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“Where Is Your Rupture?”:
Mass Culture and the Gesamtkunstwerk

ANNETTE MICHELSON

And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?
—Walt Whitman

A specter haunts the theory and practice of the arts throughout our century: the specter of the Gesamtkunstwerk, a notion born of late romanticism, nurtured and matured within the modernist moment, and never wholly exorcised in the era of postmodernism and of electronic reproduction. To Adorno, writing in 1944, television promised a synthesis of radio and film that would so impoverish artistic production that “the thinly veiled identity of all industrial products” would reveal itself,

derisively fulfilling the Wagnerian dream of the Gesamtkunstwerk—the fusion of all the arts in one work. The alliance of word, image, and music is all the more perfect in Tristan because the sensuous elements which all approvingly reflect the surface of social reality are in principle embodied in the same technical process, the unity of which becomes its distinctive content. This process integrates all the elements of the production, from novel (shaped with an eye to film) to the last sound effect. It is the triumph of invested capital, whose title as absolute master is etched deep into the hearts of the dispossessed in the employment line; it is the meaningful content of every film, whatever plot the production team may have selected.¹

To the specter of the Gesamtkunstwerk, already somewhat faint and failing, Moholy-Nagy had delivered, in 1925, a telling, though not fatal, blow. It is in the text of Painting, Photography and Film² that he says, when speaking of the projects

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of cubism and constructivism, that they attempted a purification of the expressive component of "art" (one notes the quotation marks); that they led an attack upon the subjectivism of a previous generation, whose relegation of art to preoccupations of leisure time went hand in hand with an excessively sublimated notion of artistic production, issuing in an art that was trivial and derivative, severed from its roots in social collectivity. He then evokes a second line of protest, described as "the attempt to bring together into one entity, singular works or separate fields of creation that were isolated from one another. This entity was to be the Gesamtkunstwerk in the form of architecture as the sum of all arts." Such was the project of de Stijl and of the Bauhaus in its first period. But this project Moholy defines as produced within a specific historical moment, that of the triumph of specialization. And this we understand retrospectively as the consequence of the division of labor as the dynamic of the industrial revolution. It is with characteristic acuteness that Moholy perceives this ideal as a compensatory reaction to a general fragmentation of existence and therefore incapable of providing the ground for an art of social collectivity, an art of necessity. For it provides, as it were, merely an addition to the present state of things, an increment.

"What we need," he says, "is not the Gesamtkunstwerk alongside and separate from which life flows by, but a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing Gesamtkunstwerk (life) which abolishes all isolation, in which all individual accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a universal necessity." 4

There would seem to have been two major, antithetical programs for the achievement of this radically utopian aesthetic in our century. One might call them, roughly speaking, those of the Yogi and the Commissar, casting Eisenstein as Commissar and recasting (with the respect and apologies due a Zen Master) John Cage as the Yogi. I wish, however, to consider a third attempt of the recent past, one whose deviant logic was preeminently of our time, producing a mediate or degraded version of this project. I have in mind a site of artistic production perspicuously exempt, if only for a brief period of time, from industrial criteria of production, modes of distribution, and forms of commodification. It was, as it happens, a film studio. I shall not, however, be proposing, in the manner of Moholy's contemporaries, the cinema as the ultimate Gesamtkunstwerk. Rather, I shall consider the structure and dynamics of this site of production as a late variant upon Moholy's model, subject, however, to the powerful constraints and perversions of its particular moment within late capitalism.

The site and period, then, are those of Andy Warhol's old Factory, described by Warhol himself as those in which "we made movies just to make them" rather than that in which he was producing "feature-length movies that

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3. Ibid., p. 17.
4. Ibid.
regular theaters would want to show.” It is the shot from Valerie Solanis’s gun in 1968 that marks the boundary between two sites and modes of production, the moment of replacement of a previous artisanal mode of production by a systematic division of labor. When, as has been noted, Warhol began increasingly to delegate authority as in the later films, his participation was limited to the work of financing and publicity. The Chelsea Girls is the major work that concludes the first period. After 1968, Warhol assumed the role and function of the grand couturier, whose signature sells or licenses perfumes, stockings, and household linens manufactured elsewhere. Warhol’s “business art” found its apogee in the creation of a label that could be affixed to the feature films made under the

5. Warhol is known to have placed the following advertisement in The Village Voice in 1968: “I’ll endorse with my name any of the following: clothing, AC-DC, cigarettes, small tapes, sound equipment, Rock ’N Roll records, anything, film and film equipment, Food, Helium, WHIPS. Money, love and kisses Andy Warhol. EL 5-9941.” This text is reproduced in Patrick S. Smith, Andy Warhol’s Art and Films (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986), p. 167.
direction of Paul Morrissey. And Morrissey's role in the suppression of films made prior to his accession to power is linked to the marketing of the new product, coded with an eye to industrial norms.

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Consider, then, the image that provides the title of this text. Dated 1960, this work is, of course, the rendering of an advertisement for surgical trusses, an early instance of Warhol's deployment of the found image; he was to rework it more than once. It is, as well, an image of poignantly proleptic resonance, and we may therefore quite appropriately juxtapose it with Andy Warhol, Artist, New York, Richard Avedon's portrait, made in 1969, in which the artist displays the surgical scars that memorialize the assault upon his life made the preceding year by the Executor-in-Chief of the Society to Cut Up Men.

I shall, however, in what follows, be rehearsing neither the Orphic nor the hagiographic iconography that this juxtaposition may appear to generate. More significantly, these two images mark the limits of Warhol's intervention as a major and pivotal force within American independent cinema. And it is through that intervention that one may trace the passage, within that cinema, from the body's analytic representation to one of synthetic incorporation.

Most simply put, the notion of rupture will center on the break within American independent cinema in the representation of the body as effected by Warhol and the consequences of that break: the passage from a cinema postulated on the primacy of the part object to that of the whole body, in its parallel passage from one of assertive editing to that of long shot/plan séquence. What later followed was the development of a cinema tending to incorporeality, as in the work of Snow and Frampton—to "the taste's quick glance of incorporeal sight," a cinema of literal textuality.6

If it may be claimed that the desire for the mode of representation which came to be that of cinema is grounded in the phantasmic projection of the female body,7 we may see confirmation of that claim in a founding myth of cinematic practice, that of Kuleshovian montage. One of its powerfully constituent elements posits the desiring gaze of the male subject, directed at the female object as inferred, synthesized by, the spectator from a sequence of shots of the actor Mosjoukine and an anonymous female. We have, however, an even more impressively demonstrative instance of cinema's synthetic properties, its construction of the female body, the ideal object of desire as synthesized, once again, by the viewer, as if inevitably, from the juxtaposition of part objects.

6. The increasingly sublimated erotics of avant-garde film practice in the 1970s and '80s culminates in the production of Hollis Frampton's Poetic Justice and Michael Snow's This is, both films composed entirely of text to be read from the screen.
This second, alternative founding moment is inscribed within a tradition of Russian literature that extends from Gogol to Bely. Indeed, in Bely’s *Petersburg* (1912), we find the following: “Alexander Ivanovich was thinking that features of Zoya Zacharovna’s face had been taken from several beautiful women: the nose from one, the mouth from another, the ears from a third beauty. But all brought together, they were irritating.” In this passage Bely anticipates, as well, the early spectator’s uneasy reaction to assertive editing and the extreme close-up.

In the United States, a new era in the representation of the body begins in the period following the Second World War, with the early films of Maya Deren, to be sure, but perhaps more pertinently for present purposes, in the work of collaboration between the filmmaker Willard Maas and the British poet George Barker, at that time resident in New York. Through the succession of extreme close-ups in which skin, fold, membrane, hair, limb, and member are transformed into plateaus, prairies, pools, caves, crags, and canyons of uncharted territory, *Geography of the Body*, produced, like *Meshes in the Afternoon*, in 1943, develops the grand metaphor of the body as landscape. Estranged, the body

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appears as an "America," a "Newfoundland," its lineaments suffused with the minatory thrill of exploration. Through close-up, magnification, and patterns of editing, this film text works to disarticulate, to reshape and transform the body into landscape, thereby converging, in a manner that is both curious and interesting, with that filmic microscopy which now offers us passage through the canals of the reproductive and cardiovascular systems.

It was the project of Stan Brakhage to chart this landscape, and, through hyperbolization of montage, radical suppression of the establishing shot, and systematic use of close-up, to expand, with a view to its cosmic extrapolations, the disarticulated body's analogical virtuality, as in Prelude, Dog Star Man (1964). And we can now clearly see that the trajectory initiated in Window Water Baby Moving (1958), the early masterwork produced to document the birth of his first child, culminates in The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes (1974), filmed in the Pittsburgh morgue. Brakhage now offered the autopsist's literal, manual dismembering of the human cadaver: the cutting up of men and women.

There is a dominant trend toward this representation of a body-in-pieces, of what is in Kleinian theory termed the part object, that runs, like an insistent thread, a sustained subtext, through much of American artistic production (and through its painting and sculpture in particular) in the decades of the 1950s and '60s. Art objects as part objects, then. Locating the sources, we encounter, once again, in a surprisingly wide range of work, the haunting and seminal presence to whom artists of that period paid, in varying forms and degrees of intent, a
steadily intensifying tribute: that of Marcel Duchamp. This effort of location entails consideration of a few works of emblematic import.

The first of these is 11, rue Larrey, that door which, in defiance of the apothegm, stands both open and closed, at one and the same time. Reflecting now, more than a quarter century later, upon the old Factory, one recalls that site whose threshold was indeed marked by a door both open and closed: the space in which one could, as the saying goes, "swing both ways," where stern imperatives of choice, the strict polarity of either/or, reified in the austere ethos of abstract expressionism, were abrogated, displaced by what is currently termed "sexual preference." In this arena, whose ecumenicity accommodated homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, MARiée and CELibataire were daily conjoined, and frequently within the prototypical single body, single persona.

Duchamp has offered us, however, in addition to this emblem of indifference, another set of images, representations of that supreme part object, the prime object of infantile identification and projection: the breast. Prière de toucher (1947) was to be followed by the sculptural renderings of the male and female sexual parts, Objet-Dard (1951) and Feuille de Vigne Femelle (1950). And we are, I shall want to claim, justified in seeing Rotary Demo-Sphere (Precision Optics) (1925) as a prototype of Anemic Cinema (1927), which conflates, in its spirals' alternately receding and projecting movement, penis and breast—often identified by the infant as one and split off in impulses of rage and/or love. I
refer here to the theorization of the part object by Melanie Klein, founded upon that of Karl Abraham in his attribution of the importance for the child of the relation to part objects such as the breast (or feces) in his work on Melancholia. Klein later posits the initial introjection, by the child, of the mother’s breast and a constant splitting of its good (giving) and bad (rejecting) aspects, aimed at introjection of a good breast and the projection and annihilation of a bad one. Moreover—and this will have bearing upon one’s readings of Duchamp and of other artists whose work concerns us—the cannibalistic relation to the breast is, during the second oral stage, transferred to the penis as well; both are revealed in significant case histories as the objects of deepest oral desires. Klein was to go on to observe that the sadistic, cannibalistic fantasies and anxieties aggravated by weaning would lead the child to displace its interest onto the whole of the mother’s body, so that a primitive Oedipal envy and jealousy is thereby added to the oral sadism. And a urethral and anal sadism, added to the oral, would lead to the stage described by Melanie Klein as the stage of maximum sadism.

Every other vehicle of sadistic attack that the child employs, such as anal sadism and muscular sadism is, in the first instance, leveled against its mother’s frustrating breast, but it is soon directed to the inside of her body, which thus becomes at once the target of every highly intensified and effective instrument of sadism. In early analysis, these anal-sadistic, destructive desires of the small child constantly alternate with desires to destroy its mother’s body by devouring and wetting it, but their original aim of eating up and destroying her breast is always discernable in them.9

The Kleinian scenario of infantile development is, of course, that of a horror feature, the longest-running one known to us. Klein and Hanna Segal were to go on to elaborate upon the notion of children’s art and art in general as involving the desire to repair and make restitution to the object of destructive fantasies.

Our most compelling point of entry into the consideration of the role of the part object within the art of the mid-1950s through the ’60s is to be found in the work of Eva Hesse. This choice is dictated by the conviction that it was the major achievement of a woman artist, through her obsessive constitution of a repertory of part objects (and this within the minimalistic moment) to have produced the elements of a radical renewal of the sculptural enterprise, of its grammar and its materials. It is this primal image, the archetypal part object, that is more generally inscribed within the broadest range of late 1950s and ’60s American artistic production, in forms and variations so diverse as almost to defy inventory. Even as it ranged from the work of Kenneth Noland to that of Jasper Johns, its presence was effectively masked by the dominant critical and theoretical discourse of the period. In reading Johns’s celebrated and enigmatic Target with Plaster Casts (1955), we discern, in addition to the part objects cast and placed in the upper-level compartments, the image of the main panel as more than a representation of “surface.”

It is therefore interesting to consider the reading Leo Steinberg offers of this work in 1963, engaged as he then was in a pioneering critique of the claims of “formalist” criticism. Remarking on the manner in which Johns’s subjects tend to be “whole entities” or complete systems seen from no particular angle, Steinberg infers a refusal to manifest subjectivity. Turning to Target and noting Nicholas Calas’s criticism — “One-ness is killed either by repetition or fragmentation” — Steinberg records Johns’s explanation of the inserted anatomical frag-
ments as the casual adoption of readymades (they “happened” to be around in the studio), and goes on to remark on “the fact that these anatomical parts are not whole, that only so much of them is inserted as will fit in each box, that they are clipped to size.” From this he concludes that “the human body is not the ostensible subject. The subject remains the bull’s-eye in its wholeness, for which the anatomical fragments provide the emphatic foil.”

What then follows is the account of a verbal jousting between Steinberg and Johns, with Johns characteristically insisting on the absence of either overt or implicit emotional content, of his desire (as seen by Steinberg) to excise meaning from them.

But Steinberg is characteristically uncomfortable with this position, for “when affective human elements are conspicuously used, and yet not used as subjects, their subjugation becomes a subject that’s got out of control. At any rate, no similar fracturing of known wholes has occurred since in Johns’s work.”11 And “the assumption of a realism of absolute impersonality always does fail—if taken literally. That assumption is itself a way of feeling; it is the ascetic passion which sustains the youthful drive of a youthful Velásquez, or a Courbet, while they shake the emotional slop from themselves and their models.”12

Against Steinberg’s reading of his paintings as works of absence, Johns’s contention leaves Steinberg with a feeling of almost palpable dissatisfaction. He has certainly circled in closer to these elusive works, but he has not, as it were, quite grasped them. But hasn’t he passed too rapidly over the central panel, that of the target, the bull’s-eye? For the target is surely another conventionalized variant of that primal object whose interest is, in this instance, heightened for us in that it is represented as the implicit object of aggression.

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 52.
Bearing in mind this consideration of the part object, epitomized in a range of practices—in those, among others, of Duchamp, Johns, Noland, Hesse, and in the editing patterns of Brakhage, as inheritor of the "classical" or postrevolutionary tradition of montage—I return to the Factory, reentering through that swinging door. I do so, however, by way of a detour.

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There is a story—apocryphal perhaps—of Verlaine's impoverished last years, of the Paris garret and its meager furnishings, entirely covered in gilt paint. To the visitor, bewildered as to the how and why of this fancy, Verlaine's reply was, "But this is how poets should live!" Grandeur, as tribute to and warrant of the artist's vocation, was not, one imagines, the point of Billy Linich's decoration of Warhol's studio walls. That would, in fact, have been distinctly at odds with the aesthetic of the tacky which prevailed in this latter-day version of Bohemia. Rather, tin foil bestowed, as gold would not, the minimal reflective potential upon surfaces, which could transform the Factory into a dim Hall of

Mirrors, redoubling in its confusion of actor and audience the narcissistic dynamic of the site’s theatrical economy.

Here was a factory located outside the codes and standards that govern and sustain industrial labor. To understand the old Factory is to absorb that paradox and to reconstruct a world in which the prohibitions and restrictions that determine and sustain the structures of production are bracketed.

We reconstruct, then, a milieu in which, as well, the prohibitions and restrictions that govern the structure of everyday life are suspended, together with the decorum that underwrites traditional forms of social hierarchy. From this world are excised the pity, piety, and etiquette linked to those forms. Here distances between persons are abrogated and eccentricity is exalted. Parodistic expression defines the center, the core of a continuous representation governed by a principle of inversion. Here the world is seen in reverse, as it were, or askew, or upside down. Travesty and humiliation are central tropes of representation. And through this place, from time to time, came the sound of laughter, shrill and ambivalent, both mordant and revitalizing, both aggressive and self-destructive.
Such was the milieu of the old Factory in its prelapsarian era (1960–68), the site of Warhol's most productive period. In that world, choice, risk, transgression had lost their ground; the enveloping air breathed, sanctioned, enabled, the abolition of those interdictions that constitute their terrain. The old Factory of East Forty-seventh Street was, in the expansionist climate of the early 1960s, preeminently the site upon which Duchamp's door of 11, rue Larrey opened to reveal the din and clutter, the revelry and theatries of Bakhtinian carnival, as described in the great works on Rabelais and Dostoyevsky. The old Factory, the site of Warhol's recasting of the Gesamtkunstwerk, solicits analysis in terms of Bakhtin's master category, defined as the "sum total of all diverse festivities of the carnival type." 13

One recalls the manner in which carnival, in its most general form, is defined as syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort, producing variants and nuances that vary with period and with differences of cultic origin and individual festivity. As Bakhtin puts it, carnival has "worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms—from large and complex mass actions to individual gestures." And most significantly, "As theatrical representation, it abolishes the dividing line between performers and spectators, since everyone becomes an active participant and everyone communes in the carnival act, which is neither contemplated nor, strictly speaking, performed; it is lived."

Within this life, several particular modalities are distinguished. Those of especial relevance here are: 1. Abolition of distance and establishment of free and familiar contact and exchange; 2. Eccentricity; 3. Mésalliance; 4. Profanation. In carnival, behavior and discourse are unmoored, as it were, freed from the bonds of the social formation. Thus, in carnival, age, social status, rank, and property lose their powers, have no place; familiarity of exchange is heightened.

Linked to this is the possibility of "carnivalistic mésalliances": "All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced... are drawn into carnivalesque contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, wed's, and combines the sacred with the profane, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid." And, of course, the high with the low.

It thus becomes that nexus within which mésalliances are formed. As Kathy Acker has pointed out in a recent account of the Factory, "the uptown world of society and fashion" here joined that of prostitution and the general "riffraff of Forty-second street, that group which at the same time no decent person, even a hippy, would recognize as being human." It was in this social nexus that Edie Sedgwick (among other "girls of good family") enjoyed her brief celebrity. Here the hustler could play Tarzan to Jane, "sort of."

And since in carnival, parodistic images parody one another, variously and

Andy Warhol in the old Factory.
from varying points of view, Roman parody is described as resembling "an entire system of crooked mirrors, elongating, diminishing, distorting in various directions and to various degrees." We may say that the unfoiled studio literalized this practice. More than that, it was Warhol's strength to have revised the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, displacing it, redefining it as site of production, and recasting it in the mode of carnival, thereby generating for our time the most trenchant articulation of relation between cultures, high and low. In the picture of carnival as a system of representation, we can recognize the old Factory, that hall of mirrors whose virtual space generated improbable encounters and alliances, eliciting the extravagant acts, gestures, "numbers," that composed the serial parody of Hollywood production that overtakes the Warholian filmography of 1960–68.

It is, however, Bakhtin's definition of the essential and defining carnivallistic act that completes and confirms one's characterization of the old Factory as carnivallistic system. That act is "the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king." Italicizing the phrase, he insists upon its presence in all festivities of the carnival type — in the saturnalia as in European carnival and festival of fools.

Under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world — the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal. Carnival is the festival of all-anihilating and all-renewing time. Thus might one express the basic concept of carnival. But we emphasize again: this is not an abstract thought but a living sense of the world, expressed in the concretely sensuous forms . . . of the ritual act.

The crowning ritual is, however, invested with a dualism, and ambivalence; its shifts celebrate the "joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority." For

Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester; this act, as it were, opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of carnival. In the rituals of crowning . . . the symbols of authority that are handed over to the newly crowned king and the clothing in which he is dressed — all become ambivalent and acquire a veneer of joyful relativity; they become almost stage props . . . . From the very beginning, a decrowning glimmers through the crowning.

And Bakhtin stresses the manner in which, for the medieval festival of fools, mock priests, bishops, and popes were chosen in place of a king. It is indeed in the climactic sequence of *The Chelsea Girls* (1968) — the crowning work of Warhol's significant film production — that the Factory, which generated the continuous
parodistic procession of divas, queens, and "superstars," produces, like the world of the medieval carnival, as its culminating ritual its own *parodia sacra*: the election of a pope. Ondine, the virtuoso performer at the center of the film's most brilliantly pyrotechnical sequence, does indeed insist that he has been elected Pope.

He comes on with his paper bag,

from which (with much noisy crinkling on the sound track) he extracts a syringe. Using his belt to tie his arm, he proceeds through the methodical ritual of giving himself a shot of Methedrine. . . . Ondine then turns to the camera and asks if he should begin. "Okay? Okay. Well now, let's see." He arranges himself more comfortably. "As you are all well aware, uh, I am the Pope. And, uh, the Pope has many duties. It's a crushing job. I can't tell you. And—uhhh—I've come down here today in order to give you all some kind of inside view of my life, and what I've been doing with my uhhhh"—there is a long tracking pause—"Popage? Right, my Popage. Not just the Pope as Pope, but the Pope as a man. Right? First of all, you will undoubtedly want to know who, or what, I am Pope of. Well, uhhhh," a mock faggot groan, running his fingers through his hair. "Jesus! There's nobody left. Who's left?"

Time is being filled. . . . But now, back on the left, a woman walks on; somebody new has come to give her confession to Ondine, as Ingrid Superstar did at the beginning of the film. As she sits down and begins to talk, something seems slightly wrong, slightly off . . . somewhat smirkily, she sets out to question the Pope's spiritual authority. She announces that she is hesitant to confess. Exactly Ondine's meat. "My dear, there is nothing you cannot say to me. Nothing. Now tell me, why can't you confess?" The inattentive ear hears the remark fall: "I can't confess to you because you're such a phony. I'm not trying to be anyone."

Ondine replies,

"Well, let me tell you something, my dear little Miss Phony. You are a phony. You're a disgusting phony. May God forgive you," and Ondine slaps her again, more violently, then leaps up in a paroxysmic rage. With his open hands he begins to strike the cowering bewildered girl around the head and shoulders. "You Goddamned phony, get the hell off this set. Get out."

Ondine then breaks down and circles the room, hysterical—"I'm sorry, I just can't go on, this is just too much, I don't want to go on"—it is the longest camera movement
in the film. Her husband is a loathsome fool, she is a loathsome fool, and so it goes. Phase by slow, self-justifying phase, Ondine, who has been beside himself, slowly returns to himself—that is, to the camera. And, as he calms himself, the camera reasserts its presence.  

Ondine’s interlocutor, in questioning his papal authenticity, has transgressed the limits, violated the canon, opened a breach in the regime of carnival, the ground of Ondine’s papal incarnation. If Ondine cannot go on, it is because that breach is, indeed, a grave one, involving not merely an error of style, a faux pas, a loss of “cool,” but a radical assault upon the Factory’s regime of representation and, by implication, upon its spatiotemporal axes.

The time of carnivalesque representation is that of undifferentiated distension. This carnivalesque Factory constructed, enclosed within a world where time is indeed money, suspended, annulled, in turn, the spatiotemporality of productivity’s ratio. Carnival time is indeed expended, not clocked or measured. Day and night succeeded each other in scarcely visible sequence within the tinfoiled precinct of the old Factory. And this was fundamental to the sense in which its production had introduced a rupture within filmic practice as well.

The cinema of part objects, epitomized in the hyperbolic montage of Brakhage, had, as we know, been that of aspiration to a continuous present, one image succeeding another at a pace that allows no space or time for recall or anticipation. The spectator is positioned within an hallucinated now. Warhol’s films generate another kind of temporality, for they take, as it were, their time, the distended time of contemplation and expectation: Robert Indiana slowly, slowly eating what appears to be a single mushroom; a man receiving a blowjob; John Giorno sleeping; the light changing on the Empire State Building. That time, punctuated only by the flares of successive reel endings, is also time in which to wonder: “What’s going to happen? Do I have time to go and buy some popcorn or to go to the bathroom without missing anything? How long, oh Lord, how long?” In an industrial film—say Douglas Sirk’s Written on the Wind—the gap is not irreparable; in Window Water Baby Moving it is; for Brakhage’s categorical rejection of the narrative codes has, in fact, as one of its primary purposes, to insure that irreparability.

Brakhage saw in Warhol’s work an elimination of subjectivity. He, Brakhage, had insisted on a preeminence of subjectivity that required a radical assault upon the space of representation, upon the radical separation of signifier and signified. Not simply the suppression of objects, actors, and actions, but the radical transformation of the spatiotemporal which was their precondition: the elision of their determinant coordinates. In his filmic perpetual present, inspired

14. This account of the climactic sequence of The Chelsea Girls is drawn from Stephen Koch’s exceptionally fine study, Stargazer: Andy Warhol’s World and his Films (New York: Marion Boyers, 1985), pp. 94–96.
by the poetics of Gertrude Stein, images and sequences thus follow in the most 
rapid and hyperbolic fluidity of editing, eliminating anticipation as vector of 
cinematic construction. Both memory and anticipation are annulled by images as 
immediate and fugitive as those we call hypnagogic, that come to us in a half-
waking state. Like them, Brakhage’s films present a nonstop renewal of the 
perceptual object which resists both observation and cognition. The hypnagogic, 
as Sartre had noted, can excite attention and perception: “one sees something, 
but what one sees is nothing.”

This is a vision that aspired to a pure presence in which the limits separating 
perception and eidetic imagery dissolve in the light of vision as Revelation, 
uncorrupted by the Fall that is called the Renaissance, as perpetuated in the very 
construction of the camera lens.

Brakhage is known to have uttered a howl of rage at the emergence of 
Warhol’s film work—largely, one surmises, because it seemed not to be work. But 
surely, mainly because the old Factory regenerates, as it were, through the

celebrated unblinking voyeuristic stare of Warhol's camera, the time, the
temporal axis of expectation along which narrative can be reinstated. What Brak-
hage foresaw, no doubt (with an anticipatory shudder rather reminiscent of
Eisenstein's, just three decades before, at the approach of sound) was that along
the temporal axis the narrative syntagma could be restored, and with it the space
of the whole body as erotic object of narrative desire.

Warhol's parody of the film factory stands, nevertheless, as a powerful gloss
on the Frankfurt analysis of the culture industry. To reread that text is to recall
to what degree it focuses upon film production as the paradigmatic mode of the
culture industry, and how sharply its critique is directed at what we now see as
the construction and positioning of the spectator.

For the last decade and a half the discipline of cinema studies has worked to
analyze and theorize that positioning. There is, however, a sense in which the
recent ascension of cultural studies begins to work against this theorization
through its determination to valorize the spectator, now cast as resistant. (One
thinks of a recent characterization of Madonna's body as "site of semiotic strug-
gle.") For Warhol, stars were, in Horkheimer and Adorno's phrase, "a pattern
around which the world embracing garment is cut," a pattern they warn us "to
be followed by those shears of legal and economic justice with which the last
projecting ends of thread are cut away." For as they put it, in the note entitled
"Mass Society,"

The opinion that the leveling-down and standardization of men is
accompanied on the other hand by a heightened individuality in the
"leader" personalities that corresponds to the power they enjoy, is
false and an ideological pretense. [Rather they are] focal points at
which identical reactions of countless citizens intersect . . . a collect-
ive and overexaggerated projection of the powerless ego of each
individual.

They look like hairdressers, provincial actors, and hack journal-
ists. Part of their moral influence consists precisely in the fact that they
are powerless in themselves but deputize for all the other powerless
individuals, and embody the fullness of power for them, without
themselves being anything other than the vacant spaces taken up
accidentally by power. They are not excepted from the break-up of
individuality; all that has happened is that the disintegrated form
triumphs in them and to some extent is compensated for its decom-
position. The "leaders" have become what they already were in a less
developed form throughout the bourgeois era: actors playing the part
of leaders.15

It is the supposedly resistant spectator of cultural studies, "glued," as they say, to the television, who, having somehow converted the family living room into a site of resistance, elected—not once, but twice—just such an actor to the presidency of the United States of America.
