

Poetic Recuperations: The Ideology and Praxis of Nouveau Réalisme

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Abstract

Taking previously un-translated writings of critic Pierre Restany as a primary source, this article demonstrates how his vision for the Nouveau Réaliste movement of the 1950s and 1960s demands a detailed and theoretical (rather than historically contextual) exploration of its attempt to reconcile visual art with the quotidian. Accordingly, Bürger's criticism of the historical and neo-avant-gardes is weighed against theories of aesthetics and politics from Adorno to Rancière. In addition, Heidegger's work on the art object, alongside Benjamin's interest in Hölderlin, serves to inform an analysis of Restany's investment in a concept of the 'poetry of the real'. Individual works by Niki de Saint-Phalle, Daniel Spoerri and Yves Klein are also investigated as exemplars of the Nouveau Réaliste ideology. My interest in Restany's life and work stems from recent art world concentrations on the banal or 'infra-ordinary' and its relation to similar concerns within sociology.

Contents

Introduction

Reevaluating the Neo-avant-garde

Aesthetics and Politics

Countertopographies

Mining the Poetic

Intuitive Gestures

Everyday Deviance

Introduction

[1] The subject of the everyday is a popular one in many fields, and one that is so expansive that it is nearly impossible to pinpoint any definitive characteristic for its long-time incorporation within the visual arts. If viewed through a sociological lens however, it becomes less difficult to understand the potential for reciprocity between high culture and the mundane. Henri Lefebvre, for one, struggled to define the relationship between the marvellous and the real leading him to conclude that the everyday needed no embellishment for its poetic qualities to be revealed.¹ He also identified the dangers of mythologizing the artist and supporting institutions of high culture since they inevitably create a rift or boundary between art and non-art. Made during the immediate post-war years and culminating in the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, these observations solidified the notion that society's greatest concern was alienation or the isolation of individuals from one another and the need for some sort of commonality. Much of the concern was triggered by the infiltration of capitalism and the shifting of attention from quasi-Marxist cultural reconstruction to the accumulation of wealth – a shift dependent upon the attraction of the aesthetic design of commodities and the

¹ See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1 (1947), trans. John Moore, London 1991.

propaganda of advertising. Within this climate, the art critic Pierre Restany (Fig. 1) positioned himself as the spokesperson for an art form that would seek to resolve these different approaches. Confronted with the issues proposed by the historical avant-garde, the Nouveaux Réalistes sought to renegotiate the discourse surrounding the autonomous work of art or aesthetic object and the previously undisputed need for its negation by embracing economic and technological progress. In essence, the expansion of everyday awareness – ways of behaving and observing – aided by visual art would reassign the role of artist to everyone living and working within the urban centre. Importantly, this potentiality continued to be pursued in later years by applauded artists such as Joseph Beuys and, much more recently, by theorists such as Boris Groys.²

[2] As a writer, Restany sought to establish a system in which the work of Marcel Duchamp could be considered a ground zero, a fresh platform from where modern art practices could leap. Borrowing Duchamp's concept of the ready-made and using it to confirm a style or technique invoked by the Nouveaux Réalistes emphasized an early act of appropriation as opposed to fabrication and set in motion a highly theoretical approach to art practice; as mentioned above, that every individual and not just the trained artist has within himself or herself the capacity to create, recognize, and appreciate a work of art and that the materials which make up such works need not be restricted by convention. That is, with the newfound popularity of the aesthetic of the everyday in France at this time, it was hoped by Restany that the field of creative potential might be widened to include those not necessarily trained in traditional artistic techniques. In his theoretical work of 1979, *L'autre face de l'art*, he wrote: 'An entire contemporary technological humanism, a rational optimistic pre-figuration of a future society capable of providing a tangible reality and an internalized individual practice to the theory of general creativity is founded upon the artistic baptism of the object: all men are creators.'³ Here, Restany disclosed a profound desire for men and women to play active roles in their own modernization. Such statements, often laced with what can be regarded as a teleology particular to their author, emphatically began to question the view that artworks retain any sort of potent originality that might be directly connected to the psycho-biography of their producers. In many respects this position is problematic since, for the most part, the artworks produced by the Nouveaux Réalistes themselves communicate what could be termed a signature style. Even so, the assigning of such recognizable attributes might be the fault of the institutional art market rather than that of the movement's founder whose intentions, on paper, were to open up a more generalized creative field. Restany's critique was limited by its self-proclaimed responsibility to map out the effects Nouveau Réalisme had upon the world; he required a definition of the movement and he needed it to be sustainable as an important art historical coup. Nuit Banai has argued that his

² See Boris Groys, *Going Public*, New York 2010.

³ Pierre Restany, *L'autre face de l'art*, Paris 1979, 15, my translation.

concept of the ready-made was overly simplistic in the sense that its claim that the object acts as the univocal conduit between art and everyday life is far too narrow or that because the ready-made simultaneously replicates and demolishes the logic of capital, it could be said never to achieve a desired closure.⁴ Even so, it is crucial to remember that his teleological and performative approach – his *ideology* – should not be taken too literally; by relying on the symbolic object, it becomes possible to move beyond it and conceive of that space of participatory critical engagement that it opens up, a *praxis* supported by the artists themselves.



1 Pierre Restany, ca. 1960 (photo: Shunk-Kender; © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, Shunk-Kender)

[3] Historically, the group disbanded shortly after the signing of their manifesto in pursuit of careers which were based on their individual strengths rather than their adherence to a strict and all-encompassing methodology. Perhaps this was due to a growing appreciation of their work as well as the fast pace of socio-economic change during those years. Whatever the reasons, a similar tension found in other movements of the era formed between the theory behind *Nouveau Réalisme* and its practical application to the making of artworks. It should be noted therefore that I have chosen to consider the early days of Restany's efforts that are recounted in *Le nouveau réalisme*, a collection of essays and statements published together in 1978, where his theory of the 'poetry of the real' and its practice by certain artists is most closely aligned, actively creating a bridge between the coherence of rational thought and the necessary incoherence or aura (i.e. blind spot) of the artwork. Recent scholarship has proved that it has been challenging to completely satisfy neo-avant-gardiste aspirations when it comes to the actual production of artworks and, it could be said, even the *Nouveau Réaliste* manifesto

⁴ Nuit Banai, 'The Ready-made Public and Its Phantom', in: *Pierre Restany's Half-Century*, an international colloquium organized by the National Institute of Art History in partnership with the International Association of Art Critics and the Archives of Art Criticism, Paris, 30 November – 1 December 2006.

is inevitably subject to loose interpretation by the very artists who are meant to represent it.⁵ Still, their works somehow separate themselves from those under other banners whose leaders are also faced with the question of modernity and its effects on daily life and visual culture; it is my intention to add to this discourse by looking more closely at Restany's idiosyncratic position alongside the field of contemporary aesthetics.

[4] To clarify the frequently underestimated uniqueness of the Nouveau Réaliste movement, it is useful briefly to compare it with general artistic practices in America during those years, which were directed at similar issues surrounding consumerism and the quotidian. After the Second World War, popular opinion conceded that New York had robbed Paris of its role as the heart of the art world and had drawn international focus away from continental Europe, primarily by the introduction of Abstract Expressionism to painting. Yet, once the novelty of such existentially oriented works had worn off, the next generation of American artists (e.g. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg) shifted their attention outward to the streets and to industry. In this way, they were similar to their politically motivated Parisian counterparts in their desire to open up the realm of possibilities for art in terms of its contribution to common experiences and collective encounters. On a slightly different scale, the quickly growing capitalist climate in post-war France was, of course, fostered by the American example already in place. As Kristin Ross has underlined, '[w]hat is at stake in any discussion of the Americanization of France is less a conflict between two opposing ideologies than between two different economic organizations within the same philosophical framework.'⁶ Both countries sought advancement economically and culturally, yet whereas the U.S. continued along its familiar trajectory, France was just beginning to modernize at, what seemed to many, an alarming rate.

[5] The theory behind Nouveau Réalisme relied on a 'spiritual distance' between Paris and New York in that its participants responded to a '[...] modern urban consciousness within an [historically] artistic centre.'⁷ For Restany, this combination of old and new was unavailable in cities as streamlined as New York since, without a coherent sense of its cultural past all it could grasp for was its questionable future; in art, this problematic manifested as apparent disorganization or haphazardness that could not, realistically, be socially transformative. The artists working in Paris of the 1950s and 1960s were surrounded by its long history while at the same time faced with modernization; this juxtaposition was unavailable in most American cities. Pierre Mayol described the Parisian environment as follows: 'These seemingly sleepy, old-fashioned things, defaced houses,

⁵ See David Hopkins, ed., *Neo-avant-garde*, New York 2006 and Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde: Topographies of Chance and Return*, London 2010.

⁶ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, London 1996, 42.

⁷ Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, Paris 1978, 34, my translation.

closed-down factories, the debris of shipwrecked histories still today raise up the ruins of an unknown, strange city. They burst forth within the modernist, massive, homogenous city like slips of the tongue from an unknown, perhaps unconscious, language. They surprise.⁸ Not only did Nouveau Réalisme respond to the responsibility of artworks under the socio-political conditions of a country grappling with a new economic system, but it did so within an environment that demanded that attention be given to its own physicality. If everyday life was always already being lived in terms of aesthetic awareness, then artistic production would be susceptible to its influence and therefore inform it more effectively than anything the American Neo-Dadaists had produced. Again, for the artists who rallied round him during the initial phases of Nouveau Réalisme, Restany's theories pertained more to a way of life than to a way of making art and yet, as a critic, he was bound by his field. This article seeks to liberate him somewhat.

[<top>](#)

Revaluating the Neo-avant-garde

[6] In the 1970s, Peter Bürger established a method of comparing the Modernist ideal of the autonomy of art and the historical avant-garde's critique of it with what he sees to be the inadequacies of the post-war neo-avant-garde art movements. Culminating in the nineteenth century and leading into the First World War, the notion of art as a progressively linear and therefore self-sustaining phenomenon became situated outside of any notion of the everyday, allowing for concepts of the aesthetic to be held in a different regard to the political.

Only after art has in fact wholly detached itself from everything that is the praxis of life can two things be seen to make up the principle of development of art in bourgeois society: the progressive detachment of art from real life contexts, and the correlative crystallization of a distinctive sphere of experience, i.e., the aesthetic.⁹

[7] Such an arena gave rise to the contemplative viewer as opposed to the involved participant, cementing the function of art as something other than socially transformative; what was thought of as artistic progress developed out of what had come before in art, not necessarily from any external material – form was admired over content, as it were. Bürger insists that this phenomenon, the 'bourgeois institution of art', was what enabled the historical avant-garde, particularly Dadaist practices, to begin attacking notions of art itself rather than simply acting as another art form whose purpose it was to critique other art forms and, in so doing, receive acclaim. 'The intention of the avant-gardiste may be defined as the attempt to direct toward the practical the aesthetic experience (which rebels against the praxis of life) that Aestheticism developed. What most strongly conflicts with the means-ends rationality of bourgeois society is to

⁸ Pierre Mayol et al., *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking* (1994), trans. Timothy J. Tomasik, London 1998, 133.

⁹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis 1984, 23.

become life's organizing principle.¹⁰ For Bürger, a typology in three parts is able to categorize the history of art: the function of sacral art was to create cult objects or objects of ritual, the production of these objects was collective as was their reception; courtly art's function was representational and was produced by artists who began to see the uniqueness of their vocation due to the social reception of their efforts; finally, the function of bourgeois art was to portray society's self-understanding and was produced by a recognized individual for elitist individual appreciation. It is this final development that made the avant-garde attack a possibility: 'In bourgeois art, the portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding occurs in a sphere that lies outside the praxis of life. The citizen who, in everyday life has been reduced to a partial function (means-end activity) can be discovered in art as [a] "human being".¹¹ Seeing this role of art to be false, the historical avant-gardistes sought to reevaluate art's function in order to create an everyday life based on the ideal of artistic spontaneity; the time-honoured practice of depicting everyday life in art while, at the same time, removing art from that arena of the quotidian conditions not an opportunity to affect social transformations, but instead a vacuum in which only an alienated stance can be upheld. Rather than taking art's domain to be above and beyond the gritty activity of bourgeois society, the historical avant-gardistes desired to make art the new governing force within it.

[8] Crucially, if a failure of the historical avant-garde is to be considered, it must be acknowledged that the same institution it hoped to undermine was eventually instrumental in giving it strength and purpose. Bürger reveals that

[a]n art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance. During the time of the historical avant-garde movements, the attempt to do away with the distance between art and life still had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side. But in the meantime, the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life, and this also allows one to recognize the contradictoriness of the avant-gardiste undertaking.¹²

[9] It is the sterilization of such attempts at cultural revolution that presents a curious challenge for any art practices that follow them, begging the question as to how to avoid institutional absorption or shelving. There is a co-dependency here which suggests that art must, to some degree, remain separate from models of everyday life in order for the aesthetic and political to inform and enhance one another.

[10] Enter the neo-avant-garde; for Bürger, while the intention of artists such as the Nouveaux Réalistes might have been able to make a social critique, they really only served to perpetuate the behemoth that is the art museum: 'the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste

¹⁰ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 34.

¹¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 48.

¹² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.

intentions.¹³ Even if he is correct in thinking that the approach of such artists was from a point where the institution was seen as an ally rather than a target and therefore inspired works which would have been automatically historical and devoid of any 'protest value', it is somewhat unfair to assume that the same desire to subvert is a prerequisite and that the neo-avant-garde was aspiring to replicate the accomplishments of its predecessors. If it were not for the failure and consequential neutering of the historical avant-garde, then its components, specifically the readymade, could not have been appropriated by the neo-avant-garde and remobilized *then* (in the late 1950s and early 1960s) with the hope of not destroying but unlocking the ivory tower and welcoming a completely separate set of socio-economic conditions (i.e. French post-war capitalism) into the jurisdiction of the art world. Certainly the work of Hal Foster has hinted at this possibility. Confronting Bürger directly, he asserts that 'one project in the 1960s [...] was to *critique* the old charlatanism of the bohemian artist as well as the new institutionality of the avant-garde.'¹⁴ Remarkably, and in equal contrast to Bürger's criticism (yet perhaps overlooked by Foster), Pierre Restany's writings allow room for the possibility that the institution can be seen as *part of* everyday life rather than as the necessary evil of a cultural depository. Such a stance could also be seen to provide a loophole for dooming statements, e.g., 'without surrendering its claim to truth, art cannot simply deny the autonomy status and pretend that it has a direct effect.'¹⁵

[11] The comparative reflections Bürger sets in motion confirm the urgency, evidently also felt by those he criticizes, to reorient visual culture after what he sees to have been a cataclysmic fracture. Turning to an article written for the forum 'Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics' held at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1991, it becomes clear that the reconciliation between modernity and postmodernity continues to be elusive. He asks: 'what's happened? A border has disappeared that [...] had the unquestionable status of a metaphysical principle guaranteeing the possibility of art: the border between art and the culture industry and, simultaneously, between art and non-art.'¹⁶ The construction of a barrier between art and everyday life, or what he calls the 'dialectic of the boundary', can be attributed to Theodor Adorno, whose work regarding aesthetics will be addressed shortly. For now, in the aftermath of Jean Baudrillard's insistence that high art has been irrevocably absorbed into an increasingly overpowering field of sameness and mediocrity,¹⁷ it is interesting to note how Bürger strove to articulate the problems facing contemporary art practices of the 1970s. Remarkably, a

¹³ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 58.

¹⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, London 1996, 11.

¹⁵ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57.

¹⁶ Peter Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', trans. Ben Morgan, in: *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, London 1991, 4.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Conspiracy of Art' (1996), in: *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, trans. Ames Hodges, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, London 2005, 27.

desire to maintain such a barrier is uncovered which suggests that life and art do indeed co-exist as self-critiquing entities. He claims that

[i]t is, however, neither the boundary nor the object that is active, but us. Every time the border between art and the everyday is wiped away we react by reinstating it. Paradoxically, the institution that determines what does or what doesn't count as a work of art gains in significance to the degree that works of art and everyday objects become indistinguishable.¹⁸

[12] It is the threat of art dissolving into the mire of the mundane that feeds any notion of its autonomy and we, as experiencing subjects, determine the level of reverence to attribute to avant-gardiste attempts at progressiveness. In other words, the status we give to certain aspects of visual culture based on their innovativeness or profundity is not attributed readily. For example, judging a street performance as a regular occurrence rather than as a work of art perpetuates the authority of the institution to make the same distinctions while at the same time allowing space for such an authority at all, thereby establishing a hierarchy of standards by which artistic achievement and cultural tastes are measured. Hence, for Bürger, the vehicle of art for art's sake is fuelled by a general expectation to encounter objects within a context that excuses them from any function outside of their aesthetic function, confirming for the viewer an emphasis on the artist's existential and privatized creativity over any possibility for the works themselves to form the catalysts for extended social experimentation.

Because the individual does not realize him- or herself in actions in and for society but only in pursuit of private advantage, he/she experiences society as an external limit to action rather than as something in essence universal. [...] Thus, as history withdraws as a possible arena for sensuous experience, so art becomes the site of imaginary self-realization. [...] Thus alienation necessarily penetrates into the realm of art. The experience of meaning that the subject longed for becomes the never-ending story of the representation of its absence.¹⁹

[13] If we are to put stock in the notions of Baudrillard, then it seems they have established the everyday as a wasteland where meaning cannot be distilled from the profusion inundation of imagery that clouds our perceptive abilities. As Lefebvre has stressed, a work/leisure binary supports a society of alienated subjectivities that consistently search for scenarios that might alleviate feelings of purposelessness.²⁰ Here, Bürger insinuates that the experience of a work of art confirms a hope for meaning by literally illustrating meaninglessness; by referencing only itself it encourages a model for thinking the infinite. He is adamant that aesthetic discourse, as such, has always been rooted in the institution, which makes the thinking of objects as art a possibility and provides an arena in which to perform an escape from the real.²¹ Even so, following this

¹⁸ Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', 5.

¹⁹ Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', 10.

²⁰ Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 35.

²¹ Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', 12.

logic, there is still a world outside the ivory tower into which the viewer must return. With this in mind, surely it is reasonable to suggest that neo-avant-gardiste practices such as those of the Nouveaux Réalistes had acknowledged the predicament described above early on and had circumvented any such assumed ignorance within the modern subject since, by combining the traditions of artistic display and appreciation with the soulless objects of consumerism, they also questioned the function of any boundary in between. In this way, they set themselves apart – or forty degrees above²² – the historical avant-garde's nihilistic approach. Consequently, Bürger's allegation that 'once you're inside the place called Art there's no getting out again'²³ is highly contentious; what are the parameters of such a distinction? He concludes his article in a somewhat pessimistic tone:

It seems that the only chance of meaningful action in modernity is whole-hearted engagement with meaninglessness. [...] Art's attempt to assimilate itself to political agitation is the impossible gesture that must be forever enacted and then retracted. The new life will not come, but it remains an alternative we must continue to suggest.²⁴

[14] In order effectively to come to terms with this concept of the 'impossible gesture', it is necessary to work from a specific model that is not new, but one that might be renegotiated within the context of Restany's agenda for art practice and, subsequently, the correlations between contemporary visual culture and the quotidian. Two camps can now be set up on either side of a proverbial field: at one end, art as aesthetic object and, on the other, art as political trigger; it is possible that Restany's position might produce a sort of truce between them.

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Aesthetics and Politics

[15] Like Bürger, I would now like to turn to the writings of Theodor Adorno. Beginning with his dialogues with Georg Lukács surrounding the political responsibilities and capabilities of the arts in general and moving into his views concerning the artwork within the context of greater society, aspects of his *Aesthetic Theory* should be re-read through a Restanian lens. Primarily in terms of literature, but also visual art and music, Adorno and Lukács sought to determine what form or style could best represent the conditions of modernity; namely, alienation under the oppressive demands of post-war capitalism in Europe. For Adorno, the autonomy of the Modernist aesthetic could achieve such a socio-political critique better than the 'critical realism' or mimetic approach endorsed by Lukács.²⁵ That is, an art that has the ability to inform everyday life by making use of

²² Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, 283.

²³ Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', 14.

²⁴ Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', 14.

²⁵ See Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958), trans. John and Necke Mander, London 1979.

either fictive narratives (e.g. the writings of Honoré de Balzac or Thomas Mann) or visual allegories (e.g. the naturalism of figurative painting and sculpture) only serves to perpetuate the world as lived by illustrating it rather than bringing about its transformation through critique. The Modernist artwork, on the other hand, demonstrates the inconsistencies and infinite variables that point towards the isolation and consumerism that dominate a world that exists post-Holocaust. For, as Adorno writes elsewhere, '[e]ven Lukács will find it impossible to get away from the fact that the content of works of art is not real in the same sense as social reality.'²⁶ Art itself is greater than the sum of its parts; the work is not the object as much as it is the possibility for the object existing. Lukács's realism will figure later as a corollary to that second proverbial camp set in opposition to notions of art's full autonomy. At this stage, it is important to continue exploring Adorno's concept of society as it relates to artworks and the institutions that support them.

[16] As Bürger has pointed out, the reception of art within the bourgeoisie provided ammunition for the historical avant-garde to question its purpose – yet what exactly was its role? Adorno describes it as a condition in which art practitioners and viewers of art understand that what they are making and what they are looking at is cognizant of its own irony; art *knows* that its subject is its own position within the socio-political arena.

Art [...] is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art.²⁷

[17] Because works of art have no other utility than to reflect upon the society from which they derive, they provide an ironic and liminal space in which that world can be criticized and, if only briefly, left behind. It is this apartness from the everyday that seems to be required for art to bear any cultural effectiveness that needs to be carefully reviewed in order to arrive at any neutral ground between the two camps of aesthetics and politics. Moreover, the tenets of Nouveau Réalisme need to be (re)introduced to an Anglo-American audience that is increasingly concerned with problems of objecthood and participation in contemporary visual art. Adorno continues: '[a]rt keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance; unless it reifies itself, it becomes a commodity. Its contribution to society is not communication with it but rather something extremely mediated: it is resistance in which, by virtue of inner-aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated.'²⁸ This statement can be read as an early prediction for the state of today's visual culture that has so concerned thinkers like

²⁶ Theodor Adorno, 'Presentation IV: Reconciliation under Duress' (1961), *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans., ed. Ronald Taylor, London 1977, 159.

²⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London 1999, 225-226.

²⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 226.

Baudrillard; how does one reconcile the function of artworks within a neo-capitalist context in which they have indeed already become commodities? For Adorno, there appears to be no question that art and the socio-economic sphere do not and should not mix. 'Nothing social in art is immediately social, not even when this is the aim.'²⁹ He vehemently defends the notion that the aesthetic realm is diametrically opposed to that of the political in order to illustrate that the latter's tendency to codify and systematize all aspects of society will never be fully achieved. Rather, autonomous art will continue to negate such a possibility and establish itself as an ideology of free enterprise that is not bound by socio-economic restrictions. Artworks, by their very nature, condense the real into a mere referent and assume what Adorno would call a spiritual quality; though produced out of social situations they retain only their own interior a-sociality. 'Form works like a magnet that orders elements of the empirical world in such a fashion that they are estranged from their extra-aesthetic experience, and it is only as a result of this estrangement that they master the extra-aesthetic essence.'³⁰ Here, Adorno almost begins to align himself with what can be gleaned from Restany, particularly regarding the notion of careful selection from the quotidian for the purpose of de-familiarizing it and thereby creating art. He would argue that this act, in spite of Nouveau Réaliste intentions, confirms the necessary segregation of art. Continuing this passage, if the reader keeps Restany's vision for art praxis in mind, it is notable that Adorno is highly cautious of such a potentiality, which sets him directly against any claims made for a socially transformative neo-avant-garde and makes him an attractive source for Bürger.

Insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness. Through their difference from a bewitched reality, they embody negatively a position in which what is would find its rightful place, its own. Their enchantment is disenchantment. Their social essence requires a double reflection on their being-for-themselves and on their relations to society.³¹

[18] The 'baptism' of the object, while a social act, must also be classified as an artistic gesture in order to be removed from all other gestures; life and art can never wholly absorb one another since the one cannot exist without the other.

[19] A series commonly known as *tirs* or 'shooting' pictures (Fig.2), completed in the early 1960s by Niki de Saint-Phalle who, at the time, was associated with Nouveau Réalisme, consists of sculptures as well as false canvases; the latter were made by plastering over balloons of paint onto wooden panels. From a distance, the artist, her peers, and eventually members of the public would repeatedly fire at these objects with a twenty-two caliber rifle until the holes left by the bullets had exuded enough liquid to have 'composed' an abstract painting. Such a practice immediately questions the

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 226.

³⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 226.

³¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 227.

significance of authorship and the expression of internal or personal genius since the private space between work and maker has been unlocked but, more importantly, the act of flushing out the artwork with a hunting rifle introduces the disruptive territory of the political into the restricted territory of the aesthetic. In some respects, this reconciliation draws upon André Breton's pure Surrealist act of firing a pistol amidst an unsuspecting crowd³² and yet, problematically, after the artwork is performed, it becomes reduced to a mere painting that will later be displayed within the context of its own potential for autonomy; the neo-avant-gardiste object is captured and documented by the institution in a similar fashion to the subversive attempts of the historical avant-garde.



2 Niki de Saint-Phalle, *Tir* - séance 26 juin, 1961 (in progress): Artistic action: participants (left to right, shooting at pigment sacks hung on tableau): Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint-Phalle, unidentified man kneeling), Paris, Impasse Ronsin, 26 June 1961 (photo: Shunk-Kender; © 2008 Niki Charitable Art Foundation, all rights reserved / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2012; photo © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, Shunk-Kender)

[20] The question then becomes whether this fact impedes their objective of poeticizing the real and thereby lowers consciousness of the quotidian as something to be embraced rather than overlooked or dismissed. Adorno insists that '[a]rtworks that want to divest themselves of fetishism by real and extremely dubious political commitment regularly enmesh themselves in false consciousness as the result of inevitable and vainly praised simplification. In the shortsighted praxis to which they blindly subscribe, their own blindness is prolonged.'³³ This statement might help to explain the short-lived success of the historical avant-garde but it does not wholly account for the platform from which Restany launched his own movement. It is fair to suggest that Nouveau Réalisme embraces a small amount of fetishism and relies on the *expectation* invested in the

³² André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1930), in: *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Helen R. Lane and Richard Seaver, Ann Arbor 1972, 125.

³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 228.

autonomy of art by the bourgeoisie so that alternative conditions or spaces of critical engagement might be cleared. In some capacity, it could be argued that Restany acknowledges the situation that Adorno painstakingly outlines and, in his own writings, seeks to push past any imposed limitations while also incorporating them so that attacks on the neo-avant-garde like those later made by Bürger might be deflected.

[21] Turning to modes of production and reception, Adorno explains that the former is just as crucial as the latter, if not more so, when attempting to place art within the broader scope of society in general. 'Interest in the social decipherment of art must orient itself to production rather than being content with the study and classification of effects that for social reasons often totally diverge from the artworks and their objective social content.'³⁴ In other words, not only must art criticism move away from any concept of locating inherent meaning within the artwork, but it must also take into account the socio-economic conditions of the time in which such work is produced, no longer ignoring or missing the fact that artists, like other workers, are members of the same production line that has resulted from the division of labour brought about by modernity.

Since time immemorial, human reactions to artworks have been mediated to their utmost and do not refer immediately to the object; indeed, they are now mediated by society as a whole. The study of social effect neither comes close to understanding what is social in art nor is it in any position to dictate norms for art, as it is inclined to do by positivist spirit. [...] Art and society converge in the artwork's content, not in anything external to it.³⁵

[22] Retrospectively, or by looking back on art from the outside, traditional critical practices have been unable to authentically encapsulate or communicate the specific moments and motivations behind artworks and instead focus on the aftermath of their exhibition as a laboratory from which cultural traits are identified and analyzed in order to confirm a linear art history. For Adorno, this type of analysis obfuscates the matter of locating an intersection for aesthetics and politics since it will always be one step behind the artwork that, for all intents and purposes, is greater than the residuals of its reception (i.e. its interpretation) by the masses. In this way, again, art's autonomy holds out against the notion of its capacity as an emblematic signpost for the goings on of the external social arena.

The contradiction between the object reconciled in the subject, i.e. spontaneously absorbed into the subject, and the actual un-reconciled object in the outside world, confers on the work of art a vantage-point from which it can criticize actuality. Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world.³⁶

[23] In this sense, Restany can be thought of as having been ahead of his contemporaries thanks to his belief in not only the inclusion of such conditions, namely

³⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 228.

³⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 228.

³⁶ Adorno, 'Presentation IV', 160.

the everyday, within artistic discourse – a trope not entirely particular to him – but also its development into a theory that pushes past Adorno's; namely, that if such a rift between art and life is unavoidable and, indeed, necessary, then why not approach it from the inaugural act of the artist and allow it to kindle a movement? Even if, as Adorno claims, '[a]rt's double character – its autonomy and fait social – is expressed ever and again in the palpable dependencies and conflicts between the two spheres'³⁷ and visual art objects only confirm such a conflict, Nouveau Réalisme, in theory, by directly acknowledging this set of restrictions, at the very least managed to weaken them; it accessed a style, for lack of a better word, that demonstrated that its artists, as producers, were participants in the same post-war socio-economic circumstance as their patrons. In this sense, the fog which separates the space of the institution that has collected their work from the space of the real or quotidian begins to dissipate. Thus, Restany's position is perhaps more in line with that of Lukács in that it supports the notion that the refraction of the real as it is found in life within the realm of art is more revealing than its reflection.

[<top>](#)

Countertopographies

[24] Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, made manifest in book form with the help of Robert Filliou, Emmett Williams, Dieter Roth and Roland Topor, acts as an encyclopaedic collection of objects that have been catalogued from their random arrangement on a table found 17 October 1961 in Spoerri's studio at 3:47pm. From a pale-green egg cup to a red stapler, each object's history has been developed and documented to form a compendium of random poetical connections that began in 1962 and were updated in 1966, 1968, and then again in 1995; the stream of consciousness of everyday life is made available by the careful attention given to these mundane utensils and the connections they have with each other and their owners. As a contributor to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Pierre Mayol observes that '[a] place inhabited by the same person for a certain duration draws a portrait that resembles this person based on objects (present or absent) and the habits that they imply.'³⁸ By acting as mnemonic devices these randomly placed objects become the catalysts which connect five people's lives, effectively seizing a specific moment in time in order to create a space in which infinite anecdotal information can be added, a space which can be thought of as an 'everlasting present'.³⁹ For Topor, '[t]hese migrating objects which wash up in our homes have different histories, the consequence of the ebb and flow of daily life

³⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 229.

³⁸ Pierre Mayol et al., *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, 145.

³⁹ Daniel Spoerri et al., *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1962), eds. Alastair Brotchie and Malcolm Green, trans. Malcolm Green and Emmett Williams, London 1995, 12.

penetrating the imaginary.⁴⁰ Domestic objects are used to reveal the collective nature of everyday life that is accessible through the imaginative process of anecdotal association, which is born from memory. Spoerri's book catalogues those memories in footnotes, allowing the viewer-reader to follow a specific chain of events and also to realize its open-endedness. The editors Alastair Brotchie and Malcolm Green explain that 'the *Topography* performs an almost classical aesthetic, even philosophical, task: that of organizing, or at least intimating a possible organization of, a world whose complexity seems ungraspable [...].'⁴¹ Behind the guise of an encyclopaedia, this artwork facilitates the impossible task of archiving and controlling the unquantifiable by attending to the most minute and seemingly irrelevant details. Rather than contain or sterilize the quotidian, it allows for its enrichment by introducing a procedure that suggests an alternative perspective, a transformation, as it were.

[25] Returning to Adorno, it becomes clear that, for him, art's autonomy is in danger of becoming negated or nullified in that so many attempts at its analysis, whether by the institution or by theory and criticism, only serve to trample the aesthetic while being overly preoccupied with the socio-political signification of art. Moreover, to deliberately target the aesthetic arena, as Marcel Duchamp and the historical avant-gardistes did, does not justify a revolution in art; instead, it promotes a destructive mob mentality that is deluded in its quest for meaning and purpose. Ironically, it is also this mentality that rescues art from its total destruction.

It is claimed that the age of art is over; now it is a matter of realizing its truth content, which is facilely equated with art's social content: the verdict is totalitarian. [...] The moment art is prohibited and it is decreed that it must no longer be, art – in the midst of the administrative world – wins back the right to exist, the denial of which itself resembles an administrative act.⁴²

[26] The moment the institution or the latest avant-garde turns its attention to the target of art and acts, either by staging retrospective exhibitions or calling for the death of art in a more immediate manner, it clears a path for art forms to emerge and await their own respective institutionalization; Adorno recognizes this as a never-ending pattern. If 'the necessity of art [...] is its non-necessity', then it cannot be corralled into the space outside its own autonomy, for to do so only confirms that same space as infinite and eternal.⁴³ Still, Adorno admits that high art does trickle down into the realm of the everyday and becomes popularized in such a way as to require its being transformed into something lesser than itself. What he calls art's 'double character' involves a paradox in which its autonomous state is paired with that of its social

⁴⁰ Roland Topor, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, 21.

⁴¹ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, 13.

⁴² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 251.

⁴³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 251.

absorption, supporting the notion that if art is experienced outside of the aesthetic encounter (i.e. amidst the din and distraction of everyday life) then it would be ridiculous to be caught contemplating it as if it might provide a transcendental experience. For Adorno, these haphazard crossings of two different worlds demonstrate the impossibility of their becoming one.

The sphere of entertainment, which has long been integrated into production, amounts to the domination of this element of art over all the rest of its phenomena. These elements are antagonistic. The subordination of autonomous artworks to the element of social function buried within each work and from which art originated in the course of a protracted struggle, wounds art at its most vulnerable point.⁴⁴

[27] If we take this to be the definitive position of our first proverbial camp – that of art's removal from everyday life or the opposition of the aesthetic encounter as a political space to other types of encounters, then Restany's ambitions of the late 1950s and early 1960s begin to become more comprehensible. Instead of making such black and white distinctions for the capabilities of art practice, he sought to arrive at a departure point from where the Nouveau Réaliste artwork (from conception to reception) might promote the belief that the space of everyday life, technology, and progress could be perceived as an artwork in and of itself – a 'total artwork' or Gesamtkunstwerk, as it were. Thus, just as in Spoerri's *Topography*, elements within that space are as deserving of 'meaningful' aesthetic contemplation and are able to demonstrate the strength of art rather than its vulnerability. Indeed, it is the maintenance of art as a category that was to be redefined *ideologically* that set Restany the critic apart from those artists like Spoerri who sought to subtract it as a variable in the 'art' plus 'life' equation; that is, a *lived* poetry of the real.

[<top>](#)

Mining the Poetic

[28] Restany lists three points which constitute and determine the various methods of those artists he championed:

1. A method of perception and sensible communication in the service of a cosmic intuition;
2. A desire to integrate industrial technique into the metamorphosis of the quotidian;
3. A wish to poetically recuperate the most current forms from the explosion of organized visual languages: posters, advertising, and mass media.⁴⁵

[29] The concepts of 'poetic recuperation', 'cosmic intuition,' and 'the metamorphosis of the quotidian' provide an outline for this critical analysis pertaining to a remobilization of Nouveau Réaliste ideology within current visual art practices. In addition, they serve to

⁴⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 253.

⁴⁵ Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, 212.

negotiate a shift in the socio-economic paradigm that arguably has reinvigorated such an outlook, effectively mining the poetic and allowing it to be recognizable today in artworks that make use of everyday materials and embrace sociological themes. Before any conclusions can be drawn from Restany's third point, it is useful to measure his claims against older theories regarding the poetic.

[30] In order to arrive at the fundamental construct behind Restany's 'baptized' Nouveau Réaliste object – the thing itself, as it were – it is important to approach it first from a broader, more abstract perspective. Martin Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935) confronts the problematic relationship between things and their artistic representation in order to lay out a schematic for what it is that artworks are able to accomplish culturally and socially. Though heavily tested by the likes of Fredric Jameson and Jacques Derrida, this seminal chapter of *Poetry, Language, Thought* is relevant to this project in that it manages to establish a stage upon which the neo-avant-garde might improvise its aims at recontextualizing everyday visual culture within the arena of high art, and thereby begin to bridge that gap between the historical and the contemporary in hopes of tangible social developments. That is, due to Heidegger's determination to distinguish between the characteristics of things and artworks, a notion of the thing-as-artwork becomes a possibility – not as a closed critique of the bourgeois institution of art in the sense that Marcel Duchamp had intended, but as a more charged and transformative vehicle that potentially might connect that institution with everyday life by reflecting its multiplicities directly.

[31] Any aim to bypass the trap of thinking the everyday in terms of equipment or as a field of routine and monotonous encounters and effects demands a turn to the work of art and what Heidegger believes to be its origin via the now famous example of Vincent van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes. The transferral of these objects from the physical realm of the everyday to the verisimilar picture plane assigns to them a revelatory role; the shoes become things, as opposed to mere equipment, thanks to the work of art. This system of transference connects with Aristotle's concept of *mimēsis*, or the tendency of art forms to suggest a boundless moment in which the Being of the thing is perpetuated convincingly by its continual becoming or representation, thereby invoking its essential elements.⁴⁶ For Heidegger, Van Gogh's painting does not communicate a general notion of shoes as inanimate objectified case studies which simply aid the artist to replicate them as realistically as possible in two dimensions, but instead invokes for the viewer an entire world of experience that is particular to their absent owner; what Heidegger recognizes as the everyday life of a peasant is, for him, at once contained within and dispersed from *das Ding*. In this way, '[t]he art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the artwork, the truth of

⁴⁶ See Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. Preston H. Epps, Chapel Hill 1970.

what is has set itself to work.¹⁴⁷ Hence, the workly character of the artwork – its autonomy, for lack of a better word – illuminates the thingly character of the thing.

[32] Restany's understanding of how the quotidian might reveal itself as relevant to visual art and vice versa resonates strongly with this early example of Heidegger's. Of course the obvious difference is that, following Duchamp's inaugural act, the Nouveaux Réalistes embraced and manipulated the ready-made object and began to renegotiate the theoretical distance between notions of Aristotelian mimicry and the real itself, allowing Heidegger's observations to be extended to another level.

Nouveau Réalisme values the artistic baptism of the object as a major event and from it infers a transcendental lesson. Whatever the everyday object, it is removed from the grip of contingency: by invocation, that is by the sole aspect of voluntary choice it becomes a work of art, but a work of art endowed with an absolute and general potential for expressivity. The concept of the ready-made also shifts in meaning, or better, it is carried to the extreme limit of its extension. Duchamp's urinal is not only *a* sculpture, but it is *all* sculpture, within easy reach of the hand.⁴⁸

[33] Bound up in Modernist teleology, this 'general potential for expressivity' encourages an acknowledgement of the economic boom experienced by post-war Europe and engenders a concept of the real – that specific socio-economic situation – as poetic and worth recognition as an art form in its own right. For Restany, the ready-made had achieved an ability to not only critique the boundaries of visual culture, but also to promote the acceptance of technological progress in all fields. This helps to clarify the idiosyncrasies of the European neo-avant-garde of the late 1950s and early 1960s, but does not necessarily account for the causes and effects of their remobilization in our present. What thingly essence is transmitted from the contemporary artwork that takes the everyday as its subject and the ready-made as its substance? Jameson has argued that the postmodern age, with its multi-media and shallow montages, does not provide a foundation upon which the poetic, in a Modernist sense, can build; the essential qualities of everyday life that Heidegger observes to be infused in Van Gogh's painting have been smothered and diffused by the slick machinations of a culture industry that has been endorsed and developed by artists such as Andy Warhol.⁴⁹ Assuming that the current socio-economic circumstances of late capitalism have pushed a society once new to consumerism to the point of extreme desensitization, where the general essence of things has been lost in the fog of their sheer proliferation, then it stands to reason that within such a nullified environment a strand of the poetic might be recuperated.

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York 2001, 38.

⁴⁸ Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, 34.

⁴⁹ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham 1991.

[34] The differentiation between the real and its essence, that so intrigued Restany, resonates with Heidegger's differentiation between 'earth' and 'world'. Thinking in terms of everyday life, it is the routine and monotony of the earthly realm (the trappings of form) that act as blinders to the pure and eternal qualities of the worldly (the freedoms of content) and yet, it is the purity of the world that allows it to reveal itself to us by way of specific moments of clarity, one of which can be found during the encounter with the work of art when equipment is elevated to the thingly through the workly character of the artwork.

The *world worlds*, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-non-objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being.⁵⁰

[35] The world exists a priori as a combination of uncontrollable and unthinkable elements that appear to be controllable and thinkable. It cannot be accurately or wholly represented, but it can appear fragmentally in certain formats. Just as the artist's process produces a microcosmic world within the artwork, so does the exhibition organizer articulate through methods of display the consecration of that work as an object apart from others. For Heidegger, when the everyday or the earthly finds its way into the work, as it does in Van Gogh's painting, it acts as a catalyst that unveils the essence of the world. 'A work, by being a work, makes space for that spaciousness.'⁵¹ In art, such a transition is possible thanks to the materials chosen by the artist. For instance, Heidegger claims that stone, that unremarkable stuff of earth, can be transmuted into a sculpture, a world in and of itself that reveals (or worlds) the openness of the worldly. Likewise the poet, who in writing reveals a word's essential being rather than its use in common parlance, contributes to the negotiation of the aforementioned dichotomy through the acts of complete appropriation and transformation. In other words, '[n]owhere in the work is there any trace of a work-material.'⁵² It is at this point, considering the doors opened by the ready-made, that Heidegger's theory becomes somewhat limited. Surely when one encounters a Nouveau Réaliste artwork, one notes the hybridity between what have been categorized as equipment and things. Daniel Spoerri's *tableaux-pièges* or Jacques de la Villeglé's *affichisme* if considered in conjunction with Heidegger's text, could be said effectively to inform what have been called the territories of earth and world by suggesting they are combined within the work, rather than the former transforming wholly into the latter. Perhaps then, the openness of the world and the ability of earthly or everyday materials to communicate it via the work of art, a process he painstakingly outlines while considering examples of

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 43.

⁵¹ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 44.

⁵² Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 46.

more traditional art forms, is made more readily available by the Restanian approach to art production. That is, what Heidegger claims to be demonstrated by the artwork in 'setting up a world and setting forth the earth, [...]'⁵³ in basic terms, is intangible yet experiential. However, by insisting that everyday life can profit from the inclusion of everyday objects within the terrain of more traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture *after* Duchamp, Restany seeks to demonstrate how the viewer's expectation for an authoritative or didactic experience – one that confirms the autonomy of art and the space where the Heideggarian worldly is retold – might not have to be so contained. The Nouveau Réaliste artwork aspires to not only reveal the worldly or exalted from the earthly or base during the moment of the artistic encounter, but also to reveal the capacity of artworks to do so – the *process*, as it were, as well as the result. In this sense, it becomes feasible that such a 'witness machine'⁵⁴ could encourage a reevaluation of everyday life outside of its presence, leading to more participatory forms of experience.

[36] To critically engage with modern and contemporary art implies that a work can withstand a more independent gaze, one that is able to see the whole (content) as well as its parts (form); in some respects this is a limited approach that attempts to look in from the outside and locate meaning. Heidegger insists that the work envelops and takes over the subjectivity of the viewer, transporting him or her to a place where the origin of art can be identified while leaving the everyday behind. '*Art then is the becoming and happening of truth.* [...]. Truth is never gathered from objects that are present and ordinary.'⁵⁵ Yet, Restany would argue that such truth, perhaps akin to what he has called the 'transcendental lesson' that is inferred from the baptism of the object, can indeed be gathered from the quotidian as long as the quotidian has been enhanced by its grafting onto the workly character of the artwork. Since the poetic for these two thinkers appears to fixate on the finite and infinite respectively, it is necessary to explore another take that addresses the problems presented by the notion of the hermeneutic circle.

[37] Interestingly, it is Walter Benjamin who manages to arrive at an explanation as to how understanding the poetic or *Gedichtete*, as it arrives from texts, is still a feasible window through which the potentialities of the everyday as fundamentally shared, in spite of its many variables, can be acknowledged. Written in 1915, 'Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin' examines the problem of interpretation as it relates to experience, with emphasis placed on the literary construct of the poem. For our purposes, it should be understood that Benjamin's analysis might also be extended and included within discourse surrounding visual artworks.

⁵³ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 48.

⁵⁴ See Rebecca Schneider, 'Solo Solo Solo', in: *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt, Oxford 2005.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 69.

The concept of the poetized is [...] a limit-concept. It is first of all a limit-concept with respect to the concept of the poem. As a category of aesthetic investigation, the poetized differs decisively from the form-content model by preserving within itself the fundamental aesthetic unity of form and content. Instead of separating them, it distinctively stamps in itself their immanent, necessary connection.⁵⁶

[38] The problem of differentiating between form and content is acknowledged here but Benjamin's concern lies elsewhere. With the hermeneutic circle intact, meaning cannot be fixed by the picking apart and reconfiguring of disparate formal elements so that a work can be read and closed; it is better to look towards a concept of unity within works that thrives on the equation of form-content and seeks to understand the force that distinguishes them from other forms of expression. Theorist Howard Caygill has studied Benjamin's perspective and has concluded that his version of the poetic is 'both product and object of critical investigation [...];' the poem (artwork) is singular and already fully realized by its author, whereas the poetic defines a state of 'speculative critique' which 'synthetically unites the absolute ("spiritual order") with spatio-temporal experience ("intuitive order").'⁵⁷ In this way, Benjamin's notion of the poetic acts as a 'limit concept' between the actual poem and life; grounded in a notion of inconstancy, the everyday allows the poem to come into being just as the poem allows the everyday to present itself. That is, 'limit' is not conceived here in terms of limitation, but in terms of a potentially consistent recalibration of effects and registers – the infinitude of the poetic is transmitted through the finitude of the poem (work). Benjamin continues:

Thus, the poetized emerges as the transition from the functional unity of life to that of the poem. In the poetized, life determines itself through the poem, the task through the solution. The underlying basis is not the individual life-mood of the artist but rather the life-context determined by art.⁵⁸

[39] Meaning, as something interpretable, cannot be allocated from an uninvolved and distanced position; an approach to aesthetics that believes content to be a direct result of form must be replaced by one which focuses on the affective capacities of the artwork and the shifting subjectivity of the always-participatory viewer; in this sense, the artist's minor gesture confirms life as not external to the work (poem). The notion of speculative critique needs to be embraced so that meaning is free to circulate between artworks and everyday life, allowing for continuous moments of readability. Benjamin's insistence that the poetic is a limit concept is crucial to thinking in terms of a speculative model – he does not at any point defend a systematic or semiological reading of works since the poem is at once specific and general, always in flux and with many points of entry. Caygill explains: 'This means that the possible configurations of "the Poetic" are determined as much by the actual configuration of the given poem as by the potentially infinite number

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin' (1914-1915), in: *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913 – 1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, London 2004, 19.

⁵⁷ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, London 1998, 36.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, 'Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin', 19-20.

of configurations in possible experience or "life".⁵⁹ Hence, Restany's desire to empower the Nouveau Réaliste visual artwork with the ability to poetically recuperate aspects of life from the everyday by means of its structure illustrates his belief in the idea that the quotidian cannot only determine the visuality of the work itself, but is in turn determined and poeticized by the work and its various elements – Nouveau Réalisme yields itself to the multiplicitous nature of everyday life. Though Restany, in a similar fashion to Heidegger, is arguably preoccupied by a need to uncover an idea of truth in reference to the profundity of artworks, it can be construed from his writings that he, like Benjamin, seeks to defend an art form that remains open-ended and that is led by its inner qualities, thereby revealing through the encounter with it an aptitude for social transformation that extends from the simultaneous containment and dispersion of the poetic. Despite his close art historical reading of artworks and their makers, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is embedded in Restany's teleological outlook; the quotidian is triggered and affected by the experiencing of form-content as it is communicated by the everyday object-as-art.

[40] Having explored two models of the poetic that are characterized by their studies of late nineteenth-century Modernism (painting for Heidegger and literature for Benjamin), let us turn to the more timely texts of Jacques Rancière, which should encourage an up-to-date reading of Restany's views as well as a means of thinking through the feasibility of their remobilization. To reiterate Restany's first point, some Nouveaux Réalistes aimed at the poetic recuperation or the successful appropriation of mass media produced in post-war France so that their forms could be reconsidered within an artistic context. In other words, the movement was concerned with representing daily life to its audience by means of an artistic lens. This approach lends itself as a possibility for affecting the relationship between art and life due to the neo-avant-garde's successful remobilization of the less successful historical avant-garde and yet, for some, modernity's pervading crisis of representation has proved such success impossible. Rancière confronts the notion of Modernism in the arts and links its aesthetic development to post-war socio-economic development. In order to better understand his take on the poetic, it is helpful to describe briefly the tripartite categorization of politics within aesthetics that he outlines in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Rancière defines modernity's three artistic regimes as: the ethical, the poetic or representative, and the aesthetic. The ethical regime directly relates the notion of labour to visual imagery, in that artworks within this category are primarily utilitarian and socially functional – the artist's privatized environment in which the artwork is completed is implied by the work itself, revealing to its public the very nature of what it is to work. In line with Janet Wolff's assessment of art's social production, this first regime does not support any idea

⁵⁹ Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, 37.

of art as distinct from everyday life.⁶⁰ Our main concern, however, now lies with the poetic and aesthetic regimes. Whereas the ethical regime is concerned with how images inform and are informed by society, the poetic regime focuses on representing that society outside of itself, as it were; it involves the bourgeois institution of art that the historical avant-garde attacked and, in addition, defends the notion of art's autonomy as it has been stipulated by Adorno. Rancière insists that it is through the mode of attempted representation of life and then the mode of reception experienced by those representations that render the poetic (representational) regime insufficient for an art that affects and informs everyday life or the *realness* of reality.

[*m*] *imēsis* is not the law that brings the arts under the yoke of resemblance. It is first of all a fold in the distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in social occupations, a fold that renders the arts visible. It is not an artistic process but a regime of visibility regarding the arts. A regime of visibility is at once what renders the arts autonomous and also what links this autonomy to a general order of occupations and ways of doing and making.⁶¹

[41] It is not simply an artistic approach that is being criticized here, but a whole system of beliefs that posits the experience and practice of art above and beyond other occupations; the poetic *creates* the gap between aesthetics and politics rather than bridging it by distinguishing between ways of making art and other forms of labour.

[42] Later in his text, Rancière cites *Madame Bovary* as an example of a literary work that illustrates the folly of attempting to seek reconciliation between the poetic art of books and the non-poetic reality of life. Conversely, the aesthetic regime of the arts, that which Rancière champions, manages to combine aspects of the other two regimes and arrive at a concept of artistic production and reception that suggests 'artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible [...].'⁶² That is, like Restany, Rancière supports the notion of an art that takes advantage of the expectation for its own autonomy, in the sense that it will critique the socio-political simply by being apart from it (i.e. represent it to the contemplative, authority-seeking viewer). At the same time, such an art is politically effective in that it incorporates aspects of the everyday and is therefore more likely to infiltrate it. For, '[t]he aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.'⁶³ At this point it is crucial to condense our terms somewhat - what Rancière has named the 'aesthetic regime' of the arts can be construed as more in line with Restany's concept of the 'poetry of the

⁶⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London 2004, 20-21.

⁶¹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22.

⁶² Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22-23.

⁶³ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 23.

real' and, therefore, Rancière's defense of this particular regime is comparable to Restany's goal of recuperating the poetic from the everyday via visual art; the latter should not be aligned with the isolationist view of representation that is described above as it pertains to the second regime.

[43] In *The Future of the Image*, Rancière directly confronts the problem of representation within contemporary visual culture. Revisiting the model of the aesthetic regime, he discusses the challenges postmodernity presents to its potential:

In this new regime, there are no longer appropriate subjects for art. [...] There are no longer rules of appropriateness between a particular subject and a particular form, but a general availability of all subjects for any artistic form whatsoever.⁶⁴

[44] Echoing Jameson and Baudrillard, Rancière suggests that the art of our times is incapable (and should not be capable) of capturing any romanticist (poetic) notion of truth or poetry from the realm of the everyday since, with the constant flood of contemporary visual stimulation, variation, and repetition, the significance of works - if treated as representative of life - is inherently intangible and confirms the cultural repercussions of a nullified and over-stimulated society. He continues: 'everything is now on the same level, the great and the small, important events and insignificant episodes, human beings and things. Everything is equal, equally representable. And this "equally representable" spells the ruin of the representative system.'⁶⁵ Moreover, the very space of the poetic/representative regime (e.g. the museum or commercial gallery) is called into question since the stage upon which visual art has been accepted by its public has been demolished; the zone of the artistic encounter has been fractured and mixed in with all other zones of common experience.

The 'interrupted spectacle' revokes the privilege of the theatrical space of visibility, the separate space where representation offered itself up to vision as a specific activity. Now there is poetry anywhere and everywhere [...]. There is poetry wherever some spectacle can symbolize the identity of what is thought and what is not thought, what is wanted and what is not wanted.⁶⁶

[45] Yet this is precisely why the neo-avant-garde and its remobilizers succeed where others have not in terms of disproving the end of art, as it were - they effectively demonstrate the interruption of the spectacle that is the bourgeois institution of art by *inhabiting* the space of that spectacle.

[46] Restany observed: 'Today reality surpasses the fiction we call common knowledge. What becomes of realism in our civilization of the image? [...] The artist today lives in

⁶⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London 2007, 118.

⁶⁵ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 120-121.

⁶⁶ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 122.

constant rivalry with other operators and technicians in the visual field.⁶⁷ If thought out in conjunction with Rancière's current parameters, the solution as early as 1960 was to remind those other operators and technicians that they were also artists by introducing the materiality of their lives into the realm of high art – the hybridization of quotidian equipment and Modernist art forms identifies the contemporary crisis of representation as it is identified in philosophy; the only difference is that it is the artworks that are doing it, providing an unprecedented and tangible access point out of tragedy for the likes of Emma Bovary. In Rancière's words:

Such is the paradox of the aesthetic regime in the arts. It posits the radical autonomy of art, its independence of any external rule. But it posits it in the same gesture that abolishes the mimetic closure separating the rationale of fictions from that of facts, the sphere of representation from other spheres of existence.⁶⁸

[47] Thus, we are returned to the problem of what it is that artworks try (and fail) to represent, namely, the poetic or, in Heideggerian terms, truth. I would continue to argue that it is highly significant that, rather than truth, Restany's Nouveau Réaliste movement, in theory and in practice, stumbled upon an approach to art making during a specific socio-economic juncture that allowed it to manifest the paradox described by Rancière above. That is, if Restany's first goal for the movement was to poetically recuperate popular visual imagery into the realm of art, it was so that the poetic could then be effectively conceptualized within the realm of the everyday. Subsequently, those whose practice falls under what I have called the remobilization of Restany's 'poetry of the real' all operate from a register of subtlety which allows them to function poetically amidst what Rancière has identified as poetry's crisis; during art's current condition of no rules and 'general availability' their potential for poetic recuperation is inverted. Now, after years of mass production, simulation, and serialization – the overcooking of Restany's recipe, as it were – the readymade object relieves the discerning viewer from constant servings of external visual stimuli, it satisfies when virtual realities do not and reconnects us to one another by delivering the stuff upon which we are dependent; whereas many of the objects chosen by the Nouveaux Réalistes were antiquated or outmoded, some were of new design and purpose at the time of appropriation. Today, both types have become symbolic of the complex and often detrimental relationships between product, producer, and consumer that are themselves far from outmoded for many contemporary practitioners in the field of visual cultures.

[<top>](#)

Intuitive Gestures

[48] It is this notion of comprehension that leads to Restany's first marker for the Nouveau Réaliste project, namely, the goal for such an art to function within the service

⁶⁷ Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, 228.

⁶⁸ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 23.

of a 'cosmic intuition'. In order to unpack this next topic, it is important to be sure to explore the reasons why he might have chosen these precise words to describe the orientation that the viewer would assume during and after the encounter with certain works of art. As has been discussed, Europe's post-war climate presented viewers and makers of art with a wider range of tools for thinking about objects and their connection to the uncompromising division that the pre-war art world placed between high art and popular visual culture. For Restany, such a climate provoked a shift from the inactive contemplative stance taken up during the artistic encounter towards a more volatile and interactive state of awareness and social responsibility.

What we are in the process of rediscovering, more so in Europe than the United States, is a new sense of Nature, our contemporary Nature – industrial, mechanical, promotional. The fields of Arcadia are henceforth repressed in the most mythical zones of our vision. It is the city or the factory that is the context of our everyday reality.⁶⁹

[49] At the apex of a long and predictable art history, a window of opportunity had arrived for the social production of art that would question the frozen autonomy of the artwork, limited by its sole purpose of representation, and demonstrate its potential for prolonged effectiveness as a poetic lens through which reality could be recognized. Restany, therefore, sees the world itself – the exterior – as an autonomous tableau from which segments can be extracted and serve to illustrate that wholeness which would otherwise remain hidden. He adds that this type of artistic activity accomplishes more than a Duchampian critique of art's boundaries:

This recognition of the autonomy of the exterior object does not merely involve the resolution of the concept of a work of art: it immediately poses the problem of the interaction of objects with the psyche of the individual. This metaphysics of technology risks ending up as a sort of meditative animism.⁷⁰

[50] In other words, until the arrival of the moment in which the European neo-avant-garde could act, the habit of the viewer assumed a necessary rift between him or herself, the artist, the artwork, and the institution; this habit catered to the notion of art's autonomy as being distinct from life so that it could critique it. Restany proposes that the opening up of the everyday by extending Duchamp's efforts can break the spell that has trapped viewers within passivity. Such 'metaphysics of technology' are then able to trigger what he has described as a cosmic intuition or an awakening to the world.

[51] It is not that the Nouveau Réaliste object appropriates from the realm of the everyday so that an absolute pertaining to the everyday might be revealed, but that the encounter with such an object crystallizes all encounters and becomings, demonstrating the incommensurability of the everyday rather than pointing towards an ideal of utopian futurity. Hence, it could be said that Restany's loudly voiced desire to establish and

⁶⁹ Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, 292.

⁷⁰ Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, 292-293.

confirm the historicity of his movement has distracted the majority of his readers from considering a subtext that promotes the possibility that the Nouveau Réaliste praxis, by remobilizing the attempts of the historical avant-garde, would itself be remobilized over and over again by artists concerned with the concept of Being as it is understood through the articulation of the modern and contemporary quotidian. Temporally, the immeasurable duration of individual lives can be glimpsed within those spaces of pause, the encounter with Heidegger's notion of the 'thingly' fused with that of the 'workly', as it were. This is not only to establish the theory that Restany, at the time of writing, was formulating an unprecedented potentiality for art, but to also reiterate and expand upon his main points so that the groundwork he laid can indeed open up a space in which high art and everyday life might reconcile their tumultuous relationship. As Gilles Deleuze tells us, '[t]he immanent event is actualized in a state of things and of the lived that make it happen.'⁷¹ Such an event arguably involves the state of consciousness, that 'cosmic intuition' that Restany believed could be served by the specific 'method of perception and sensible communication' taken up by artworks that successfully meld the artistic tradition of the ready-made with the socio-economic and political realms, thereby demonstrating that any attempts to distinguish between the two will ultimately fail. Furthermore, the remobilization of such tactics contributes to their own initial readability in that it confirms the longevity of the poetic or absolute within (post)modernity in spite of the inevitable transitions of circumstantial reality in general.

[<top>](#)

Everyday Deviance

[52] Restany's second categorization of Nouveau Réaliste praxis boasts the direct incorporation of industry into the production of art so that the everyday or the social might then be understood as an overriding work of art; in his own words, he seeks the 'metamorphosis of the quotidian' since '[w]e have entered the sociological stadium of the civilization of the image, enemy of artisanal techniques, individual talents, written literatures, eager for speed and immediate communication, ready to speculate on the need for chance and the arbitrariness of choice.'⁷² Such conditions demand that the crisis of representation in the arts not only be recognized, but also rectified by expanding the jurisdiction of visual art so that it might serve a broader purpose and find another route to what Heidegger has called truth. The question then, is how exactly such transformations are able to be brought about and how they are able to function - *what* is metamorphosing and *into what*? During her talk in the first plenary session of a 2006 colloquium on Restany's life and work, Annie Claustres pointed out that, unlike other art critics who concerned themselves with literary topics and references, Restany was

⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life* (1995), trans. Anne Boyman, New York 2001, 31.

⁷² Restany, *Le nouveau réalisme*, 81.

influenced by human science and, as a result, was particularly attracted to the writings and ideas of Herbert Marcuse.⁷³ In the final chapter of *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse insists that 'advanced industrial society' inadvertently produces false desires which are wrongly construed as needs. This way of living that does not allow space for critical thinking or independent action can be characterized as 'one-dimensional' and an attitude of resistance or a 'great refusal' is necessary in order to bring about effective social change, an outlook which made his work important to the student revolts of May 1968. Thus, the question is how Restany's vision for art practice interacts with such a specific sociological stance and whether or not his clearly-voiced embrace of technological development is at odds with what the Nouveaux Réalistes actually accomplished. In many ways, and on a more subtle level, their efforts underline this cultural one-dimensionality instead of promoting a utopian or transcendentalist meta-narrative. Significantly, it is plausible that their work can now be finally read within this register since emerging and mid-career artists are considering these ramifications once again.

[53] Restany's zeal involving an art of everyday life prompted his ideological framework that assigned Nouveau Réalisme a place between a traditionalist or classicist view of what art could and should accomplish and a nihilistic view that maintains industrialization destroyed any such potential for it.⁷⁴ Somewhere in the middle of these two extremes he saw room for an anomaly, a 'deviant function' or another side to art practice. This deviance could be established by a wilful embrace of industrial progress within the context of a Modernist artistic tradition which its practitioners would then subvert by acquiescing to the age of consumerism and mass production in terms of their artistic choices; the everyday was to infiltrate the institution, but from within.

The deviant function travels to the zero degree of expression and stops there; an intellectual choice destined to develop an internal logic of disposability, this 'poetic' perspective is made complete by its incarnation as the deontology of a style, in an artistic orientation, to the detriment of pure revolutionary ferment.⁷⁵

[54] This conditional approach to art making was meant to pander to viewers' expectations and simultaneously exceed them through the appropriation of the fundamental characteristics of paintings, sculptures, performance, etc. and a deviant invitation to the socio-economic world; the complexities and instability of modern life were able to penetrate the autonomous and sacred space of art rather than refuse it totally.

[55] To such discourse regarding aesthetics and politics, philosopher Jacques Rancière adds: '[p]olitics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct "fictions", that is *material*

⁷³ Annie Claustres, 'Questioning the Myth: Pierre Restany's Role in the Historiography of French Art in the Post-war Period', in: *Pierre Restany's Half-Century*, n.p. (see note 4).

⁷⁴ Marie Gautier, '*L'Autre Face de l'art: From Historical Logic to the Critique of Modernity*', in: *Pierre Restany's Half-Century*, n.p.(see note 4).

⁷⁵ Restany, *L'autre face de l'art*, 29.

rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.⁷⁶ Literature and visual art, like history, appropriate from the real and produce renditions or fictions that guide and determine our social structure. Of particular importance is that very rarely, if at all, did literature or visual art make this their *subject* until the neo-avant-garde was able to build upon the inadequacies of the historical avant-garde. Undertaken soon after the experiment of 'voiding' Iris Clert's gallery, Yves Klein's project *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (Fig. 3) involved the participation of the viewer-as-consumer as well as that of the artist-as-salesman. Klein divided the void he had described as one of pure artistic potentiality into several parts which were all accounted for by printed receipts that individuals could purchase and then be given a weighed amount of gold leaf, dependent on the size of that particular zone. A list of rules was also included in the transaction, which stated that the artist, as well as an official art world representative, must be present at the sale and that unless the new owner allowed the artist to dispose of half the amount of gold leaf into a natural body of water (such as the Seine) and then burn the receipt himself, the immaterial zone would not be his completely.



3 Yves Klein, *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility*, 26 January 1962, ritual with Dino Buzzati (photo: Shunk-Kender; © Yves Klein / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2012; photo © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, Shunk-Kender)

[56] Hence, there was a choice between embracing the concept and the owning of a non-property that could be visited at a specific location (e.g. an empty room of a

⁷⁶ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 39.

museum or gallery local to the collector) or retaining the slip of paper to later introduce to the art market for re-sale. Read against Restany's concept of the 'deviant function', it is remarkable that with this gesture Klein managed to combine the trappings of everyday life and commerce with the autonomy of art and manipulate them both by placing specific regulations upon them and by fictionalizing the real or, rather, substantiating the unreal. Rancière claims that '[p]olitical statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. [...] They reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission.'⁷⁷ Klein's zones of sensibility have just as much to do with the analysis of everyday life practices as they do with those of high art in that they reveal aspects of a coded behaviour within the specific shift in the socio-economic paradigm of Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These aspects could be characterized by a then new individualism that encouraged capital gain and a spirit of commodification; the choice to accept or decline the immaterial zone demonstrates that the neo-avant-gardiste attempt was not one which presupposed an idealistic result for all participants in the same sense that Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*⁷⁸ would be criticized as doing in the late 1990s, nor does it take the mundane for granted and focus wholly on the aesthetic encounter as a privileged political moment. Rather, it is an artistic attempt that makes the multiplicities of everyday life readable as such by tapping into the 'poetry of the real'. In Rancière's words, 'the "fictions" of art and politics are therefore heterotopias rather than utopias.'⁷⁹ And, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, these 'heterotopias', or non-idealised spaces, are shown to be the zones where structures are deconstructed, where the imperfections of systematic modern living are revealed.⁸⁰ Restany and the Nouveaux Réalistes made their focus the many variables that conjoin and produce the illusion of the apparently seamless fabric known as 'culture', effectively producing a neutral ground from their own contentious historical moment so that politico-aesthetic experimentation among contemporary artists, whose work accounts for the everyday of late capitalism within a discourse of globalization, might prosper.

[<top>](#)

⁷⁷ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 39.

⁷⁸ See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Dijon-Quetigny 2002. Interestingly, this work was published just before Bourriaud began serving as the co-director of the Palais de Tokyo when, incidentally, Restany was the acting President on the Board of Trustees. Bourriaud was also the keynote speaker at the aforementioned 2006 conference in Paris, where he credited Restany as a powerful influence on his own curatorial work.

⁷⁹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 41.

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), (no individual translator credited), London 1989, xviii.

