Merely Interesting

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I am interested in what is interesting.

—Ed Ruscha

[Mr. Wilcox] misliked the very word "interesting," connoting it with wasted energy and even morbidity. Hard facts were enough for him.

—E. M. Forster, *Howards End*

But what is the use of being interesting.

—Gertrude Stein, *Henry James*

Skeptical as academics in the humanities have grown about the relevance of aesthetic evaluations to criticism,[1] there is nonetheless one measure that continues to circulate promiscuously—if often, in a telling way, unconsciously—in virtually all contemporary analyses of cultural artifacts: interesting. What is the significance of this evaluation's persistence in critical speech and writing? Is it simply that interesting is academic politesse? A way of making the least obtrusive, smallest possible claim of value for the object at hand (that it is, at the very least, worth the attention we are paying to it)? Should we thus regard it as just a vacuous buzzword circulated only in intellectual or professional coteries? Or is there something more substantive and salient for the understanding of critical practice behind its ongoing appeal?

To be sure, the application of interesting to objects is not always aesthetical; cultural interpreters are just as likely to find objects historically interesting, psychologically interesting, and so on. When surreptitiously

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1. In spite of a general acknowledgment of the nondesirability (and, indeed, impossibility) of separating knowledge from human interests (a point long argued by feminist, Marxist, and pragmatist critics), an ideal of noninterested inquiry still seems vaguely to underwrite the notion that aesthetic judgments should be bracketed from criticism (Kant's own particular claim for their own "disinterestedness" notwithstanding). For the most explicit theory of critique as the unity of knowledge and interests, see Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1971).

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invoked as a term of aesthetic evaluation, however, what does our reliance on interesting say about the relationship *between* aesthetics and criticism? Is it just a rhetorical tic left over from a formalism equating criticism with the evaluation of an artwork's "success"? Does its habitual but usually unconscious use call for a rethinking of—or just corroborate—the merely incidental relation of feeling-based judgments to criticism's task of producing knowledge? What aesthetic, much less critical, power could such a nondescript judgment even have?

The very indefiniteness of interesting, and its capacity to toggle between nonaesthetic and aesthetic judgments, can help us get at a closely related question. What counts as evidence when we are trying to convince other people of the rightness of our aesthetic judgments, given their foundation on subjective feelings of pleasure or displeasure? The question obviously comes to the fore when these efforts at justification are considered integral, and not incidental or counterproductive, to criticism's efficacy and force. This view conspicuously underwrites the Frankfurt school tradition of Marxist aesthetics, where diagnoses of the "damaged life" of capitalist modernity are built directly upon complex arguments for the superiority of Beethoven over Tchaikovsky (Adorno), Mann over Kafka (Lukács), or Mallarmé over Stevens (Jameson). Coming at the problem from a different angle in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (2004), Stanley Cavell puts the premise to test by attempting to justify his own definition of criticism as explicitly the effort to justify claims for the worth of a cultural object, via an examination of problems surrounding praise posed by the musical *Bandwagon*.[2] Cavell's remarkable reading of a Fred Astaire movie that he clearly

2. See Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), esp. "Something out of the Ordinary," pp. 7–27, and "Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise," pp. 61–82. As Cavell notes, doing criticism "non-polemically or non-argumentatively . . . does not mean [agreement] with everything that I find calls for a response." Rather, "criticism in my writing often tends either to invoke the idea that Kant established for 'critique,' namely articulating the conditions which allow a coherent utterance to be made, or a purposeful action to enter the world, or else to provide an explication or elaboration of a text . . . that accounts for, at its best increases, which is to say, appreciates, my interest in it" (p. 6). Elaine Scarry's critique of what she calls the "political critique of beauty" is similarly based on a justification of her own claim for the beauty of palm trees, via an analysis of their significance as a returning motif across a series of Matisse paintings (Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* [Princeton, N.J., 1999], p. 58).

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finds artistically praiseworthy (while, crucially, never saying so directly) opens out into an Austin-inspired analysis of the perlocutionary nature of praise itself, a speech act that Cavell takes as synonymous with the judgment of beauty as theorized by Kant and, by extension, as a synonym for aesthetic judgment in general.[3]

The question of how we use reason to justify aesthetic judgments is worth examining more closely in light of the fact that we do so all the time and without recourse to general principles. As Frank Sibley puts it, in language recalling Hume's problem of induction, the "nonaesthetic features" of objects do not supply criteria for our evaluations of them as, say, elegant, cute, or gaudy. The absence of general principles for the application of these "aesthetic concepts" (which Sibley is quick to set apart from "verdicts" or comparative judgments of merit and defect such as mediocre or excellent) preempts one from reasoning that, say, an object must be "cute" if it is small, nonangular, and soft. Though many small, round, and soft things *are* cute, smallness, roundness, and softness can't be deduced from these instances as logically sufficient conditions for applying the concept. Yet the fact that there are no logically binding connections between the nonaesthetic qualities of an object and what Sibley calls its "aesthetic character" does not mean that there is *no* connection. Why else would it seem so right (or, as Austin would say, felicitous) to describe puppies and jingles as cute, but not skyscrapers or novels? Indeed, granted that it is "impossible for a person to verify or infer [that a thing has a certain aesthetic quality] by appealing . . . only to non-aesthetic properties," why is it that, when asked by others to justify our aesthetic judgments, we do so precisely by pointing out the nonaesthetic features on which that aesthetic quality appears to depend?[4] If not one of logical entailment, what *is* the relationship between aesthetic and nonaesthetic judgments? This is a question with direct bearing on the question of the ultimate relevance of aesthetic evaluations to critical practices aimed at producing conceptual or rational knowledge, especially in practices organized around the study of artworks. It also bears on the philosophical matter of whether there is a rational dimension to aesthetic experience, a question that has been con-

3. See Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, p. 9. What Kant's work on aesthetic and moral judgments and Austin's ordinary language philosophy have in common is that both show how humans can exercise their rational faculties in ways not limited to the discovery of truths. Nelson Goodman and S. Chandrasekhar (among others) argue that this is the case even in science, where aesthetic judgments (which are never truth-apt) have always played a role. See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, 1976), and S. Chandrasekhar, *Truth and Beauty: Aesthetics and Motivations in Science* (Chicago, 1987).

4. Frank Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford, 2001), pp. 34, 35, 47.

tinuously controversial within aesthetics and one that is even arguably constitutive of aesthetics, ever since its "invention" as a self-defined science by Alexander Baumgarten in 1750.

Sibley's investigation of the not logical yet not exactly *illogical* relationship between aesthetic judgments and nonaesthetic features thus shows the difficulty of fully separating a philosophical inquiry into the nature of aesthetic judgments from the seemingly ancillary, merely rhetorical question of how we convince other people of their rightness afterward. Indeed, for Cavell, it is the secondary question that provides the key to the first one. Cavell begins from the sense of an aesthetic judgment as a claim that the subject is compelled to make public by speaking; this is what Kant's third critique's analysis of the beautiful implies. The real significance of this claim lies precisely in the way in which, in the absence of conventions governing its felicity (which do exist in the case of illocutionary speech acts such as betting or marrying), it intrinsically lays the speaker open to "rebuke" from others in a way that shifts the power to determine the act's felicity from the speaking/judging I to the listening you. In light of this fundamental exposure to public disputation (and even ridicule), the question of what Kant's aesthetic judgment *is*—"a kind of compulsion to share a pleasure, hence . . . tinged with an anxiety that the claim stands to be rebuked"—becomes more or less coeval with the question of *how one will support it*.[5]

Here interesting comes to the fore as the aesthetic judgment in which this question of justification looms largest of all. Someone who succeeds in convincing me of the rightness of her judgment of an object as cute or gaudy will have done so by getting me to perceive it as she does, and she'll have done this by directing my attention to its roundness, softness, and smallness or to its bright and intense colors. But, in contrast to what Sibley calls the "notable specific dependence" of aesthetic character on nonaesthetic features in these cases, the interesting doesn't seem tethered to any features at all. Though bound up with the perception of novelty (against a backdrop of the expected and familiar), what counts as new is much more radically dependent on context than features such as round or bright. There are thus no nonaesthetic features ever *specifically* responsible for anything being interesting. In fact, it seems as if virtually any nonaesthetic feature, including ones that may not be immediately perceivable (such as aspects related to an object's history), can be singled out as evidence in support of this judgment. Because the problem posed by the interesting is thus not a dearth of admissible evidence but rather the proliferation of too

5. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, pp. 67, 9.

many kinds, the task of legitimizing this aesthetic judgment becomes unusually difficult to the extent that it also becomes too easy. Anything can presumably count as evidence at one moment or another for the interesting, and so no particular kind of evidence will ever seem especially or finally convincing.[6]

The most characteristic thing about the interesting thus seems to be its lack of distinguishing characteristics, making its *"deduction,"* as Friedrich Schlegel wrote in 1797, "perhaps the most difficult and complicated task" within "the entire realm of the science of aesthetics."[7] With the exception of its special relationship to novelty (or more exactly because of it), the interesting could thus be described as an aesthetic *without content* and, as such, one ideally suited to the historical emergence of the modern subject as a reflective, radically detached, or ironic ego.[8] This was how *das Interessante* appeared to the German romantics, the first critics to formally recognize the interesting as an aesthetic quality in the context of a growing discipline made possible by a newly emergent public sphere. At a cultural moment marked by an explosive growth in print media, including the proliferation of new genres and the rise of the novel to especial prominence among them, it was Schlegel who first set the interesting, which he associated with the art of modernity, in explicit opposition to the beautiful classical poetry of the Greeks. While *die schöne Poesie* of antiquity is objectively rule-bound, universal, and disinterested (as befitting a culture in which,

6. One upshot of this is that there do not seem to be any specific nonaesthetic features whose presence could ever *rule out* our judgment of something as interesting, in the way that brittleness, roughness, severe angularity, and bigness can rule out a judgment of something as cute. Sibley calls these "voiding characteristics," and they are a crucial way in which our justifications of these judgments of aesthetic quality fall under something at least analogous to scientific falsifiability; see Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics*. For voiding characteristics make it possible for the "reasons" we offer in support of our claims about an object's aesthetic character to seem not true or false, but irrelevant or absurd (as when I direct attention to an object's brittleness to convince you that it's cute). Like compliments, insults, bets, and curses, judgments of aesthetic value cannot be said to be true or false, but the reasons one provides to substantiate them can render the act of substantiating infelicitous (to use Austin's term). More significantly, against the claim that there's no way to truly *argue* about aesthetic claims, voiding characteristics make it possible for me to justify aesthetic judgments that negate the aesthetic judgments of *other* judges. In other words, they enable me to supply "reasons" for why I do not find the film that you found subtle, subtle, or the work of music that you consider delicate, delicate, which are capable of convincing you of the rightness of my judgment over yours (as when, in the latter case, I direct your attention to the rapid succession of *fortissimo* chords in the last four bars).

7. Friedrich Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, trans. and ed. Stuart Barnett (Albany, N.Y., 2001), p. 99; hereafter abbreviated *OGP*.

8. For more on this connection, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, Calif., 1999), esp. the first chapter, "The Most Uncanny Thing," pp. 1–7.

supposedly, no metaphysical gap exists between man and nature and no striving is therefore necessary to represent the ideal), *die interessante Poesie* is restlessly subjective and idiosyncratic, "content to take nothing less than everything for its province; resolved to possess and to express the entire range of human experience; [and] more interested in the individual variant than in the generic type."[9] As Schlegel puts it:

> The general orientation of poetry—indeed, the whole aesthetic development *[Bildung]* of modernity—toward the interesting can be explained by this lack of universality, this rule of the mannered . . . and individual. . . . It is clear why a complete satisfaction can never be attained in this way, why there can be no *endpoint* when it comes to the *interesting*. . . . The more often the longing for a complete satisfaction that would be grounded in human nature was disappointed by the individual and mutable, the more ardent and restless it became. Only the universally valid, enduring, and necessary—the *objective*—can fill this great gap; only the beautiful can still this ardent yearning. [*OGP,* p. 35][10]

Note the specific temporality Schlegel assigns to the interesting: ongoingness. Open to interminable particularization because no laws govern its determination by any content in particular, interesting literature has no endpoint other than the subject himself, who embarks on a "restless" quest for eclectic novelty or "*individuality* that is *original* and *interesting*" destined to continually disappoint him.[11]

Schlegel's opinion of the interesting would famously undergo a 180-degree reversal, however, only a few years after he introduced the antithesis

9. A. O. Lovejoy, "On the Meaning of 'Romantic' in Early German Romanticism: Part II," *Modern Language Notes* 32, no. 2 (1917): 72.

10. However suitable for alleviating this restless striving and yearning, for Schlegel the beautiful is so at one with its historical epoch that it cannot be simply reintroduced into modern use. He thus argues critics will find it futile to appeal to beauty as a criterion for evaluating contemporary literature. Though at best the critic might find "a few exceptions" among modern writers whose work can be evaluated "to the degree to which they approximate the objective," "the *interesting* [nonetheless] remains the actual modern standard of aesthetic worth. To extend this point of view to Greek poetry is to *modernize* it. Whoever finds Homer merely interesting, desecrates him" (*OGP*, p. 83).

11. As G. W. F. Hegel would put it: "Bondage to a particular subject-matter and a mode of portrayal suitable for this material alone are for artists today something past. . . . The artist thus stands above specific consecrated forms and configurations and moves freely on his own account, independent of the . . . mode of conception in which the holy and eternal was previously made visible to human apprehension." As the modern artist thus becomes a "*tabula rasa,*" detached from any particular worldview, his productions become merely interesting (G.W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. [Oxford, 1975], 1:605; hereafter abbreviated *A*).

between it and the beautiful in *On the Study of Greek Poetry.*[12] As A. O. Lovejoy notes, "the 'romantische Poesie' of which we hear so much after 1798 was simply the 'interessante Poesie' of the earlier period."[13] Schlegel found its first glimmerings in Shakespeare's commitment to the representation of unique individuals, including "the eccentric oddities and failings attendant on them" (*OGP,* p. 33). Subsequently epitomized by the novel after Goethe, Fielding, and Richardson, with its increasing focus on the lives of ordinary yet "original" people, the interesting would eventually be embraced by Schlegel as part of a broader romantic agenda advocating the creation of new hybrid styles and genres; a shift from enthusiasm to detachment as the proper stance for writers and critics to adopt towards literature; an encouragement of the active reader through a deliberate use of "incomprehensibility"; and the making of poetry increasingly like criticism while also making literary criticism more poetic.[14] Here Schlegel was pursuing a marriage between art and science that, as we will see shortly, would be pursued in the systems-based conceptual art of the 1960s as well:[15] "The more poetry becomes science, the more it also becomes art. If poetry is to become art, if the artist is to have a thorough understanding and knowledge of his ends and means . . . then the poet will have to philosophize about his art."[16] Or as another of the "Athenäum Fragments" prescribes: modern "poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry."[17]

Interesting literature for Schlegel is thus reflective or philosophical, well aware of the absence of vision that propels the modern subject from one thing to the next while knowing that his "striving toward knowledge of the infinite" cannot ever be satisfied.[18] *Das interessante* thus walks hand in

12. A conversion due in part, Lovejoy argues, to the influence of the intervening publication of Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry;* see Lovejoy, "On the Meaning of 'Romantic' in Early German Romanticism," p. 74.

13. Ibid., p. 67.

14. See Schlegel, "On Incomprehensibility" and "Athenäum Fragments," in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: The Romantic Ironists and Goethe,* ed. Kathleen M. Wheeler (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 32–40 and no. 116, pp. 46–47. See also Schlegel, "Critical Fragments," in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism,* no. 117, p. 44: "Poetry can be criticized only by way of poetry. A critical judgment of an artistic production has no civil rights in the realm of art if it isn't itself a work of art." For an excellent overview of all the various aspects of the German romantic literary project, see Wheeler, introduction to *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism,* pp. 1–27.

15. See Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 242. For Lee's account of conceptual art's attraction to cybernetics and systems theory, see pp. 218–57.

16. Schlegel, "Athenäum Fragments," no. 255, p. 50.

17. Schlegel, "Athenäum Fragments," no. 238, p. 49.

18. Wheeler, introduction to *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism,* p. 2.

hand with romantic irony, defined not just as a detachment from any definite way of life but also, as Karl Solger and Ludwig Tieck suggest, as a surprisingly productive falling-back of the mind onto its own limits while embarked on a quest for the Absolute (for, as Kant showed, the discovery of these limits is a kind of knowledge, too). Yet, for Hegel, the detachment that makes the interesting so compatible with irony and art that fuses philosophical and aesthetic interests is precisely what makes it complicit in advancing the *end* of art.[19] If art is fundamentally the expression of a definite content or meaning in a *sensory* medium, the reflective detachment characteristic of the modern artist cannot be adequately expressed *by* art.[20] Anticipating late-twentieth-century criticisms of conceptual art for its "perceptual withdrawal" or noticeable lack of sensory appeal,[21] Hegel claimed that an art whose content is "an abstract proposition" poses a problem *for* art that can be solved only by philosophy (*A,* 1:51), thus reentrenching the division Schlegel sought to overthrow.[22] The lack of "sensuously particularized" content on the part of the reflective, merely interesting modern artwork would thus seem, on Hegelian grounds, to well-nigh disqualify interesting as an aesthetic judgment altogether—which may be exactly why critics today who feel nervous about making aesthetic judgments but want to do so anyway find it so appealing.

Of course, as noted earlier, interesting has nonaesthetic as well as aesthetic uses. Yet its fluctuation between nonaesthetic and aesthetic judg-

19. For a more detailed commentary on Hegel's indictment of the interesting, see Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (Chicago, 1985).

20. Hegel is emphatic: the work of art "should put before our eyes a content, not in its universality as such, but one whose universality has been absolutely individualized and sensuously particularized" (*A*, 1:51).

21. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 519; hereafter abbreviated "CA."

22. Thus while the modern artist's lack of attachment to a particular worldview and consequent ability to "take on any subject-matter or artistic style" are precisely what make *das Interessante* an exciting development for Schlegel, Hegel's sense of its promise for art is quite different: "In our day . . . criticism, the cultivation of reflection, and . . . freedom of thought have mastered the artists too, and have made them, so to say, a *tabula rasa* in respect of the [content] and the form of their productions. . . . Today there is no material which stands in and for itself above this relativity, and even if one matter be raised above it, still there is at least no absolute need for its representation by *art*" (*A,* 1:602). From this standpoint, modern art's turn to *das Interessante* is an inadvertently revealing sign of art's cultural superfluousness. Hegel's indictment of August and Friedrich Schlegel as "greedy of novelty in the search for the distinctive and extraordinary," and thus prone to falling "into admiring the mediocre, ascribing universal worth to what was only relatively valuable, and [boldly endorsing] a perverse tendency and subordinate standpoint, as if it were something supreme," thus also doubles as an indictment of the aesthetic they supported (*A,* 1:63, 64).

ments is arguably intrinsic to the aesthetic use of interesting and in a manner that sharpens its difference from other types of aesthetic judgment. For unlike *beautiful, majestic,* or *elegant,* which are always and unambiguously terms of aesthetic value even when applied to nonartworks (to call Einstein's theory of general relativity "beautiful," as S. Chandrasekhar notes so many scientists did, is precisely to judge it on aesthetic rather than mathematical or scientific grounds),[23] *interesting* has juridical applications across an unusually vast range of contexts. Indeed, there seems to be something radically generic about *interesting* that not only underwrites this diversity of applications but that proceeds from the zero degree feeling at its root. While William James described this basic feeling—"interest"—in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) as the minimal condition of our experiential reality,[24] Ralph Barton Perry would redefine it in *General Theory of Value: Its Meaning and Basic Principles Construed in Terms of Interest* (1926) as the more specific tendency of the "living mind to be *for* some things and *against* others."[25] Weaker in intensity and less erotically charged than its feminized and more voraciously epistemophilic cousin, curiosity (long regarded, as Hans Blumenberg has shown, as the libido of theory, that is, both the driving force and a potential threat to reason from within),[26] for Perry this basic "*state, act, attitude or disposition of favor or disfavor*" is the "original source and constant feature of all value." Conversely, Perry defines value, in its generic form, as "any object . . . [of] any interest" (*GTV,* p. 115).

In his work on affect in the 1960s, Silvan Tomkins treats interest in a similar fashion, referring to it as "a necessary condition for the formation of the perceptual world."[27] Tomkins does note the connection between

23. Quoted in Chandrasekhar, *Truth and Beauty,* p. 148.

24.

> Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to*. Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word. It varies in every creature, but without it the consciousness of every creature would be a grey chaotic indiscriminateness, impossible for us to even conceive.

(William James, *The Principles of Psychology,* 2 vols. [1890; New York, 1950], 1:402–3. I am indebted to Joe DiMuro for this reference.)

25. Ralph Barton Perry, *General Theory of Value*: *Its Meaning and Basic Principles Construed in Terms of Interest* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), p. 115; hereafter abbreviated *GTV*.

26. And by pre- and post-Enlightenment philosophers alike. See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age,* trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

27. Silvan Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness,* 4 vols. (New York, 1962–92), 1:347; hereafter abbreviated *AIC*.

"interest-excitement" and the experience of the unexpected, which prompts him to classify it with fear and startle/surprise in his system of affects. Unlike the feeling of being startled, however, which dissipates as quickly as it flares up, for Tomkins, interest has the capacity for duration and recursion. In contrast to the once-and-for-allness of our experience of, say, the sublime, the object we find interesting is one we tend to come back to, as if to verify that it is *still* interesting. To judge something interesting is thus always, potentially, to find it interesting *again*. In contrast to the "suddenness" Karl Heinz Bohrer celebrates as the essence of the aesthetic relation, here aesthetic experience seems narrativized or to unfold in a succession of episodes akin to the "steps of thought" Philip Fisher associates with the classical passion of wonder.[28] Tomkins accordingly perceives interest as required for systemic complexity, for "shift[ing] from one perceptual perspective to another, from the perceptual to the motor orientation and back again, from both the perceptual and the motor to the conceptual level and back again" (*AIC,* 1:348). Because of its capacity to also produce "sustained immersion—[where one is] able to come back again and again to the same problem until there is a breakthrough," Tomkins also views interest as a necessary condition for the physiological and psychological support of any "long-term effort and commitment," from scientific work to political activism to, say, reading a nine-hundred-page novel (*AIC,* 1:363, 349).

Tomkins's references to "long-term effort" and the recursive temporality of "com[ing] back again and again" return us to the link between the interesting and ongoingness.[29] It is this temporal orientation that, in conjunction with its semantic blankness, arguably makes interesting so useful as a syntactic placeholder, enabling critics to defer more specific aesthetic judgments indefinitely. Interesting thus becomes particularly handy as a euphemism, filling the slot for a judgment conspicuously withheld. But in addition to replacing or postponing aesthetic judgments, we also use interesting to facilitate our return to the object for judging at a later moment, like sticking a Post-It in a book. As if founded on a "feeling of incomplete-

28. But unlike wonder, which as Fisher stresses is an aesthetic of "rare experiences" marked by an emotionally powerful response to novelty, the interesting marks a common mode of aesthetic experience in which our affective response to novelty, which modernity *habitualizes*, is *mild* (Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* [Cambridge, Mass., 1998], p. 1). See also Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. Ruth Crowley (New York, 1994).

29. Which, as Pamela Lee notes in *Chronophobia,* is a kind of time as much associated with Fernand Braudel's *longue durée* as with Hegel's idea of bad infinity. This relationship is the central focus of Lee's reading of Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" and her overview of the art of the 1960s in general. See Lee, *Chronophobia*, pp. 260–308.

ness" that makes it anticipatory as well as recursive (what's anticipated is precisely a return),[30] to call an object interesting in this regard is to make a silent promise to the self: come back to this later.

The interesting thus contains the "forward reference in time" (*GTV*, p. 250) central also to Nelson Goodman's provocative argument that *future* aesthetic encounters are not only implied by but an active factor in determining the nature of our aesthetic encounters *in the present*.[31] Without sacrificing universality to relativism,[32] the judgment of interesting thus registers the simple fact (one strangely overlooked by much aesthetic philosophy) that time makes a difference in aesthetic evaluation. But because aesthetic experience continues to be broadly conceived as a sort of thunderbolt, in terms of instantaneity, suddenness, and once-and-for-allness (that is, as Fisher acidly notes, based on the overused model of the sublime),[33] the extended temporality of the interesting seems to partly explain why it is so prone to not being recognized *as* an aesthetic value, even in contexts where feeling-based assessments are explicitly called for. Indeed, at first glance, interesting seems to violate every aspect of Kant's account of aesthetic judgment in the third critique and, above all, its dictum that the judgment of taste be "*entirely disinterested*" (that is, founded on a feeling of "satisfaction or dissatisfaction" detached from any representation of the object as useful or even existing).[34]

Interesting is the *verbal* antithesis of disinterestedness. There is, however, a sense in which its low affect makes the two seem less different than

30. Its simultaneously forward and backward temporal orientation would most likely be viewed by Perry as directly resulting from the feeling of interest, which he describes as an attunement between *"expectation,"* and the *"unfulfilled phases of a governing propensity . . .* which is at any given time in control of [our] organism as a whole" (*GTV*, p. 183). On the "feeling of incompleteness" in relation to modern obsession and compulsion (and their own temporalities), see Jennifer L. Fleissner's brilliant *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago, 2006), p. 61.

31. See Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 99–126. It is worth noting that this "forward reference in time" is also visible in the economic idea of interest as monetary appreciation.

32. While the interesting will always imply the possibility of a future encounter with the object in which one's original evaluation of it might be revised, to call an object interesting is still to claim that it is *objectively* interesting. Indeed, to judge an object interesting is to claim that *everyone* who encounters it *will have precisely this feeling*, precisely this expectation of a future encounter in which their original evaluation of it might be revised. This claim for universal validity even in the absence of criteria (which for Kant is what finally separates aesthetic judgments from judgments of taste) may seem hard to reconcile with the suspicion that the aesthetical judgment of interesting is specific to restricted discursive communities. I will be addressing this problem at the very end of this essay.

33. As Fisher writes, "With the sublime we have for two hundred years built up a more and more intricate theory for a type of art that we do not actually have and would not care for if we did have it" (Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences,* p. 3).

34. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* trans. J. H. Bernard (New York, 1951), p. 45.

alike, which may also explain why the interesting is so prone to turning boring.[35] *Trivial Pursuit*, the mass-produced version of a longstanding English public-house entertainment, shows how dialectically inseparable the two modern affects are. Thousands of people over the last few centuries have clearly found trivia interesting, but just as obviously . . . trivial. Much like the way in which the interesting toggles—is itself a toggling—between aesthetic and nonaesthetic judgments, the wavering between the boring and interesting seems internal to the interesting,[36] as a direct consequence of the specific nature of the feeling at its root, a feeling so low in intensity that it can even be hard to say whether it counts as satisfaction or dissatisfaction, feels good or bad to feel (and in contrast to the unequivocal feelings of pleasure/displeasure that give rise to judgments of the beautiful/disgusting). Things can therefore be interesting in an irritating way, as well

35. Now how exactly did this come about? A. O. Hirschman offers a compelling explanation in his historical account of how, in "political arguments for capitalism before its triumph," the "interests" were praised for their ability to *block* the passionate impulses of man in the Hobbesian state of nature. Once it becomes linked to the rational will in the seventeenth-century discourses of statecraft that Hirschman examines in *The Passions and the Interests,* interest takes on the role of being affective intensity's countervailing opposite rather than a species of affective intensity in its own right. See A. O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J., 1997). My thanks to John Guillory for this reference (and to Mark McGurl for raising the question).

One finds a parallel approach to interest as passion's dispassionate antithesis in Freud's distinction between interest and libido, with the former defined as the investment of energy proceeding from the ego's self-preservative instincts and the latter as the much stronger energy directed by the ego toward objects of sexual desire. See Sigmund Freud, "The Libido Theory" (1923), in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology,* vol. 6 of *Collected Papers,* ed. Philip Rieff (New York, 1963), pp. 180–84. Freud's distinction seems to underlie Teresa Brennan's more recent insistence on a difference between unreflective passionate intensities (that is, classic emotions like anger) and the "feeling of a calming and discerning variety" she calls "feeling intelligence" (Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* [Ithaca, N.Y., 2004], pp. 128, 131). It is precisely this feeling's mildness and indeterminate nature that endows it with its ability to register the presence of *particularized* intensities, that is, qualified emotions not to be confused with the undifferentiated or "open" feeling that registers them. As Brennan explains, although the "passions or affects now claim to be a class of feeling, rather than something discerned by feeling," our continued practice of speaking of the feeling of envy or of anger betrays that there is indeed a type of feeling that detects these feelings, briefly attaching itself, as it were, to one before moving on to register the presence of the next (p. 105). In its lack of specific content, the reflective "feeling intelligence" that Brennan also calls "living attention" (p. 24) (to contrast it all the more sharply with the specific feelings it discerns) looks very much like the "interest" that underpins the generic form of value for Perry. And in its cursorlike ability to move from one feeling to another without ever becoming permanently affixed to any, "feeling intelligence" in Brennan's theory of affect behaves much like the serial artist or detached and reflective subject who according to Schlegel produces merely interesting art.

36. For a more probing account of how the dialectic between the interesting and the boring becomes especially problematic for feminism and other political discourses invested in timeliness ("which inevitably embroils [feminism] in the relation among novelty, interest, and merit that characterizes modernity"), see Jane Elliott, "The Currency of Feminist Theory," *PMLA* 121 (Oct. 2006): 1700.

as in a pleasantly exciting one; in both cases, interest begins as a feeling of not knowing exactly *what* we are feeling. This affective uncertainty is clearly the source of the association of the interesting with ambivalence, coolness, or neutrality—affects not only associated with irony but with the modern scientific attitude. It also lies at the root of why we suspect people often say things are interesting when they aren't sure exactly *how* they feel about them . . . yet. There is thus a sense in which the true opposite of interesting is not a *dis*interested but rather an explicitly interest*ed* judgment, as Giorgio Agamben suggests in his gloss of Hegel's view of the rise of the ironic artist as signaling the end of art's relevance for culture as a whole: "Only because art has left the sphere of *interest* to become merely *interesting* do we welcome it so warmly."[37] Or, as Nietzsche suggests by invoking Stendhal, art consigns itself to being merely interesting only at the moment when, as a price for autonomy, it gives up its *promesse de bonheur*.[38]

Interesting always seems to come with this *merely* attached to it, as if to highlight its indeterminacy or what Hegel would call its lack of content. Yet everything we have said above suggests that the aesthetic judgment of interesting *does* have a concrete and even "sensuously particularized" content. Far from being an ahistorical abstraction, the interesting is a specifically modern response to novelty and change (which is a noticeably irrelevant issue when it comes to the beautiful)—and, more precisely, to novelty as it necessarily arises against a background of boredom, to change against a background of sameness. It is moreover a modern aesthetic

37. Agamben, *The Man without Content,* p. 4.

38. "'That is beautiful,' said Kant, 'which gives us pleasure *without interest*.' Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine 'spectator' and artist—Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*. At any rate he *rejected* and repudiated the one point about the aesthetic condition which Kant had stressed: *le désinteressement*. Who is right, Kant or Stendhal?" (quoted in Agamben, *The Man without Content,* pp. 1–2). Nietzsche's tone underscores the counterintuitive way in which the interesting poses a challenge to disinterestedness from the perspective of affective *weakness*. For as the following comment by Antonin Artaud similarly illustrates, the critique of "disinterested pleasure" most often tends to be made with emotional vehemence on behalf of the same: "To our disinterested and inert idea of art an authentic culture opposes a *violently egoistic* . . . i.e., *interested* idea" (Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards [New York, 1958], pp. 10–11; cited in Agamben, *The Man without Content,* pp. 2–3; first italics mine). To Nietzsche and Artaud's critiques of disinterestedness with and on behalf of strong feeling, we could add Pierre Bourdieu's, for whom the "pure" judgment of taste is so inextricably tied to class interests in the reproduction of invidious distinctions that disinterested "taste" comes to resemble its emotionally vehement opposite: dis-taste or disgust at the tastes of others. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1984), p. 38. It may also be worth noting that Bourdieu actually includes "Interesting," along with "Beautiful," "Ugly," and "Meaningless," as one of the four possible options for response in his surveys of French working-class tastes in *Distinction*.

whose distinctiveness resides in its low or minimal affect, its functional and structural generality, its seriality, its eclecticism, its recursiveness, and its future-oriented temporality. In addition to explaining its rise in particular cultures at particular moments (late eighteenth-century Germany but also, as we will soon see, the postwar United States), these characteristics also make the interesting more aesthetically central to the history of some artistic genres than to others, starting first and foremost, as Schlegel argued, with the novel.

Writing almost a century later in a contiguous effort to develop a theory and criticism of the novel that would legitimate its tenuous status as art,[39] Henry James would crystallize Schelgel's insight by singling out interesting as the genre's particularly salient if also particularly *minimal* standard of aesthetic worth: "The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of."[40] Peter Brooks traces James's investment in the interesting back to Denis Diderot's "effort to establish the new genre of *drame*, which owes much to the novels of Richardson and in some ways prefigures melodrama." As Brooks elaborates, "Diderot's definition of *le genre sérieux,* intermediate between tragedy and comedy—but explicitly not a mixture of the two—addresses itself to the 'interesting' in life." With this proposal of "serious attention to the *drama* of the *ordinary*," Brooks notes, "we are near the beginnings of a modern aesthetic in which Balzac and James will

39. On this topic, see Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations in American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), and Dorothy Hale, *Social Formalism: The Novel from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford, Calif., 1998).

40. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York, 1987), p. 191. James's self-conscious appeal to the interesting in this seminal essay (published three years after *The Portrait of a Lady*, where matters of interest, disinterestedness, and boredom famously abound) seems motivated in part by his critical dissatisfaction with Walter Besant's standard of good, a moral as well as aesthetic value that Besant appears to think can be deduced from objective criteria. James, in contrast, makes clear that the "innumerable" reasons why a novel might strike us as interesting are irreducibly subjective and discoverable only after the fact: "The ways in which [the novel] is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable. . . . They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others" (pp. 191–92). With its echoes of *das Interessante* (similarly reflective, limitless, and focused on subjective particularity), it is key that James's proposal of interesting as the novel's proper aesthetic standard is part of an explicit campaign on his part to develop a theory and criticism of the novel—a larger cultural project that strikingly recalls Schlegel's own agenda (and the role of *das Interessante* therein) of establishing literary criticism as a new and relatively autonomous science/art. Both examples suggest that the history of interesting (and its usage in contemporary criticism) is in some deep way bound up with the history of literary criticism itself—or, more specifically, with the history of its autonomization and professionalization. I am indebted to Mark Goble for this last point.

fully participate: the effort to make the 'real' and the 'ordinary' and the 'private life' interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lay bare the true stakes."[41] Though this relation between the interesting and melodrama is not immediately intuitive (what could be more counter to the spirit of an aesthetic founded on detachment?), Susan Sontag draws the same connection, singling out opera, along with the novel, as the "archetypal art form of the 19th century, perfectly expressing that period's . . . discovery of the 'interesting' (that is, of the commonplace, the inessential, the accidental, the minute, the transient)."[42] The association returns in an even more surprising fashion in Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in which minimal art is famously indicted both for being "merely interesting" *and* for being "theatrical."[43]

Temporarily bracketing Fried's way of linking the merely interesting to theatrical tendencies in postwar American art (we will return to this issue soon enough), it is easy to see the intimacy between this diachronic aesthetic and the nineteenth-century novel, a temporal form uniquely suited for capturing the detailed variety and rhythms of everyday life. Yet it is also clear, from Gertrude Stein's massive experiment in narrating history in *The Making of Americans,* to the recursive variations of Samuel Beckett, Georges Perec, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, to Italo Svevo's and David Foster Wallace's investigations of addiction—endlessness that can only be coped with "one day at a time"—in *Zeno's Conscience* and *Infinite Jest*, that the interesting has also continued to be a dominant aesthetic for the novel more broadly, well into the twentieth century and beyond.[44] In these sprawling encyclopedic works about ongoingness, the authors seem to have simply increased the proportion of boredom—in the ratio of boredom to interest paradoxically internal to interest—as if in an experimental quest to discover what the absolute minimal condition of interesting might be. And this, significantly, was a goal shared by notoriously discursive late twentieth-century visual art—prefigured by the minimal art deemed merely interesting by Fried but as indebted to the narrative innovations of Stein and Beckett as to historical developments in its own medium—in which the serial aesthetic of interesting would come to play its next major role.

41. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, Conn., 1976), pp. 13, 14.

42. Susan Sontag, "Nathalie Sarraute and the Novel," "*Against Interpretation" and Other Essays* (New York, 1966), p. 101.

43. See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 148–72; hereafter abbreviated "AO."

44. A tradition Wayne Booth continues by proposing interesting as a "general criterion" for evaluating narrative fiction in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1983), p. 124.

Marking a general turn from an older "aesthetic of industrial production and consumption," epitomized in pop and minimalism, to "an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization" ("CA," p. 520), conceptual art is where interesting most noticeably reemerged as a focal point for public debates about modernity and aesthetics (and about the rational dimension of aesthetic experience in particular) since the discourse produced by the German romantics. Known for its insistence on visual art's "parallels, if not identity, with the systems of linguistic signs" in its larger effort to "[renew] the Duchampian quest for a nonretinal art" through a "strategy of 'perceptual withdrawal'" ("CA," p. 519), conceptual art's signature style was often conceived as a kind of stylelessness due to its polemic replacement of easily recognizable art-historical styles, or the look of Art, for what Donald Kuspit called "the look of thought."[45] In a culture marked by "an ever-more-rapid rhythm of fashion and style changes, and the proliferation of advertising and the media to an unprecedented degree," the look of "reflective" art of the 1960s seemed, as it did to many in the 1790s, like the look of capitalist modernity itself, especially in its tendency toward rationalization.[46] For as Benjamin Buchloh notes, it is with conceptual art that the artwork, already "dematerialized" by Duchamp, most fully became "the ultimate subject of a *legal definition* and the result of *institutional validation*"—which is to say a forensic art ("CA," p. 519; my emphasis). It thus becomes a promising site for seeing how the interesting functions as a forensic aesthetic in its own right—as a judgment that due to its distinctive nonspecificity most conspicuously raises the issue of its own justification and thus the question of how we supply evidence for our aesthetic evaluations in general, according to the juridical model of evidence presented in courts of law.

The moment of conceptual art is more specifically one in which the merely interesting emerges against a background of bureaucracy as an aesthetic of *information*.[47] With its idioms of inventory, classification, and

45. See Donald Kuspit, "Sol LeWitt: The Look of Thought" (1975), in *Sol LeWitt: Critical Texts*, ed. Adachiara Zevi (Rome, 1994), pp. 209–25. In contrast to Kuspit's account, Rosalind Krauss argues that LeWitt's work was actually an obsessional parody of rationality, in "LeWitt in Progress," *October,* no. 6 (Fall 1978): 46–60. For an interesting reading of this debate, see Nicholas Baume, "The Music of Forgetting," in *Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes*, ed. Baume (exhibition catalog, The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn., 26 Jan.–29 Apr. 2001), pp. 21–22.

46. Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), p. 2; hereafter abbreviated *CA*.

47. As evinced in the landmark show at the School of Visual Arts, New York, curated by Mel Bochner, "Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art" (1966): Xeroxes of lists, invoices, blueprints, notes, and plans by architects, composers, mathematicians, and visual artists, mixed in with pages from *Scientific American*

documentation (especially in the case of what Jack Burnham called "Systems-Based" work),[48] the distinctive look of conceptual art for many was thus not just that of thought but of post-Fordist knowledge work. Its "neutral" style thus did not have a neutral meaning, as Jeff Wall acerbically noted in 1985, but could be seen rather as a depressing reflection of art's "powerless mortification in the face of the overwhelming political and economic machinery that separates information from truth"[49]—a view that Wall would surely have found confirmed by this comment by Sol LeWitt: "The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise."[50] The ultimate weakness of conceptual art for Wall and others, however (as Thomas Crow notes), would reside in "its failure to generate any subject matter free of irony."[51] Echoing Hegel's objection to the rise of interesting art at the turn of the preceding century (as well as Schelgel's own account of the restless "serial artist" who produces it), Wall's claim that conceptual art "could undertake no subject matter in good faith" thus resurrects the lack of specificity that we have seen haunt theorizations of the interesting from the very beginning—and in a way that places the question of its own historical specificity in a front-and-center position.

Here I would argue that while there are obviously differences between its role in the literature of early Machine Age Europe and in the art of the information/service-based economy of the postwar United States, the interesting is an aesthetic specific to capitalist modernization at the broadest level—if also one that uniquely highlights its *dual* tendencies toward rationalization/abstraction and differentiation/individuation. While arising in tandem with the explosion of new print genres made possible by the consolidation of the literary marketplace in the 1790s, its dominance in the 1960s coincided with the growth of new media and communication technologies transforming the U.S. from an automated into an "informated" society, as recently tracked by Alan Liu with especial attention to the rise of

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and other periodicals, presented in four anonymous-looking black ring binders mounted on pedestals.

48. See, for instance, Jack Burnham, "Systems Aesthetics," in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Osborne (New York, 2002), pp. 215–18.

49. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1996), p. 216. See Jeff Wall, "Dan Graham's Kammerspiel," in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Alberro and Stimson, pp. 504–13.

50. Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966," *Aspen Magazine* 5–6 (1967), www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/serialProject.html

51. Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture,* p. 216.

coolness.[52] Though already nascent in the ironic detachment of *das Interessante*, there is arguably an even closer connection between the interesting and the information aesthetic of cool. Low affect, self-conscious reflexivity, generic and stylistic hybridity, the privileging of the simultaneously unique *and* trivial, and a seemingly endless pursuit, in the felt absence of a more totalizing historical vision, of the next new thing (and then the next one after that), all make interesting as specific to, and as revealing about, the conditions of the rise of American postmodernism as German romanticism. This suggests that *das Interessante* and the merely interesting are responses to essentially the same phenomenon: the experience of novelty and change in a capitalist culture in which change is paradoxically constant and novelty permanent. I ask the reader to keep this continuity in mind as I now turn to a much closer examination of conceptual art, which will disclose, in a sharper way than could be done through the novel, aspects of the interesting that shed further light on the questions I raise at the beginning of this essay about the relevance of aesthetic evaluations to criticism.

The Forensic Aesthetic

In addition to its fascination with evidence, conceptual art shared what Franco Moretti describes as nineteenth-century detective fiction's basic paradox: "It must tell ever-new stories because it moves within the culture of the novel, which always demands new content; and at the same time it must reproduce a scheme which is always the same."[53] To meet the double goals of standardization *and* individuation (and so maintain the "constantly renewed willingness to be prepared for surprises" that Niklas Luhmann argues is the primary function of mass media),[54] Moretti notes that "detective fiction links a continuous novelty of content to a perennial fixity of the syntax."[55]

"A continuous novelty of content" linked "to a fixity of the syntax" is an especially apt way to describe the books of photographs of ordinary objects that Ed Ruscha began publishing in the early 1960s. Frequently cited as one of the early influences on the look of conceptual art overall, these anonymous, generic-looking compilations—*Twentysix Gas Stations* (1962), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*

52. See Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago, 2004).

53. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London, 1983), p. 141.

54. Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media,* trans. Kathleen Cross (Cambridge, 2000), p. 22.

55. Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders,* p. 141.

(1966), *A Few Palm Trees* (1971), and others—were clearly engineered to keep affect on a low burner, generating, at most, tiny flares of interest like the "small fires" appearing at regular intervals in *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964). As the representation of a succession of modest flickers that almost seem produced by our recognition of the slight differences between them as we read along, *Small Fires* might be taken as an allegory of the interesting itself (fig. 1). But why end this series with milk? According to Ruscha, "Milk seemed to make the book more interesting."[56]

Ruscha claimed that sequential order was in fact crucial to the design of his "interesting" books, even though their style of presentation was nonhierarchical: "The pictures have to be in the correct sequence, one without a mood taking over."[57] Homeopathically, *Small Fires* was thus designed to preempt the gestalt of a definite emotional quality (mood) by evoking, in its place, a feeling paradoxically specified by its vagueness and indeterminacy. While interest certainly comes to mind here, Ruscha had a more idiosyncratic term for it: "This book had an inexplicable thing I was looking for, and that was a kind of a 'Huh?'"[58] Likening this mild but inquisitive, affective, and cognitive response to "a sort of 'itch-in-the scalp,'" Ruscha notes it was being pursued in the work of many of his contemporaries, from Hilla and Bernd Becher's *Anonymous Sculpture*—documentary-style photographs of cooling towers, silos, and other industrial architecture first published in book form in 1960 (fig. 2)—to John Baldessari's collection of slides, *The Back of All the Trucks Passed While Driving from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday 20 January 1963* (1963).[59]

Such relatively early conceptual works, all tellingly in the format of the book or series, underscore the significance of generic classifications for the interesting: "cooling tower," "palm tree," "truck." By defining the judgment of the beautiful as the cognition of an object of universal pleasure even in the absence of concepts, Kant mooted the relevance of the *type* of entity judged beautiful (given our indifference to whether it exists, the class of objects it belongs to couldn't be further from the point). In contrast, because the interesting involves the recognition of novelty and "in order to

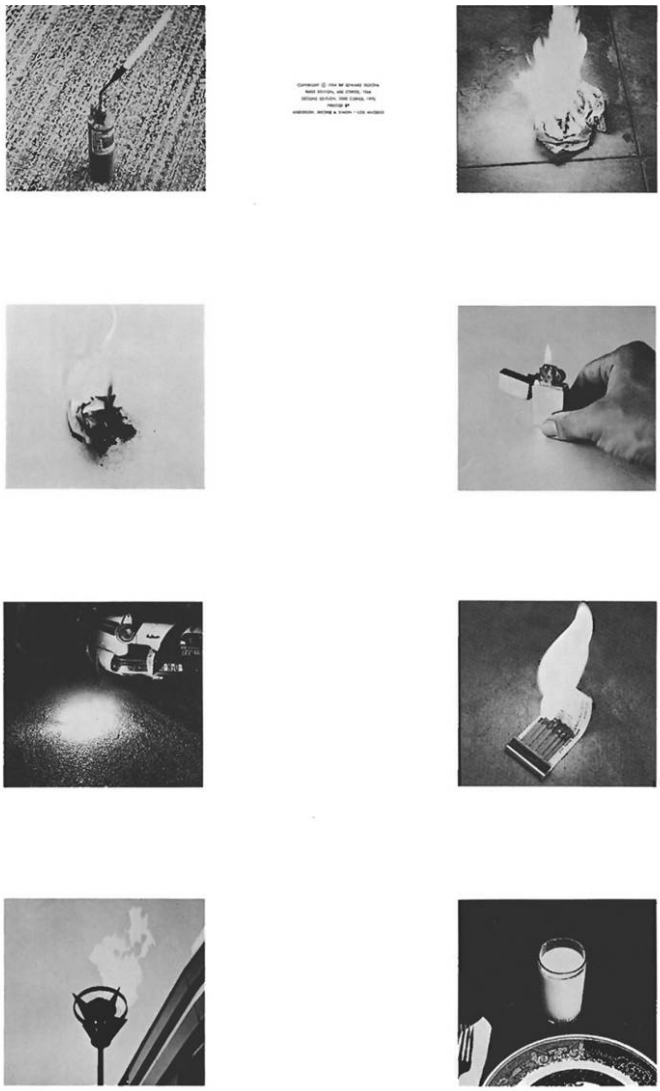
56. Ed Ruscha, "'Concerning *Various Small Fires:* Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications," interview by John Coplans, *Leave Any Information at the Station,* ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), p. 25.

57. Ibid.

58. Ruscha, "'. . . A Kind of a Huh': An Interview with Edward Ruscha," interview by Willoughby Sharp, *Leave Any Information at the Station,* p. 65.

59. Ruscha, "Statement in Henry Hopkins, *Fifty West Coast Artists,*" *Leave Any Information at the Station,* p. 10.

FIGURES 1a–b. Ed Ruscha, *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964). Front cover and inside matter. Forty-eight-page book, 7.06 x 5.5 x 0.2 in., closed dimensions.



Various Small Fires and Milk 1964—48-page book, 7 1/16 x 5 1/2 x 1/16 in. (17.9 x 14 x .5 cm) closed dimensions 33

FIGURES 1a–b. (*continued*)

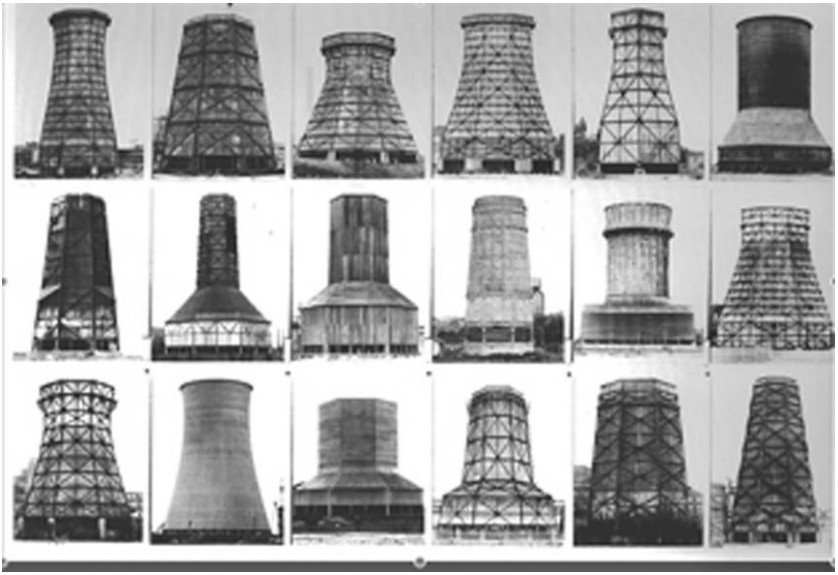


FIGURE 2. Detail from Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Anonymous Sculpture* (159–72). Thirty black-and-white photographs; text panel with reproduction. 81.5 x 74 in. overall.

recognize novelty we need familiar contexts,"[60] interesting art, as Henry James foresaw, *requires* general classifications: "Everything . . . becomes interesting from the moment it has closely to consider, for full effect positively to bestride, the law of its kind."[61] In other words, the judgment of interesting is underwritten by a realization that the object is meaningfully different from *others of its type*—an emphasis on the general and schematic that only superficially seems to contradict its concomitant emphasis on difference. Indeed, Ruscha strove to capture the "neutral" ethos of the generic precisely *through* a strategy of variation. In keeping with Daniel Buren's explanation for his use of color in his stripe paintings ("I am not saying pink is neutral, or gray is neutral, but a gray striped canvas then a blue striped one then another in green, and so on . . . *hinders by successive*

60. Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, p. 28.

61. James, "Preface to *The Awkward Age*," *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James* (New York, 1934), p. 111. While putting the stress on medium rather than genre per se, Richard Wollheim underscores the same link, distinguishing "evaluations of interest" from "evaluations of quality" on the basis that while the latter "do not presuppose any specific . . . understanding of the art to which the work in which quality is found belongs," judgments of artworks as "interesting" exclusively "are made within, and are intended only to hold within, the framework of a given art" (Richard Wollheim, "Why Is Drawing Interesting?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 [Jan. 2005]: 3).

and equal repetition any significance for any of them"),[62] *Various Small Fires* presents us with a matchbook . . . then a butane lighter . . . then a road flare (and so on).

X, *then* Y, *then* Z. . . . : The aesthetic character Ruscha wanted his books to have clearly hinges on a sequential temporality that he invokes elsewhere to distinguish the period style his books helped define from that of an earlier generation of abstract expressionists. While the latter "'approached their art with . . . instant-explosiveness,'"[63] collapsing "'the whole art process into one act,'" Ruscha "'wanted to break it into stages.'"[64] Bound thusly to a diachronic rather than synchronic idea of form (which as Stanley Fish, Peter Brooks, Catherine Gallagher, and others have noted has proven to be an intrinsically more difficult concept of form for many to grasp),[65] the merely interesting look of conceptual art could thus be described as the look of getting there, of development or progression in discrete "stages." This is exactly how David Hockney describes it in "Beautiful or Interesting?" (1964), a dialogue with Larry Rivers published in *Art and Literature*:

> LR: Now let me ask a serious-type question: would you prefer your work to be thought beautiful or interesting?
> DH: Putting it like that I think I'd rather have it thought beautiful. It sounds *more final*, it sounds as if it did something. Interesting sounds *on its way there*, whereas Beautiful can knock you out.
> LR: Beautiful you connect with the old masters, except for someone like Bosch, sort of beautiful and interesting. I think "interesting" more like Duchamp coming along and cracking glass? You can't

62. Daniel Buren, "Interview with Daniel Buren," interview by André Parinaud, trans. Lucy Lippard, in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972. . . .*, ed. Lippard (1973; Berkeley, 1997), pp. 41–42; emphasis mine.

63. Ruscha, "Interview with Edward Ruscha," interview by Bernard Brunon, *Leave Any Information at the Station,* p. 251.

64. Ruscha, "Ed Ruscha, Young Artist: Dead Serious about Being Nonsensical," interview by Patricia Failing, *Leave Any Information at the Station,* p. 228. LeWitt would note a similar impulse in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art": "If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then . . . all intervening steps—scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed work, models, studies, thoughts, conversations—are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product." More significantly, LeWitt's final products deliberately adopted the "interesting" look of a "intervening step" (LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5 [Summer 1967]: 83; rpt. *Conceptual Art,* ed. Alberro and Stimson, pp. 12–16).

65. On the resistance to seeing temporal form as "form," see Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 155; Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 319; and Catherine Gallagher, "Formalism and Time," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (Mar. 2000): 229–51.

say that's beautiful—not in the way Renoir's beautiful, although the idea may be.

DH: Surely it's now beautiful—*first* it was interesting, *now* it's beautiful. . . .?

LR: I must have had in mind—and there's a little spleen in it—that we are surrounded by a whole nation of artists in the other camp saying anything beautiful is soft, old-fashioned, and these sort of people are making the "interesting" works of art.[66]

Whereas beautiful is *"final,"* interesting is in medias res, *"on its way"* to a *"there"* whose content or meaning is indeterminate. Echoing Schlegel's elucidation of *das Interessante* (which has "no endpoint") in opposition to *das Schöne* (which is "universally valid, enduring, and necessary"), here the contrast between the two aesthetic categories is similarly drawn in terms of time. Unlike Schlegel, however,who viewed the supersession of *das Schöne* by *das Interessante* as irreversible, Hockney and Rivers stress the ephemerality of the turn to the interesting in the work of their contemporaries in part to splenetically hint at its failure to achieve art-historical permanence. For while embroiled in a larger narrative of development *("on its way there"),* the interesting also seems sensitive to change from within. Just as what's cool now is not likely to be cool next season, "*First* it was interesting, *now* it's beautiful" implies that one of the unique things about the interesting is precisely its susceptibility to absorption or displacement by other aesthetic qualities.[67] In spite of being one of the "artists in the other camp," Ruscha would appear to agree, wryly commenting in 1982 on how vulnerable to history (and nostalgia) the moodless look of his books would prove to be: "Now that I look back on it, its beginning to get harder to find a gas station that looks like that. It's beginning to look like the '60s. . . . In the future this book is going to look totally dated; and that's the one thing I was totally against."[68]

The generic and anonymous look of the merely interesting artwork was a distinctively sixties look. In highlighting this irony, Ruscha's remark points to what Mary Ann Doane describes as a fundamental tension be-

66. David Hockney and Larry Rivers, "Beautiful or Interesting?" in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings,* ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 224–25; my emphasis.

67. However, because it lacks "voiding characteristics," the interesting stands out as uniquely capable of coexisting with other aesthetic qualities without losing its distinctiveness. Thus while one would be hard pressed to find an example of something that is at once elegant and gaudy, it is fairly common to find things that are interesting and gaudy, or interesting and elegant. And even, as Hockney and Rivers note, interesting and beautiful.

68. Ruscha, "Catching up with Ed Ruscha," interview by Lewis MacAdams, *Leave Any Information at the Station,* p. 239.

tween modernity's rationalizing/abstracting tendencies and its emphasis on the ephemeral and contingent, which the early conceptual artists' preference for the photographic series could be read as an effort to resolve. The use of a form emphasizing rule-boundedness and regularity, over and against a medium that for Peter Galassi marks "the culmination of a tendency in the history of art that rejects the general, the ideal, and the schematic . . . [for] the particular, the singular, the unique,"[69] could also be read as a way to reconcile two kinds of time: the fleeting instant seized by the photograph and the duration necessary to perceive diachronic form. For antinostalgic "serial artists" like Ruscha, Buren, and Baldessari, in particular, it would provide a way of neutralizing the former with the latter.

This clash between instantaneity and duration would become increasingly visible in works over the decade. Indeed, conceptual art's effort to counterbalance its reliance on fast or rapidly distributable media (printed matter, photos, Xeroxes, magazines, telegrams) with slow or time-consuming formats (language, the earthwork, performance or process-based art) was arguably a response to the rapidly accelerated powers of circulation (systems of communication and transportation) in the postwar U.S. overall. As Alexander Alberro notes, this speedup had a radical impact on virtually every aspect of art-related activity in the sixties. Over the decade, hastened press coverage changed "serious avant-garde collecting . . . from a private depreciated 'act' of commitment to untested ideas into a conspicuous public activity that drew more and more eager recruits from the new age of affluence."[70] In addition to newly endowing experimental art with investment value, the "publicity economy" shifted the task of its legitimation to the new class of art consumers, which for the first time also included corporations seeking to "establish a reputation for progressiveness" by buying and displaying art.[71]

One surprising casualty of the intensified publicity feeding the experimental art boom, Alberro notes, was thus the scholarly art critic, increasingly squeezed out in favor of gallery owners and collectors, the popular news media, and the conceptual artists themselves as the "central conduit between artists and their audiences" (*CA,* p. 6).[72] This shift was not per-

69. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), p. 10.

70. Quoted in Sam Hunter, introduction, *The Harry N. Abrams Family Collection* (exhibition catalog, The Jewish Museum of New York, New York, 29 June–5 Sept. 1966), n.p.; quoted in *CA,* p. 7.

71. Nina Kaiden, "The New Collectors," in Kaiden, Bartlett Hayes, and Richard J. Whalen, *Artist and Advocate: An Essay on Corporate Patronage* (New York, 1967), p. 13; quoted in *CA,* p. 13.

72. This may seem to contradict the fact that the sixties was also a period of particularly

ceived by all critics as negative, however. As Lucy Lippard notes briskly in a 1969 interview: "If *Time* and *Newsweek* were more accurate, they'd probably be better art magazines than most of the art magazines. . . . If you respect the art, *it becomes more important to transmit the information about it accurately than to judge it*."[73] Lippard would repeat this point during a radio show with Douglas Huebler, Dan Graham, Carl Andre, and Jan Dibbets in 1970: "One of the things I like about so-called conceptual art is that *while it communicates itself, or else it doesn't*, just as objects do or don't, it gets transmitted much more rapidly. Print, photos, documents get out much faster and more people see them. Then critics become unnecessary because the primary experience is their audience's own." As Lippard continues, "The responsibility lies with the audience instead of an intermediary. Maybe that's what people don't like about it. The public likes . . . *value judgments* . . . which is why all this quality bullshit is dominant."[74]

Yet Lippard clearly was invested in judgments of value and quality; as she herself said, she "lik[ed]" conceptual art. What is striking, then, about her blithe concession to the critic's newly downsized role as mediator of the public's relation to art is that it takes place in terms that at once contradict and concur with her comment's underlying premise: that if one "respect[s] the art," that is, *judges* the art to be important and affecting (that is, *interesting*), what one says about it will ultimately take a backseat to the sheer fact of its being talked *about*. Criticism would therefore seem to offer only a slower version of what publicity and conceptual art already provide: information. It is therefore hardly surprising that "by 1965 . . . articles which criticized an artist's work began to have the same effect as articles which praised it,"[75] a development that noticeably distinguishes the rise of merely interesting art from that of *die interessante Poesie* in the 1790s. For while *das Interessante* emerges as a response to equally dramatic aspects of modernization at the level of production and consumption (factory automation, urbanization, the rise of mass markets and fashion), its

intense art criticism, which became a "'serious discipline' in the US only at this time, and primarily through the medium of *Artforum*" (Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes* [London, 2003], p. 105). Yet, as Foster points out, the "very grandiloquence" of serious criticism in the 1960s and 1970s "betrays a certain desperation," which testifies to the situation Alberro describes, with its intensity reflecting an effort "to shore up a [critical as well as] aesthetic field that was pressured and fragile" (ibid., p. 119).

73. Lippard, interview with Ursula Meyer, in *Six Years,* p. 7; emphasis mine.

74. Lippard, in Huebler et al., WBAI-FM, New York, symposium, 8 Mar. 1970, in *Six Years*, p. 157; emphasis mine.

75. Steven W. Naifeh, *Culture Making: Money, Success, and the New York Art World* (Princeton, N.J., 1976), p. 96; quoted in *CA,* p. 9.

upshot would be an *expansion* of the critic's role in creating new art-consuming publics and shaping public taste, as the career of the Schlegels and their cohort at Jena demonstrates most vividly. In contrast, the intensified publicity surrounding interesting art in the 1960s led to a *diminishment* of the critic's influence on public culture. Most ironically, for all of this increased public awareness, by around 1970 most conceptual artists were acknowledging that the main audience of their work would be other conceptual artists. As Joseph Kosuth would put it in his introductory note as American editor of *Art-Language* (1970):

> The audience of conceptual art is composed primarily of artists—which is to say that an audience separate from the participants doesn't exist. In a sense, then, art becomes as "serious" as science or philosophy, which doesn't have "audiences" either. *It is interesting or it isn't, just as one is informed or isn't.*[76]

Conceptual art "*is interesting or it isn't,*" just as "*one is informed or isn't*" or, from the side of the object, just as it "*communicates itself or it doesn't.*"

Both comments suggest that publicity's dominant role in determining value in the art world of the 1960s extended to art making itself, with techniques of dissemination and distribution increasingly folded into the act of production. In addition to mimicking art-specific strategies of disseminating and circulating information like the poster and catalog, conceptual art became interested in *all* the ways in which information might be displayed. As it thus made use of charts, specimen cases, and reference manuals to pursue its resemblance to the science fair project, boardroom presentation, or information booth, over the decade the look of merely interesting conceptual art would evolve into the look of *public exhibition* as such. Baldessari would both reflect and comment on this tendency in *A Person Was Asked to Point* (1969), a series of photographs of a male hand "pointing to things that were interesting to him" (fig. 3). Read by one art historian as a cheeky riposte to painter Al Held's sardonic remark, "'All conceptual art is just pointing at things,'"[77] *A Person Was Asked to Point* was then recursively enfolded into Baldessari's next serial artwork, *Commissioned Paintings* (fig. 4), a "showing" of the work of amateur artists that Baldessari describes as follows:

76. Joseph Kosuth, "Introductory Note by the American Editor," in *Six Years*, p. 148; my emphasis. This remark should reinvoke our suspicion that the aesthetic judgment of "interesting" is exclusive to restricted discursive communities (groups defined precisely by the nonexistence of an "audience separate from the participants") and in a way that seems incongruous with the claim to universal validity that distinguishes aesthetic judgments from judgments of taste. I will return to this problem at the end of this essay.

77. Osbourne, *Conceptual Art*, p. 88.

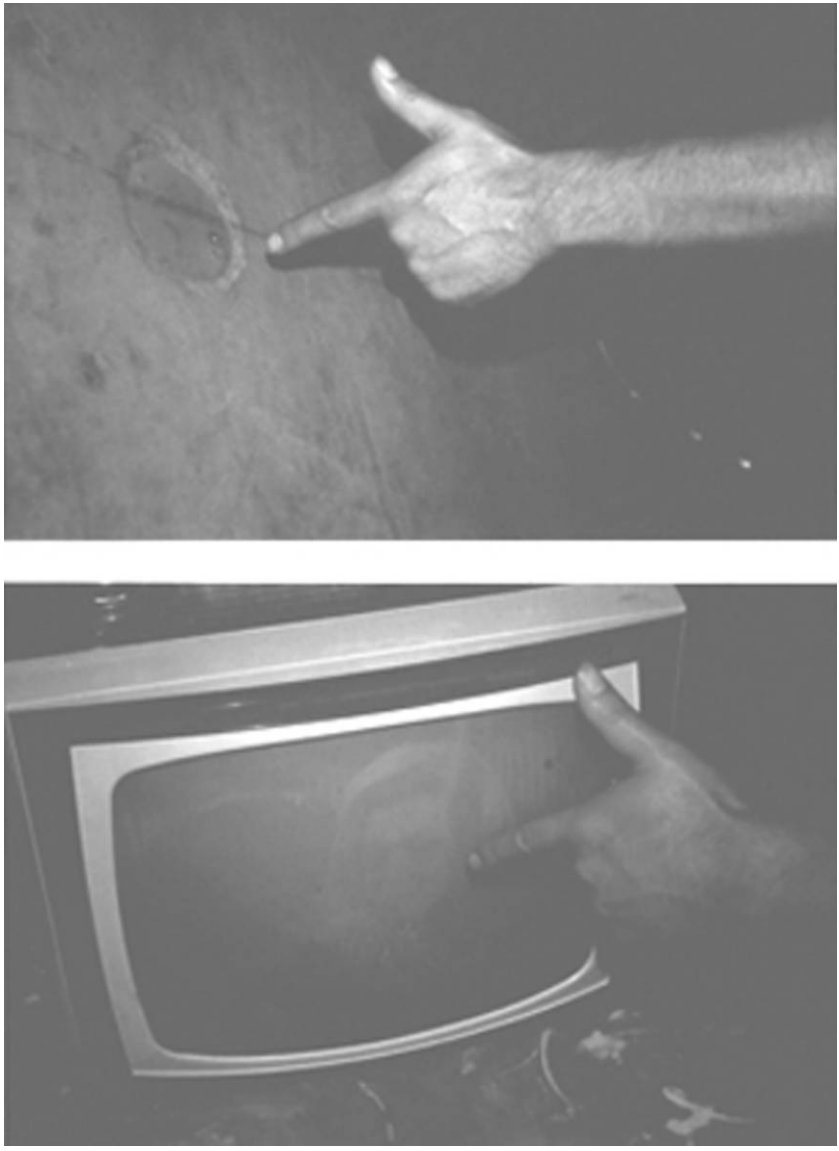


FIGURE 3. John Baldessari, *A Person Was Asked to Point* (1969). Color photos mounted on museum board. Two from the series, 29 x 42.5 in. each.

FIGURE 4. Detail from John Baldessari, *Commissioned Paintings* (1969). Acrylic or oil on canvas. 59 x 45.5 in.

> The procedure: First I visited many amateur art exhibits. When I discovered a painter I asked if he or she would do a painting on commission. The problem of providing interesting subject matter (to avoid their usual choice of schooner ships, desert cacti, moonlit oceans, etc.) was solved by a series I had just finished which involved someone walking around and pointing to things that were interesting to him. I presented each artist with approximately a dozen of these slides from which to choose. They were asked to paint a rendition as faithfully as possible, the idea being that the art would emerge. Upon completion, each painting was taken to a sign painter and the artists name affixed thus: "A Painting By. . . ."[78]

Here art (or, more exactly, interesting art) becomes coeval with the *showing* of art—and, even more precisely, with the showing of art depicting the act of showing. If the *Commissioned Paintings* series suggests that what most sets the ambitious 1960s artist apart from the amateur is precisely the work of presentation traditionally associated with curators and publicists, interesting for Baldessari is the aesthetic concept that best shores this distinction up: "The problem of providing interesting subject matter . . . was solved by a series I had just finished which involved someone . . . pointing to things that were interesting to him." For all its modesty and lack of distinguishing qualities, here interesting becomes the signature of the new serious art, art pointedly equating itself to stylized acts of exhibition. Robert Barry would take this tendency furthest in his *Robert Barry Presents* series: works that consisted of Barry's "showing" of work by other conceptual artists and even conceptual art exhibitions, as in *Robert Barry Presents Three Shows and a Review by Lucy R. Lippard* (1971).

Far from being devoid of style or perceptual qualities, the distinctive look of sixties conceptualism was that of public display—or, more specifically, the look of the public display of evidence, and typically evidence of information having been circulated. This would become especially evident in the rise of communications art in the latter half of the decade, from On Kawara's telegrams and Eleanor Antin's postcards to works based on the postal system like Huebler's *42nd Parallel.* Joining the preoccupation with ways of displaying information with a more explicit interest in the representation of time, *42nd Parallel* was first presented as follows in *Douglas*

78. As Baldessari continues, "It was important that the paintings were exhibited as a group so that the spectator could practice connoisseurship, for example comparing how the extended forefinger in each was painted" (John Baldessari, *John Baldessari: Works 1966–1981* [exhibition catalog, Municipal Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 22 May–21 June 1981], p. 11; quoted in *Conceptual Art,* ed. Osborne, p. 89).

Huebler: November 1968, the first of a series of "exhibitions" existing solely in catalog format curated by the masterful publicist Seth Siegelaub:

> *42nd Parallel.* 11 certified postal receipts (sender); 10 certified postal receipts (receiver); 3040 miles (approximate). 14 locations, A'–N', are towns existing either exactly or approximately on the 42° parallel in the United States. Locations have been marked by the exchange of certified postal receipts sent from and returned to "A"—Truro, Massachusetts. Documentation: ink on map; receipts.

With its scrupulous gathering of courtroom-ready "evidence" (certified postal receipts), Huebler's attempt to use time to give form to a highly abstract and inhabitable space is notably forensic in ethos. As Huebler notes, "*42nd Parallel* used an aspect of the United States Postal System for a period of time to describe 3,000 miles of space and *was brought into its completed existence* through forms of documentation that in fact 'contain' sequential time and linear space in present time and place."[79] The existence of the merely interesting artwork here comes to paradoxically coincide with a presentation of evidence for its existence—evidence that is also, simultaneously, a record of a concrete period of time, made perceivable by the slow but steady circulation of information through a system otherwise resistant to visualization.

With this link between time and evidence in mind, let us return to Lippard's and Kosuth's comments on how conceptual art (which is "interesting or it isn't, just as one is informed or isn't") inaugurated a key shift in the conditions of art's reception. Based on cues given by the work itself, it would now be "more important" for critics to "transmit the information about [the artwork] accurately than to judge it." Their relinquishment of aesthetic judgment was widely viewed as an ideological hallmark of the advanced art of the sixties overall, as evinced above all in its embrace of the interesting. In "Art and Objecthood," Fried thus cited Donald Judd's comment "a work needs only to be interesting" in a confirmation of his suspicion that "the literalists have largely avoided the issue of quality or value":

> Judd himself has as much as acknowledged the problematic character of the literalist enterprise by his claim, "A work needs only to be interesting." For Judd, as for literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) *interest*. Whereas within the modernist arts nothing short of *conviction* . . . matters at all. (Literalist work is often condemned . . . for be-

79. Douglas Huebler, "Catalogue of First Exhibition to Exist Solely as a Catalogue in Which the Work and Its Documentation Appear," in *Six Years*, p. 62; emphasis mine.

> ing boring. A tougher charge would be that it is merely interesting.) ["AO," p. 165]

With this implicit restriction of aesthetic judgments to ones based solely on strong and unequivocal feelings ("conviction"), interesting with its basis in weak and indeterminate feeling became an effective term for Fried to register, as a symptom, the purported avoidance of "quality or value" that defines "literalist sensibility." To shore up this contrast between evaluations founded on conviction and interest (and his subtle exclusion of the latter from aesthetic experience proper), Fried strikingly overlaid it with the contrast between two kinds of time. While the judgment of conviction results from something "grasped or intuited or recognized . . . or seen *once and for all*" ("AO," p. 165; my emphasis) (that is, as "a kind of *instantaneousness*" ["AO," p. 167]), the judgment of "interest" ensues from an experience of "endless or indefinite *duration*," as exemplified best for Fried by sculptor Tony Smith's description of a highway drive on the unfinished New Jersey turnpike ("AO," p. 166). It is this description of highway driving as model for artistic practice that Fried uses to most explicitly link "interesting" to sequential time, or the duration of "go[ing] on and on." As Fried states, "endlessness, being able to go on and on, even having to go on and on, is central . . . to the concept of interest" ("AO," p. 166). And it is precisely this continuous and divisible temporality, so central to the discursive art of the novel, that for Fried disqualifies "interesting" from counting as a judgment of value or quality at all: "The concept of interest implies temporality in the form of continuing attention directed at the object while the concept of conviction does not" ("AO," p. 167). But, in denying *any* aesthetic meaning to interesting, Fried thus ends up excluding "continuing attention directed at [an] object" from the kind of engagement that results in claims of aesthetic value, leaving us with a very odd understanding of what it means to be aesthetically engaged.

For all of their differences, Fried and Lippard thus agree that the merely interesting art of the 1960s in some way abandoned "the issue of quality or value," in a way either indexed by its discursiveness/communicativeness (Lippard) or its "on and on" temporality (Fried). While Lippard casts this abandonment of aesthetic evaluation in a positive light (as a progressive, anti-institutional stance) and Fried in a negative one, the assumption in both cases is that judgments of quality or value (instantaneous and final) and acts of communicating information (discursive and ongoing) are mutually exclusive. Is this in fact true?

To answer this, let us consider Richard Serra and Philip Glass's *Long*

Beach Island, Word Location (1969) as presented in *Letters*, a catalog/exhibition curated by Philip Simkin in the form of documents in a box:

> In a 30-acre area of marshland and coastline 32 polyplanar speakers were placed in chosen locations so as to cover the site.
>
> The word *is* was recorded on a 15-minute tape loop and became the sound source for the speakers. The volume was controlled so that the speakers did not interrelate, but could only be heard within their proximity. In other words, two speakers could not be heard in the same area. Each sound dissolved in a given space.
>
> The placement of a specific word in location points to the artificiality of a language. The imposition of the word as symbol negates the experience of the place. Conversely the experience of the place denies itself in relation to the word. (For by defining itself in relation to language it denies its meaningfulness independent of definition.)[80]

Even if viewed in person (which would by no means be an easy feat), *Long Beach Island, Word Location*'s vastly extended form (thirty-two emissions of sound distributed over thirty acres of land) would not only preclude it from being taken in "once and for all" but would make it extremely difficult to perceive in general. For this reason, as with the receipts that "complete" Huebler's *42nd Parallel*, the work's documentation is not merely supplementary but intrinsic to its form—pointing once again to the merely interesting artwork's identification with evidence. One suspects that Fried would not have hesitated to describe this as a kind of literalism, the antivirtual or discursive, merely interesting ethos of minimalism taken even further, it would seem, by conceptual art. Yet *Long Beach Island, Word Location* is hardly a case of "what you see is what you see" (Frank Stella); and it is not really a representation of the idea of art as idea (Kosuth).[81] What Serra and Glass's work rather asks us to "see" or perceive and also form an idea about is precisely the *dissonance* between sensory experience and ideas that their artwork describes. A wide range of merely interesting conceptual artworks explores the same friction: from LeWitt's *Variations of Incomplete Cubes*, which, as Jonathan Flatley notes, strives for "a particular, and particularly maximized, tension between perception and conception"; to Huebler's "road trip" pieces ("I realized that I was measuring *sense impressions against conceptual knowledge*, the conceptual knowledge being maps"); to Mel Bochner's serial projects ("In what I am

80. Richard Serra and Philip Glass, *Long Beach Island, Word Location,* in *Six Years*, pp. 106–7.

81. Frank Stella, "Questions to Stella and Judd," interview by Bruce Glaser, ed. Lippard, in *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1968), p. 158. *Art as Idea as Idea* (1967) is the title of one of Kosuth's serial projects.

doing the synthesis is in *the contradiction of the visible and the mental*").[82] In repeatedly staging this clash between conceptual knowledge and sensory perception (one importantly not reconcilable by the revelation of one mental faculty as superior to the other, as in the Kantian sublime), merely interesting conceptual art helps us see that the aesthetic judgment of interesting, which places us in an affective relationship to the fact of our not knowing something, encodes an analogous clash between knowledge and feeling. This clash comes in the form of a question akin to Ruscha's "Huh?": What was it that I must have noticed and simultaneously *not* noticed about the object in order to have judged it interesting? Noticed because my attention had to have been drawn by *some* feature; not noticed because here I am, wondering what it was. Like the *not logical yet not exactly illogical* relationship between nonaesthetic features and aesthetic judgments, there is thus a double negative at the heart (or "Huh?") of the interesting: a not knowing exactly what it is that we are feeling, and a feeling about this very fact of not knowing (which can feel exciting or irritating).

The dissonance between knowing and feeling in the subjective judgment of interesting thus tellingly corresponds to the friction between ideas and sensory experience in the merely interesting object. Dennis Oppenheim strikingly invokes interesting as the very sign of this friction, as if it were a kind of spark or "small fire" produced by it, in a comment on *Time Line* (1968), a series of photographs documenting his three-mile-long "plotting" of the International Date Line at the U.S.–Canadian boundary on a frozen river in Maine: "Some interesting things happen [in my work] process: you tend to *get grandiose ideas* when you look at large areas on maps, then you find they're difficult to reach so you *develop a strenuous relationship* with the land."[83] In a parallel to the clash staged between the generality of words and the particularity of place in *Long Beach Island, Word Location*, here we find the interesting explicitly located between the flash of ideas and a physical experience that takes time to *develop;* between the spontaneous conceptualizing we do when we glance at maps and the *durée* of the body's relationship to the spaces they represent. *Time Line* thus shows how the "maximized tension" between concept and perception in merely interesting conceptual art is also, crucially, a tension between two temporalities. As with the efforts of Ruscha and other early conceptu-

82. Jonathan Flatley, "Art Machine," in *Sol LeWitt*, p. 95; Huebler, in Huebler et al., WBAI-FM, New York, symposium, in *Six Years*, p. 156, emphasis mine; and Mel Bochner, "Problematic Aspects of Critical/Mathematic Constructs in My Art," lecture, ICA London, Apr. 1971, in *Six Years*, p. 236, emphasis mine.

83. Discussion with Dennis Oppenheim, excerpted in *Six Years,* p. 184.

alists to counteract the instant seized by photography with the *durée* embodied by the series, the dissonant conjoining of temporalities in later works like *Time Line* hints at a similarly complex temporality in the judgment of the interesting itself. For while objects do tend to strike us as interesting immediately or spontaneously, the interesting then proceeds to slow things down—as if it were a judgment paradoxically comprised of two phases: one that is instantaneous followed by one with duration.

To explain what I mean by this succession of temporalities, it helps to turn back to Serra and Glass's work. The first two paragraphs of *Long Beach Island, Word Location* are clearly a verbal description of *Long Beach Island, Word Location*:

> In a 30-acre area of marshland and coastline 32 polyplanar speakers were placed in chosen locations so as to cover the site.
>
> The word *is* was recorded on a 15-minute tape loop and became the sound source for the speakers. The volume was controlled so that the speakers did not interrelate, but could only be heard within their proximity. In other words, two speakers could not be heard in the same area. Each sound dissolved in a given space.

Note that, while seemingly an aid to our perception of *Long Beach Island, Word Location*, its description is actually describing how the work's sensory elements resist perception: "two speakers *could not be heard* in the same area"; "each sound *dissolved* in a given space." More ironically, the very words ostensibly helping us get a sense of the place delimited (thirty acres of marshland) are informing us that "the word as symbol" *negates* "experience of . . . place."

> The placement of the specific word in location points to the artificiality of a language. The imposition of the word as symbol negates the experience of the place. Conversely the experience of the place denies itself in relation to the word. (For by defining itself in relation to language it denies its meaningfulness independent of definition.)

This third paragraph comes across as different from the preceding two. But how?

To begin, it looks less like a description and more like justification of the work's claim to significance, as if responding to the question of an imaginary interlocutor: Why is *Long Beach Island, Word Location* interesting? Why indeed? Because by distributing hits of sound across a natural environment to demonstrate how "the experience of place denies itself in relation to the word" and "the imposition of the word . . . negates the experience of place," it gives us both an abstract idea *and* a palpable sense

of a discord between concept and sensory experience and their respective temporalities. Regardless of whether we actually become convinced by these statements that *Long Beach Island, Word Location* is an arresting and important work, their function in the work is clearly that of displaying evidence in support of its claim to be interesting, though in a manner that brings this aesthetic claim to our attention in a curiously belated way, as an afterthought or a postscript to the more time-consuming presentation of evidence on the claim's behalf. Of course, a claim to quality or value has to exist prior to any presentation of evidence made in support of it, just as a thing has to be produced before it can be publically displayed. But, much in the way that strategies of display and circulation came to be incorporated into the production of merely interesting conceptual artworks, here there is a sense in which the justification for an aesthetic judgment seems to be pushing its way into the frame of the judgment itself.

Serra and Glass's collaboration in *Letters* thus shows how the "merely interesting" conceptual artwork becomes coextensive with evidence in support of its claim to quality or value, though in a manner that embeds the claim inside this evidence, as if the evidence were more arresting and important than the claim. We see this also in Robert Barry's *Art Work* (1970), part of the landmark *Information* show curated by Kynaston McShine:

> Art Work
>
> It is always changing. It has order. It doesn't have a specific place. Its boundaries are not fixed. It affects other things. It may be accessible but go unnoticed. Part of it may also be part of something else. Some of it is familiar. Some of it is strange. Knowing of it changes it.[84]

Why might one find *Art Work*, or really any artwork, as its generic title invites us to ask, interesting? Because it manages to be at once "familiar" and "strange"; because while "it has order," "it is always changing"; because "it affects other things." In addition to supplying justifications for why someone might find it interesting, *Art Work* works almost like a point-by-point definition of the interesting as we have explored it so far: as a diachronic aesthetic that embodies the "capitalist oxymoron"[85] of serial novelty ("some of it is familiar"; "some of it is strange"); as an aesthetic that attempts to reconcile modernity's rationalization and abstraction with its emphasis on the contingent and ephemeral ("it has order"; "it is always changing"); as a judgment with an unusually wide range of nonaesthetic

84. Robert Barr, *Art Work* (1970), in *Six Years,* p. 178.
85. Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* (London, 2005), p. 5.

and aesthetic applications ("it doesn't have a specific place"; "its boundaries are not fixed"); as an aesthetic judgment easily combined or coupled with *other* assessments of aesthetic quality ("part of it may also be part of something else")[86] and one so low in affect that it is chronically easy to miss ("it may be accessible but go unnoticed"). In a way that casts a new light on conceptual art's fascination with things typically exhibited as scientific proof in legal contexts (receipts, data, blood samples, and invoices), *Art Work* reveals the interesting to be a forensic aesthetic. For here the merely interesting artwork not only bears the look of a public display of evidence but identifies itself with evidence of a very particular kind: information presented in justification of an implicit claim to quality or value (if merely that of being interesting). To be sure, the information presented by the conceptual artwork to make its case for this claim may not always be coextensive with its form; this immanence seems specific to later works coterminous with their own documentation or based entirely on language. But, even in cases where no justification is readily available, I would argue that it is in the nature of the interesting to pose the problem of this justification immediately and to solicit a demand for the justification, from someone.

In recognizing how it diverts our attention from judgments (quick) to justifications (slow) and thus how its relation to evidence connects to its relation to time, we can see what most importantly sets interesting apart from other aesthetic evaluations. When someone proclaims that they find, say, a tree or a poem beautiful (a judgment rarely made, it is worth noting, about novels), the force of the conviction underlying the judgment tends to channel our attention back to the sheer event of her having found it so. This is why it can be so strangely difficult to respond to someone's passionate declaration that something is beautiful. Whether we nod in sympathetic agreement or politely look at the ground, we are likely in either case to silently think, There you have it, or I guess that's that. As Hockney and Rivers note, there is something "final" about the beautiful, which often seems to double as a signal that aesthetic evaluation is complete. Even if one agrees with the judge, but in a way that will become especially conspicuous if we disagree, his emphatic judgment is likely to do nothing but call attention to itself as an emphatic judgment.

In contrast, when someone feels compelled to make public his evaluation of an object as interesting, we are compelled to immediately ask, Why? Here, aesthetic evaluation seems no longer finalized by the act of making an aesthetic claim but rather to have just gotten on its way. Somehow

86. See note 67.

facilitated by the very features that at first glance seemed to *disqualify* the interesting as an aesthetic evaluation (semantic indefiniteness, affective ambiguity, anticipatory as well as recursive temporality), it is as if the judgment of interesting solicits a why from others precisely in order to create an occasion for the judge to make her reasons public. This is perhaps why we tell people we find things interesting not only when we find them unbeautiful but when we find them beautiful, too. The judgment of interesting thus neither is the antithesis of conviction nor is devoid of the claim to universal validity that for Kant distinguishes aesthetical judgments from judgments of taste.[87] For when I am compelled to make public my appraisal of something as interesting, I am speaking precisely from my conviction that it is objectively worth paying attention to, *regardless* of my appraisal's vulnerability to time. When we judge, say, a bad movie to be interesting (and when we say interesting we so often do mean "bad but nonetheless interesting"), we are therefore essentially making a plea for extending the periodicity of aesthetic evaluation: Let's keep on talking about this movie, let's continue giving it attention, even though is it not particularly good. Based exactly on our conviction that the object merits our going on, merits stretching the moment of aesthetic appraisal to include its discursive and intersubjective aftermath, we tell people we find works interesting when we want an opportunity to show them our evidence or to present support for our claims of value in a way capable of convincing them of their rightness. In other words, we tell people we find works interesting when we want to do criticism.

Far from being an aesthetic without content, the deepest content of interesting is the process of its own justification. The term's dominance in the discourse surrounding conceptual art is, thus, far from indicating the latter's "avoidance of the issue of quality or value." Indeed, by soliciting a request from the other for us to show them our evidence (which would suggest a deeper connection between Fried's critique of the interesting artwork for being time-consuming and for resembling a demanding person than his own essay seems to realize),[88] the interesting actually extends what aesthetic evaluation might mean or encompass within its parameters: not just the act of judgment but that judgment's discursive and narrative consequences. Indeed, no aesthetic judgment seems better suited to epistemologically enrich the power of aesthetic judgments, by extending the periodicity, and disclosing the dialogic possibilities, of this communicative act. By making art coincide with evidence at so many levels, the forensic art

87. I am grateful to Paul Gilmore for raising this question.
88. I am indebted to Aaron Kunin for this insight.

of the sixties seems especially exemplary of this potential. If no aesthetic judgment moves us faster away from judgments to justifications than interesting (as opposed to making the latter seem merely incidental to what it means to make an aesthetic claim), what could be more interesting than art that equates itself to the presentation of evidence through and through?

All of this sheds light not only on the centrality of interesting to conceptual art but on its ongoing appeal to critics. In addition to the way the interesting suspends a once-and-for-all appraisal, for a "continuing attention directed at the object" that might help us figure out why it made us go "Huh?" in the first place, the power of this seemingly mild aesthetic lies in the surprisingly ambitious way in which it redefines the process of aesthetic evaluation as including the other's subsequent demand for us to justify it. There is thus a deeply pedagogical dimension to the interesting as well. For in the effort to provide evidence capable of proving the rightness of our judgment to our questioner (which will of course take time), we are likely to seek and present additional information about the work and also to debate with him about the work—not only for the final end of convincing him but as a way of enlisting him to convince *us* or help us arrive at a fuller understanding of why we thought the work was interesting to begin with.

Diachronic and informational, forensic and dialogic: the aesthetic of the interesting thus has the capacity to produce knowledge. From Adorno on the products of the culture industry (con) to Cavell on Hollywood screwball comedies (pro) or Helen Vendler on Wallace Stevens (pro) to Fredric Jameson on Wallace Stevens (con), *all* contemporary criticism is thus, in some sense, an implicit justification of why the object that the critic has chosen to talk about is interesting (which can be for "innumerable" reasons, as Henry James reminds us, including ones grounded in feelings of ambivalence and dislike). The interesting thus shows a way out of the deadlock between the old idea that the task of criticism is to produce verdicts of artistic greatness and mediocrity or of success and failure, and the more generally accepted idea that criticism should try to purge itself of aesthetic evaluation entirely (since, given its institutional context, it cannot help but tend to reproduce values already set in place). The assumption here is that if one wants to be critical of how aesthetic values are historically and institutionally reproduced and of the social consequences of their reproduction one should cut these evaluations out of the picture entirely. Yet, in neither reducing criticism to the making of aesthetic judgments nor presuming that indifference to aesthetic value is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the various forces *behind* the production of value, the interesting cleaves right through the opposition between aes-

theticism and philistinism. In doing so, it keeps the possibility alive that a critic might actually continue the task of influencing public judgment, if only in the modest way of suggesting that some texts are more worth paying attention to than others and then supplying reasons why.

It is here that we can begin to glimpse why the fact that the judgment of interesting seems peculiar to restricted or what Kosuth calls "serious" communities (groups based on specialized knowledge in which "an audience separate from the participants doesn't exist") does not necessarily entail an exclusivity that belies its claim for universality. For while it may be true that interesting always begins life as the judgment of those in the know (as seems in keeping with how its recognition of novelty requires a preexisting knowledge of frameworks), the demand for justifications that it solicits from others, which in turn creates the occasion for one to supply them, suggests that this aesthetic is actually aimed at enfranchising outsiders and thus expanding the boundaries of the original interest group. Interesting is both what makes "serious" subcultural groups cohere in the first place and what makes it possible for people to belong to many of them, creating the webs of filiation that make these interest groups overlap. Much in the same way it "bestrides" aesthetical and nonaesthetical judgments, we thus find the interesting at the border between the common and the specialized, bespeaking a desire to open up the "serious" group founded on the possession of specialized knowledge, but without dissolving its autonomy, in a way that once again points to its special relation to pedagogy. It is here, as well, that we can see why the interesting, while noticeably lacking the political (if not always progressive) symbolism of the sublime and the beautiful, is not entirely devoid of a politics of its own[89] — certainly not a revolutionary politics, by any means, but rather a Habermasian project of expanding the public sphere.

In the same piece in which he notes that conceptual art "is interesting or it isn't, just as one is informed or isn't," Kosuth shores up this account of the work by citing the following comment by Clement Greenberg as a foil: "Aesthetic judgments are given and contained in the immediate experience of art. They coincide with it; they are not arrived at afterwards through reflection or thought."[90] Looked at closely, Greenberg's claim about the impossibility of an aesthetic experience devoid of judgment (which I think is right) doesn't help Kosuth prove that conceptual art, for all of its preoccupation with "reflection or thought," made no claims to aesthetic quality. As I have been arguing throughout, the art was interest-

89. As pointed out to me by Franco Moretti.
90. Quoted in Kosuth, "Introductory Note by the American Editor," p. 146.

ing. Greenberg's stress on the instantaneity and finality of aesthetic judgments does helpfully disclose, however, why aesthetic judgments are not in themselves interesting—which is for exactly the same reasons that their time-consuming and ongoing justifications are. This is why they will always play a key role for analysts of culture who have a critical and aesthetic interest in producing knowledge about objects that interest them, including the *merely* interesting ones.