

In Advance of Resignation Stated as Defiance

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In Advance of Resignation Stated as Defiance¹

Since the mid-late 1950s, the prerogatives of the art world have largely been informed by a stance that Rubinoff has described as “resignation stated as defiance”...a “self-fulfilling failure”. While artists may claim their work subverts the authority of social norms or corporate culture, etc., they are in fact resigned to the status quo to the point that they are indistinguishable from it. This essay will consider Rubinoff’s insight and argument to the contrary that art can and should function as the “map of the human soul”, that the history of art is fused with the subject in a line of inheritance from Chauvet to Otto Dix, and it carries the “essence of liberation”. As he has written, the “artist’s journey on the path of art history takes him to the furthest reaches of his predecessor as his point of departure... the soul is the sum of all humans knowledge”. Rubinoff’s body of sculptural works conveys a “chart for evolution”, which he is “obliged to extend to his successors”, who will in turn be called upon to navigate the crises of their own age. Chief among his aims, and those of the JRSP Sculpture Park, is promoting this understanding on the role of the artist in society.

Dix and George Grosz are key among the 20th century artists whom Rubinoff regards as his artistic predecessors. The first section of my paper will examine the concepts they gleaned from art history to produce what he calls statements of “defiance” and “liberation” in the face of total war and corrupt leadership. I will briefly consider how they negotiated the challenges of deep social suffering, in the trenches and on the home front, by engaging in conversation with art of the past. I will also touch on a handful of artists who linked to the examples of Dix and Grosz to address the horrors of World War II, which included the Nazi Concentration Camps, aerial bombardment and, finally, the detonation of two hydrogen bombs.

Painters Jackson Pollock, Willem DeKooning, Robert Motherwell, along with sculptor David Smith, absorbed the lessons of Grosz and Dix, and continued to expand the tradition of art history while negotiating the contemporary world within the scope of universal concerns. Interestingly, all four seized upon the practice of automatism employed by European Dadaist and Surrealists, as an act of resistance against oppressive society. The Americans, however, laid

¹ The title phrase “In Advance of” is taken from a 1915 work by Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*. In his 1961 lecture at the Museum of Modern Art entitled “Apropos of ‘Readymades’”, he described how this store-bought snow shovel had become a work of art simply because he CHOSE it: “In New York in 1915 I bought at a hardware store a snow shovel on which I wrote ‘In Advance of a Broken Arm’”.

aside the goal of excavating universal anxieties, and instead described the un-meditated act of creation as a means of, first, knowing the self, and, second, enabling the viewer to develop new ways of seeing in order to negotiate post-war realities.

In part two, I will consider the descendents of the so-called Abstract Expressionists, the first generation of artists to reach maturity after World War II, in the age defined, as Rubinoff has described, by the threat of nuclear winter, and the means by which they soundly rejected examples provided by artists like Grosz and Dix and Motherwell and Smith, as a “source of knowledge” and “liberation”, turning instead to the Dada artist Marcel Duchamp. Rubinoff has described the strategies and ideas those young artists gleaned from Duchamp as “resignation stated as defiance”. Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol and others of the so-called “next generation” after the Abstract Expressionists, ruptured the line of inheritance from their artistic ancestry by disrupting the role of the artist in the creative act and resituating the viewer as the “nexus” of information. In short order, “resignation stated as defiance” became a commodity and sent shock waves through the academy. This essay will draw clear a distinction between Rubinoff’s pursuits and those of his contemporaries, who came of age and experienced success in the greatly changed art world of the 1960s, mobilizing his argument that, in its present state, most art production and supporting institutions are not concerned with the role of the artist in evolving consciousness. It will also underscore his argument for an alternative conception of the history of art as a source of liberation.

Otto Dix fought on both the Western and Eastern fronts in World War I and visualized both his traumatic experience in the trenches and post-war scenes of urban life. In the series’ *The Trench* and *War Cripples* he is highly critical of Weimar leadership, especially the systematic neglect of war veterans. To address the specific challenges of war and post-war life, he linked to his art historical predecessors, disrupting the illusionistic picture plane while referencing subject matter visualized by Goya in *Disasters of War*, which reveals the ultimate futility of war to dispel the myth of noble death.

For Geroge Grosz, legibility was paramount in his critical depictions of Berlin life under the Weimar. He argued that art should be readily comprehensible to have the broadest impact on society:

My aim is to be understood by everyone. I reject the 'depth' that people demand nowadays, into which you can never descend without a diving bell crammed with cabbalistic bullshit and intellectual metaphysics... A day will come when the artist will no longer be this bohemian, puffed-up anarchist but a healthy man working in clarity within a collectivist society.

In works such as *Germany: A Winter's Tale* (1917-9) and *Grey Day* (1921) he referenced art history to present a radical reformulation of traditional principles. As he wrote:

My Drawings expressed my despair, hate and disillusionment, I drew drunkards; puking men; men with clenched fists cursing at the moon. . . . I drew a man, face filled with fright, washing blood from his hands. . . I drew soldiers without noses; war cripples with crustacean-like steel arms; two medical soldiers putting a violent infantryman into a strait-jacket made of a horse blanket. . . I drew a skeleton dressed as a recruit being examined for military duty...

Rubinoff shares their concern for negotiating current political and social realities by linking to his “ancestors”. In addition to Dix and Grosz, these include Bach’s musical principles of counterpoint, which he argues, are discernable in the sculptural forms of Michelangelo and Mondrian’s infinite landscapes. Because his works contain the “roadmap to the human soul” handed down by these artists and others, Rubionff argues that they enable the viewer, young artists in particular, to achieve a new awareness of his/ her location at this particular spot in the natural world and in this age defined by the ever-present threat of nuclear winter, in order to evolve consciousness to adapt and reform our leadership and institutions.

As a preface to analyzing Duchamp’s strategy (or non-strategy) of “absurdity stated as defiance” that was embraced by young artists in the 1950s, I will first consider a handful of mature New York artists working immediately after World War II to address the previously inconceivable human catastrophes wrought by the Holocaust and atomic bomb. Pollock, Newman, Motherwell and Smith shared the aim of aim of prompting viewers to contemplate the creative act as a means of adapting to the new realities of contemporary life. Their examples support Rubinoff’s argument that artists can engage in dialogue with their predecessors to help viewers orient to a new reality.

Jackson Pollock credited Kandinsky for teaching him how to "enter" a picture, "...to move around in it, and mingle with its very life". Fineberg summarized the experience of viewing works like *Number 1, 1948* (1948) as “reconstruct[ing] the act of creation”. Because the artist’s every motion and gesture is traceable, the work maintains a sense of immediacy, which “highlights the present as the fixed reference point in the painting”.² As Pollock argued in a 1950 interview: “...new needs need new techniques...It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the

²Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, 3rd edition. New York: Prentice Hall (2011), pp. 94-5.

Renaissance or any past culture. Each age needs new techniques.”³ He also addressed the question of whether the layman could appreciate his work by suggesting that s/he “...should not look *for*, but look passively---and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for.”⁴

Barnett Newman asserted:

*The subject matter of creation is chaos...all artists...have been involved in the handling of chaos...The present painter can be said to work with chaos not only in the sense that he is handling the chaos of the blank picture plane but also in that he is handling the chaos of form. In trying to go beyond the visible and known world he is working with forms that are unknown even to him...engaged in the act of true discovery in the creation of new forms and symbols that will have the living quality of creation.*⁵

In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1) he visualizes the infinite in the red field and employs narrow vertical bands (called “zips”), to convey the presence of the artist and thus relate natural order to the human scale. This device, he argued, gives the viewer a sense of place to “be” within the universe.

Robert Motherwell produced his *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series to “[insist] that a terrible death happened that should not be forgot” — the execution of Garcia Lorca among the countless horrors of the Spanish Civil War.⁶ The ovoid forms paired with bold vertical bars form what Fineberg called a “dramatic foil for the spontaneous emotive elements, such as the loose gestural brushwork, the paint drips, and the free irregularity of the artist’s rebellion against the self-imposed compositional order of alternating bars and ovals. The resistance to order...stands for resistance to order on wider fronts...”⁷ As Motherwell wrote, in the act of painting, he employed metaphors of “abandonment, desperation, and helplessness”.⁸

David Smith’s sculptures belie the hand-worked and improvised practices of action painting. He employed industrial materials to create “symbols of the industrial era”. His *Cubis* series balances human values and intellectual life, facilitating a new dialogue between viewer

³ Jackson Pollock interview with William Wright (1950). *Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné 4*, Eds. Francis V. O’Connor and Eugene Victor Thaw, eds. New Haven: Yale University Press (1958), pp. 248-51.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Barnett Newman, “The Plasmic Image” (1943-45) in Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman Part I*. New York: museum of Modern Art (1971), pp. 22-24.

⁶ As quoted by Fineberg, p. 75, from Robert Motherwell, “Robert Motherwell: A Conversation at Lunch,” in *An Exhibition of the Works of Robert MOtherwell*, January 10-28, 1963, to accompany the first Louise Linder Eastman Memorial Lecture, Jan. 14, 1963. Northampton, Mass. Unpaginated.

⁷ Fineberg, p. 75.

⁸ Motherwell conversation with Fineberg, Jan 8, 1977.

and artwork by drawing attention to the process.⁹ He argued that, in dealing with irrational aspects of the natural environment and man's nature, each new project has the potential to change the world. As Smith wrote, "If you ask me for whom do I make art, I will say that it is for all who approach it without prejudice. My world, the objects I see are the same for all men of good will. The race for survival I share with all men who work for existence..."¹⁰

Helen Frankenthaler is a crucial transitional artist, a generation younger than the Abstract Expressionists, whose work was centered in debates on the merits of formalism versus expression. She allowed the possibility that *Mountains and Sea* (1952) contained "in the Pollock framework...a certain Surreal element—the understated image that was really present: animals, thoughts, jungles, expressions".¹¹ Clement Greenberg, however, discounted that possibility, instead praising its "decorativeness", suggesting that the surface and color had become inseparable. Kenneth Noland was among a cluster of young artists who embraced this formal reading as a way forward. In *And Half* (1959) he employed Frankenthaler's staining process, but with the goal of shifting the viewer's attention from the creative act to the formal interaction of colors, as "pure visual presence," arguing, "we realized that you didn't have to assert yourself as a personality in order to be personally expressive...We felt that we could deal solely with esthetic issues, with the meaning of abstraction, without sacrificing individuality..."¹² As Crow described, even before Pollock's "sensational, near-suicidal death" in 1956, young New York artists were questioning the perceived expectation that they "owed their audience some form of spectacular self-revelation".¹³

Emerging artists of the next generation alleged that the "Existentialist rhetoric" of the Abstract Expressionism was inherently "subjective," that the "moralizing" was bankrupt, and that it had become a homogenizing cultural force that left no room for maneuvering.¹⁴ Deriding

⁹ Ibid, pp. 136-7.

¹⁰ David Smith, "Statements, Writings" (1947-52) in *David Smith by David Smith*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston (1968), p. 133.

¹¹ Helen Frankenthaler interview with Henry Geldzahler, *Aftforum* 4, no. 2 (October 1965), p. 37.

¹² Kenneth Noland interview with Diane Waldman. Excerpt from "Color, Format and Abstract Art: An Interview with Kenneth Noland," *Art in America* 65, no. 3 (May-June 1977), p. 99.

¹³ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc (1996), p. 9. The younger artists were also concerned by the rising value of Abstract Expressionists works. In 1957, for example, the Metropolitan Museum purchased Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* for \$30,000 and in 1959 DeKooning's show at the Sidney Janis Gallery sold out for \$150,000 on opening day.

¹⁴ These arguments were directed, in part, at the public adulation and institutional endorsements achieved by the Abstract Expressionists by the early-1950s, including profiles in *Life Magazine* and exhibitions organized by the US State Department. In the latter, abstraction was promoted as evidence that democracy enables free thinking in contrast to Communism, which forestalls it. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, transl. Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1983). Rubinoff has acknowledged that his predecessors in the Age of Agriculture were employed by the "warrior class" and the patron's intended message in works like Michelangelo's *Pietà* was not in keeping with a Humanist agenda. But, because those artists remained loyal to art

gestural painting as obsessively decorative, and no longer “viable”¹⁵, they called for a new, objective conception of the “real”. These criticisms of the older generation are based on an abstracted retelling of their stated intentions, creative processes and public response.¹⁶ Next generation artists outlined a series of “problems” with their predecessors and much of their content was situated as a critical solution. I fill focus here on the perceived problem of a gap between art and life, considering how this argument was structured and a variety of responses to “acting” in that gap.

The younger group was bound by a sense of self-alienation and armored for an attack on the myths of consumer culture. While they carried forth the basic values of existentialism from the New York School, the younger group denied that there was such a thing as fixed identity to be “discovered”. Instead, they resituated the viewer as a “nexus” of information, and argued that the artist’s task is to facilitate the discovery and rediscovery of the environment in which the self is continually formed. As Robert Rauschenberg argued, “I don’t want my personality to come out through the piece...I want my paintings to be reflections of life...your self-visualization is a reflection of your surroundings.”¹⁷

This conception of the spectator as contributing to the creative act, was in large part informed by the early 20th century experiments of Dadaist Marcel Duchamp. In the 1917 he submitted “The Richard Mutt Case” to the artist’s magazine *Blind Man*, cementing his vision of the artist as someone able to rethink the world and remake meaning through manipulations of language as opposed to someone who produces handcrafted visual objects for “retinal” pleasure.¹⁸ As he wrote: “Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no

history, their work supercedes the specific conditions into which it was introduced, and survives as an essential component in the “map of the human soul”.

¹⁵ Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958-1964*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company with Whitney Museum of American Art (1984), p. 15.

¹⁶ As George Segal later asserted in conversation with Haskell, “We found it amazing that so much avant-garde twentieth-century art was rooted in physical experiences of the real world and suddenly the Abstract Expressionists were legislating any reference to the physical world totally out of art. This was outrageous to us.” Haskell p. 15.

¹⁷ Quoted by Fineberg, p. 167. From Rauschenberg interview in Barbara Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*. New York: Elizabeth Avedon Editions, Vintage (1987), p. 221.

¹⁸ This was in response to the decision by the Society of Independent Artists to reject *Fountain* on the grounds that it was not art. By rule, the Society displayed all submissions of art. Duchamp dismissed the development of modern art from Courbet as purely “retinal”, i.e. appealing to the eye. Of course, this dismissive reading of Courbet overlooks the truly defiant nature of works like *Burial at Ornans* and *The Stonebreakers*, which attacked a range of corrupt contemporaneous institutions, including the Church, the Royal Academy and consumer economy itself. He also dismissed the Impressionists as being concerned only with capturing what they see, despite the social problems exposed by Manet, Degas and others. As the artist described to Pierre Cabanne, he had considered himself “liberated from the past” since, in 1912, the Salon des Independants refused his *Nude Descending a Staircase*. As he claimed, “It helped liberate me completely from the past...” “I’m going to count on no one but myself, along.” From Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Thames and Hudson, p. 31.

importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.”¹⁹ Thus, in the effort to question the very notion of art and the “unnecessary adoration” of it, he contrived a system to alter its very identity and value. Born out Dada’s imperative to reject and ridicule the art and bourgeois culture of the modern world as an anti-war stance, Rubinoff describes Duchamp’s strategy as one of resignation stated as defiance, and draws a stark distinction between his response to the horrors of the Great War and corrupted leadership, in comparison to those of Dix and Grosz discussed earlier. Rubinoff suggests that because Duchamp rejected art history, his work neglects the essential Humanist function of art. Furthermore, in reviving Duchamp’s example of negation to both criticize their predecessors and create a new role for both artist and viewer, the next generation created a lasting rupture in the understanding of the artist’s role in society as inherited from Chauvet.

Beginning in 1954, when a large collection of Duchamp’s works including *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) and *The Large Glass* (1915-23), were placed on permanent display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and accelerating through the late 1950s and early 1960s, he contributed to numerous publications, including “The Creative Act” (1957), in which he cemented his contention made some four decades earlier that the creative act is not performed by the artist alone, and that the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by “deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications”.²⁰

In 1960 British Pop artist Richard Hamilton laid out a typographic version of *Green Box* (originally published in 1934) in book form and in 1963 Pasadena Art Museum director Walter Hopps organized Duchamp’s first retrospective, which, according to Tomkins, resulted in his “canonization”. Tomkins argued that the display of his Readymades in particular emboldened young artists to employ mechanized production as a means of breaking through the existing barriers of the art world.²¹ And, in 1964 the artist endorsed the production of thirteen Readymades in signed editions of eight for the Galleria Schwarz in Milan. As Girst noted, Duchamp himself wryly predicted the toll of time on his early 20th century Readymades, acknowledging that the original shock effect could not be repeated.

¹⁹ Marcel Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case,” in *Blind Man 2* (1917), p. 5.

²⁰ Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act” lecture given in Houston, April 1957. Published in *Art News* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957). Translated into French by Duchamp for Michel Sanouillet, ed., *Marchand du Sel: Ecrits de Marcel Duchamp* (1958).

²¹ Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde: Duchamp, Tinguely, Cage, Rauschenberg, Cunningham*. New York: The Viking Press (1962).

Next generation artists on both sides of the Atlantic also embraced the premise of Marshall McLuhan's 1951 book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (a reference, of course, to Duchamp), which examined subliminal messaging in corporate ad campaigns. McLuhan pioneered the field of cultural studies with analyses on the social implications of such imagery.²² The British Independent Group, as theorized by Richard Hamilton and Lawrence Alloway, were actually the first to describe American consumer imagery as "Pop" and situated it as a sort of aesthetic challenge to tradition, appealing to artists to separate the arts from "an obsolete art of agonized private experience, tied to the antiquated regimes of European power...fixated on traumatic memories..." of the war.²³

Hamilton penned the following statement to accompany *Just What Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* which was featured in the group's *This is Tomorrow* exhibition in 1956: "We resist the kind of activity which is primarily concerned with the creation of style. We reject the notion that 'tomorrow' can be expressed through the presentation of rigid formal concepts. Tomorrow can only extend the range of the present body of visual experience." Hamilton challenged the artist to become a "knowing consumer", to "accept the objects that constitute [the] environment in a new way".²⁴

In the mid-through late-1950s Rauschenberg developed a series of "Combines" including *Bed*, *Canyon* and *Odalisk*, that foregrounded his contention that everyday materials and imagery would bridge the gap between art and life. Most objects in this series also contain a reference to the spontaneity of gesture painting, although Rauschenberg admitted that he could not fully embrace chance as many of his peers did. *Odalisk*, for example, took three years to complete.²⁵

Rauschenberg argued that his role as artist was to assimilate the found objects that appeared in his everyday activities, and not to impose an analysis on them. He described the artist as becoming aware that "he is part of an uncensored continuum that neither begins with or ends with any decision or action of his".²⁶ Artists on both sides of the Atlantic embraced this notion of seeking out and acknowledging feedback, "from an acceptance of the life we are

²² And, in the early 1960s McLuhan coined the phrase "global village" in forecasting that "electronic interdependence" would cause a shift from independent to collective identity. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Makings of Typographic Man* (1961) he warned that the world was becoming more and more like a computer with the result that Big Brother was replacing the human senses.

²³ Haskell, p. 40.

²⁴ Christopher Finch, *Image as Language: Aspects of British Art 1950-1968*. New York: Penguin (1969), p. 24

²⁵ He exhibited the combines at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1959.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 23-27.

leading to an awakening to that same life”.²⁷ Perhaps the great difference in his stance in comparison to Rubinoff’s can best be summed up in this 1977 statement: “I don’t think any honest artist sets out to make art. You love art. You are art. You do art. But you’re just doing something...if you try to separate the two, art can be very self-conscious, a blinding fact. But life doesn’t really need it so it’s also another blinding fact.”²⁸

Jasper Johns also embraced the notion that art should not be introspective, but that it should “[reorient] input rather than originating content”.²⁹ He focused on the question of *how* the art object means what it means, and closing the gap between the thing and its representation. His *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) is, literally, a target, and yet it also employs the established “language” of painting, with obvious brushstrokes and careful choice of colours. Crow suggested that he purposely chose a contested national symbol *Flag* (1954-5), to undercut the expectation that artist “owed their audience some form of spectacular self-revelation” and to bracket the “marks of...privileged, metropolitan individuality within the anonymity of bypassed, provincial forms of expression”.³⁰ He employed encaustic, as a way of tracking each movement. In *Flag* there’s a sense that “each stripe, each star, and the blue field were individually created by assembling small pieces of newspaper dipped in wax...and sealed in place on the underlying ground of thin fabric.”³¹ While the medium enables an emphasis on repetition, exactitude and, as Crow suggests, “literalness”, the beads and ripples also function to evoke and neutralize the analogous effects of Abstract Expressionism.³²

Instead of transforming the flag in illusionistic space, he underscored its 2-D status. Furthermore, utilizing a known symbolic object, enabled him to illustrate the conscious act to forfeit artistic decision-making.³³ He employed a “sign” from the real world to question the status of his creation as art object, questioning the relationship between the painted image and the “real”.³⁴ Crow suggests that, when Johns had his first one-man show at Leo Castelli in 1958, the audience received the message that the “emotionally loaded gestures” of his predecessors

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Robert Rauschenberg video Interview with Barbaralee Diamonstein, ed. *Inside New York’s Art World: Robert Rauschenberg and Leo Castelli*. New York: Recorded in cooperation with New School for Social Research (1977).

²⁹ Fineberg, p. 194.

³⁰ Crow, p. 9.

³¹ Ibid, pp. 17-18.

³² Ibid, p. 18.

³³ Haskell, p. 77.

³⁴ Is it a painting of a flag, or just a flag?

were “grandiose and hollow”, while his frozen in time effect functioned to “create a barrier rather than an invitation to emotional empathy”.³⁵

As artists of the 1950s and 1960s assimilated media and consumer culture in the effort to distinguish themselves from their immediate predecessors by underscoring how they were linked to homogenized culture, a gambit based on the assertion that all available conceptions of art had been exhausted. Rubinoff, on the contrary, sees no gap between life and art. His insight on art as the map of the human soul indicates that it was Duchamp who caused the initial rupture and the Pop artists who reopened and deepened it. While their stated aims do, on the surface, intersect with Rubinoff’s insight on the potential for art in the face of nuclear winter, a comparison of the two strategies begs the question: if “culture” instead of direct experience of nature is designated as subject matter, what sort of outcome can be expected when culture itself is flawed? How can we possibly achieve the necessary level of reflection to evolve consciousness? Instead of returning to art history to both shed these associations and address contemporaneous concerns, as Rubinoff has advocated, Johns and his cohort situated dominant artistic practice firmly in the culture of which they claimed to disapprove. Today many and perhaps the majority artists who pursue the MFA route to professionalization, claim to be subverting a particular cultural norm through a set of material references, but with the support of an institution that Rubinoff would suggest is itself corrupt.

Certainly, this phenomenon is intertwined with another narrative to emerge from the art of Duchampian dissent. As Crow described, “The eclipse of old heroic models did not bring about a decline in the importance and appeal of art. On the contrary, the proliferation of dissent and the fragmentation of voices propelled advanced art to new levels of desirability for wealthy

³⁵ Crow, p. 19. While this Pop conceptual art was gaining steam and overtook the New York scene in the early 1960s, many along the way voiced concern about the meaning and functioning of these works, their regard or disregard for their predecessors and for the future. Leo Steinberg, for example, summarized his feelings of unease upon viewing *Target with Four Faces* by quoting Baudelaire on Ingres: “No more imagination; therefore no more movement...For what really depressed me was that I felt these works were able to do to all other art.” In *Target with Four Faces*, “...I seemed to feel the end of illusion. No more manipulation of paint as a medium of transformation...[Johns] resorts to a plaster cast and builds an actual box to contain it...So, the flat is flat and the solid is three-dimensional...There is no more metamorphosis, no more magic of medium...There is in all this work, not simply an ignoring of human subject matter...but an implication of absence...of human absence of the man-made environment. In the end, these pictures by Jasper Johns come to impress me as a dead city might—but a dead city of terrible familiarity. Only objects are left—man-made signs which, in the absence of men, have become objects. And Johns has anticipated their dereliction.” Steinberg, “Contemporary Art and Its Public,” in *Harper’s Magazine*, 224: 1342 (March 1962) pp 36-8.

individuals, corporations and great civic museums.” Yes, there is “aggression in the work, yet its setting speaks in a contrary voice of acceptance and reassurance”.³⁶

In the mid-1960s, Minimalist art emerged as a direct descendant of Duchamp via the conceptual-Pop art of the 1950s. Donald Judd crystallized Rauschenberg and Johns’ interest in eradicating content from the work itself and hence negating any claim of emotional introspection. He took a “logical” next step within their discourse, to abandon imagery altogether, instead asserting the overtly un-symbolic physicality of materials, so that the object is entirely literal. He constructed series of boxes in multiple media in a diversity of locations. He established a new dialogue with the art of the past, from Pollock through the history of painting, in the effort to question the entire system of illusionistic perspective. If an image suggested three dimensions, he argued, it was a “compromise”. In these works he insists that art should be rooted in experientially verifiable truth. Thus, there is no suggestion of three dimensions, because three dimensions exist. In 1965 Judd coined the term “specific object” to refer, as Fineberg described, “to the literalness with which this new sculpture and painting revealed itself to the observer as precisely what it was in the physical sense rather than as a metaphor or representation”.³⁷ The next year art historian Ludy Lippard hailed his work as an avant-garde gesture, writing, “The exciting thing about [them]...is their daring challenge of the concepts of boredom, monotony and repetition.”³⁸ It’s important to bring Judd’s sculptural works into this discussion because viewing them in comparison to Rubinoff’s can deepen our understanding of his insight on the Humanist value art as the map of the human soul.

Here I want to interject another sort of rebuttal of Minimalist anti-illusionism and Pop disengagement. Eva Hesse was one among a number of women artists who openly challenged the prevailing trends of the mid-1960s, by likening them to the impersonal, alienating corporate culture they claimed to oppose. As she asserted, “I feel very close to Carl Andre...I feel, let’s say, emotionally connected to his work. It does something to my insides. His metal plates were the concentration camp for me.”³⁹ While I’m not suggesting a direct kinship with Rubinoff, she is a strong example of an artist who surveyed the scene and spoke out, arguing that art must be personally engaged, specifically that it should be rooted in real, tactile experience of the world.

³⁶ Crow, pp. 12-13.

³⁷ Fineberg, p. 281.

³⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, “New York Letter: Recent Sculpture as Escape,” *Art International* (Feb. 20, 1966), p. 50. Quoted by Fineberg, p. 281.

³⁹ Quoted by Fineberg, p. 299. From Eva Hesse in Cindy Nemser, “An Interview with Eva Hesse,” *Artforum* (May 1970), p. 60.

She described a personal drive to find form for her emotional struggles in the aftermath of escaping the concentration camps in 1939, and the subsequent suicide of her mother.⁴⁰ And, while I doubt Rubinoff would agree with her employment of the forms and systematic character of Minimalism in works like *Ishtar* (1965) and *Untitled (Rope Piece)* (1965), she did challenge the established definition of “non-work”, suggesting, “I would like the work to be non-work. This means that it would find its way beyond my preconceptions. What I want of my art I can eventually find. The work must go beyond this.”⁴¹

Hesse wasn't alone in insisting that art should be engaged in both individual and collective struggle. Romare Bearden, who was taught by Grosz at the Art Students League in the 1930s, credited his foundational lessons on the history of art and technical focus on composition for enabling his development of African American subject matter during the Civil Rights struggle. In works like *The Dove* (1964) Bearden “pays homage to the Cubist grid as a way of setting off the energetic fragmentation of the subject. The brick wall in the background, obstructing a long view into space, is directly inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch street scenes. Meanwhile, the dove, perched above the central doorway, suggests the present of Christian faith, without, however, suggesting any systematic allegory.”⁴² Likewise in *Baptism* (1964), he “consciously quotes historical styles of art...in the four faces borrowed from West African masks...and...the compositional structure...of Francisco de Zurbaran.”⁴³ Bearden also looked to Courbet, who carefully considered his audience, and the social responsibility of artists, an acknowledgment that contrasts starkly with Duchamp's designation of Courbet as responsible for the “retinal” trend in modern art.⁴⁴

These are just two of many artists working in the 1960s, who called out and worked in opposition to Duchampian ironic detachment. The significance of their stances tends to be subsumed, however, in the persistent Postmodern narrative on the ever-increasing “plurality” of the art scene. Rubinoff has also expressed concern over the lasting influence of Postmodern political philosophy as exemplified by Lyotard, who argued strongly against Enlightenment values in support of such universal ideals as freedom and progress through history. He contended that, given the impossibility of universal values, human actions will always be motivated by

⁴⁰ Fineberg, pp. 296-7.

⁴¹ Eva Hesse, untitled statement in *Eva Hesse*. New York: Fischbach Gallery (1968).

⁴² Fineberg, p. 367.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 367.

⁴⁴ Romare Bearden Interview with Henri Ghent for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (June 29, 1968).

incompatibility and difference.

As this presentation draws to a close, I return to Rubinoff's conception of Duchamp's stance as "resignation stated as defiance" to note a seeming resurgence of interest in "Systems Art" of the late 1960s, made perhaps most tangible in MIT's re-creation of Hans Haacke's 1967 solo show. The original purportedly opposed that institution's involvement with the military industrial complex. For it, Haacke devised a number of elaborate physical and biological "systems..." produced with the "explicit intention of having their components physically communicate with each other, and the whole communicate physically with the environment".⁴⁵ These included *Condensation Cube* (first made in 1963), a hermetically sealed plexiglass cube. Jones has suggested that Haacke's effort to encapsulate a micro-climate within the gallery further extended Duchamp's ready-mades by completely detaching art from an emotion, mystery, feeling or intuition. In elevating the system to object, he eradicated the human observer from it. Hence, the viewer is witness but s/he is not a part of the system and there is no opportunity for empathy.

I referenced this project because many of my cohort, including artists, art historians and curators, see great promise in *Aesthetic Relations*, which seeks to produce inter-subjective encounters. Local iterations include *Colourschool* and *Instant Coffee*, and perhaps the best-known laboratory is the *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris. The crux of the practice is that meaning is decided collectively, in gatherings of people organized by the institution, rather than individually. In my experience, there is typically an overriding claim to subverting all sorts of oppressive systems, ranging from capitalism to American imperialism, and art school homogeneity, while there is little tangible proof of a sustained "interruption". As Bishop warned, "An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas as artists-as-designer, function over contemplation, and open-endedness over aesthetic resolution, is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience..."⁴⁶

Girst argued that such unexamined re-deployments of Duchamp's ideas in the contemporary environment can be a "hollow gesture of resistance—especially since this

⁴⁵ Caroline Jones, "Hans Haacke 1967" in *Hans Haacke 1967*. Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center (2011). As Jones has noted, he originally called the prototype "Weather Cube", a title which accommodates shifts due to visitor presence; the later title "Condensation Cube" is more a device to capture (or present) a process, which, again, eliminates the human observer.

⁴⁶ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," in *October* (2004), pp. 54-5.

resistance has been practiced as a meta-ironic gesture in the art world for decades”. As an example, he pointed to Takashi Murakami’s summation of collaboration with Louis Vuitton: “The Louis Vuitton Project is my urinal”!⁴⁷

On this note, I will close with an except from Duchamp’s 1961 speech at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art:

*..I mean that the general public accepts and demands a lot from art, far too much from art; that the general public today seeks aesthetic satisfaction wrapped up in a set of material and speculative values and is drawing artistic output towards an enormous dilution. This enormous dilution, losing in quality what it gains in quantity, is accompanied by a leveling down of present taste and its immediate result will be to shroud the near future in mediocrity. In conclusion, I hope that this mediocrity conditioned by too many factors foreign to art per se, will this time bring a revolution on the aesthetic level, of which the general public will not even be aware and which only a few initiates will develop on the fringe of a world blinded by economic fireworks. The great artist of tomorrow will go underground.*⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Thomas Girst, “Marcel Duchamp: A Hagiography,” in *Impuls Marcel Duchamp/ Where Do We Go from Here?* Eds. Antonia Napp and Kornelia Röeder. Schwerin: Hatje Cantz (2011), p. 45. In conjunction with the Turner Prize in 2004 the BBC asked 500 international art experts to name the most seminal artwork of 20th century, and Duchamp’s Fountain was their top pick.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 47.