

Towards a Critical Art Theory

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Critical theory rejects the given world and looks beyond it. In reflection on art, too, we need to distinguish between uncritical, or affirmative, theory and a *critical* theory that rejects the *given art* and looks beyond it. Critical *art* theory cannot limit itself to the reception and interpretation of art, as now exists under capitalism. Because it will recognize that art as it is currently institutionalized and practiced—business as usual in the current ‘art world’—is in the deepest and most unavoidable sense ‘art under capitalism,’ art under the domination of capitalism, critical art theory will rather be oriented towards a clear break or rupture with the art that capitalism has brought to dominance.

Critical art theory’s first task is to understand how the given art supports the given order. It must expose and analyze art’s actual social functions under capitalism. What is it *doing*, this whole sphere of activity called art? Any critical theory of art must begin by grasping that the activity of art in its current forms is contradictory. The ‘art world’ is the site of an enormous mobilization of creativity and inventiveness, channelled into the production, reception, and circulation of artworks. The art institutions practice various kinds of direction over this production as a whole, but this direction is not usually *directly* coercive. Certainly the art market exerts pressures of selection that no artist can ignore, if she or he hopes to make a career. But individual artists are relatively free to make the art they choose, according to their own conceptions. It may not sell or make them famous, but they are free to do their thing. Art, then, has not relinquished its historical claim to autonomy within capitalist society, and today the operations of this relative autonomy remain empirically observable.

On the other hand, a critical theorist is bound to see that art as a whole is a stabilizing factor in social life. The existence of an art seemingly produced freely and in great abundance is a credit to the given order. As a luxurious surplus, art remains a jewel in the crown of power, and the richer, more splendid and exuberant art is, the more it affirms the social status quo. The material reality of capitalist society may be a war of all against all, but in art the utopian impulses that are blocked from actualization in everyday life find an orderly social outlet. The art institutions organize a great variety of activities and agents into a complex systemic unity; the capitalist art system functions as a subsystem of the capitalist world system. Without

doubt, some of these activities and artistic products are openly critical and politically committed. But taken *as a whole*, the art system is ‘affirmative,’ in the sense that it converts the totality of artworks and artistic practices—the sum of what flows through these circuits of production and reception—into ‘symbolic legitimation’ (to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s apt expression for it) of class society.¹ It does so by *simultaneously* encouraging art’s autonomous impulses and politically neutralizing what those impulses produce. Art *simulates* the experiences of freedom, reconciliation, joy, solidarity and uninhibited communication and expression that are blocked in class society. Art is a form of compensation for the injustices, repressions and self-repressions, and impoverishments of experience that characterize everyday life under capitalist modernity. As *compensation*, art captures and renders harmless rebellious energies and dissipates pressures for change. In this way art is an *ideological support* for the social status quo and contributes to the reproduction of class society.

Frankfurt Modernism

The Frankfurt theorists pioneered and elaborated this dialectical understanding of art. Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno—working in close relation to others, including Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer, and certainly stimulated by the different Marxist approaches of Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács—have shown us how art under capitalism can, at the very same time, be both relatively autonomous and instrumentalized into a support for existing society. Every work of art, in Adorno’s famous formulation, is both autonomous and *fait social*.² Every artwork is autonomous insofar as it asserts itself as an end-in-itself and pursues the logic of its own development without regard to the dominant logic of society; but every work is also a ‘social fact’ in that it is a cipher that manifests and confirms the reality of society, understood as the total nexus of social relations and processes. In the autonomous aspect of art’s ‘double character,’ the Frankfurt theorists saw an equivalent to the intransigence of critical theory. Free autonomous creation is a form of that reach for a non-alienated humanity described luminously by the young Karl Marx. As such, it always contains a force of resistance to the powers that be, albeit a very fragile one.

Their attempts to rescue and protect this autonomous aspect led the Frankfurt theorists to an absolute investment in the forms of artistic modernism. For them, and above all for Adorno, the modernist artwork or opus was a sensuous manifestation of truth as a social process straining towards human emancipation. The modernist work—and to be sure, what is meant here are the masterworks, the zenith of advanced formal experimentation—is an “enactment of antagonisms,” an unreconciled synthesis of “un-unifiable, non-identical elements that grind away at each other.”³ A force field of elements that are both artistic and social, the artwork indirectly or even unconsciously reproduces the conflicts, blockages and revolutionary aspirations of alienated everyday life. They saw this practice of autonomy threatened from two directions. First, from the increasing encroachments of capitalist rationality into the sphere of culture—processes to which Horkheimer and Adorno famously gave the name ‘culture industry.’⁴ Second, from political instrumentalization by the Communist parties and other established powers claiming to be anti-capitalist.

It was in response to his perceptions of this second threat that Adorno issued his notorious condemnation of politicized art.⁵ Ostensibly responding to Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1948 call for a *littérature engagée*, Adorno’s position in fact had already been formed by the interwar context: the liquidation of the artistic avant gardes in the USSR under Stalin and the Comintern’s adoption of socialist realism as the official and only acceptable form of anti-capitalist art. Art that subordinates itself to the direction of a Party was for Adorno a betrayal of art’s force of resistance. He took the position that art cannot instrumentalize itself on the basis of political commitments without undermining the autonomy on which it depends and thereby undoing itself as art. Autonomous (modernist) art is political, but only indirectly and only by restricting itself to the practice of its proper autonomy. In short, art must bear its contradiction and not attempt to overcome it. As the culture industry expanded and consolidated its hold over everyday consciousness and, indeed, as struggles of national liberation and urban uprisings politicized campuses over the course of the 1960s, Adorno responded by hardening his position.

There can be little doubt, that the given artistic autonomy is threatened by the two tendencies Adorno pointed to; but there is little doubt either that his conception of the problem forecloses its possible solution. Culture industry and official socialist realism were not the only alternatives to the production of autonomist artworks. But Adorno in effect couldn’t see these other alternatives because he had no category for them. The most convincing of these alternatives constituted itself by terminating its ties of dependency on the art institutions, abandoning the production of traditional art objects, and relocating its practices to the streets and public spaces. The formation of the Situationist International (SI) in 1957 was an announcement that this

alternative had reached a basic theoretical and practical coherence. Adorno remained blind to it as he continued to polish his *Aesthetic Theory* until his death in 1969. So did his heir, Peter Bürger, who would publish *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in 1974.

An English translation of Bürger’s book appeared in 1984.⁶ Since then, it has functioned mainly as a theoretical support for modernist positions within Anglophone (i.e. globalized) art and cultural discourse. It still tends to be cited by those happy to counter-sign any possible death certificate of the avant gardes, and by those dismissive of attempts to develop practices in opposition to dominant institutions. In the present context, we would only need to read Andrea Fraser to see how Bürger is still brought in as an authority purportedly demonstrating the futility, infantilism and bad faith of all practices aimed directly against or seeking radically to break with established institutional power.⁷ For Fraser, Bürger, together with Pierre Bourdieu, becomes a resource for the justification of an ostensibly more mature and effective position within the institutions. However, even when it is called ‘criticality,’ resignation remains resignation. It is not my purpose here to engage with specific readings of Bürger or even to fairly represent the development of Bürger’s own positions since 1974. What follows is a critique of the arguments advanced in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, since it is this text, in its English edition, that is operative today in support of a resigned and melancholic modernism. And in this regard, it is crucial to see Adorno standing behind Bürger. While in other respects, Adorno remains a key critical thinker, for me, his rigid investments in artistic modernism are a political problem and, as such, are to be critically resisted.

Towards a Different Autonomy

With both Adorno and Bürger, the problem can be traced to a theoretically unjustified over-investment in the work-form of modernist art. Bürger basically rewrites the history of the artistic avant gardes as the development of the work-as-force-field so dear to Adorno. For Adorno, the avant garde is modernist art, identity pure and simple. Bürger makes an important advance beyond this identification by grasping that the ‘historical’ avant gardes had repudiated artistic autonomy in their efforts to re-link art and life—and that their specificity is to be located in this repudiation. But although Bürger works hard to differentiate his analysis from Adorno’s, he returns to the fold, so to speak, by judging this avant-garde attack on the institution of autonomous art to be failure, a ‘false supersession’ (*falsche Aufhebung*) of art into life.

The avant-garde intended the supersession (*Aufhebung*) of autonomous art by leading art over into a practice of life (*Lebenspraxis*). This has not taken place and presumably cannot take place within bourgeois society unless it be in the form of a false supersession (*falschen Aufhebung*) of autonomous art.⁸



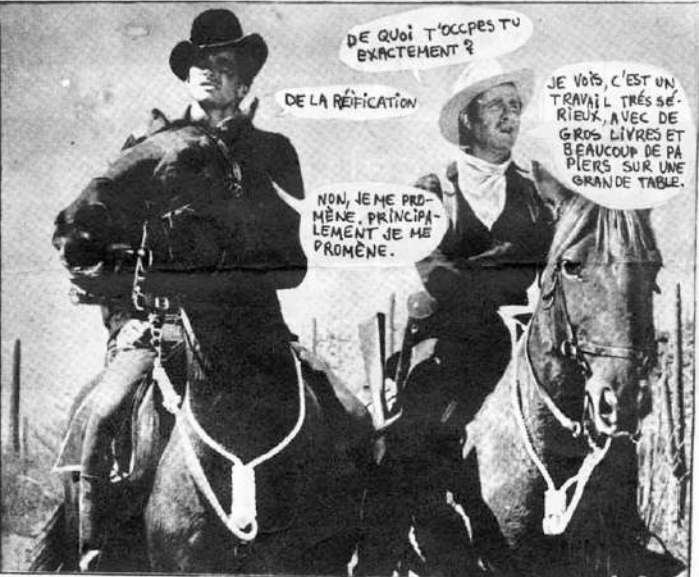
LA PRÉSIDENCE PASSE ENCORE, MAIS LA TRÉSORÈRIE IL N'EN ÉTAIT PAS QUESTION. ILS CONVAINquireNT AISEMENT UNE PASSANTE, QUE LE HASARD AVAIT MIS SUR LEUR TROTTOIR, DE PRENDRE LE RÔLE PLUS COMPROMETTANT DE TRÉSORIÈRE.

... C'EST L'ARGENT EN EFFET LE MOTIF DE TOUTES LES DISCORDS, DE TOUTES LES HAÏNES, DE TOUTES LES AMBITIONS, C'EST EN UN MOT LE CRÉATEUR DE LA PROPRIÉTÉ. SI L'ON N'ÉTAIT PLUS OBLIGÉ DE DONNER QUELQUE CHOSE EN ÉCHANGE DE CE QUE NOUS AVONS BESOIN POUR NOTRE EXISTENCE, L'OR PERDRAIT SA VALEUR ET PERSONNE NE CHERCHERAIT ET NE POURRAIT S'ENRICHIR PUISQUE RIEN DE CE QU'IL AMASSERAIT NE POURRAIT SERVIR À LUI PROCURER UN BIEN ÊTRE SUPÉRIEUR À CELUI DES AUTRES. DE LÀ, PLUS BESOIN DE LOIS, PLUS BESOIN DE MAÎTRES



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DE QUOI T'OCCUPES TU EXACTEMENT ?
DE LA RÉFÉCATION
NON, JE ME PROMÈNE. PRINCIPALEMENT JE ME PROMÈNE.
JE VOIS, C'EST UN TRAVAIL TRÈS SÉRIEUX, AVEC DE GROS LIVRES ET BEAUCOUP DE PAPIERS SUR UNE GRANDE TABLE.

MES PRINCIPES ET MES GOÛTS FIRENT MON BONHEUR DEPUIS MON ENFANCE. ILS FURENT TOUJOURS L'UNIQUE BASE DE MA CONDUITE ET DE MES ACTIONS : PEUT-ÊTRE I-RAI-JE PLUS LOIN, JE SENS QUE C'EST POSSIBLE, MAIS POUR REVENIR, NON, J'AI TROP D'HORREUR POUR LE PRÉJUGÉ DES HOMMES. JE HAISSAIS LEURS CIVILISATIONS, LEURS DIEUX, LEURS DÉVOTIONS, J'AMAIS SACRIFIER MES PROPRES CHANTS.

RAVACHOL JULES, DIT KOENIGSTEIN, FRANÇOIS, NÉ LE 11 OCTOBRE 1854, TAILLE 1m 66; PROFESSION: TEINTURIER. RELATIONS: RÉVOLUTIONNAIRES. CAUSE DE LA DÉTENTION: DESTRUCTION D'IMMEUBLES ET DÉTENTION D'ENGINS EXPLOSIFS.

L'EXCELLENCE DE CE SAVOIR THÉORIQUE NE POUVAIT ALLER SANS UNE PRATIQUE APPROPRIÉE. ILS AVAIENT PEU À PEU SU RECONNAÎTRE CEUX QUI LA DÉTÉRIORATION DE LA MACHINE SOCIALE SERAIT UN JEU IMPITOYABLE. C'EST AINSI QUE LES POURPARLERS AVEC L'«INTERNATIONALE OCCULTE» S'ENGAGÈRENT.

POT V: BE NE DIC

Situationist International tract by André Bertrand, *Le Retour de la Colonne Durruti* (Strasbourg: Association Fédérative Générale des Étudiants de Strasbourg, 1966).

The only successful result was an unintended one: after the historical avant gardes, according to Bürger, a transformation takes place in the work-form of art. The organic, harmonized work of traditional art gives way to the (non-organic, allegorical) work-form in which disarticulated elements are held together in a fragmentary unity that refuses the semblance of reconciliation: “Paradoxically, the avant-gardiste intention to destroy art as an institution is thus realized in the work of art itself. The intention to revolutionize life by returning art to its praxis turns into a revolutionizing of art.”⁹ In other words, art cannot repudiate its autonomy, but it can go on endlessly repudiating its own traditions, so long as it does so in the form of modernist works. This pronouncement of failure and ‘false supersession’ is far too hasty. I will return to this point later. Here I want to question this investment in the institutionalized autonomy of art by contrasting it to the autonomy constituted through a conscious break with institutionalized art.

The Situationist alternative to art under capitalism was a more advanced and theoretically conscious breakout than the often partial and hesitant revolts of the early avant gardes. Founded in 1957 but continuing in many respects the project of the Lettrist International (LI) from which many of its founding members came, the SI was a Paris-based network of mostly European national ‘sections’ active until its self-dissolution in 1972. Formally combining the LI group around core members Guy Debord, Michèle Bernstein and Gil Wolman and the Imaginist Bauhaus around Asger Jorn, Constant and Giuseppe Pino-Gallizio, and soon assimilating the Munich-based Spur group around Hans-Peter Zimmer, Heimrad Prem and Dieter Kunzelmann, the SI undertook a radical collective critique of postwar commodity capitalism and the art system flourishing around a restored modernism. Drawing the practical conclusions, they transformed the SI within four years from a grouping of artists into a revolutionary organization of cultural guerrillas. The SI’s critical process of progressive detachment from the art institutions culminated in an internal prohibition on the pursuit of an art career by any of its members. Situationist practice was radically politicized, but is not reducible to a simple or total instrumentalization. We can agree with Adorno that artists who paint what the Party says to paint have given up their autonomy; as apologists for the Central Committee’s monopoly on autonomy, they are no more than instruments for producing compromised works. But the SI was a group founded on the principle of autonomy—an autonomy not restricted as privilege or specialization, but one that is radicalized through a revolutionary process openly aiming to extend autonomy to all. The SI did not recognize any Party or other absolute authority on questions pertaining to the aims and forms of revolutionary social struggle. Their autonomy was to critically study reality and the theories that would explain it, draw their own conclusions and act accordingly. In its own group process, the SI accepted nothing less than a continuous demonstration of autonomy

by its members, who were expected to contribute as full participants in a collective practice. This process didn’t always unfold smoothly. (What process does?) But the much-criticized exclusions carried out by the group by and large reflect the painful attainment of theoretical coherence and are hardly proof of a lack of autonomy. ‘Instrumentalization’ is the wrong category for a conscious and freely self-generating (i.e. autonomous) practice.

Moreover, the Situationists were even more hostile than Adorno to official Communist parties and would-be vanguards. Their experiments in collective autonomy were far removed—and openly critical of—the servility of party militants. Alienation can’t be overcome, as they put it, “by means of alienated forms of struggle.”¹⁰ Their critical processing of revolutionary theory and practice was plainly much deeper than Adorno’s—and was lived, as it must be, as a real urgency. They carried out an autonomous appropriation of critical theory, developed in a close dialectic with their own radical cultural practices and innovations. As a result, true enough, they ceased to produce modernist artworks. But they never claimed to have gone on with modernism; they claimed rather to have surpassed this dominant conception of art.¹¹ My point is that Situationist practice—however you categorize or evaluate it—was certainly no less autonomous than the institutionalized production of modernist artworks favored by Adorno. If anything, it was far more autonomous and intransigently critical. In comparison to Situationist practice, which continues to function as a real factor of resistance and emancipation, Adorno’s claims for Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett seem laughably inflated.

On the Supersession of Art

Situationist art theory, then, does not suffer from the categorical and conceptual impasses that led Frankfurt art theory to draw the wagons around the modernist artwork. For the Situationists, art oriented towards radical social change could no longer be about the production of objects for exhibition and passive spectatorship. Given the decomposition of contemporary culture—and in passing let’s at least note that there is much overlap in the analyses of culture industry and the theory of spectacular society—attempts to maintain or rejuvenate modernism are a losing and illusory enterprise. With regard to the content and meaning of early avant-garde practice, the critical art theory developed by the SI in the late 1950s and early 60s and concisely summarized by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 is basically consistent with Bürger’s later theorization. But the two theories diverge irreconcilably in their interpretation of the consequences.

The rise of capitalism—the tendency to reduce everything and everyone to commodity status and exchange value—was the material condition for the relative autonomy of culture; the bourgeois revolution was the political last act of a

material process that had pulverized traditional bases of authority and released art from its old function of ritual unification. For the Situationists, as art became conscious of itself as a distinct sphere of activity in the new order, it logically began to press for the autonomy of its sphere. But self-consciousness also brought awareness of the impotence of this autonomy as a form of social *separation* and insights into its new functions in support of bourgeois power. The avant gardes of the early twentieth century responded with a practical demand that separation be abolished and autonomy be generalized through revolution. This far Bürger is in agreement. But for him, the defeat of the revolutionary attempt to abolish capitalism makes the avant garde break-out a failure that must be re-inscribed in the work-form of art, while for the Situationists this defeat is only one moment in a struggle that continues. For the SI, the logic of art—necessarily first *for* and then *against* autonomous separation—remains unchanged, and art can make its peace with separation only by deceiving itself. Resigned returns to institutionalized art and to the empty, repetitive formalist experiments of work-based modernism can only represent a process of decomposition: the “end of the history of culture.”¹²

In political terms, there are at this point just two irreconcilable options: either to be enlisted in culture’s affirmative function—“to justify a society with no justification”—or to press forward with the revolutionary process.¹³ The institutions will organize the prolongation of art “as a dead thing for spectacular contemplation.”¹⁴ The radical alternative is the supersession (*dépassement*; that is, *aufhebung*) of art. The first aligns itself with the defense of class power; the second, with the radical critique of society. Surpassing art means removing it from institutional management and transforming it into a practice for expanding life here and now, for overcoming passivity and separation, in short for ‘revolutionizing everyday life.’ There are of course possibilities for modest critical practices within the art institutions, but these can always be managed and kept within tolerable limits. Maximum pressure on the given develops from a refusal of the art system *as a whole*, openly linked to a refusal of the social totality. The history of the real avant gardes, then, is not the history of artistic modernism, but the attainment of consciousness about the stakes and the need for this overcoming.

The main defect of Bürger’s theorization can be located in his historical judgement on the early avant gardes, because this judgement becomes a categorical foreclosure or blindness: For Bürger, the conclusion that the early avant gardes failed in their attempts to supersede art follows necessarily from the obvious fact that the institution of art persists. There can be no dialectical overcoming without the negating moment of an abolition: “It is a historical fact that the avant-garde movements did not put an end to the production of works of art, and that the social institution that is art proved resistant to the avant-gardiste attack.”¹⁵ Art is

not abolished; therefore, no supersession. This leads Bürger to declare that the early avant gardes are now to be seen as ‘historical.’ Henceforth, attempts to repeat the project of overcoming art can only be *repetitions of failure*; such attempts by the ‘neo-avant garde,’ as Bürger now names it, only serve to consolidate the institutionalization of the historical avant gardes *as art*:

In a changed context, the resumption of avant-gardiste intentions with the means of avant-gardism can no longer even have the limited effectiveness the historical avant-gardes achieved... To formulate more pointedly: the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-garde intentions.¹⁶

Marcel Duchamp’s gesture of signing a urinal or bottle dri-er was a failed attack on the category of individual production, but repetitions of this gesture merely institutionalized the readymade as a legitimate art object.¹⁷

The problem here is that Bürger restricts his analysis to *artworks* and to gestures that conform to this category. That he comes close to perceiving that this may be a problem is hinted in those places where he uses the term ‘manifestation’ (*Manifestation*) to refer to avant-garde practice: “Instead of speaking of the avant-gardiste work, we will speak of avant-gardiste manifestation. A dadaist manifestation does not have work character but is nonetheless an authentic manifestation of the artistic avant-garde.”¹⁸ But soon it is clear that *all forms of practice* will in the end be either reduced to that category or else not recognized at all: “The efforts to sublimate art become artistic manifestations [*Veranstaltungen*] that, independently of their producers’ intentions, take on the character of works.”¹⁹ Bürger’s limited examples show that what he has in mind by ‘manifestation’ are gestures that already fit the work form, such as Duchamp’s ready-mades or Surrealist automatic poems—or at most, provocations performed before an audience at organized artistic events (*Veranstaltungen*).

Happenings and Situations

Bürger is aware of the ‘happening’ form developed by Allan Kaprow and his collaborators beginning in 1958. But he classes happenings as no more than a neo-avant garde repetition of Dadaist manifestations, evidence that repeating historical provocations no longer has protest value. He concludes that art today “can either resign itself to its autonomy status or ‘organize happenings’ to break through that status. But without surrendering its claim to truth, art cannot simply deny the autonomy status and pretend that it has a direct effect.”²⁰ Art’s ‘claim to truth,’ however, turns out to be a normative description of autonomy status itself. Following Adorno, Bürger accepts that it is only art’s limited exemption from the instrumental reason dominating everyday life that enables it to recognize and articulate the truth—‘truth’ here being understood not as a correspondence between reality and its representation but as an

implicit critico-utopian evaluation of *reality*. Truth is not conformity to the given, but is rather the negative force of resistance generated by the mere existence of artworks that, obeying no logic but their own, refuse integration. Bürger's argument here merely endorses Adorno's. What it really says is: art can't give up its autonomy status without ceasing to be art. And the implication is that if art does manage to directly produce political and social effects, it thereby ceases to be art and is no longer his—Bürger's—concern.

But Bürger cannot escape the problem in this way. He has already argued that the aim to produce direct effects (i.e. the transformation of art into a practice of life, a *Lebenspraxis*) is precisely what constitutes the avant garde. So he cannot now give his theorization of the avant garde permission to ignore the avant gardes when they do attain their aim. He also attempts to elude the same problem with a variation on the argument. Pulp fiction—in other words, the non-autonomous products of the culture industry—are what you get when you aim at a supersession of art into life.²¹ By 1974, there were serious counter-examples for Bürger's argument; the SI even went so far as to spell everything out for him in its own books and theorizations. In this case the blindness is devastating, for the gap between contemporary avant-garde practice and the theory that purports to explain why it is no longer possible invalidates Bürger's work.

This would be the case only if the SI accomplished successful supersessions of art without collapsing into culture industry. The collapse hypothesis is easily dispensed with, since the SI did not indulge in commodity production. But putting Bürger's theory to the test at least helps us to see that any evaluation of Situationist supersessions must take into account the fact that the SI cut its ties to the art institutions and repudiated the work form of modernist art. The same cannot be said of Bürger's 'neo-avant garde.' Bürger's examples—he briefly discusses Andy Warhol and reproduces images of works by Warhol and Daniel Spoerri—are artists who submit *artworks to the institutions for reception*.²² Even the case of Kaprow, who is not named but can be inferred from Bürger's use of the term 'happening,' does not disturb this commitment to institutions. Kaprow wanted to investigate or blur the borders between art and life, but he did so under the gaze, as it were, of the institutions, to which he remained dependent. It is in this sense that every happening does indeed, as Bürger claims, take on the character of a work. At most, the happening form achieved an expansion of the dominant concept of art, but not its negation. Ditto, in this respect, for the case of Fluxus. The subsequent appearance of the new medium or genre of 'performance art' confirms the institutional acceptance (and neutralizing assimilation) of this direction. (In my terms, the result of a successful capture or assimilation of a rebellious form of practice is another *expansion of the category* of institutionalized modernist art.)

The differences between the happening and the situation are decisive here. As an experimental event that never seriously put its autonomy status in question, the happening staged interactions or exchanges of roles between artist and audience—but in safe, more or less controlled conditions, and ultimately for institutional reception. Only when, as in the Living Theatre in exile and also perhaps in Jean-Jacques Lebel's notorious 'Festivals of Free Expression' in the mid-1960s, happening-like events sacrificing the element of institutional reception (and its implicit appeal for institutional approval), did they become something more threatening to the institution of art. On the other hand, the staging of personal risk or even physical danger through the elimination of the conventions that put limits on audience participation, as in Yoko Ono's *Cut Pieces* of 1964-65 or Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974), are extremes of performance art that are indeed subject to the dialectic of repetition and the recuperation of protest pointed to by Bürger.

In contrast, a situation—a constructed moment of alienated life that activates the social question—does not depend on the dominant conception of art or its institutions to generate its meaning and effects. The Situationists themselves, who continued to criticize contemporary art in the pages of their journal, published in 1963 an incisive discussion of the happening form and differentiated it from the practice of the SI:

The happening is an isolated attempt to construct a situation *on the basis of poverty* (material poverty, poverty of human contact, poverty inherited from the artistic spectacle, poverty of the specific philosophy driven to 'ideologize' the reality of these moments). The situations that the SI has defined, on the other hand, can only be constructed on the basis of material and spiritual richness. Which is another way of saying that an outline for the construction of situations must be the game, the serious game, of the revolutionary avant-garde, and cannot exist for those who resign themselves on certain points to political passivity, metaphysical despair, or even the pure and experienced absence of artistic creativity.²³

Situations activate a revolutionary process, then, but do so by developing social and political efficacy within the found context of material everyday life, rather than through a displacement of everyday elements and encounters into the context of institutionalized art. In this sense, situations are indeed 'direct' by Bürger's criteria. The so-called 'Strasbourg Scandal' of 1966 is an example of a successful situation that contributed directly to a process of radicalization culminating, in May and June of 1968, in a wildcat general strike of nine million workers throughout France. There is, moreover, little danger of mistaking or perversely misrecognizing this kind of event with an artwork or happening. The conclusion seems inescapable that the SI renewed—and not merely repeated to no effect—the avant garde project of overcoming art by turning it into a revolutionary practice of life.

It follows that what Bürger has named the ‘neo-avant garde’ in order to dismiss it is not avant garde at all. Those who, like the SI, renewed the avant garde project were categorically excluded from the analysis. When the repudiation of institutionalized art and the work form are given their due weight as criteria, then it becomes clear that the avant garde project of radicalizing artistic autonomy by generalizing it into a social principle is a logic inherent or latent in the capitalist art system. It will be valid to activate this logic—and to actualize it by developing it in the form of practices—just as long as the capitalist art system continues to be organized around an operative principle of relative autonomy. It will be valid, that is, for artistic agents to reconstitute the avant garde project through a politicized break with the dominant institutionalized art. True, actualizations of the avant garde logic cannot be mere repetitions. Each time, they must invent practical forms grounded in and appropriate to the contemporary social reality that is their context. But because this logic amounts to a radical and irreparable break with institutionalized art, there is little risk that such a protest will be reabsorbed through yet another expansion of the dominant concept of art. The SI showed that art could be surpassed in this way in the very period in which, according to Bürger, only impotent repetitions are possible.

Notes

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randall Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) 128.
2. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1970] 1997) 5.
3. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 176.
4. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1944] 2002).
5. Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Notes to Literature, Vol.2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
6. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1974] 1984).
7. Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* (September 2005) 278-83.
8. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 53-4, translation modified.
9. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 72.
10. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, [1967] 1994) 89.
11. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 129-47.
12. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 131.
13. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 138.
14. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 131-2, translation modified.
15. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 56-7.
16. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 58.
17. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 52-7.
18. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.
19. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 58.
20. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57.
21. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 54.
22. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 62, 58.
23. Situationist International, “Editorial Notes: The Avant-Garde of Presence,” in Tom McDonough, ed. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, trans. John Shepley (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002) 147.