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## **NO!art AND THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT**

### **Negative Aesthetics and Moral Visuality**

5        The deliberate encounter of the skeletons of concentration camp victims and the pornographic, full-bodied pin-ups on Boris Lurie's dissecting and ruthlessly synthesizing collages! Do these images still shock? In an age of overkill *information* we are bombarded daily with media images, most recently from Kosokov to Guatemala, that violate our deepest feelings and values, *painlessly*. We are hurt without pain, it seems, as we lack the time, really the belief in any tangible purpose to consciously absorb and work through these shocks for them to become *experience*. Hence, to be honest, Boris Lurie's images shocked me no more nor less than others. Rather, upon opening the NO!art exhibition catalogue published in German in the Berlin of 1995<sup>2</sup>, I was disturbed that I never had seen such images before, that the culture industry had somehow, and for not immediately manifest reasons, suppressed NO!art from us. By us I mean also specifically also my more seasoned colleague from art history who expressed his irritation that he had never encountered NO!art during his research on Robert Morris' concentration camp images, exhibited at the documenta 8, 1987, one of them, excerpts, enlargements, and collages from original fotos montaging *among the corpses the strongly magnified, seemingly intact, indeed, seemingly living nude body of a young woman*.<sup>3</sup>

20        Have the dead not lately come alive — since Spielberg's *SCHINDLER'S LIST* (1993), for example, presently at the Berlinale in the *Zoo-Palace*, with James Moll's *LAST DAYS*, made in Hollywood 1999, starring the Holocaust survivor Renée Firestone, who was greeted with standing ovations after the film's showing. — *Question*: was she applauded as an actor or as a survivor? — Then there are German films like *AIMÉE & JAGUAR* featuring a love affair between a Jewish German and non-Jewish German woman, also *THE SPECIALIST*, an Eichmann film by the Israeli filmmaker Eyan Silvan<sup>4</sup>. In our movie house we have been seeing Roberto Benigni's *LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL* (1997), and there is Law Professor Bernhard Schlink's short novel, *THE READER*<sup>5</sup> which already reads like a screen script, etc. Have the dead come alive, of late, to wake us to remembrance in the sense of Walter Benjamin's *untranslatable EINGEDENKEN*, or are we witnessing the highest stage of an exploitation of the Holocaust by a proliferating *Holocaust industry* — addressed as such by the scandalous Norman Finkelstein —, a marketing a blend of information,

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<sup>2</sup> NO,catalogue, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK), Berlin 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Otto K. Werckmeister, *Zitadellenkultur* (The Citadel Culture), Hanser Verlag, München Wien 1989.

<sup>4</sup> See Christian Peitz, *Auschwitz im Zoo-Palast. Berlinale 1999: Neue Filme thematisieren den Holocaust, doch das Kino verweigert sich der Zukunft*, Die Zeit 8, 18. Feb. 1999, 38.

<sup>5</sup> 1995; trsl. from the German 1997.

by now well-known, and entertainment? The German writer Martin Walser in 1999 even spoke of the *instrumentalization* of the Holocaust for political purposes. This has angered not only the Jewish world. In the United States, one has come to a new stage of critiquing the conventions of memorizing the Holocaust in recent New York exhibits like *MIRRORING EVIL: NAZI IMAGERY — RECENT ART*, at the Jewish Museum in March 2002. In particular, Alan Schechner's *It's the Real Thing: Self-Portrait at Buchenwald*, in which the (Jewish) artist, a generation removed from the Holocaust, imagines himself in a concentration camp, holding a Diet Coke *has offended Holocaust survivors*<sup>6</sup>. Schechner's montage thus quite symbolically (re)implicates American capitalism as Boris Lurie had done much more aggressively in the New York of the late 1950s, early 1960s, except that no one remembers *NO!art*. — I would like to return to Walser's infamous inflammatory speech by the end of my presentation, and to Schechner's *It's the Real Thing* in our subsequent discussion.

I may be allowed one more personal note before turning to the more precise agenda of my presentation: For my generation growing up in Adenauer Germany, images of the *Holocaust* and pin-ups were separate parts, both *underground* as neither were really publically discussed; seeing them in the Berlin *NO!art* catalogue for the first time in iuxtaposition, relation, even familiarity to each other, I realized that in my subconscious they had been stored as archetypal images of thanatos and eros. This awareness, in the moment of writing, that these prejudiced/predjudging images of commodified sexuality, pornography and sadistic violence and destruction could have been implanted in a generation's mind as *universal* images, comes as the real shock. At this moment, upon viewing Boris Lurie's collages from the late 1950s and early 1960s, which still today may be classified as *underground*, also reappears an intellectual guide out of the confines of a Christian-Democratic silent German majority in the 50's and 60's: Theodor Adorno. Theodor Adorno, the co-author of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), for my generation brought the culture industry's ubiquitous images of commodification for the first time into the focus of a historical understanding the productivity of the critical NO of art.

**The Dialectic of Enlightenment:** Theodor Adorno and Horkheimer had completed *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1944, as exiles in the United States, Santa Monica, Cal.<sup>7</sup> It was first published in 1947 by Querido, a major exile press in Amsterdam, one year after Boris Lurie emigrated to the States in the wake of his experience as an inmate of a camp associated with Buchenwald. Seemingly not very grateful to the American host nation which had sheltered them as German Jews from the Nazis and protected them from Japanese imperialism — ultimately with the Atomic bomb —, Adorno/Horkheimer had come to view American capitalist society — less than a decade before the rise of McCarthyism — in dangerous relation to fascism. They had thereby linked anti-Semitism with the capitalist mechanism to subjugate the weak, and to ostracize and eliminate the

<sup>6</sup> See *New York Times*, Saturday, March 2, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment: An Essay on the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge 1980, p. 114 ...

other and outsider as the *enemy*. Horkheimer's/Adorno's hermeneutics of suspicion claimed that the capitalist commodification of every vital need and cultural expression had made a victim of individual authentic experience, had led to an unanalyzed discontent in civilization. Protest against the system had been displaced with hatred and aggression against outsiders, foremost the Jews  
 5 viewed as the original modern entrepreneur without values, abused as scapegoats. The practice to manipulate the subject's comprehensive needs toward mere objects for mass consumption, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, had been merely exploited by the Nazis in using *the training the culture industry has given (the masses), in order to organize them into its own forced battalions*.<sup>8</sup>

Some 15 or so years later, Boris Lurie's works would bring Jews as objects of ultimate violence  
 10 and woman as sex objects — the latter, of course, a lesser theme for Adorno — into an explosive proximity. Nevertheless, as I see it, Lurie's statements concerning female sexuality as constructed by the male consumer's gaze thereby do not place him into the contemporaneous vanguard of the *woman question*, of feminist concerns. Neither had the *Big NO* of the student movement, at the end of the decade, any sense of the specific exploitation of women in the repressive system they at-  
 15 tacked, as they still had little insight — in spite of Herbert Marcuse's better understanding — that the sexual revolution should not have been delinked from women's liberation. Yet, the collages of Boris Lurie articulate a sense of this problem, even though their references to women are ambiva-  
 lent<sup>9</sup> — to my mind, highly ambivalent, *consciously* so.

As for the commodification, thus frustration of sexuality, the authors of the *Dialectic of the*  
 20 *Enlightenment* had written:

*The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises .... The culture industry does not sublimate; it represses. By repeatedly exposing the objects of desire, breasts in a clinging sweater or the naked torso of the athletic hero, it only stimulates the un-*  
*sublimated forepleasure ... The Hays Office merely confirms the ritual of Tantalus .... Works of*  
 25 *art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish*.<sup>10</sup>

And as elaborated in the chapter *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, the weaker sex, woman, was blamed for sexual frustration in a system that placed the organisation of production and consumption over the gratification of the instinctual. The capitalist culture industry had displaced individual experience — ERFÄHRUNG — as open to intersubjective dialogue and  
 30 participation by instead manipulating, constructing the subject in relation to mere objects as a so-called *free* consumer resulting into the consumption of woman in the profit dictated terms of pornography.

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<sup>8</sup> Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Taylor, *Die NO!art Bewegung in New York, 1960 bis 1964*, p. 32 – 37, *NO*, catalogue, Berlin 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 140.

The Jewish Russian exile Boris Lurie will a decade and a half later formulate, in the visual medium, his own American experience stunningly close to Adorno's darkly suspicious, albeit philosophical insight into the dialectic of the culture industry. The difference being that the entwinement of anti-Semitism, in its ultimate logic of the programmatic extinction of the Jews by gassing, and pornographic misogyny formulated in the authoritative context of the institution of philosophy is sanctified and easily assimilated. In the medium of writing, moreover philosophical writing, the identification of anti-Semitism with the exploitation and commodification of the woman's body is *overlooked*, while the visual medium's identical practice lead to the marginalization, if not repression of *NO!art*. The repression of the visual productions of *NO!art* occurs — before its institutionalization — already at the point of viewing. At which point, the avant-garde method of montage provokes and shocks an audience, already morally shocked by the historical events and now, once more, by the composition of, normatively viewed, two unrelated issues into a moralizing exclusion of the moral as the immoral. — We will have to come back to this moral dimension of *NO!art*'s shock in comparison to the satirical, dialectical methods George Grosz's montages, which Boris Lurie was familiar with.

Here, of course, I do not talk of any influence of German critical theory in exile on the arts in America, even though Lurie himself does refer, much later, in a 1995 article to the *forward looking teachers of the Frankfurt School*.<sup>11</sup> Rather, I here focus on the fact that Adorno and Lurie as exiles and Jews, as outsiders, refugee aliens in America had equally experienced the distance and disengagement necessary for them to perceive subterraneous connections of modernity and fascism. Their intense strangeness to America gave the exiles — like once Karl Marx in Brussels and London — a specifically estranging view of conditions in the land of the highest developed capitalism. Lurie himself wrote about the origins of *NO!art* in New York as *the largest Jewish community in the World, ... the product of war and their armies, of the concentration camps ... NO!art's target is the hypocritical intelligentsia, the capitalist manipulation of culture, the consumer society and other American Molochs*.<sup>12</sup> In similar terms, the American Moloch had already been the targeted by Allen Ginsburg, in his great *Howl* of 1952 — written in the wake of WW II and, specifically, the Korean War —, the official reaction to which exposed the American mentality, indeed, as *pornographic and prudish*.

In overall terms, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* makes the salto mortale of establishing a link between enlightenment and domination, as the enlightenment had prioritized the ethically and rationally autonomous subject.<sup>13</sup> In *Elements of Anti-Semitism. The Limits of Enlightenment* this equation is brought a step further in order to explain the victimization of the Jews: Rationality becomes an *idée fixe*, the domination of reason as *ultima ratio* results in a loss of self-reflection and

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<sup>11</sup> Boris Lurie, *Anmerkungen zu Kunst, Leben und Politik*, p. 125, *NO*, catalogue, Berlin 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Connerton, p. 169.

the imagination, in other words, of the ability to project beyond the status quo. Thus enlightenment results into the separation from the real, pivots, so to speak, head over heels into a compulsory, quasi-hallucinatory state of paranoia. That paranoia is the urge to persecute and annihilate everything that does not fit its pre-judiced order, everything and every man that is different: *the whole man has become the subject-object of repression*.<sup>14</sup> *Enlightenment has turned into terror*. In which scheme of things the Jew has become *an object of instinctual release*.<sup>15</sup> The consumer mind, just like the totalitarian mind has been trained in the unconditional surrender to the given, lost the power of reflection that comes from the openness of negation, of saying NO!, — or making *NO!art* —. This narrow mind seeks to vent its unconscious feeling of being colonized by harshly reacting against others, those who differ from its order, thus are weaker and vulnerable targets: Jews and women. Needless to say, in the history of German-Austrian anti-semitism as a monstrous *side effect* of modernization processes, women and Jews have been traditionally conjoined through stereotyping the latter as *effeminate*, and *lustful*.<sup>16</sup>

Before returning to some of the introductory remarks, let me discuss a few sample images of *NO!art* in context.

Lurie's *Saturation Paintings (Buchenwald)*<sup>17</sup>, 1959-64 and his *Railroad Collage*<sup>18</sup>, 1963 represent exemplary critiques of such connections between capitalism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and fascism/Nazism. *Railroad Collage*, 1963 is an uncovering demonstration of the paranoid deadly Nazi sense of order. Most disturbing in the midst of the most disturbing, at least for the male viewer, is the circumstance that the woman, her image superimposed by foto montage over that of the corpses, pulling her slip over her behind, exerts a certain measure of sex-appeal - in spite of the context she appears in. What Juergen Habermas says about Georges Bataille as an erotic writer, can be said, albeit only to a certain critical extent, about Boris Lurie's image making: *assaulted by obscenity, gripped by the shock of the unexpected and unimaginable, — the reader/viewer — is jolted into the ambivalence of loathing and pleasure*.<sup>19</sup> The fundamental difference being that Bataille intended to utilize the energy of the arising shock for an unlinking of the aesthetic from the moral, his ultimate goal being the materialist *devolution* of subject-centered imaging, the decomposition of the vertical head — idealist subjectivity —, the disruption of aesthetic representation to the *base* — meaning low as well as basic — presentation of the bodily *informe* — bodily fluids from semen to blood, spit, and excrements, cut of body parts, etc. — By contrast, Lurie's Neo-Dada productions mostly reverse the impact of the shock from the rupture of aesthetic

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>16</sup> See Sander Gilman, *Smart Jews*.

<sup>17</sup> See *NO!art catalogue*, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> See *NO!art catalogue*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Juergen Habermas, *Between Eroticism and General Economics: Bataille*, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT, 1987) p. 237.

conventions to the moral. He utilizes the disruption by montage for a political, meaning subject-oriented effect. After all, the meeting of disparate images in his work are not at all surrealist *chance* encounters but - like that of Grosz and Heartfield in the Weimar Republic's twenties - part of a programmatic activist project.

5 Slide 3: George Grosz, *Christus mit Gasmaske. Maul halten und weiterdienen* as an example of shock by montage: *violation* of the normative image of an *institutional* Christ.

Back to Lurie's *Railroad Collage*. The image of Holocaust victims, as already Horkheimer/Adorno wrote, serially reproduced in the company of commercial advertisement in contemporaneous magazines like *Time*, thus made invisible, here is revitalized. Revitalized in a disturbing  
10 sense: the nude woman's image draws the contemporary viewer out of the moral context into an instinctual relation of domination, in conflation of women and Jews as *objects of instinctual release* (Adorno/Horkheimer). The viewer is thus made, for a precarious moment, a collaborator to the scene.

**Boris Lurie's Dialectic of Enlightenment as Self-reflection:** *Saturation Paintings (Buchenswald)*, 1959-64, one of the major documents of Lurie's *Holocaust Art / NO!art* consists of three major components, the montage of

1) a foto of the Jewish inmates of a concentration camp, lined up and grouped behind a fence, staring vacuously through the barbed wire. Some look directly toward the eye of the camera, others obliquely avoiding eye contact for whatever — emotional, we feel foremost, or circumstantial —  
20 reasons. The caption reading *Can it happen again?* designates the shot as possibly one taken at the moment of the camps' liberation by the Allies, and thereafter utilized in the press or on posters for denazification purposes in Germany,

2) there is a series of frames of a full-bodied, full-breasted nude in various poses and stages of undressing and exposing herself to the camera, or better being exposed by the camera: Her smile  
25 is the smile of keep-smiling, the smile of the seductress, and of the woman seduced, forced by the monetary reward that motivates the series of images as a financial arrangement. All of the images give the voyeuristic viewer some sense of control over the woman as sex-object, his secretive gaze in turn is made visible by the montage. Thus the viewer is confronted with the impossible choice of complicity or critical distance.

3) underlying both image segments is part of a page (p. 13) of an article by H. R. Trevor-Roper, Regent Professor of Modern History at Oxford. In a late, almost superfluous, relatively futile interpretative move we read-only if we force ourselves to closely focus on the small print — parts of the author's commentary from 1961 on whether or not the Holocaust was a singular event.

The constellation results in a moral shock and the spark of insight into a hidden connection, an  
35 intertwinement first conceptualized by Adorno's writings, and now tangibly illuminated by Lurie's montage. Yet, as much as the lure of the girlie photo still resists a unified critical, distanced approach to the montage of what only appears to be disparate, I am reminded of the self-awareness implicit in George Grosz's satirical paintings and montages from Germany in the 1920s. I am re-

minding us of his admission, made in his autobiography *A little YES and a Big NO*, written and published in 1946 in the United States: *I was part of what I criticized*.

Slide 4: Grosz, *Deutschland. Ein Wintermaerchen*, as an example of a dialectical critique as self-critique.

5 Lurie, doubly-bound to the female body and its pornographic commodification in fascination and aggression, we recall his self-commentaries<sup>20</sup>, most likely would not reject to identify with George Grosz' self-assessment — who, by the way, taught at the New York Art Students League until 1936 where Lurie enrolled in 1946. Lurie, too, is part of what he criticizes, thus his artistic statements, too, are — in their specific terms — more of *a little yes and a big no*, rather than an outright NO! As  
10 the *NO!art* group provocatively called their productions *Jew art*, relating the images of the Holocaust with those of the daily violence of vulgarity implies an ironic self-distance as well as an aggressive tendency to shock the Jewish and non-Jewish audience alike.<sup>21</sup> Their collages violated the *BILDERVERBOT* — prohibition of images — of Jew and *gentile*, however differently. Jewish *self-hatred* and German post-Holocaust self-hatred meet each other in such images. The intense, im-  
15 possible complications of these works continue to speak of a European provenance of *NO!art*, in its sharp critique of American conditions comparable to Adorno/Horkheimer's earlier statements. Indeed, compared with such complicated sentiments, Pop art's colorfully superficial yes to America must have been *liberating*. In sum, *NO!art's* self-implication in what it criticized, is a form of a dialectic of the enlightenment which the elitist philosopher-theorist Adorno did not normally subject  
20 himself to. It would have meant an implication also of the authority of philosophical discourse in the making of the *authoritarian mind*. Hence the sometimes unbearable tenor of the self-righteousness of the philosophical discourses of his essays in cultural criticism. With the productions of *NO!art*, the dialectic of enlightenment thus goes beyond Adorno's/Horkheimer's text cited. *NO!art* thus comes closer to exemplify Adorno's — often quoted and mostly misunderstood — 1949 dictum that writing  
25 *poetry after Auschwitz* has become *barbaric*, for that matter *impossible* in traditional terms of aesthetic self-sufficiency, just as the very statement of its *impossibility* has become subject to the *dialectic of culture and barbarism*.<sup>22</sup> The *barbaric*, ambivalent *dirtyness* of *NO!art* montages causes shock and rejection while it constitutes a uniquely visual cognitive strength, drawn from the amoral energies of vision, which disallows the dualisms of pure/impure, beautiful vs. ugly, etc., of the aes-  
30 thetic tradition.

Martin Walser's speech at the acceptance of the German bookdealers' association Peace Prize had declared the *instrumentalisation of the Holocaust* for political purposes. And Walser wanted to claim the right to look away in order to be able to reflect on the German past in the privacy of his own conscience, to retain a sense of freedom in his life and work by keeping it open to the aes-

<sup>20</sup> See Ulrike Abel, *Gemischte Gefuehle. Zum Frauenbild in der NO!art*, p. 83, NO!art catalogue, Berlin 1995.

<sup>21</sup> See Taylor, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, in *Prismen* (Muenchen: dtv, 1963), p. 26.

thetic experiences that are the focus of all great literature — just as Goethe was able to write his masterpiece *Wilhelm Meister* by looking away from the issues of the French Revolution. And might one not also be justified to say that any real understanding and memory of the Holocaust could be blocked by a *surplus of informations*. *The details of everything suppress the feelings. It is much more effective, to let everything float in a quietness, surrounded by a secret. Hyperillumination kills reality. And that is true also for the Holocaust.*<sup>23</sup> These remarks were made in 1995, four years before Martin Walser gave his speech. Does one find them credible or not?

I have just quoted from Boris Lurie's *Anmerkungen zur Kunst, Leben und Politik*<sup>24</sup> and not from Martin Walser's speech. Here are Boris' words once more — translated from the German —, his German which he calls his second *MUTTERSPRACHE* — mother tongue — and quite touchingly his *HIMMELSPRACHE* — heavenly language — as the language of Goethe, of German high culture: *surplus of informations. The details of everything suppress the feelings. It is much more effective, to let everything float in a quietness, surrounded by a secret. Hyperillumination kills reality. And that is true also for the Holocaust.* And his article continues to stress in quasi-Benjaminian fashion experience over information by way of storytelling: *My mother certainly would not have liked it, that her sacrifice is being used to illustrate various, also egotistical, also some good — purposes, and that politicians' mouths, full of lies, use them for their dirty public relations. She must still labor for her EINSATZKOMMANDO. She is not allowed to vote democratically against that. Her right to vote was given to the Holocaust-museum directors.*<sup>25</sup> And Boris Lurie goes on to stress the significance of experience over mass media produced information, of *action* in life. He tells of the *action art* of a Russian-Swedish non-Jewish woman who at the risk of her life delivered care packages to the Jewish inmates of a concentration camp, or a Riga woman who, being marched off, left behind, at the risk of her life, the note *Revenge us*. He valorizes individual actions and accounts of such actions over public events (such as trials) which *once more put the nose of the world into the shit.*<sup>26</sup>

But what do these remarks made by Boris Lurie in 1995 have to do with Boris Lurie's collages from the late 1950s and early 1960s? The long and the short of my comparison of his statement with Walser's amounts to a *contrast*: Most of all, I cannot agree with Walser's claim of *aesthetic privilege* as a legacy of the German classics. Since Dada as a forebear of *NO!art* we no longer can believe in aesthetic autonomy exempting from the contingency of time and place. And Lurie is an artist who through the very nature and function of his exhibition methods credibly shunned what he calls the *New Yorker Kunst KZ.*<sup>27</sup> At any rate, Walser *forgets* the commodification and politicization

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<sup>23</sup> NO!art catalogue, Berlin 1995, p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

of intellectual production in a mass medium like TV, including his own speech. Most significantly: by contrast, Lurie acknowledges his participation in what he criticizes — via the pornographic imagery, for instance, which I discussed at length. Unlike Walser's or Adorno's, quite like George Grosz', Lurie's arguments are not morally aloof arguments that presuppose a vantage point of purity and innocence. Nor are they arguments that call as a witness the *immaculate* conception of art. After all, art too can be *shit* as stated by Grosz and John Heartfield in the *KUNSTLUMP* debate of 1920, and shit can be art as stated by the *NO! Sculpture Show/ Shit Show* in the Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York 1964.

In conclusion, a consciously simplified reflection on the naming of *NO!art*. Does it mean art that shouts *NO*, or does one shout *NO* to Art?: Avant-garde art in the 20th century, if any good, has been the voice that *always negates*, with or without Adorno. Its continued saying *NO!* — under whatever difficulties — is to be considered a condition of its survival. Artists and critics alike ought to be aware and wary of the philosophically — not artistically! — pre-scribed position of an *end of art* — meaning the same as an *end of history* —, a certain type of postmodernist argument. Is Lurie right, when he wrote in 1995: *The struggle of the modern/avant-garde is over. The new culture industry has absorbed the avant-garde.*?<sup>28</sup> Has *NO!art* been absorbed? Has *Mirroring Evil* been absorbed?

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 127.