The Cultural Politics of Pop: Reception and Critique of US Pop Art in the Federal Republic of Germany*

by Andreas Huyssen

In the mid 1960s, when the student movement broadened its criticism of the university system to include attacks on West German society, politics and institutions in general, a wave of pop enthusiasm swept the Federal Republic. The notion of pop that attracted people almost magically not only referred to the new art by Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann and others; it also stood for beat and rock music, poster art, the flower child cult and the drug scene—indeed for any manifestation of "subculture" and "underground." In short, pop became the synonym for the new life style of the younger generation, a life style which rebelled against authority and sought liberation from the norms of existing society. As an "emancipation euphoria" spread, mainly among high school and university students, pop in its broadest sense became amalgamated with the public and political activities of the anti-authoritarian New Left.

Consequently, the conservative press once more decried the general decay of Western culture, not deeming it necessary to investigate whether the protest—political or apolitical—was in any way legitimate. The traditionally conservative cultural critics reacted accordingly. Since they preferred to meditate in seclusion about Kafka and Kandinsky, experimental literature and abstract expressionism, they denounced Pop art as non-art, supermarket-art, Kitsch-art and as a coca-colonization of Western Europe.1 But various branches of industry and business (producing and marketing records, posters, films, textiles) understood immediately that the youth movement created needs that could be exploited economically. New markets opened up for cheap silk screens and small sized graphic works. Mini-galleries were inaugurated as frequently as mini-boutiques.2 The art experts, of course, continued to feud about whether Pop should or should not be accepted as a legitimate form of art.

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1. See Jost Hermand, Pop International (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), pp. 47-51.
2. In the early sixties there were less than a thousand galleries in the FRG; in 1970 the number of galleries had more than doubled. See Gottfried Sello, "Blick zurück im Luxus," Die Zeit, 44 (November 1, 1974), 9.
Meanwhile, a predominantly young art audience had begun to interpret American Pop art as protest and criticism rather than affirmation of an affluent society.³ It would be worthwhile to examine why this view of Pop as critical art was much more widespread in Germany than in the US. The strong German tradition of cultural criticism (Kulturkritik) certainly has something to do with the difference in reception; another factor, however, was that in Germany the Pop reception coincided with the student movement, while in the US Pop preceded university unrest. When Pop artists exhibited commodities or declared that serial productions of Coca-Cola bottles, filmstars or comic strips were art works, many Germans did not see these works as affirmative reproductions of mass produced reality; they preferred to think that this art was intended to denounce the lack of values and criteria in art criticism and that it sought to close the gap between high or serious, and low or light, art. The works themselves only partially suggested such an interpretation, but it was strengthened by the needs and interests of individual recipients, determined as they were by age, class origin and contradictions of consciousness. The interpretation of Pop as critical art was certainly fostered in Europe by the fact that European artists of the 1960s, whose works were often exhibited together with American Pop works, were indeed trying to develop an art of social criticism. The crucial factor, however, was the atmosphere created by anti-authoritarian protest and its adherence to Marcuse's cultural theories, an atmosphere that cast an aura of social criticism over many cultural phenomena which appear quite different from today's perspective.

When I saw the Pop Documenta in Kassel in 1968 and the famous Ludwig collection on exhibit in Cologne’s Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, I found sensual appeal and excitement not only in the works by Rauschenberg and Johns, but especially in those by Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann and Indiana. I, like many others, believed that Pop art could be the beginning of a far reaching democratization of art and art appreciation. This reaction was as spontaneous as it was false. Right or wrong notwithstanding, the very real feeling of liberation which many art spectators experienced at that time was more important: Pop seemed to liberate art from the monumental boredom of Informel and Abstract Expressionism; it seemed to break through the confines of the ivory tower in which art had been going around in circles in the 1950s. It seemed to ridicule the deadly serious art criticism which never acknowledged fantasy, play and

spontaneity. Pop's almost indiscriminate use of bright colors was overwhelming. I was won over by its obvious enjoyment of play, its focus on our daily environment, and at the same time by what I took to be its implied critique of this same environment. Art audiences were expanding considerably. In the 1950s, most art exhibits had been exclusive events for a small circle of experts and buyers. In the 1960s, hundreds, even thousands of people came to the opening of a single exhibition. No longer did exhibitions take place only in small galleries; modern art invaded the big art institutes and the museums. Of course, it was still a bourgeois audience, including many young people, many students. But one was tempted to believe that the expansion of interest in art would be unlimited. As for the derogatory and condemning judgments by conservative critics, they only seemed to prove that the new art was indeed radical and progressive. The belief in consciousness raising by means of aesthetic experience was quite common in those days.

Still something else recommended this art to the younger generation. The realism of Pop, its closeness to objects, images and reproductions of everyday life, stimulated a new debate about the relationship between art and life, image and reality, a debate that filled the culture pages of the national newspapers and weeklies. Pop seemed to liberate high art from the isolation in which it had been kept in bourgeois society. Art's distance "from the rest of the world and the rest of experience"4 was to be eliminated. A new avenue seemed to lead almost by necessity to the bridging of the traditional gap between high and low art. From the very beginning, Pop proclaimed that it would eliminate the historical separation between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, thereby joining and reconciling art and reality. The secularization of art seemed to have reached a new stage at which the work of art rid itself of the remnants of its origins in magic and rite. In bourgeois ideology, the work of art—in spite of its almost complete detachment from ritual—still functioned as a kind of substitute for religion; with Pop, however, art became profane, concrete and suitable for mass reception. Pop art seemed to have the potential to become a genuinely "popular" art and to resolve the crisis of bourgeois art, which had been evident since the beginning of this century.

The crisis of bourgeois art: Adorno and Marcuse

Those who had confidence in the critical nature and emancipatory effect of Pop art were well aware of this crisis of bourgeois art. In Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* it results in the pact between the composer Adrian Leverkühn and the devil, whose help became a prerequisite for all of Leverkühn's compositions. In the novel the devil speaks as an art critic: "But the sickness is general, and the straightforward ones shew the symptoms just as well as the producers of back-formations. Does not production threaten to come to an end? And whatever of serious stuff gets on to paper betrays effort and distaste. [...] Composing itself has got too hard, devilishly hard. Where work does not go any longer with sincerity how is one to work? But so it stands, my friend, the masterpiece, the self-sufficient form, belongs to traditional art, emancipated art rejects it."5 Why, one asks, has composing become so difficult? Why is the masterwork a thing of the past? Changes in society? The devil answers: "True, but unimportant. The prohibitive difficulties of the work lie deep in the work itself. The historical movement of the musical material has turned against the self-contained work."6 The emancipated art on which Thomas Mann's devil elaborates is still a highly complex art which can neither break out of its isolation nor resolve the radical opposition of aesthetic illusion (*Schein*) and reality. It is well known that Thomas Mann took ideas from Adorno's philosophy of music and integrated them into the novel. The devil speaks Adorno's mind. Adorno himself always insisted on the separation of art and reality. For him, serious art could only negate the negativity of reality. It is only through negation, he believed, that the work maintains its independence, its autonomy, its claim to truth. Adorno found such negation in the intricate writings of Kafka and Beckett, in the prohibitively difficult music of Schoenberg and Berg. After reading Thomas Mann's novel one might come to the conclusion that the crisis of art takes place in a realm hermetically sealed off from the outer world and from the production relations of art that any modern artist must deal with. But Adorno's arguments have to be understood within the framework of his analysis of culture industry (*Kulturindustrie*), which is contained in his *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), co-authored with Max Horkheimer.7 To Adorno, it seemed necessary and unavoidable that serious art negate reality; this view

was a result of his American experiences, which convinced him that in the modern, rationally organized capitalist state even culture loses its independence and is deprived of its critical substance. The manipulative praxis of this culture industry—Adorno thought mainly of record, film, and radio production—subordinates all spiritual and intellectual creation to the profit motive. Adorno again summed up his conclusions—equally pessimistic for high and low art—in a 1963 radio lecture: “Culture industry is the purposeful integration of its consumers from above. It also forces a reconciliation of high and low art, which have been separated for thousands of years, a reconciliation which damages both. High art is deprived of its seriousness because its effect is programmed; low art is put in chains and deprived of the unruly resistance inherent in it when social control was not yet total.”8 It follows that art in a traditional sense has become unconceivable today.

Certainly the Pop enthusiasts of the 1960s found less support in Adorno’s thesis of total manipulation than in Marcuse’s demand for a sublation (Aufhebung) of culture which they believed Pop art was about to initiate. In his essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” which was first printed in 1957 in the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung and republished by Suhrkamp in 1965, Marcuse reproached classical bourgeois art for silencing itself from the realities of social labor and economic competition and for creating a world of beautiful illusion, the supposedly autonomous realm of the aesthetic which fulfills longings for a happy life and satisfies human needs only in an unreal and illusory way: “There is a good reason for the exemplification of the cultural ideal in art, for only in art has bourgeois society tolerated its own ideals and taken them seriously as a general demand. What counts as utopia, phantasy and rebellion in the world of fact is allowed in art. There affirmative culture has displayed the forgotten truths over which ‘realism’ triumphs in daily life. The medium of beauty decontaminates truth and sets it apart from the present. What occurs in art occurs with no obligation.”9 Marcuse believed that the utopia of a better life expressed in bourgeois art need only be taken at its word. Then, by necessity, the autonomy of art would be eliminated and art would be integrated into the material life process. This elimination of affirmative culture would go together with a revolution of the patterns of bourgeois life: “Beauty will find a new embodiment when it no longer is represented as real

illusion but, instead, expresses reality and joy in reality.”10 Habermas has pointed out that in 1937, in view of fascist mass art, Marcuse could have had no delusions about the possibility of a false sublation of culture.11 But thirty years later, the student revolt in the US, France and Germany seemed to be initiating precisely the transformation of culture and the radical change of life patterns, which Marcuse had once hoped for.12

Since Pop art had a strong impact in the Federal Republic only in the second half of the 1960s, its reception coincided with the high point of the anti-authoritarian revolt and with attempts to create a new culture. This would explain why Pop art was accepted in the Federal Republic (but not in the US) as an ally in the struggle against traditional bourgeois culture, and why many people believed that Pop art fulfilled Marcuse's demand that art not be illusion but express reality and the joy in reality. There is an unresolved contradiction inherent in this interpretation of Pop art: how was it possible that an art expressing sensual joy in our daily environment could at the same time be critical of this environment? One might also ask to what extent Marcuse was misunderstood on these matters. It remains highly doubtful whether Marcuse would have interpreted Pop art as a sublation of culture. It is true that Marcuse spoke of the integration of culture into the material life process, but he never explained this idea in detail. If this deficiency is one side of the coin, the other is Marcuse's insistence on bourgeois idealist aesthetics. An example: when Marcuse praises the songs of Bob Dylan, he lifts them out of the material life process and sees in them the promise for a liberated, utopian society of the future. Marcuse's emphasis on this anticipatory, utopian role of the work of art owes as much to bourgeois aesthetics as does Adorno's thesis of the work of art as a total negation of existing reality. But it was just this idealism in Marcuse's thought that appealed to the early student movement, and his influence on the Pop reception in the Federal Republic makes Pop's links with the anti-authoritarian revolt evident.

10. Ibid., p. 151.
12. See Herbert Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation (Boston, 1969); later, of course, Marcuse differentiated and modified his theses on the basis of new developments within the student revolt, underground and counter-culture; see Herbert Marcuse, Konterrevolution und Revolte (Frankfurt am Main, 1973).
Warhol and Duchamp—a digression into art history

Some observations on art history might be appropriate before moving on to the second phase of Pop reception in the Federal Republic—the critical evaluation of Pop by the New Left, which will have to be discussed in the context of the larger art debate after 1968.

In 1962 Andy Warhol, who is seen as the most representative Pop artist in the Federal Republic,13 "painted" a series of serial portraits of Marilyn Monroe. I pick one of them for discussion: five times five frontal views of the actress' face arranged in rectangular order. Warhol has chosen one photo and reproduced it with the silk screen technique,14 adding slight modifications to the original. Art thus becomes the reproduction of a reproduction. It is not reality itself that provides the content of the work of art, but rather a secondary reality—the portrait of the mass idol as the cliché image that appears millions of times in the mass media and that sinks into the consciousness of a mass audience. The work is made up of identical elements and characterized by a simple, theoretically unlimited, serial structure. The artist has surrendered to the principles of anonymous mass reproduction and has documented his closeness to the image world of the mass media. Affirmation or critique—that is the question. By itself, the artistic structure of the Monroe silk screen hardly provides an answer.

One year later, in 1963, Warhol created a similar serial portrait with the revealing title "Thirty are better than one." This time the subject was not an idol of mass culture, but a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, not even in color, but in the black and white of photography. The Renaissance artist's masterpiece has its renaissance under the production conditions of modern media society. But Warhol not only cites Leonardo's work, which, due to its mass distribution in the form of prints, could be considered part of today's mass culture.15 He also alludes to one of the fathers of the art of the 1960s—Marcel Duchamp, himself an elite artist par excellence.

In 1919 Duchamp took a reproduction of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*,

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13. This is so even though again and again there are critics who do not count Warhol among the Pop artists but see him as a genius sui generis.


15. In April 1974, the real *Mona Lisa* was carried in procession from the Louvre to Japan and was exhibited there; rather as a stimulus to French national pride and Japanese business (cf. *Newsweek*, May 6, 1974, 44) than as a genuine attempt to take the masterpiece to the masses.
pencilled in a moustache and a goatee, and called this "combination ready-made" 16 L.H.O.O.Q., initials which reveal the iconoclastic intention of the work if pronounced in French (elle a chaud au cul, or she has a hot ass). 17 Of course, the "creator" of the ready-mades mainly wanted to provoke and shock a society which had gone bankrupt in World War I. It is not the artistic achievement of Leonardo that is ridiculed by moustache, goatee and obscene allusion, but rather the cult object the Mona Lisa had become in that temple of bourgeois art religion, the Louvre. Duchamp challenged the traditional concepts of beauty, creativity, originality and autonomy still more boldly in 1917, when he declared as a work of art an object designed for reproduction—a urinal, which he called Fountain and signed with a pseudonym. An objet trouvé, the urinal becomes a work of art only by virtue of the fact that an artist exhibits it. In those days, the audience recognized the provocation and was shocked. It understood all too well that Dada attacked all the holy cows of bourgeois art-religion. And yet Dada's frontal attack was unsuccessful, not only because the movement exhausted itself in negation, but also because even then bourgeois culture was able to co-opt any kind of attack made on it. Duchamp himself saw this dilemma and withdrew from the art scene in 1923. The withdrawal seems only logical considering that today an assiduous audience admires L.H.O.O.Q. as a masterpiece of modernism in the museums.

When there was a New York retrospective of his work in 1965, Duchamp once again tried to express the problem artistically. As invitations to the opening, he sent out about one hundred post-Warholian Mona Lisas. They depicted a Mona Lisa without moustache and goatee on the backside of a playing card bearing the title Rasé L.H.O.O.Q. "Through this reconstruction of her identity the Mona Lisa has as a matter of fact completely lost her identity," 18 the critic Max Imdahl commented. I rather ask myself whether the "certain smile" of the Mona Lisa is not directed at an audience that accepts the mere repetition of a provocation as art 19 or that can revel in the thought that today even provocation has become cliché. Did Duchamp, who never concealed his disapproval of Pop, not see that the outrage of 1919 had degenerated into applause and co-option? Warhol, to be

18. Ibid., p. 494.
19. The playing card Mona Lisa was exhibited at the latest Duchamp exhibit in New York (1973) and Chicago (1974).
sure, is more consistent in this matter. He does not even want to provoke any more. He simply reproduces mass reproduced reality like Coca Cola bottles, Brillo boxes, photos of filmstars and Campbell soup cans. In his polemic against the distinction between non-art and art the Dadaist Duchamp still sides with art ex negativo (almost all of his post-Dada work bears witness to this), but Warhol is no longer even interested in such a polemic. This becomes clear in interviews in which his statements are closer to the language of commercial advertising than to any form of art criticism. The following passage, taken from an interview conducted by G.R. Swenson in 1963, shows how Warhol naively praises the reification of modern life as a virtue: “Someone said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. I want everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through Communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under government: It’s happening here all by itself without being under a strict government; so if it’s working without trying, why can’t it work without being Communist? Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we’re getting more and more that way. I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody. Is that what Pop Art is all about? Yes. It’s liking things.” Warhol seems to be a victim of the advertising slogans he himself helped design before he became an artist. He had made the switch from ad man to artist with a single idea: not to advertise products, but to proclaim those same products and their graphic reproductions as works of art. In accordance with Warhol’s slogan “All is pretty,” the Pop artists took the trivial and banal imagery of daily life at face value, and the subjugation of art by the laws of a commodity producing capitalist society seemed complete.

Criticism of Pop art

It is exactly at this point that criticism set in. Pop artists were accused of surrendering to the capitalist mode of production in their techniques and of glorifying the commodity market by their choice of subject. Frequently such criticism took issue with Warhol’s soup cans, Lichtenstein’s comics, Wesselmann’s bathroom arrangements. It was pointed out that several Pop artists had worked in advertising and graphic design before coming to art

22. See the essays collected and edited by Hermann K. Ehmer, Visuelle Kommunikation: Beiträge zur Kritik der Bewusstseinsindustrie (Cologne, 1971) and Hermand, Pop International.
and that the difference between advertisement and art had shrunk to a minimum in many of their works—a fact which is not to be mistaken for the elimination of the art-life dichotomy. Furthermore, it was observed that Pop art, which partly originated in advertising, in turn influenced it. Comics, for instance, began appearing in ads only after Lichtenstein had made them the main theme of his work.\textsuperscript{23} The mouth canvases of Wesselmann, themselves part of the lipstick and toothpaste ad tradition, had a visible effect on such ads. While ads of an earlier period showed the human being belonging to those lips and teeth, post-Wesselmann ads frequently blow up the mouth and show nothing but the mouth.\textsuperscript{24} It is symptomatic that the artists themselves did not see this link between Pop and advertising as something negative. James Rosenquist, for instance, who also came to art from advertising, stated: “I think we have a free society, and the action that goes on in this free society allows encroachments, as a commercial society. So I geared myself, like an advertiser or a large company, to this visual inflation—in commercial advertising which is one of the foundations of our society. I’m living in it, and it has such impact and excitement in its means of imagery.”\textsuperscript{25} Of course it is problematic to take such self-interpretations by artists too literally. There are quite a few cases in the history of art and literature where a work revealed an intention or a tendency which blatantly contradicted the artist’s ideological consciousness. But subtle doubts did not seem appropriate at a time when the theoretical discussion of art had led to a radical scepticism toward all contemporary art, including Pop. Pop art in particular had contributed to this radical scepticism—not as the new art of an imaginary cultural revolution which some of Pop’s disciples hoped for, but rather as an art that revealed the elitist and esoteric nature of traditional avantgardism because more than any other preceding art movement it laid bare the commodity character of all contemporary art production.\textsuperscript{26}

\textit{Art as commodity}

It is not surprising that the Left’s criticism focused on the commodity character of art in capitalist society. Forums for the discussion were \textit{Kursbuch 15} with essays by Karl Markus Michel, Hans Magnus

\textsuperscript{23} One might theorize that recent critical interest in comics as a form of popular culture is not unrelated to Lichtenstein’s introduction of comics into the realm of high art.

\textsuperscript{24} See the essays by Heino R. Möller, Hans Roosen and Herman K. Ehmer in \textit{Visuelle Kommunikation} for further discussion of the relationship between Pop and advertising.

\textsuperscript{25} Interview conducted by G.R. Swenson. Reprinted in Russell and Gablik, \textit{Pop Art Redefined}, p. 111.

\textsuperscript{26} Cf. Hermand, \textit{Pop International}, p. 50 f.
Enzensberger and Walter Böhlich, and Die Zeit, which printed an analysis by the Berlin SDS collective “Culture and Revolution,” programatically entitled “Art as a Commodity of the Consciousness Industry.” This theoretical discussion, in which different positions of the New Left were articulated independently from each other, bears on the critical evaluation of Pop art even though Pop was mentioned neither in the SDS paper nor in Kursbuch.

The SDS collective’s point of departure is the thesis that every individually produced and supposedly autonomous work of art is swallowed up by the system of distribution (art dealers, galleries, museums). Not only does the artist depend on an efficient organization of the distribution apparatus, but even the reception of the work of art takes place within the framework of the culture industry. By advertising and promoting the works it distributes, the industry generates certain expectations. The aesthetic objectivation achieved in the work of art does not reach the consumer directly; it is filtered through the mode of mediation. The culture industry—which like any other branch of industry is integrated into the economic system of capitalist society—is thus the pivot of art production and art reception. In apparent agreement with Adorno, the SDS collective concludes: “Art, caught up in the distribution system of the culture industry, is subjected to the ideology of supply and demand. It becomes commodity. The culture industry sees the legitimation of producing art only in art’s exchange value, not in its use value. In other words, the objective content of art works and their enlightening role become irrelevant in a system based on profit maximization, against which an adequate reception of art would rebel.”

While low art (Hollywood movies, TV series, bestsellers, hit parades) floods the consumer with positive models which are as abstract as they are unrealistic, the function of high art is to legitimize bourgeois domination in the cultural realm by intimidating the non-specialist, i.e., the majority of a given population. With this evaluation of high art, the SDS analysis goes beyond Adorno, who also condemns the culture industry, but keeps insisting that if high art rejects economic utilization, it can offer the only realm of withdrawal for creative, non-alienated labor. In the SDS analysis, the culture industry’s capability for manipulation seems complete. The analysis in effect combines Adorno’s attack on low, trivial art with a version of Marcuse’s thesis of the affirmative character of high art—a reductionist version, in which high art, viewed as nothing but a means of domination, is

28. Ibid.
deprived of its utopian and anticipatory element.

Given such a gloomy description of the situation, the conclusions reached by the SDS theoreticians seem contradictory. Suddenly they demand that bourgeois aesthetics be dealt with critically—as if the culture industry had not already made bourgeois aesthetics obsolete. They also call for the creation of a progressive art, though clearly it could only be a critique of a negative reality—again a critique of ideology (Ideologiekritik). These suggestions are clearly products of a period in the student movement when it was believed that enlightenment would bring about a change of consciousness, that revolutionary change would take place in the superstructure. Which material forces would bring about this revolution was a question never answered. Despite the fact that at this time critical theory was already being vigorously criticized, the SDS paper documents a continued dependence on Adorno and Marcuse. It focused not on the productive forces and the production relations in the realm of art, but rather on problems of manipulation and consumption which the SDS collective hoped to solve by a critique of ideology.

Similar difficulties emerge in the essays in Kursbuch 15 which are characterized by a capitulation to the consciousness industry and by the declaration that art and literature are dead. It is true that Enzensberger condemned the then fashionable pompes funèbres that celebrated the death of culture under the banner of a cultural revolution. But his analysis confirmed what at first he wanted to shrug off as a literary metaphor—the death of literature; more precisely, the death of littérature engagée, which saw social criticism as its main function, and which had dominated the German scene in the 1950s and early 1960s. This insight resulted largely from the student movement which, as Karl Markus Michel pointed out correctly in the same issue, had zeroed in on the social privileges of artists and writers, and had drawn attention to the distance separating artists from social praxis.29 Enzensberger adopted this argument when he reproached engaged literature “for not uniting political demands and political praxis.”30 Maybe the Left’s enthusiasm for cultural revolution was somewhat naive. Maybe Enzensberger was right in criticizing the revolutionary histrionics of the Left which “by liquidating literature sought to compensate for its own incompetence.”31 But he should have seen that his desire “to teach Germany the alphabet of politics”32 was not all that

31. Ibid., 195.
32. Ibid., 197.
different from the intentions of the student Left. After all, Enzensberger too demands a critical art and suggests documentary and reportage as appropriate literary genres. Like the SDS paper, Enzensberger’s essay leaves open the question of to what extent such a critical art could be effective in a culture whose main characteristic is manipulation.33 A more basic question must be raised as to whether these critical essays do not run the risk of fetishizing the very notion of culture industry. How can one continually demand new forms of critical art if the culture industry in fact suppresses any enlightenment and criticism of capitalist society? How can Enzensberger get around the “law of the market” which “dominates literature perhaps even more than other products?”34 Where art is seen as commodity and as nothing but commodity, there is an economic reductionism equating the relations of production with what is produced, the system of distribution with what is distributed, the reception of art with the consumption of all commodities. This is a misunderstanding. We cannot dogmatically reduce art to its exchange value, as if its use value were determined by the mode of distribution rather than by its content.35 The theory of total manipulation underestimates the dialectical nature of art. Even under the conditions set by the capitalist culture industry and its distribution apparatus, art ultimately can open up emancipatory avenues if only because it is granted autonomy and practical uselessness. The thesis of the total subjugation of art to the market also underestimates possibilities for emancipation inherent in consumption; in general, consumption satisfies needs, and even though human needs can be distorted to an amazing degree, every need contains a smaller or larger kernel of authenticity. The question to ask is how this kernel can be utilized and fulfilled.

*The Benjamin debate*

Capitalist culture industry inevitably produces a minimum of art and a maximum of trash and kitsch. Therefore, the task is to change culture industry itself. But how can it be done? Critical art alone does not suffice, since in the best of cases, its success remains limited to consciousness raising. As early as 1934, Walter Benjamin noted that “the bourgeois apparatus of

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33. This presentation of Enzensberger’s position limits itself to the 1968 *Kursbuch* article. It neither deals with his earlier ideas nor with his later development, which would go beyond the scope of the problems under consideration in this article.

34. *Ibid.*, 188.

35. This is not to deny that frequently the distribution apparatus has a direct impact on artistic production itself.
production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into the question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it." 36 Critical theory did not lead out of this dead end street. A return to Benjamin and Brecht, however, seemed to provide a new perspective and new possibilities. It is significant that in the Federal Republic interest in Benjamin initiated by Adorno's and Tiedemann's editions led to an attack on the Frankfurt editors. They were reproached with playing down the importance of Brecht and Marxism for the late Benjamin. 37

Interest in Benjamin's theses about materialist aesthetics reached a high point after 1968, when the student movement left its anti-authoritarian phase and tried to develop socialist perspectives going beyond "protest against the system" and the "great refusal." The notion of manipulation, on which Adorno's theory of culture industry and Marcuse's theory of one-dimensional man were based, was legitimately criticized, but the critique went too far, frequently ending up as a complete rejection of both Adorno and Marcuse. Their place was now taken by the Benjamin of the mid-1930s. Two of his essays, "The Author as Producer" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," became particularly influential. It is worth mentioning that Adorno and Horkheimer had conceived the chapter on culture industry in Dialektik der Aufklärung as a reply to Benjamin's 1936 reproduction essay; the latter is also related to Marcuse's essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture," which, like Benjamin's piece, was first published in the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. Both essays deal with the sublation (Aufhebung) of bourgeois culture, albeit in very different ways. 38

Benjamin was influenced by Brecht, whose major ideas had evolved out of experiences in the Weimar Republic. Like Brecht, Benjamin tried to develop the revolutionary tendencies of art out of the production relations of capitalism. His point of departure was the Marxist conviction that capitalism generates productive forces that make the abolition of capitalism both possible and necessary. For Benjamin, the productive forces in art are the artist himself and the artistic technique, especially the reproduction

37. The debate took place in Das Argument, 46 (March, 1968), Alternative, 56/57 (October/December, 1967), and 59 60 (April/June, 1968), Merkur, 5 (1967) and 1-2 (1968), and Frankfurter Rundschau. For a detailed bibliography see Alternative, 59/60 (April June, 1968), 95.
38. For differences between Benjamin and Marcuse see Habermas, "Kritik," pp. 177-185.
techniques used in film and photography. He acknowledges that it took much longer for the production relations of capitalist society to make an impact on the superstructure than it took them to prevail at the basis, so much longer that they could only be analyzed in the 1930s. From the very beginning of the essay on reproduction Benjamin insists upon the primacy of revolutionary movement at the basis. But the dialectics of the conditions of production leave their mark on the superstructure too. Recognizing this, Benjamin emphasizes the value of his theses as a weapon in the struggle for socialism. While Marcuse believes that the function of art will change after the social revolution, Benjamin sees change developing out of modern reproduction techniques, which drastically affect the inner structure of art. Here lies the importance of Benjamin for a materialist aesthetics still to be written.

Both essays by Benjamin make several references to Dada and cast a new light on the Pop debate. Benjamin found the "revolutionary strength of Dada" in its testing of art for authenticity: by using new means of artistic production, the Dadaists proved that this criterion of bourgeois aesthetics had become obsolete. In the reproduction essay Benjamin wrote: "The Dadaists attached much less importance to the sales value of their work than to its uselessness for contemplative immersion. The studied degradation of their material was not the least of their means to achieve this uselessness. Their poems are 'word salad' containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language. The same is true of their paintings, on which they mounted buttons and tickets. What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded as reproductions with the very means of production." Benjamin recognized that Dada had been instrumental in destroying the bourgeois concept of an autonomous, genial and eternal art. Contemplative immersion, which had been quite progressive in an earlier phase of bourgeois emancipation, since the late 19th century had served to sabotage any kind of social praxis geared toward change. During the decline of middle-class society, "contemplation became a school for asocial behavior." It is the undeniable merit of the Dadaists that they exposed this problem in their works. Benjamin did not overlook the fact that the Dada revolt was ultimately unsuccessful, however. He explored the reasons for its failure in a 1929 essay on surrealism: "If it is

40. Benjamin, "Author as Producer," p. 94.
41. Ibid., p. 296.
42. Ibid.
the twofold task of revolutionary intellectuals to overthrow bourgeois intellectual domination and to make contact with the proletarian masses, they have failed almost completely to deal with the second part of their task because it cannot be mastered by contemplation." 43 Out of negation alone, neither a new art nor a new society can be developed.

It was also Benjamin, of course, who praised John Heartfield for salvaging the revolutionary nature of Dada by incorporating its techniques into photomontage. 44 Heartfield, who like other leftist intellectuals (Grosz, Piscator) had joined the KPD in 1918, published his photomontages in such working class publications as AIZ (Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung) and Volks-Illustrierte. 45 He fulfilled two of Benjamin's major demands—the application and use of modern artistic techniques (photography and montage), and partisanship and active participation of the artist in the class struggle. For Benjamin, the key question was not the position of a work of art vis-à-vis the productive relations of its time, but rather its position within them. 46 Nor does Benjamin ask, what is the position of the artist vis-à-vis the production process, but rather, what is his position within it? The decisive passage in "The Author as Producer" reads: "Brecht has coined the phrase 'functional transformation' (Umfunktionierung) to describe the transformation of forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia—an intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production and hence active in the class struggle. He was the first to address to the intellectuals the far-reaching demand that they should not supply the production apparatus without, at the same time, within the limits of the possible, changing that apparatus in the direction of Socialism." 47

In opposition to Adorno, Benjamin held a positive view of modern reproduction techniques as they were applied in art. This disagreement can be traced to their respectively different understanding of capitalism, rooted in different experiences and formed at different times. To put it simply, Adorno was looking at the US of the 1940s, Benjamin at the Soviet Union of the 1920s. Another important factor is that, like Brecht, Benjamin saw great potential in the "Americanism" introduced in Germany in the 1920s, while Adorno never overcame his deep mistrust of anything American. Both

44. Benjamin, "Author as Producer," p. 94.
46. Ibid., p. 87.
47. Ibid., p. 93.
authors, however, have to be criticized for a distortion of perspective which makes it problematic to apply their theories in the 1970s. Just as we should question Adorno's view of the US, we should be sceptical about Benjamin's idealizing enthusiasm for the early Soviet Union, which sometimes borders on a proletariat position. Neither Adorno's thesis of the total manipulation of culture (cf. his one-dimensional interpretation of jazz), nor Benjamin's absolute belief in the revolutionizing effects of modern reproduction techniques, has withstood the test of time. Benjamin, to be sure, was aware that mass production and mass reproduction in no way automatically guaranteed art an emancipatory function—not when art was subjected to the capitalist production and distribution apparatus. But it was not until Adorno that a theory of manipulated art under the capitalist culture industry was fully developed.

This leads us back to the Pop debate. According to Benjamin's theory, the artist, merely by seeing himself as producer and operating with the new reproduction techniques, would come closer to the proletariat. But this did not happen to the Pop artist, because the role that reproduction techniques play in today's art is totally different from what it was in the 1920s. At that time reproduction techniques called the bourgeois tradition into question; today they confirm the myth of technological progress on all levels. And yet, modern reproduction techniques have a progressive potential even today. The technical innovation at the heart of Warhol's work is the use of photography combined with the silk screen technique. Because this technique makes the unlimited distribution of art works possible, it has the potential to assume a political function. Like film and photography, the silk screen destroys the century-old aura of the work of art, which, according to Benjamin, is the prerequisite for its autonomy and authenticity. It is not surprising that in 1970 a Warhol monograph—using Benjamin's and Brecht's categories—claimed that Warhol's opus was the new critical art of our times. The author, Rainer Crone, was right to view the silk screen technique in the light of Benjamin's thesis that "to an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility." Warhol, Crone claimed, forces the observer to redefine the role of painting as a medium. One might object that such a redefinition already had been made necessary by Dada. There is a more important

49. Crone, Warhol.
objection to be made, however. Crone's interpretation is based exclusively on an analysis of Warhol's artistic techniques; he completely ignores Benjamin's linking of artistic technique and political mass movement. Benjamin, who found his model in the revolutionary Russian film, wanted the bourgeois contemplative reception of art replaced by a collective reception. Yet, when Pop art is shown today in the Museum of Modern Art or in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne, the reception remains contemplative and thus Pop remains a form of autonomous bourgeois art. Crone's Warhol interpretation can only be regarded as a failure because he lifts Benjamin's theories out of their political context and neglects all the problems that would be posed by an application of those theories to today's art. A major contradiction of Crone's approach is that on the one hand, he supports Warhol's attack on the autonomy of art and the originality of the artist, and on the other hand, writes a book which glorifies the originality of Warhol and of his art. The aura absent from Warhol's works is thus re-introduced in a kind of star cult, in the "auratization" of the artist Andy Warhol.

In another context, however, Benjamin's theories can be related to Pop art. Benjamin trusted in the capacity of revolutionary art to stimulate the needs of the masses and to turn into material force when those needs could only be satisfied by collective praxis. That Pop was seen as a critical art at the time of the anti-authoritarian protest cannot be understood if one adheres to the thesis art equals commodity. Viewed from Benjamin's perspective, however, this interpretation was valid so long as the Pop reception was part of a political movement in the Federal Republic. We can also understand now that the interpretation of Pop as a progressive art had to change once the anti-authoritarian student movement foundered on its internal and external contradictions. By that time, of course, Pop had already been co-opted by the museums and collectors as the newest form of high art.

Toward a transformation of everyday life

The views of Adorno and Benjamin are diametrically opposed, and neither offers totally satisfying solutions to today's problems. Adorno's thesis of total manipulation and his conclusion that serious art has to maintain an autonomy of negation must be refuted as well as the often naive belief of Brecht and Benjamin that artistic techniques might lead to an elimination of bourgeois culture. And yet, if Adorno's critique of the capitalist culture industry is combined with the theories of Brecht and Benjamin, it is still
valid. Only from such a synthesis can we hope to develop a theory and praxis leading eventually to the integration of art into the material life process once called for by Marcuse. It does not make much sense to play one position against the other. It is more important to preserve that which can still be of use today—not only certain elements of theory, but also whatever was progressive in the Pop reception of the anti-authoritarian student movement and in the movement itself.

It seems to me that both artists and exhibitors have learned from the reception and critique of US Pop art. At the most recent Documenta exhibit,51 three tendencies could be observed. While the American photorealism continued to adhere closely to reproduced reality (thus drawing the same kind of criticism levelled at Pop art earlier), the Concept artists almost completely withdrew from image into the cerebral. This withdrawal from the reality of pictorial presentation can be interpreted as a reaction against the oversaturation of our consciousness with reproduced images, or as an expression of the problem that in our world many crucial experiences are no longer sensual and concrete. At the same time, however, Concept art perpetuates the suppression of sensuality so characteristic of contemporary capitalist society. It seems to lead back into the vicious circle of abstraction and coldness in which Adrian Leverkühn was trapped. The reduction of the traditionally aesthetic 52 has reached a point where the work no longer communicates with the audience because there is no concrete work left. Here modernism has pursued its course into absurdity.

More interesting results of Pop came to light in another area of the Documenta, particularly in the documentation of imagery of daily life which was taken seriously for the first time. Cover pages of the newsweekly Der Spiegel were exhibited along with trivial emblems, garden dwarfs, votive pictures, ads and political posters. A widely publicized show in Düsseldorf had a similar intent. Its theme was the eagle as a sign or symbol. The close relationship to Jasper Johns' flag canvases is obvious.

In 1974 the Berlin Academy of Art presented a documentary show called Die Strasse in which photographs and maps of city cultures from around the world were related directly to Berlin's urban renewal plans. Such shows, especially the last one, aim not only at an interpretation of daily life but also at its transformation.

If Pop art has drawn our attention to the imagery of daily life,

demanding that the separation of high and low art be eliminated, then today it is the task of the artist to break out of art's ivory tower and contribute to a change of everyday life. He would be following the precepts of Henri Lefebvre's *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* (*Daily Life in the Modern World*), no longer accepting the separation of the philosophical and the non-philosophical, the high and the low, the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical, the cultivated and the non-cultivated; and not planning only a change of the state, of political life, economic production and judicial and social structures, but also planning a change of everyday life. Aesthetics should not be forgotten in such attempts to change everyday life. The aesthetic activity of human beings not only manifests itself in the iconic arts but in all spheres of human activity. Marx wrote: "An animal forms things in accordance with the measure and the need of the species to which it belongs, while man knows how to produce in accordance with the measure of every species and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent measure to the object. Man, therefore, also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty." Along with Marx we must understand the transformation of everyday life as "practical human-sensuous activity," an activity that must enter into all spheres of human production—the forming of nature and cities, of home and work place, of traffic systems and vehicles, of clothing and instruments, body and movement. This does not mean that all differences between art and daily life should be eliminated. In a liberated human society there would be art qua art as well. Today more than ever it is the task of Marxist critics to expose the popular equation of art and life for what it is—nothing but a mystification; what we need is a critical analysis of the unprecedented aesthetization of everyday life that took place in Western countries in the postwar era. While Pop art disclosed the commodity character of art, the Federal Republic witnessed an aesthetization of commodities (including advertising and window displays) which totally subjugated the aesthetic to the interest of capital. Remembering Marx's thesis that the human senses are the result of thousands of years of development, we may legitimately ask

56. For a discussion of commodity aesthetics see Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Kritik der Warenästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), and Lutz Holzinger, *Der produzierte Mangel* (Starnberg, 1973).
whether human sensuality itself might not undergo a qualitative change if the present manipulation of our sensual perceptions is continued over a long period of time. A Marxist theory of sensuality and fantasy under late capitalism must be developed, and this theory should provide an impulse to change everyday life. Even false, crippled needs are needs and—as Ernst Bloch has shown—contain a kernel of human dream, hope and concrete utopia. In the context of the student movement in the Federal Republic, Pop art succeeded in evoking progressive needs. Today, the goal still should be a functional transformation (Umschichtierung) of false needs in an attempt to change everyday life. In the Paris manuscripts, Marx predicted that the human senses would be liberated as a result of the elimination of private property. We know today that the elimination of private property is at most a necessary condition, but not a sufficient cause for the emancipation of human sensuality. On the other hand, the Pop reception in the Federal Republic has shown that even in capitalism there can arise forces which insist on overcoming the suppression of sensuality, and thus challenge the capitalist system as a whole. To understand and utilize such forces—that is the task at hand.