German and Russian Studies Honors Projects

May 2010

Formalism, Self-referentiality, and the Avant-garde

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Recommended Citation

Biareishyk, Siarhei, "Formalism, Self-referentiality, and the Avant-garde" (2010). *German and Russian Studies Honors Projects.* Paper 6.
http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/gerrus_honors/6

Formalism, Self-referentiality, and the Avant-garde

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Macalester College: April 22, 2010

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> – Ferdinand de Saussure

> The real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization.
> – Jacques Lacan

Constituting the secular subject

Jacques Lacan maintains that the subject of secular modernity is a Cartesian subject—the subject looking for its certainty. The Cartesian *cogito* – I think, therefore I am – claims to have grounded the subject's existence by the mere token of thinking. In this way, the Cartesian method departs from the previously established philosophical canon in that it refuses to accept the notion of collective agreement as a proof of truth and certainty. Descartes, furthermore, attempts to reject positing the notion of certainty on an unconditionally presupposed higher authority—omnipotent God. These two conditions, that neither collective agreement nor superhuman authority suffice in his method, inaugurate the Cartesian subject as a subject of secular modernity—a paragon of secular thought. As opposed to relying on a sacred text or a transcendent authority, Descartes follows his endeavor appealing only to the authority of the signifier (human thought) and its logic.

Insofar as Lacan defines the subject first and foremost in its relation to the signifier, tracing the "inaugural emergence of the subject" to "that historical moment at the beginning of the seventeenth century," psychoanalysis concerns itself with what is historically a subject of secular modernity (*BXI* 223).

Pointing to the Cartesian method, Lacan says that "Descartes apprehends his *I think* in the enunciation of the *I doubt,*" therefore, basing his ontological "*I am*" on doubt (44). However, among other fallacies, Lacan points out that in spite of his intentions Descartes leaves his certainty in the hands of the benevolent God, "an Other that is not deceptive," whose invocation in turn stems out of a gap in the logic of the signifier ("I think") (36). Kojin Karatani concisely formulates Descartes' proof: "I doubt because I am imperfect and finite—which itself is the evidence (proof) that a perfect and infinite [O]ther (God) exists" (154). While it is in truth the non-deceptive Other that guaranties the proof of *cogito*, Descartes claims to derive this Other directly from the *cogito*. Far from being a mere logical fallacy, Descartes' circular argument traverses a necessary way for the emergence of the unconscious. The subject of the unconscious, the Cartesian subject, Lacan says, "appears at the moment when doubt is recognized as certainty" (126). What is crucial for the secular subject is the moment he mistakes his own certainty for that imagined in the Other due to the repression of circularity in his own thought. The unconscious, which structures the subjectivity on the most fundamental level, has to be located therefore in the field of the Other, i.e., in language and everything that it entails: the laws, cultural values, economic system, and so on. Having grounded Being on the basis of the signifier, the Cartesian subject exemplifies the fundamental psychoanalytic claim that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (*BIX* 20).

At the outset, this conclusion foregrounds a two-fold consequence. First, the constitution of subjectivity replicates the given symbolic order; this also means that, rather than an organic link to being, what defines the subject of secular modernity is a mode of representation as a mediating factor in relation to the field of the Other. Second, as a corollary, an investigation of a formal structure of the subject is also a formalization of the structure of the symbolic order itself. What is at stake in explicating the emergence of the subject is nothing less than elucidating the preconditions of a given cultural code and knowledge production in relation to the modes of representation.

Positing the subject secondary to the signifier, Lacan delineates the advent of the subject in the movement of alienation. The choice of the term "alienation" is not incidental, for the subject of secular modernity transpires as other than itself; the subject is engendered by the signifier, which is not at all homogeneous with being. Lacan stresses the point that signifier is "that which represents a subject," not for another subject, but "for another signifier" (*BXI* 207). According to the structuralist linguistics, the signifier is a pure negativity, which comes to be defined differentially, in relation to all other signifiers. In *Course in General Linguistics* Ferdinand de Saussure says: "*In the language itself, there are only differences...and no positive terms*" (118; emphasis in the original). Hence, if the subject transpires as representation of one signifier to another, it is constituted in relation to the proliferating series of differences and negativities, which continues indefinitely. Yet being as such eludes language and formalization; as Lacan puts it, being is "that which is there beneath the meaning" (211). In this indefinite sliding, therefore, the chain of signifiers marks the disappearance of being in signification, which triggers the fading of the subject, an effect which Lacan terms *aphanisis*. In alienation, Lacan

recapitulates, the signifier functions "only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject" (207).

Split in the process of alienation, the subject recovers its being through desire, in the movement which Lacan designates as separation. In its disappearance, the subject is lacking (being), which marks a point at which desire emerges. For, in addition to the lack of its own eclipsed being, the subject locates a lack in the field of the Other—this gap in the Other is the lacking meaning, the signifier that has no signified attached to it. Lacan illustrates the lack of the Other in the subject's reaction to the message that it receives from the Other: "*He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*" (214). It is clear, therefore, that "*man's desire is the desire of the Other*," but only as an unknown, as lacking (38). The separation then proceeds as a superimposition of these two lacks (being on the part of the subject; signified on the part of the Other): "the subject … brings the answer of the previous lack, of his own disappearance, which he situates here at the point of lack perceived in the Other" (214). Confusing its own lack for the lack in the Other, the subject is able to apprehend the Other's desire as its own, as if it knew the concrete meaning behind the signifier in the Other. In order to find its own desire in the field of the Other, however, the subject has to make a leap: the meaning and the certainty that the subject has to posit is essentially ungrounded.

Exemplifying this movement, Lacan indicates the path from alienation to separation in the instance of Descartes's radical doubt. As Descartes stumbles upon the limit of his *I think* as "a mere point of fading" (alienation), he is only able to overcome this limit in a logical leap by forcing the lack of his own certainty to coincide with the lack per-

ceived in the Other (separtation). Descartes thus grounds his *cogito* on the non-deceiving God, who in turn is a logical consequence of the *cogito*. The meaning and certainty about the Other's words and their underlying desire, therefore, comes with the price of the repression of the original non-meaning—the lacking foundation for being—which splits the subject in the first place.

This preliminary sketch outlines the logical path that the subject, as the subject of the unconscious, will have to traverse. What however remains unclear is the concrete function of the signifier, which assumes the entire weight of the argument. Lacan emphasizes that alienation "is linked in an essential way to the function of the dyad of signifiers…it is only with two that [the subject] can be cornered in alienation" (236). First of all we must distinguish between the unary and binary signifiers in the initial couple that is able to produce the effect of fading: S_1, the unary signifier, represents the subject to S_2, the binary signifier. Concerning the latter, Lacan adds: "The *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is the binary signifier" (218). This term, borrowed from Freud, which ultimately will be realized in *Urverdrängung*, the primal repression, has to be understood as "*the representative (le représentant)…of the representation (de la représentation)*" (217). The function of the signifier lies on the side of *Repräsentanz*, of being a representative, which Lacan compares to the job of a diplomat, who is supposed to represent a country, something "whose signification, while constantly changing, is, beyond their own persons" (220). In this way, the signifier is radically severed from its signification (signified content). "Signification," Lacan says, "comes into play in the *Vorstellung*," which is the opposite pole of representing (220).

The binary signifier, representing the *Vorstellung* (signification), has to be posited as an exceptional kind of signifier serving a completely different function from that of both the unary signifier and all other signifiers. In "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," Lacan expounds on the function of the binary signifier: "a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier. This latter signifier"—the binary signifier—"is therefore the signifier to which all the other signifiers represent the subject" (694). How are we to understand that all the signifiers represent the subject to the binary signifier? According to the structuralist thesis, a signifier is defined differentially, in opposition to every other signifier in the chain—e.g., the tree is not a church, not a road, etc; on the other hand, in relation to the signifier "tree," every other signifier has a function of basically saying "I am not a tree." Lacan's thesis, therefore, can be understood in the following way: because of the differential and negative nature of the signifier, every signifier can only represent the subject to the binary signifier by telling it "I am not the subject." This is the function of the unary signifier (S_1) and the battery of all signifiers that emerge after the advent of the binary signifier (S_2). In other words, every signifier represents the subject *qua* its non-identity with the subject *to the binary signifier*. This is a crucial point in understanding the asymmetry of representation and the privileged position of the binary signifier: that to which the subject is represented. Only in relation to the binary signifier do all the other signifiers signal the absence of the subject. *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz,* therefore, equates the subject and its absence as one and the same thing, triggering the subject's disappearance in the face of the signifying chain. Since the subject and its fading are one and the same thing, in alienation, the binary signifier stands for the subject by signifying its own disappearance. What triggers

the emergence of the subject, while at the same time inducing its fading, is a failed representation—the initial dyad of signifier, the indeterminate vacillation between S_1 and S_2, is the representation that *does not work*.

The binary signifier's privileged position is further evident in that it serves as a representative (in the sense of both precondition and addressee) of the representation of the subject, "which means that if this signifier is missing, all the other signifiers represent nothing. For something is only represented to" (694). At the stage of alienation, although the split has been introduced, the subject has not yet emerged as the subject of the unconscious and the subject of desire—desire being a non-symbolizable function (i.e., the function beyond representation, which will allow the recovery of the subject's being in view of the proliferating chain of signification). The logical presupposition in the movement of alienation is that the subject is not distinguishable from the signifying chain; the convergence of the two—the subject and the signifying chain—is in turn symbolized by the binary signifier, for it represents the representation of the subject and at the same time serves as a condition of representation as a whole (without it "all the other signifiers represent nothing"). The Other is the locus of representation, which emerges in its entirety already with the first dyad of the signifiers, and because the Other is first and foremost lacking, in representing representation as a whole, the binary signifier stands for the lack in the Other. [1] The binary signifier thus collapses the subject to this essential lack in the Other. It is therefore clear that the binary signifier also stands or the subject's death

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[1] Lacan symbolizes the lack in the Other as $A\!\!\!/$; in turn, because it is the signifier of the lack in the Other the matheme for the binary signifier is $S(A\!\!\!/)$.

and its induced fading: representing the lacking representation, the binary signifier simultaneously represents the absence of the subject.

Because the function of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* makes manifest the lack of the subject's own foundation intertwined with the lack in the Other, the subject's "I" cannot emerge unless it separates itself off from this lack in the Other, from this incessant fading. This "I" emerges only at the cost of the repression of the binary signifier: "the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz,* is *unterdrückt*, sunk underneath" (*BXI* 219). After the repression of the lack in the Other, the subject imagines the coherence of the desire of the Other, and, by assuming this desire as its own, the subject is able to fill the split of its own lacking foundation.

The repression does not, however, cause the complete loss of the binary signifier; on the contrary, in its very absence the latter assumes an essential role in the signifying chain: "the battery of signifiers is…complete, and this signifier can only be a line that is drawn from its circle without being able to be counted in it" ("Subversion of the Subject" 694). Due to the exclusion of the binary signifier, the signifying chain can be totalized— it is complete—which stops the indefinitely proliferating series of signification, thus allowing meaning to emerge. As excluded, the binary signifier takes over the function of non-sense (as opposed to meaning), and it is that on which this totality (sense) is predicated. Furthermore, by the token that it cannot be counted in the representational order, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is beyond the totality of sense, and, as such, assumes a position of "unrepresentable."

Self-referentiality as a problematic of formalization

Evident in Descartes, and what has haunted secular reason in his aftermath, is a problematic and its consequent failure to construct a solid edifice of thought without first presupposing a transcendental being. At the same time, one cannot return to the Platonic notion of agreement as production of truth, if one is to avoid solipsism. Karatani explains that the production of truth by means of agreement is only possible if it were granted that "[w]hat is true for the self must be true universally"—a notion which nonetheless presupposes a transcendental subject (149). In addressing the problematic of the Cartesian subject, a series of questions arises: what are the limitations of the secular subject? Does the disavowal of a transcendental being signal its disappearance? Or does the transcendental function persist in a different form in secular subjectivity?

Formalism is one tenet of thought that attempts to address these questions, which was initially developed by Russian Formalists, and was taken up in the twentieth-century, among other areas, in structural linguistics, semiotics, set theory and theory of natural numbers, structural anthropology, and, of course, the Lacanian theory, which is nothing other than a formal theory of the subject. Karatani summarizes the method of formalism in that it "apprehends the form as a precedent and the object and the sense one makes of it as the model or interpretation of the form" (xxxv). Formalism abstracts the totality of material conditions in order to deduce the structure that is presupposed in the functioning of this totality. In this methodology, formalism aspires to avoid both the emergence of a transcendental being and Platonic solipsism. Thus, instead of God or solipsism, formalism follows the law of differentiality: in conceiving all its elements in relation to each

other, a structure is conjured from negative spaces and their differential relationships. What is important to emphasize is that structuralism does not unconditionally impose the differentiality of the substance it formalizes from the outside; on the contrary, it is only because a given substance is differential that formalism becomes possible at all. At the same time, it is only due to the formalist method that the differentiality of the structure becomes evident.[2]

Karatani, however, contends that any formal system is not only a differential system, but a self-referential differential system, which amounts to the system's inconsistency or, more precisely, undecidability. In order to explain the self-referentiality inherent in any formal system, one has to differentiate between three levels: natural (as in "natural numbers"), formal level (formalized number theory), and meta-level (a second-order principle that grounds the consistency of the formal level). The term "natural" in question has nothing to do with nature, as it is traditionally understood; Karatani explains this terminology: "[m]atters to which we provisionally apply the adjective 'natural,' then, are neither contradictory to the artificial nor distinct from it. Rather, they are part of 'what man makes,' though the procedure by which they are made is not known" (61). This relation between nature and culture ("what man makes") is best exemplified by the prohibition of incest. Karatani writes: "The prohibition of incest is 'what man makes,' but it is not made by man, because it is this prohibition itself that makes man into man" (96). Although the prohibition of incest is a cultural phenomenon, it is the very condition that

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[2] The historical dimension of formalism thus must be kept in mind: why is it that formalism managed to formulate its method and elucidate the differentiality inherent in social fields or literary production at this historical moment, while maintaining that this structure was there, as it were, all along? Among other factors, the initiation of formal critique coincides with the advent of the avant-garde on aesthetic arena—a movement, as I will argue, that conjures the whole art history at its disposal precisely by emphasizing the formal level of its artistic production. Although no causality between the two should be drawn, this coincidence hints at the importance of the historical aspect of formalism. Although I do not address this issue here, the text concedes that formalism as philosophy is itself historical.

is constitutive of culture. In this way, the origin of the prohibition of incest—whether it belongs to nature or culture, i.e., made by man or what makes man—remains strictly undecidable. The term "natural" then has to be understood in this sense: it enjoys a causal relationship to the totalization of the formal system (human society), while it retrospectively emerges as the effect of this structure (society is that which imposes the prohibition of incest). The same logic applies to other phenomena constituting societies: for instance, the notion of religion in Durkheim, societal organization in Mauss, or myths in Levi-Strauss, all of which are man-made phenomena, and yet must be ascribed to the level of the "natural" by dint of the fact that they are presupposed for a society to exist.
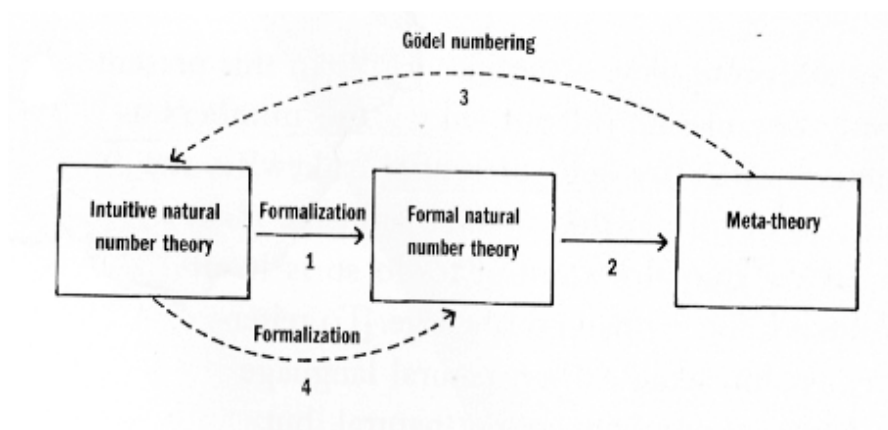
Figure 1. (Karatani 62)

In the theory of natural numbers, Kurt Gödel exemplifies the self-referential character of a formal system by showing that any axiomatic system that grounds the formalization of the theory of natural numbers is necessarily tied up with the terms of natural numbers themselves (Figure 1). The formal level, towering above the "natural" phenomena, itself presupposes a meta-language that sustains the consistency of the former. Karatani summarizes the method of Gödel's incompleteness theorem: "he ingeniously set up a self-

referential paradox wherein meta-mathematics, understood as a class, gets mixed into the formal system as a member of that class" (55). The incompleteness theorem basically demonstrates that the presupposed meta-level that sustains the formal system can only be fathomed in the terms of the "natural" level—a member of the class in the formal system itself. Unless this circular movement in the triad of natural, formal, and meta-level is resolved, the formalization method as such remains undecidable.

Gödel's example does not only characterize the self-referentiality in the natural number theory, but also epitomizes the undecidability of any formal system. For instance, Descartes's argument of the *cogito* is a self-referential argument par excellence: non-deceiving God (meta-level), who is the guarantor of certainty of the *cogito* as proof (formal level) is derived from the signifier "I think therefore I am" as a reference to the subject's imperfection in doubt (natural level)—the very level it assumes to ground ontologically. In the same way, the axiomatic system that grounds the consistency of the natural number theory, or any formal system for that matter, can neither be proved nor disproved.

At stake is the very foundation of mathematics: if Gödel's incompleteness theorem is correct, how can the natural number theory (or any axiomatic system) function in the face of its own undecidability? Karatani counters this question as follows: "The real developments in mathematics have been made by applied mathematicians, who remain indifferent to foundations as such; indeed, mathematical development has proceeded *irrationally*" (56). The answer to this fundamental problem is strikingly simple: in

practice, the self-referentiality inherent in any axiomatic system is externalized and, as such, ignored.[3]

Similar logic finds application in the formalization of language. Karatani notes: "even if natural language is formalized—reduced to certain symbols—the interpretation or definition of the symbolic form must be executed by natural language itself" (62, see Figure 2). Karatani continues: "The whole scheme presents not only the impossibility of meta-language, but also the impossibility of natural language as a foundation. Accordingly, we can say that natural language is itself this loop" (ibid.). Although not explicitly addressed, this loop in language finds articulation in Saussure's structural linguistics. Saussure's most basic principle—that the signifier is defined differentially, in relation to all other signifiers—leads to a conclusion that the signifier first and foremost appears as the signifier of another signifier. As Lacan puts it: "no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification" ("The Instance of the Letter" 415). Addressing the most basic formalization of language offered by Saussure—and its consequential reversal by Lacan that reads Signifier/signified—Lacan remarks that "the algorithm [S/s] itself is but a pure function of the signifier" (418). The self-referential loop consists in the fact that the formalization of the natural language can only proceed by way of natural language—the signifier can appeal to no authority other than itself.

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[3] This logic also corresponds to the development in psychoanalysis since Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. While at the early stages of psychoanalysis, Freud believed that the uncovering of the repressed—talking through the symptom as it were—dissolves the symptom, this view had to be amended. Lacan does not cease to emphasize that knowing the symptom does not correspond to the cure of the symptom. In other words, the repressed is not a meta-level in relation to the symptom (return of the repressed in a coded form).
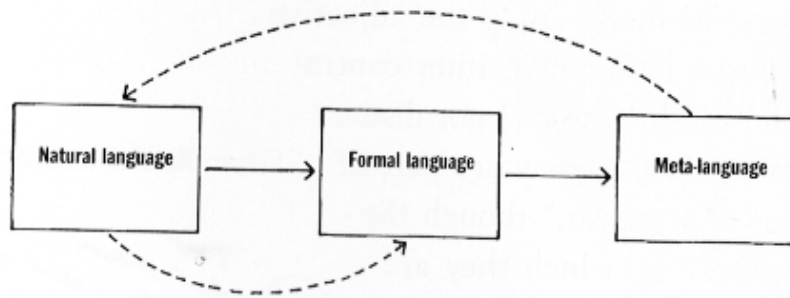
Figure 2. (Karatani 62)

Although this critique is quite simple, if not simplified, it nevertheless carries with it a series of repercussions. Since the proliferation of signification in formalization must continue indefinitely, the question of the emergence of meaning is unavoidable. As Jacques Derrida argues in his *Of Grammatology*, the emergence of meaning in Saussure's formal system demands a suppression of a signifier and surfacing of an exceptional signified: "There has to be a transcendental signified for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible" (20). Derrida continues: "It is the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self, and nevertheless, as signified concept, in the element of ideality or universality" (ibid). What does it mean that the transcendental signified produces itself "from within the self"? Does Derrida here not identify the transcendental function in the transfer of the self-referentiality inherent in formalization onto a single signifier that is able to short circuit the indefinite proliferation of signification? Precisely because of the self-relational nature of the signifier, the formal system cannot sustain itself and unwittingly produces a

transcendental function.[4] According to Karatani, then, since a differential substance is nothing but a self-relational loop, it marks the dead-end of formalization—in a self-deconstructive gesture it negates any possibility of a foundation, introducing either undecidability or a transcendental presupposition.

And yet, in the face of the deconstruction immanent in every text, the interpretation does not vanish as a possibility, but persists as necessity. Derrida admits parenthetically: "The desire to restrict play is, moreover, irresistible" (59). In other words, the desire to produce meaning, be it fundamentally ungrounded and based on the emergence of the transcendental signifier, perseveres alongside its impossibility. With the impending emergence of the transcendental function, the objective of secular reason is radically undermined. The task to produce a foundation without a reference to an omnipotent being or the notion of agreement does not result in the vanishing of the transcendental function, but rather in its displacement and exclusion. This is Lacan's point in stating: "For the true formula of atheism is not *God is dead*…the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*" (*BXI* 59). Given the Lacanian postulate that the unconscious is structured like a language, and the fact that the self-referentiality of language leads to the emergence of a transcendental function and its subsequent exclusion, then this transcendental function must be located in the unconscious. Hence, the transcendental function emerges precisely because, as Karatani puts it, "[l]anguage is essentially a language about language," which implies that God is the product of language itself (*AAM* 62). Still, this does not mean that the transcendental function emerges merely as secondary to language; on the contrary,

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[4] Whether one chooses to call this transcendental function the "transcendental signifier" (Derrida) or "transcendental subject" or simply "zero" (Jakobson's zero phoneme) is secondary to my argument. What is essential is the inevitability of the transcendental function due to the self-referentiality inherent in the formal systems.

precisely because natural language is itself a loop, it presupposes the transcendental function in order for meaning to emerge.

Lacan and the paradox of self-referentiality

Lacan's theory of the subject, and his method as a whole, is predicated in part on the structuralist thesis that language is a differential system. If Lacan follows the method of formalization, the question arises: how can Lacanian theory be sustained in view of the undecidability induced by the self-referential paradox? My contention is that, not only does Lacan account for the self-referentiality inherent in a formal system, he also presents a critique of formalism as a whole—a critique that is an elaboration, rather than negation, of the structuralist method; furthermore, the formal theory of the subject offers a line of escape from the self-referential paradox.

Karatani's persistent discussion of the dead-end of formalization in a self-referential paradox as the trope of secular age is already acknowledged in Lacan. Regarding the formal topologies he uses, Lacan says: "They are supports for your thought that are not without artifice, but there is no topology that does not have to be supported by some artifice—it is precisely the result of the fact that the subject depends on the signifier, in other words, on a certain impotence in your thinking" (*BXI* 209). In saying this, Lacan hints that any formal system explaining a "natural" phenomenon clashes against a difficulty that is structurally inevitable and hence can be overcome only by a mechanism capable of concealing the undecidability inherent in language. As Karatani demonstrates, every positing of a second-order principle—any representation of natural phenomena in formal terms—that would aspire to be a foundation always descends, in a self-referential

movement, back to the first level, thereby viciously precluding the pursued certainty. The constitution of a formal structure, therefore, necessarily demands the suppression of self-referentiality; this is what Lacan calls the "artifice," a sleight of hand, that Karatani in turn will identify as the prohibition of self-referentiality or "castration."

The materialization of the subject structurally imposes a limit in representation, which Lacan here characterizes as "impotence" of thought. The self-referentiality of language must be located in the sphere of the Other, and, indeed, the subject's relation to the Other can be conceptualized as a loop. Lacan describes this relation as follows: "from the subject called to the Other," the unary signifier that represents the subject to the binary signifier, "to the subject *of* that which he has himself seen appear in the field of the Other," the subject then appears as the binary signifier, a mere shadow of representation, "from the Other coming back" in the form a lack, that can be summed in the question: "What does he want from me?" ("SoS" 690). What is essential to understand is that the latter question is none other than the reformulation of the subject's own question to the Other—"what do you want?"—that returns to the subject in a different form. What the subject imagines as the outside, the Other—*qua* the subject's meta-level—is nothing but a reflection of the subject's own split. Insofar as this movement from the subject to the Other and back triggers the emergence of desire, it becomes clear that self-referentiality is at once a necessary condition for the materialization of the subject by way of desire and that which is repressed along the way. As previously argued, what is repressed in the constitution of the subject is the binary signifier; *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz,* which is then necessarily excluded from the set of signifiers, embodies the self-referntial mechanism in the formation of the subject. Manifest in the inability to answer the question "What does

he want from me?," the lack in the Other (i.e., a symbolic order as a differential system), is an effect of the self-referentiality of the signifier: it is the constitutive element of both the symbolic order and the subject, neither of which can function as the meta-level of the other. As demonstrated earlier, insofar as *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* stands for the lack in the Other, it can be said that the binary signifier is the signifier of the self-referentiality of the formal system.

The problematic of formalization can be rehearsed in the movement of alienation as a precursor of the emergence of desire. Alienation arises as a choice between two joined sets, Being and Meaning (Fig. 3) —two sets that have at least one common element (non-meaning)—and defined by the characteristic that, whatever the choice, the common element is lost, and hence, the choice "has as its consequence a *neither one, nor the other*" (Lacan 211)[5]. The signifier that represents the subject emerges in the field of the Other, in language, wherein meaning can be located and being is excluded. Consequently, "[i]f we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning" (Lacan 211). If, on the other hand, we choose meaning, "the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-meaning"—the part that corresponds to the binary signifier (the stand-in of being), which must be repressed for meaning to emerge. Hence, "it is of the nature of this meaning, as it emerges in the field of the Other, to be in a large part of its field, eclipsed by the disappearance of being" (ibid.). The choice of alienation marks the disappearance of the original condition of subject's existence—having both meaning and retaining its being.

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[5] In *The Logic of Sense* Gilles Deleuze emphasizes the role of non-meaning, or nonsense, in structuralism as a necessary condition to the emergence of sense. Deleuze writes: "structuralism shows in this manner that sense is produced by nonsense and its perpetual displacement and that it is born of the respective position of elements which are not by themselves 'signifying'" (71).
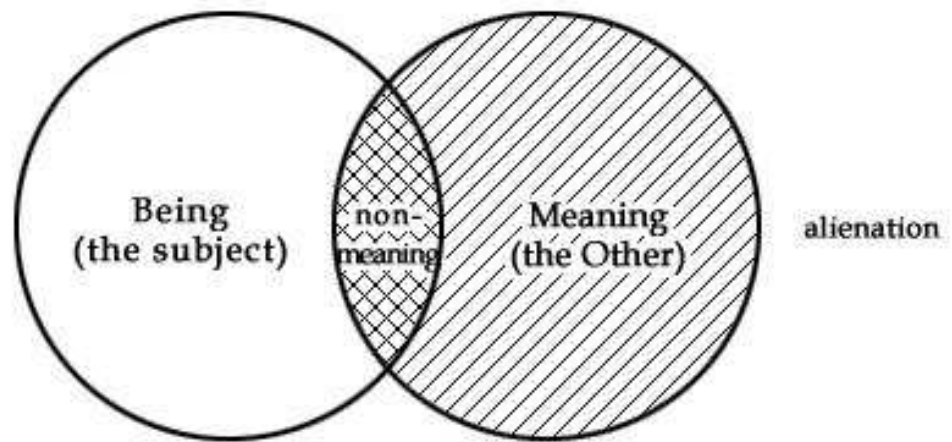
Figure 3. (Lacan 211)

The structure of alienation as the joining of two sets embodies the failure of the formalization to provide a solid foundation in the face of its self-referentiality. Think of the first set in question as the formal level, on which a claim is proposed as truth with regard to the "natural" level (e.g., *cogito* as an ontological proof); the second set is then the meta-level, or the second-order principle, which should provide the ground of certainty to the proposed truth (e.g., the non-deceiving God). In order that certainty of truth be grounded, the two sets cannot overlap. As demonstrated by Karatani, however, the meta-level is always formulated in terms of the first level of proposition (e.g., Descartes derives his non-deceiving God on the basis of his imperfection evident in doubt). Lacan includes this notion in his schemata in insisting that the overlapping of the two sets is the constitutive principle in the formation of the split subject. The binary signifier, the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz,* is located precisely in the intersection of the two sets. As an effect, the binary signifier represents the impinging undecidability and has as its effect the disappearance of certainty. The end result of alienation can be conceived in the

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following formulation: neither truth nor certainty. The problem of the undecidability in formalization is therefore encapsulated in the movement of alienation in the constitution of the subject.

Far from being a problem or an obstacle, Lacan constructs alienation as a logical precondition that necessitates the next step—beyond undecidability—in the realization of the subject, formalized in the movement of separation. In separation, the emergence of the unconscious and desire compensate for the fading of the split subject. What proves undecidable in the self-referentiality of the formal structure transfers to the function of desire at a point "when doubt is recognized as certainty" (126). Thus the second-order principle necessarily emerges, as the unconditional transcendental, but transpires as such only in the unconscious. Lacan formulates this persistent split of impossibility of meaning in language and its necessary formation in the distinction between the levels of statement and enunciation.

In order to elucidate the dynamic between statement and enunciation, I will draw on the self-referential paradox as stated in set theory. Once infinity is conceived as a number, the premise of the set theory can be formulated as follows: "Given any set, finite or infinite, a set with more elements can always be obtained" (Karatani, *AAM* 52). The paradox thus looms large in the possibility of raising a question of the set of all possible sets: namely, whether the set of all sets includes itself or not is, on the formal level, undecidable. In "natural" language, the same paradox can be expressed through the statement: "I am lying." On the formal level, indeed, the statement "I am lying" is undecidable due to its self-referentiality: if I am lying, the statement "I am lying" itself turns out to be true, whereas if I am telling the truth, the statement indicates a lie.

Although the self-referential paradox appears to be the dead-end of formalization proper, Lacan sees it as an enabling condition of psychoanalysis. In order to resolve the paradox "I am lying," Lacan introduces a difference between the level of the statement and the level of enunciation: "the *I* of enunciation is not the same as the *I* of the statement" (*BXI* 139)[6]. On the level of the statement, if the content is taken purely according to its formal logic, the meaning of this sentence is indeed undecidable; the level of enunciation, however, is concerned with the desire that is presupposed in uttering the statement in the first place. In "I am lying," on the level of the statement, "am lying" becomes a signifier in the field of the Other. As its effect, the "am lying"-signifier determines the "I" retrospectively on the level of enunciation: *"I, determined retrospectively, becomes a signification…of what it* ["am lying"-signifier] *produces at the level of the enunciation"* (139). Once the words leave the subject's mouth and enter the field of the Other, it is the Other who is in control to determine not only the value of the subject's statement but also the "I" of the subject itself. Having passed through the field of the Other, "from the *I am lying* which is at the level of the chain of the statement…what results is an *I am deceiving you*" on the level of enunciation (ibid.). This transformation occurs because apart from the formal logic, once the statement enters the field of the Other— and we recall that "Man's desire is the desire of the Other"—desire takes over to deliver a message beyond the subject's control or intention (*BXI* 38). Desire is that which eludes formalization; formalization stops short because it does not foresee that desire must intervene as a result of the repression of the binary signifier—the very signifier that stands for the self-referentiality transpiring as the deadlock of formalization. Further-

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[6] Lacan's distinction between statement and enunciation is often employed in different vocabulary: the levels of enunciated and enunciation. "Statement" and "enunciated" are to be understood in the same way.

more, this analysis shows that far from being able to produce an undecidable statement, the subject is condemned to telling the truth unconditionally, because on the level of the enunciation even "the lie as such is itself posited in this dimension of truth" (138).

The shift from the level of the statement to the level of the enunciation thus comes about precisely as the result of the failure of formalization. The resolution of the self-referential paradox resides in the register outside the symbolic inscription: the categories of desire and the unconscious overstep the symbolic and the imaginary, while signaling the approach to the real—the real understood as failure of formalization. The instances which demonstrate the undecidability of a formal system are not a devastating critique of the latter, but rather the negative gestures, which foreground self-referentiality as an ontological category. Similarly, where the logical impossibility of constituting meaning shows itself, the excess of meaning follows as a necessary consequence.

CHAPTER TWO:
Representations that work too well: *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*

> They cannot represent [*vertreten*] themselves, they must be represented [*vertreten*].
> – Karl Marx

Modes of Representation

The Lacanian approach takes it as a starting point that the subject of secular modernity is engendered by way of the failed representation—in the space between two signifiers (S_1 and S_2). As a direct consequence, the most intimate feelings and beliefs of the subject are mediated by representation; fundamentally, man's desire passes through the Other, the locus of representation. The formalist method and its "failure" force the problematic of representation as the foremost issue of secular thought—precisely because neither agreement nor transcendental being remain valid as a way to forego the issue of representation. To phrase it differently, representation and its failure are the preconditions of philosophical discourse. The problematic of representation thus shifts away from the opposition of the real versus the represented and rethinks this dichotomy in a different light: the real *because* it is (not) represented.

A series of questions arises: because the subject is constituted secondary to the signifier through failed representation, what is the condition of the representation that works? Do we encounter heterogeneous modes of representation, in particular, in art, politics, and philosophy? We have already seen that both terms, *Vorstellung* and *Repräsentanz*, though translated into English as "representation," serve two radically different functions relevant to the constitution of the subject and the symbolic order. Moreover, while the original dyad of signifiers "does not work" (for it triggers the fading of the subject), the subsequent emergence of desire is accompanied by a sliding of the level of the statement to the level of enunciation: to the point where even a paradox turns into a successful signification. Does this sliding between two levels entail a shift in the mode of representation as such?

Karatani in his *Transcritique* turns to Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in order to untangle two different modes of representation in the spheres of politics, economics, and, finally, art and philosophy. Marx's text seeks to demonstrate that, following the introduction of the parliamentary representative system after the Revolution of 1848 that "delivered universal suffrage for the first time," the democratic election of Louis Bonaparte as emperor was not a political fluke, but rather a logical consequence of the relation between the representative system and the social classes behind it (*Transcritique* 143). The aptness of Marx's critique consist in the fact that it does not merely deal with the representative system but first and foremost with its failure: the democratic election of Louis Bonaparte as emperor signals the utmost limit of representation and the collapse of the democratic representative apparatus. Behind Marx's question as to "how it is possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part?" thus

lurks a deeper issue: In what way and under which conditions does representation fail? (Karatani *TC* 145).

Central to understanding Marx's thesis is the distinction between two modes of representation: *Vertretung,* which designates political representation and carries the connotation of representation as "standing-in-the-place-of" someone, and *Darstellung*, as a mode of re-presentation in which one pretends to be someone else, as is the case of actors [*Darsteller*] in theater or film. Central to *Darstellung* is the function of imaginary mediation: thus, for instance, in theater the relation between the actor and what he or she represents [*darstellen*] is purely fictional, i.e., imaginary. Constitutive of *Vertretung*, on the other hand, is the direct—rather than imaginarily mediated—connection between the representatives and the represented. Karatani traces the function of *Vertretung* in the system of representation that was predominant before the introduction of the parliamentary system—namely, in the political system of *Ständeversammlungen,* "an assembly of different castes/professions from preindustrial Europe" (*TC* 144). Karatani draws on Hans Kelsen to explain the original notion of *Vertretung*: the nature of the representative system [*Vertretung*] in *Ständeversammlung* forged a direct bond between the representatives and represented, where the former were directly "tied to" and "responsible to" the latter ["*ihrer Wählergruppen gebunden und diesen verantwortlich waren"*] (*TC* 324n.16). [7] Hence, the original meaning of *Vertretung* as the name for the representative system does not belong to the parliamentary democracy; rather, it goes back to the political

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[7] Helpful to understanding the distinction between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* are the concepts of metaphor and metonymy. As Lacan points out in his "Instance of the Letter," metaphor is a relationship of "one word for another"—one signifier for another; like in *Darstellung*, the determinate condition of metaphor is that the two signifiers share radically disparate meanings. Metonymy, on the other hand, where a part stands for a whole, is akin to *Vertretung*, insofar as the representative in *Ständeversammlung* is a part of the class he represents; the representative in *Ständeversammlung* is "standing-in-the-place-of" the whole of the social class to which he belongs.

situation of the pre-industrial Europe, where the representatives and the represented shared an apodictic relationship with one other.

While the signifier of the representative system stayed the same, the notion of *Vertretung* had undergone a radical shift since the introduction of the parliamentary system. Karatani relies on the following passage in Marx in order to describe the role of a representative [*Vertreter*] in relation to the petty bourgeoisie in the parliamentary system:

> This content is the transformation of society in a democratic way, but a transformation within the bounds of the petty bourgeoisie. Only one must not get the narrow-minded notion that the petty bourgeoisie, on principle, wishes to enforce an egoistic class interest. Rather, it believes that the special conditions of its emancipation are the general conditions within whose frame alone modern society can be saved and the class struggle avoided. Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives [*Repräsentanten*] are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven and earth. What makes them representatives [*Vertreter*] of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the political and literary representatives [*das Verhältnis der* politischen *und* literarischen Vertreter] of a class and the class they represent [*vertreten*]. (Marx *Eighteenth Brumaire* III; *Der achtzehnte Brumaire* 142)

Marx describes here the Montagne government enacting a kind of farce in the establishment of the so-called social democratic state. The result of the post-1848 coalition of petty bourgeois and the workers in the parliamentary democracy, where the representatives [*Vertreter*] may be "as far apart as heaven and earth" from the class they represent, was "not of doing away with two extremes, capital and wage labor, but of weakening their antagonism and transforming it into harmony" (Marx *EB* III). The ideological modification in the notion of *Vertretung* in post-1848 France, under the guise of democratic values and universal suffrage, installed only a certain social class as representatives,

thereby assuring the perpetuation of the capitalist mode of production. Unlike in *Ständeversammlungen*, the representatives [*Vertreter*] in the parliamentary system no longer belonged or were directly tied to the class they represented; as Marx stresses, these representatives must not have been "all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shop-keepers," not to mention the enthusiastic champions of proletariat.

Although this transformation in the meaning and function of *Vertretung* is clear, the conditions that allow ideological efficacy in the parliamentary system remain enigmatic. This ideological efficacy of the parliamentary system must be sought in the exact nature of the relation between the representatives and the class they represent. In this passage Marx ridicules the position of the democratically elected representatives [*Vertreter*] in the parliamentary system in contrast to the function these representatives aspire to enact. The fact that in the parliamentary system the "drive" to represent a given class is merely "theoretical," rather than practical, betrays Marx's sarcasm: "that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life." This, of course, in Marx's view is quite ridiculous, since the material conditions determine consciousness [*Das Sein bestimmt das Bewusstsein*] and the material condition of these representatives are "as far apart as heaven and earth" from those of the class they represent. In this respect, Karatani is justified to claim that in the parliamentary system the relation between the representative and the represented is of "arbitrary" or "fictitious" nature; "[i]n the parliamentary system based upon universal suffrage," Karatani says, "the representative system [*Vertretung*] is thoroughly 'fictitious' as compared to *Ständeversammlung*" (144).

While deriding the parliamentary representatives, Marx nevertheless precisely formulates what should pertain to the mode of representation that is *Vertretung*: sarcasm aside, the representative should be driven "to the same problems and solutions to which material interests and social position drive the latter [the class they represent] practically"—while this drive should not be merely "theoretical," but rather practically substantiated. This, however, is only possible if the representatives share the apodictic relationship, e.g., material conditions or direct responsibility, to the class they represent—qua *Ständeversammlung* in pre-industrial Europe. The medium, which gives the representatives in the parliamentary system the necessary credence, according to Marx, is their fantasy that "in their minds" they don't get beyond a required limit. Hence, the distance between the representatives and represented is only overcome by imaginary sublation. This theoretically mediated, rather than practically substantiated, relation constitutes precisely the function of *Darstellung*, as opposed to *Vertretung*. The role of the representatives in the parliamentary system is no longer "standing-in-the-place-of;" rather, insofar as this connection is arbitrary and finds its justification "in their minds," the parliamentary system resonates with *darstellen* as an act of fictional representation. Arbitrariness and fictitiousness found in the parliamentary system pertain precisely to the order of *Darstellung*.[8]

With the introduction of the parliamentary system, therefore, the mode of representation has undergone a shift: *Vertretung* in the political realm takes on all the qualities of *Darstellung*, while *Vertretung* qua *Ständeversammlung* as such is effaced. Yet the notion of *Vertretung* does not lose its weight on the scene of political theater completely.

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[8] This is the meaning of Althusser's famous claim that there is no outside ideology. All political representation, and by analogy, all philosophical representation, is ideologically mediated: *Darstellung* is the only mode of representation available to secular reason.

As Marx's analysis demonstrates, the parliamentary representative system, although corresponding to *Darstellung*, must acquires a double quality: it is arbitrary—the representatives in the parliamentary system do not belong to the class they represent—and it appears as not arbitrary (qua *Vertretung*)—legitimized by the universal suffrage in place. In this sense, *Vertretung* is *Darstellung's* necessary double: in order to be effective in the political realm, *Darstellung* must transpire as enacting the function of *Vertretung.*

A chiasmatic reversal: from *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* to *Vertretungsdarstellung*

The dynamic between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* surfaces as a chiasmatic reversal of the logic present in the formation of the subject—as well as in the closure of the formal system. As I have previously argued, the formal system necessitates the repression of the binary signifier, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*—representative of representation. Evidently, in the context of parliamentary representative system, one also cannot avoid the issue of a binary signifier that appears as a redoubling of the representational function. At every instance of *Vertretung* the representation is two-fold: first*,* the representative stands for the content of representation (a class that he or she represents) in an arbitrary or fictitious connection; and, second, the instance of fictitious representation erases the trace of its own arbitrariness by means of re-presenting [*darstellen*], or "putting on an act," of representation [*Vertretung*].[9] The redoubling of representation in this context could be

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[9] The parallel between *Darstellung/Vertretung* and metaphor/metonymy respectively, clarifies the necessity of the displacement, not complete effacement, of *Vertretung*. That is, although metonymy does not undergo historical metamorphoses (at least, not self-evidently), its connection to metaphor shows the necessity of a double process in representation. In "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious" Lacan writes: "Metaphor's creative spark…flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other's place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain" (422). Lacan points out that in the work of metaphor, one signifier is replaced by the other, while the other signifier nonetheless maintains a certain metonymic relationship to all other signifiers. Here, the interplay between the discussed concepts is two-fold. One the one hand,

termed *Vertretungsdarstellung*—re-presentation of representation. *Vorstellungsrepräsen-tanz* must be understood as a signifier of the lack in the Other (i.e., the locus of represen-tation), which is accordingly repressed in order that representation is totalized; *Vertre-tungsdarstellung* is the other side of the same coin: it is instead excessively present in the representative system and must appear at every moment of representation.

The relation of *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* is one of fantasy—it is at once "imaginary" and yet it is necessary for the symbolic efficacy. While the original dyad of signifiers in the formation of the subject "does not work" (for it induces the fading of the subject), the representative mode in the parliamentary system (*Darstellung* enacting the role of *Vertretung*) "works too well:" as Marx demonstrates, the parliamentary system manages to promote an economic program that harms the proletariat in the name of the universal suffrage. Because the doctrine of the universal suffrage vies to represent all classes beyond their difference as a result of the democratic elections, the parliamentary system implies the totalization of a differential structure (multitude of classes and class relations). Just as the closure of the formal structure is presupposed for the emergence of meaning, the representative system functions as if the representation in question is total: "the representative can behave as if he represented everyone, even though it is not the case" (Karatani, *TC* 151-2). The dynamic of *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* corresponds to the totalized system where the shortcoming of representation (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* as the lacking meaning in the Other) has been repressed, and the ideological fantasy, by means of the imaginary register, creates a coherent totality of the symbolic order—a

Lacan clarifies that there is no metaphor without metonymy (no *Darstellung* without *Vertretung*—or, in other words, no statement without enunciation). On the other hand, as *Darstellung* replaces *Vertretung*, and it becomes clear that the redoubling of the signification as *Vertretungsdarstellung* is metaphoric (*Darstellung* is the locus of metaphor), *Vertretung* becomes "the occulted signifier," which remains "present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain."

unified political program that claims universal validity (e.g., democracy or human rights).[10]

This success of representation, in turn, elucidates the failed representation of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. In alienation, the dyad of signifiers functions purely on the level of representation as "standing-in-the-place-of;" to recall Lacan's analogy, the function of *Repräsentanz* is one of a diplomat—a *Vertreter*, who represents a country beyond his or her own persona. In view of the "success" in the dynamic of *Vertretungsdarstellung,* the condition of the failure of the initial dyad of signifier becomes clear: the formation of the subject demands an introduction of desire, which is the intervention of the imaginary register. In other words, representation *qua* S_1 and S_2 does not work, because it fails to make up for the necessity of *Darstellung,* which is present in excess in the parliamentary system of representation, enabling the latter to "work too well."

With the shift in the logic of representation from *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* to *Vertretungsdarstellung,* what function does the former assume? Does *Vorestellungsrepräsentanz* play no role in the totalized differential system? As Marx demonstrates with the example of the democratic election of Louis Bonaparte, which signals the end of democracy, the abolition of the parliamentary system is a perpetually impinging possibility, immanent in its logic. Thus, although the play of *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* "works," it is constantly under the threat of crisis, where the arbitrariness of representation resurfaces. In crisis, as the token of the arbitrariness of representation a resemblance of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* shows itself and as a reminder that the symbolic order is

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[10] Lacan's formalization of fantasy, incidentally, is the same as that of the split subject after alienation and separation: $\$ \diamond a$—the split subject and fantasy arise as a result of separation, mediated by *objet a*, the object cause of desire as means of the introduction of the imaginary.

lacking and that the representation is not total (not-all), though it aspires to be. In the mode of representation that claims universal validity, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* as the signifier of "unrepresentable," is immanent as the point of peril to its representational efficacy. Marx grasped the metamorphosis in the notion of *Vertretung* in the parliamentary system precisely at the moment of such crisis: the election of Louis Bonaparte as Emperor. Karatani argues: "Only because the relationship between the representative and the represented is arbitrary was it possible that the industrial bourgeoisie as well as other classes, could abandon their representatives and choose Louis Bonaparte" (*TC* 145). The reverse holds equally true: because "a nobody" could lawfully and democratically seize complete power in the representative system, did it become evident that the connection between the representatives and the represented is not that of apodictic *Vertretung*, but rather of fictitious *Darstellung*.

Furthermore, Marx points out that the key to the success of Bonaparte's coming into power required an extra element: the unrepresented who were ready to accept the Emperor as the sole legislative organ that is able to represent them. The unrepresented of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is not the proletariat, but rather the small-holding peasants. The proletariat constitutes a social class, which is why it can find its representative in the communist party (albeit, again, it is worthy to reiterate, that the communist party could only entertain a relationship of *Darstellung* to the proletariat). The small-holding peasants, on the other hand, "don't form a class" and consequently are unrepresentable in the parliamentary system (Marx *EB* VII). As "unrepresentable," thus, the class-less small-holding peasants signal the disintegration of *Vertretung* as a parliamentary representative system in the demand for an abstract universal representative embodied in the figure of

the emperor. With regard to the small-holding peasants, *Vertretung* undergoes yet another metamorphosis in Marx's text:

> They [small-holding peasants] are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent [*vertreten*] themselves, they must be represented [*vertreten*]. Their representative [*Vertreter*] must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power which subordinates society to itself. (Marx *Eighteenth Brumaire* VII; *Der achtzehnte Brumaire* 199-200)

While the election of democratic representatives [*Vertreter*] proves to lose an organic connection to the class they represent, the executing power is supposed to represent the will of the people directly (see *TC* 148). Although the election of a single leader vows to restore the original meaning of *Vertretung*—in that the leader vows to have an unmediated relationship to the people, whatever the class—in truth, the election of Bonaparte signals merely the dissolution of parliamentary representation. As Karatani notes, in this instance of failure we see "a collapse of representation as the solution to the unrepresentable" (147). The "unrepresentable" element—in this context the small-holding peasants—occupies the place of the excluded fraction of society, whose exclusion allows for the totalization of the representative system—the illusion of universal validity—in the first place. In turn, it embodies the arbitrary connection of the bourgeois representatives in the parliamentary system to the society as a whole; thus, the small-holding peasants stand in the place of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz,* the excluded precondition of totalization and the signifier of arbitrary meaning in the symbolic order. It is from this place that the threat to disintegrate the representative system emanates. Thus, the dissolution of representation comes with the return of the repressed, from the place where *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* must be located.

If Bonaparte is the "solution" to the unrepresentable, we must pose the following questions: does Bonaparte completely forego the mediation of representation? Or, if that is not the case, what does he represent?[11] On the one hand, because the connection to the socially existing classes remains arbitrary, the Emperor represents [*vertreten*] the will of the people qua *Darstellung*. On the other hand, in the moment of crisis, the "beyond" of representation shows itself; Karatani stresses that "Marx saw a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie in universal suffrage, the backdrop of the coup of the Eighteenth Brumaire, rather than a direct violent means of rule" (151). This means that the Eighteenth Brumaire was only a symptom of the representative system in question and only exposed what was behind the *Darstellung*—namely, the bourgeois economic interests. If the original notion of *Vertretung* from the times of *Ständeversammlungen* is, as Karatani puts it, an "apodictic rapport" of the representatives to the class they represent, and if the parliamentary system is able to represent the social classes only qua *Darstellung*, then it becomes clear that the parliamentary system (and Bonaparte as its "backdrop") shares an "apodictic rapport" to the "beyond" of representation [*Darstellung*]—the bourgeois economic interests. In this sense, the old notion of *Vertretung* is not fully effaced, but remains beyond *Darstellung:* while the parliamentary system enacts re-presentation [*Darstellung*] of representation [*Vertretung*], it nevertheless bears an unmediated connection to a certain view of the social reality—the parliamentary system represents [*vertreten*] the aforementioned interests in an organic manner.

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[11] The case of Bonaparte is only one of the solutions for the unrepresentable, the other being the ethical act. The ethical act demands the restructuring of the symbolic order from the position of the unrepresentable (see Lacan's *Book VII* and *Book XX,* and Badiou's *Ethics* and *Logics of Worlds*); the election of Bonaparte, on the other hand, postponed the tension of the unrepresentable and in the same movement perpetuated the existing symbolic order. Another (failure of a) solution to the unrepresentable will further define itself in my discussion of the avant-garde.

In order to interpret further the "beyond" of representation [*Darstellung*], I will once again draw on Lacan: "I shall take up here the dialectic of appearance and its beyond, in saying that, if beyond appearance there is nothing in itself, there is the gaze" (*BXI* 103). The gaze belongs to the level of the unconscious, to the discourse of the Other—in a word, the gaze is the point from which the Other speaks with the subject's words, where the level of the statement slides to the level of enunciation. As I previously argued, the totalization of the formal system necessarily gives rise to the transcendental function, which finds its place in the unconscious (recall Lacan's words that "God is unconscious"). Thus, beyond representation [*Darstellung*] is the transcendental function, which in this context is the gaze of the bourgeois economic interests. Lacan writes: "From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt itself to it" (*BXI* 83)— the parliamentary system cannot but "adapt" to the gaze of the bourgeois interests, consciously or not. Still, this transcendental function is produced within the limits of the imaginary register: "The gaze I encounter," Lacan writes, "is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (84). Although the gaze is an imaginary element, it is constitutive of the symbolic as a totalized system—in a word, it comes about with the exclusion of the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* in order to shift from the representation that "does not work" to the one that "works too well." The state of the situation in the Eighteenth Brumaire takes the following shape: whereas the parliamentary representative system is thoroughly "fictitious," and thus functions as *Darstellung,* this representational mode is governed by a transcendental function that is beyond representation. If the parliamentary system re-presents [*darstellen*] the society as a whole, beyond *Darstellung*, it represents [*vertreten*] the bourgeois economic interests (the gaze). This double

property of representation emerges only in a negative gesture at the moment of crisis, at the point when the dissolution of representation looms large.

To make my point clearer, I turn to Slavoj Žižek's reading of Alain Badiou's *The Meaning of Sarkozy:*

> 'If democracy means representation,' Badiou writes in *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, 'it is first of all the representation of the general system that bears its forms. In other words: electoral democracy is only representative in so far as it is first of all the consensual representation of capitalism, or of what today has been renamed the "market economy". This is its underlying corruption.' At the empirical level multi-party liberal democracy 'represents' – mirrors, registers, measures – the quantitative dispersal of people's opinions, what they think about the parties' proposed programmes and about their candidates etc. However, in a more radical, 'transcendental' sense, multi-party liberal democracy 'represents' – instantiates – a certain vision of society, politics and the role of the individuals in it. Multi-party liberal democracy 'represents' a precise vision of social life in which politics is organised so that parties compete in elections to exert control over the state legislative and executive apparatus. ("Berlusconi in Tehran")

Here Žižek clearly differentiates between two modes of representation. On the one hand, "at the empirical level," the representative system "mirrors, registers, measures," and represents people's opinions—this it does in the mode of *Darstellung*. On the other hand, however, in a "transcendental sense," "a certain vision of society" is represented. The latter, "transcendental" representation, corresponds to the gaze as the transcendental function beyond *Darstellung*—the beyond, which is at the same time a constitutive precondition of *Darstellung*. Žižek taps into the displaced role of *Vertretung*: while on the fictitious level the parliamentary system mirrors people's opinions, in truth, the representative system enjoys an "apodictic rapport" to "a certain vision of society," i.e., the "market economy." Hence, what is represented [*vertreten*] beyond *Darstellung* is the transcendental function that arises with the exclusion of the unrepresentable and subsequent totalization of the symbolic order—the symbolic order that claims the universal

validity (e.g., universal suffrage), despite the arbitrariness of its own foundation (i.e., the necessary exclusion of the "unrepresentable"). The dynamic of *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* thus takes the following shape: *re-present [darstellen] all you want on the level of the statement, on the level of enunciation you will always represent, "stand-in-the-place-of" [vertreten], the transcendental function.*

CHAPTER THREE:
Representation and its beyond: failures of the avant-garde

> Paradoxically, the avant-gardiste intention to destroy art as an institution is thus realized in the work of art itself. The intention to revolutionize life by returning art to its praxis turns into a revolutionizing of art.
> – Peter Bürger

> I want nothing to do with art and this is the only way for me to do anything for art.
> – Joseph Beuys

In my analysis of the theory of the avant-garde and the aesthetic movements that came after the historical avant-garde, I will elucidate avant-garde's rapport with the formal method, on the one hand, and I will argue that constitutive of the avant-garde's project is its particular oppositional relationship to both modes of representation, *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. I maintain that the emergence of the avant-garde's aesthetic program lends itself to the formal analysis, while at the same time, the avant-gardist intervention enables the formulation of art history in terms of a totalized formal system. Let me emphasize that by the formalist aspect of the avant-garde I do not understand the immanent quality of a given artistic form without regard to the subject matter, which is often associated with the notion of art for art's sake, but rather the anti-institutional stance of the avant-gardist project.[12] Because the art institution in part assumes the role of the symbolic

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[12] The association of the avant-garde and formalism with the self-sufficiency of art and art critique has been in large valorized by an influential American art critic Clement Greenberg in his article "Avant-garde and

order, I treat avant-garde as a subject, not in the sense of an anthropomorphized entity, but as an effect of a structural determination. The emergence of the avant-garde, insofar as it redefines art outside the terms of the art institution, embodies what was earlier described as the subject of secular modernity (Cartesian subject). What constitutes the truth production of the Cartesian subject is that neither the transcendental being nor the notion of agreement suffices to ground its certainty—i.e., to provide the foundation of its subjectivity. By the same token the avant-garde refuses to accept the terms of the institution as the foundation of its subjectivity: the avant-garde attempts to negate the notion of the artist as an individual genius (transcendental ego) and does not accept the notion of agreement (institutional opinion) as the defining principle of its artistic practice. In this unconditional negation of the art institution, however, the question "What is art?" remains unanswered—thus, the avant-garde loses its foundation as art. The problematic of the avant-gardist project consists in an attempt to deal with the self-referentiality in art that induces the fading of the subject. Just as the impasse of formalization produces meaning in philosophy, the lacking certainty of its own foundation becomes a productive force of the avant-gardist praxis. Corollary to the formal analysis of the avant-garde, the failures of the avant-gardist project shed light on the paradoxes encountered in the formal method itself.

Kitsch." Insofar as this article seeks to produce meaning of an art-work (and furthermore to evaluate art) merely on the basis of certain artistic techniques, it has been termed "formalist," while it further perpetuated the separation of art from the praxis of life, and, moreover, argued this separation as constitutive of avant-garde. Far from reducing all artistic means as equal, Greenberg establishes a hierarchy in art—between "kitsch" and "avant-garde," between "common man" and "cultivated spectator"—and, in this sense, exemplifies reactionary and nostalgic sentiments of dogmatic delineation of art and non-art. Greenberg's critique exemplifies the function of the art institution: it canonizes Modernism as a privileged sphere in relation to social reality, praises an artist-genius (e.g., Jackson Pollock), and creates a hierarchy of artistic means and works—all that in the name of "avant-garde" and under the guise of "formalist" critique.

What makes art

In order to understand and thematize the movement of the European avant-garde, it has to be first of all approached in relation to the traditional Western and bourgeois art institutions. Since the advent of secular modernity, art at its every stage of development has been invested in overcoming a previously established tradition: the art historians are able to categorize, not without overlaps and complications, the periods of Baroque, Rococo, Romanticism, Neo-Classicism and so on. The aforementioned categories make themselves available to categorization in terms of content of the work of art, the techniques employed, and the artistic means available—in short, every step in overcoming the previous artistic current consists in the imposition of a new style and problematic. In order that every new form is granted a status of art, it passes through the art institution that in turn normalizes the innovative content, means, and techniques as an acceptable artistic practice. The central question in the development of art in relation to the avant-garde is the following: is avant-garde just another overcoming of a previously established tradition or rather, as Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* claims, a "revolutionizing of art" as a whole? If, indeed, it is the case that the avant-garde marks a radically new stage in the development of Western art, what are the conditions and aspirations that the historical avant-garde sets to its successors?

Jurij Tynjanov, one of the foremost thinkers of the Russian Formalist movement in the 1920s, in his articles "On Literary Evolution" and "Literary Fact," presents an account of the structure that underlies the shifts from one aesthetic movement to another as a system of evolution. Tynjanov treats each literary or aesthetic movement as a system, consisting of differential elements of the greater system of the history of literature or art;

Tynjanov writes: "The main concept for literary evolution is the *mutation* [*smena*: change, replacement, shift] of systems, and thus the problem of 'traditions' is transferred onto another plane" ("On Literary Evolution" 67).[13] The "other plane" in question is an approach to literary "traditions" not as positively defined entities, but rather systems in differential relation to one another. Tynjanov thus maintains that the artistic devices of a given epoch cannot be understood immanently, only according to the aesthetic norms of this epoch; the relations of each aesthetic element or device (e.g., rhyme, subject matter, the use of archaic language) must be approached both in relation to the other elements in a given system (given epoch), and in conjunction with other systems (both, previous epochs and non-aesthetic series). "What in one epoch would be a literary fact"— what is canonized as an aesthetic norm—"would in another be a common matter of social communication [*bytovym javleniem*: phenomenon of ordinary life], and vice versa, depending on the whole literary system in which the given fact appears" ("OLE" 69). What in one aesthetic system serves a dominant function (or what Tynjanov calls the "constructive principle")—e.g., the meticulous use of perspective and symmetrical construction in classicist painting—ceases to occupy a defining role in another epoch— e.g., the perspective in cubist paintings. [14] Consequently, in view of art or literature as evolution, the question "What is literature?" or "What is art?" cannot be answered by enumeration of aesthetic norms. Tynjanov emphasizes—and this view differentiates the

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[13] In citing Tynjanov I am using a standard translation of the article. In cases where I feel that the English translation is insufficient or misleading, I will refer to the Russian text in brackets, while providing alternative translations that are my own.

[14] What Tynjanov calls "the dominant" or "constructive principle," is akin to the concept of the master-signifier or the quilting point [*point de caption*] in Lacanian theory (see *Seminar III*). The constructive principle organizes the differential relations in a given epoch, producing from a multitude of possible artistic practices a single coherent literary fact. Similarly, the master-signifier or the quilting point, being itself an empty category, structures the meaning production of a single formal system, e.g., the concept "democracy," though it may imply a number of heterogeneous definitions, structures the political (and often social, economic, and cultural) discourse in contemporary society.

formalist analysis from the traditional understanding of art and literary history—that "[a]ll firm static definitions of [literature] are displaced by the fact of evolution" ("Literary Fact"). Innovation in art and literature as such is dynamic; it arises "on the basis of *'random' results and 'random' thrusts, mistakes"*—what is perceived as a "mistake" in one epoch can be retrospectively defined as a norm ("LF"). If the totality of art can only be conceived through exclusion of non-art, an aesthetic innovation stems from the extra-aesthetic sphere; the Russian Formalists term this sphere "*byt,"* i.e. everyday life (Bürger terms it "means-ends rationality of everyday life").[15] Since the "mistakes" that will define the next epoch in the aesthetic evolution come precisely from this sphere, the aesthetic practice invariably occupies a relationship to everyday life, even if its status in society is that of exclusion from everyday life. For this reason, Tynjanov insists that literary theory must proceed in step with the formal analysis of other systems, such as social conditions or ideological imperatives of a given period, and not perpetuate the myth of "art for art's sake."[16]

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[15] This dynamic between art and social reality is exemplary in music. Jacques Attali theorizes music as "organization of noise," arguing that music is "inscribed between noise and silence, in the space of the social codification" (Attali 11, 20). Canonic norms of a period thus identify an innovation in music prior to its institutionalization as noise; such was the noise of every day life in the city, the sound of trains and propellers, which subsequently became the material of the avant-gardist compositions.

[16] Tynjanov's view is a departure from the early formalist critique, in which, indeed, the method of analysis concerned the immanent structure of a given work (without its relation to other traditions or spheres of life). While the Formalists soon moved away from such mode of analysis, as is evident in Tynjanov's critique, the Soviet Marxist literary critics waged an attack on the Formalists, reproaching them for advocating the apartness of art from social reality. Responding to this criticism (the response was left unheard, as after the official institution of socialist realism in USSR, the term "formalism" evolved into a kind of an insult), Jakobson writes: "Neither Tynjanov nor Mukařovský, nor Šklovskij nor I—none of us has ever proclaimed the self-sufficiency of art. What we have been trying to show is that art is an integral part of the social structure, a component that interacts with all the others and is itself mutable since both the domain of art and its relationship to the other constituents of the social structure are in constant dialectical flux. What we stand for is not the separatism of art but the autonomy of the aesthetic function" ("What is Poetry?" 174). Jakobson points out that the formalist critique advocates neither the view of "art for art's sake" nor the Marxist position, where art is thought of as subservient to social reality; rather, it is precisely the objective of the formalist critique to elucidate the border between the two, i.e., the role of the aesthetic function.

The construction of the norms for each epoch is the result of a function that Tynjanov calls "automation," whereby previous "mistakes" are inscribed in the canon and evolve into new rules (Bürger calls this process "institutionalization," rendering it one of the central functions of the art institution). Tynjanov formalizes the necessary steps of literary evolution as follows:

> Thus, when we analyze literary evolution we encounter the following stages: 1) when related to an automated principle of construction the opposite constructive principle is delineated dialectically; 2) its application takes place—the constructive principle seeks the easiest application; 3) it [the constructive principle] covers the maximum mass of phenomena; 4) it becomes automated and causes opposite principles of construction to emerge. ("LF")

Grasped as a system, the history of literature or art is reduced to a cycle of shifting "dominants" or "constructive principles," which restructure the "literary fact" of a given epoch.[17] Each innovative constructive principle eventually becomes "automated" or institutionalized, thus outlining the "limit" of what is considered literature or art; the given limit allows an "outside," a space of transgression, a space for new "mistakes"—and the cycle necessarily follows the same structural pattern of development. Thus, art as a whole can only be fathomed in the tension between the dominant and the marginal, as the overcoming of the former by the latter; in this dynamic, formalism seeks to forego the positing of universal criteria for art and sees art in a constant flux and movement. In all this, is avant-garde just another epoch that promotes its own constructive principle in the cycle of the art evolution? If so, wherein does then the "revolutionizing of art" consist? Is any new epoch of art in the same way "a revolutionizing of art"?

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[17] It must be noted that Tynjanov's account of literary evolution is not a teleological construct. Rather, Tynjanov writes, it is "[n]ot a regular evolution but a leap, not a development, but a dislocation" ("LF").

What sets the movement of the avant-garde apart from this series of fluxes in European art is its resistance to be described according to the terms of the traditional system of categorization. As Bürger writes:

> It is…a distinguishing feature of the historical avant-garde movements that they did not develop a style. There is no such thing as a dadaist or a surrealist style. What did happen is that these movements liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of past periods. Not until there is universal availability does the category of artistic means become a general one. (*TOAG* 18)

Bürger's thesis is a radical one: he contends that the emergence of the avant-garde did not only change the praxis of art, but also introduced a new paradigm in categorizing the aesthetic production of previous epochs. The avant-garde demanded the demolition of borders between the instituted "artistic means" and, as such, claimed the validity to all the artistic techniques beyond their normative prescriptions—a gesture, according to Bürger, which made the thematization of the artistic means in relation to each other possible. At the same time, declaring all artistic means valid, the avant-garde renders the notion of validity obsolete: avant-garde "destroy[ed] the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity" (*TOAG* 87). As a consequence, Bürger's thesis implies that the artistic means as such, beyond the normative definition of a given epoch, become recognizable or emancipated from the doctrine that previously enveloped them.

I will extend Bürger's claim beyond the connection between the "universal avail-ability of artistic means" and their becoming a general category; I maintain that the avant-gardist revolt carries direct consequence to the emergence of the formalist notion of the evolution of art. If Bürger is right that the avant-garde dissolved the possibility of a single tradition to present itself as universally valid, this means that, in the same gesture, the avant-garde rendered them equally valid alongside each other as distinct historical

moments, not as "true" or "false" doctrines. The repercussion of this circumstance is two-fold. On the one hand, if with the advent of the avant-garde all the normative definitions of art suddenly transpired as equal, it became possible to juxtapose all these traditions in terms of the formalist method—the history of art had to be rewritten in the negative spaces and differential relations between the epochs. On the other hand, this interpretation shows that the avant-garde is not just another cycle in Tynjanov's schemata of evolution, but a point when the very structure of the evolution folds onto itself in a self-referential paradox. The avant-garde does not merely position itself against a single style as its target, as an overcoming of a previous constructive principle with a new one; rather, as Bürger emphasizes, "[w]hat is negated [in avant-garde] is not an earlier form of art but art as an institution" (*TOAG* 49). Whereas Tynjanov argues that the evolution proceeds in a series of automized forms and emerging constructive principles as de-automation, the avant-garde assumes de-automation as its constructive principle. No longer does a certain "mistake" threaten to become cannon, but rather, *all* mistakes are permitted. Joseph Beuys takes this logic to its extreme, exclaiming that "everyone is an artist," while at the same time putting in question the very notion of what Tynjanov calls "literary fact"—with Beuys's paradoxical manifestation, "literary fact" becomes obsolete with regard to the avant-garde. This exemplifies that with the advent of the avant-garde, the question "what is art?" enters a new paradigm of articulation.

If a revolutionizing of art by the avant-garde has any meaning, it consists precisely in reshaping of conditions of the question of "what is art?"—if everyone is an artist, a question "who or what is not an artist?" looms in the forefront. Any positive answer stakes against an equally valid formulation, and the series of positive answers will

unwittingly proliferate in a way that the signifier endlessly slides in an untotalized system (just like the proliferation of signifiers constitutes the fading of the subject, as we shall see, the avant-gardist intervention signals the fading of the avant-gardist subject). This paradoxical issue is implicitly present in Tynjanov's text: if literature or art, according to Tynjanov, cannot be grasped positively but must be understood in the evolution of the normative concepts, how are we to delineate the border between art and non-art? Tynjanov formalizes the literary evolution without an appeal to a single norm, but along this line of evolution, the question "what is art?" voids itself in the continuous displacement from one epoch to another, and as such, remains unanswered.

In view of the fact that the authorial function as constitutive of art ceases, the question "what is art?" metamorphoses into the following formulation: "what makes art?" This question echoes the previously described problematic of structuralism: "what makes human?" The collapse of different artistic means of the past epochs lays bare the terrain of aesthetics to the "natural" level of formalization (akin to "natural" numbers or "natural" language). Thus, what makes art cannot be causally traced back to the concept of artistic genius—i.e., first was the artist, then came art; on the contrary, the constitutive element of what defines art versus non-art is an elusive, yet universally present element in the evolution of art, an element that stands on the causal border of "art(ist) made" and "what makes art(ist)." Wherein does this elusive element lie? And what is the role of the avant-garde in making this element an object of thematization?

Exemplary to this paradoxical stance of formalization toward the history of art is Roman Jakobson's essay "What is Poetry?", in which he, echoing Tynjanov's claims, argues that the definition of aesthetic norms cannot delineate the border between poetry

and non-poetry—it is the task of literary studies, claims Jakobson, to clarify precisely this obscure border. This was possible, for instance, in classicism, where a poet had to adhere to a rigid set of poetic forms, while only a limited set of subject matter was appropriate to poetry. With the advent of the avant-garde, however, the dadaist's subject matter of a poetic work borders on nonsense, just as the surrealist's engagement with chance in production of poetry negates any poetic intention. The content of poetic work becomes secondary, while the form loses its normativity with regard to syntax or rhyme. Taking this train of development to its extreme Velimir Khlebnikov, a Russian Futurist poet, maintained that even "the typographical error…is often a first-rate artist" ("What is Poetry?" 165). In this context, where just about anything can be poetry, Jakobson is able to pose a question: what makes poetry?—a question that confronts the border of the set of elements in question ("poetry") and what is presupposed in its totalization.

Just like the prohibition of incest exemplifies the causally undecidable element presupposed for the existence of human society, Jakobson takes recourse to a self-referential element that is found at the limit between poetry and non-poetry. Jakobson terms this "poeticity," which assumes the role of an elusive and empty element that determines what is poetry in any given epoch; Jakobson writes:

> …the content of the concept of *poetry* is unstable and temporally conditioned. But the poetic function, *poeticity*, is, as the 'formalists' stressed, an element sui generis, one that cannot be mechanically reduced to other elements…For the most part poeticity is only a part of a complex structure, but it is a part that necessarily transforms the other elements and determines with them the nature of the whole…Only when a verbal work acquired poeticity, a poetic function of determinative significance, can we speak of poetry. (174)

With the introduction of the concept of poeticity, Jakobson taps into the self-referential paradox, which, as Karatani argues, is constitutive of any formal system. For Jakobson, poeticity "is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the

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object being named" (ibid.). Poeticity thus transpires as a self-reflexive concept that is able to short-circuit the proliferation of the differential relations of literary evolution. Though the function of poeticity, according to Jakobson, is a precondition for any poetic work, it is no accident that Jakobson locates the manifest example of poeticity in Khlebnikov's futurist poetry, namely, in his concept of "*samovitoe slovo*"[18]—an invented word that refers only to itself and carries no referential meaning in everyday language. The role of the avant-garde in elucidating the formalist method becomes clear: although the function of poeticity (or Tynjanov's "constructive principle") must be presupposed throughout the entire literary evolution, it becomes recognizable only with the advent of futurist poetry. Inversely, the impasse of formalization—its self-referentiality and lacking foundation—finds a central place in the avant-gardist project. Having abolished any dogmatic definition of art, the avant-gardist praxis finds its own foundation as art only in a self-referential gesture such as Jakobson's *poeticity* or Khlebnikov's *samovitoe slovo*.

Theorizing the avant-garde

It is not my thesis to draw a causal relationship between the emergence of the avant-garde and the formalist method as its consequence; my contention is that the avant-garde embodies the formalist method in the sphere of art—namely, in its differential relation to the art institution. Because the avant-garde can be posited only as defining itself against the bourgeois art institution, it is imperative first of all to identify the function of this institution and the status of art in bourgeois society. Whereas in the pre-secular age the producer of art was merely a craftsman, an anonymous servant of divinity—indeed, it

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[18] *Samovitoe slovo* is commonly translated as "word as such;" the etymological root of "*samovitoe*," however, in addition to implying the self-sufficiency of the word, connotes a process of active becoming: a word that makes itself, or, in literal translation, the word that weaves/twists itself.

would have been a heresy to sign one's name on iconography—the notion of the artist only emerges during the Renaissance, where the artist works in the courtly environment, assuming the ruling class as its patron. This notion of the artist as an individual genius, albeit a patron's servant, prepares the stage for the development of the autonomous status of art in the bourgeois society (see Bürger *TOAG* 47-49). The distinguishing feature of art in bourgeois society is that art comes to occupy a privileged place relative to everyday life; Bürger speaks of an "autonomy aesthetics," "conceived as a social realm that is set apart from the means-ends rationality of daily bourgeois existence" (10). The bourgeois art does not only retain the notion of the individual genius from courtly art—as opposed to the collective productive craft in sacral art—but also establishes the reception of art as an individual activity, open to an individual judgment—as opposed to the collective or sociable reception of courtly art (see *TOAG* 48). This status of art, organized around individual production and reception, is an effect of the emergence of the bourgeois art institution, which, in addition to qualifying what should be considered an art-work, guarantees the "apartness of the work of art from the praxis of life" (25).

If, indeed, art in the bourgeois society escapes the means-ends rationality, it would appear to present a disruption of the order of this society, that is, it would assume, at least in theory, a subversive position against this order. What Bürger points out, however, is that behind the appearance of the autonomous art as an outside of the utilitarian structure of society lies an historically conditioned function that the institution imposes on art: neutralization of social critique. Hence, Bürger concludes: "This neutralization of impulses to change society is thus closely related to the role art plays in the development of bourgeois subjectivity" (13). The fallacious stance of the art institution

that guarantees art a position apart from the dominant utilitarian ideology serves as the very tool to sustain that order of ideology. "The citizen who, in everyday life has been reduced to a partial function (means-ends activity) can be discovered in art as a 'human being'" (48). Autonomous art, therefore, becomes one of the means to assure that, in the end, the citizen remain reduced to the partial function without claiming to appeal to any modification of this rationale.

The tension that Marx elucidates in the parliamentary representative system takes a similar shape in the role of art in the context of the bourgeois society. The art institution assumes a role of art's representative, *Vertreter,* in the social praxis of life. Hence, any social critique in art is mediated by the art institution. The logic of the art institution calls for a reformulation of Marx's disclaimer: like the small-holding peasants, "art cannot represent [*vertreten*] itself, it must be represented [*vertreten*]." Insofar as the bourgeois art has historically functioned within the order of re-presentation *qua Darstellung*, the art institution plays a role of a representative [*Vertreter*] of re-presentation [*Darstellung*]. In this way the art institution provides a frame of the reception of art (for instance, the assumption of artistic genius or separation of the spectator and the work of art). As Marx's text and Karatani's analysis demonstrate, however, the notion of *Vertretung* is ideologically infused and is able to represent in apodictic manner only the transcendental function of a given symbolic order—e.g., bourgeois interests (whether social, political or economic). The neutralization of art's critical potential and its place in a privileged sphere in society, a sphere that is apart from social praxis, is one and the same thing. Hence, the function of the art institution is to provide a ready interpretation of the representational order [*Darstellung*] in a given art movement with regard to its social status,

while nevertheless retaining an illusion of the bourgeois public that the art-work is an object of individual reception. *While, on the level of the statement, the art institution vows to represent [*vertreten*] art, on the level of enunciation, the art institution represents [*vertreten*] in apodictic manner the ideology of means-ends rationality of everyday life.*

The avant-gardist project thus can be formulated as an attempt to break down the imposed representational order in both senses: *Vertretung* in the social praxis by the art institution and *Darstellung* as the aesthetic representational mode of the previous epochs. Bürger writes: "the historical avant-garde movements cause a break with tradition and a subsequent change in the representational system" and, furthermore, they "not only intend a break with the traditional representational system but the total abolition of the institution that is art" (*TOAG* 62-3). On the one hand, by collapsing all artistic means of past eras, the avant-garde changes the representational order in art qua *Darstellung* (this shift in *Darstellung* is manifested in the fact that any "mistake" can become an artistic expression); on the other hand, in demanding the abolition of the art institution, it also aspires to annihilate the representational order of *Vertretung*

It is apparent that the avant-gardist praxis targets two modes of representation; the central question, however, remains unclear: what is the connection between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* in the avant-gardist aesthetic production? Because *Vertretung* is a mediating apparatus that relates art to the praxis of life, this question amounts to the following problematic: how does the representational order [*Darstellung*] in the avant-gardist art relate to social reality? The avant-garde's ambition to destroy the art institution as a reaction to bourgeois art, according to Bürger, is defined by two conditions: that the art

become integrated in the praxis of life and at the same time that it escape the means-ends rationality of the societal order. These two conditions assume a paradoxical relationship to one another—if art is to engage directly with the social praxis, because the social praxis is governed by the means-ends rationality of everyday life, the avant-garde would necessarily succumb to the utilitarian order that it aspires to combat. Hence the underlying intent of the avant-garde movement as the only resolution of this evident contradiction: "to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art" (49). For this reason, in its attack against the art institution, the avant-garde assumes a political stance that does not only undertake to change the praxis of art but also the social praxis as a whole—an aspiration that is at once utopian and historically unrealized. Given this paradoxical stance of the avant-garde in relation to social reality—a social reality that refuses to be reshaped on the basis of art—in what way does the avant-garde produce its critique?

The analysis of the Russian Formalists addresses precisely this issue in locating the center of this problematic in the attack on the canonized, institutionally accepted, representational order [*Darstellung*]. With regard to Futurist poetry, Jakobson questions to what end the avant-garde poet seeks to problematize the established canon. Apropos "*samovitoe slovo*" (self-referential, self-woven, word as such)—and consequently, addressing the very function of "poeticity"—Jakobson writes:

> "Why is all this necessary? Why is it necessary to make a special point of the fact that sign does not fall together with object? Because besides the direct awareness of the identity between sign and object (A is A1), there is a necessity for the direct awareness of the inadequacy of that identity (A is not A1). The reason this antimony [*sic*] is essential is that without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts…the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized. Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of reality dies out. ("WiP?" 175)

In this passage Jakobson argues that the avant-gardist intervention in the order of *Darstellung* creates a "mobility of concepts." Without this "mobility," the process of "auto-

matization"—the institutionalization of artistic forms—signals the production of a single interpretation (neutralization of social critique). With the established identity of sign and object "activity comes to a halt," and any potential of social change ceases; "the awareness of reality dies out"—reality becomes a mere play, re-presentation on stage, while the arbitrary *Vertretung* of the art institution erases its trace.

Viktor Shklovsky expresses a similar sentiment with regard to the role of "estrangement" in art; without estrangement, "held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingess. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war" (*Theory of Prose* 5). "Estrangement" relates precisely to the order of *Darstellung* as its negation or problematization. According to Shklovsky, the deviation from the norms of the institution ("automatization"), transfers onto the critique of social reality, without which "life fades into nothingness." As I previously argued, insofar as *Vertretung* by the art institution defines art's place in relation to social reality, for the avant-garde, the attack on the order of *Darstellung* becomes a means of critique of "automatization" or representation qua *Vertretung*. What we encounter in the historical avant-garde is a conflation of two representative systems; by abolishing *Darstellung* (in its continuous provocations against the representational means of the traditional art), the avant-garde aspires to forge an apodictic relationship of art (both as form and content) to the social reality. The avant-garde seeks to establish such conditions of social life that the representational system [*Vertretung*] is rendered unnecessary; the work of art thus would enjoy an unmediated relation to social praxis and to art as a whole: in the relationship of art and life praxis, the avant-garde aspires to create an organic link, in view of which it

would assume a role of *Vertreter* to itself—the aesthetic production that represents [*vertreten*] art in social praxis without the mediation of the art institution.

The insistence on the distinction between two heterogeneous modes of representation further clarifies the position of the avant-garde in view of the formalist conception of literary evolution. What concerns Tynjanov are the shifts in the order of aesthetic representation [*Darstellung*], whereas the representative organ [*Vertretung*] remains omnipresent throughout this evolution: one literary fact substitutes the other, while the process of "automation" ("automatization" in Jakobson and Shklovsky) inevitably persists. In contrast, the avant-garde does not merely stand for the shift in *Darstellung*, but, more importantly, recognizes the central role of the art institution and demands the restructuring of *Vertretung*. The advent of avant-garde, therefore, marks a break with the literary and aesthetic evolution in that it lays bare the representational apparatus [*Vertretung*] as a central problematic of aesthetic production. *The constitutive feature of the avant-garde is to engage the two modes of representation— in provocations of the* Darstellung *it aspires to negate* Vertretung

On the intersection of the necessary and the impossible

An initial formalization of the avant-garde, in most general terms, stems from the basic fact that the avant-garde is constituted in opposition to the bourgeois art institution as a defining principle of Western art at that historical moment. This means that the avant-garde does not abandon the notion of art but contests its status in bourgeois society, as something apart from the praxis of life. Since the art institution defines what (Western) art is, delineating a totality of what encompasses art and excluding everything else as

non-art, the avant-garde positions itself outside the totality that is Western art. The avant-garde thus aims to assume a role of that which is not represented [*vertreten*] by the art institution. The constitutive choice that defines, and at the same time splits, the avant-garde is: either Western art (bourgeois art institution) or the avant-garde (the unrepresented).

This choice—either Western art or the avant-garde—bears as its consequence the alienating effect we know from Lacan's formulation: "*a neither one, nor the other*" (*BXI* 211). The alienation of the avant-garde subject realizes itself in the fact that the spheres of the Western art and the avant-garde overlap. The totality of Western art according to the bourgeois institution entails, as its constitutive part, what is non-art: namely, the praxis of life (*"byt"* in the vocabulary of Russian Formalists). It is because the bourgeois art sets itself apart from the praxis of life that it achieves its privileged status in society, seemingly outside the means-ends rationality of social life. This is precisely the point of the overlap that serves as a constitutive part of the alienated avant-garde subjectivity: the avant-garde assumes an objective to integrate art into the praxis of life, which is the very realm (non-art) that the art institution employs to define the bourgeois artistic practice. The praxis of life in question—for there exists only one dominating praxis of life in the bourgeois society—is the means-ends rationality. If indeed, in addition to the negating notion of the bourgeois art institution, the two conditions of the avant-garde, as Bürger formulates them, are that it remains separated from the means-ends rationality and that the art be integrated into the praxis of life, the subject of the avant-garde is alienated, for the two conditions enter a neither-nor relation: neither foundation in Western art nor in the praxis of life.

This alienation on the formal level marks the disappearance of the avant-garde subject, because of its eclipsed being. The eclipsed being of the avant-garde subject is
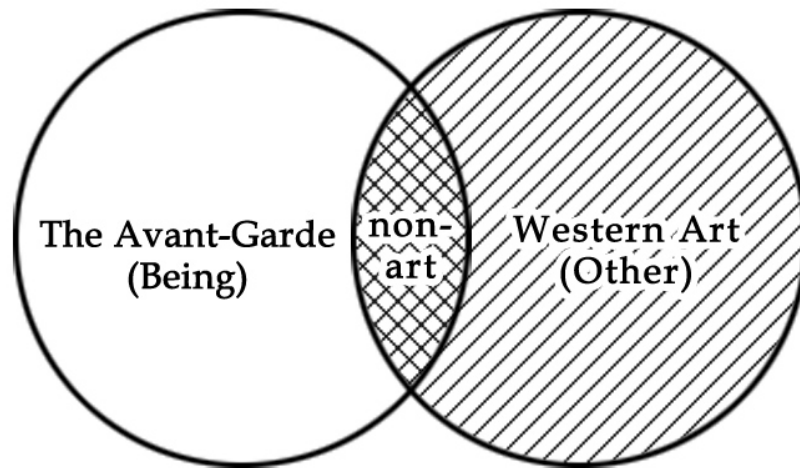

Figure 4.

evident in the disappearance of the necessary condition that avant-garde is forced to assume. Lacan further articulates the alienation effect in a condition "*not* something…*without* something else" (*BXI* 216). In relation to the avant-garde, it can be therefore said: no art as praxis of life without the praxis of life outside means-ends rationality. In the relation of the two defining aspects of subjectivity, Lacan stresses that "from one to the other there is a necessary condition" (ibid.). What creates the alienating effect, the fading of the subject, is that "[t]his necessary condition becomes precisely the adequate reason that, causes the loss of the original requirement"—if art is to be integrated in the praxis of life, it would have to engage in the means-ends rationality, and thus succumb to supporting the same function that the bourgeois art institution already fulfills, which in the same movement negates the original requirement: the avant-garde's anti-institutional stance.

If the avant-garde is split in alienation, what constitutes its movement of separation? The separation of the avant-garde, if understood as the totalization of the symbolic order, means that the avant-garde be inscribed in the symbolic order, i.e., be institutionalized. Paradoxically, however, if it is to sustain itself, the avant-garde must remain in a state of perpetual crisis: the "neither…nor" condition with regard to the art institution and the praxis of life is constitutive of its subjectivity. The institutional question "what is art?" must linger unanswered; the foundation of art remains perpetually elusive. Insofar as the avant-garde insists on the disintegration of the institution of art (representation qua *Vertretung*), it seeks to grasp the signifier of the lack in the Other and utilize it as a weapon in negating the latter's representational order. Thus, the return of *Vorstellungs-repräsentanz*, the very signifier that creates the alienating effect, becomes the principal element of the avant-gardist praxis. In relation to the art institution, the avant-garde posits itself as unrepresented (*nicht vertreten*), and akin to the situation of the small-holding peasants in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire,* it demands the dissolution of the representative system (art institution) as the solution for the unrepresented.

Because, according to Lacan, alienation necessitates separation or death, and the separation proceeds through the field of the Other, the very foundation of the avant-garde subject remains in the hands of the art institution. The case of Marcel Duchamp is an exemplary instance of this dependence on the mercy of the institution. Duchamp's Ready-Mades seek to destroy the concept of the art-work as a product of an individual genius by introducing the mass produced objects into the sphere of art; as its effect, the concept of the artist-genius as a producer transpires as a mere construct. Duchamp's statement foregoes the representational order [*Darstellung*] (of what is considered art)

and as such represents [*darstellen*] nothing other than the attack on the art institution. Furthermore, while rendering a bicycle wheel, a urinal or a bottle drier into Ready-Mades, Duchamp short-circuits the means-ends position of the mass-produced commodities: he exhibits once useful objects as works of art that lose their utilitarian purpose in society. Though at first, Duchamp's Ready-Mades resist incorporation into the representational order [*Darstellung*], and in the same gesture position themselves as unrepresentable [*vertreten*] by the art institution, art institution's acceptance of Ready-Mades as art (which marks the point of separation) is enough to reverse this initial position. Duchamp's Ready-Mades have become not only widely accepted, but also immensely popular, and thus occupy a central place in contemporary museums of art. Bürger summarizes the effect of the institution: "Once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite" (52). Indeed, having passed through the field of the Other, Duchamp's Ready-Mades no longer eliminate the concept of individual genius, but rather epitomize it: Duchamp is exhibited as a paradigmatic modern genius—the Ready-Mades are sold as pieces of art as long as his signature, a mark of an individual genius, appears on the work. Despite its original intentions, the subject of the avant-garde finds the foundation of its art through the institution at the cost of losing its being as avant-garde subject. And inversely, the avant-garde sustains its being only if the Other "plays fair," that is, if the institution sticks to its principles and does not recognize the avant-garde as a part of art (just like the Cartesian Other is not supposed to "deceive").

Not only, however, does the avant-garde seek to posit itself as unrepresented, but, moreover, insofar as it can sustain its own subjectivity only in the state of perpetual

alienation, the avant-garde aspires to assume the place of *unrepresentable*. This location is best grasped through Lacan's discussion of modalities in *Book XX*. Lacan describes the modality of the impossible as that which "doesn't stop not being written"—i.e., the unrepresentable (94). That is the point that the avant-garde seeks to assume. "Being written" in this case should be understood as the instance of inscription into the symbolic order; as such, avant-garde fails at the moment of its inscription and persists so long as it "doesn't stop not being written." The art institution, on the other hand, stands for the inscription of art into the symbolic—by positing art as a privileged sphere apart from the means-ends rationality of everyday life, it inscribes art into the utilitarian order of social reality as neutralization of social critique. Consequently, the art institution corresponds to what Lacan terms the modality of "necessity"—that which "doesn't stop being written" (94). In fact, as I previously argued, because the avant-garde can only be understood in relation to the art institution, it finds itself on the intersection of the impossible ("doesn't stop not being written") and the necessary ("doesn't stop being written")—the very intersection characterizing the real or *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* (as that which signals the impossibility of totalization of the formal system and at the same time is necessarily excluded). Because it remains in perpetual alienation, the avant-garde entertains a certain relationship to the binary signifier, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz,* insofar as this signifier represents the lacking meaning in the Other. But in collapsing the order of re-presentation [*Darstellung*], what does avant-garde represent [*vertreten*]? While on the level of the statement, it seeks to forge an apodictic connection with the praxis of life and thereby represent [*vertreten*] itself, what does the avant-garde represent on the level of enunciation and, in all this, what is the role of the binary signifier?

Lacan writes: "behind the lack of that which takes the place of representation"—behind the necessary repression of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*—"is the *Trieb*"—the drive, which is a "fiction" but as such must be presupposed as a "fundamental ontological notion" (*BXI* 60, 123; *BVII* 127). Lacan continues: "if, for lack of representation, it is not there"—the drive eludes representation, and, as Freud points out, "the death instincts [*Triebe*] are by their nature mute"—then "what is this *Trieb*? We may have to consider it as being only *Trieb* to come" (*BXI* 60; *The Ego and the Id* 46). If the avant-garde relates to the binary signifier (S_2) and the lack of representation, does it not try to establish a direct connection to the drive?

As previously argued, the praxis of the avant-garde involves an economy of representation and its failure. The location of the avant-garde on the intersection of the necessary and the impossible—the art institution and its transgression being constitutive of avant-garde—can be further conceptualized in the dynamic of the pleasure principle and its beyond, the death drive. Freud conceives of the pleasure principle as a rule of homeostasis—least amount of excitation possible; he characterizes the activity of the pleasure principle in seeking "to keep the quantity of excitation present in [the mental apparatus] as low as possible or at least to keep it constant" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 5). What Freud indicates with the dominance of the pleasure principle in the mental apparatus corresponds to the task of the art institution to reduce the social critique (excitation) in the aesthetic praxis. The function of the pleasure principle consists in sustaining the order of representation: as unconditionally present, the pleasure principle corresponds to the modality of the necessary as it "doesn't stop being written." Lacan writes: "Each time a state of need arises, the pleasure principle tends to provoke a reinvestment in its

content…The diffuse energy of the pleasure principle tends toward this reinvestment of representation" (*BVII* 137). The reinvestment of representation is precisely the way that the art institution wards off the social critique in art. As the case of Duchamp demonstrates, his provocation of the order of representation [*Darstellung*] locates a beyond the sphere of art. The Ready-Mades consequently give rise to a need to "reinvest" the pleasure principle in order to reduce the social critique inherent in Duchamp's provocation—to sustain the homeostasis of the privileged sphere that is art. The institutionalization of Duchamp's critique reinvests the homeostasis of representation in two ways: first, in incorporating the Ready-Mades in the totality of "what is art" and, second, in producing a ready-interpretation of the Ready-Mades as representing Duchamp as a modern genius. Thus, having internalized Ready-Mades in the order of representation [*Darstellung*], the homeostasis of the art institution is restored.

Although on the level of the statement, an avant-gardist provocation is unrepresentable and re-presents nothing within the sphere of the institutionalized art, on the level of enunciation the following occurs: insofar as this provocation is directed against the art institution, which embodies the functioning of the pleasure principle, the avant-garde seeks to represent [*vertreten*] through its aesthetic production [*Darstellung*] the "outside" of the art institution and the "beyond" of the pleasure principle. The relation of the art institution and the avant-garde is not only one of opposition but necessary dependence: as I have argued, the normative institutional limitation of what is art enables the avant-gardist subjectivity. Such is the case with the pleasure principle: while imposing a certain limit, the reinvestment of representation, the pleasure principle also delineates its "beyond"—the death drive. "Pleasure limits the scope of human possibility—the pleasure

principle is a principle of homeostasis"—least excitation as possible or, in the context of the art institution, as little (effective) social critique as possible; "Desire, on the other hand," Lacan continues, "finds its boundary, its strict relation, its limit, and it is in the relation to this limit that it is sustained as such, crossing the threshold imposed by the pleasure principle" (*BXI* 39). The "threshold" that Lacan emphasizes is the border where the death drive manifests itself in the transgression of the aforementioned limit. The "beyond" of the pleasure principle, "beyond" representation, is an ontological category; in this case, the desire that finds its cause in the limit of the pleasure principle follows the guidance of the death drive. The dynamic of the pleasure principle and the death drive thus elucidates the persistence of the avant-garde in spite of its necessary failure: so long as the art institution as *Vertreter* imposes a limit, the desire to transgress this limit perseveres. To clarify this point further I now turn to the development of performance art (or, alternatively, Body Art) in the 1970s, after the failure of the historical avant-garde, and particularly to the work of Marina Abramović, whose performances follow the persistent and elusive death drive.

> I am a performer…not an actor.
> – Marina Abramović
>
> …she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living.
> – Jacques Lacan

Performance and the case of Marina Abramović

Whereas Bürger maintains that his analysis only applies to the historical avant-garde movements—in particular Dadaism, early Surrealism, and early Soviet avant-garde—and reduces the similar artistic movements from the 1950s onward to the "neo-avant-gardes," it is my contention that the art movements in post-World-War-II Europe and the United States continue to aspire to the historical avant-gardist's intentions. I maintain that the avant-garde practice persists beyond its initial failure. Bürger writes: "Although the neo-avant-gardes proclaim the same goals as the representatives of the historic avant-garde movements to some extent, the demand that art be reintegrated in the praxis of life within the existing society can no longer be seriously made after the failure of avant-gardiste intentions" (109). Contrary to that, the example of the work of Marina Abramović in the 1970s unfolds the logic of the avant-garde subject to its extreme.

Bürger bases his claim on the fact that the post-1950s art movements have abandoned the double condition of the historical avant-garde—that art be incorporated in the praxis of life without sucumbing to the mean-ends rationality of everyday life. What my analysis has shown, however, is that Bürger's discussion of the avant-garde lends itself to a reformulation of the avant-gardist project in relation to the modes of representation: constitutive of avant-garde is the negation of the order of representation [*Darstellung*] as a means of attack on the art institution as *Vertreter;* the defining feature of the avant-garde is to position itself on the side of the death drive, as unrepresented and unrepresentable. In these terms, performance shares an affinity with historical avant-garde: as ephemeral, performance leaves no permanent "art-work," thereby resisting a reinvestment of representation, where *Darstellung* can be immediately institutionalized. In other words, performance as praxis is at its outset a critique of *Darstellung* in art. Abramović's work in the 1970s, and in particular her performance *Thomas Lips* (1975), pursues a critique of the law of the art institution as *Vertreter* of artistic praxis. Consequently, her work maintains a certain relation to the "beyond" of representation, and, hence, to the avant-gardist project. While the project of the historical avant-garde to incorporate art into the praxis of life failed, the avant-garde subjectivity does not disappear; on the contrary, precisely *because* the historical avant-garde failed to achieve its aspirations, the post-WWII art movements introduced performance as a still more radical way to negate the double aspect of representation. In the way that the limit of the pleasure principle sustains the desire of transgression, the "necessary" modality of the art institution to inscribe the avant-garde within the symbolic order sustains the desire of the avant-garde; the perseverance of the avant-gardist project beyond the original failure is the

persistence of the drive, for the drive, as Lacan says, "is only *Trieb* to come." Thus, far from the impossibility of embracing the avant-gardist project after its failure, the continual resurgence of the avant-garde in new forms is a structural necessity.

In her 1975 performance *Thomas Lips* in Innsbruck, staged in a gallery setting before a watching audience, Abramović ate a kilogram of honey, drank a liter of wine, and crushed the wine glass with her hand. She then proceeded to whip her own body after cutting a five-pointed star with a razor on her stomach. She placed her naked and injured body on the block of ice under a suspended radiator, which assured the continuing bleeding. After Abramović remained on the ice for 30 minutes, the public intervened to terminate the performance, removing the artist from the block of ice.

Why does Abramović do this to herself? In this most superficial of questions, I find the defining tension of Abramović's early solo performances during the 1970s. The answer is at once simple and perplexing: *she* does not do it. The question of the artist's self-infliction of pain is at the outset a misleading one: the analysis of Abarmovic's work must resist conflating Abramović-the-author and Abramović-in-performance. I argue that Abramović-the-author, insofar as she designs the piece, *is not* the figure in the performance; and the body that endures the performance *does not* do it to itself, but rather suffers under the structure of the performance previously imposed.

Implicated in a performance are two separate levels: the authorial level and the level of the performance. The authorial level—the design implemented by the artist—defines the setting, objects involved, the subject matter of the performance, and the institutional setting of the performance. The performance, on the other hand, is the materialization of the possibilities allowed by the given authorial design. In *The Trans-*

formative Power of Performance Erika Fischer-Lichte writes that Abramović's actions during the performance "constituted a new, singular reality for the artist and the audience, that is to say, for all participants of the performance" (16). Though restricted in possibilities by the design of the performance, the singular reality of the performance is not finalized and closed, but a reality in becoming. The artist in the performance, as part of a "singular reality," cannot be conflated with the author, who constitutes the conditions of the performance; rather, the artist in the performance is beyond authorial intent. The author as a designer of the performance, therefore, is displaced from this "singular reality" and remains outside it, albeit as its defining factor. The integral structural difference between the two levels thus becomes clear: while the performance-level unfolds diachronically as a singular reality, the authorial-level is synchronically present and constitutive of the latter.

In addition to the content of the performance and the spectators, the institutional setting is already implicated in the singular situation of the performance. During the performance the body traverses the public sphere (the gallery) and posits its own pain within and against the symbolic order. The defining element of Abramović's performance is that the very process of production of the work of art takes place within the interpretative apparatus (within the art institution, in front of the watching public). In this way, Abramović's performance stands on the border between the level of the statement and, what is produced after the encounter with the Other, the level of enunciation. This circumstance enables a direct confrontation with the representative apparatus [*Vertretung*] and, as its consequence, allows the performance to interrogate the rules of interpretation. Being part of the setting, the art institution is one of the elements that become the

part of the performance-level of the work-in-production, which reduces the mediating factor of *Vertretung* to absolute proximity to the representational order [*Darstellung*].

What is the role of re-presentation [*Darstellung*] in Abramović's performance? This function is best elucidated in contrast to a theatrical production. Abramović herself insists: "I am a performer…not an actor" (Stiles 93). Indeed, Abramović is not a *Darsteller*—she does not entertain an arbitrary relation to a concept that she is supposed to re-present. On the contrary, as it were, she re-presents [*darstellen*] nothing, but rather represents [*vertreten*] her own art in apodictic manner (which harkens back to the avant-gardist intention to forge an organic relation of art to life praxis). This characterization of performance, however, is true only to a singular performance, such as *Thomas Lips* in Innsbruck 1975, and is not to be generalized for her entire career as a performance artist. Abramović re-performed *Thomas Lips* twice, as part of a piece *Biography* (Vienna, 1992) and as one of the performances in the series *Seven Easy Pieces* (New York, 1995). Unlike its re-performances, only *Thomas Lips* of 1975, which exemplifies the singular nature of a performance, led to the interference by the public. In *Biography* Abramović produced a two-hour footage of films and photographs of her entire artistic career. During the film, while the footage was showing the photographs from 1975 *Thomas Lips*, Abramović reenacted part of this performance on stage before the watching public. She did not, however, repeat the entire performance, but only a single instance: she cut out a five-pointed start on her stomach, not producing a singular performance situation, but rather paying homage to the performance of 1975 (see Goldberg 12). Her performance of *Thomas Lips* in Guggenheim Museum in New York, on the other hand, maintained a similar structure to the original. The difference was that in New York Abramović paced

herself by alternating the processes of eating honey, drinking wine, and flagellating herself; she lay on the ice for a limited amount of time and added several new elements, such as singing a patriotic song and wearing shoes from her and Ulay's earlier perform-ance ("Great Wall of China," 1988; see Carlson). Although the authorial level remained almost the same (wine, honey, ice, institutional setting, etc), the performance materialized in a radically different way. Unlike the action in Innsbruck, which lasted two hours, the performance in New York went on for six hours, an intended maximum length imposed at the outset; more importantly, the critical moment of public intervention was missing.

A decisive line between the performance of 1975 and its re-performances must be drawn: whereas the former problematized the issue of *Darstellung*, the latter made clear what it re-presented [*darstellen*]. Namely, the re-performances of the piece were framed in biographical detail and re-presented [*darstellen*] their historical counterpart of 1975. In this case, unlike in the original, one cannot speak of the proximity between performance and interpretation; on the contrary, the institution already provided a ready-interpretation even before the re-performance took place. One should recall Jakobson's polemic that with the "identity between sign and object…there is no mobility of concepts…and the awareness of reality dies out" ("WIP" 175). The awareness of performance-in-the-making subsides in the face of its solidified signified content (i.e., biography or the original performance, not to mention the artist as genius) in the re-performance; the intervention of the public thus was structurally impossible precisely because with the dominance of *Darstellung* "the awareness of reality dies out:" the separation between the spectator and the art-work became immobile. Kristine Stiles writes: *"While Seven Easy Pieces* [the re-performance in New York] was realized in a series of singular events that

Abramović performed, and thus was reminiscent of Body Art, it also represented theater in its re-presentational modes" (93). This contrast between the performance of 1975 and its subsequent re-enactments outlines the tension between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*. Whereas in the original performances, Abramović represented [*vertreten*] Body Art (i.e. the piece represented [*vertreten*] the performance praxis directly), in the re-enactment she represented her earlier career via the mode of representation qua *Darstellung,* reminiscent of theater; as Stiles points out, the re-performance had no longer an apodictic rapport with Body Art. The proximity of *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*, which I argue is central to the avant-garde production, has vanished in the re-performance. Hence, relevant to my discussion of the avant-garde as it relates to the death drive as failure of representation is only the performance in Innsbruck, while the later re-performances signal the reinvestment of representation in the pleasure principle.

In *Contract with the Skin* Kathy O'Dell locates Abramović's performance in the context of a genre of performance of the 1970s that she coins "masochistic performance." O'Dell discusses Abramović alongside such artists as Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, and Ulay (Abramović's performance and life partner during 1976-88). O'Dell draws on the notion of the contract in Gilles Deleuze's *Masochism*, as a constitutive condition of a masochistic situation. The self-infliction of pain without interference of the public proceeds only as a result of a contract—implicit, orally stated, or, in case of Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (Naples, 1974), transcribed. The contract thus sanctions the non-involvement of the public in relation to the acts on stage. O'Dells summarizes a common trope in masochistic performance: "by pushing their actions to an extreme, they [the

artists] could dramatize the importance of a transaction that is often overlooked or taken for granted" (2).

The affinity of Abramović's performances and masochism, as conceptualized by Deleuze, extends further than the predominance of contract. In fact, masochistic situation itself is a type of performance; Deleuze emphasizes that in masochism "[e]verything must be stated, promised, announced and carefully described before being accomplished" (*Masochism* 18). The role of suspense and climax occupy a central place to a point when "the woman torturer freezes into postures that identify her with a statue, a painting or a photograph" (33). The critical difference between a masochistic situation and a "masochistic performance" is embodied in the overall role of the contract: whereas the performance of the former consists in executing the contract, the latter, according to O'Dell, seeks to critique it. Consequently, the contract in masochistic situation is its submission to the order of *Darstellung;* Deleuze makes this clear in saying that in masochism the performance takes place "mythically, dialectically and in the imaginary" (35). The performance in art, on the other hand, reacts against the view of art as mere *Darstellung*. Although it may take it as its content, simulating a painting or a statue is not constitutive of performance art in question; on the contrary, performance initiates its practice in order to move beyond these modes of representation. Critique of the contract in performance is a critique of the predominance of *Darstellung* in art. The more profound link between performance and masochistic situation, however, lies in the fact that both maintain a relation to the death drive. When Deleuze argues, to repeat, that masochism "pursues [the death drive]…mythically, dialectically and in the imaginary," he indicates that masochism seeks to re-present an ontological category, something that is "unrepresentable" or

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"mute," via the order of *Darstellung*. As I have argued, the avant-garde also maintains a relation to the death drive, and the performance art is the persistence of the avant-garde in a drive "to come." Does the performance art then, like masochism, seeks to represent the death drive via *Darstellung*?

O'Dell, indeed, in insisting that performances in question entertain a purely metaphorical function, implies that performance only relates to the mode of representation as *Darstellung*. By probing the limits and possibilities of the contract, O'Dell contends, the masochistic performance presents a critique of the contracts functioning in the greater social context. O'Dell writes: "masochistic performance artists of the 1970s took suffering upon themselves in order to point to trouble in two interconnected social institutions: the law and the home" (12). This argument relies on a presupposition that the locus of meaning in masochistic performance is metaphor. Consequently, O'Dell maintains that the function of the masochistic performance is to demonstrate "the metaphoric function of an artistic act to entreat comparison to something beyond itself" (12). In this instance O'Dell reduces the performance art in question to fulfilling a merely representational role [*Darstellung*]. In this view, the critique potential of the masochistic performance remains radically detached from the praxis of life. O'Dell concludes: "they [the aforementioned artists] rooted themselves in the fundamental art historical notion that the overriding value of art lies in its play within the arena of the symbolic, its representational status, and its reliance on metaphor"(9). As evidence, the author discusses Burden's *Shoot* (1971)—where the artist was shot in the arm by his accomplice in a gallery setting—as a metaphor of being shot in Vietnam, while arguing that the two cannot maintain a literal connection since the artists "*chose* those actions" (12; emphasis in the original). Though

referring to the praxis of life, the masochistic performance bolsters a certain signified content; hence, in O'Dell's view, the original performance of *Thomas Lips* and its subsequent re-performances are structurally the same by the token of merely representing [*darstellen*] something beyond its immediate content.

Indeed, the content of a performance cannot be taken in literal connection to the "reality" of life. Is there not however a literal contract, beyond the metaphoric interpretation of the content, which concerns the masochistic performance? What sanctions the separation of the viewer and the artist—the contract in question—is the role of the art institution. Far from serving a merely representational function (metaphor), the role of the institution (contract) is inscribed into the symbolic as law, articulating and dictating the disparateness of the two spheres—spectator and a work of art. O'Dell is right to point out the potential metaphorical function of performance art, but she reduces the masochistic performance to no more than that: "Pane, Acconci, Burden, and Ulay/Abramović all investigated the self as a subject through the mechanism of fantasy but never really moved beyond seeing the body as a material object with symbolic potential" (9).[19] By reducing the masochistic performance, including Abramović's first performance of *Thomas Lips,* to a metaphor, O'Dell thus elides the critical potential of the performance art with regard to the very real condition of the institution. It is this function, the contract that the art institution imposes, that Abramović's *Thomas Lips* (1975), beyond the metaphorical meaning of its content, calls into question.

Thomas Lips demands immediacy of action, not deferral of intellectual elaboration. Hence, Fischer-Lichte argues that such a performance "vehemently resists the

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[19] In this context O'Dell uses the term "symbolic potential" to describe metaphor, not to refer to the symbolic order (the law), which is actually the opposite pole of metaphor.

demands of hermeneutic aesthetics, which aims at understanding the work of art" (16).

Although different metaphorical interpretations of a performance are possible, they are

possible only in retrospect, as the reinvestment of the pleasure principle: the horrifying

movement of the performance, where the artist puts her own life at stake as a public

spectacle, overrides any mediated reflection—the metaphor as such collapses; the repre-

sentation [*Darstellung*] fails. Unlike a masochistic situation, the performance in question

does not appeal to the metaphor as a way to represent [*darstellen*] the death drive; on the

contrary, the failure of *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*, as failure of the pleasure principle, is

the means to forge a connection to the death drive.

In instigating the public's intervention, *Thomas Lips* (1975) clearly transcends a

merely representational [*Darstellung*] status and acquires what Fischer-Lichte calls

"transformative potential." No doubt, many (if not all) Abramović's works trigger and

demand a dialogue with the public. Only in her early performances, however, does the

matter of life and death is contingent on the decisions of the spectator. [20] After meeting

Ulay, with whom Abramović collaborated for over a decade (1976-88), her work took a

different direction. In an interview Abramović insinuates that meeting Ulay saved her

life; Abramović says: "Death was the next step, because I could not see how it could

progress farther. It was almost a miracle for me to meet Ulay" (Kaplan 17). Hence, the

duo performances by Ulay/Abramović had a radically different character in comparison

to Abramović's early work; RoseLee Goldberg remarks: "Shocking an audience was less

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[20] The other two performances, which required absolutely unmediated participation of the public were *Rhythm 0* in Naples, 1974 and *Rhythm 5* in Belgrad, 1974. During the latter, having located herself inside a five-pointed star set aflame, the artist lost consciousness, which prompted public's intervention. This performance, however, was outside a gallery setting. Nonetheless, although not discussed in this paper, the analysis still applies to *Rhythm 5*, insofar as Abramović framed the piece as an art work and the art institution sanctioned the initial non-interference of the public. Abramović did not perform either of these works again.

of an issue [in Ulay/Abramović in comparison to early Abramović] than was the creation of situations, the dramatic architectural settings of which combined to provide a sense of ceremony of sufficient duration for the nervous energy of the artists to be transferred to the audience" (12). Thus, only early performances as singularities, in part due to shocking the audience, transcend what O'Dell calls the merely "metaphoric function."

The essential structural condition that gives the power to *Thomas Lips* (1975) is the institutional setting of the performance. Because this singular situation takes place within the four walls of a museum, it takes refuge in the art institution. Thus, the fact that the audience witnesses the artist's pain and suffering is initially "justified" because of the historical development of the autonomous position of Western art. Directly in the praxis of life—without claiming rights to the privileged sphere of art—Abramović's actions would be simply inconceivable; such actions could only proceed as a public spectacle under the guise of an "art-work." The institution's insistence on the work of art as an autonomous entity predicates the non-interference of the observers—the work remains apart from life praxis. It is this status of the "apartness" of the work of art that sanctions the very horrors that the performance entails. Hence, this assumption is a precondition that enables the performance to proceed at all. Nevertheless, while the performance complies with the regulations of the museum, the open process of its production (the coincidence of the statement-performance and enunciation-interpretation) delineates the possibility to keep the said regulations under a threat of complete dissolution. Precisely this structural condition of the performance enabled the intervention of the public in Innsbruck 1975, breaching the law of the institution, and thereby collapsing the division between aesthetic production and the praxis of life. Beyond the metaphorical value of the

content (five-pointed star as a symbol for communism, honey and wine as representations of Orthodox Church), *Thomas Lips* interrogates in a literal way the law of the art institution.

The proximity of the interpretative apparatus to the critical production in the performance poses a question: how exactly are we to understand the stance of the Abramović's performance toward the art institution? If Abramović's performance must take the separation of the work of art and the praxis of life as its starting point, the negation of the law of the art institution requires an initial identification with the law. This double aspect of performance—affirmation and negation of the law—is possible precisely due to the split between the authorial-level and performance-level. The separation of the two levels can be respectively attributed to the ambivalence toward the art institution: while the authorial-level corresponds to the law of the institution, the performance-level has the potential of striving for its dissolution. Corollary to that, this underlying split in the performance makes clear that the institution functions on the synchronic level, when representation [*Vertretung*] is totalized, while the negation of the law may only take place in performance's diachronic realization. This is another way of saying that any dissolution of the law of the art institution is only *temporary*; while the representation is retrospectively and inevitably reinvested on the synchronic level.

As the public intervenes, one must ask a question: what triggers this collapse and negation of the law of the art institution? Why cannot the institution ward off the intervention of the public on the basis of the separation of the work of art and the spectator?

In his analysis of *Antigone,* Lacan demonstrates the failure of the law, similar to that of the situation in *Thomas Lips*. The differentiation between the authorial-level and

the performance-level allows one to grasp Abramović in the performance as a tragic figure; namely, as a figure that Lacan terms "between two deaths." In *Antigone,* because the heroine demands the funeral rites for her brother Polynices, who is a traitor to their city-state, and fulfils these rites despite the prohibition of the law, Antigone is sentenced to death by Creon, who represents the law of the city-state. In explaining to Creon why she has submitted herself to death, torture, and isolation from the community, Antigone counters: "That's how it is because that's how it is" (*BVII* 278). The same reasoning is at work in Abramović's performances: neither the audience nor the institution has an immediate answer as to why Abramović lays her body on the block of ice bleeding it under the radiator. Abramović's role resonates with the figure of a tragic hero, which clarifies the injunction and necessity to negate the law, i.e. the art institution and the symbolic order as a whole.

Indeed, the performance does not aspire to refer to a greater context—posit meaning or intent—and insists on starting *ex nihilo* with regard to the institutional question of "what is art?" There is no grounding principle that justifies Abramović's actions aside the arbitrary structure that is already in place without any precedent of aesthetic foundation. The refusal to answer this question positively is an avant-gardist gesture par excellence: "That's how it is because that's how it is"—a self-referential response without a foundation and which belongs to a fading subject in a state of alienation. Moreover, losing its own ground, situated on the side of the unjustifiable with regard to the totality of the symbolic order, the performance, as it were, answers the questions "What is art?" with a binary signifier; as *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz,* art stands for the groundless of the formal system, and, in this instance, it is that which points to the failure of the institutional law.

Yet, what determines the performance is precisely the initial acceptance of the law; the initial identification with the law, belonging to the authorial-level, is precisely what gives the performance its tragic dimension. The previously imposed conditions of the situation deprive Abramović-in-performance of "free will." Once the authorial-level has triggered the unfolding of the performance in *Thomas Lips*, the interpretation of meaning and authorship ("artistic choice") gives way to the immediate questions concerning the endurance of the body and participation of the public. The full submission of the body to the synchronic determination on the authorial-level replaces the Greek concept of "fate" in Abramović's work, transferring an autonomous art-work onto the tragic plane. The liter of wine and kilogram of honey have been prepared for consumption, the razor blade is at hand to cut out a five pointed star on her stomach, and the ice platform with a radiator over it await the artist's body to inflict the unavoidable pain and suffering. Though Abramović as the author of the experiment is implicated in the structure that defines her "fate," within the performance itself, she has no choice but to go through the horrific obstacles defined for her in advance. Her position in the performance embodies Sade's idea "that the greatest cruelty is that the subject's fate is displayed before his eyes with his full awareness of it" (Lacan, *BVII* 219). As an author, Abramović designs the structure of the performance, and yet, as an object of the performance, she finds herself beyond the limit of her control and authorship.

The significance of Abramović assuming a role of tragic figure lies in the fact that it is precisely the function of the tragic figure to put the very symbolic order that inflicts pain and humiliation into question. The perpetuation of the unjustifiable horrors on stage however does not quite constitute Abramović as a tragic figure; neither does pain alone

suffice to make manifest the contradictions of a symbolic order. It is Abramović's ability to impose and consecrate a previously unseen limit immanent in the symbolic order that pushes her into the sphere of the tragic. As Lacan writes: "for in the end tragic heroes are always isolated, they are always beyond established limits, always in an exposed position, and, as a result, separated in one way or another from the structure" (*BVII* 271). Abramović's body, exposed and looked at, a detestable spectacle, suffering but enduring, is located in the "beyond" that Lacan describes. The singular situation of the performance points to the "beyond" of the pleasure principle, marking the impeding manifestation of the death drive. On the one hand, because the body remains in the museum space and posits itself as an object of an art work, it is within the structure; on the other hand, the very fact that it is the human body that undergoes an unbearable ordeal of pain on the brink of death, situates it beyond the symbolic order. The potential of self-annihilation does not only cross the line of the law imposed by the art institution, but also disregards the reigning imperative of the contemporary society as a whole to preserve an individual life (suicide and self-infliction of pain are among the taboos of our society). The pain Abramović experiences within the content of the performance, imposed on the authorial-level and sanctioned by the art institution, cannot be inscribed and appropriated in the symbolic order. Pain is that, which eludes the symbolic order and exposes a glimpse of the real. She is alone, implicated in and isolated from the structure, vanishing into non-existence.

Describing Antigone's state, Lacan summarizes the very position that Abramović assumes in *Thomas Lips*: "she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living" (280). Indeed, the fatal danger of Abramović's performance posits her beyond the

realm of the living. In her analysis Fischer-Lichte remarks that, as a result of the artist's self-torture in *Thomas Lips,* "some members of the audience could no longer bear her ordeal" (11). This indicates that those in the audience, by the token of sharing the singular world of the performance are dragged together with the artist beyond this realm of the living. The public must interfere because *it* cannot bear the implication of its own presence. As an essential part of the art institution, the public assumes complicity in the transgression of the taboo between life and death. Consequently, the audience terminates the performance.
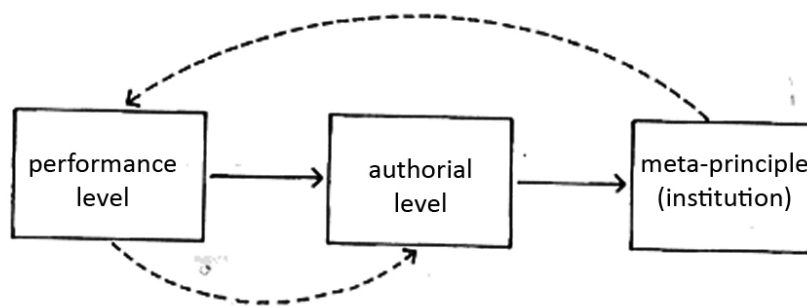

Figure 5.

As the wall between the spectator and the work of art disappears, the very precondition of the performance within the art institution is annihilated. In the same movement, the performance gains a self-referential quality: the separateness of the authorial-level (identified with the institution) from the performance-level that it defines can no longer be maintained. Just as the realms of the dead and the living, the two levels converge: the content of the performance, i.e. the public taking action within the singular situation, retrospectively redefines the very structure of the performance—i.e., the

assumption that the public enters the performance as a passive observer. The apartness of the work from the praxis of life—the injunction of the institution—subsides in the face of the limit between death and life, pain and the symbolic.

Why does Abramović's performance induce horror? Precisely because the consequences of her work find no place in the accepted symbolic order: there is no way to justify the pain and humiliation that the public inflicts on her. Yet this horrific effect is sanctioned by the contract of the performance; namely, it is inscribed in the very structural conditions of the performance—it is at the outset the face of the law. The horror is the manifestation of the self-referentiality where authorial-level, which is supposed to structure the performance from the outside, sanctioned by the law of the art institution as a meta-principle, is retrospectively reversed. By collapsing what is supposed to be the level of *Darstellung* (performance) with the roles of the author—the public writes its own script of the performance by entering it—and the institution (*Vertretung*), Abramović exemplifies that the self-referentiality is constitutive yet repressed in the functioning of the art institution. In other words, Abramović follows the rules, and yet, by taking these rules to the limit, she demonstrates that these very rules allow for the horrors that they intend to ward off. She makes manifest that the death drive, the beyond of the pleasure principle, is immanent in the logic of the latter.

In conclusion: how to fail in success and how to succeed in failure

To what end does the staging of the art institution's failure amount? Just as an instantaneous manifestation of the death drive does not disintegrate the efficacy of the pleasure principle, neither do Abramović's early performances signal the end in the dominance of

the art institution. As the major retrospective "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present" in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2010) demonstrates, even ephemeral art such as Body Art finds a place in museum space through film, photographs, and re-performances by other artists. Needless to say, all these function within the mode of *Darstellung*, having accepted the art institution as *Vertreter*. Incidentally, most of the re-performers were hired actors [*Darsteller*], who would not endure the entire lengths of Abramović's original pieces, but would switch after reasonable periods of time due to the museum regulations. Exemplary of this shift in representation is a re-performance of Abramović/Ulay's performance *Imponderabilia* (1977), where the two artists stood naked face to face in the doorway at the Gelleria Comulae D'Arte Modern in Bologna, thus forcing the public to enter the gallery through the narrow space between the two artists and also forcing them to choose whether to face Abramović or Ulay as they squeeze between these. The re-performance at the MoMa also had two nude artists—who, from time to time, would switch places with other performers—standing at the entrance to the gallery; next to them, however, was a museum official who would inform the somewhat perplexed visitors that this is an art-work, but if the public prefers, they can enter through an alternative doorway located within feet from the "re-performance." What originally was a forced confrontation with the artist and sexual difference, having been given an alternative entrance, became a choice between invading the artists' privacy or avoiding the situation altogether, a choice between a staged participation or non-participation, both of which amount to the same thing. Namely, by means of *Darstellung*, the re-performances convey a historical fact, making their signified content clear; at the same

time, any critique of art institution as *Vertreter* is neutralized and any link between art and the praxis of life ceases.

In all this, what do we learn from the "successful" dissolution of the law in the case of *Thomas Lips* (1975)? What Gödel had accomplished in mathematics, proving the undecidability of any formal system, Abramović realizes in the aesthetic realm: by way of the death drive, Abramović provides a "proof" of the self-referentiality in the representative apparatus [*Vertretung*], thereby demonstrating the groundlessness and arbitrariness of the law of the art institution. As Karatani points out, however, Gödel's proof, although it constitutes a break in theoretical mathematics, in no way affected the advance of applied mathematics and thus could be largely ignored; by analogy, the "successful" transgression of the law of the art institution does not negate the latter, but, on the contrary, makes manifest the mechanism that enables the art institution to secure its authority despite the persisting avant-gardist provocations.

The proximity of the authorial-level/enunciation and performance-level/statement, though allowing for the potential collapse of the law, entails the condition that the authorial-level already incorporates this potentiality of failure. Insofar as the authorial-level assumes the law of the institution, the institution already represents [*vertreten*] its own failure, if only in potentiality. The dissolution of representation [*Vertretung*] thus becomes a member of its own class, i.e., the totality of representation. But how does the representative apparatus [*Vertretung*] cope with its paradoxical determination as both failure and efficacy? As previously argued, the institutional level assumes the temporality of synchrony, while the transgression of the law takes place only within diachrony as the unfolding of the performance. The art institution always already internalizes its own

diachronic failure on the synchronic level in including its failure as potentiality within the domain of representation [*Vertretung*]. The self-referentiality suppressed in representation (*Vertretung*), which signals the dissolution of the representative apparatus turns into a tool of reinvestment of representation (*Darstellung*): the very loop-hole that enables the failure is the condition that assures the efficacy of institutionalization.

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