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# **Diane Arbus and Albert Oehlen: Some Notes towards a Dialectical Conception of Art**

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## **Introduction**

In this paper, I theorize two dialectic moments in which art is situated. My hypothetical dialectic is based on Hal Foster's explication of the relationship between the neo-avant-garde and the historical avant-garde which forms the thesis of his text *The Return of the Real*. Foster's argument can be broadened to explicate not just the neo avant-garde's relationship to the historical avant-garde but also all art as such. Foster sees the historical avant-garde as a kind of first moment that will later be comprehended (and subsequently "completed") by a second moment (in this case, the neo avant-garde). In this paper, I use Foster's dialectic as a heuristic to understand contemporary art. Specifically, I will look at how the photographs of Diane Arbus can illustrate work which would occupy the first moment in Foster's dialectic by functioning as stains as Žižek describes them. Further, I will look at contemporary artists' potential to become blinded by post-ideological dogma and how this blindness leads them to become stuck in the first moment of Foster's dialectic. This situation necessitates a catalyst to spur contemporary artists' thinking to comprehend the ontological conditions of their ideological world. Here, I will demonstrate how recent paintings by Albert Oehlen function as Žižekian acts that clear the aesthetic ground to open a space for a second artistic moment.

## Žižek, Arbus, and the Stain

For Žižek, every picture has a stain, a mote in the field of vision, an aporia. Žižek sees these stains as “kernels” of the real. The symbolic order *exists* to cover over these kernels to prevent an eruption of the capital “R” Real as conceived by Lacan. These kernels, seen as stains from within the symbolic network of relationships meant to occlude them, function as nodal points for the symbolic. By looking at the stain, we see the make-up of the whole field of symbolic relations attempting—but ultimately failing—seamlessly to incorporate it. Žižek states, “There is always a point where ‘I see nothing,’ a point that ‘makes no sense,’ i.e., which functions as the picture’s stain—this is the point from which the very picture returns the gaze, looks back at me” (Žižek 2001, *Enjoy...*: 15). We see, briefly, those moments where the symbolic “shows,” where its awkward cobbling over the Real is most apparent. It is *because* the symbolic writes over these stains that a series of stable relationships can form. Thus, the stain is simultaneously where the symbolic is anchored and where it fails to be anchored. It’s interesting to note, then, that Diane Arbus, whose photographs cause such discomfort, referred to her subjects as stains. In a letter to David Pratt, she writes, “They are the proof that something was there and no longer is. Like a stain. And the stillness of them is boggling. You can turn away but when you come back they’ll still be there looking at you” (qtd. in *Revelations* 236). Arbus means this literally; her subjects almost always look directly at their viewer. This look inculcates. The stain addresses us. Here, I’ll focus on Arbus’s *A Young Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C. 1966* and *Seated Man in Bra and Stockings, N.Y.C. 1967*, though a sizable portion of her oeuvre could easily work equally well.

The symbolic order constructs subject positions prior to the subjects who will occupy them. Žižek states, “In the network of intersubjective relations, every one of us is identified with, pinned down to, a certain fantasy place in the other’s symbolic structure” (Žižek 2001: 5). He continues, “We can relate to these ‘people of flesh and blood’ only insofar as we are able to identify them with a certain place in our symbolic fantasy space” (Žižek 2001: 6). These fantasy spaces are constituted by a number of overlapping symbolic constructions, one of which is gender. Gender is a predicate of all interpersonal relations, a position within the symbolic that marks individuals and informs any encounter. Our ability to relate to someone is contingent on our ability to place him or her into this symbolic yet imaginary space. What’s elided in these transactions is the imaginary space itself. This space is only noticeable as fantasy when something which doesn’t fit attempts to occupy it. Žižek states, “That is to say, ‘fantasy’ designates an element which ‘sticks out,’ which cannot be integrated into the given symbolic structure, yet which, precisely as such, constitutes its identity” (Žižek 2001:

89). The subjects of Arbus's photographs are male, yet they "stick out" because they occupy the "wrong" space. We know they are trying to occupy the feminine gender due to the signifiers present in the photograph.



Figure 1: *A Young Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C. 1966*

In *A Young Man...* the subject wears his tar-black hair in curlers. His nails are long and painted. His eyebrows have been plucked entirely and in their stead is a line from a makeup pen. He wears eyeliner, mascara & lipstick and holds his cigarette loosely between his index and forefingers with his thumb resting on the butt. In *Seated Man...* the subject sits cross-legged, with his left foot dangling loosely. He wears hose, stilettos, and a matching black bra and panty set. What's interesting about these photographs is that the viewer sees these items as signifiers for the first time, despite the fact they've "always" been there. These details stick out because they are "misplaced," so the viewer sees the constitutive elements of her fantasy as fantasy. In these photographs, the viewer

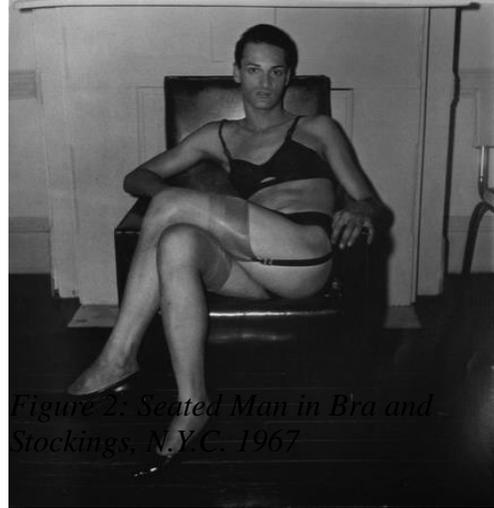
becomes aware that the properties of any given fantasy space are not essential to a particular subject, but transferable. Thus, her symbolic relations are both made visible and proven illusory<sup>1</sup> at the same time. The symbolic fiction of gender exists explicitly to prevent such subjects who represent the dramatically unsymbolizable Real of sexuality from existing. For gender to be seen (in order to take place in our imaginary economy) it must become a set of practices. Thus, gender is the symbolic lexicon of codified relations meant to assimilate the unsymbolizable Real qua sexuality; and the transvestite is the stain, the site where symbolization falters, and in its faltering, the viewer sees the symbolic as such. What unsettles the viewer is that the misplaced subject is as able to occupy the fantasy spot as well as anyone else. So, in a reciprocal process, the viewer realizes that there is nothing inherent in herself that places her in her subject position. For this reason Arbus's subjects gaze at us. To accept the gaze is to experience what the viewer has forgotten, her existence in a network of symbolic relations that is, essentially, imaginary. As Žižek states, "This empty form, this black stain in the very heart of reality, is...the 'objective correlative' of the subject...[B]y means of anamorphic stains, "reality" indexes the presence of the subject [emphasis Žižek]" (Žižek 2001: 134). Ultimately, Arbus's photographs are as much "about" the person viewing them as the ostensible subject.

## Roland Barthes' Myths and the Stain

Roland Barthes' notion of mythologies, from his book of the same name, is useful here. For Barthes, myth is the way things become appropriated in semiological representation and the sublimation of this appropriation as "the way things are." The process by which myth is read as a factual system is "naturalization." Barthes writes "...in [myth], things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences" (Barthes 1972: 142). He later continues, "[myth] cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making of the world" (M, 155). Arbus's focus on the stain is a kind of demystification (or to use terminology more in line with Barthes, "demythification"). For Barthes, myth is the super-added value given to an object upon its transition into semiological representation. He writes, "Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society... A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed by Minou Drouet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter" (Barthes 1972: 109). The element added to representation is intention. All language is motivated whether we are conscious of such motivation or not. Barthes writes, "[M]yth is a type of speech defined by its intention...much more than by its literal sense...[I]n spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, *made absent* by this literal sense...This constituent ambiguity...has two consequences for the signification, which henceforth appears both like a notification and like a statement of fact" (Barthes 1972: 124). This is what mythology is: the habituation to the intentional nature of language until it seems like a statement of facts. Barthes explains:

In fact, what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system. (Barthes 1972: 131)

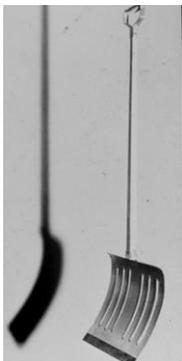
Myth doesn't hide the ties between objects and their symbolic appropriation, but rather encourages us to misrecognize them as natural, thus obscuring their historic contingency. The use value generated by representation is subsumed into things like "common sense" and the inherent excess generated



becomes sublimated. The stain, however, exposes this intentionality. The stain is a site where this excess “sticks out” as Žižek says. The stain shows that the symbolic is not a passive repository—it has an intent, and an irreducible ideological component as ideology *is* the motivated symbolic. What Arbus accomplishes by focusing on the stain is to separate history from nature and re-posit nature as a system of values.

However, Arbus isn't exploiting her subject/stains as a means of “rupturing” the symbolic. The stain occurs at moments where the symbolic *falters* but doesn't necessarily “fail.” While Arbus is interested in making the symbolic visible, she's in no way interested in escaping it. Arbus's photographs position one at “the moment when the given field is ‘sutured’ and blinds itself to its constitutive outside” (Žižek 2001: 85). Arbus catches the moments where subjects are being written over. Granted, that writing over may be awkward, cobbled together in the most provisional manner; nonetheless, the subject is interpellated. In these photographs the subjects are, supposedly, in the act of dressing. They are not fully in costume yet. This was the situation of many of Arbus's subjects (transvestite or not). She frequently photographed strippers, strongmen, circus freaks, as well as transvestites dressing or in dressing rooms. She is interested most in that moment, that flash, where the symbolic wavers, then congeals again around a subject, the moment where the subject is sutured into the fabric of the symbolic. It's not that the viewer doesn't know how to take the subjects of *Young Man in Curlers... or Seated Man...* The subject *tells* the viewer exactly how to take them, exactly which fantasy space she occupies, and this telling, this return gaze, is the symbolic given back to us. The stain's ability to do this is what makes it a nodal point. As Wayne Koestenbaum writes in “Diane Arbus and Humiliation,” “Arbus, photographing the pathetic and the decentered, turns these figures into new, vivid centers. Dignifying them, according them significance, she shuts off a realm of accidental rustlings, an unparaphrasable territory where meaning loosens, and typecasting falters” (Koestenbaum 2010: 346-347). Koestenbaum's use of term “significance” is apt as it implies Arbus's subjects gain intersubjective value as well as semiotic value. Arbus isn't giving us the realm of “accidental rustlings” where “meaning loosens, and typecasting falters,” but rather the opposite—her work is positioned at the moment where such a realm is foreclosed.

The title of Arbus's retrospective is *Revelations*. The title is in some ways an unfortunate



choice, carrying as it does such metaphysical connotations. Yet, it's also wholly accurate. What's revealed is not an exterior Real outside of our lived existence but rather our lived existence itself. *Revelations* is a mirror, not a window. The photographs in the text function like stains. While Arbus allows us to see the symbolic, we don't leave it. A useful analogy would be Duchamp's readymades whose “content” is the museum culture itself. However, their message only makes sense *within* the museum. If I put *In Advance of a Broken Arm* in my garage, it becomes a

*Figure 3: In Advance of the Broken Arm*

snow shovel again. Duchamp's readymades can only function as stains when placed in the wrong fantasy position. Thus the work is both of the symbolic and refers *only to* the symbolic. *In Advance of a Broken Arm* doesn't offer any more metaphysical truths than *A Young Man...* or *Seated Man...*—the only thing it makes visible is where we're standing.

## Hal Foster's Dialectic

The way Arbus's work is received by the viewer is analogous to how historical avant-garde is received by viewers in Hal Foster's explication of the historical avant-garde's relationship to the neo-avant-garde put forward in his text *The Return of the Real*. Foster counters German critic Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which Foster sees as *the* central text on the avant-garde (Foster 1996: 8). Particularly problematic for Foster is Bürger's treatment of the historical avant-garde as "an *absolute origin* whose aesthetic transformations are fully significant and historically effective in the first instance" (Foster 1996: 8). Foster finds this idea of self-presence suspect, stating that such assumptions see an artist like Duchamp as "born full-blown from his own forehead" and ignore the fact that "[t]he status of Duchamp... is a retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings" (Foster 1996: 8). Foster also faults Bürger for treating art as teleological, culminating in the historical avant-garde. Foster writes, "[Bürger presents] history as both *punctual and final*. Thus for him a work of art, a shift in aesthetics, happens all at once, entirely significant in its first moment of appearance, and it happens once and for all, so that any elaboration can only be a rehearsal" (Foster 1996: 10). This doesn't mean, however, that Bürger sees the avant-garde having in some way succeeded, but rather conceives it as a tragedy—a tragedy that can only be repeated, which leads Bürger to dismiss the neo-avant-garde that follows as farcical. Foster, however, complicates this critique by demonstrating the necessity of the neo-avant-garde to delineate the implications (and limitations) of the historical avant-garde. Foster's thesis describes a first moment in art that will only be understood via a second moment that follows the first. Foster counters Bürger by theorizing a dialectic between the historical avant-garde and the neo avant-garde. Foster posits "a temporal exchange between historical and neo avant-gardes, a complex relation of anticipation and reconstruction," wherein the first instance of the avant-garde is complemented and revised by the second instance of the neo-avant-garde (Foster 1996: 13). Foster explains:

[Rather] than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde, might the neo-avant-garde comprehend it for the first time? I say "comprehend," not "complete": the project of the avant-garde is no more concluded in its neo moment than it is enacted in its historical moment. In art as in psychoanalysis, creative critique is *interminable* (Foster 1996: 15).

Thus, the neo-avant-garde acts reciprocally on the historical avant-garde in a dialectic manner with a first moment that is later comprehended, but not completed, by a second moment. This moves past Bürger's teleological understandings of art. Foster sees this first instance of the historical avant-garde as characterized by its critique of convention. He explains this through the example of Alexander Rodchenko's triptych *Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue*:

What is effected by the signal acts of the historical avant-garde, as when Alexander Rodchenko presented painting as three panels of primary colors in 1921? "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion," the great constructivist remarked in 1939, "and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow. I affirmed: this is the end of painting. These are the primary colors. Every plane is a discrete plane and there will be no more representation." Here Rodchenko declares the *end* of painting, but what he demonstrates is the *conventionality* of painting: that it could be delimited to primary colors on discrete canvases in his artistic-political context with its specific permissions and pressures—this is the crucial qualification. *And nothing explicit is demonstrated about the institution of art.* (Foster 1996: 17)

This holds true for Marcel Duchamp as well, particularly his readymade sculptures, which have become synonymous with the historical avant-garde. Foster writes, "[T]he Duchamp readymade articulates the enunciative conditions of the art work from without, with an alien object. But the effect is still to reveal the conventional limits of art in a particular time and place" (Foster 1996: 17). This initial act of the avant-garde is one of delimiting the conditions of expression, a kind of bracketing of the signifier we see in modernist writing as well. Foster's conception of a dialectic relationship between the historical avant-garde and neo avant-garde can be transposed and forwarded as a framework to analyze all art, even art that is not explicitly avant-garde if we remove historically limiting terms like "avant-garde" and "neo avant-garde." While Arbus's photographs are not avant-garde in either the historical or taxonomical sense, I see her work as situated in this first moment.

### **The First Moment and (Re)presentation**

This first moment is essential as it delineates the terms of our enunciative and perceptive condition. There is, however, a danger of this representation of reality devolving into mere (re)presentation, a repetition of existing circumstances that serves to bolster ideology. This is similar to the distinction Horkheimer and Adorno make in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* between reproduction and expression that is effected by the culture industry. They state, "Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human being as what the whole has made of them. And all its agents, from the producer to the women's organizations, are on the alert to ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 100). In other words, by showing the viewer the symbolic order, one tacitly reinforces its existence as material fact, as

opposed to positing it as the mutable, intersubjective economy that the symbolic is.

Repetition is a type of assertion which can potentially abolish the critical distance Arbus wants to create by estranging the viewer from certain gender signifiers in order to bracket the referent and allow us to see these signifiers as signifiers. Subsequently, such art could ultimately act to support ideology, implicitly reaffirming the order it represents via its repetition of that order. Horkheimer and Adorno state:

Ideology becomes the emphatic and systematic proclamation of what is. Through its inherent tendency to adopt the tone of the factual report, the culture industry makes itself the irrefutable prophet of the existing order. With consummate skill it maneuvers between the crags of demonstrable misinformation and obvious truth by faithfully duplicating appearances, the density of which blocks insight. Thus the omnipresent and impenetrable world of appearances is set up as the ideal. Ideology is split between the photographing of brute existence and the blatant lie about its meaning, a lie which is not articulated directly but drummed in by suggestion. The mere cynical reiteration of the real is enough to demonstrate its divinity. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 118)

Thus, by making the symbolic process visible, Arbus runs the risk of naturalizing it, of perpetuating it via its representation as an empirical *thing*. While Arbus's is showing us the contingency of the symbolic order, which in her photographs' initial historical moment would be unsettling for a viewer, over time the effect on the viewer wanes, and images that may have once been unsettling become commonplace. Today, for example, most informed viewers of art wouldn't see Arbus's pictures of transvestites as particularly disturbing, but merely as displaying "the way things are." However, once the effect in the viewer shifts from unsettling her existing preconceptions to reaffirming her existing preconceptions, work that was once potentially disruptive or controversial to viewers—over a long enough timeline—can eventually participate in the same naturalization of myth that it once denuded. Most informed viewers of art would have already come to an understanding of gender as a symbolic fiction, so the continued repetition of this fiction can make it a kind of fact. Thus a symbolic order, even one which is made visible only during moments of crisis or challenge, as it is in Arbus's photographs, can become calcified in the minds of viewers when they are shown that order again and again.

### **Post-Ideology?**

By bracketing these signifiers off, Arbus runs the risk of fetishizing such signifiers, rendering them posthistorical. This is the "fetishism of the signifier" that Foster cautions against in *The Return of the Real* that "tend[s] to render it aesthetic, to recoup it as an art-commodity" (Foster 1996: 11). Bracketing the signifier can "occlude the historicity of its practices" (Foster 1996: 104). Such signifiers become free-floating and self-evident, severed from historical contingency. This tacitly positions a posthistorical

critical perspective from which one can perform such bracketing. Indeed, a constitutive absence of any photograph is the person taking it.<sup>ii</sup> In this manner, Arbus could return the history to what has been naturalized while ignoring the historicity of her own position. Thus, Arbus's transvestite photographs can be seen as a contradiction wherein the motivated symbolic qua ideology is made visible while simultaneously positing that there is a position outside or "above" ideology which allows for such critical distance. And, that very idea *is* ideology. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek explicitly attacks such a notion. Recognizing that one lives in an ideologically saturated world does not exculpate or distance one from such a reality. This is why Žižek states the contemporary belief that we now live in a "post-ideological" world is deeply naïve. He writes:

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological...people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society (Žižek 1989: 30).

And it's this belief in a second space that is somehow above or outside ideology that constitutes this fantasy which enables ideology to begin with. Žižek writes:

We have established a new way to read the Marxian formula "they do not know, but they are doing it": the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion...What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity... The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*. (Žižek 1989: 30)

This is why outing something as ideological can be seen as an inherently failed gesture because in doing so one merely reasserts a certain critical distance from ideology which exists only as a fantasy space *within* ideology. Therefore, when Arbus shows the viewer high heels or stockings as ideologically-motivated signifiers, the viewer comes to believe she is being disillusioned while in actuality she is becoming more deeply interpellated in the very illusion the viewer believes to be moving beyond.

One should not fault Arbus for this blind spot, however. Her work is what I consider a first moment in art. In providing us with the symbolic motivated by ideology, Arbus allows us to see the articulable conditions of our lived experience. Though ideology may be inescapable, there is a value in making it visible. My criticism pertains to modern viewers, who without a second moment provided in later works to fully analyze the first moments as exemplified by Arbus's photographs, come to be

further illusioned while believing themselves disillusioned. The *initial* American viewers of Arbus's photographs may well have been disillusioned as the presence and function of ideology was not the intellectual commonplace it is now (especially for the informed viewer of art). However, few *contemporary* viewers of art would deny the saturation of ideology in our perception, so Arbus's work functions not to disillusion their existing perception (as it may have once done) but rather to bolster the contemporary viewer's existing preconceptions. And this is where the importance of Foster's conception of the second moment of the neo-avant-garde as a comprehension of the first moment comes into play. The first moment makes visible, the second moment evaluates.<sup>iii</sup> Foster writes:

[L]ike the Rodchenko, the Duchamp is a declaration, a performative: Rodchenko "chooses." Neither work purports to be an analysis, let alone a deconstruction. The modern status of painting as made-for-exhibition is preserved by the monochrome...and the museum-gallery nexus is left intact by the readymade...Such are the limitations underscored fifty years later by artists...who...elaborate these same paradigms in order to investigate this exhibition status and that institutional nexus systematically... [T]his is the essential relation between these particular historical and neo-avant-garde practices... [A]rtists...develop the critique of the conventions of the traditional mediums, as performed by dada, constructivism, and other historical avant-gardes, into an investigation of the institution of art, its perceptual and cognitive, structural and discursive parameters. (Foster 1996: 20)

It's this complementary, dialogic understanding of art that can be forwarded (though Arbus clearly wasn't a member of the historical avant-garde, nor is she commonly associated with the neo-avant-garde, despite being contemporary with many of its early practitioners). The value of this framework lies in not taxonomical distinctions but rather the concept of a reciprocal action in art consisting of a first moment of delineation and a second moment of comprehension. Further, Foster's theoretical second moment can be broadened to include not only a critique of the institutions of art, but also a critique of the social institutions constitutive of our lived experience.

## **Cynical Reasoning**

One "problem" with this framework is that it requires a second moment. There is a potential for contemporary artists to become stuck in the first moment of Foster's dialectic and see this first moment as an artistic end game and, subsequently, art issued from this mindset becomes teleological. Foster sees this kind of fatalism, which finds its grounding in the belief that ideology has been "outed," as an example of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's "cynical reasoning." Foster writes:

According to Sloterdijk, cynical reason is "enlightened false consciousness." The cynic knows his beliefs to be false or ideological, but he holds to them nonetheless for the sake of self-protection, as a way to negotiate the contradictory demands placed upon him. This duplicity recalls the ambivalence of the fetishist in Freud: a subject who recognizes the reality of

castration or trauma (or, in my analogy here, of aesthetic conflict or political contradiction) but who disavows it. Yet the cynic does not disavow this reality so much as he ignores it, and this structure renders him almost impervious to ideology critique, for he is already demystified, already enlightened about his ideological relation to the world (this allows the cynic to feel superior to ideology critics as well). Thus ideological and enlightened at once, the cynic is “reflexively buffered”: his very splitting armors him, his very ambivalence renders him immune. (Foster 1996: 118)

The cynical artist is disabused of illusion. Her cynicism provides a false second space that distances her from ideology. Cynicism is a protection one gets after absenting themselves from ideology. Cynicism is a way of *disidentifying*, of dissociating. It is a gesture whose message is “though I do this, I am not this.” The fallacy of this gesture is that our lived experience fundamentally cannot be dissociated from ideology. Ideology is an “always already.” It is an irreducible register of lived reality. To disassociate from it is abdicate personal agency. Foster writes, “Cynical reason does not cancel so much as relinquish agency—as if agency were a small price to pay for the shield that cynicism might provide, for the immunity that ambivalence might secure” (Foster 1996: 223). For artists who come after someone like Arbus, whose work constitutes a first moment of initial seeing, the symbolic fiction of gender in the case of the photographs I’m focusing on, there is an intellectual trap in viewing predecessors as the last word and using their art to reiterate instead of comprehend the parameters of what came before. Further, there is safety for contemporary artists in repeating the gestures of an initial moment, particularly one like Arbus’s where ideology is “outed.” By doing so, contemporary artists demonstrate that they too are not duped, inoculating themselves against criticism. And thus the contemporary artists’ work becomes a cynical repetition of what came before. Unlike Arbus, who is providing a disruptive moment of initial seeing, the contemporary artists who repeat the gesture of showing us the world as ideologically saturated do so from a position of already knowing to an audience of the already informed. Since such work can lay no real claim to shock, it relies on farcical repetition, its cynicism replacing insight. Such cynicism protects contemporary artists from the demands of creating a second moment of analysis with their art. Cynicism allows the contemporary artists to do without doing, relying on a kind of fetishistic disavowal wherein they represent ideology as a construct that limits our experience yet they themselves somehow still remain outside of ideology’s boundaries. These artists provide a revelation of the already revealed, using irony to foreclose criticism of their lack of insight—they *know* their work is derivative or unoriginal, so any critique along those lines is simply proof that the critic “doesn’t get it.” These artists’ ironic self-awareness of representing prevents any critique of their work being repetitious. Viewers, then, are asked to adopt the same sense of irony (after all, irony only affects cynics, and artists who rely on it both presume and create their own cynical audience). Cynicism is the belief system that allows the contemporary artist and viewer to stay within the bounds of ideology (to continually repeat its existence to the point of calcifying it as an immutable “fact of life”) while still retaining the feeling that they are somehow not

part of that very same system.

However the affected distance of cynicism is just that, affected. One of the things Žižek argues in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is the necessity of moving beyond an ideological critique whose signature move is demystification. In contemporary society, such disillusionment has *already* been accounted for. Žižek writes, “It is clear, therefore, that confronted with such cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer works ... [C]ynical reason takes this distance into account in advance” (Žižek 1989: 27). According to Žižek, “in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, that cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game” (Žižek 1989: 24). This ironic detachment (the way cynicism is now manifested), characteristic not only of many contemporary artists but society as a whole, is an illusion. The big Other (be it the law, society, etc...) couldn’t care less whether or not subjects are performing ideology ironically as long as they do it. Cynical distance and ironic detachment, then, are not modes of resistance but rather tools of ideology that provide us with imaginary methods of resistance in order to foreclose any substantive resistance. This misrecognition *is* ideology. Žižek states:

...it is not just a question of seeing things (that is, social reality) as they “really are,” of throwing away the distorting spectacles of ideology; the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence. (Žižek 1989: 25)

A better way of looking at the situation is to understand that:

*“ideological” is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence—that is, the social effectively, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals “do not know what they are doing.” “Ideological” is not the “false consciousness” of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by “false consciousness.”* [emphasis Žižek] (Žižek 1989: 16)

He later continues, “Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them* [emphasis Žižek]” (Žižek 1989: 30). This is not to negate the importance of a critical first moment that delimits the conditions of self expression and representation. The problem is that this moment can stagnate into an objective truth in service to the conditions it delimits when such a moment is not analyzed by a subsequent, second moment addressing the ontological conditions underlying those conditions of expression. This is the danger of contemporary artists who show us the world as saturated with ideology without addressing ideology’s very inseparability from the ability to “see” anything at all. Thus, there exists a necessity for some sort of catalyst in this first moment in order to move to the second.

## Acts

This catalyst will take the form of what Žižek describes as an “act.” Acts are moments of absolute freedom, that “[temporarily suspend] the field of ideological meaning, i.e., which [interrupt] the link between ‘words’ and ‘deeds’” (Žižek 2001: 35). Acts are “founded only in [themselves], not in any kind of ideological ‘sufficient grounds’” and thus seem nonsensical to those within the symbolic (Žižek 2001: 35-6). They are *inherently* nonsensical; they take the subject out of any frame of reference. Words lose their tie to actions; signifiers lose their performative power. However, the subject undergoing an act doesn’t leave the symbolic permanently (to do so is accomplishable only by death). The subject is utterly changed by the act. The distinction between “act” and “action” is important. “Action” implies agency, the ability to meaningfully perform inside an intersubjective network. In other words, action is what happens within the symbolic. An act requires the radical abjuration of agency (as evidenced by the fact that an act can be forced). Despite being able to *initiate* an act, however, the subject can’t *perform* one. Žižek explains:

The act differs from an active intervention (action) in that it radically transforms its bearer (agent): the act is not simply something I “accomplish”—after an act, I’m literally “not the same as before.” In this sense, we could say that the subject “undergoes” the act (“passes through” it) rather than “accomplishes” it: in it, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not), i.e., the act involves a kind of temporary eclipse... of the subject. Which is why every act worthy of this name is “mad” in the sense of radical *unaccountability*: by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a “crime” a “transgression,” namely of the limit of irreducible *risk*: in its most fundamental dimension, it is always *negative*, i.e., an act of annihilation, of wiping out— (Žižek 2001: 44)

Though acts are inherently negative, they can be “positive” for a subject in the sense that when the subject re-enters the symbolic, she has the potential to enter in a new position. Žižek calls this gesture a kind of ‘symbolic suicide,’ ‘an act of ‘losing all,’ of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that [enables] us to begin anew from the ‘zero point,’” (Žižek 2001: 43). “[A]n *act* is at the very foundation of a new social link,” states Žižek (Žižek 2001: 45). The act is not a second moment in Foster’s dialectic, however. Every act is void of “content.” An act cannot analyze. An act is a ground clearing that creates space for a new subject. I see the act, as it is manifested in artistic work, as a way to spur a stagnated first moment into a dialectical process with a second moment which will take place in the empty space opened by the act.

The artwork of Albert Oehlen provides an excellent illustration. Take his painting *Chloé*, one from a series started in 2007. Characteristic of these paintings is an awkwardly juxtaposed collage base made of European advertisements and inkjet prints of typographically manipulated words the

artist has chosen, over which Oehlen smears paint, usually into an indeterminate dun color, creating amorphous, cataract-like spots that make both the artist's words and the advertisements indiscernible in places. His compositions eschew craft. His color combinations are hideous, blending to the same awful gray one achieves when she paints the same space with every possible color. Oehlen's brushstrokes are somehow less than haphazard, more unintentional than accidental. The paintings, for lack of a better term, look like shit. And yet, such a comment, however accurate, misses the point entirely. They *are* shit. Oehlen, with paintings like *Chloé*, is depicting an excremental excess of the Real in the symbolic. The Subjects of Arbus's photographs function as stains at the moment of incorporation into the symbolic; Oehlen's smeared paint functions as a stain at its moment of rejection by the symbolic. Thus, the conception of both artists work occurs at a similar moment—"the condition of being on the brink of conversion to anything," as Arbus describes it—the difference being that Arbus's subjects converge with the symbolic into "something" while Oehlen's painted smears converge with the unsymbolizable Real into "nothing." In his 2009 interview with Max Dax, Oehlen states, "I was aiming at abstract painting that had an innate irritability caused by the obtrusive adverts. I definitely wanted to be able to say the pictures were paintings, too, as opposed to collages. Every now and then, the interplay between two posters creates a joke, but there's no statement behind the content, the content implodes" (Oehlen and Dax 2009: 81). Later, he elaborates, "You've got these advertising elements that are without meaningful context and that will not interact with the other elements in the picture like in a question and answer game—no negation, confirmation, dissimilarity, nothing like that!" (Oehlen and Dax 2009: 81).

We see this in *Chloé*. The advertisements *seem* to give the painting a context. In the upper-left corner is an upside down perfume ad with the inverted name *Chloé* in front of a female model over whose head a giant letter “B” has been pasted, the “B” starting a word which is ultimately indecipherable. In the lower right is, in my best approximation, a cross-dressing soldier, seemingly floating in space and framed by a window. The picture is clearly a sliver of something bigger, yet the rest of the image is covered by another image that has been either magnified or cropped in such a way to make its content entirely unrecognizable. Overlaying this are digitally-designed letters, printed out on what looks like standard 8.5” X 11” paper in a rounded, childish font. These letters form the only decipherable



Figure 4: *Chloe*

words, the article “the” and the noun “cow,” neither of which goes particularly far in contextualizing the work. Moreover, the collage elements, which seem at first laid out in a rectilinear fashion, are actually slightly askew. Even in reproduction one can see wrinkles and creases in the image where Oehlen has pasted them sloppily to the canvas. This functions as the context of Oehlen’s painting, and yet it works proactively against providing any substantive context. The collage comes just close enough to frustrate but doesn’t go so far as to help. Indeed, there are a myriad of signifiers present in the work, but they all feel somehow broken or ruptured. John Kelsey notes that the images form not so much a base as a “false bottom” (qtd in Pearson 92). Kelsey states that in Oehlen’s paintings “images [become] separated from any informative, revolutionary or ultimately painterly task. Just images, with no job to do. Nothingness, the void” (qtd. in Pearson 92). These images, severed from the symbolic, become free-floating imaginary spaces without an intersubjective symbolic network to aggregate them into any kind of significant arrangement—in its stead, as the painting’s anchor is a large smear slightly to the left of the center of the canvass, yet clearly dominating the visual field as other, smaller smears seem to radiate in awkward angles from it like severed tentacles. Oehlen’s painting functions as a stain for the viewer, a kernel of the real, not at “the moment when the given field is ‘sutured’ and blinds itself to its constitutive outside” by the viewer but rather, at the inverse moment, when the given field rips open the sutures and exposes the viewer to the constitutive outside. While Arbus’s photographs

allow the viewer to see herself for the “first” time as positioned by the symbolic, Oehlen’s paintings allow the viewer to *feel* herself as a subject outside the symbolic (without, of course, actually taking her outside of the symbolic). The experience is not necessarily pleasant. Thus, Oehlen’s content is the effect on the subject viewing the painting. Not the intersubjective subject, but the subject as him or herself. Thus, even though the painting is of a stain, the painting’s *effect* on the viewer is an act.

## The Real

Obviously, Oehlen’s artwork does not access the Real as unsymbolizable trauma, which is how many contemporary critics and theorists use the term. Oehlen’s work shows the Real only in the sense that it acts as an imaginary “spectre” of the Real. The Real exists in that it participates in our symbolic economy in an imaginary form, but not as an outside to which we can appeal. To conceive of the Real this way is to posit an Other of the Other. Indeed, Žižek addresses this explicitly in his text *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. For Žižek, such an appeal is just metaphysics through different means, representative of a desire to move beyond a world of semblances to a Real world. He writes:

[W]e should abandon the standard metaphoric of the Real as the terrifying Thing that is impossible to confront face to face, as the ultimate Real concealed beneath the layers of imaginary and/or symbolic Veils: the very idea that, beneath the deceptive appearances, there lies hidden some ultimate Real Thing too horrible for us to look at directly is the ultimate appearance—this Real Thing is a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency (“antagonism”). (Žižek 2002: 31)

For Žižek, such an idealized understanding of the Real tacitly reinforces the very world of appearances one seeks to surpass by adopting such a belief. The Real exists *only* as a symptom of itself. There is no Real as such. Žižek writes:

The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition...an image, a semblance, an “effect,” which, at the same time, delivered “the thing itself”....[T]he real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre [emphasis Žižek].* (Žižek 2002: 19)

Therefore, Oehlen’s act is *not* presenting us with the Real as Real; it is not *literally* some kernel of the real, but rather, the Real as “reality,” the Real in its symbolic/imaginary register.

## Historicism vs. Historicity

One could make the argument that art occupies a unique symbolic space, one in which the suspension of meaning is not considered a gap. Žižek himself states as much:

[In] today's art scene [...] the real does *not* return primarily in the guise of the shocking brutal intrusion of excremental objects, mutilated corpses, shit, and so on. The objects are, for sure, out of place, but in order for them to be out of place, the (empty) place must already be here ... The emergence of excremental objects that are out of place is thus strictly correlative to the emergence of the place without any object in it, of the empty frame as such [emphasis Žižek]. (Žižek 2001: 223)

On this point it's hard to argue with Žižek, and, of course, Oehlen is far from the first artist to willfully make senseless paintings that look like shit. However, I wouldn't go so far as to say that this prevents a painting like *Chloé* from being experienced by the viewer as an act. After all, it's Žižek himself who states that every act is a repetition.

Another way to think about this would be the difference between "historicism" and "historicity." Žižek explains the difference between the terms in *Enjoy Your Symptom*. "Real" history is an amorphous mass resisting meaning. We can imagine this Real history as the continual destruction witnessed by Walter Benjamin's angel in "Theses on the Philosophy of History.": "[The angel's] face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (Benjamin 2007: 257). The *narrative* of history is written retroactively. History as such can be experienced as a kind of stasis (as narrative exists *only* in the symbolic). Žižek explains, "'truth' lies on the side of ahistorical stasis, whereas History is always 'false,' a narrative of the victor who legitimizes his victory by presenting the previous development as the linear continuum leading to his own final triumph" (Žižek 2001: 80). Revolutions, according to Žižek, "deliver" true history; they break with the established narrative of history and re-present, or make present again, the traumatic kernel of the real in the form of the radically non-narrative "true" history, making possible the writing of a new narrative. All revolutions, then, are acts. Žižek states, "Revolution 'delivers' the past failed attempts by *repeating them in their possibility*,' it retroactively realizes their potentials which were crushed in the victorious course of 'official' history [emphasis Žižek]" (Žižek 2001: 80). Historicism therefore, is the project of writing history after the traumatic encounter with the Real. "Historicity" is the continual return of the kernel of the real, or the threat of such a return, which unseats the potential for any Ur narrative of history. For Benjamin (and later Žižek) history occludes the true state of emergency that society is always in. In "Theses..." Benjamin writes that for the cultural materialist working against historicism "[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the

rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we will realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency” (Benjamin 2007: 257). Similarly, Žižek writes, “That is to say, the only way to save historicity from the fall into historicism, into the notion of the linear succession of ‘historical epochs,’ is to conceive these epochs as a series of ultimately failed attempts to deal with the same ‘unhistorical’ traumatic kernel [...] The most succinct definition of historicism is therefore: historicity *minus* the unhistorical kernel of the Real,” (Žižek 2001: 81). Every revolution is identical in character; it brings back that unhistorical kernel of the real. Acts do the same. Though acts may occur at different times chronologically, they are still all the same act. An act obliterates all notions of chronology.

As such, I don’t believe that because other artists have presented an imaginary representation of the real and so have cleared an empty symbolic space for such acts prevents a painting from having the effect of an act on a viewer. An act, in the pure Žižekian conception of the term, has the same effect whether it happens once or one hundred times. A revolution has an effect whether or not other revolutions have occurred in the same country; and, in a similar fashion, Oehlen can still be a revolutionary despite the fact he comes after other revolutionaries. Artists like Oehlen prevent art as a discipline from falling into historicism, from too easily assimilating paintings like *Chloé* as blank spaces in a predetermined field. Work like Oehlen’s makes sure that art keeps its false bottom and prevents any potential homogenization or hegemony of product and consumer. “Difficult” or even “impossible” works like *Chloé* force the dedicated viewer to continually go through a zero point and recreate themselves as a subject. Art history is full of such moments. Žižek positions Kazimir Malevich’s *The Black Square on the White Surface* as the first act in art (that which allowed for a new fantasy subject position in art). I would argue Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (“created” roughly fifty years later) is also act, another work which changes the artistic subject, introducing an unassailable kernel of the real which forces the subject to reconfigure their intersubjective relations around it. Oehlen is yet another.

## Conclusion

Paintings like *Chloé* act as little kernels of the real for viewers—or *object petit a*’s in the Lacanian sense—that redialecticize art, particularly work which has become stuck in the first moment of Foster’s dialectic, works that have become historical, teleological—works which convey an “end” to art.<sup>iv</sup> To be clear, Oehlen’s work in and of itself, does not constitute a second moment in Foster’s dialectic—indeed, “in and of itself” Oehlen’s work constitutes *nothing*. In fact, acts are the exact opposite of a second moment as acts themselves are seen as entirely incomprehensible from within the symbolic. However, this nothing is all important. This nothing provides a zero point from which the artist and

viewer can start anew. *Chloé* is a catalyst that can push artistic paradigms of a first moment fallen to cynicism into the second moment of analyzing and comprehending the larger cultural and ontological circumstances of work from the first moment.

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<sup>i</sup> I say ‘illusory’ here *not* to denote that these relationship are non-existent. They are most certainly a part of our empirical existence. I use ‘illusory’ to show that our relationships to the elements of our lived reality are contingent and not essential (imaginary). This contingency, however, makes them no less a part of our lived reality.

<sup>ii</sup> Obviously self-portraits are possible in photography (indeed, one of Arbus’s most famous photographs is self portrait) but even in that case, I would still argue that you are not seeing the subject position from which the picture is being taken.

<sup>iii</sup> Of course, this distinction is subjective and border between description and criticism is provisional. While I recognize the potentially endless discussions possible for definitely taxonomizing artists (for instance, does Duchamp’s *Fountain* merely “articulate the enunciative conditions of the art work” or is it critiquing the institutions of art themselves?) I feel that the undergirding framework of such a taxonomy is sound. However, ultimately, which end of the dialectic a work of art is on will always be up for grabs.

Moreover, there is the problem of the lack of discreteness between convention and institution. Foster explicitly counters this by stating that while the two are inseparable, they are distinctly different: Obviously convention and institution cannot be separated, but neither are they identical. On the one hand, the institution of art does not totally govern aesthetic conventions (this is too determinist); on the other hand, these conventions do not totally comprise the institution of art (this is too formalist). In other words, the institution of art may *enframe* aesthetic conventions, but it does not *constitute* them. This heuristic difference may help us to distinguish the emphases of historical and neo-avant-gardes: if the historical avant-garde focuses on the conventional, the neo-avant-garde concentrates on the institutional” (17).

<sup>iv</sup>After all, doesn’t such “end game” work have an arrogance to it? A tacit belief that it has somehow emerged victorious over the naivety of what came before?

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