mengham claimed, a kind of puppet of a set of semiotic and political theories, eclectically derived from poststructuralist and postmodernist sources and concertedly promulgated among a core readership. These theories act to produce a reading of the poem by "remote control" (Mengham 1989: 122), determining in advance what will be recognized in the work and hence what will be said about it. The audience for Language Poetry, in short, is trained to salivate at the poems' reflections of Language Poetry theory, a deleterious parody, in Mengham's view, of an engaged aesthetic, critical, or political response to artworks. Accordingly, Mengham also believes that Language Poets overestimate the degree to which their poems free the reader from the social control of normative syntax and usage and, accordingly, also mistake the potential site of political efficacy in their activity as writers. They disproportionately emphasize the controlling power of structural features such as syntax, when the decisive work is being done in shaping and disciplining the context of reading, a site in which theories may play a crucial role.

Similarly, in his recent article "Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay," William Lavender (1996) has focused on the attempts by the Language Poets Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein, in a number of essays and interviews, to offer a theoretical legitimation of their poetic practices by calling referentiality into question as a pseudo-realistic mirage of language under capitalism. Lavender notes the apparent paradox of formulating the principle of linguistic nonreferentiality and opacity in the generically referential and semitransparent idiom of the academic theory essay. He goes on to argue, like Mengham, that theories, presented in the essay genre, become the closed context within which the poems are compelled to render up their meaning: "The nonselfreferring, tautological form of the essay is the context and referent of all the reflexive strategies deployed in Language prac-

tice. . . . The poetry, then, is less 'non-referential' than it is simply subject to new rules for interpretation, rules which are given to us simultaneously with the poems, on facing pages, so to speak, in a textual practice that blurs the genres by placing essays in the same anthologies as the poems" (Lavender 1996: 194–95). Both Mengham and Lavender take a dim view of this powerful, unacknowledged role of theory in Language Poetry. The poems are seen as at once somehow dishonest (they claim to be free, but everywhere they are in theory's chains) and manipulative (they claim to free the reader, but only to more deviously slap theory's nearly invisible cuffs on him or her).

Though pursuing different lines of argument, Carroll, Altieri, Mengham, and Lavender nevertheless circle around the same theoretical crux. Carroll is concerned with disengaging artworks from theories as separate genres of discourse or, more generally, as different ways of meaning; he seeks thus to discredit all claims by critics and artists that artworks perform theoretical work. Altieri argues that the enthusiastic critic of avant-garde poetry has covertly sacrificed the many-sided conflict of interpretations, putatively rejected by the writers themselves and short-circuited by their techniques, in favor of a unidirectional coup of theory. Mengham and Lavender start from practical cases and accept as an initial given the generic separation of types of discourse such as the poem and the theoretical essay. But, in turn, they seek to evaluate the interpretative valencies of this separation, the potential control that theories can exert over readings of artworks, precisely insofar as avant-garde artistic discourse does not generically make its practitioners' theoretical commitments explicit. At the center of both arguments, however, lurks the unresolved issue of just how it is that artworks relate to theories and what roles, artistically legitimate or illegitimate, theories can play in shaping the meanings of artworks.

Part of the problem in discussions of this issue is a great deal of confusion among similar terms that may hold very different conceptual implications: "theory," as a nebulous but ever-expanding genre of academic writing; "a theory," in distinction to observation or other sort of empirical summoning of data; and "theories," which implies the idea of a kind of serial propagation of conceptual frameworks and rivalries between competing frameworks. The first sense of *theory*, which amounts to a professional jargon and its attendant bureaucratic effects, is largely irrelevant to my discussion. I take the third term, *theories*, as my primary usage, since "a theory" always competes with other theories to account for facts that are inconsistent with existing theories and to elicit new data. Theories also are developed in series, and their history is an integral part of their workings.

Compounding these terminological problems is the fact that in the arts

and humanities, most people who have any traffic with theory have few clear ideas about what a theory is and how one might be constructed. In fact, though we speak about theory as if we knew what we were talking about, it is very hard to find a good, quotable definition that falls somewhere between the rough-and-ready notion of just "speaking in general" and pages of abstruse logical symbols and obscure talk about protocol sentences and correspondence rules. It is in the philosophy of science that the question of theory has received its most thoroughgoing discussion, and insights gained here may also be extended to discussions of art and theory. Considerable sophistication about the relative autonomy of theory and the complicated relation of theories, hypotheses, models, and experiments has been achieved in the philosophy of science over the decades since the logical positivists and Karl Popper (1959) initiated a vigorous debate about theory and practice in the sciences.[1] While there are clearly some differences between the specific forms of practices of making art and performing lab work, between articulating artistic theories and formulating theories about scientific phenomena, these differences should not be exaggerated.

In this spirit, I offer here a relatively simple, popularizing definition of theory, from an article by Arthur Danto (1967) on the philosophy of science. It serves my purposes both in giving a working definition of theory and in suggesting, in the very person of Danto and the trajectory of his philosophical career, the potentially fruitful intersection between problems in the philosophy of science and aesthetics. Danto (1967: 299) writes:

> A theory may be regarded as a system of laws, some of which are empirical. Not every empirical law is part of a theory, nor are all the laws of a theory empirical, for some of a theory's laws employ theoretical terms, which are nonobservational. Theoretical terms, if they denote at all, refer to unobservable entities or processes, and it is with respect to changes at this covert level that one explains the observed regularities as covered by empirical laws. . . . Moreover, the behavior of theoretical entities, supposing the theory to be true, is . . . often so grossly disanalogous to the behavior of the entities they are invoked to explain that our ordinary framework of concepts fails to apply to them.

The key points in this definition are two: theories are formulated as systems of propositions that characterize patterns of regularities; and theories often employ terms—for example, *surplus value*, *shell-energy states*, and *bifurcation*

1. The literature on theories in the philosophy of science is vast, and any detailed discussion lies out of the scope of this essay. However, some key points of reference would include: Althusser 1977 [1965]; Althusser and Balibar 1970 [1968]; Bachelard 1984 [1934]; Carnap 1928; Feyerabend 1975 and 1987; Foucault 1970 [1966] and 1972 [1969]; Hacking 1983; Kuhn 1970 [1962]; Lakatos 1978; Lakatos and Musgrave 1970; Lecourt 1975 [1972]; Popper 1959 and 1979 [1972]; Quine 1981; Winch 1990 [1958].

points—that are not empirically observable. We can imagine analogous terms in aesthetics and interpretation theory that have a similar dual aspect of defining patterned consistencies and referring to nonobservable entities: for example, the art historian Alois Riegl's (1985 [1901–23]) "Kunstwollen," through which he defined particular historical modes of art; Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1960) "fusion of horizons" between the present of interpretation and the past of a text; and Jean-François Lyotard's (1971) chaotic and unrepresentable "matrix" out of which discourse and figure are differentiated. (I make no argument here about the validity of these terms; I merely point to them as examples.)

Another point of possible confusion is that avant-garde art as a distinct domain of social practices and values is so intimately bound up with the workings of theories (I will soon turn to discussing some of the ways in which this is true) that we might venture to say that without theories there can be no avant-garde art. But then avant-garde artworks are the components out of which this domain of art is constructed, and so perhaps the artworks are nothing but instances of the theories that are needed for us to have avant-garde art. Of course, as I have already implied, this tack is not quite right. But there remains the task of defining this strange set of structural and symbolic relations between artworks and theories that lets us claim two things at once—two claims that strongly tempt us to confuse artworks with acts of theorizing: on the one hand, avant-garde art appears to be inseparably bound up with theories and dependent on them in a particularly ostentatious fashion; on the other hand, avant-garde artworks do not themselves "theorize" but draw on and refer to theories in a number of complex and important ways.

II

In the next section, I will offer a taxonomy of ways in which artworks might *refer* to theories; there I will be concerned with the possible symbolic relations that an artist may establish between avant-garde artworks and theories. In this section, however, I wish to discuss some *functional* relations between avant-garde works and theories—relations that concern the role of theories in establishing the identity of an object or event *as art*, in guiding processes of artistic production, in shaping the approaches of readers/listeners/spectators to avant-garde works, and in helping us infer meanings from the enigmatic or fragmentary signs most often employed in such works.

The first of these functional relations, most eloquently expounded by Arthur Danto in his essay "The Artworld" (1964) and later at length in *The*

Transfiguration of the Commonplace (1981), concerns the very definition of an object or action as a work of art. Danto refers continually to the extreme example of artworks that are outwardly indiscernible from real, utilitarian objects or, as a corollary, different works of art that are, by their sensual and material qualities alone, indistinguishable. What the Duchampian ready-made, the Warhol Brillo Box, the monochrome black or white paintings of Malevich, Reinhardt, and Rauschenberg tell us, Danto argues, is that the defining essence of art need reside in nothing perceptible in artworks—that is, art cannot be defined by reference to any technically manifest feature (or "aesthetically actual" characteristic, in the sense of "phenomenal") of such works. These peculiar works suggest that questions of beauty, appropriateness, vividness, and sublimity on the one hand, along with the degree of skill, expressiveness, virtuosity, and economy on the other, while often taken as definitive for the art-status of many works, are in the limiting case of avant-garde works secondary qualities only, entering into consideration only after a prior identification of the object or action *as* an artwork in the first place. Danto (1992) sees this identifying act as the conferring of a special ontological status on the work, an act of baptism, the contextualizing of it in a "discourse of reasons," which he calls an *artworld*. Although his definition of this term is, as George Dickie and others have pointed out (Dickie 1993; Carroll 1993), somewhat vague and oscillating, the core of the idea has remained relatively unchanged from its original formulation in Danto's (1964: 580) "The Artworld": "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld." In a recent revisiting of the concept, Danto (1992: 46) has offered the following refinement, now suggesting that the totality of possible conflicts of informed interpretation constitutes the bounds of the artworld: "The artworld is the discourse of reasons institutionalized, and to be a member of the artworld is, accordingly, to have learned what it means to participate in the discourse of reasons for one's culture." It amounts to a complex of reasoned arguments and interpretations, plus the tacit ethos that keeps the evaluative process within certain loosely defined limits while animating its actors with a sense of the intrinsic value of pursuing the activity in its present channels.

Crucial for my discussion, however, is the central role that Danto assigns to theories in constituting and sustaining the artworld. Though never acting outside of a broader operative framework, he suggests, a historically layered context of *theories* may be the predominant factor in making this act of identification possible. Thus, in the case of Andy Warhol's notorious work, Danto (1964: 581) writes: "What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain

theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is. . . . Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting." It is important to underscore that Danto is not arguing for a definition of art as a matter of whatever a small clique of snobs designate as art or, as was facilely assumed by some conceptual artists, that "this is art if I say it is," or even that the artist's theories about art are themselves the artworks. It is rather that the ontological boundary line between the artworld and the world of real objects is the decisive and indispensable criterion in determining if an object or action is a work of art. For at an extreme that was being intensively explored in the visual arts, music, and theater in 1964 when Danto wrote his original "artworld" essay, that boundary line could be drawn in the *absence* of reference to intrinsic, aesthetically perceptible characteristics of the work—that is, by reference to a theory that can gain some general consideration and assent.

Parenthetically, I am uneasy with some of Danto's examples, especially his use of Warhol. Thomas Crow's important essay on the social-critical content of the early Warhol, "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol" (1996b: 49–65; cf. 1996a: 83–92) and my own misgivings about Fredric Jameson's (1991: 6–16) use (or abuse), in his postmodernism essay, of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* as a kind of hermeneutic blank, a deadpan work resistant to any interpretative reading deeper than acknowledging the sheer fetishistic presence of the commodity, have contributed to this caution. Contrary to Jameson's claims and his ingenious comparison of Warhol's work to Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots*, Magritte's *Le Modèle rouge*, and Walker Evans's photograph *Floyd Burroughs' Work Shoes*, *Diamond Dust Shoes* itself offers a number of hermeneutic lines of pursuit, from formalistic to autobiographical-psychoanalytic to social-semiotic. None of these interpretative approaches leads to the purely tautological dead end that Jameson claims to have discovered in this painting, which, despite Warhol's use of photographic processes, is in many respects—for example, its brilliant coloristic effects and its rich play between flatness and illusionistic depth—a quite traditionally "painterly" work and by no means as artistically unsettling as, say, a Duchampian readymade. The putative depthlessness of Warhol's work seems to lie more with beholders ready to find nothing there than with the art itself. In his book *The Rise of the Sixties*, however, Thomas Crow (1996a) mentions the interesting case of the woman artist Sturtevant, who made replicas of works by prominent contemporary artists. Warhol lent her the silkscreens for his *Flowers* series. This led to a work

by Sturtevant more radically indiscernible in physical characteristics from Warhol's paintings than Warhol's paintings were from his artfully modified photographic sources; at the same time, by implication, Sturtevant's remakes engaged with a range of ideas about originality and secondariness, about craft and art status, and about gender. It thus seems to me that Sturtevant's *Flowers* would be a more appropriate illustration of aesthetic indiscernibility than much of Warhol's carefully arranged, manipulated, and colored use of photographic/commercial raw materials. Whatever the shortcomings of Danto's illustrations, however, I do want to underscore the value of his thought-experiment, his attempt to find an example of a recognized artwork that would be either indiscernible from a nonartwork (as with Duchamp's unmodified readymades) or to go one step further than Danto, to find an artwork that would have no phenomenal properties whatsoever. I think we can find this latter more properly in the field of music, with John Cage's notorious silent composition, *4'33"*.

To forestall an obvious objection to my claim that this work qua artwork has no phenomenal properties, I need to dispose of one typical interpretation of this piece, which Cage himself at times encouraged and which needs to be replaced by a better understanding of the stakes of this work. An important way of dealing with artworks of this sort, both by its detractors and its supporters, has been to explain them as *acts of performance*. So, according to this view, when Cage comes out on stage, opens the piano, looks at his watch, closes the piano, and leaves the stage after four minutes and thirty-three seconds, *that* is the singular, improvisational instantiation of the work, along with all the contingent, ambient sounds that enter the performance frame: coughs, noises from outside, fidgets, squeaky chairs, snickers, and so on. From one side of the critical spectrum, confronted with minimalist sculpture and the early instances of conceptual and performance art, Michael Fried (1998 [1967]) famously attacked such works as theatrical and situational, and in his view antiartistic—that is, concerned with a work's merely eventlike character (its sheer performative effect on a spectator) rather than with the richer phenomenological, meaningful qualities of the artistic object as artwork. From the other side of the critical arena, some prominimalist and proconceptualist statements lent credence to this view, if with a different evaluative spin. Thus Cage (1961: 276) reports in his first and very influential book *Silence* that he has often enjoyed performing his silent works by himself out in the woods:

> I have spent many pleasant hours in the woods conducting performances of my silent piece, transcriptions, that is, for an audience of myself, since they were much longer than the popular length which I have had published. At one

performance, I passed the first movement by attempting the identification of a mushroom which remained successfully unidentified. The second movement was extremely dramatic, beginning with the sounds of a buck and a doe leaping up to within ten feet of my rocky podium. The expressivity of this movement was not only dramatic but unusually sad from my point of view, for the animals were frightened simply because I was a human being. However, they left hesitatingly and fittingly within the structure of the work. The third movement was a return to the theme of the first, but with all those profound, so-well-known alterations of world feeling associated by German tradition with the A–B–A.

Cage is being rather witty in his talk of a classical A–B–A structure in his sylvan performances of his silent piece, but to conclude that the work is nothing but the decision to perform it is to understand it quite wrongly. For one thing, such a view brushes over the fact that *4'33"* is not a continuous block of silence, but the sum of carefully composed and assembled durational units of silence. Cage (1990: 20–21) describes this process in his 1988–89 Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard:

i was in the process of writing the *music of changes* that was done in an elaborate way there are many tables for pitches for durations for amplitudes all the work was done with chance operations in the case of 4'33" i actually used the same method and i built up the silence of each movement and the three movements add up to 4'33" i built up each movement by means of short silences put together it seems idiotic but that's what i did i didn't have to bother with the pitch tables or the amplitude tables all i had to do was work with the durations

What are the implications of this fact—that the work is quite thoroughly composed, although the units of composition are imperceptible? The first is to place the work centrally within a context of aesthetic problems concerning the status of musical works of art: how the musical artwork relates on the one hand to its notated score and on the other to the various instantiations of the work in performance. A particularly vexing issue has to do with the degree of deviation in scores or performances that still allows one to claim identity for a given work. If Beethoven left out of a particular manuscript copy a sharp or even a whole bar from his Ninth Symphony, we would probably see it as a corrupt score of the recognizably identical work. But what if every third note were different? Similar questions can be raised about performance. How bad or deviant does a performance have to be before it is no longer a performance of the same work? And if in trying to realize a violin passage from the Ninth, I miraculously produce something that distinctly sounds like a violin passage from the Kreuzer sonata, which, if either, work am I in fact playing? Cage's silent piece distinctly engages with these sorts of theoretical issues about the ontological status

of the musical artwork. For he also makes implicit reference to a central philosophical tenet, which he formulates variously: silence doesn't exist in nature; silence can't be perceived; silence is nonphenomenal. Following from this, we can conclude that if the musical artwork *4'33"* is composed of silences, then Cage has written a work in which the resemblance between the work and its performative instantiations is, on theoretical grounds, necessarily *zero*. Any performance of *4'33"* is bound to have phenomenal features, even if they are as minimal as ambient sounds and the hum of nerves and the circulation of blood in the human body; by definition, however, the work as such is made up of nonphenomenal units, durations of pure silence, which cannot be experienced.

Even at a step back from Danto's innumerable examples of indiscernibles, however, we can see the relevance of the basic idea that our acts of artistic identification, guided by theories, play a crucial role in our approaching avant-garde works with understanding. Without Jackson Mac Low's (1986 [1978]) supplementary appendices to the main text, concerning the composition and performance of his "Vocabulary for Custer LaRue" (Figure 1), a seemingly random scattering of words, we might very well mistake the printed work for an ordinary verse poem, entitled "Vocabulary for Custer LaRue," but produced accidentally with mismatched software. Without some knowledge of Iannis Xenakis's use of stochastic methods to compose music of certain sound densities and of his ideas about the relation of music and architectural space, we might legitimately wonder if we weren't listening to the orchestra tuning up, instead of to a painstakingly layered pattern of glissandi and percussive sounds. And, unaware of postmodern concerns with simulation and the image-discourse of the mass media, we might break our heads trying to remember the title of that film from which one of Cindy Sherman's (1990) *Untitled Film Stills*, a series of photographs, is taken.

Ronald Johnson's (1996) wordless poem "Beam 18" (Figure 2) from his long poem *Ark*—a flat, inked right handprint under the title, on an otherwise blank page—provides an even better example. While we might find the patterns of whorls and loops in some ways visually beautiful, this response is only relevant in relation to the primary question raised concerning the identification of the work as art: Is this an artwork or a stray handprint left by a careless printer? This question extends down to more specific levels of identification, such as the question of genre and function of the print: Is this a poem? In what way? Is it an illustration to a poem? Which poem? Is it a kind of signature of the artist on the blank page or the mark of an intentionless, but ordered process? Does it express anything? Does it symbolize anything? Even a detailed knowledge about hands and hand-

A Vocabulary for Custer LaRue: First Realization – 12/4/78

lust sea laser Lear lucre sucre
acute
seral
lace clause arse secure crease
eta creel cut sleet cruets reels
suer late Tralee
real
creates sure sect clear
set
rectal
eraser stale Arles rears Ares
tale
saute reuser
ela Lars
acres
reseat east Crete release scut
rest cause
suet Salter
terser cruelest
Raul cul
alee car scare
eel
steracle crueler
tea rets
sear
err Erse
eats races ere else Earl seer
alter seta
urea terse Surt
cue reuse rust Luce
star tears cure care
racer cetera
scale lease rare
lees ester Ulster
lues tease usual teal alert sate lure ease seat
raster
trace lectures caul lets clue surer rates
sue least
cease ear Lester eucre
eras steel ruse ate sale truces rules Urals
Ursa select cruse cult cruel creature
later clearer carts arrest
serrate arcs crust cute
rat scar lutes reuser lac realer leers curs
last
tars Celts rales rut Luc salt
luster Laure Ceres cart lats slate
caste sur arts true sauce
stare use ultras curls
scat Uta talc Lares steer
cleat Elea Carus tares rescue steal
Terra trees secret seal Sucret truer
reset cluster crates elate
Cete ruler realest

Figure 1 From Mac Low 1986: 279, with permission.

BEAM 18

Figure 2 From Johnson 1996, n.p., with permission.

prints, say that possessed by a criminologist, will not take us very far in answering these questions. It is theories about art, poetry, pictures, and language which help us make sense of them, if any sense is to be made at all. Moreover, the limits of the strictly *phenomenal* dimension of the work can be explored by asking in what ways the work might have been improved. It would be absurd, for example, to say Johnson should have used the other hand, or that Ezra Pound's handprint would have been politically problematic while Alfred Lord Tennyson's would certainly have been a bit kitschy. And Johnson precisely abjures more obviously expressive presentations of the handprint—opting for the black-and-white inked imprint over a shaded or colored presentation, for the flat posture over a tense or distorted gesture, for a complete print over a fragmented or suggestively incomplete one. Since its demeanor is so expressively neutral beyond the second-order "expressiveness" of the hand's whorls and curves, and because it betrays little if any of the artist's intention in inking the page in such a way, it offers few hints as to what might count as an improvement as opposed to a distortion of the work, or even another work altogether.

The second major way that theories are bound up with the avant-garde is related to Danto's artworld-constitutive role of theories, but concerns more the act of making particular artworks on the one hand, and viewing, hearing, or reading them on the other. Here, assuming we have already negotiated the great divide between art and nonart, we enter into the domain in which artworks pose further problems, first to the artist making the work, then to the audience trying to come to terms with it. In general, we can observe, theories work at a certain remove from these particular problems. It is unlikely that the Language Poet Steve McCaffery, upon becoming stumped with how to revise a particular line that is not working, goes and opens up Henri Meschonnic's *Critique du rythme* (1982) to find the answer to the dilemmas the work is posing to him; nor would the reader probably discover much direct help in reading the poem by browsing through Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984 [1974]), despite what we may know from McCaffery's (1986: 143–58; 201–21) critical essays about his interest in Kristeva's ideas. Nevertheless, theories do work in important and highly effective ways at a remove from this kind of direct contact, by shaping and sharpening the writer's and the reader's heuristic repertoire. Theories may shape our heuristic approaches in ways that open up new ways of seeing, hearing, and reading. Although our experience and understanding of both traditional and avant-garde artworks may be positively affected in this way by our knowledge of theories, the reception of avant-garde artworks, with their enigmatic and unconventional character, calls on theories with particular intensity. For from theories, we may de-

rive and hierarchize the rules of thumb we follow when we are not given a clear set of preferred choices of how to proceed—a typical situation when confronting an unfamiliar, transgressive avant-garde artwork.

The film scholar James Peterson (1996: 108–29), in considering how viewers come to understand something about avant-garde films, provides several theoretical observations that I believe are generalizable to avant-garde art as such. Peterson notes that semiotic approaches to film have found their greatest success in the study of highly conventional, generically defined narrative films. This success, he argues, can be explained by the strong operation of semiotic codes in these works. But it is questionable whether avant-garde films offer much to viewers in the way of coded materials, and hence the attempt to study them with code-oriented methods may fail to comprehend the ways these films work. Rather than a code-based "communication model," Peterson suggests, avant-garde films call for an "inference-based model," which would focus on the ways viewers make sense in the *absence* of a clear code. In such an approach, the emphasis falls on two things: the ways in which background knowledge, both declarative (knowing that) and procedural (knowing how), is acquired; and the internalization of strategies for going on in the face of uncertainty. For example, in watching a given Stan Brakhage film, we need to know something about the filmmaker and his ideas, the context of avant-garde film in the 1960s, and the other works of the artist. We also have to have some rules of thumb for trying to make sense of what we are seeing. Brakhage's theories about the ways that our vision has become attenuated to a very narrow range may cause us, in watching, to attend to both the overall intensity of the imagery and certain subtle alterations that pass before us (see Brakhage 1982). Other theories we may hold—concerning color and form, language and image, and so on—may shape other relevant heuristics and affect our understanding of the film.

The third major relation between avant-garde works and theory lies in the impact of works *on* theories. New works may provoke changes in theories or shifts of allegiance from one theory to another. Danto (1964) has described how conceding the status of art to properties previously considered unartistic not only will affect that type of artwork possessing the newly admitted property but also may reconfigure the whole matrix of relations that go into defining the artworld as the totality of possible art-ascribing properties. Carroll (1996 [1979]: 163), in his essay "Avant-Garde Film and Film Theory," suggests that "a given avant-garde film can cause either the expansion or contraction of a theory." In this regard, I think that individual works of art have much the same restrictions on their efficacy in changing theories as scientific observations or experiments have with

respect to scientific theories. No single observation or experiment can require a theory to be rejected, although it may require that conditions or supplementary hypotheses be added to account for the inconsistencies between fact and theory. What was once hopefully referred to by Popper (1979 [1972]: 14–15) as a "crucial experiment," "an experiment which may refute, depending on its outcome, either the theory to be tested or the falsifying theory" opposed to it, was shown by later philosophers of science such as Imre Lakatos (1970: 119–20; cf. 154–77) to be unable to bear the weight Popper sought to put on it. This absence of "crucial experiments" follows partially from the already-remarked fact that theories are not reducible to observables but, rather, refer regularly to nonobservable entities and utilize vague, nontheoretical terms, what Hilary Putnam (1962: 250–51) calls "broad-spectrum notions." These latter terms include such basic but difficult to analyze terms as "things," "physical magnitude," "determines," and so on. There is also a sociological dimension to the persistence of scientific theories in the face of contradictory facts, an institutional issue with fairly clear corollaries in the arts and in criticism. As Ian Hacking (1983: 121–22) cannily notes in a discussion of Lakatos's work, "A group of workers who have just had a good idea often spends at least a few more years fruitfully applying it. Such groups properly get lots of money from corporations, governments, and foundations. . . . How do you stop funding a program you have supported for five or fifteen years—a program to which many young people have dedicated their careers—and which is finding out very little? That real-life crisis has little to do with philosophy."

Even aside from such irrational factors in the conservation of theories in spite of new, unassimilable facts, theories are refuted primarily by other elaborated theories, which may be adopted for a variety of reasons. The success of a rival theory, of course, depends in good part on how well it accounts for the facts; but it also partially hinges on criteria that have little to do with empirical confirmation—elegance of construction, pedagogical convenience, and so on. Thus, to return to the analogy of artistic innovation to scientific change, we can say that while new artworks may compel a certain piecemeal expansion or contraction of theories, their force should not be overestimated. There is no more a "crucial artwork" that refutes a widely accepted theory of art than there is a "crucial experiment" that may single-handedly falsify a scientific theory. As Lakatos (1970: 158) notes about scientific innovations, there is a strongly retrospective aspect to the idea of "crucialness": "crucial experiments are seen to be crucial decades later." While the rhythms of reevaluation may be different in the arts than in experimental science, particular artworks similarly become "crucial" or "breakthrough" only derivatively and retrospectively, by virtue of

their well-timed positioning within broader contexts of change in ideas and practices—for example, Eliot's *Waste Land* within the desperate cultural and political ferment of post–World War I Europe or Jasper John's flag and target paintings amid the stagnating critical hegemony of abstract expressionism. Given the unbridgeable logical distance between theories and single practical facts, it is rather easy for incongruities between them to be ignored for a long time, and in both directions, especially where the theory or practice is long-standing and has gained general assent. It is primarily during those rare periods in which a multitude of diverse, new works appear in a climate of proliferating ideas that individual artworks may have a certain efficacy in provoking major changes in the theories of art.

III

Having explored these three major functional relations of avant-garde artworks and theories, we can now deal more briefly with a few of the pertinent ways that such works may *refer* to theories symbolically. While I make no claim to an exhaustive taxonomy, I will enumerate six main ways which I believe to cover, more or less, most cases. These are, in order of their explicitness: iconographic correspondence, use of theories as thematic material, exemplification, direct allusion, formal allusion, and expressive use of theoretical diction.

The case of iconographic correspondence, though hardly without complexities and problems, need not occupy us much here. This mode involves conventionalized, allegorical symbolizations and is marginal, for obvious reasons, to avant-gardism, which stresses nonconventional, innovative forms and symbols. It might, however, be observable in the productions of small, theoretically inclined, disciplined groups; for example, I think of the symbols of the minotaur, the preying mantis, and the headless man for the writers of Georges Bataille's circle. It may also function in an individual artist's private iconography; for example, Pierre Klossowski's drawings obsessively instantiate his analyses of the phantasms in Sade and Nietzsche.

An interesting example of the use of theories as thematic material is provided by bpNichol's (1990) text entitled "Probable Systems 20: Ludwig Wittgenstein & DADA (an historical footnote)" from his book *art facts: a book of contexts*. This text takes an example from Wittgenstein's *Brown Book* in which a list of four alphabetical signs (*abcd*) is correlated with a repertoire of four directional movements, indicated by arrows (Figure 3): *a*, left; *b*, right; *c*, up; *d*, down. Following Wittgenstein's lead, Nichol extrapolates—fallaciously, I should mention—the diagram to a figural mapping of the

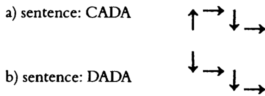
PROBABLE SYSTEMS 20
Ludwig Wittgenstein & DADA
(an historical footnote)

BROWN BOOK 33)

Ludwig Wittgenstein gives as an example the sentence "aacaddd" in which the letters are equated with arrows which are understood as movements carried out by the person comprehending the sentence according to the following chart:

a	→
b	←
c	↑
d	↓

we can construct two other sentences & graph their movements:

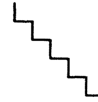


BROWN BOOK 34)

The order "CADA" generates the ornamental linear design

if 33) is applied to 34) the actual sentence generated in 34 can be read as CADACADACADA where "CADA" as an order is the understood sentence CADA CADACADA.

if the system Wittgenstein proposed in 34) is applied to our second sentence DADA (generated by Wittgenstein's system in 33) then "DADA" as an order generates the ornamental linear design



(note the "staircase" phenomenon.)

In western languages the print page leads us deeper into meaning from top left to bottom right. Wittgenstein in his *Brown Book* 34) system generates the actual graphing of DADA if we understand it as an order to move deeper into language. The fact that any staircase goes both up & down indicates that "DADA" as a sentence could be translated to read "move deeper into language by which i mean allow yourself to move back & forth freely thru all levels of language."

Figure 3 From Nichol 1990: 80–81, with permission.

letters *d, a, d, a,* from which he derives a down- and rightward moving staircase. He concludes by giving a verbal ekphrasis of the figure, which is to serve as a definition for the set of operational commands marked by the alphabetical string "*dada*": "Wittgenstein . . . generates the actual graphing of DADA if we understand it as an order to move deeper into language. The fact that any staircase goes both up & down indicates that 'DADA' as a sentence could be translated to read 'move deeper into language by which i mean allow yourself to move back & forth freely thru all levels of language' " (81). Of course, it is obvious that this work relies on allusion, above all to the existence of something called dadaism, which, to cash in on the historical aspect of this "historical footnote," took place more or less contemporaneously with the beginnings of Wittgenstein's own work. And in yoking Wittgenstein and dadaism, Nichol is implicitly declaring his own allegiances to a humorous, yet intellectually engaged, exploration of language in the medium of art. Still, it would be hard to say that this work is limited, in its reference to theory, to a kind of wink or nod or flag to

the reader. For Nichol is genuinely interested in the issues of intertranslatability between notations, performances, and verbal statements raised by Wittgenstein's investigations. It does not merely add connotations to other artistic materials, but provides the materials and themes of the work as a whole.

By illustrating some of the very processes of moves and mis-moves between symbol systems, Nichol's work shades over into the realm of exemplification. I use this term in the sense that Nelson Goodman (1976 [1968]: 52–57) gives it: exemplification as the reverse of denotation. Denotation, Goodman explains, designates the relation between a representation (a picture of Bill Clinton) and the particular, existent thing to which that representation refers (the man Bill Clinton). The picture functions like a label for the man. Exemplification, in contrast, reverses the order of priority of the label and the object labeled; it confers a label on a sample, which possesses the property designated by the label. Thus, using the same example, we are now no longer interested in the fact that Bill Clinton's picture denotes a particular man from Arkansas who occupies the oval office; rather, we are interested in its exemplification of the label "presidential portraits," of which other famous portraits of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson could be equally valid exemplifications. In an art historical context, if Oskar Kokoschka's portrait of Karl Kraus denotes the man Karl Kraus, we could also see this same portrait as one of the finest examples of "Viennese modernist portraits." In this case, it is the art historical label ("Viennese modernist portrait") that is being referred to as a sample (Kokoschka's portrait of Karl Kraus).

Clear-cut exemplifications of theories are not actually very easy to find in avant-garde art, largely for the reasons that Carroll (1995: 5) notes in "Avant-Garde Art and the Problem of Theory"—the symbolic disjunctiveness or puzzle-like character of most avant-garde works. Yet I think that we need not be overly puristic about our application of the term, since artists often, rightly or wrongly, believe themselves to be providing examples or quasi-examples of theoretical ideas. To adopt the voice of Goodman for a moment, an example may still be an example, even if it is a bad example. Moreover, there is at least one group of avant-garde works that I can think of that exemplifies a theory in a rigorous way. That is the so-called enantiomorphic chamber series of the sculptor Robert Smithson, a series of works that deploys sets of mirrors to illustrate an optical peculiarity—the cancellation of reflection when multiple mirrors are placed at particular angles (see Hobbs 1981: 59–62). As far as I can tell, while polemically engaging with the context of Formalist art theory, which sought to discover a standard of artistic quality in an "opticality" supposedly realized by mod-

ernist painting, Smithson's enantiomorphic works also *fully exemplify* the optical theory of enantiomorphic phenomena. The exceptional nature of these works should not, I think, be seen to detract from their importance as illustrations in our own reflections, not on optics, but on the relations of avant-garde works and theories.

I use the term *allusion* in a restricted sense, to mean adding to works secondary meanings through partial or otherwise limited references to theories. I distinguish direct allusion and formal allusion, since we can have artworks that verbally allude to a theory without attempting to refer to some aspect of it through its form (direct allusion) and other works that depend solely on context and the background knowledge of its audience to forge a connection between its form and a given set of theoretical ideas (formal allusion). To give a hypothetical illustration: The singer Madonna, having read a cultural studies collection of essays about her art (e.g., Schwichtenberg 1993; Frank and Smith 1993), decides to call her autobiographical narrative, conventional in all other respects, *The Mirror Stage*, thus attempting to lend it an additional dimension of meaning by terminological allusion to Lacanian psychoanalysis. When psychoanalytic film theorist Laura Mulvey agrees to do the film version, however, she insists on changing the title to *Not a Virgin*, but fractures the linearity of the narrative with a repeated scene in which the image of the protagonist is subjected to various reflective distortions and multiplications. At no point in the film version is any explicit verbal mention of Jacques Lacan or his signature concepts made, but the audience that might be expected to go see the film could also be expected to have the associative link of mirrors with Lacanian theory (and, indeed, perhaps a broader set of associations about postmodernism and spectacle as well).

To descend from these flights of theoretical fancy to the example of Nichol's "Probable System" works, his number 16 (*device for measuring the signified*) (Nichol 1985: 121) alludes both directly and formally to Saussurian language theory. The work is composed of a black-and-white photograph of a transparent glass, sitting in front of a window through which one sees a blurry horizon of trees. Painted one atop the other on the glass and divided by a horizontal black line are four painted animals: from top to bottom, a camel, a donkey, a pig, and a rooster. The rooster, lowest on the glass, appears to stand on the table; the pig, next up on the glass, seems to stand on the windowsill; the donkey appears to stand on the horizon line outside; and the camel would seem to be walking only along the free-floating line on the glass, projected into the distant blur of the sky above the horizon line. Formally, the work plays with various levels of surface inscription and illusions of depth, playfully alluding to the variable dimensionality of signi-

Probable systems 16:

device for measuring the signified

Figure 4 From Nichol 1985: 121, with permission.

fied meaning—the different degrees of ideality—that may be projected by a signifier. It directly alludes to Saussurean theory by using the term *signified* in its title. At the same time, by a kind of rebus-like indirect verbal allusion, in the use of a photograph and glass, it conjures the absent word *transparency* (Figure 4): the putatively normative relation of signifier to signified

PROBABLE SYSTEMS 23

for Noam Chomsky

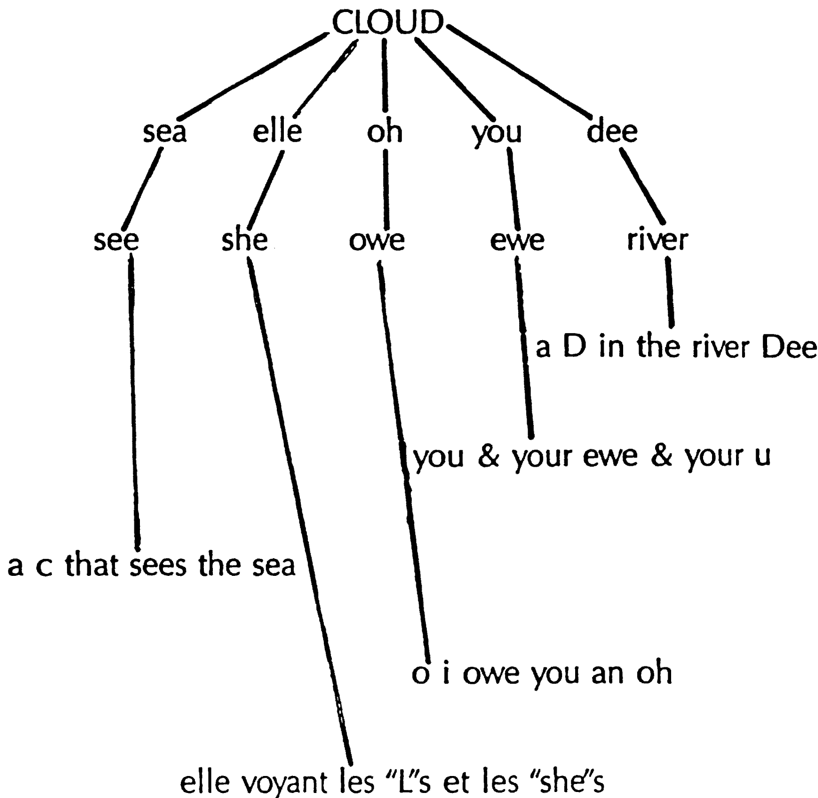


Figure 5 From Nichol 1990: 115, with permission.

that deconstructionist theorists and avant-garde poets alike saw themselves as opposing in the Saussurean legacy. Likewise, Nichol's "Probable System 23 (for Noam Chomsky)" (Figure 5)—a tree-like diagram analyzing the word *cloud*—combines both direct allusion (Chomsky's name in the dedication and his signature tree diagram) and allusion through formal analogy (the work's "analytical" structure alludes to the activity of the Chomskyean linguist).

Expression represents the weakest form of reference of avant-garde works to theories. I define expression, once again, in terms borrowed from Goodman, who understands expression as the metaphorical counterpart of exemplification. A piece of red cloth exemplifies "red" when this label

can be predicated of the sample and the sample really possesses the property designated by the label—that is, when it really is red. Goodman (1976 [1968]: 85–95) claims that if we say that this same piece of red cloth, now worn as a cloak by the heroine of an opera, also *expresses* "passion," then we perform a similar symbolic operation, only metaphorically: we predicate this label of the sample supposing that it possesses this property of being passionate metaphorically. To illustrate this point in relation to an avant-garde artwork, I will quote a passage from the poem "Geodes" from Christian Bök's (1994) beautiful book *Crystallography*:

> arteriosclerotic mazes of tunnels
> capillarize the flesh of the rock,
> the caves, alveoli in stone lungs.
>
> all maps here appear axodendritic.
>
> all ways are alleyways
> that always waylay you.
>
> anatomical sketches
> of the caverns
> depict their random
> morphogenesis,
> the mutant formation
> of disembodied
> organs that connect
> without order:
> a rhizomatic *corpus*.

Here there is an allusive tagging of theories through words like "morphogenesis" (René Thom) and "rhizomatic" (Gilles Deleuze); but there is also a kind of metaphorical expressiveness of these and the other technical terms aside from any explicit reference they are making. Through their scientific or theoretical aura, they "express," in Goodman's sense, subjectlessness or agentlessness, which in turn contributes to the lyrical strangeness of the space Bök is depicting. This is purely metaphorical, since there is no reason we should suppose that a crystal or a geological formation should, were it to be granted a tongue, begin to speak in Latinate jargon like a lycée-trained French mathematician. And yet expressively, within the framework of Bök's book, it is an appropriate choice.

IV

In conclusion, I want to reframe the structural and symbolic relations of artworks and theories in a somewhat broader perspective—to discuss the

pedagogical aims implicit in the production and dissemination of avant-garde artworks. I have already suggested some of the reasons that this pedagogical impulse would be particularly strong—indeed, almost inherently necessary to the avant-garde's cultural project: its problematic, puzzling works often require that one hold a particular theory to allow them their status as artworks in the first place, and once that ontological divide has been negotiated, they have little evident connection to the habits of viewing, reading, or listening their audience may possess through everyday practice and through dealings with more conventional works of art. In one way or another, the audiences of avant-garde works must learn how to construe and recognize unfamiliar objects, events, and texts as artworks and to apply heuristic tools to allow them inferentially to grasp the specific problems that the works pose. Therefore, it is not accidental that surrounding the artworks, narrowly defined, there is a nebulous periphery of discourse related to the works that is crucial to the work's being understood and evaluated. Indeed, much of this discourse originates with the artists themselves, in the form of statements, lectures, study groups, debates, interviews, essays, reviews, and the like. Ironically, given the spontaneous rhetorical antiacademicism of many avant-garde artists, avant-garde groups have often reconstituted an almost classical sort of academy: independent, quasi-academic pedagogical institutions through which the "idiomatics" of their artistic tendency, the necessary presuppositions of understanding their work, could be elaborated and practically disseminated. As Lavender (1996: 198) notes in his critique of Language Poetry theory, "The Language poets are more academic than the academics. As with Pound, to be 'anti-academic' is to protest against the university not being academic, or rigorous, enough."

We can characterize this pedagogical dimension of avant-garde works as the attempt to coordinate four elements: a theory, a set of heuristic moves, the formal and symbolic properties of the work, and the audience's capacities for interpreting and understanding. Given the difficulty of avant-garde works, the often half-baked or utopian nature of their purveyors' theories, the limited development of operative procedures for reading works inferentially, and the natural and sociological limits on the capacities of audiences, it is not surprising that more often than not these attempts fail or go awry. It might be nice to think that if we could only get rid of Disney studios and get children started soon enough, they might naturally gravitate toward the surrealist animators the Brothers Quay and Jan Švankmajer rather than toward *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid*. But we would be sorely disappointed, I suspect, if we ever got the chance to make the experiment. The other danger of the pedagogical utopianism is, of course, authoritari-

anism, ranging from Pound's and Olson's "Damn blast yr intellex" bluster, to more sinister flirtations with totalitarian politics or private dictatorship, like the example of the Austrian actionist artist Otto Mühl, who is now in prison for some of the less savory aspects of his utopian artistic commune. Charles Harrison (1991) gives a rather humorous example of pedagogical misfire in his discussion of Art & Language's work "Index 002 Bxal," an elaborate system of operations for combining indices of particular topics, dispositions, or commitments, ranging from the ideological to the absurd. The work is incredibly complex, so complicated, in fact, that as Harrison drily reports, "the possibility of understanding as a recountable form of enlightenment was systematically ruled out in the design of the work" (103). Yet in ruling out this putatively reactionary conception of understanding, Art & Language pretty much precluded any kind of understanding at all for any but a fraction even of their own group and close followers. At the exhibit of the work in New York, Art & Language allowed viewers to record their responses. As reported in the September 1974 issue of the journal *Art-Language*, these included a kind of dutiful graduate-student curiosity ("This derives from Bar-Hillel's notions of indexicality, doesn't it?") and baffled pseudopopulist outrage ("What the fuck is this elitist nonsense?"), but it hardly indicated that any significant redefinition of art had taken hold even among the small public for contemporary art shows (Harrison 1991: 101–3).

I would like to conclude by giving the last word to Nichol, by quoting one final "Probable System," one of Nichol's last works before his death in the fall of 1988, the ironic utopian proposal of number 24, subtitled "physical contexts of human words." If I read this work correctly, Nichol would seem to be commenting on the irrepressible impulse to remake the world, to retrain all our accepted habits of perceiving and speaking, that has historically characterized the avant-garde, and the occasional absurdities that entails. Yet at the same time, he suggests, it is precisely this utopian impulse that opens the path of DADA, paralogically derived, through all the levels of language:

> In a number of the preceding PROBABLE SYSTEMS, we have been examining concepts like "the weight of speech," the "speed of thot," etc. What becomes increasingly apparent is the need for certain world standards when it comes to print. Something as simple as measuring the circumference of words is made meaningless by the virtual babel of type-faces and type-sizes.
>
> If a world standard were adopted—something like, say, 10 pt, or 12 pt, Helvetica, Garamond or Futura—then numerous variables could be taken into account & meaningful discussions & research could begin to take place. For instance, a more accurate notation of pitch and volume variables would become possible.

It could also illuminate discussion of the justified paragraph versus the preferred typographic mode of ragged right. And, of course, that old question of the time it takes for the mind to get around certain old thinking would finally be answerable.

This is merely to point to the advantages of setting up such a standard. Those interested could begin by forming local study groups to discuss the problem and approaches to be taken in order to get their government to adopt the notion of a World Standard for Print Size & Style. We can only hope that this initiative does not go the way of Esperanto. (Nichol 1990: 118–19)

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