Hal Foster: The editors of October have decided to begin a series of roundtables in order to explore some of the problems that appear to confront art, theory, and politics with a special urgency in this country today. Recent political events, socioeconomic developments, and institutional changes have transformed the frames in which these practices are enacted and understood. The same is true of historical work in modernist studies, and in future issues we hope to address controversial new readings there as well. For this first conversation we focus on a tendency that to some of us appears pervasive in contemporary art and criticism alike: a certain turn away from questions of representation to iconographies of content; a certain turn from a politics of the signifier to a politics of the signified. For purposes of specificity we concentrate on the art exhibited at the 1993 Whitney Museum Biennial, and we do so aware of the great difficulty of a critique that wishes to question some tendencies evident in the show but not to abet its many reactive detractors. In this conversation Benjamin Buchloh, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, and I are joined by Miwon Kwon, a doctoral candidate in architectural history and theory at Princeton University and an editor of the journal Documents.

To get things started, I will offer a blunt proposition. In much contemporary art in this country there are two distinctive moves, two typical tropisms: a turn to a theoretical concept and/or a political position as content, as the message of the work. These messages are important; they concern the most essential aspects of our identities and our communities. But often, it seems, this very urgency deflects from full attention to work on the work, to work on its materials and forms, not in the sense of formalism but in the sense of signification: how materials signify, in what ways meanings are informed historically and delimited institutionally.

First, the turn to theoretical concepts. To the extent that these concepts function as content to be illustrated, there are often two complementary effects. Art is presumed not to be theoretical, to be productive of critical
concepts in its own right. And theory is presumed to be separate and supplemental, to be applied or not as one sees fit. As a result there may in fact be little *formal* difference—little difference in signification—between, say, the illustration of ideas concerning simulation in neo-geo art or commodity aesthetics in neo-readymade art in the late 1980s, and the illustration of concepts from gender studies or postcolonial theory in politically committed art in the early 1990s. Obviously there is a great difference in political content, but there may not be much difference in the politics of the signifier. Both in the cynical reason of the first type of art and in the voluntaristic transparency of the second type of art, work on the signifier is often neglected—in the first case as futile, in the second case as irrelevant. And these two assumptions—that art cannot be theoretical in its own terms, that theory is only supplemental—may disable more than enable a theoretical art, and may do so *in its very name.*

As for the turn to the political in art, the question as always is where this is to be located, that is to say, how it is to be constructed. Here too the tendency today seems to be to see the real of the political as external, as somewhere else. Once projected outside art, however, it can only be brought back within it as content, and usually through an autobiographical gesture. In this leap there is again a possible elision of work on the signifier that might disable as much as enable a political art. And rather than a new intimacy of artistic culture and political action, it might indicate an increased distance—one that has to be vaulted voluntaristically.

*Rosalind Krauss:* One of the things that I find symptomatic of the situation you are calling the return of the signified is the tendency of recent art criticism to avoid talking about the art itself and instead just to name a set of ideas that the art might invoke. I was struck reading the catalog texts for the Whitney Biennial by this constant deflection of attention from the texture of the work. The work is seen to have a meaning that one can succinctly name and then use that name to pass from the object to a register of “important ideas.” The work is never thought to be layered, to be involved with a multiplicity of ideas, to be worked on.

I’ll give an example. In the Biennial I was particularly struck by Lorna Simpson’s work, especially the interplay it set up on facing walls between the grid constituted by the mouthpieces of a massive variety of different brass instruments on the one hand, and the truncation of the black body presented simply through a photograph of lips on the other hand. Here was a sense of two different taxonomic spaces: on the one side, the field of the object, of all the different horn types from tuba to bugle; on the other side, this taxonomy of the body, the body cut up racially, ethnographically, and also stereotypically because of the association between the black body and brass music—the jazz trumpeter and so on. I thought this was complex
but economically stated through the relationship of those two spaces, and their grids both evoked and stated ...  

Silvia Kolbowski: And the relationship between fear and anger ...  

Krauss: I didn’t get to fear and anger. I was thinking about form—about why those mouthpieces were in a grid, why the body was deprived of its matrix, the lips excised. I was thinking about what I was being shown visually. Then, on the wall bridging between the two “grids,” there was the newspaper clipping about Tom Bradley being asked whether, were he not mayor of Los Angeles, would he, as a black man, be afraid after the Rodney King verdict. And he said, “No, I wouldn’t be afraid; I’d be angry.” I thought that was irrelevant to the piece, and not particularly interesting. 

Then I read Thelma Golden’s catalog essay “What’s White . . . ?” And there she presents us with the one meaning of the piece: it’s the Wall of Jericho; black rage is going to well up, and the Wall will be shattered. Moreover, in her description she said that it is a wall of trumpets. Not only is this inaccurate on the basic level of description, since there is the mouthpiece of every conceivable kind of brass instrument. But it is also not accurate to say that the work is solely about black rage. If that is what Lorna Simpson thinks too, well, there’s no reason to privilege the intention of the artist. You make a work, just as any one of us writes a text: you present it, you publish it, it’s out there, and its meaning is at work in a public space. And if we believe in a public space, which is the space of the political, then I don’t think we should privilege the artist or the curator saying that this is strictly about one thing—here, that it is strictly about black rage. It is partly about black rage, but it is partly about how she made it, the fact that she is invoking the grid and many other formal devices. That work on the material level of the piece is what constitutes the signifier. 

So I found this an interesting case of what seemed an extraordinary limitation on the play of the signifier, refusing the possibility that meaning might burgeon. I think there is something profoundly unpolitical about that limitation. 

Kolbowski: It’s the attention to so-called political content that allows for a privileging of intention. In many of the essays in the catalog, even in Homi Bhabha’s, there’s a return to the artists speaking about their work. What’s interesting is that the work isn’t analyzed per se. A schism is set up between so-called form and so-called content that is not questioned in the essays—or in the reviews of the show that I have seen. And the privileging of content within that schism may account for the artists’ statements being included in the show and for the articles repeatedly referring to the artists’ intentions. 

Miwon Kwon: The inclusion of artists’ statements is not new at the Whitney. There are precedents, and sometimes statements are very helpful. What artists have to say about their own work is valid. But what is particular and peculiar
about this year's Biennial is that so many of the statements function as testi-
monials. I also think that it is assumed that the artists are very theoretically
engaged, that their work is incredibly difficult material, and that in order for
the audience to get it—which is not necessarily to engage it critically—the
artists must speak.

*Krauss:* Do you think it is such difficult material? Is the idea of black rage more
difficult than what I described as my experience—not having read any
statement but simply looking at the work? Which is more theoretical?

*Kwon:* I went back to the show just to read the statements—to see how I felt being
pulled by the work and then being directed by the intentions of the artists.
And I found the statements always deflated the work.

*Foster:* It is important to develop the point Silvia made in relation to the political
and the autobiographical. Often in the work that wants to critique identity
there is a turn to the autobiographical because of the need to access a politi-
cal content.

*Kolbowski:* There is a transparency of the autobiographical as a genre in some of
this work.

*Foster:* Right. And sometimes it is very straightforward, as in my favorite statement
in the Biennial: “My work is mostly autobiographical, except for the horse
stuff.” What disturbed me is that the project of the art is often to critique
identity, but the subject is almost always presumed, either as the subject that
addresses or the subject to be addressed, or both. So there is a turn to
autobiographical identity often in the very moment of its questioning (I
see this in critical theory too). How productive a paradox is this?

*Benjamin Buchloh:* I’m not sure that the project is to critique identity. That’s not
the project of some of these artists. They would much rather be associated
with a project of affirming and constructing identity. The articulation of
the work is an act of empowerment, of inscription, of consolidating identity.

*Kolbowski:* The majority of the work?

*Buchloh:* I didn’t say the majority. But for a number of the artists, Lorna Simpson
being one of them, the critique of identity is not the central issue.

I would like to return to the definition of the political that Rosalind
introduced. You implied that the work does not have a “chora” dimension
that one traditionally expects from a work of art—that it is not layered, that
it does not generate a multiplicity of readings …

*Krauss:* I think her work—Lorna Simpson’s work—does. But the apparatus con-
structed for it wants to deprive it of this. And even if the artist wants to be
complicit with that deprivation, wants to rush to the signified, that isn’t my
problem. And her work is better than that.

*Buchloh:* Yes. But you give one definition of the political, whereas the instrumental
form of meaning that these people impose is deemed by you apolitical. That
goes right to the crux of the matter because it is not so evident that the type
Jimmie Durham. Detail from
I forgot what I was going to say.

1993
of liberal aesthetic experience that you posit as the quintessentially political experience in artistic production is a universally valid model. It presumes a competent reading subject at all times.

Krauss: That’s right.

Buchloh: There is another model of aesthetic production and experience at work throughout history, which is the highly structured model of communicative action based on the assumption of intentionality and communication, on very focused statements made in a preconceived mode of address—targeting specific audiences. This model positions itself in direct opposition to the assumption that a competent reading audience will at all times be capable of absorbing the multiplicity of the artwork.

Krauss: I accept what you say except for the labeling of my position as “liberal.”

Buchloh: For me that’s not an insult.

Krauss: But it reads as an insult—that there’s this really serious, heavy-duty Left position and then there’s this wishy-washy, pluralistic liberal position. Some of the greatest Left thinkers who have analyzed how works of art actually work—like Lukács—would not accept this instrumental notion of agitprop art.

Kolbowski: I didn’t realize you were privileging one type of so-called political art over another.

Buchloh: I was not. I was challenging the assumption that the political as Rosalind defined it is universally accepted.

Krauss: I don’t think you addressed what I said. Once you make a work, whether text or visual art or visual art that operates as text, once it appears in public space, it is open to many readings, and you can’t control its meaning. Your notion that it is univocal, that the communication channels are pure and controllable, is something I deeply doubt. The multiplicity of readings will be there willy-nilly. And I wonder what type of politics it is to pretend that you can control it—and what notion of public space.

Kolbowski: Just as a point of clarification, would you say that no artwork exhibits or proposes its own closure? Because I think some works do function in this way. All works are not equally multivocal and heterogeneous.

Krauss: I would agree. But even the ones that try very hard to limit it—and I assume that Lorna Simpson attempted to limit hers with the clipping about Mayor Bradley—do not always succeed.

Kolbowski: I was thinking of inadvertent closure and limitation.

Foster: I think the clipping about Bradley situates her work; it doesn’t necessarily limit it. The idea of a work that opens out into a public space of many possible meanings overlooks the limits of institutions of reception. And that is my complaint about some of the work in the show. Not only does it think it can move directly to a concept or a position, but as it does so it tends to neglect its own siting within different discursive institutions. It purports to have
immediate access to the social and the political. So some of the reductiveness is due to the critical apparatus, but some, too, is immanent to the work itself, and it has to do with its illustrational aspect.

Kolbowski: I don’t think there’s a lack of attention paid to the signifier; I would question the kind of attention that is paid. There’s an emphasis on pragmatics. As soon as a work addresses an idea, what’s emphasized is a pragmatic position. The general sense of a lot of the work in the exhibition is that the form is one of convenience or accommodation—that this or that form will allow a particular idea to be communicated. So there is work on the signifier, but it’s a functionalist approach that seems to ignore poststructuralist debates.

Foster: What seems to be devalued is the political dimension of work on form and representation. That may make it almost necessary to resort to the autobiographical: when the politics of form is dismissed, one may be thrown back on personal statements, on political expressionism.

Of course, to argue in this way may be to protect my own interests in a genealogy of critical work of the last two or three decades (if that is not too autobiographical a statement!). Over the last few years I have seen a sometimes phobic reaction to multiculturalism on the part of artists and writers involved in critical theory (poststructuralisms, Frankfurt School, psychoanalytic feminisms, you name it). It is never openly stated, but it runs like this: Oh, God, the subject is back, just when we thought we had deconstructed it for good! And the signified too—no one seems to care anymore about our priestly expertise in the mysteries of the signifier. And, to add insult to injury, these “returns” have captured our avant-garde!... Sometimes support of these developments is mixed with such resentment. I feel it sometimes too.

Kwon: For me what is paradoxical, and frustratingly interesting, is that the critique of the institution in 1980s art opened up the space for a lot of these artists to do what they do. It informs works by artists like Renée Green, Fred Wilson, and Jimmie Durham. But whereas Jimmie Durham continues to problematize the possibility of an autobiographical mode, many others have fallen into what you have called the pragmatic or illustrative mode. The 1980s critique of the institution hasn’t been forgotten; it’s just taken a very particular turn.

In terms of the question that Benjamin raised about the nature of politics, my disappointment about the show comes from the institutional apparatus that reads this work in the flattest way possible. It also comes from the artists themselves being negligent in what they are making. A lot of the artists take too many shortcuts, foregoing the responsibility of how the work is made, how it might be read, in order to consolidate politically. That is what they think they must do: to put up the most univocal image.

Kolbowski: You mean it’s strategic?
Kwon: Yes, to a large extent.
Kolbowski: I want to pick up on your point about institutional critique in the 1980s—though I would hope we would carry it back further
Foster: And push it ahead too . . .
Kolbowski: There’s very little painting in the show, but there is some, and I was struck by how oblivious it seemed to be to painting as a historical form. In fact, the notion of historical form seems mostly absent to me. And in relation to the literal and social space of the museum, there also seems to be a lack of attention to specificity.
Kwon: Although many artists would say, I have done a site-specific installation for the show.
Kolbowski: I know that the definitions of site-specificity have changed over the years. But even though a lot of the work looks embedded in the space, I wonder how much of it really deals with an extended notion of the institution per se.
Krauss: I’d like to go back to this question of the signified and the notion that the work is strategic. When Hal introduced the discussion, he used another term for this: “iconography.” I don’t know that that historical dimension, which is to say a historiographic consciousness, is really an issue for these artists. The fact that modernism fought a battle to liberate images from a slavery to text, to a totally instrumental, illustrative task, doesn’t seem to occur to this generation. Now you can decide that isn’t your battle. But I don’t think the word “iconography” has much resonance for artists today.
Foster: I meant “iconography” in a colloquial sense—a concern to connect a representation directly to a meaning located somewhere else, in another text or in the external world.
Krauss: But my point is that if it doesn’t strike you in a historical sense you don’t see what its dangers might be. You don’t see that illustrating certain notions of feminism, tenets of Marxism, or ideas of postcolonialism, in short this rush to a strategic staging of ideas, might be a problem. There is a naive embrace of what seems a clear form of communication but is in fact very instrumental.
Buchloh: It might not be naive, in the sense that there could be a theory behind it, one that articulates that the traditional audience that we assume to be capable of receiving the multiplicity of aesthetic structures is a privileged audience. This argument says, We don’t want to address this numinous “universal” audience anymore. We want to address, with very clearly circumscribed statements, a different type of audience, one that is not privileged in the traditional sense of prepared reading competence. In order to reach out to that audience, in order to communicate at all, we have to make a sacrifice—a sacrifice in the range of aesthetic differentiations and subject constructions operative in the work.
This could be well argued, and it might be worth considering—that is, if it were able to produce a different type of audience in the museum, a different type of artist, a different type of communication and competence.
Foster: Your framing of this possibility seems condescending.
Buchloh: Why is it condescending? To whom?
Foster: To the audiences that are to be invited in. It assumes that they have no analytical competencies, no reading methods, of their own.

Krauss: It is also bizarre to say that there is one kind of competence we cannot assume—any notion about the history of modernism, or how to look at works of art. We assume that competence is gone. But we do assume an extraordinary competence in theoretical and political texts. Thus the reading room at the Biennial filled with new books of critical theory, where we were all obediently to sit down and learn how to read this work. There’s an incredible arrogance in terms of the competence that’s assumed there. It’s that group, the one expected to have such competence, that is very small and very elitist.

Kolbowski: Competence in a “postmodernist” sense is posited as being created by the work rather than assumed as pregiven. It’s not that I find your model presumptuous, Benjamin; it’s that I think it points to a failing in the work—that the work would not complicate the notion of what competence is for the viewer. The artist’s working methods would then be not only instrumental but teleological, and would result in a narrowing down of potential readings and a limiting of the possible positions for the spectator.

Buchloh: That depends on the position from which one argues. One could very well make the case that every instance of such articulation is infinitely more valid as a political act than any effort at continuing a tradition of criteria of aesthetic complexity, of subjective differentiation. Every instance of such articulation opens up practices, sets up conditions of future production, initiates forms of experience that were previously inaccessible. If that is a “teleological” project, then political, educational, and didactic projects are all teleological, and that’s not objectionable.

Kolbowski: Why a hierarchy of political efficacy or validity that dichotomizes politics and form? If the teleology is inherently deterministic, then I think there is a problem with such work, the problem of strategic approaches in general.

Buchloh: I don’t see why specifically defining one’s practice in those terms is more deterministic than blindly following myths of aesthetic autonomy. Why can’t one say, I define my project to be opening up venues, addressing new audiences, providing models of enactment, empowerment, articulation? Those are not deterministic statements; they’re addressing particular conditions.

Krauss: I can’t accept the complacency with which you describe this. Let’s use Homi Bhabha’s text as an example of the new competence. One of the things that I found extraordinary about his text—perplexing, moving, and annoying—is the last two paragraphs. After this argument about liminality and interstitial spaces, beyonds and betweens, after saying relatively little about the works of art but mentioning various texts important to him (such as Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses), he gets to this very touching memory of himself as a ten-year-old in Bombay seeing a Giacometti, his Walking Man, and having a strong aesthetic experience—
being struck by the thing, thinking about it, associating it with Gandhi, which is a very interesting association. It was not about resenting this alien object but rather connecting to it in terms of his own experience. But that was the experience of a ten-year-old. He is now in his forties, and I would be very interested to know how he would move on from that memory. But he doesn’t.

It seems to me that if you want to talk about art as translation, which is the subject of his text, then you might start with an experience that affected you. I see a lot of polemics circulating around the work but very little engagement with it. Bhabha does not address the works visually. That’s why he falls back on the artists’ statements.

Kwon: I was moved by those last paragraphs too, and was struck by how different it was from his usual writing.

Foster: But he raises a problem there that is crucial to address, which is the complication of modernism in different contexts, in non-Western contexts, in different times and spaces. I want to get back to the point Benjamin raised. None of us objects to the opening to new artists and different audiences; on the contrary. None of us sees it, as Hilton Kramer does, as “the class suicide” of trustees of museums like the Whitney. But I wonder how open this opening really is. Who these artists and audiences are and what they can do often seems delimited before the fact. I sense an implicit interpellation—in the work and in such shows—that you are this identity and this only, and that all else follows: what art you make, what politics you support, and so on. Is this “construction”? It seems more like conscription to me.

Kwon: I got very depressed when I first saw the show. I thought, Is this where identity politics has brought us? But I want to ask another question. Why were Homi Bhabha and Avital Ronell—people who are much more savvy about literary material than visual art—asked to write the texts for the catalog? Isn’t there an assumption that their writing has direct meaning for the art on view, that it is a key to unlock some of it?

Kolbowski: I think the problem is that Bhabha felt the need or was asked to address the works in the show specifically. His theoretical text was not left to function without illustration—whether artists’ explanations or descriptions of works. As for the Giacometti anecdote, I read it as meaning that he only understands the sculpture once it is overlaid with the reference to Gandhi. This is a subtle point, in fact, about the problematic of art “communicating” universal value.

Krauss: Like Bhabha, I am a tremendous admirer of Toni Morrison’s Beloved. I do not think Morrison believes only a black woman can understand her novel. Clearly I will not understand it in the same way a black woman might. But my experience of the greatness of Morrison as a writer has to do with her extraordinary control over language, the evocativeness of her images. Is that inappropriate to her work now? Is your point, Benjamin, that this is an out-
moded connection to have to a work of art in this age of empowering specific audiences?

*Buchloh:* I don’t think it is outmoded. I think it is a problematic concept if it is positioned as the exclusively valid basis from which judgments are drawn. Otherwise it is not problematic at all.

*Krauss:* What does that mean?

*Buchloh:* What that means is that, when you defined the aesthetic as the political as it operates in public space, you did not address who is capable of experiencing it. You did not address the possibility that a work might be structured along different parameters—precisely because some authors now have understood that this presumed capacity to read the aesthetic experience is not at all universal but is highly overdetermined in terms of class, race, and gender and that a concept of universality can be highly privileged. Unless one initiates steps to provide other conditions that enable people to generate that kind of reading capacity, nothing will ever shift in terms of who is an author and who is a recipient of a certain definition of culture.

*Kolbowski:* What you say is ironic because the Whitney made a huge effort to make the Biennial comprehensible to a very wide audience. There was an enormous amount of explaining: even though much of the work makes an attempt at direct communication, it is still surrounded by a framework of institutional explication and pedagogy—gallery tours, panels, the catalog, and wall labels. If that framework exists in any case, it could encompass work that is more challenging at the level of the signifier, and related to historical precedents. It would still depend to some extent on a framework that works with its audience.

*Kwon:* There has come to be a code of what kind of work constitutes institutional critique. Mimicking exhibition strategies has become a popular trope that people copy, automatically assuming that institutional critique is guaranteed by slightly modifying these strategies. I think curators buy into that too. And because part of the project of institutional critique has been to dismantle elitism, classism, racism, and so on, putting a black artist in a white institution is readily accepted as doing some critical and political damage to the ideology of the institution.

*Buchloh:* Who says either institutional critique or site-specificity at this moment in time, for this generation of artists, is a crucial strategy? Are we trying to establish an academic continuity of concepts of institutional critique or site-specificity, as though they are in and of themselves valid? There might be a moment when we have to recognize that institutional critique is a historically completed or futile project at this point in time.

*Kwon:* My point is that there is an assumption that certain artists are automatically political because of their skin color, their sexual orientation . . .

*Buchloh:* No, the fact that they are people of color is not political, but the fact that a museum breaks its conventions of excluding them is political. The fact that
there is suddenly an audience that can relate to its own producers, that a community is established that can construct further relationships, modes of production, modes of interaction, and role models—that is political.

Foster: But those relationships cannot be assumed.

Buchloh: No, but they have to be initiated. And if you continue not to initiate them because you have another concept of the political that is ultimately more valid because it is more specific in its critique, then you close the institution except to only traditional operations.

Kwon: I don't think that's entirely true. Within the Biennial there are works that deal with identity in ways that are not flattening. For me Jimmie Durham's work does that. And he himself is very conscious of the fact that there are iconographies of political art, of Native American art, and that he has no choice but to deal with them, to try to undermine them. And there are other artists who are complicating the very notion of what it means to be political. But because of the way that the works are framed, the complex works—like Lorna Simpson's—fade out or get reduced. They get assimilated into this pluralistic, multiculturalist project, and you can't see her work being more than an expressionistic politics of a black woman artist with anger.

Kolbowski: Of course it's a virtue that the institution represents the under-recog-nized. This is a historical necessity. But the presumptions posed by that attitude have to be questioned; they have to be articulated.

Foster: Right. The problem arises when it is presumed that the representation or the relationship is there before the fact. It seems to me that in this pursuit of the referent, in this search for the real—the politically real, the socially real—there is a realist code at work. Miwon and I have talked about it. It works fairly simply: proximity to the real is determined by signs of oppression and emblems of community. This is not to suggest that real oppression or authentic connection does not exist; my point is that, institutionally and discursively, they are processed as part of a realism—and that one has to recognize this realism as one works toward new forms of representation.

Buchloh: I want to respond to what Miwon said—that it should be the complexity of the work that qualifies it to enter. This brings to mind discussions of about twenty years ago when curators, especially European curators, said, You Americans, you have this peculiar attitude about quotas and ratios. We would never do that in Europe. We only go by the quality of the work. We would never include a woman in our exhibitions just because she was a woman. We would never go beyond the standards of our judgment... That's a very similar argument to what you suggested—that there has to be an established quality first in order to cross the threshold of the institution...

Kwon: Is that what I'm saying? That makes me very uncomfortable...

Buchloh: I would argue for exactly the opposite: one develops different models, and the different models would never correspond to traditional criteria of quality in the first place.
Krauss: What are those models? For me the model now operative is one in which people are not only afraid to tell jokes but are incapable of getting them—of getting the point, of understanding irony, of looking at something and its opposite at the same time. People now resist the notion that complicated meanings might resonate from within a single work. It’s like telling a joke to a room full of people with no sense of humor. I feel this art is exactly like that—that there’s a tremendous fear of resonance, of irony, of paradox, of any kind of complication. I know there may be certain positions programmatically opposed to the notion of the joke—for example, the feminist position that there is no joke that isn’t told off the back of a woman, that the joke is not acceptable as a model of anything. But I can’t imagine a life without jokes, without the possibility of play, of meaning a couple of different things at the same time.

Kolbowski: There’s always a stake in a joke, always an object of the fun. But certainly feminisms have availed themselves of humor—and the notion of jokes critically framed within humor. And there is humor in a lot of feminist writing, as well as in some of the work in the show.

Krauss: Well, another example of the problem I have in mind is the piece by Hillary Leone and Jennifer Macdonald, which I thought was a very beautiful work. I could go into the same kind of analysis of it that I did for the Lorna Simpson. It mattered how tall those branding irons were, that they could swing—everything visual about the work mattered. And it was unbelievably reduced by the wall plaque stating its political agenda. I don’t think it matters if you know that those branding irons are shorthand symbols or what designations for women those symbols represent. The cruelty of the branding iron is inscribed in its physical being. The work is not there only to serve the text. It’s that multiplicity that I advocate. Benjamin, is that to call for a mode of experience that is about being privileged, liberal, white, educated? Is that really to sell out other people who supposedly don’t have that “competence,” to talk down to them? I think your position is snobbish, not mine.

Kwon: I agree. You also assume a lot about particular identities and communities—that they will naturally produce something unfamiliar, challenging, and different. Signs of difference alone then become the criteria. That puts a lot of artists of color in a huge dilemma. Let’s take Byron Kim as an example (I don’t know him personally). If he foregrounded his interest in the grid, in seriality, repetition, modularity, etc., I don’t think he’d be in this year’s Biennial. Of course these formal qualities are part of his work, and perhaps it’s unfair of me to distinguish them from the content, but that’s precisely the trouble—the ease with which I can separate them. He gave an Oriental content to Minimalism. As an Asian-American artist he must deal with skin color in order to be included in shows like this year’s Biennial. They are looking for those signs of different modes of production.

Krauss: You mean that in order to be included he has to produce work that will have those signifieds?

Kwon: Exactly. And not just him or other artists of color. It's also true for artists involved in issues of sexuality. In order to become visible they are under pressure to play along with rules of a game not of their own making. Many of them have been tagged—they have to fulfill a kind of implicit performance contract if they're going to get some time on stage. I personally know artists who feel this dilemma acutely.

Kolbowski: There's pressure on them to focus on a so-called content?

Kwon: And that content is usually about who they are, moving toward the autobiographical.

Krauss: That's extremely interesting.

Kolbowski: But no one is pressuring them to deal with the autobiographical as a genre in a particular way. There might be some implicit demand that they deal with the autobiographical. But autobiography has a history as a genre, and the question is whether that history is taken into account.

Kwon: I think some of the artists are concerned with it. However, if I were an artist interested in autobiography as a genre, I would not be freely allowed to deal with anything other than being an Asian woman. My agenda is usually prefigured for me.

Krauss: By whom?

Kwon: By different contexts of presentation. In museums, at conferences . . .

Kolbowski: What you get called on to represent . . .

Kwon: Yes.

Krauss: So you have to come forward as the Asian woman?

Kwon: Right. And if I speak on something that seems to be unrelated to me personally—for example, on Jimmie Durham's work—I'm told I don't have that right. I've been attacked for that, mostly by the Native American community. The problem arises from within a community as well as an institution.

Krauss: Benjamin, you think that's a good idea?

Buchloh: There's a slight misunderstanding on Miwon's part. When I suggested radically different models of cultural production, I was not emphatically pointing to difference constructed along the parameters of race or ethnicity. Different models to be constructed along those parameters too, and there are other models to be constructed altogether, less obvious ones and perhaps more difficult ones, along the parameters of class. Difference can also be determined by other criteria, such as accessibility, communicability, particular targeting of audiences traditionally excluded from cultural access, whether in the institution or in production.
To go by sheer mechanistic representation: if I have to play that role in this conversation, I gladly take it, even though it is not a position I wholly subscribe to either. I think it is a much better political perspective to say, Yes, we will go about politics as mechanistically as necessary in the sense that we go by quota, by systematic inclusion, by systematic searching out. It is much more important to break the apparatus that has traditionally excluded all of this, at every level, whether it is education, production, reception, or audience. The apparatus has not moved and will not move on its own, so you have to step in and just break its strictures. Europeans are a very interesting comparison here—with their holy emphasis on pure criteria of aesthetic quality regardless of race, ethnicity, and class.

Krauss: Which Europeans?

Kolbowski: It is a particular kind of aesthetic criteria. They define value singularly. A prime example is the Conceptualism show in Paris a couple of years ago, which was composed as a retrospective view, although it identified itself as “a perspective.” What struck me about the show was that there were just one or two women. This was so in part because the model that was constructed excluded performance, film to a large degree, and dance—all of which were completely integrated into the fabric of Conceptual endeavors during that time. So the curatorial model was extremely delimiting, and leads one to wonder what determined this “perspective.”

Krauss: In France the problem is not about quality; it is about nationalism. They are tremendously parochial. The museums collect only French artists. And the curator of the Conceptualism show is French; it was his view, and it is very limited. Their notion of quality is determined by a nationalist view.

Kolbowski: That wasn’t the case with this show; there were very few French artists included. It was the use of a particular model of Conceptualism as a genre, as a category of art, that privileged the kind of work done by men at the time. Sometimes people work in ways that do not fit so comfortably within existing models.

Foster: I don’t think this opposition that Benjamin has resurrected between a Brechtian idea of an engaged art and an aestheticist idea of art fixated on quality is very useful in the situation of contemporary practices. I don’t think it gets us very far in relationship to the Biennial either. It forces people who might object to certain presuppositions of such engagement into a position designated as merely aestheticist, and vice versa. It seems to me a real ideological limitation to reframe the current situation in those old binary terms.

My desire is hardly to save art with a capital A, as it is in most of the reviews of the Biennial. Nor is it even to reaffirm a certain genealogy of institutional critique. For me what is important is to limit the damage of reductionism that sometimes goes along with the demand for representation. That demand is historically and politically necessary. But there may be
limitations inscribed in the very ways in which institutions are opened up, and those limitations should be questioned.

Buchloh: Who is damaged by reductionism?

Foster: Artists and audiences who seem to be invited into the museum, but only under certain conditions, only with certain expectations, explicit or not—I think they might be damaged. It may be presumptuous of me to say so . . .

Buchloh: I would think so . . .

Krauss: I want to address this. For me this privileging of the signified and this jetisoning of work on the signifier does do damage, and one can think about it in another realm too—in relation to work by women and some of its related feminist criticism. I have just finished a project on Cindy Sherman, which meant, among other things, reading the criticism of her work. Almost all of this criticism is a rush to the signified: I don’t mean all the incredibly dumb articles written by male critics; I mean that written by most feminist critics too. It sees her work in terms of the characters of the film stills, the stars, even the actresses, the various types of abused women. Almost none of these critics imagines that Cindy Sherman is an artist who constructs those images—that the signified might be a function of how she in fact constructs them.

The signifier is not just an empty, formal operation; it controls what sorts of meanings can arise in the work. Cindy Sherman has, for example, attacked the construction of the image as vertical, and substituted, through the manipulation of the camera angle, an experience of the field as horizontal. In this way she has attacked notions about the Gestalt and good form, the body and beauty. But there is an absolute refusal to think about what she has been doing in the construction of her work for over the last ten years. That demeans her work. As a critic, I have an obligation to that work—that’s my first obligation. Is it presumptuous of me to want to honor the work in her work? I think some feminists have reduced her work—and not alone (people like Arthur Danto have done it too)—to a banal, doxa-ridden, and thin reading.

Kolbowski: You’re referring to feminist theoreticians who came to her work from other fields, in part because there was a critical vacuum around the work of a lot of women artists in the 1980s, in part because of the crucial role feminisms played in creating a post-disciplinary cultural environment. Feminist theoreticians from the fields of psychoanalysis, literary and film theory introduced vital, hardly reductive, concepts to the analysis of art. For example, the political and sexual status of the viewer’s gaze, and the social importance of identification and fantasy to an anti-realist reading of the image.

Krauss: What I want to stress is a historical development. Right now I have encountered a lot of students who want to write on artists like Cindy Sherman, and they all produce the same clichéd argument: the male gaze, femininity as masquerade—this whole vocabulary is wheeled out and dumped onto her work. No one is looking at the work.

Kolbowski: That’s because of the underdevelopment of critical writing in general.
Krauss: These students think of themselves as having competence.

Kolbowski: My point is that, while the notion of interdisciplinarity is hugely important, sometimes a kind of superficiality can arise.

Foster: In a prior interface between artistic work and critical theory there were often simple juxtapositions of art and theory, and they were often illustrational too.

Buchloh: Can you specify?

Foster: Well, one of the high moments of October was the convergence between art called postmodernist and theory called poststructuralist. They were seen to illuminate and develop one another. In the best examples of this criticism there was more than a simple juxtaposition of shared operations. But there were occasions—I can think of some in my own work—when the theory was made the content of the art. That has become more dominant as a “method” not only in critical production but in artistic production as well.

Krauss: That is because art critics and historians are now modeling their own writing on those earlier examples of people coming from other fields with little competence in visual analysis. We have this development in which there is an absolute incapacity to attend to the signifier.

Kolbowski: But that incapacity has been endemic to the disciplines of art criticism and history for God knows how many years: there’s usually a veering into formalism or a use of the image as illustration of some concept or another.

Foster: The irony here, though, is that critical theory was introduced to disrupt those patterns of making and viewing, and now in the name of that same theory formalist and iconographic modes are smuggled back in.

Kolbowski: Neither those disciplines nor curatorial practice have really dealt with these problems. It’s no different when a curator has an idea and pulls together some pieces to illustrate it. Within political theory too the schism between theory and practice is rife. The reason we are here is that we feel it is an underacknowledged problem.

Kwon: It’s interesting to me that this problem is becoming visibly exacerbated in its intermingling with multiculturalist policy and practice. It’s related to what Hal said before—that certain people are seen to be closer to the real, to real experiences of life. And they tend to be black, gay, women—closer to having direct contact with socially oppressive situations and therefore thought to be closer to being able to communicate directly.

Buchloh: I want to ask Hal and Rosalind to define what the “damage” really is. Both of your arguments seem to depart from a certain voluntarism—that there are alternate models of cultural production at hand, and we can choose between them. I think cultural production is the most overdetermined human activity: you produce from a moment of absolute restriction, not from a moment of grand access or opportunity. Whereas your arguments seem to hold that certain forms of value, of criteria, of quality—if they were only handled properly by the right people in the right way—would be accessible again. We would have wonderful painting and sculpture in the next
Biennial if we only would pick the right artists or had the right curators. But it doesn’t work that way. And if there is painting in the Biennial, it’s stuff like Peter Cain’s, and it’s the most ridiculous nonsense that one can imagine. So there is a certain bankruptcy of those practices.

Foster: That is a caricature of my position.

Krauss: I don’t recognize my position in that either.

Kolbowski: I don’t even think that position was articulated. The point was that on the part of both curators and artists there is a certain lack of attention to signifying practices, an overemphasis on so-called content, an adherence to the schism between theory and practice, and a number of other things. No one was implying that there was a ready cache of other artists or other models that could be brought in. But shouldn’t we expect the curatorial framework to address the problems of the “political” in art?

Are there really new political models in evidence in the show? Take the plan of the Biennial. Here was this show that was supposed to be radically different from prior Biennials, and yet the layout was relatively tame, the circulation was very conventional, in some ways the catalog was too. The video room was new in its centralization, but the programming was anti-integrative. I went three times and was able to see just one program. The effect was to maintain the hierarchy of media—to say that video and film were still not as important. We haven’t even talked about that.

Foster: Some of it is yet to be shown, and as you say it is very difficult to see it all.

I need to respond to Benjamin. I don’t speak out of nostalgia, and I agree with you that art is produced in a situation of necessity. But it seems to me that such necessity is often absent from the work in the Biennial and in other venues today. There is urgency, yes, but because it does not often work through the historicity of its own forms or the limitations of its own siting it tends to come across as personal content, again as political expressionism.

Krauss: Benjamin, I think we’re talking past one another. Either it matters to Cindy Sherman and others that their work be addressed at the level of the complexity with which it is made, and it matters to other people, or it doesn’t. If it doesn’t, then I agree with you. Let’s pack it up, and we’ll have different models and different notions of culture. But I think it does matter.

Foster: Rosalind, you see the delimitation of the work as due to the critical apparatus and the institutional frame. I think the historical originality of some art in New York right now is that this delimitation has become immanent to the work.

Krauss: It has become immanent to the work because the work is imitating models of discourse.

Foster: I wonder if my anxiety before this question has to do with the displacement of the critic. That displacement was initiated by market institutions in the 1980s—galleries, museums, magazines. It now seems to be carried on by the work itself.

Krauss: Yes, I think that has happened.
Kolbowski: As an artist I don’t think the problem has to do with looking toward theory, toward another discursive field, as long as that engagement is not exclusive. The problem lies with the ways in which the artist works with the relation to another discursive field. What is not worked on enough is that relation, and that again is a question of the signifier.

Foster: That is precisely my point. I don’t deny the need of any of these relationships—to new artists, new audiences, new modes of production and reception, new theories. But we all must attend to the “to,” to the “between.” We can’t simply assume it, because if we do, we may elide it even before it can be constructed; we may limit it even before it can be opened up.

This is not to fetishize some deconstructive point, but that “to” might be the site of the most effective work—political, theoretical, and aesthetic. That “to” raises all the questions of representation, at all the different registers. And I think collectively we have blurred those questions in our desire to make the “to” happen, to make it connect immediately.

Foster: Enough politically?

Kolbowski: There is a lack of work on the “between” because the assumption is that if one occupies the “between” it is enough. And it is not understood as a relation.

Kolbowski: When the work is exclusively on the signifier, the same old schism is maintained between theory and practice, between signifier and signified. Work that only addresses the signifier easily veers into formalism. And yet there is a historical importance to work that did so, and much work today could not be done without it. But some artists work in an amnesiac or semi-repressed state because such prior work is rejected out-of-hand as purely formalist. For example, the reception of Minimalism today is quite reductive, iconoclastic, rather than historicizing.

Buchloh: Rosalind, I don’t think we have talked past one another. I agree with your argument for a complex approach to certain types of practices, but that does not preclude an argument that considers activist cultural practices that forego traditional notions of differentiation and complexity for the sake of specific cultural goals. I don’t think they are incompatible as positions. I think they have to be recognized as operating within different timings—that there is an asynchronicity to different operations…

Krauss: It could be argued that they are incompatible. When Miwon says that certain artists produce work in order to satisfy the needs of curatorial
programs that want the art to manifest a certain kind of politics, or that she
can only speak from a certain position of identity as a critic—if that is true,
if this notion of an activist politics controls both what artists and critics
allow themselves to do, then indeed it seems to me to be incompatible with
the notion I was talking about—that of honoring the complexity of work.
I don’t see an easy bridge between those two positions.
Kolbowski: It is difficult to think of those two practices as either complementary or
comfortably coexisting. Under the rubric of the political in this country we
don’t often get the inclusion of both types: there is a tendency to favor one
over the other, “activist” or “aesthetic.” They don’t have a productive relation-
ship to one another; they are not allowed to complicate each other.
Foster: I agree with Benjamin here. It’s not about an easy coexistence of the two.
It’s about the need to think different practices in different spaces at different
times, all in the present. This is not wild pluralism; it is not identitarian multi-
culturalism either. It is a recognition of the historical fact that practices
develop along different lines that are nonetheless always imbricated.
Kolbowski: If I have certain notions of what is important to critical inquiry in terms
of political art, they aren’t interchangeable with a completely different articu-
lation of stakes and approaches.
Foster: Right. They contest one another. Again, it’s not about pluralism; it’s about
the need to think these different approaches together, not to make them
equal or identical, but to see them at work in the same field.
Buchloh: The argument is definitely not about pluralism. Perhaps I can rephrase
my position now. This politicization of artistic practice that we see in some of
the work in the Biennial may be damaging in the sense that it may deflect
the question of what actual politics are. That is one problem I have with this
type of work. Another problem is its radical elimination of the historical
dimension—this amnesiac condition in which much of the work operates—
for the sake of an activist intervention. This defines the aesthetic production
and reception as almost incapable of historical recollection, commemoration,
or reflection. The type of politics suggested in that model I find deeply
problematic as well.
Krauss: But you have already given its rationale—that this work cannot depend
on, is able to cut free from, such competence, which is a competence in the
history of the recent past.
Buchloh: Here we come to the heart of the matter, as far as I am concerned. For how
can you establish competencies within other social groups that are tradition-
ally disempowered except by generating cultural productions of that kind?
You can’t simply assume established competencies as the only ones reliable.
Krauss: So why are you lamenting that there’s no historical dimension?
Buchloh: Because I cannot conceive of a competence without a historical dimen-
sion. Nor can I conceive of a political dimension outside of historical
thought. That is the contradiction of activist production.
**Krauss:** At least I am happy to hear you say there is a contradiction.

**Kolbowski:** I think that the so-called crisis of invention in the past few decades can be displaced onto the question of what an audience is and the notion of what competence is. In a sense, that is where inventiveness most productively lies, as far as I am concerned.

**Krauss:** You mean in creating new forms of competence.

**Kolbowski:** That is a by-product.

**Buchloh:** No, I think it is a key project.

**Kolbowski:** A major aspect of making political work today—and it has been this way for the past ten or fifteen years at least—is to take into account the kind of audience that the work produces. It is essentialist to work the other way around: tailoring work for an audience that is perceived to be preexistent. The possibility for changes in social relations does not follow from this.

**Kwon:** If there is an amnesia, that is ironic because many artists want to rewrite histories, to resurrect histories that have been erased. Perhaps the amnesia is specific to art history. And perhaps this links up with what I think is a return of primitivist tendencies. Let’s say that many of these artists have foregone art-historical concerns—that they are more interested in social and political issues. Are we then to believe that their work is more connected to those realities? This reflects on the artists’ positions as well as the curators’.

**Kolbowski:** Where the amnesia comes in is to presume that the reality of art history and the “more real” reality of political history are dichotomous. They aren’t.

**Buchloh:** And how can you claim to construct a historical discourse if you do not even have the capacity to reflect on the historic specificity of the field in which you operate? That seems a contradiction as well.

**Kwon:** But don’t you think that contradiction as a myth is very much alive in art practices right now?

**Krauss:** Yes.

**Kolbowski:** That’s right—the notion that art history is somehow a less real and less significant kind of history.

**Krauss:** And the notion also that certain people are closer to the real, that they have a closer connection to themselves, their identities, their instincts—that is a potentially racist position to take.

**Buchloh:** You don’t have to phrase it in those terms.

**Krauss:** But Miwon did phrase it in those terms when she represented a curatorial position that she resents as a strange return of primitivism. I think it is.

**Kwon:** I don’t project it on curators alone. I think the artists have internalized it too.

**Buchloh:** But exclusion and marginalization do bring you closer to the reality of oppression and hold you in that position.

**Foster:** That’s right. As Cornel West says, there are certain realities that many people cannot not confront.
Buchloh: Absolutely. That’s a traditional Marxist perspective. Yes, the proletarian is closer to the real of exploitation than the bourgeois—there’s no doubt about it. They are “privileged” in that sense as a historical class. And to be systematically excluded from cultural production brings you closer to the reality of a muted position.

Kolbowski: But the problem is that there is an implicit demand to represent exclusion in essentialist terms.

Buchloh: I see the problem, and it is crucial, but the point has to be made that it is not just a privileging . . .

Krauss: Benjamin, when you call for this reality you might reflect on the troubled history of proletarian writers within Communist parties. This troubled history is something you should put on the table before you say, Yes, the proletariat is closer to reality and therefore should be the source of all cultural experience.

Foster: There are aspects of this conversation that have reproduced yet again some of the arguments in Walter Benjamin’s “Author as Producer”: Where is the political in art located? Is it in the tendency of the content, in the attention to form, in the place of the artist in production and reception? No one denies the reality of oppression. But a problem arises when this reality is conflated with a realist code that awards certain positions political truth on the basis of essentialist associations. If anything is “liberal” in this discussion, it is that.

Kolbowski: It’s not a question of degrees of closeness. What we question is the assumption that no mediation or multiple positionings exist.

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