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RADICAL HISTORY &
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3

THE THEORETICAL DESTINY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

THE END OF ILLUSIONS

In our day and age, it is widely assumed that the more grandiose historical encounters between art and politics have proven to be unsuccessful. Such a failure has apparently revealed the extent to which the aesthetic dreams of ushering in new forms of sociopolitical life were as much based on puerile delusions as the mumbo jumbo of yesteryear's political radicals. This historical thesis, at least in certain sectors, tends to frame the very field of artistic and political possibilities. "In politics," writes Thierry de Duve, "revolutions engendered the Terror and the Gulag, and we no longer have faith in their project of emancipation. In art, the notion of the avant-garde is no longer acclaimed [*n'a plus bonne presse*], and revisionism is now the order of the day."¹

If we unpack this thesis, it is indeed arguable that in the realm of the arts, to begin with, a prominent historical consensus has come to impose itself with the force of an indisputable given. If it be on the left or on the right, among art historians or philosophers, if it be considered a cause for celebration or regret, nearly everyone agrees that the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century has failed. Like many other forms of aesthetic rebellion, the very institutions against which it had revolted were able to

recuperate it. In spite of the critical efforts of the neo-avant-garde at mid-century and beyond, the same historical dialectic purportedly transformed its negativity into the stabilizing positivity of the establishment, and art history continued its homogenizing march, dialectically enriched by the very attempt to contravene it. It therefore matters little if the neo-avant-garde is understood as the veritable rebirth of the avant-garde or simply the tail end of a long funeral procession, for its fate is widely judged to be identical with that of its predecessor. Today, the avant-garde has the dubious distinction of having twice failed. In the current age of colossal corporate museums and the global art market, the very appeal to the avant-garde or neo-avant-garde strikes many as the result of a puerile longing based on the myth of an outside that no longer exists, or never in fact existed.

It must not go unnoticed that there is a partial historical synchrony between the perceived failure of the avant-garde—as well as of other forms of aesthetic rebellion—and the supposed disintegration of the political grand narratives of the communist and socialist traditions. In the last third of the twentieth century, a seemingly endless number of voices have prophetically proclaimed that the utopian project of radical social transformation has been proven to be illusory. The era of the end of aesthetic myths largely coincides, therefore, with the age of the termination of political fantasies: the avant-garde and radical socialism are twin illusions. The political vanguard shares a common destiny with the aesthetic avant-garde: their early utopian fervor paradoxically served to reveal—via a dialectical inversion—the supposedly indisputable historical fact that there is no alternative to the systems in place.²

Our epoch is thereby implicitly framed as an enlightened age in which the delusions and superstitions of yesteryear no longer have any purchase. The presumed collapse of utopian projects, if they be aesthetic or political, paradoxically serves to confirm the progress of our own knowledge. In other words, the thesis on the failure of artistic and political endeavors judged to be utopian is itself premised on an utterly utopian conception of epistemic progress and the assumption that we can now establish definitive knowledge regarding the successes and failures of history. We thereby presume to have arrived at a meta-utopian epistemological plateau from which we

can overlook and judge all previous—and future—utopian undertakings. Regardless of the specific formulation of the end of illusions thesis, it must not therefore be lost on us that the true utopia, as it appears at the ultimate end of history, is epistemological and historiographical rather than aesthetic or political: we now supposedly know, unlike our benighted predecessors, that the course of history cannot be changed by radical art or revolutionary politics. This theoretical utopia serves to put a definitive end to all other utopian aspirations and practices by purporting to have attained absolute knowledge concerning what is historically possible.

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY: THE ABANDONMENT OF AESTHETICS AND THE RETREAT OF RADICALISM

To provide a detailed account of the end of illusions thesis, it would, of course, be necessary to meticulously explore the various intellectual constellations that have contributed to it, as well as the motley political, economic, and social forces that have actively promoted it. For the sake of providing one specific case study, whose implications will transcend the particular instance analyzed, this chapter will concentrate on the troubling state of contemporary critical theory and, more specifically, on the flagship publication by Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1973).³ This book continues to serve as one of the central reference points in current debates on the avant-garde, and many of its critics still accept much of its methodological orientation. In order to situate and introduce its central claims, it will be useful to begin with a brief overview of the evolution of Frankfurt School critical theory and its relationship to the omniscient defeatism of the end of illusions thesis.

It is well known that the early members and associates of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, which was nearly named the *Institut für Marxismus*, were very concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and radical political transformation, as evinced by the work of figures like Theodor Adorno,

Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. Jürgen Habermas, who is often recognized as the major figure in the second generation of critical theory, distanced himself from the primarily Marxist orientation of the early Frankfurt School. Although his relationship to Marx is complicated, we can, for the purposes of this brief discussion, take our bearings from a revealing text from the mid-1980s on the exhaustion of utopian energies where he asserts that "the utopian accents have moved from the concept of labor to the concept of communication."⁴ He goes on to insist on "the abandonment of the methodological illusion that was connected with projections of a concrete totality of future life possibilities," which leads him to the conclusion that "the utopian content of a society based on communication is limited to the formal aspects of an undamaged intersubjectivity."⁵

It is not only in the realm of politics that Habermas has given his own unique imprimatur to the end of illusions thesis. He has also provided a distinctive and derisively crystalline formulation of this thesis regarding the avant-garde aspiration to link art and life: "But all those attempts to level art and life, fiction and praxis, appearance and reality to one plane . . . all these undertakings have proved themselves to be sort of nonsense experiments. These experiments have served to bring back to life, and to illuminate all the more glaringly, exactly those structures of art which they were meant to dissolve."⁶

Although a detailed investigation would be necessary, it is certainly arguable that the end of illusions thesis has taken a firm hold over much of third-generation critical theory, leading to two important tendencies: the abandonment of aesthetics and the retreat of radicalism. Regarding the former, it is remarkable that a significant number of the current representatives of Frankfurt School critical theory have neglected the question of aesthetics. If it be Rainer Forst and Axel Honneth in Germany, or Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, and Thomas McCarthy in the United States, many contemporary critical theorists have sidelined the question of aesthetics in favor of moral and political philosophy. Peter Uwe Hohendahl has underscored this methodological reorientation: "In the official transition from Habermas to Axel Honneth, who was recently appointed Habermas's successor at the University of Frankfurt, the aesthetic question, which was so prominent

in the work of Adorno and Benjamin, has been moved to the background."⁷ Such a shift in focus, it should be noted, turns its back on the resolutely interdisciplinary approach of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. There are, of course, important exceptions, as we will see. However, in conformity with the widespread academic specialization of the contemporary intellectual world, critical theory has generally come to mean, at least in certain circles, a theory focused primarily on moral, political, and social issues. A clear separation between art and the sociopolitical realm is more or less implicitly accepted, and many contemporary critical theorists thereby abandon the project of a total analysis of society that would include aesthetics and the culture industry.

A retreat of radicalism has accompanied the general abandonment of aesthetics. The political orientation of the major representatives of third-generation critical theory is notably less transformative than that of first-generation figures. It would, of course, be a mistake to unduly identify the latter with a revolutionary agenda across the board. Indeed, it is arguable that they were often plagued by certain conservative tendencies. However, the radical high points of the first generation of critical theory stand in stark contrast to the work of many of the representatives of the third generation. With few exceptions, the more recent critical theorists are generally more concerned with improving democratic debate and various institutional mechanisms rather than with radically altering the very structure of society, politics, and economics through revolutionary struggle.

Although the abandonment of aesthetics and the retreat of radicalism are characteristics of a certain form of neo- or post-Habermasian critical theory, if not of much of Habermas's own work, there are numerous exceptions to this general tendency.⁸ Regarding the engagement with aesthetics, let it suffice to cite, in the current context, the work of Peter Bürger, Christoph Mencke, and Martin Seel in Germany, that of Jay Bernstein and Peter Osborne in the Anglophone world, or that of Jean-Marc Lachaud and Rainer Rochlitz in France. There are surely many others who are equally worthy of mention. The list of those dedicated to revolutionary politics would certainly be much shorter, but there are still thinkers who identify simultaneously with Frankfurt School critical theory and transformative

politics. Although a detailed analysis would be required before drawing any definitive conclusions, it certainly appears that some of Nancy Fraser's work is at least slightly closer to the transformative heritage of the first generation than the work of many of her contemporary interlocutors.⁹

These exceptions, as well as others that could be cited, do not necessarily call into question the working hypothesis that I would like to advance: the relationship between aesthetics and transformative politics no longer imposes itself as a crucial and central object of analysis for contemporary critical theory. On the contrary, it is frequently assumed that they can be studied in isolation, or that the question of aesthetics can simply be abandoned, as well as that of revolutionary politics. Even those who are interested in examining the relationship between art and politics often develop, as we will see in the case of Peter Bürger, melancholic accounts of their historical divorce that underscore the impossibility of any reconciliation in the current conjuncture. In many ways, contemporary critical theory thereby runs the risk of partaking in and contributing to the historical imaginary of the end of illusions, according to which the aesthetic dreams of an art capable of transforming society are as illusory as those of the utopians who mistakenly thought that they could actually change the course of history.

With this in mind, we can now turn to Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and his own explicit historical contextualization of his project. It is clearly rooted in the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory, but he situates it more precisely in terms of a post-1968 melancholy and the sobering realization that "all revolutions have failed": "When I conceived of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* . . . the impulses that the May events had awakened had already been arrested."¹⁰ Appealing to Walter Benjamin's writings on constellations, he asserts that May 1968 shed a new light on the historical avant-garde, thereby making his project possible: "The second event . . . illuminates the first. This constellation underlies *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. From the standpoint of the utopia of 1968, whose failure was already unambiguously sketched out, the author read the historical avant-gardes and saw the failure of the May '68 movement prefigured in them. . . . The author does not need to deny that it is an image marked by melancholy."¹¹ Based, therefore, on Bürger's own reflexive historical understanding of his project, it is

the supposed political failure of the movements of May '68 that illuminated the failure of avant-garde artistic projects. The end of political illusions, in other words, retroactively shed light on the end of aesthetic illusions.

In turning to Bürger's history of the demise of avant-garde delusions, it is important not to lose sight of the fundamental stakes of our analysis, which far surpass his particular argument. The overall goal of this chapter and the next is to call into question our supposed historical knowledge in order to rethink the avant-garde today by definitively breaking with the historical order that frames it within an all too well determined destiny.

THEORY OF ARTISTIC AUTONOMY

In order to understand Bürger's central thesis, let us begin with the historical typology that he uses in order to explain the emergence of what he calls the historical avant-garde movements (Dadaism, early Surrealism, and the Russian avant-garde after the October Revolution).¹² Three principal elements organize this typology: the function, the production, and the reception of works of art. In the era of sacral art, to begin with, art functions as a cult object produced collectively within religious institutions and destined for a communal reception. Courtly art constitutes the first step in the emancipation of art from the world of the sacred. Although its reception is still collective, it is produced by individuals and aims at representing figures of authority and courtly society. It is only in the third age of bourgeois art that production is individualized along with reception. Whereas art was an integral part of the life praxis of the faithful and of courtly society in preceding eras, its function changes significantly in the bourgeois culture that emerges at the end of the eighteenth century. Isolated from life, it comes to function as the "objectification of the self-understanding of the bourgeois class" without playing a veritable social role.¹³ The separation of art from life praxis thereby becomes one of the dominant characteristics of bourgeois art and constitutes what Bürger calls its autonomy as "a distinct social subsystem," following in part the work of Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas.¹⁴

His overall typology reads, therefore, as a trilogy that recounts the history of the emancipation of art: the sacral era of cult objects is succeeded by the courtly age that liberates art from religion, which is followed in turn by the bourgeois period and the emancipation of art from all social functions. It is precisely for this reason that he refers to autonomy as an "ideological category": it "joins an element of truth (the apartness of art from the praxis of life) and an element of untruth (the hypostatization of this fact, which is a result of historical development as the 'essence' of art)."¹⁵

In spite of the connotations inherent in Bürger's vocabulary, it is extremely important to note that the so-called autonomy of art, and what he also refers to as the institution of art (*Institution Kunst*) in bourgeois society, does not result from the institutionalization of art in modern museums, academies, universities, and so forth. He is very clear regarding this point in a long passage in a collection of essays written in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

In the sociology of literature and art, the concept of the "institution of art" is occasionally employed to denote social formations [*Einrichtungen*] such as publishers, bookstores, theaters, and museums, which mediate between individual works and the public. "Institution of art" will not be used in this sense here; the concept rather refers to the epochal functional determinants [*die epochalen Funktionsbestimmungen*] of art within the bounds of society. I will not contest the possibility of a sociology of instances of mediation. . . . Only, this sort of empirical sociology of instances of mediation is not likely to illuminate the social function of art and its historical transformation. Adding investigations of individual instances cannot replace theoretical coordinates [*Theorierahmen*], which alone can form the basis for research on the social function of art. . . . We can treat as the *institution of art* those notions [*Vorstellungen*] about art (its functional determinants) which are generally valid in a society (or in individual classes or ranks).¹⁶

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, he describes the institution of art in terms of the emergence of "a systematic aesthetics as a philosophical discipline in

which a new concept of autonomous art is developed."¹⁷ The supposed separation between the social subsystem of art and society as a whole derives directly from this new concept: "with the constitution of aesthetics as an independent sphere of philosophical knowledge, this concept of art comes into being, *which has as a result* that artistic production is divorced from the totality of the life [*Lebenstotalität*] of social activities and comes to confront them abstractly."¹⁸

These and other such statements reveal an operative idealism that openly belies Bürger's critique of idealist aesthetics as well as his express appeal to materialism: "its author understood *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as, primarily, an attempt at laying the foundations for a materialist cultural science."¹⁹ In the "Postscript to the Second German Edition," he attempts to justify this apparently contradictory position by asserting that aesthetic theories, although they represent the most advanced ideas of an era, are not limited to the field of philosophy because they also dominate the minds of those who intervene in institutions in the material sense of the term. However, he does not propose in the least to change the relation of determination between ideas and institutions. On the contrary, he incongruously invokes as a defense of his apparent materialism the fact that he concentrated on "ideas about art in their most developed form" (notably those of Kant and Schiller).²⁰ What is more, as his precious few examples performatively illustrate in their own right, there is actually only one idea of art: "the singular term 'institution of art' highlights the hegemony of *one* conception of art in bourgeois society."²¹ This partially disguised idealism is thus, in fact, a staunch idealism founded on a monolithic conceptualism: a single concept of art serves as the functional determinant for the totality of artistic theories and practices in the modern age.

This methodological idealism is seconded by what we might call a hermeneutic idealism, upon which some of his more severe critics have remarked. Marjorie Perloff goes to the heart of matters when she writes: "Bürger's theses are buttressed by precious few concrete examples, and no wonder. If the avant-garde exists only to call into question art as an institution, there is no point characterizing the actual work of Picasso or Picabia, Breton or Broch. Bürger, for that matter, seems to have much less interest in

in what the avant-garde produced than in family quarrels with Gadamer and Horkheimer, Benjamin and Adorno.²² Benjamin Buchloh has perhaps been Bürger's most persistent gadfly, repeatedly recalling the concrete ways in which the complexities of artistic practices in the twentieth century are irreducible to the monolithic conceptual structures of a theoretician who maintains a safe, and even sterile, distance from art history.²³

In all fairness, it must be noted that Bürger does have a consistent response to such criticisms:

There are, of course, differences between futurism, Dada, surrealism and constructivism. . . . A history of the avant-garde movements would have to represent these differences, which can be demonstrated by tracing the intellectual altercations between the various groupings. Theory pursues other goals; thus *Theory of the Avant-Garde* tries to make visible the historical epoch in which the development of art in bourgeois society can be recognized. To this end, it needs to undertake generalizations that are set at a much higher level of abstraction than the generalizations of historians.²⁴

He invokes the same distinction between history and theory in his introduction to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, asserting that his book does not aim at providing a historical account founded on specific interpretations of works of art: "the examples from literature and the fine arts to be found here are not to be understood as historical and sociological interpretations [*Deutungen*] of individual works but as illustrations of a theory."²⁵ He thereby proposes a theoretical distinction between two distinct practices: history relies on historical and sociological interpretations, whereas theory marshals illustrations that "serve to give concreteness to statements that make a more sweeping claim to general validity."²⁶ Although such a delimitation might appear to vindicate his project against his art-historical critics, it actually provides yet further proof of his deep-seated idealism. For his fundamental assumption is that there are theoretical constructions capable of grasping a historical field in its "contradictoriness" such that the crystalline waters of theory are not muddled by the unsettling investigations into the

multifariousness of concrete particulars. Indeed, according to a rather suspect strategy of selective exemplarity, he accepts and even highlights particular instances that illustrate his theoretical constructs while simultaneously dismissing any counterexamples as nothing more than historical and sociological interpretations. This means, at least in theory, that no specific examples would ever be able to confute his conceptual edifice because the latter is situated at a higher level of abstraction. He thereby establishes an idealist system of defense resembling a castle in the sky.

Let us return, in this light, to the question of the institution of art. It is clear that what Bürger understands by this expression is a theoretical institution. And this is for good reason: material institutions such as the modern museum, national libraries, modern theatres and operas, or the publication industry in no way serve to illustrate his conceptual thesis on the separation between art and society. On the contrary, it is arguable that they reveal the extent to which there was a slow and complex reconfiguration of the relations between art and society in which the former came to play an important role in the struggles surrounding the constitution of national identities. Let us take a single example, which is particularly appropriate for Bürger's concentration on the visual arts: the modern museum. Theodore Ziolkowski identifies its prototype in an example that is directly connected with Bürger's field of analysis: the *Altes Museum* in Berlin, which was designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel and built between 1823 and 1829, when his friend, G. W. F. Hegel, was giving his famous lectures on aesthetics at the University of Berlin. According to Ziolkowski:

Schinkel's museum in the Lustgarten embodied an institution that had never before existed: a museum dedicated exclusively to art (and specifically including painting as well as sculpture), intended primarily for the education of the nation, located in such a manner as to make a statement about the equality of art vis-à-vis church and state, designed in such a manner as to suggest the religious power of art, displayed in such a manner as to emphasize the autonomous integrity of the work of art, and organized in such a manner as to reveal the historical development of art as a central phenomenon of human culture.²⁷

Like many other historians and theorists—ranging from Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm to Dominique Poulot and Larry Shiner—Ziolkowski insists on the strong connections between this new institution of art and the emergence of modern nation-states as well as the establishment of national, cultural *patrimoines*. Instead of simply separating art from society, institutions like the modern museum helped facilitate more direct access to works of art by creating a public space in which the cultural past was often staged in such a way as to train and educate the citizenry of emerging nation-states. It is, of course, important to add—against Bürger's assertion—that no institution has a single and unique social effect. Institutions have variable consequences, and one of these, in the case of the modern museum, was to create a site for the possibility of a relatively new and important bond between 'art' and 'society.'

It is true that Bürger is partially correct to insist on the historical novelty of aesthetics and art in the singular, which was discussed in chapter 1. However, he does not sufficiently recognize the extent to which the singularization of the idea of art is bound up with material institutions that are intertwined with the social and cultural practices of developing nation-states. It is by no means my intention here, it should be noted, to oppose a vulgar materialism to Bürger's de facto idealism. On the contrary, it is essential to remind ourselves that the opposition between concrete examples and theoretical constructs is itself an abstraction: there are never pure, brute facts on the one hand and ideational systems on the other. They are always intertwined in diverse and complex ways such that the very distinction between them remains purely heuristic. Therefore, it makes just as little sense to appeal to an idea of autonomous art that is supposed to trickle down into institutions and practices as it does to exclude the conceptual dimension of human praxis in the name of a vulgar materialist account of institutions.

THE VERITABLE DESTINY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Let us now turn to the theoretical history that Bürger adumbrates against the backdrop of the so-called autonomy of art at the end of the eighteenth

century, which is in fact the idea of the autonomy of art that he finds in Kant and Schiller. This new conceptualization, according to Bürger, does not exclude straightaway heteronomous aesthetic practices whose contents are still political. During the first half of the nineteenth century, a discrepancy exists, therefore, between the idea of autonomous art and the heteronomous content of individual works. It is only during the second half of the century that the separation between art and life praxis comes to occupy the very content of works of art. This transformation reaches completion in aestheticism at the end of the nineteenth century, when "art becomes the content of art."²⁸

Autonomy qua idea of art, which comes to serve as the content of artistic works, is the necessary condition for the historical emergence of the avant-garde: "The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is removed from the life praxis of men [*die Institution Kunst als eine von der Lebenspraxis der Menschen abgehobene*]."²⁹ It is thus aestheticism that finally reveals social inefficacy as the essence of art in bourgeois society and thereby provokes the self-critique of art that is the avant-garde. The latter negates the autonomy of art and endeavors to reunite it with life. Proposing "a radical break with tradition," Dadaism, early Surrealism, and the Russian avant-garde share a common objective: "the destruction of art as an institution [*Zerstörung der Institution Kunst*]."³⁰ The negative intention of the avant-garde leads not only to an assault on the function of art in bourgeois society but also to an attack on the individual production and reception that are proper to it. Bürger cites as examples the negation of individual creation in Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades* and André Breton's attempt to negate individual reception by proposing "recipes" that allow every reader to write his or her own "automatic texts."³¹ If it be at the level of function, production, or reception, the avant-garde intention is always and everywhere the same: to destroy the institution of art in bourgeois society.

This destructive impulse goes hand in hand with a new understanding of the work of art. Posing a direct challenge to the organic unity of part and whole in previous artwork, the inorganic work of the avant-garde

produced heteroclitic assemblages of cacophonous elements. Yet, as illustrated by the case of Cubism, the simple creation of a montage of desultory fragments does not immediately qualify as an avant-garde work of art. It is also necessary to have the intention to call into question art as such, that is to say, the idea of art. Bürger ultimately proposes, therefore, a dual definition of the avant-garde: it is at one and the same time the intention to destroy the institution of art and to create inorganic works.³² Such a definition is one of the first signs that the avant-garde was destined to fail: how can art be abolished through the production of works of art?

Indeed, the very failure of the avant-garde was due to the success of one of its intentions: by creating works that were recognized as art, it was actually integrated into the exact same institution that it sought to destroy. According to the Marxist logic of recuperation, the revolt against art as institution was absorbed by the very institution that was the object of rebellion. It is for this reason, moreover, that the neo-avant-garde is constitutively inauthentic according to Bürger: it "institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions."³³ The a priori failure of the neo-avant-garde thereby echoes the a posteriori downfall of the historical avant-garde. Bürger seems to have taken his inspiration from Karl Marx's famous and oft-cited lines: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."³⁴ The tragedy of the avant-garde reappears—and can only reappear—on the historical stage as the farce of the neo-avant-garde.

Before examining some of the fundamental historiographical problems plaguing Bürger's thesis, it is important to show that his position is slightly more complicated. In point of fact, the avant-garde adventure of the early twentieth century is profoundly contradictory, for the separation between art and life is the sine qua non condition for a "critical cognition of reality."³⁵ That is to say that an art that fully integrates itself into the praxis of life would lose its critical capacity. Since the era of the historical avant-garde, this has been illustrated by the culture industry, which has effectively eliminated the distance between art and life by what Bürger calls a "false

sublation [*Aufhebung*]."³⁶ Hence, the downfall of the avant-garde is not simply a de facto occurrence. It is a de jure failure founded on the very principles of its formation:

The historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former. The avant-garde intends the abolition [or sublation] of autonomous art [*die Aufhebung der autonomen Kunst*] by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life. This has not occurred, and presumably cannot occur, in bourgeois society unless it be as a false sublation [*Aufhebung*] of autonomous art.³⁷

This is the veritable destiny of the avant-garde: a determined, theoretical fate based on the necessary concatenations of its inner concept. Agency is largely removed from history in the name of an idealist determinism: nothing can escape the destiny of the Idea of the avant-garde in bourgeois society. "The history of concepts," Bürger avers in a revealing passage, "can show how the individual aspects of a concept, which unfold theoretically as a necessary interrelationship, have formed themselves historically."³⁸

Given what he calls the "the experience of the false sublation of autonomy," he comes to ask "whether a sublation of the autonomy status [*Aufhebung des Autonomiestatus*] can be desirable at all, whether the distance between art and the praxis of life is not requisite for that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable."³⁹ In *The Institutions of Art*, he provides a definitive response—founded apparently on conceptual principles—to this rhetorical question: "the opposition to life-praxis is the condition enabling art to perform its critical function, even as that condition prevents the critique from having any practical consequences."⁴⁰ The conditions of possibility of critical art with practical implications thereby coincide with its conditions of impossibility. Avant-garde art is theoretically destined to critically fail: either it dissolves art into life praxis and loses its critical function, or it maintains its distance from life at the expense of not having practical consequences.

As we have seen, this failure, inscribed as it is in the very concept of the avant-garde, is tied to the remarkable success of inorganic works of art.⁴¹ Political defeat was the price of artistic triumph. This was a Pyrrhic victory if ever there was one, for the artistic achievement of the avant-garde was nothing short of the *Aufhebung* of the avant-garde intention to *aufheben* the very institution of art.

CRITIQUE OF THE HISTORICAL ORDER OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Bürger proposes a periodic history organized solely around the chronological or vertical dimension of history. He dispenses with the horizontal dimension, meaning the distribution of practices in space, in the name of chronological linearity. He defends, moreover, a primarily discontinuist thesis insofar as he purports to be able to clearly distinguish between three artistic epochs and diverse moments of bourgeois art. Each period is determined by a uniform conceptual order within a grandiose story of autonomization that takes the form of a progressive trilogy leading from the sacred objects of an enchanted world to courtly art and finally the autonomous art of bourgeois society. It is against this backdrop that the historical avant-garde is understood as both the moment of historical self-consciousness of the autonomy of art as well as a daring venture to reenchant art by transforming it back into an integral part of life praxis. Its ultimate failure in its sociopolitical endeavors thereby serves as a formidable lesson to anyone who wants to alter the course of history: it is impossible to change the structure of historical development, that is, its ideational framework, and art only has a single role to play in each time period. In the bourgeois society of the modern age, it is perforce autonomous, and it is a myth to think that it can be authentically reconnected with life. The theoretical dialectic of autonomy integrates all of the moments of negation, revolt, and refusal into a single, unifying totality. The avant-garde thereby ultimately functions as the work of the negative that enriches, confirms, and brings to a self-conscious end the inexorable process of autonomization.

In spite of Bürger's apparent attempt to break with teleology and evolutionism, he ends up producing a rectilinear, totalizing, and unidirectional history rooted in reductive determinism. By proposing a so-called dialectical conception of history and constantly invoking contradictions and a lack of historical synchrony, he deploys a suspect strategy for maintaining a unilinear history at a macroscopic level while providing himself with the means for responding to counterexamples at a microscopic level. This is why, at least in this case, dialectical history functions like a theodicy: the affirmation that the historical process is contradictory permits the recuperation of any and all counterexamples within the framework of a single, totalizing historical development. Like Ptolemy, Bürger engages in intellectual acrobatics in order to preserve the general structure of the movement of history by adding as many epicycles as necessary in order to integrate the totality of 'empirical facts' within a single and unique process of Ideas. Consider, for instance, his response to the claim that the modern age has been marked by the commercialization of aesthetics: "It is one of the tricks of the dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy that this very radicalized claim for autonomy in art, which aestheticism formulates, coincides historically with the subjection of the aesthetic to the valorization interests of capital."⁴² Concrete instances of artistic heteronomy, when run through Bürger's dialectical machinations, actually serve to confirm the autonomy of art. His methodological orientation presupposes, moreover, as is often the case with dialectical histories, a theoretical mastery of the objective course of history, an intellectual authority of such a rare pedigree that no historical data could ever call it into question. This is how he ultimately establishes a reductive historicism. By purporting to know the true movement of history at work behind temporal appearances, he reduces the totality of historical phenomena to a supposedly objective reality: the dialectical process of the autonomization of art. In short, his dialectic of history functions as a form of methodological subterfuge allowing him to explicitly abjure teleology and evolutionism while clandestinely recuperating the very same historical order that they depend upon, thereby producing a vertical, totalizing, unilinear, unidirectional (at least in bourgeois society), objective, and determinist history.

His analysis of the avant-garde depends, moreover, on a monolithic conceptualism. Each of his major concepts—autonomy, the institution of art, aestheticism, the avant-garde, and so on—is endowed with a theoretical uniformity by purporting to synthesize a set of extremely complex practices. Let us begin with the central issue of autonomy. Bürger presents it as an epochal concept, meaning a notion that serves to capture the fundamental characteristics of an age in a singular ideational framework. The guiding methodological assumption is that historical eras are reducible to singular concepts and that the goal of theoretical reflection is, in part, to identify the appropriate notions for each age. In Bürger's case, he aligns a series of epochal concepts—autonomy, aestheticism, the avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde—in order to provide what he takes to be a coherent theoretical framing of art-historical developments since the eighteenth century. In such an undertaking, he has to establish a nearly impermeable historical filter that allows him to be highly selective in choosing the illustrations of each epochal concept in such a way as to preserve its unified hegemony. It is worth considering, in this regard, his massive dismissal of committed art through the course of the nineteenth century. He authoritatively claims, in order to illustrate his thesis, that "the predominance of *one* (autonomous) concept of art is demonstrated by the struggle against committed art which is waged on several fronts."⁴³ In one fell theoretical swoop, he purifies nineteenth-century artistic developments of all of those—from Hugo, Dickens, and Zola to Whitman, Courbet, and many others—who were interested in directly relating art to what he calls social and political life praxis: "Ever since the aesthetics of autonomy was institutionalized, attempts to link up with the Enlightenment's concept of literature and to include cognitive and moral questions in art have been fought by writers and critics (examples would be the rejection of Zola's naturalism and of Sartre's *littérature engagée*). . . . In fully developed bourgeois society 'autonomy' and 'use' of art have increasingly come to oppose each other."⁴⁴ Indeed, he defines modern art as such in terms of autonomy: "Art' in the modern sense of the word refers to those artistic practices loosened from moorings to real life."⁴⁵

The autonomy thesis does not only purge artistic history in order to structure it in terms of hegemonic epochal concepts, thereby abolishing

both the complex geography of historical developments and the social tensions operative in various space-times. It also attempts to draw theoretical lines in the sand by delimiting art as such from other fields of practice, thereby making it into a transcendent, monolithic idea rather than an immanent sociohistorical notion and a concept in struggle. Art, it might be said, is only autonomous insofar as it functions for Bürger as a rarified and purified idea. Aesthetic practices are, for their part, intertwined with other practices, and their delimitation as such is the result of ongoing social struggles. As mentioned above, there are important links between nineteenth-century artistic practices and the novel institution of the art museum, as well as the constitution of the cultural heritage of emerging nation-states. This is one indication among others that the "institution of art" in this sense by no means emerged as an autonomous sphere but was rather entwined with important social, political, and historical transformations.

It is worth indicating some of the other historical elements that suggest that Bürger's thesis could actually be reversed: rather than art becoming autonomous from society in the modern age, it underwent a significant popularization or democratization, for lack of a better term. It is not my intention to make such an argument, at least insofar as it would run the risk of replacing one epochal concept by another. Instead, I simply want to briefly foreground various aspects of aesthetic practices in the nineteenth century that demonstrate some of the reasons why the autonomy thesis is fundamentally untenable (this is equally true of the heteronomy thesis, which is just as schematic). To take a few important cases, it is clear that the rise of the modern novel and other relatively recent aesthetic developments are linked in various ways to increasing literacy rates and the slow expansion of mass education. They are also tied to a long series of industrial and technological changes. Works of art not only became reproducible on an unprecedented scale through technological advances such as photography, electrotyping, cheap paperbacks, and so on, but they also entered into novel networks of rapid circulation, stimulated in part by the railways. A mass market for artistic goods developed, which significantly changed the social distribution of works of art. According to Eric Hobsbawm:

Few societies have cherished the works of creative genius (itself virtually a bourgeois invention as a social phenomenon . . .) more than that of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. Few have been prepared to spend money so freely on the arts and, in purely quantitative terms, no previous society bought anything like the actual amount of old and new books, material objects, pictures, sculptures, decorated structures of masonry and tickets to musical or theatrical performances. (The growth of population alone would put this statement beyond challenge.)⁴⁶

The arts were thereby firmly intertwined with various sociocultural practices and became part of the everyday socialization of citizens through phenomena such as newspapers, periodicals, books, decorative objects, photographs, museums, public concerts, and theatrical performances.

Bürger sometimes qualifies his position by referring to the "relative independence" of art and recalling that, as a social subsystem, it nonetheless remains part of society as a whole.⁴⁷ Moreover, his theory regarding the failure of the avant-garde suggests that it is impossible to link art to life praxis *within* bourgeois society.⁴⁸ In principle, if society were to change, then the role of art could perhaps be altered as well. However, this is apparently such a distant possibility—"all revolutions have failed," he categorically asserts—that he does not seem particularly concerned with it.⁴⁹ Instead, he focuses the majority of his intellectual energy on defending the autonomy thesis. In fact, he explicitly spurns two of the suggestions advanced in the preceding paragraph regarding art's relationship to socialization and to the market economy. To begin with, he admits that "nothing appears to contradict the idea that art is set up as an autonomous institution in bourgeois society more than the fact that works of art in this very society are pressed into service as instruments of schooling [*Erziehung*] and socialization."⁵⁰ However, he hastily circumvents this problem by appealing to a principled relation of determination: "works of art can be pressed into service as instruments of schooling precisely because of their autonomous status."⁵¹ According to a dialectical legerdemain, autonomy is the necessary condition of possibility for social use. He regularly relies on such unsubstantiated declarations at key moments in his counterarguments. A similar *petitio principii*

characterizes his rejection of what he calls the "economic approach."⁵² He claims, following Gerhard Leithäuser, that there are "formal prescriptions" for art in bourgeois society but not "actual prescriptions" that would extinguish artistic independence, because otherwise there would be no distinction between autonomous art and the culture industry (which apparently is the case for the "economic approach").⁵³ However, it is precisely the existence of such a distinction that must be proven, rather than simply assuming that it exists and peremptorily declaring that "commodity aesthetics presupposes an autonomous art."⁵⁴

Let us pause to consider in this light the central case of Friedrich Schiller, who is apparently responsible, along with Immanuel Kant, for the novel concept of the autonomy of art.⁵⁵ Now it is true that Schiller partially relies on Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* to develop his conceptualization of beauty: "Beauty gives no individual result whatever, either for the intellect or for the will; it realizes no individual purpose, either intellectual or moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us to perform no individual duty, and is, in a word, equally incapable of establishing the character and clearing the mind."⁵⁶ Indeed, he explicitly castigates the "self-contradictory" idea of didactic and moral art on the grounds that "nothing is more at variance with the concept of Beauty than that it should have a tendentious effect upon the character."⁵⁷ However, this insistence on beauty's freedom from utilitarian ends nowise means that the aesthetic condition is not propitious for the development of political freedom, as well as of knowledge and morality. According to the historical account he provides in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794–95), "the essential bond of human nature" has been "torn apart," leading to a ruinous conflict that has "set its harmonious powers at variance."⁵⁸ Since the age of reason and Enlightenment has proved incapable of restoring this lost "unity of human nature," he claims that something else is necessary in order to overcome the barbarism of his age: "The way to the head must lie through the heart. Training of the sensibility [*Ausbildung des Empfindungsvermögens*] is then the more pressing need of our age, not merely because it will be a means of making the improved understanding effective for living, but for the very reason that it awakens this improvement."⁵⁹ Aesthetics is thus understood as the indispensable bridge capable

of linking the two impulses of humanity: the sensuous drive of physical existence and the formal penchant of rationality. And it is precisely in this regard that Schiller advances a general argument regarding the social role of art. Far from being purely autonomous, the fine arts are explicitly described as an "instrument" for the improvement of the "moral condition" and hence the political sphere: "we must indeed, if we are to solve that political problem in practice, follow the path of aesthetics, since it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom."⁶⁰ In fact, he denigrates all other attempts at political and social reform, insisting on the need for an aesthetic *Aufhebung* capable of restoring the unity of humanity: "we must continue to regard every attempt at reform as inopportune, and every hope based upon it as chimerical, until the division of the inner Man has been done away with (*aufgehoben*), and his nature has developed with sufficient completeness to be itself the artificer (*Künstlerin*), and to guarantee reality to the political creation of Reason."⁶¹

It is therefore a grave mistake to interpret Schiller's claim regarding the purposelessness of beauty as an argument in favor of the autonomy of art. If beauty, on his account, should not be controlled by external constraints or subordinated to tendentious ends, it is precisely because its freedom has propitious political effects. In fact, art plays a privileged salvational role at the core of Schiller's argument: by reestablishing the unity of human nature through an *Aufhebung* of its two fundamental but opposed impulses, it leads toward freedom.⁶² To use Bürger's somewhat problematic vocabulary, we might say that if art is autonomous in relationship to individual ends, it is precisely in order to be heteronomous when it comes to establishing political freedom. This is why Schiller actually identifies "the most perfect of all works of art" with "the building up of true political freedom."⁶³ Indeed, he defines freedom as the successful *Aufhebung* of man's conflicting impulses, which can only occur in aesthetics: "As soon, that is to say, as both the opposite fundamental impulses are active in him, they both lose their sanction, and the opposition of two necessities gives rise to freedom."⁶⁴ This reestablished unity helps lead as well to truth, morality, and the fulfillment of humanity.⁶⁵ The freedom of the aesthetic impulse of play is thus in no way "autonomous" from social, political, moral, and epistemological concerns. On the contrary, aesthetics functions as the privileged path to a new humanity and a new society.

It is not only that Bürger constructs a faulty image of Schiller as one of the first thinkers of the autonomy of art when, in fact, Schiller attempted, if anything, to think art's redemptive relationship to society in terms of an aesthetic *Aufhebung* equivalent to political freedom. It is also that his description of the historical avant-garde as the endeavor to overcome the distinction between art and life comes dangerously close to Schiller's own depiction of art as the unity of life and form. It should be noted, in this regard, that the author of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* had an expansive conception of art. When he discusses "beauty for her own sake," for instance, he explicitly refers to the aestheticization of daily life that breaks away from the "fetters of exigency" through adornment, furniture design, and architecture.⁶⁶ In more or less the same context, he also refers to the gleam of freedom in the purposeless displays of the animal world, from the swarming of insects in the sunlight to the melodious warbling of songbirds.⁶⁷ We should not, therefore, confuse his discussion of art and aesthetics with a restricted understanding of a social subsystem of institutionalized fine art and literature. More germane to our discussion here, he defines aesthetics in terms of the *Aufhebung* of life and form:

The object of the sense impulse, expressed in a general concept, may be called *life* in the widest sense of the word. . . . The object of the form impulse, expressed generally, may be called *shape*, both in the figurative and in the literal sense. . . . The object of the play impulse, conceived in a general notion, can therefore be called *living shape*, a concept which serves to denote all aesthetic qualities of phenomena and—in a word—what we call *Beauty* in the widest sense of the term.⁶⁸

Just as in Bürger's argument concerning the avant-garde, he claims that this unity of opposites can never be perfectly realized. Indeed, the equilibrium of reality and form "always remains only an idea, which can never be wholly attained by actuality. In actuality there will always be a preponderance of one element or the other, and the utmost that experience can achieve will consist of an oscillation between the two principles."⁶⁹ He does not, however, think that there is an inevitable failure inscribed within the very nature of this undertaking.

Bürger's monolithic conceptualism is equally apparent in his account of aestheticism and the historical avant-garde. Regarding the former, it is at once surprising and revealing that he does not provide any extended analysis of historical examples of aestheticism, a term that functions in his text as an ideational construct with little or no material content. He thereby avoids discussing the complex ways in which what is called aestheticism was, in part, a progressive attempt, on behalf of figures as diverse as William Morris and Oscar Wilde, to aestheticize everyday existence. The following description of aestheticism by Fiona MacCarthy, for instance, equates it very precisely with the endeavor to link art to life praxis, which Bürger of course takes to be one of the defining attributes of the avant-garde's anti-aestheticism: "One of the main tenets of aestheticism was that art was not confined to painting and sculpture and the false values of the art market. Potential for art is everywhere around us, in our homes and public buildings, in the detail of the way we choose to live our lives. . . . In its essence aestheticism was a movement for reform and the project to infiltrate beauty into everyday life."⁷⁰ This description perfectly echoes one of Oscar Wilde's memorable descriptions of Dorian Gray: "to him Life itself was the first, the greatest of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation."⁷¹

Concerning the avant-garde itself, it might be said that it is by no means this constellation of movements that was doomed to failure, but rather Bürger's own theoretical undertaking. For it is impossible to establish a single epochal concept for the entirety of aesthetic practices qualified as avant-garde in the early twentieth century. As Benjamin Buchloh has appropriately explained: "Any theorization of avant-garde practice from 1915 to '25 . . . must force the vast differences and contradictions of that practice into the unifying framework of theoretical categories, and is therefore doomed to failure. One wishes that Bürger had expressed some awareness of how patently absurd it is to reduce the history of avant-garde practices in twentieth-century art to *one* overriding concern."⁷² While Bürger has occasionally attempted to nuance his account,⁷³ he nevertheless purports to be able to distinguish between those movements that were authentically avant-garde and those that remained peripheral (Cubism, for instance). He defines the unity of the avant-garde in terms of the uniformity of its intention, and thus

as an intellectual phenomenon that is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to verify. Moreover, in his description of the avant-garde work of art, he establishes the same fundamental uniformity by defining it as inorganic. He thereby finds both facets of his definition of the avant-garde on the same monolithic conceptualism: just as there is only one avant-garde intention, there is only one avant-garde work.

Methodologically, he relies on a transcendental hermeneutics according to which a single principle or set of principles is supposed to determine the totality of artistic practices. These principles correspond to a sequential series of epochal concepts in such a way that each concept purportedly governs the aesthetic practice of an entire era. The possibility that multiple practices might inhabit the same time frame is either simply excluded or incorporated into a strictly periodic history through the rhetorical appeal to the dialectics of history (which only serves to maintain the governing principles of an era by admitting certain "contradictions"). Moreover, there is a parallel purification of historical space by which certain privileged locations become representative of epochal trends at the expense of others. For instance, the early work of the Vienna Secession, the rise of Mexican muralism, and the central rôle of the Bauhaus in Germany would have all been viable candidates for the elaboration of a more complex geography of avant-garde activities, but they are generally left out of Bürger's account. Finally, the author of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* not only reduces the vertical dimension of chronology to a rectilinear progression of conceptual orders while turning a blind eye to the horizontal dimension of geographic diversity; he also excludes the stratigraphic dimension of the diverse social practices inhabiting the same space-time, thereby excising important art-historical developments.⁷⁴ Consider, for instance, French Impressionist Cinema, which overlapped spatially and temporally with French Dadaism and Surrealism, and was arguably one of the most significant avant-garde film movements. However one might try to classify the work of Abel Gance, Jean Epstein, Marcel L'Herbier, and others, it is obvious that they were not attempting to abolish the very idea of autonomous art. Therefore, it is patently unclear how their work could be integrated into Bürger's thesis on the historical avant-garde, and it appears that it suffered from exclusion

due to either expediency or lack of awareness. The case of French Impressionism also raises the issue of the complex social intertwining and overlapping between what are referred to as relatively discrete movements. To take but one such example, Luis Buñuel worked as an assistant director to Jean Epstein on *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), and he made two important Surrealist films in collaboration with an artist known primarily for his paintings, Salvador Dalí: *Un chien andalou* (1928) and *L'âge d'or* (1930).

Bürger not only purifies and filters individual space-times in order to establish overarching conceptual principles for an entire era. He also tends to overlook the truculent tensions that animated many of the avant-garde movements. He generally downplays, for instance, all of the significant conflicts within and between Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Russian avant-garde. To cite only a few examples, one of the clashes apparent in early Dada, according to Martin Gaughan, was "between Ball's inclination to the spiritual and the more aggressively non-metaphysical approach of Huelsenbeck and Tzara. For the older man art might still have a salvatory role, for the two younger men it was an assault weapon."⁷⁵ In the case of Surrealism, some critics talk about two or more movements, or at least a split between two rival groups, affiliated respectively with André Breton and Georges Bataille. Furthermore, in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, there were a number of important political disputes that polarized the Surrealists. André Breton had joined the French Communist Party in 1927, along with Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, and Pierre Unik. With the evolution of the Stalinist Communist Party and its proletarian policy, Aragon eventually renounced Surrealism in favor of communism, and Breton did the opposite, while nonetheless maintaining strong ties to Leon Trotsky and the non-Stalinist revolutionary left. Dalí, for his part, was expelled from the group in 1934 because of his alleged sympathies for the Hitler regime.⁷⁶

Bürger's response to such criticisms would most likely consist in reiterating that he is doing theory rather than history. However, as we have already seen, there is no hard and fast distinction between the two. History is itself a theoretical endeavor, and there is no such thing as brute empirical facts. The latter always function as 'givens' within a conceptual assemblage. Bürger's own assemblage is one in which the vertical dimension of chronology is

reduced to a rectilinear sequence of determinate epochal concepts, and he occludes both the horizontal and the stratigraphic dimensions of history. Moreover, he relies on a transcendental hermeneutics in order to isolate the governing principles of an entire set of practices, and thus of a complete historical era. For all of these reasons, it should now be clear that the critique of his work in this chapter is not a simple appeal to 'material facts' that belie his claims. On the contrary, it aims at going to the heart of the matter by focusing on the historical logic operative in his work. In order to rethink the avant-garde, we must not content ourselves with reviewing the historical record. We need a new historical order.

2. REALISM, FORMALISM, COMMITMENT

- Literature?*, 83 (translation slightly modified). Although he does not develop this passage, it certainly appears that the Church's image-writing is an example of the use of the fine arts to communicate meaning in much the same way as prose writing.
83. Ibid., 104.
 84. Ibid., 94.
 85. Ibid., 118 (translation slightly modified).
 86. Ibid., 113 (translation slightly modified).
 87. Ibid., 116 (translation slightly modified).
 88. Ibid., 137 (translation slightly modified).
 89. Sartre's history of drama in *Un théâtre de situations* includes at least one significant exception: Corneille rejected the psychological theater of the classical age and anticipated contemporary situationist theater by depicting free human beings in their total situation. See Sartre, *Un théâtre de situations*, 58–60.
 90. On this point, see Boschetti, *Sartre et "Les Temps Modernes,"* esp. 246–50.
 91. It is worth noting that Sartre was aware that there were exceptions to the general rules he established. See Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, 132–33.

3. THE THEORETICAL DESTINY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

1. Thierry de Duve, "Fonction critique de l'art? Examen d'une question," in *L'art sans compas: redéfinitions de l'esthétique*, ed. Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1992), 14.
2. On this issue, see Russell A. Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 43–44.
3. As in the previous chapter, I will concentrate primarily on the analytic position found in a single book, while also tracing out its theoretical developments in other works.
4. Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 68.
5. Ibid., 68–69.
6. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 11.
7. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "From the Eclipse of Reason to Communicative Rationality and Beyond," in *Critical Theory: Current State and Future Prospects*, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Jaimey Fisher (New York: Berghahn, 2001), 19.
8. There are at least two other problematic tendencies that are worth highlighting in passing: the severing of psychoanalysis from the project of critical theory, as well as the general eschewal of economics.
9. See, in particular, Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
10. Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*," *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 700, 698. Bürger does add

3. THE THEORETICAL DESTINY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

- this important qualification: "Measured against their goals and the hopes that they carried, all revolutions have failed: this fact does not lessen their historical significance." Ibid., 700.
11. Ibid., 711–12. Bürger also refers to what he calls "the revolutionary illusion of the student movement of '68." Bürger, "Pour une définition de l'avant-garde," in *La Révolution dans les lettres: textes pour Fernand Drijckoningen*, ed. Henriette Ritter and Annelies Schulte Nordholt (Amsterdam; Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 1993), 23.
 12. Bürger avers that Cubism "is part of the historic avant-garde movements, although it does not share their basic tendency (sublation [*Aufhebung*] of art in the praxis of life)." Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 109. Italian Futurism and German Expressionism attack "art as an institution" and thereby qualify, "with certain limitations," as part of the historical avant-garde (ibid.).
 13. Ibid., 47.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Ibid., 46.
 16. Peter Bürger and Christa Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, trans. Loren Kruger (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 4–5; see also ibid., 33 and 72.
 17. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 41–42 (translation slightly modified).
 18. Ibid., 42 (translation slightly modified, my emphasis).
 19. Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 699. Idealist aesthetics seems to be founded, for Bürger, on the assumption that the autonomy of art is an eternal—rather than historical—truth. See ibid., 707. For his most sustained critique of "idealist aesthetics," see Bürger, "Pour une critique de l'esthétique idéaliste," in *Théories esthétiques après Adorno*, ed. Rainer Rochlitz (Arles: Actes Sud, 1990), 171–246.
 20. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 98. See also Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, 9; and Bürger, "Pour une critique de l'esthétique idéaliste," 177.
 21. Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, 6.
 22. Marjorie Perloff, Review of *Les Avant-gardes littéraires au XXe siècle* by Jean Weisgerber and *Theory of the Avant-Garde* by Peter Bürger, *Modern Language Review* 81, no. 2 (April 1986): 427.
 23. See, for instance, Benjamin Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America*, November 1984, 19; as well as Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avantgarde," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 41–52; and Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). See also Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 1–33.
 24. Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 703.
 25. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, xlviii.
 26. Ibid., 1.
 27. Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 320.
 28. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.
 29. Ibid. (translation slightly modified).

3. THE THEORETICAL DESTINY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

30. Ibid., 109, 72. Bürger does assert that "the avant-gardistes proposed the sublation [*Aufhebung*] of art—sublation in the Hegelian sense of the term: art was not to be simply destroyed [*zerstört*], but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form." Ibid., 49; see also Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 699. However, his vocabulary does not remain consistent through the course of the book because he regularly uses the terminology of destruction, or *Zerstörung* (Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 83, 87–89), negation, or *Negation* (ibid., 47, 49, 53), and sublation, or *Aufhebung* (ibid., 54, 58, 63).
31. Ibid., 53.
32. See ibid., 83.
33. Ibid., 58.
34. Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International, 2004), 15.
35. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.
36. Ibid., 54.
37. Ibid., 53–54 (translation slightly modified).
38. Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 697.
39. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 54.
40. Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, 8; see also ibid., 18.
41. See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 59, 72.
42. Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, 16.
43. Ibid., 7.
44. Peter Bürger, "The Significance of the Avant-Garde for Contemporary Aesthetics: A Reply to Jürgen Habermas," trans. Andreas Huyssen and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 21.
45. Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, 12–13.
46. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 280.
47. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 23 (translation slightly modified); see also ibid., 113.
48. It appears that this is why he makes the following claim: "the relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society thus becomes transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent of society." Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 46.
49. Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 700.
50. Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, 10.
51. Ibid., 11.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 12.
54. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 113.
55. Kant, it should be noted, is primarily interested in the autonomy—or, more precisely, the heautonomy—of the power of judgment, which is by no means strictly equivalent to the autonomy of art.
56. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Continuum, 1990), 101.

4. TOWARD A RECONSIDERATION OF AVANT-GARDE PRACTICES

57. Ibid., 107.
58. Ibid., 39.
59. Ibid., 67, 50.
60. Ibid., 27. See also ibid., 110, as well as 50–51: "All improvement in the political sphere is to proceed from the ennobling of the character. . . . We should need, for this end, to seek out some instrument which the State does not afford us. . . . This instrument is the Fine Arts [*Dieses Werkzeug ist die schöne Kunst*]."
61. Ibid., 46; see also ibid., 88.
62. Bürger appears to recognize this but relies on the problematic argument that autonomy is the condition of possibility for heteronomy, and he describes Schiller's project in "moral-philosophical" terms that tend to downplay or excise its political dimension (*The Institutions of Art*, 82).
63. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 25.
64. Ibid., 96.
65. See ibid., 59–60, 103, 110, 123.
66. Ibid., 136.
67. Ibid., 133.
68. Ibid., 76.
69. Ibid., 81; see also ibid., 88.
70. Fiona MacCarthy, "The Aesthetic Movement," *Guardian*, March 26, 2011. See also *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement, 1860–1900*, ed. Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr (London: V and A Publishing, 2011).
71. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 129.
72. Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," 19.
73. See, for instance, Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 704.
74. "The epoch of avant-garde art and *littérature d'exception*," Renato Poggioli reminds his readers in an important passage, "is also the era of commercial and industrial art." Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 114.
75. Gaughan, "Narrating the Dada Game Plan," in *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, ed. Steve Edwards and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 343.
76. On all of these issues, see Fiona Barber, "Surrealism, 1924–1929," in *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, 427–48.

4. TOWARD A RECONSIDERATION OF AVANT-GARDE PRACTICES

1. Even Tristan Tzara, who notoriously accentuated the role of destruction in his "Dada Manifesto 1918," also emphasized the importance of spontaneity, folly in the moment, freedom, and life.