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6. Art Criticism in the Society of the Spectacle: The Case of *October*

Noortje de Leij

Less than a decade after Guy Debord's publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson in 1976 founded the journal *October*. Initially both associate editors at *Artforum*, Krauss and Michelson left the latter over a dispute on what Krauss ironically referred to as 'the Lynda Benglis thing': a controversy about a centrefold advertisement for Linda Benglis, arranged by her dealer Paula Cooper (Bracker, 1995, p. 77). The spread was somewhat deviously arranged by Benglis's gallery and revealed a provocative photograph of a naked Benglis holding a sizable dildo against her pubic area. Krauss and Michelson, along with four other *Artforum* editors, denounced the copyrighted advertisement as an object of obscene vulgarity. The image, they wrote in a letter to the editor, represented a 'qualitative leap' in the journal and the incident was 'deeply symptomatic of conditions that call for critical analysis'. 'As long as they infect the reality around us', the editors wrote, 'these conditions shall have to be treated in our future works as writers and editors' (quoted in Bracker, 1995, p. 107).¹ In line with this announcement, Krauss and Michelson established *October*: an advertisement-free journal that read on its cover 'Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics', indicating the journal's dedication to connect these four hefty pillars. The writers who became, along with Krauss, most closely associated with the journal were Benjamin Buchloh, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, and Yve-Alain Bois.²

Although the Benglis incident might seem insignificant, or Krauss and Michelson's reaction a bit much, it does make sense in light of *October's* overall concern to maintain a space for 'critical' art within the growing commodification and 'spectacularization' of art and the art institution under the conditions of late capitalism. 'The tensions between radical artistic practice and dominant ideology will be a major subject of inquiry', the editors wrote in their mission statement (*October* Editorial, 1976, p. 4). In this respect, Debord's theory of the spectacle played a decisive role: both as a general cultural diagnosis of the 'dominant ideology' with which the *October* writers seemed wholeheartedly to agree and as a specific challenge for the field of art. Art, as Debord and the Situationists along with the members of the Frankfurt School showed, was constantly on the verge of being assimilated

to the conditions of spectacle, or as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer described in their influential text on the culture industry: ‘import[ed] into the realm of administration’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 104). The dialectic between art as a relatively autonomous site for critical practice and as an ideological manifestation of spectacular culture—complying with, rather than resisting what Debord had called ‘spectacle’—remained of central importance throughout *October*’s development. The *October* writers had witnessed that the ambition of Debord and the Situationists to dissolve art into life in an aesthetico-political revolution did not succeed. Yet, contrary to Debord—who proclaimed that true art could only subsist *in praxis*, by becoming life—they upheld the Adornian assessment that critical artistic practice might still be possible *within*—or *only*—under the putative autonomy of the art institution.³ To simply abandon or abolish the art institution under conditions of spectacular culture would mean ‘the regime of total desublimation’, Buchloh avows (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004a, p. 325). However, acknowledging that the art institution is certainly not exempted from the conditions of consumer capitalism, it had to be constantly problematized and criticized, also and specifically along the lines of Debord’s critical analyses.

My claim is that Debord’s alienating conditions of the spectacle, which ‘proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance’, and ‘demands [...] passive acceptance’, or passive spectatorship (Debord, 1995, pp. 14–15), are mirrored in *October*’s art critical project by a fundamental concern with the specific socio-political conditions of institutional mediation and with the ideological conditions of spectatorship in the sphere of reception. Both the art institution as a structure of mediation, and perception as a realm of subject formation are theorized in the art criticism of the *October* writers—albeit in various forms and sometimes more explicitly than others—as gradually more and more politicized in terms of spectacularization. As Buchloh states in an *October* roundtable discussion entitled ‘The Predicament of Contemporary Art’:

The postwar situation can be described as a negative teleology: a steady dismantling of the autonomous practices, spaces, and spheres of culture and a perpetual intensification of assimilation and homogenization, to the point today where we witness what Debord called ‘the integrated spectacle’. (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 67)

'It's a dire diagnostic', Bois responds to Buchloh's decree, '(after all, Debord committed suicide), but I think we all share to some extent' (Bois in Idem, p. 67).⁴ It is against the backdrop of this diagnosis that the *October* editors sought to reevaluate radical historical avant-garde practices in light of post-war social conditions and endorsed the critical potential of neo-avantgarde art. Their accounts of art's critical potential are, however, *in perpetuum* both fuelled and threatened by the awareness of an ominous intensification of social alienation under the strangulating grip of the invisible hand of the market.⁵

In Krauss's writing, the dismal conditions of spectacle are most clearly foregrounded in her essay on 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum', in which she laments 'Minimalism's participation in a culture of seriality, of multiples without originals—a culture, that is, of commodity production' (Krauss, 1990, p. 8). Even though Minimal art, as such initially championed by the *October* writers, foregrounded the presence of the subject and aimed to restore the 'immediacy of experience', in the end it had merely paved the way for a market-driven museum that advances ahistorical, spectacular spaces of 'pure presentness' (Bishop, 2011, p. 1): 'hyperspace', as Krauss formulates it, in need of 'a technologized subject, the subject in search not of affect but of intensities, the subject who experiences its fragmentation as euphoria, the subject whose field of experience is no longer history, but space itself' (Krauss, 1990, pp. 9–10, 17). Krauss's text strongly echoes Debord's portrayal of the spectacle's false unity and homogeneity, 'the official language of generalized separation' (Debord, 1995, p. 12), in which the subject as a modern-day consumer Tantalus perpetually reaches towards the fulfilment of his pseudo-needs (in search of intensities), obliterating historical consciousness and preventing political action. Raoul Vaneigem, a prominent member of the Situationists, sardonically diagnosed this socio-political inertia as 'survival sickness': whilst having the means to eradicate social unjustness and despair, man only uses the minimum of his resources to barely stay alive, just enough to consume. Numbed by the cyclical motion of the marketplace, in survival mode the consuming subject is, in an utterly counterrevolutionary amnesia, satisfied by merely avoiding actual death. Though '[t]he consumer cannot and must not ever attain satisfaction', Vaneigem writes, 'the logic of the consumable object demands the creation of fresh needs, yet the accumulation of such false needs exacerbates the malaise of men confined with increasing difficulty solely to that status of consumer' (Vaneigem, 2001, p. 162).

A substantial part of Krauss's text deals with a concern for this sedated subject in late capitalism, or more specifically, in the late capitalist

museum.⁶ The spectator was, in an almost utopian gesture, put on the stage by Minimalism yet ultimately fragmented and derealized as the submissive, passive spectator Debord described in *The Society of the Spectacle* and Vaneigem diagnosed with survival sickness in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Referencing the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson's essay 'Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984), Krauss uses the idea of 'cultural revolution' to explain that, even though art might provide us with a utopian alternative to, or temporary exemption from the heteronomous conditions of capitalism, it also carves out a space for the further expansion of these conditions. Art prepares, so to speak, yet another domain for its imminent recuperation by a next, more advanced moment of capitalism. 'With Minimalism', Krauss argues, 'the potential was always there that not only would the object be caught up in the logic of commodity production, a logic that would overwhelm its specificity, but that the subject projected by Minimalism also would be reprogrammed' (Krauss, 1990, p. 12). That is: reprogrammed into a fragmented, passive spectator. The dispersal of the conscious, active (revolutionary) subject through the mechanisms of image consumption and the 'appearance' of individuality as a marketable image-commodity are intrinsic functions and effects of spectacular culture as described by Debord. They are, he argued, 'the efficient motor of trancelike behaviour' (Debord, 1995, p. 17).⁷ This aspect of Debord and the Situationists' theories, I contend, takes on major importance in the *October* writings.

Jonathan Crary, a frequent contributor to *October*, extensively theorized and historicized the conditions of perception and attention 'as an indispensable part of an expanding terrain of modern spectacle' (Crary, 2001, p. 361).⁸ Crary puts emphasis on spectacle as a way of organizing attention. Attention and perception under conditions of spectacle are displaced from attentiveness to the viewing subject and the mechanisms of perception are metaphorically rerouted to the window display where they are perpetually dispersed *and* sustained through a constant introduction of novelty. This emphasis on spectacle as a way of organizing attention and perception is important to *October's* reception of Debord's spectacle and fuels the analysis of art as a sphere that can potentially counter this cultural diagnosis by putting attention to perception itself or by demanding active or conscious spectatorship.

With regard to Krauss's text on the late capitalist museum it is important to note, however, that in her accounts of 'multiples without originals', 'hyper-space', and, evidently, by her use of the term 'simulacra', she refers explicitly to Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum (Krauss, 1990, pp. 10, 12). Yet, although of a similar historical origin, often used in the same context and

sometimes seemingly interchangeable, Baudrillard's simulacrum should not be equated with Debord's spectacle. It is, instead, a *successive*, intensified phase in which the real has been replaced by simulations (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 256).⁹ The spectacle on the contrary, is, as Debord asserts: 'itself a product of real activity' (Debord, 1995, p. 14). Baudrillard's simulacrum eradicates all reality: the real is not distorted or hidden; it is no longer even possible to identify anything as 'real'. As such, Baudrillard's theory is utterly totalizing and seems to obliterate any potential opposition. Krauss appears, however, to employ Baudrillard's terminology rather freely, without clearly demarcating the consequences of his conclusion. This tendency is also noticeable in Foster's texts. Foster frequently interchanges the terms 'spectacle' and 'simulacrum' while holding on to the importance and possibility of mediation and resistance.

In an essay entitled 'Contemporary Art and Spectacle', Foster turns to Debord explaining the spectacle as the mediation of social relations between men as a relation between images. 'In spectacle even alienation is turned into an image for the alienated to consume; indeed this may stand as a definition of spectacle', Foster parenthetically remarks (Foster, 1985, p. 83). However, not much later in the text he repeatedly addresses a 'loss of the real' and explicitly cites Baudrillard arguing that 'it is no longer a question of false representation of reality (ideology), it is a question of concealing that the real is no longer the real, and thus of saving the principle of reality' (quoted in Foster, 1985, pp. 84–86). Robert Longo's work, whose 'simulations' according to Foster deal with this loss of the real, discloses this 'hyperreality' and makes us aware of our own seduction. As we can see, Foster shares with the other *October* writers a specific concern for subjective manipulation and, as Crary defined, spectacle as a way of administrating attention (through seduction and, as Foster states, 'our fascination with the hyperreal, with 'perfect' images that make us 'whole' at the price of delusion, of submission' (Foster, 1985, pp. 83, 90–91). But his explicit inclusion of Baudrillard's world of simulacrum—which can, nevertheless be 'exposed' in Longo's work—seems inconsistent. Foster's later writings, however, by and large abandon Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum, whereas the notion of spectacle persists (in a sort of updated version) in his critique on the Bilbao effect—the spectacularized museum—and within his apprehension of 'the designed subject' or 'identity branding' (Foster, 2003a, pp. xiii–xv). In one of these later essays, Foster turns to the 'mnemonic dimension' of contemporary art as a potential strategy to 'resist the presentist totality of design in culture today' (Foster, 2003b p. 130). This statement reveals his construal of design as a spectacle that is, like Debord's account of the

integrated spectacle, ruled by a timeless present in a society '[that] wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future' (Debord, 2011, pp. 12–13). Foster's reference to memory as a counter-spectacular artistic strategy exposes a strong intersection with Buchloh's later art criticism, in which he advocates the 'mnemonic' as 'one of the few acts of resistance against the totality of spectacle' (Foster, 2003b, p. 130; Buchloh, 2003a, p. xxv).

It might be possible to argue that within the *October* context Buchloh is most thoroughly indebted to Debord's legacy.¹⁰ I will therefore analyse Buchloh's incorporation of Debord's theory of the spectacle into his art critical project in more detail, especially with regards to the artistic strategies that Buchloh advocates as potentially 'counter-spectacular' or oppositional.

1. Buchloh's Spectacle

Already in its title, Buchloh's comprehensive collection of essays, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, refers explicitly to Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter on the 'culture industry' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹¹ His notion of spectacle, and in general his art critical project, is accordingly intertwined with the critique of culture industry in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. As he states:

My [...] work is situated, methodologically, between two texts: one from 1947, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the chapter on 'The Culture Industry' in particular, and the other from 1967, *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord. The more I think about those texts the more they seem to historicize the last fifty years of artistic production, for they demonstrate how the autonomous spaces of cultural representation—spaces of subversion, resistance, critique, utopian aspiration—are gradually eroded, assimilated, or simply annihilated. (Buchloh et al., 2004b, pp. 672–673)

Keeping with *October's* aspirations, Buchloh's project is characterized by an attempt to recognize and analyse artistic practices that resist or counter this assimilation of artistic production to the culture industry and spectacular culture. 'Still, then and now', he writes in the introduction to *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 'I would argue that *one* among the infinite multiplicity of functions intrinsic to aesthetic structures is in fact to provide at least an immediate and concrete illusion, if not an actual

instantiation, of a universally accessible suspension of power' (Buchloh, 2003a, p. xxiv).

Although the term 'culture industry' shows much resemblance to Debord's spectacle, Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry is principally a *segment* (yet both a result and a function) of advanced capitalist society. Their account of culture as an 'industry' signals its transformation from a field for individual expression and authentic experience into a reified site for commodified leisure and mass entertainment. Herewith, 'culture industry'—analogue to 'spectacle'—advances passive acceptance of the status quo instead of active engagement with prevailing social conditions and structures of domination. 'The total effect of the culture industry', Adorno writes, is a mass deception that 'turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves' (Adorno, 2001, p. 106). The culture industry can, as such, be seen as a *tool* for the ideological indoctrination of late capitalism. Spectacle on the other hand, *is*—boldly speaking—the ideology of late capitalism; it is, as Debord states: 'the prevailing model of social life' (Debord, 1995, p. 13). Only understood in the 'limited sense' it can be defined as mass media (or the culture industry; p. 19). Debord thus posits the spectacle as the central, unifying, principle of social organization and emphasizes that it is not merely a 'collection of images' but 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images', while the culture industry is a specific manifestation of spectacle, albeit a very powerful one (pp. 12, 15).

Although using 'spectacle' and 'culture industry' often within one sentence as two allied—at times interchangeable—forces, overall, Buchloh (along with the other *October* writers) appears to maintain the division as described above.¹² Spectacle delineates an abyss of alienation, reification, and social atomization, imperviously concealing the detriments of capital accumulation and exploitation with pacifying images of a happy and gratifying world. The culture industry, on the other hand, acquires a more specific role as a division of the spectacle and the dialectical counterpart of critical art, although the latter only intermittently so, as art often assimilates itself into a mere segment of spectacle.

Buchloh, however, rejects the Adornian modernist model of critical negation and refusal, which he condemns as too hermetic. Adorno, he states, 'ignores the fact that the concept of autotelic purity was actually dismantled early in the century', and 'failed to recognize those aesthetic changes and those new technological and social conditions constituted a historically irreversible reality' (Buchloh, 2003b, p. 209; McQuilten, 2011, p. 48n83). In

his resentment towards contemporary culture and a too rigid adherence to, what Buchloh describes as 'prescribed patterns of the political models of critique', Adorno's analysis of artistic negation lacks the contemporaneity of Debord's theory of spectacle (Buchloh, 2003a, pp. xxv–xxvi).¹³ Instead, following the Situationists' strategy of *détournement*, Buchloh recurrently advocates aesthetic strategies that appropriate the heteronomous conditions of the culture industry and spectacle in order to almost literally 'détour' them and reveal these conditions.¹⁴ Turning back to Adorno, it is however important to emphasize, again, that Buchloh and the other *October* writers maintain that this form of resistance takes place *within* the institution. Through a perpetual critique of the art institution's conditions as heteronomous, art indirectly criticizes the ideological structures of society as a whole and can, momentarily, maintain a site for resistance. In spite of this, Buchloh often warns, however, of art becoming part of the culture industry, turning into an enforcement of Debord's spectacle where it eradicates rather than enhances socio-political consciousness.

2. Use Value versus Exchange Value

This paradoxical tension between art as a site of resistance against specific forms of spectacularization and reification and its corruption into *enforcing* the very conditions it wants to challenge also formed the leading structure of Krauss's critique of Minimalism, as I previously discussed. Krauss's essay 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum' (1990) distinguished between Minimalism's good intentions and its septic, post-modern 'afterlife'. *October* had marked its beginning with an ardent support for the former 'good' Minimalism that attempted to challenge Modernist notions of authorship and originality. The *October* writers championed Donald Judd and Robert Morris, amongst others, for counteracting and demystifying the rigidity of Greenberg's formalism. Minimal art supplanted the Greenbergian timeless and universal, 'disembodied' or optical experience of the artwork with a phenomenological experience of the object in space and time and defied authorship and originality with seemingly authorless objects. The geometrical shapes, manufactured with industrially produced materials, instead revealed the work's architectural support and foregrounded its contingency to the presence of an (actively) engaging subject. It is interesting to note that one of the movement's most critical (formalist) opponents, Michael Fried, condemned the three-dimensional objects for contaminating the medium-specific purity of sculpture with

‘theatricality’—bearing in mind that the word ‘spectacle’ in French also signifies theatrical staging.¹⁵

But, as Krauss’s essay also attests to, it didn’t take long before Minimal art became the object of critique for virtually all of the *October* editors. While Minimalism did take the first step away from the modernist supremacy of the visual, it merely addressed the walls of the gallery/museum as a material support instead of revealing their neutralizing whiteness and the socio-economic foundation that keeps them erect. And even though the minimal object acknowledged the spectator, it did not question her/his subjectivity and, as such, presented the phenomenological experience as a neutral encounter between a somehow equal subject and object, as if to supplant Greenberg’s passive contemplation with a passive and ahistorical construal of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological experience. The specific subject that Minimal art construed, as Krauss argues in her 1990 text, was emblematic for, or had even—ironically close to the meaning of the word ‘avant-garde’—served as the *vanguard* for the industrialization and spectacularization of the art institution. The late capitalist museum needed precisely this ahistorical and fragmented subject that Minimal art had presented (Krauss, 1990, p. 13). Krauss thus reveals how an initially radical art practice had paved the way for a further capitalization of the art institution. In an attempt to resist this neutralizing, detrimental dynamic, a critique of the heteronomous conditions of spectacular culture therefore had to encompass a critical examination of the art institutional context and an investigation of the ideological parameters of reception. This specific constellation of critique became, under the heading of ‘institutional critique’, a key issue in the *October* project.

The artists that feature most prominently in Buchloh’s different accounts of this specific form of (institutional) critique are Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Dan Graham, and at a later stage, James Coleman—the latter, repeatedly praised by Buchloh, Foster, and Krauss (not always for the same reasons), seems to be one of the sole survivors in *October*’s quest for anticipatory artistic practice. Buchloh praises Coleman’s work for its ‘mnemonic’ quality, a term that starts reappearing more and more frequently in his later writings and which he, together with Foster, ultimately asserts as the only potentially critical or ‘counter-spectacular’ artistic strategy that is still possible under the all-consuming heteronomous conditions of the ‘integrated spectacle’.

In his earlier essays, however, (roughly speaking, before the 1990s), Buchloh puts much emphasis on the artwork’s use value or ‘use value potential’ (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 199).¹⁶ ‘If artistic production gives up altogether the idea

of use value', he contends, 'it abolishes its own inherent potential to induce dialectics within the reality of cultural history, thus producing mere artistic facticity incapable of initiating further process of development' (Idem, pp. 198–199).¹⁷ Use value's counterpart, exchange value, is bound up with the logic of the commodity and Marx's logic of equivalence. Buchloh characterizes it as decontextualized, immaterial, aligned with consumption and pertaining to the domain of simulacra by occluding any external referents. Within the context of this chapter, we can argue that 'exchange value' serves as an equivalent of 'culture industry' and 'spectacle'. By contrast, 'use value' is characterized as 'context-bound', 'functional', 'communicable', and materially grounded (Buchloh, 2003a, pp. 188, 199; 2003b, pp. 220). Artists who 'reinvest the artwork with a potential use value', Buchloh contends, imbue art with the potential to construct an oppositional sphere to the conditions of the culture industry and spectacle (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 191).¹⁸

It is in this respect illuminating to consider Buchloh's account of Dan Graham's work in a 1978 essay entitled 'Moments of History in the Work of Dan Graham' (Buchloh, 2003c). Graham's art practice critically departs from Minimal art. He intersects Minimalist concerns for place and time with conceptual art and engages Minimal aesthetics with the specific social relations of the institutional framework and the spectator-object relationship. The main edifice that Buchloh creates in his analysis of Graham's work is a dialectical opposition between politically mute art, on the one hand, and 'functional' art, on the other, understood as having a *social* function. He discerns this social function in Graham's work at the level of its material and within the sphere of perception. His early works, such as *Homes for America* (1966), *Figurative* (1965), and *Schema* (1966), dialectically invert and complicate Minimalism's preoccupation with the art object and its material support. *Homes for America* (Figures 6.1 and 6.2), for example, is a series of photographs of suburban houses accompanied by informative texts, which was published in *Arts Magazine*. The work posits the art journal as its institutional frame, as a 'found formal structure' (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 181). By presenting the artwork directly *as/in* a publication, in an art magazine, Graham creates a relatively direct relation with the audience (for the experience of the work in the magazine is a 'first-hand' experience and not the description of the work by an art critic). On the other hand, the journal's idiosyncratic character of mediation (through distribution, image selection and informative/interpretative texts) simultaneously reveals the fact that art is always already mediated—by extension, also by the seemingly neutral exhibition interior. Furthermore, Buchloh shows that the serial repetition of the industrial houses in *Homes for America*, along with the reproducibility

of the journal itself, mirror the formal principles of Minimalism while their subject matter as a 'found reality structure' is rooted in social reality: 'the misery of everyday industrial housing' (p. 181). Through Graham's dissection of these processes of mediation and his dialectical play between social reality and formal organization he reveals, as Buchloh contends: 'the *found structures beyond visible reality and its seeming concreteness*' (p. 188, emphasis mine). The found objects or ready-mades in Minimalism and Conceptual art, are in fact less 'real', Buchloh argues, than the social structures underneath that impact the way we actually experience these objects (or, more generally, perceive 'reality'). These structures 'determine reality', Buchloh writes,

with a more subtle and effective impact: equally the psycho-physiological motivations of subjective behaviour and the socio-economical conditions of objective political practice, or even more precisely, the omnipresent mechanisms of interdependence within those systems revealed in the acutely observed situations of their combined effects. (p. 188)

Rooted in Marx's account of commodity fetishism and mediated by Georg Lukács's conception of reification, Debord's spectacle is founded upon this rift between 'reality on the one hand and images on the other', at the heart of which is the idea of the 'contemplative attitude': the spectator, blinded and sedated by a world that seems natural, passively accepts this 'pseudo-world' and 'lapses into a contemplative attitude *vis-à-vis* the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties' (Debord, 1995, pp. 12–13; Lukács, 1971, p. 100). 'The spectacle', Debord writes in his concluding chapter, 'erases the dividing line [...] between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearance' (Debord, 1995, p. 153). Buchloh principally describes Graham's art as able to counter this erasure, by revealing the social structures *beyond* visible reality and by challenging the spectator's contemplative attitude with a reflection on her/his own conditions of perception.¹⁹

In Buchloh's subsequent elaboration of Graham's later performance work, we see how the artist's specific concern for subjective behaviour increasingly potentiates his art with a social function. Graham's notion of the viewing subject evolves beyond the Minimalist equation of object and subject. The artist believes that staging the presence of the spectator only acquires significance when it makes perceptible the ideologically imbued processes of perception itself (Buchloh, 2003c, p. 196). Lacking a specific visual analysis of how Graham's works actually succeed in this process,



Figure 6.1. Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, 1989. Photo offset reproduction of layout for magazine article (*Arts Magazine*, December 1966–January 1967). Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

Buchloh sums up several of his performances that, for example: reveal ‘stereotyped male-female roles; increase ‘awareness of group behaviour versus individual behaviour’; or induce and elucidate ‘the mechanisms of group identification’ (p. 197). These performances, he concludes, endow the work with aesthetic value to the extent that the spectator

experiences the inherent, historical, patterns of social reality while opening up future—instrumental—perspectives.

The outline of Graham's interests and the strategies of his formal enterprises appear in the writings and in the works as a microscopic analysis of segments of the process of history itself, their given structures as well as the modes of perceiving them and the perspectives of analysing and transforming them. And it is to the degree that the analysis succeeds in mediating the patterns of a given reality structure [...] that the work opens up an instrumental perspective of further historical proceedings, endowing the viewer with what he experiences as their artwork quality, their aesthetic value (p. 197).

This 'instrumental perspective' or 'functional model of recognition of actual history', as he elsewhere describes, is what we should understand when Buchloh speaks about use value (p. 180). And, albeit sometimes ambulatory, this idea of potential use value through an exposé of heteronomous structures of domination and a consequent instigation of socio-historical consciousness, occupies a pivotal role in Buchloh's concern for art as an emancipatory and counter-spectacular practice. However, while Buchloh here already mentions the historicity of structures of perception and



Figure 6.2. *Homes for America* (detail), 1966–1967. One from 20 colour 35mm slides. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

mediation, it is only in his later writing that the 'mnemonic' takes on central importance in his search for artistic strategies of resistance. The idea of the 'mnemonic' as an aesthetic strategy of resistance, which also plays an important role in Foster's later work, in many ways leads us back to the foundational structure of Debord's spectacle, Lukács (and Horkheimer and Adorno's) reification, and Marx's commodity fetishism. That is: a 'forgetting' lies at the core of this genealogy. In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Adorno writes that 'all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten' (Adorno et al., 1999, p. 321). That which is forgotten in the process of reification differs for Lukács and Adorno: Lukács locates this forgetfulness predominantly on the side of the subject's mediating and transforming relation to the external world (resulting in the 'contemplative attitude' towards a world that seems natural and unchangeable) while Adorno emphasizes the non-identifiable, non-conceptual element that is forgotten by over-conceptualization (irrational rationalism) and thus call attention to the *natural*, or the enigmatic quality of the object, that is forgotten by human (over-) interpretation (Vogel, 1996, pp. 78–79). I would argue that Debord's theory of spectacle leans predominantly on Lukács's conception of forgetting. The malevolence of Debord's insidious world of images arises from its concealment of the social relations behind the seemingly natural world of spectacles and the resulting enucleation of the spectator's consciousness of her/his potential to be an active, revolutionary agent. In Thesis 74, Debord writes: 'As for the subject of history, it can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and processor of its world—that is, of history—and coming to exist as consciousness of its own activity' (Debord, 1995, p. 48). The dissimilarity between Adorno and Debord (emanating from Lukács theory of reification) at the level of 'forgetting', so to speak, also accounts for the difference between Adorno's advocacy of artistic strategies of determinate negation—that emphasize art's enigmatic, sensual, and indeterminable character in its formal abstraction as a resistance against conceptualization and over-identification—and the call by Debord and the Situationists for much more active subversive artistic practices of *détournement* that reroute, and as such reveal, the illusoriness of the society of the spectacle. The latter hence not aim so much to reveal an enigmatic, ungraspable character of something real or natural underneath, but try to break the narcotic spell of that which seemed real in the first place. As I previously discussed, the artistic strategies that Buchloh predominantly favours are more indebted to Debord's idea of uncovering the mechanisms of (ideological) mediations

than to Adornian notions of artistic negation. The 'mnemonic', as a resistance to forgetfulness, also builds upon this aspiration to challenge the totalizing and alienating forces of spectacular culture.

3. Counter-spectacular Memory

Buchloh's prioritization of the 'mnemonic' appears in many ways to be a more complex and more extensive conceptualization of his early 'functionalist' model. The meaning and significance he attaches to art's 'mnemonic dimension' are theorized in a comprehensive essay on James Coleman's 'archaeology of spectacle', in which he describes Coleman's general project as 'reconstituting a historically specific body to the universalist abstraction of phenomenology' (Buchloh, 2003d, p. 163). Coleman's artistic practice seems to gradually complicate the sphere of reception as a discursive site for psychological, social, institutional, and historical mediation. His work sets up a dialogue with the modernist dogma of the visual by means of including theatrical components such as narrative, performance, and rhetoric. Yet, Coleman challenges both (post-) Minimalist and Conceptualist strategies on the same ground. Even though Minimalism and Conceptualism refuted the formalist optical doctrine, they merely expanded the Modernist positivistic paradigm. To put it in a somewhat simplified formulation: If Minimalism added a body to the disembodied eye, then Conceptualism completed the subject by adding language, or the 'brain'. Yet these were still presented as 'pure' entities. They might have challenged their different aesthetic positions reciprocally, but none of them took seriously into account the idea that optical perception, phenomenological experience, and conceptual or linguistic understanding are *all* perpetually influenced and construed by a psychological, socio-political, and historical context. That is, by the bias of the spectator; the direct material context, and its mechanisms of mediation; and, most importantly, by the overarching specific socio-historical conditions. By presenting either one of these perceptual modes as pure, Minimal and Conceptual art actually concealed the 'social truth' underneath. Buchloh advocates that consciousness of the conditions of perception, as socio-historically specific and concrete, is the only possibility to counter the totalizing claims of spectacle. '[I]t is only in the extreme emphasis on the particularity of historical experience', Buchloh declares, 'that the last vestige or the first index of unalienated subjectivity is to be found' (Buchloh, 2003d, pp. 163–164). In this line of thought, Buchloh introduces the 'mnemonic' as a counter-spectacular artistic strategy and

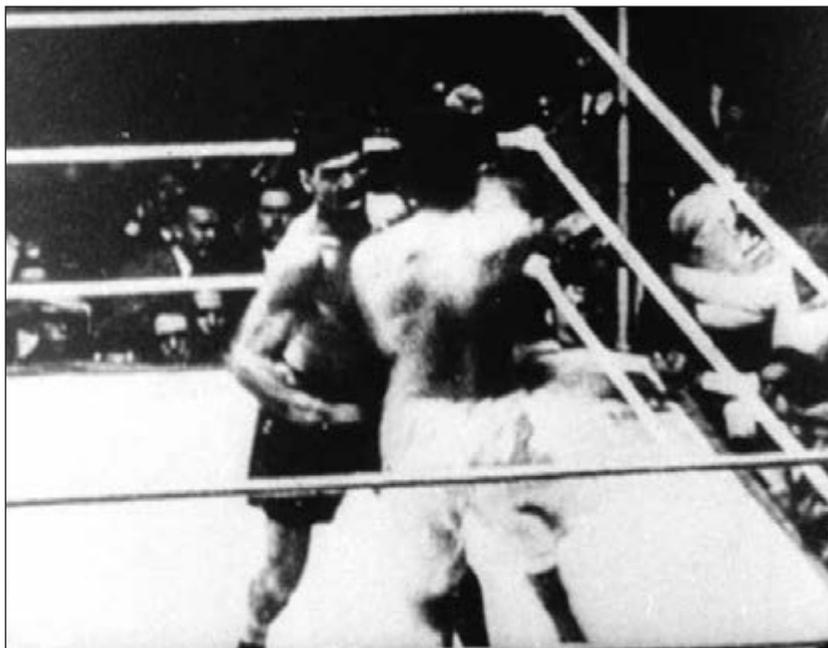


Figure 6.3. James Coleman, *Box (ahareturnabout)*, 1977. 16mm black & white film with synchronized audio narration, continuous projection. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

a necessary dimension for art to maintain—if possible at all—its social function (or in his earlier words, its use value potential).

Coleman's work *Box (ahareturnabout)*, for example, shows a found film loop of a boxing match, interrupted by flashes of black film leader and accompanied by the sound of a monologue from the artist (Figure 6.3). Buchloh introduces the work as follows:

One could understand *Box (ahareturnabout)* [...] as an announcement of a radical reversal of the paradigmatic features governing post-Minimal and post-Conceptual artistic production in the mid-1970s. As Coleman's film loop follows mimetically an exchange of punches in rapidly alternating sequences of blackouts and image-sound flashes, it literalizes the optical beat that has been brilliantly described by Rosalind Krauss as the moment of departure from disembodied Modernist opticality toward a phenomenological inscription, toward the grounding of visual experience in the range of the optical unconsciousness and its bodily foundations. Yet to the same degree that *Box* reiterates the experience of the perceptual pulse in the spectator, pushing it almost literally across the threshold

of physical discomfort, this pulse alternates with an iconic sign of two fighters exchanging actual punches. Not only does this correspondence generate an effect of the doubling of the semiotic as the physical (bordering on a pun), but it also situates the image of bodily performance within a very specific historical event and within the confrontation of two historically identifiable protagonists. (Buchloh, 2003d, pp. 161, 162)

As we can discern in Buchloh's description, Coleman literally introduces the body of the boxers into the visual field. The alternating black film reveals the interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness and the interdependence of the psychic with the physical (referencing the idea of literally being knocked unconscious) while at the same time it disrupts the spectator's otherwise uninterrupted (more absorbing) vision. Furthermore, as Buchloh explains, the work 'literalizes the optical beat'; it almost ironically transfers the visual punches, through the arousal of an empathic bodily reaction at the sight of such violence, onto the spectator's body. The text fragments introduce language as another level in the creation of meaning. Their performative recital endows the work with a certain theatricality, yet the content of the monologue seems unrelated to the boxing match and as such prevents the work to be purely theatrical or disclose a narrative—lingering in between the visual, the phenomenological, the theatrical, and the linguistic. Yet what is most significant in Buchloh's description is his last statement that the work shows two 'actual fighters exchanging actual punches' and as such 'situates the image of bodily performance within a very specific historical event and within the confrontation of two historically identifiable protagonists' (pp. 161–162). Herein lies the key to Coleman's reconstitution of 'a historically specific body'. Buchloh then further complicates Coleman's work in a meticulous analysis of the role of national identity and cultural mediation in such formations. The boxing match is on the one hand an emblem of spectacular mass entertainment. But on the other hand, Coleman—himself of Irish decent—chooses to show the Irish fighter Gene Tunney in a battle to defend his national championship, which complicates the general and universalizing 'spectacle' with a specific national identity, which is by itself mediated and fetishized by the logic of spectacle: 'constituted by means of a cultural construct' (p. 163). This dialectic reveals the contradictory mechanisms between spectacularization and identity formation, between the spectacle's universalizing homogeneity, its false unity, and its construction of specific (images of) identity. It is, however, only in hindsight possible to productively reveal the specifics of (national) identity, Buchloh argues. If not, the work would itself have a regressive and nationalistic sway and be a part of

the culture industry's mechanism of (suppressive) identity formation (p. 163). Yet if, in retrospect, we can understand the socio-historical and cultural *constructiveness* of these spectacular subjective identities, we might also begin to realize that our current situation is similarly constructed. 'Spectacular domination's first priority was to eradicate historical knowledge in general', Debord wrote in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 2011, p. 13). In this world without memory, the spectacle's power 'already seems familiar, as if it had always been there' (p. 16). Buchloh's emphasis on the mnemonic dimension of art holds on to the possibility of dismantling this naturalized presentation of spectacle. 'The effort to retain or to reconstruct the capacity to remember, to think historically, is one of the few acts that can oppose the almost totalitarian implementation of the universal laws of consumption' (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 677). Nonetheless, Buchloh emphasizes once again that the potentiality of artistic practice to create a site for the examination of subject formation and historical consciousness inexorably puts it in the same arena as the spectacle:

The necessary cultural production of sites of subject articulation and structures of memory conflicts with the simultaneous, inevitably ideological enforcement of a mythical identity; and the same schism exists between cultural production as the most complex form of spectacularization and cultural practices as the last resistances against the global homogenization generated by the spectacle. (Buchloh, 2003d, p. 165)

Furthermore, memory itself is highly susceptible to spectacularization, recuperated and transformed into a further mystifying 'memory industry' (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 677). In the manner of Debord (post-May 1968), Buchloh's oeuvre is not exactly a sanguine charade of utopian promises and revolutionary hope. As his statement above also shows, Buchloh's project perpetually appears to denounce all remaining possibilities for social agency and radical artistic practice, sweeping art altogether under the eradicating curtain of the culture industry. However, even in one of his most dismal texts, entitled 'Critical Reflections'—which is predominantly filled with dire announcements of 'catastrophic assimilation', the 'annulment of social and political utopian thinking', 'universal fetishization', and the effacement of 'the last residual differences between spectacle and the sphere of cultural production', he holds on to a conception of art's mnemonic function as a last vestige for potential resistance against the all-encompassing conditions of the *integrated* spectacle (Buchloh, 1997). Consequently, in the manner of his other major influence Adorno, Buchloh seems to spark hope in the abyss of utter

despair. 'Where everything is bad', Adorno quotes F.H. Bradley in *Minima Moralia*, 'it must be good to know the worst' (quoted in Adorno, 2005, p. 83).

And this might be idiosyncratic for the theoretical and aesthetic developments of the *October* discourse as a whole. Even though the other *October* writers seem slightly less pessimistic than Buchloh, their art criticism is, too, inherently characterized by a growing apprehension of a social narrative of alienation through mass consumption and passive spectatorship. Art might still play a critical role by revealing the constructed nature of this narrative, and as such it could evoke a latent potential for political and social self-determination. But even Foster, who presents himself as the more optimistic of the bunch, leaves us only with a mere glimpse of optimism in his advocacy of 'holding on'. Nonetheless, even in their most gloomy accounts of a society doomed to stupidity, they all sustain the possibility of resistance, of disruption, and of struggle, even if it is solely in the proclamation that all is lost. 'Couldn't we say that such a current amnesia is in great part what motivated us to write this book?' Bois asks in 'The Predicament of Contemporary Art', the concluding roundtable in *Art Since 1900* (Buchloh in Bois et al., 2004b, p. 679). It is this suspended position between an emancipatory promise—echoed in the title of the *October* journal and the writers' perpetual attempts to revitalize art's critical function—however ghostly and distant it may be, and a despairing cultural diagnosis of society as an all-encompassing and inescapable 'integrated' spectacle, that characterizes the journal's tone. Even in the most determinate goodbyes there remains a certain attempt to instigate new forms of critical practice. As Buchloh writes:

When a class nears its terminal point in history, Marx once mused, it tends to mistake its own end for the end of the world. When art critics reach the end of their historical line, they tend to mistake the failure of their prognostic identifications or lack of comprehension of present practices for the end of art. (Buchloh, 1997)

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