BEING THEN WITHIN A CONTEXT OF REVOLUTION: Six Notes on Two Films by Lawrence Weiner

Q. WHERE IS THE USE OF ART TODAY AND WHAT HAS USE TO DO WITH THE UTILIZATION OF LANGUAGE AS A MEANS?
A. AS A POINT OF INTEREST FOR DIALECTICAL DISCUSSION.
   Lawrence Weiner

0. Where to the Avant-Garde?

The post-war avant-garde came in twos, or so it seemed. Take, for instance, the art historical narrative that squares off the formalist avant-garde, which is the progeny of Greenbergian criticism, against the transgressive strategies of the neo-avant-garde, which scattered the seeds of epistemological doubt upon the modernist field of pure ‘opticality.’ Conceptual art is a case in point, utilizing language “as a point of interest for dialectical discussion,” as Weiner has it, in order to question the privileging of the visual over the verbal in modernist art. Contrary to the modernist sublimation of the material support of painting, elevating the ‘medium’ to a conveyor of ontological truth, Weiner proposes that it is through the act of speech that one gets at the operations of another medium, not simply the materiality of language – conceptual art is not concrete poetry – but, what we may call, the social apparatus of ideology.

This agonistic model of avant-garde art has been carried over to the terrain of avant-garde film, even though this act of transferal scrambled the relation between some of the terms used above. I refer the so-called discourse of ‘political modernism,’ which, according to the familiar, if problematic schema of Peter Wollen divided avant-garde film between on the one hand the ‘ontological materialism’ of American structural film-makers such as Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, and Hollis Frampton, or members of the London Co-op, such as Malcolm LeGrice or Peter Gidal, and on the other hand the ‘post-Brechtian’ counter-cinema of Godard, Hanoun or Straub-Huillet. Whereas structural film is viewed, paradoxically, to constitute a last outpost of the essentialist aesthetics of Greenbergian modernism in the late 1960s, which foregrounds the formal and material properties of the cinematic medium, as in the flicker films of Sharits, the latter is understood to represent the fore guard of a new kind of revolutionary activity, which unleashes a semiotic struggle within the ideological domain of representation, reworking and manipulating the materials of signification themselves. This
textual model of filmic production, which is construed from a conceptual amalgam of structural linguistics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism, transforms the knowing subject of modernist film (and painting), who was reflected in the unified whole of the work, into “an agent who is working with and within language in order to make something that cannot be precisely pre-conceived, that must remain problematical and in a sense unfinished, interminable.”

It is no secret that the discourse of political modernism has reached an impasse long since its inception in the early seventies. I shall not go over the various reasons for this crisis, except for pointing out two specific problems that shall occupy me in the following. To begin with, the position and distinctness of the dividing lines that were drawn by critics such as Wollen to mark the internal and external boundaries of avant-garde film are highly questionable. From the sometimes lofty perspective of the post-Brechtian avant-garde, it may have appeared that not only structural film, but also the visual arts in general were still sweating out the fevers of Greenbergian idealism. “It would be paradoxical indeed,” Wollen wrote, “if film, a form still in its infancy when these momentous shifts [of the historical avant-garde] took place, could restore the sense of direction that the other arts often seem to have lost.” Yet such a viewpoint, if truly held, not only buys into the infamous proposition of Peter Bürger that the neo-avant-garde formed no more than an empty repetition of the past, but also overlooks the filmic practice of conceptual and post-minimal artists, such as David Lamelas, Marcel Broodthaers, Dan Graham, or Lawrence Weiner, which emerged precisely in the charged force field between the institutional domains of art and cinema; an interstitial zone of cultural practice that the notion of the ‘two avant-gardes’ could only conceive in terms of a strict frontier between the ‘purism’ and ‘essentialism’ of modernist formalism and the semiotic politics of counter-cinema.

The point is not simply to expand the category of post-Brechtian film to include, say, the films of Weiner. Such a gesture of inclusion within film history threatens to miss how his films are articulated as well on the artistic practices of minimalism and pop art. What becomes necessary instead is that we discover the internal blindspots that helped shape and guide the discourse of political modernism. Where, in other words, does its oppositional model of semiotic counter-strategies fall short? Wollen’s subversive, ‘semiotic’ agent of avant-garde film sought to occupy a critical position somehow to the side, if not completely outside the symbolic order of communication. Nevertheless, this agent was incapable of ever leaving the prison house of language and was doomed to circulate forever on the boundaries of the ideological state apparatuses described by Althusser, of which the cinematic apparatus
of classical cinema formed a special case. Not only did this double bind of the spectator of avant-garde film leave something to be desired, but the social topography of power that this spectator inhabited, which was structured according to a binary logic of inside versus outside, was already in the course of being surpassed by another configuration of social control; one more flexible and less prone to dialectical analysis.

To provide a hint of where this type of reasoning may lead us, one need only recall Paul Sharits’ interest in ‘bio-feedback’ models of experience as an aid in constructing his flicker films. Here, another process of individuation comes to the fore, which is located at the level of the nervous system and jars with the notion of a semiotic subject locked into a “productive decipherment” of the world-as-text. This semiotic agent, despite all claims regarding the anteriority of language to thought, retains the status of a knowing subject capable of “generating new types of meaning.” However, Sharits’ feedback model of subjectification allows no such position of critical exteriority and begs discussion in relation to an alternative conception of how social power invests bodies with meaning than the namely what Michel Foucault has identified by the name of biopolitics. From the eighteenth century on, he argues, two complementary technologies of power emerged to administer and control human behavior and productive practice. Whereas one mechanism strives to individualize the body “as an organism endowed with capacities,” the other works on the more general level of the human species, replacing the body by “general biological processes” in order to achieve a state of homeostasis within the population as a whole. The organizing schema of biopower is thus contained within the two superimposed series of, on the one hand, the disciplinary institutions, such as schools, hospitals, barracks, and factories, that govern the training and optimization of the individual body and, on the other hand, the regulatory State apparatuses, such as health-care systems, that manage the biosociological processes of the human masses. As Foucault has pointed out, the two technologies of biopower came into existence at different times, with disciplinary institutions arising before regulatory mechanisms, but they tended to be articulated with each other in modern societies. Nevertheless, it may be argued that the institutional grid work of disciplinary power formed the dominant, organizational schema of a Fordist economy, whereas the regulatory mechanisms of biopower come fully into their own in the flexible and fluctuating networks of a post-Fordist economy, whilst shedding their statist character. Our reality is no longer, or not predominantly, that of a disciplinary society, but of a control society where power no longer is localized within institutional sites, but operates in a more diffuse manner, one more immanent to the social field.
Elsewhere I have explored certain aspects of this alternate genealogy of the avant-garde, one that is centered upon (de)regulatory mechanisms of psycho-physiological feedback, rather than upon semiotic strategies of disrupting the ideological functioning of signification and representation. In the following I wish turn my attention to another manner in which the neo-avant-garde practice during the sixties and seventies brushed up against the social configurations of biopower, taking two films by Weiner as my main focus. I shall depart from one of the main tenets of political modernism, namely that the avant-garde is engaged in an attempt to de-automatize the functioning of language; that is, to give birth to a radical type of speech act that may escape the normative patterns of ideology. Nevertheless, as I already suggested, this line of flight left the flank of the avant-garde exposed to those regulatory forces of biopower that were soon to manifest themselves in the domain of language. Paolo Virno has contended, for instance, that the emergence of a post-Fordist economy coincided with a capitalist valorization of the general human faculty of speech. According to this argument, to which I shall return at the end of my essay, employees of the service industry are rewarded for the ‘virtuosity’ of a linguistic performance that finds its fulfillment in itself. What are we then to make of the linguistic performances of conceptual art, which Weiner puts on display in his movies and that contain so many references to the political speech acts of the period? Before we conclude, all too hastily, that the cultural revolution of the sixties was nothing but a dress rehearsal, a Lehrstücke for a very different type of language game than the discourse of political modernism imagined, let us try to, once more, to ‘read’ its script together.

1. To Read Together

According to a well-known story, Jean-Paul Sartre was reproached by a Maoist comrade in 1972 for wasting energy on his monumental biography of Gustave Flaubert, The Family’s Idiot. The Maoist friend implored him to compose a proletarian novel, rather than losing himself in this autopsy of the bourgeois, literary imagination. Why did Sartre not deliver on his own call, voiced in What is Literature?, to produce a committed mode of literature that would “go beyond the antinomy of word and action” and embody “the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution”? Sartre’s attitude remained non-plussed. He rejoined the Maoist by posing a counter-question. He did not want to know what the contents of such a popular novel should be, but how it would be presented: “How might one
go about striking the attention of the masses? A popular revolutionary novel ought not to be
read by everyone alone in his corner: it would be necessary to read together.”

Indeed, how could such a collective exercise in reading assume shape? What kind of
mise-en-scène would be required? Sartre’s question was rhetorical, insisting that ‘to read
together’ must remain an improbable project at best. Nevertheless two feature-length movies
by Lawrence Weiner, A First Quarter and A Second Quarter, shot between the years of 1973
and 1975, come close to fitting the bill. These two films, which are more akin than in name
alone, demonstrate what it may mean “to read together.” In Weiner’s films, the performers
take turns reciting and enacting the works of the artist, which since 1968 have assumed the
form of verbal statements, concerning, as the artist describes, “the presentation of the
relationships between human beings & objects & objects to objects in relation to human
beings.” Throughout the two films the manner of reading varies: sometimes the performers
read the statements together, at other times they do so by themselves; sometimes they read
aloud, at other times they do so silently; sometimes they read to the audience of the movie,
while at other times the audience is left to read for itself. Reading is thus not restricted to a
private occupation, but becomes a polyphonic experience. In the hands of Weiner, cinema
was transformed into a massive reading apparatus. Or, perhaps, it were better to say that
cinema is transformed into a kind of teaching machine, since the experimental subject of
Weiner’s films is formed by the performance of an object lesson of a most elementary, if
perverse kind. In these films, as I shall demonstrate, Weiner goes “beyond the antinomy of
word and action,” actually putting words into bodies in a manner that Sartre could not have
foreseen.

2. Mise-en-scène

A First Quarter was shot in black and white in March 1973. The film is located in and
around New York City. Two years later, A Second Quarter was filmed in West Berlin. As the
title indicates, the Berlin movie builds upon the structural procedures already established by
the New York movie. Each revolves around a group of three nameless characters: a ménage
à trois consisting of two women and a man and representing various nationalities. The
spectator follows these figures as they drift through the near empty city streets or engage in
various mundane activities within the confines of a private interior. In each movie the three
characters are played by different performers. Although the film by no means forms a
documentary and plays off certain codes of narrative film, the plot of the twin films, if any, is
of a severely minimal kind. Following Weiner’s own summary of the action, the films portray “three persons engaged upon an unspecified activity [and] within the functioning of this activity works of art.”

The movies are set in the present, that is to say the early seventies, and the general atmosphere is ominous, spiked with references to the war in Indochina and current social unrest. I shall return to a discussion of the historical texture of the movies, but first I wish to focus on the verbal content of the films.

The dialogue between the performers (if dialogue is the proper term) consists exclusively of Weiner’s linguistic pieces or ‘statements which consist of no more than sentence fragments.’ In fact, the whole environment of the performers is informed by Weiner’s statements. Not only do the statements provide the content of all verbal communication, but they are also reproduced as typewritten communiqués, printed on wall posters, painted on the walls of the street, and listened to on tape recorders. Furthermore, several statements give rise to more than one mode of performance: not only spoken, they are also physically enacted. In short, Weiner’s works completely mediate the activity of the performers as if their microcosmic world were caught up in an immense feedback loop. Unlike the closed circuits of the mass media, however, that have their end in themselves, the iterability of Weiner’s statements work towards differentiation within a situation, rather than merely affirming a given state of affairs.

Certain statements describe the execution of a particular task such as ONE SHEET OF PLYWOOD SECURED TO THE FLOOR OR THE WALL or ONE STEEL I-BEAM PLACED UPON THE BOUNDARY AND ALLOWED TO REST, whereas other, more concise statements, such as DISPLACED or TRANSFERRED, have a less determinate radius of action. Despite such differing degrees of specificity, the statements used in the two films hold certain properties in common. First of all, they concern “the relationship between objects and human beings and the relationship of objects to objects in relation to human beings,” to adopt the standard phrase of the artist. Weiner has often explained that his statements do nothing more than translate a basic function of sculpture into language, namely the presentation of an objective relationship between the spectator and the world. The statements, that is, objectify a situation in which we might find ourselves, rather than impress an authorial point of view upon the stuff of reality. Accordingly, the statement ONE SHEET OF PLYWOOD SECURED TO THE FLOOR OR THE WALL verbalizes both a fundamental property of sculpture (i.e. a plinth) and painting (i.e. a pictorial support) and it conceives of a potential orientation of the recipient of the work in relation to a given architectural space (as in ‘x marks the spot’). Of course, this work does not explicitly state that the floor or wall belongs to that of a gallery or museum.
space. The “sheet of plywood” remains, therefore, also just that, a type of construction board, and need not be read as a metaphor of art.

Secondly, several statements describe an action that occurs across or in relation to a static boundary, barrier, or threshold of some kind. The edges or limits of a natural or cultural territory are marked, disturbed or transgressed by various, physical means, as in ONE REGULAR RECTANGULAR OBJECT PLACED ACROSS AN INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY. Numerous other examples appear in A First Quarter, such as: A CONCISE EXPLOSION AT THE BOUNDARIES COMMON TO THREE COUNTRIES or A RIVER SPANNED BY A TEMPORARY FIXED PONTON BRIDGE. From such examples it becomes clear that the boundary on which the statement operates can be assigned a topographical, political, or even economic reality, but it may also assume a more indeterminate reality, as in the statement TO AND FRO. AND TO AND FRO, AND FRO AND TO, which employs the syntactical means of inversion to produce an image in our mind of restless movement, back and forth, across a threshold or dividing line. Indeed TO AND FRO provides a central trope of Weiner’s A First Quarter, which continuously explores, disrupts and confuses the boundaries between interior and exterior, private and public, self and other. TO AND FRO... structures the film on the formal level of the montage and the material level of the mise-en-scène. Identical scenes recur at different moments within the movie, scrambling the narrative order of before and after, while object relations within individual shots are subjected to an incessant see-saw movement. In one scene, for instance, TO AND FRO... is realized by pushing a cigarette pack back and forth across a table surface. Moreover, in a twist on the Freudian game of fort da, TO AND FRO... invests the intersubjective dynamic between the performers. The performers constantly switch sexual partners and during one amorous encounter, the female protagonist recites TO AND FRO while tracing a line, back and forth, across the chest of the man with her finger. Later she utters the same statement while pushing a coffee mug across the table in the direction of the other two figures. This gesture appears to trigger a “to and fro” on the level of memory since the movie then cuts to a flashback of the former tryst. Yet, to describe the scene as a flashback may even be misleading since the spectator can never be sure what comes before and what comes after in these movies.

The spatio-temporal discontinuity of the films, which lack an obvious narrative development or climax, is equalled by the instability of the social roles played by the performers. They do not personify an individual character in any ordinary sense of the word. Their performance does not add up to the ‘stylized repetition of acts’ from which social identity is forged, but is dispersed across a field of active and passive positions, whereby
each performer within the unit evacuates their previous place within the triangle in order to assume the place of the other.24 And this continuous displacement of the performers within the social matrix of the group takes place to the beat of such iterated phrases as AND THEN RELEGATED TO ANOTHER GENDER/AND THEN UTILIZED AS TO ANOTHER GENDER.

It follows that the spectator is not granted a privileged perspective from which to comprehend the connection between the portrayed events. The movies are strung together from, at best, loosely connected fragments. There are no establishing shots, and the jumps between exterior and interior scenes occur suddenly, without transition or apparent narrative reason. The films are constructed as a series of “abutments,” and each scene is treated as a single, continuous component, which is not subdivided by internal cuts, although shots will often be repeated either in a row or slotted at different intervals.25 Moreover, the lengths of the shots vary widely. In A Second Quarter, for instance, scenes of more extended duration are interspersed with short bursts of images which suggest the dramatic unfolding of a chase. The performers leap across rooftops and run down alleyways with a briefcase under the arm. These random quotes from the thriller genre left aside, Weiner’s movies have little suspense value to offer. Indeed, most shots in his films objectify time by stretching themselves beyond the customary length of most shots in commercial cinema. Not only the specter of Jean-Luc Godard, but also that of Andy Warhol circulates through these films.26

3. Language Model

*IF IN FACT THERE IS COMMUNICATION
ALL COMMUNICATION IS A FORM OF TRANSLATION*

Lawrence Weiner27

Like his artistic procedure in general, Weiner’s model of language is basically of a materialist nature: each statement is formed with an eye to the “representation of an empirical existing fact.”28 Weiner’s statements have a constative and an operative function: written in the past tense, the statements describe a situation that existed in the past, but they hold out the possibility that this past situation may be reconstituted in the present, if not necessarily in a similar manner. Something was REMOVED or DEMARKED by someone at some time, but this transaction may be repeated indefinitely. It follows that Weiner’s materialist conception of language should not be confused with a naïve conception of the communicative value of language. The statements are not meant to simply describe what *is*, but to investigate how
things may be utilized, and without needing to ascribe a theoretical consistency to his view of language (Weiner’s interest in linguistics vary widely, from Piaget to Chomsky), it is perhaps best evaluated in terms of a use theory of language. The difficulty then is to understand how Weiner’s statements do not in themselves constitute a speech act, but how they may nevertheless lend themselves to a performative mode of expression.

One might say that language functions in Weiner’s statements first of all as a tool. The language use of the statements is instrumental, but it is not instrumentalized. In fact, the statements form an attempt to get back to the objects themselves, to repair the relationship between humans and things which has become ‘perverted’ (Weiner’s term) due to the proprietary and commodified character of object relations within capitalist society. Weiner does not propose that language can be returned to a state of innocence, but he maintains that there is an utopian potential of speech which he associates with a childlike view of the relationship between words and objects; a charmed world, that is, which does not bear the imprint of ideology and where things are simply known by their proper name:

*There are some points of Piaget that are correct. When he asks the children after the word: “Why this is called an apple?” and they say: “An apple is called an apple because the name ‘apple’ is written down inside the apple,” and that was their acceptance existentially that the world that they saw had some reason, as they were desperate to find reason.*

It is not insignificant that the children who were questioned by Piaget were shell-shock victims. Traumatized by the war, they were “desperate to find reason” in an unstable world torn asunder by violence. Everything must be put back in its proper place with its name tag securely fashioned. Piaget’s young patients found consolation by constructing an Adamic conception of language, whereby words merely seem to mirror an eternal order of things. It is clear that their need to ‘nomer’ things, as Weiner puts it, constitutes an effort to exclude all contingency from the domain of speech: a language purged of ideological signification.

Obviously, Weiner does not invoke the example of Piaget’s traumatized children in order to claim that language can be returned to a state of purity, merely reflecting a rational order where signs inhere directly in things. What he takes away from this scene, on the one hand, is that he is simply “using words for their meaning, presenting them to other people.”

That is to say, the statements function as tools of communication and although Weiner’s position, as we will see, is not devoid of a political dimension, it has nothing in common with a politics of the signifier that is so often associated with the linguistic turn of contemporary art and film. On the other hand, the preceding example bears out that any use theory of
language requires a theory of language acquisition as well. As I will show, *A Second Quarter*, hinges on the specific *didactic scene* by which children are inducted into the symbolic order of language. Weiner’s statements invoke an endless learning process, but there is no lesson to be imposed, no message to be extracted. Hence, in Weiner’s films the performers appear to be engaged in a continuous mode of apprenticeship, learning to speak, to translate, to construct the statements without any prior guidelines to serve them. In sum, two models of language interplay within Weiner’s work, which may be identified, if somewhat inadequately, as an instrumental and a learning theory of language. In order to understand how and why this may be the case, however, it will be helpful to consider two different notions of ‘translation’ that operate in his work.

Translation is a common trope in both films and Weiner has often asserted that translation into another language does not alter the meaning of his statements (unlike the example of poetry). Not only do Weiner’s statements have nothing to lose in translation, but they stand something to gain. Why should this be the case? Two notions of ‘translation’ are at work here. If we translate the statement *A TRANSLATION FROM ONE LANGUAGE TO ANOTHER*, as the statement suggests we do, the basic content of the statement remains the same. The statement, however, should not be confused with a tautological proposition. With each translation of a statement into another language, it is translated into another cultural configuration where the statement will acquire a different inflection. Weiner invites this possibility. The universal, *translatable* content of the statement – the informal ‘work’ -- is *translated* or formalized into a series of specific presentations, which depend upon the needs and requirements of a given situation and not determined by the artist. In *A First Quarter*, for instance, the statement *A SHALLOW TRENCH DUG FROM HIGH WATER MARK TO LOW TIDE MARK UPON A NORTH ATLANTIC BEACH* is constructed by a performer who digs his heel in the wet sand while strolling along the windswept shoreline. The trench works as a vectorial force, structuring the empty site and organizing the relations of the performers to each other and their environment. But this function of the work *in situ* was not predetermined. The statement may well receive another mode of realization in another time and place since the artist does not prescribe how the statement should be realized:

*When you translate the language from one language to another language to another language... you add to the ambiguity of the piece... And yet the general piece is there... When you say shallow trench, a shallow trench in fifteen different countries means fifteen different things. And yet it’s still a shallow trench.*
In other words, the statement – the objects, materials, and acts it represents – acquires a culturally specific meaning upon presentation. When the statement is utilized within a particular cultural configuration, the informal statement has been translated into a formal speech act that objectifies the situation in which it is uttered or enacted. Or, to borrow Weiner’s own words, the statement is given a metaphor by society upon its use.\textsuperscript{33}

We might now comprehend why Weiner’s films hinge on repetition. Iterability is namely the essence of the performative statement, since it does not accomplish what it says by an act of sheer will power. In order that “our word be our bond”\textsuperscript{34} and not be given in bad faith, the performative utterance must rely on a given set of social procedures and cultural conventions. The speech situation of the performative inheres within the shared world of a linguistic community. In order to realize its obligations, the performative speech act, whether it takes the form of a promise, a bet, or the bestowing of a name, must be supported by a previous social contract to which the parties are bound. Therefore, it is not sufficient that the speaker simply declares his intentions to keep his word; the speaker must acquiesce to a normative situation that is circumscribed by certain rules, roles and commitments. If this condition is not met, a paradoxical (and revolutionary) situation is called into existence; namely, a performative utterance must invoke a not-yet-existent community in order to validate itself. A situation, for instance, that was created by the American Declaration of Independence that spoke in the name of the ‘People’ before such an entity actually existed. The performative, therefore, makes an appeal to “an agreement in acting together that cannot be simply translated into the authorization of a prior law or set of rules.”\textsuperscript{35} Either the performative utterance accommodates itself to a social contract or it must call a new one into existence.

It is at the crucial junction, where the statement becomes a metaphor, that his work assumes political relevance. After all, the performance of a statement will either transform a given situation or it will accommodate itself to the social protocols that are already in place. It is important to stress, however, that the statement in itself does not form a metaphor. The statement invites, as it were, a collective form of reception whereby the performers might “find a place under the sun.”\textsuperscript{36} The statement suggests a method of discovering such a common horizon, but stops short of filling it with a ready-made meaning. The statement, in short, signals a potential field of action, but it says nothing about how we are to project ourselves into that situation.
4. Common Places

There are several ways in which one may think through Weiner’s concept of the metaphor. Maybe the most obvious course would be to begin with Sartre’s rejection of the poetical attitude in favor of engaged writing *What is literature?*, which corresponds closely to Weiner’s own notions of a committed art. However, I propose to take a different route, which allows us to historicize the political function of metaphorical speech within the public sphere of the 1960’s from a more productive angle, since it can be shown that this function has undergone a remarkable shift since the second half of the twentieth century. My source for this reading of the altered place of the metaphor within everyday speech is Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude*.

Virno’s discussion centers on the antithesis between the category of the ‘people’ and the ‘multitude.’ The former term describes the converging of citizens and producers into the synthetic unity of the state, whereas the latter term signifies a plurality, which knows no distinction between individual and collective, public and private. It is the multitude, according to Virno, that best describes today’s forms of life, which does not mean that there is no unity in contemporary society, but that “this unity is no longer the state; rather, it is language, intellect, the communal faculties of the human race.” In other words, the individual can no longer withdraw himself from the incessant mutations of social reality in which he is immersed. Individuals come to stand in a “direct and continuous relation with the world,” which enforces their reliance on the most general resources of language in order to find refuge or protection from the uncertainties and contingencies of existence.

Virno hunts down such ‘apotropaic devices’ of language by referring to the Aristotelian distinction between the linguistic categories of the ‘common place’ and the ‘special place.’ Common places constitute the basic armature of language and provide, as Virno notes, the “most valid logical and linguistic forms of our discourse.” Not only do these common places determine what counts as a meaningful expression to us, but they give structure to these expressions as well. The deep-lying category of the common place, however, never becomes visible on the daily surface of language use. By way of contrast, it is the so-called special places, to which Virno reckons metaphors, witticisms, and allocutions, that ornate the daily use of language. Special places form ways of saying things that are appropriate to the various institutional sites of social life, whether a political party, a workplace or classroom. These expressions will be appropriate to one situation and not
another, providing its constituents with a sense of belonging and meaning. The special places, therefore, furnish language with an “ethical-rhetorical topography.”

Yet, Virno continues, in today’s world where the disciplinary divisions of a former industrial society no longer hold, the special places are also perishing and dissolving. The life-long certitudes provided by vocational training and professional skills have given way to a process of repeated innovation and constant training and in the face of this all-pervasive, protean reality the bulwarks installed by traditional communities against the uncertainties of life no longer hold sway. The individual is caught up in an un-ending process of individuation and continuous learning, which even the readily consumed, common identities projected by the media cannot forestall. With this falling away of the securities provided by the social environment of family, work, and education, the common places move to the foreground of speech, since they offer a standard of orientation, a modicum of protection against the contemporary experience of homelessness: “they appear on the surface, like a toolbox containing things which are immediately useful.”

Like Virno’s common places, Weiner’s statements form ‘logical-linguistic constructs’, which are grounded on quite fundamental and general properties of language. They provide the performers in Weiner’s two films with just such a toolbox of language by which to orient themselves within a world undergoing substantive change. A world, that is, gripped by an immense unchaining of signs and unleashing of social energies, but this ‘cultural revolution’, let us not forget, was overdetermined by other developments as well; it occurred at the same time as a massive restructuring of the economic system of capitalism was taking place. The disciplinary society of industrial labor was making way for a post-Fordist society of service labor, with Weiner’s performers set adrift somewhere in the midst, unmoored from the anchor stones of citizenship and workmanship. The traditional institutions of the family, factory, and party are indeed nowhere in sight in Weiner’s films and as they wander through their disjointed world, the statements act as a kind of compass to provide them with a bearing upon the contingencies of their existence.

5. Embodied Speech

The microcosmic world of A First Quarter and A Second Quarter with its dispersion of subject positions across the basic unit of three performers provides a social diagram, as it were, of the cultural revolution of the sixties. Yet the term diagram does not mean something like an utopian blueprint. The films provide the mise-en-scène for a redistribution
of subject relations across a discursive field, which is constructed in a highly precarious mode from the disparate blocks of Weiner’s statements. Yielding their linguistic toolbox, Weiner’s protagonists are sent travelling upon a terrain without fixed landmarks or steady horizon. There are no coherent narratives that guide their actions. The “theatrical engagement” of the films with their own time, as Weiner has written, “is neither the expiation of guilt or a newspaper of our times.” These films do not align themselves with a specific political cause, but establish a theatrical podium for the experimental realignment and transformation of social forces. The politics is in the performance, in the movement back and forth across boundaries. Weiner’s performers must establish their own coordinates; objectify their situation by weaving a network of relationships between words, gestures and things with the statements as their equipment.

But, of course, Weiner’s performers do not start from degree zero. There is no tabula rasa of language. The relational statements of Weiner, which cause the order of things to shift TO AND FRO, are grafted upon existing ways of inhabiting the world: “When you find yourself in a social circumstance that you cannot manage, cannot figure out, at least for myself as a North American my first reference is to a movie…This was our parent, this was our role model.” Weiner conceives of cinema as a kind of disciplinary apparatus, an influencing machine, which offers an assortment of behavioral cues and narrative functions that provides the spectator with the impression of a coherent world in which to mirror himself. The assignment of Weiner’s films is, as it were, to exercise the parental authority of cinema; that is to say, to work away at the seams of representation and to thwart the spectator’s empathy with the actor. Indeed Weiner views his films as containing a compendium of past cinematic styles and techniques. Although there is no room to go into the various quotes and references in Weiner’s films, one important trope of the films is that of the ‘secret agent’ who works in and through language to subvert the codes of discourse.

The professional identity of the three performers is never declared, but they could form a group of reporters or an embryonic cell of political militants. The protagonists appear to be engrossed in some kind of oppositional, if not clandestine activity. Several of the phrases they utter make mention of the setting off detonations, the lighting flares, or the use of weapons. Furthermore, the apartment they occupy functions less as a private space than an information hub for the multiplication, translation and distribution of publicity material. The Berlin film is even more deliberate in its portrayal of a form of covert political action than A First Quarter: in one shot a performer furtively inscribes the loaded phrase
Arbeit Macht Frei on a street wall, while in another scene, a woman is roughly interrogated by an official, played by Weiner himself.⁴⁶

A central plot device of A Second Quarter is the booklet of statements from which the performers constantly quote and that passes from hand to hand in almost every scene. In the film, the booklet attains the quality of a talisman or a forbidden object that must be hidden from the authorities. It becomes an ambivalent symbol of both insurrectionary speech and the codification of language. The objectification of the statements is enforced by the performer’s intonation, which becomes obsessive to the degree of assigning each phrase with a number in certain scenes. The irony of this film is to suggest that the collection of statements constitute a set of revolutionary maxims, which brings us back to the problem of dual levels of instrumental and metaphorical language. The typical speech act of the revolutionary, after-all, takes the form of ‘my word is my weapon.’

Let me play along with Weiner’s own language game and propose that we compare the booklet in A Second Quarter to another booklet that circulated widely in the later sixties. A booklet of political teachings, moreover, that notwithstanding its incitement towards endless self-criticism, hardened into yet another ideological code of behavior. I refer to the Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, otherwise know in the West as the Little Red Book. The language of the Little Red Book is somewhat florid in nature and the various dictums ascribed to Mao manifest a strong predilection for the style and content of traditional sayings. In fact, the Little Red Book argues in favor of putting traditional adages to use in the re-education of the revolutionary masses. Mao’s Little Red Book functioned, therefore, as a kind of classroom primer for a new society, providing the Red Guards with the metaphorical stones to build a new world upon the rubble of old school Marxism.

And so I return to the figure of the Maoist, who has lingered on the edges of this essay since my opening lines. The Maoist, namely, provided the Western world in the course of the 1960’s with a new type of ‘revolutionary’ who took the former place of the ‘proletarian’ in Marxist discourse. As Fredric Jameson has argued, a “tactical and rhetorical shift” took place during these years, which in its denigration of the bureaucratic and authoritarian organization of the Soviet system, opened onto a whole new political space for the Western militant, which not only departed from the former dichotomies of class consciousness, but ultimately would relieve social struggle of its class-based orientation. This new space of militant action would become articulated by the slogan ‘the personal is the political.’ What Maoism represented to the West, in other words, was a farewell to the disciplinary units or ‘special places’ of the Marxist-Leninist party and the labor unions. The
antagonisms that shaped the class identity of the worker were replaced by a more fluid and heterogeneous concept of the political militant; more flexible modes of political collaboration were pursued in contrast to a centralized mode of party membership. In short, the political organ of the party began to break down on a cellular level, bringing us back again to the triad of Weiner as they engage upon their discursive series of speech acts, which sometimes acquired a conflictual nature and, to borrow a Maoist term, might be called ‘struggle sessions’.

Naturally, I am not claiming that Weiner’s triadic group is modeled after any specific political group, let alone the Maoist student movement. My analogy is meant as more general in kind, just as the artist describes the performers as “working with the stuff that didn’t get fit into the culture,” which he adds “is my work.” What I wish to clarify is how the films inscribe themselves within the “rhetorical shift” of political discourse that is noted by Jameson. Let me clarify this contention by briefly attending to another movie that in many ways runs parallel to the critical methods of A Second Quarter, but is more explicit in its political references, namely Godard’s La Chinoise.

La Chinoise forms the account of the radicalization of a small group of university students during the summer of 1967. They are five in total, but the core group consists of one man and two women as in Weiner’s films and, importantly, the male protagonist, Guillaume, presents himself as an actor. The students withdraw into the interior of a bourgeois apartment while their parents are on vacation and embark on the formation of a revolutionary cell. In an excellent essay on the film, Jacques Rancière has noted that the apartment in La Chinoise acts as the mise-en-scène for a gestural re-embodiment of Maoist discourse. The metaphorical conjunction of words and images in the Little Red Book, its comic-book-like illustration of ideas, is spelled out and physically re-assembled. In short, the apartment functions as an experimental classroom, replete with slogans painted on the walls, whereas the Little Red Book is treated as a course book containing elementary lessons in writing, speaking, and showing. “Maoism,” Rancière writes, “is here a catalogue of images, a panoply of objects, a repertoire of phrases, a program of actions: courses, recitals, slogans, gym exercises.” But what this course book might have to teach, no professor is there to demonstrate. The students must take on the task of teaching themselves; they must adopt the role of teachers in order to learn how to act as a militant.

The phrases in the Little Red Book become the script of a socialist theater, they are transformed into an exercise in learning to see, hear, speak and read. What the film shows is an inverted form of object lesson: “[Godard] has to put these words in bodies that treat them
as the most basic utterances, bodies that try to speak them in various ways as well as to turn them into gestures.”52 Maoist discourse is thus submitted to a physical examination whereby the crosslinks between words and images become undone, the metaphors of political speech short-circuited. And, as Rancière submits, Godard’s film shows us two methods to achieve this purpose.

The first option is to literalize the metaphor. The idea that Mao’s thought forms a weapon is, for instance, visualized in La Chinoise by transforming a portable radio, which broadcasts the voice of Radio-Peking, into a toy submachine gun. But in another scene, Godard also makes a play on art history, which harks back to my earlier discussion of the ready-made. At one point, two of the cell members engage in a make-believe game of bull fighting. The bull’s head is constructed from the handlebars and seat of a bicycle like Picasso’s famous sculpture. After Guillaume commands the others to stop fooling around, the object is thrown into the trash bin. Subsequently, a neighbor retrieves the bicycle parts and puts them to good use again. Keeping this image in mind, we may then compare Godard’s didactic method to that of Weiner, who, for instance, is severely critical of the strategy of the readymade. According to Weiner, Duchamp’s transformation of the urinal into a ‘fountain’ is only a limited success as art, since the metaphor – the fountain – remains stuck to the object, whereas the utilitarian function of the object recedes behind the symbolical title.53 The performative statement of Duchamp – ‘I name this urinal a fountain’ – indicates the discursive limits of the artistic community, its context, disclosing the implicit rules and conventions upon which its “agreement in acting together” is based. Yet with this demystifying act of Duchamp, the performance comes to an end: its political work done, the urinal-fountain enters history. Weiner’s statements, on the other hand, enable the locutor to work a historical situation over, but they are not themselves of any situation. The work is not site-specific. Hence, like Godard, Weiner explores the back-and-forth movement of objects, which shuttle between alternate systems of use and symbolical value. Weiner plays the role of Godard’s neighbor as well: he retrieves worn sayings from the trash bin of everyday speech, such as TRIED AND TRUE or EARTH TO EARTH ASHES TO ASHES DUST TO DUST, suggesting we invent a new way of employing such phrases. Or, to cast this discussion in the terms of Virno, one might argue that Weiner attempts to transfer the ritualized expressions from the ‘special place’ of institutionalized language to the ‘common place’ of the multitude. It still remains to be seen, however, how this conversion of metaphorical into literal speech in Weiner’s work can be linked to the broader socio-economic shift that is described by Virno; a task I shall take up below.
The second strategy that Godard uses to disrupt the circularity of word and image is dialectical in nature. This is the method of the object lesson, namely to hear words and see images in their dissociation. In *La Chinoise*, Godard investigates how various modes of discourse produce their illusions of truth. He deconstructs, for instance, the environmental trappings of the university lecture; the seemingly, circumstantial details, which actually shore up its pretensions to speak the truth: “As a general rule, the lecture is thought to portray the situation of authority commanded by big words divorced from reality. The apparatus of the lecture – table, blackboard, and lecturer standing in front of the audience seated on the floor and answering their questions—seems to accentuate the image of authority wielded by big words.” But what the *mise-en-scène* of the university lecture questions, Rancière concludes, is whether “the situation of authenticity isn’t actually just like that of the blackboard on which one ventures to write down sentences to be able to look at them and see what they’re saying, or like the position of authority held by the amateur professor, who ventures to let these sentences escape from his mouth and to hear their echo.” The authority of the professor is overturned by returning the lecture to the “regime of an already-said, of a recited text.” Behind the teacher, in other words, stands the actor. And Weiner could not find himself more in agreement, since, as he writes, “all intellectually determined activity is theatrical.”

The lecture scene in *La Chinoise* brings a similar scene to mind in *A Second Quarter*. In this shot one of the female actors is shown in close-up, standing behind a lectern, while delivering a series of statements to an unseen audience. Asserting her dominance over the listeners, the camera view is angled from below placing the spectator in the virtual position of the audience. In first instance, the woman embarks upon her ‘lecture’ in a confident fashion, yet as time goes on she becomes more and more distraught, if for no apparent reason. The words continue to pour steadily from her mouth, but her text becomes radically divorced from her gestures of uncertainty. Gradually her assertiveness is undermined; she appears to be gripped by a solitary ‘struggle session’ as her words and her gestures battle it out. Furthermore, the progress of the lecture is interfered with by a second, female voice, which is superimposed on the soundtrack and reiterates the same questions that were posed in the earlier interrogation scene. And, all the while, hung on the wall behind her, a poster is legible with the following text:

*WITH A RELATION TO THE VARIOUS MANNERS OF PLACEMENT &/OR LOCATION: HAVING BEEN REVOLVED (WITH OR WITHOUT A RESOLUTION) (WITHIN OR WITHOUT...)*
6. Public Intellect

The performers in *A Second Quarter* appear to be forever wrapped up in a series of classroom exercises, or what Weiner likes to call, the didactic practice of “show and tell.”\(^{57}\) Not only do they constantly reiterate Weiner’s statements as if learning by rote, but they also regularly recite the letters of the English alphabet. In Weiner’s film, this enumeration of the alphabet operates as an emblematic device with two sides. On the one hand, the arbitrary order of the alphabet stands for the utopian potential of language: the infinite, permutational possibilities of language do not, in Weiner’s system of signification at least, amount to a totalizable body of knowledge or to an indefinite deferral of meaning in the play of signs. His statements open onto an inexhaustible series of potential speech acts, where translation never comes to an end. On the other hand, the conventional order of the alphabet underscores the symbolic strictures of everyday language, which speaks its subjects as much as they speak through it. Language is not as innocent as Piaget’s young patients liked to believe. As if to underscore this point a young girl makes an appearance in *A Second Quarter*, providing us with yet another object lesson. She sings the alphabet for the camera according to the familiar tune taught to American children in school. Her performance is slightly unsteady and she keeps looking around for reassurance, but when she comes to the end of the alphabet, she concludes with the triumphant refrain: “Now I know me ABC’s what do you think of me?” Installed within this seemingly innocuous, pedagogic ritual, the interpellative structure of ideology is hard at work.\(^{58}\)

Not so much the schooling, as the de-schooling of the performers is what is at stake in Weiner’s films. According to Rancière, the whole method of Godard in *La Chinoise* can be summed up as being “marked by the most dramatic and difficult trial of all, the discovery and training in the meaning of the ‘simplest’ acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading.”\(^{59}\) And this trial marks Weiner’s filmic method as well with its critical play on the notion of the primer, which binds specific words to certain acts by forging a metaphor. If the speech act of the teacher enacts an existing social contract, the speech act of the militant is meant to call this contract into doubt, unless it comes under the sway of rote learning and words convert from sayings into slogans. But the most essential lesson that can be derived from Godard as well as Weiner is that behind the performance of both the teacher and the
militant, stands the actor. It is the actor who puts the statements of the former on trial. The actor utilizes language “as a point of interest for dialectical discussion,” just as Bertolt Brecht demanded that his actors always show that their character may have behaved differently. For every situation the appropriate social Gestus must be found, but only to demonstrate its artificiality.

What I have attempted to show is that A Second Quarter parades this combined figure of the actor-teacher-militant; a figure whose pedigree stems from Brecht. Yet this figure was to play an altered role in the context of the cultural revolution of the sixties. No longer did the actor-teacher-militant cater to the urgent need for a socialization of knowledge, such as Brecht proposed in his so-called Lehrstücke. The strict division of labor in an industrialist society made the expropriation of bourgeois science by the worker a worthwhile project. Yet with the emergence of a post-Fordist economy in the Western world this motif of the education of the worker lost its relevance. Perhaps the minimalists were the last generation of artists to be able to entertain a serious flirtation with the classical figure of the industrial worker. The deskilling of conceptual art, on the other hand, cannot be read in terms of the productivist models of the historical avant-garde. Deskilling is not of the same order of the unskilled labor of industrial production. Competence is still in play, but in a different manner. If one focuses on the practice of Weiner and certain of his peers, such as Dan Graham or Douglas Huebler, it is possible to argue that the practice of conceptual art requires a generalized form of linguistic competence, rather than any specialized mode of professional knowledge.

And here lies the crux, since as Virno has argued, it is our linguistic faculty as such that today has become a productive force in its own right. Our intercommunicative ability, our capacity to manipulate signs and our aptitude for playing all kinds of language games has come to supplement, if not completely replace those physical abilities of the human body, which were the target of training in the disciplinary institutions of the industrial era. The kind of linguistic competence that is valued within a post-Fordist society is not that of the scientist or expert, therefore, but a more generic capacity to speak, to communicate, and to collaborate with others, or what Paolo Virno has named the operations of a general or public intellect:

The general intellect manifests itself today, above all as the communication, abstraction, self-reflection of living subjects.... In other words, public intellect is one and the same as cooperation, the acting in concert of human labor, the communicative competence of individuals.
What is rewarded by the service industry is the ‘virtuosity’ of a linguistic performance, which finds its fulfillment in itself and lacks an end product. General intellect becomes an attribute of living labor; language has entered the workplace turning it into a ‘loquacious factory.’ Post-Fordist labor assimilates thereby not only the features of the performing artist, but introjects “a complex of political actions” through its dependence on a collaborative form of work. Post-Fordism, in other words, arrives at a most unexpected and dramatic turn in history: the performative speech act, which once belonged to the arsenal of the avant-garde artist and the political militant, has now entered the standing reserve of market forces. Whereas I have argued, however, that Weiner’s films make a similar connection between the domain of public intellect, performative speech and political action, we should be cautious in drawing our conclusions.

Post-Fordism colonizes the common places of language; that is to say, those general linguistic structures, by which Weiner’s perambulant performers navigated a social space in which the center no longer seemed to hold, despite the persistent traces of the old divisions scarring the cityscape of Berlin. Post-Fordism subordinates the individual to the totality of the social organization of productive labor and since in the post-Fordist multitude work no longer constitutes a distinct practice, with its own procedures and criteria, the qualitative distinction between labor and non-labor time disappears. We have seen a comparable difficulty to describe the ‘labor’ of Weiner’s performers. Yet the co-option of public intellect that Virno describes belonged to a future that was not fully visible at the time that *A First Quarter* and *A Second Quarter* took place. Weiner’s movies can be situated within a genealogy of public intellect, as described by Virno, but they opened onto a political space, which clearly did not coincide with that of the post-Fordist worker. The latter figure, according to Virno, emerged from the defeated revolutions of the 1960’s. It was the answer of capitalism to the cultural resistance of the period which expressed a “radical criticism of labor; an accentuated taste for differences, or, if you prefer, a refining of the “principle of individuation” The significance of Weiner’s films is to remind us of an utopian alternative to the advancing forces of the creative industry; an alternative, nevertheless, that was clear-sighted enough to realize that the entire basis of cultural production had begun to shift:

THE OBVIOUS CHANGE IN THE
RELATIONSHIP OF FILM TO A CULTURE
IS PERHAPS THAT THE EXPLANATION
(_NOT NEEDED JUSTIFICATION)
OF THE EXISTENCE OF ART HAS BEEN
Allied to the concept of production

This reading while obviating some form of social unease is not in fact the case: film is in relation to its society

A service industry

2 The literature on political modernism is too vast to be cited in this place, however, for an excellent analysis of this historical debate, see D.N. Rodowick, The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
3 The classic essays on this topic are Peter Wollen’s “The Two Avant-Gardes” [1975] and “‘Ontology’ and ‘Materialism’ in Film” [1976], which are both collected in his Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies (London: Verso, 1982). Although Wollen’s argument is more refined than my present summary allows, it tends to run different traditions of formalism together, allowing, for instance, Greenbergian formalism and Russian formalism to overlap within the category of ‘ontological materialism.’
4 Wollen, “‘Ontology’ and ‘Materialism’ in Film”: 204.
5 Wollen: 207.
6 For an excellent discussion of the flicker film as both “harbinger and disruptor” of the new bio-feedback circuits of control, see Branden W. Joseph, “Flicker” in his Beyond the Dream Syndicat: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage (New York: Zone, 2008).
11 Although four films were planned in the series, only two were shot. Weiner would make several other films, which employ improvised dialogues, but I shall not discuss them here. I will also not address the videos, which started out as a kind of ‘advertising’, showing the various manners in which a work, such as, BEACHED (1970) or BROKEN OFF (1971) could be visualized. Weiner’s later videos develop more complex, game-like structures, such as Green as Well as Blue as Well as Red (1974).
13 Although rarely discussed in the literature, existentialism had a formative influence on Weiner’s thinking. Nevertheless, to point out this alternative genealogy of the work is but a minor objective of the present essay. There are certainly more established routes to understand the ‘linguistic turn’ of Weiner’s work. See, above all, Benjamin Buchloh, “The Posters of Lawrence Weiner,” in Posters/ November 1965 – April 1986/Lawrence Weiner, catalogue raisonné (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art & Design; and Toronto: Art Metropole, 1987), pp. 169-174 and Alexander Alberro, Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).
14 Weiner places A First Quarter “within a context of Franco-American existentialist concept of cinema.” Weiner, “A Second Quarter: Interview by the German Academic Exchange Service, Berlin Artist Program,” in Having Been Said, p. 75. A First Quarter uses a direct mode of filming and frequent jump cuts in imitation of French New Wave cinema, but the jerky, hand-held motion of the camera and the frequent use of zooms is also inflected by the relatively new medium of television. In fact the film was originally shot on video and
transferred to film in order to capture the grittiness of the television image. By way of contrast, *A Second Quarter* was shot on color film and its images have a more static, tableau-like character. Dieter Schwarz, among others, has suggested that Rainer Werner Fassbinder provided a major example for the second movie, whereas the influence of Godard is predominantly felt in the first movie. Other directors come to mind as well, such as Theodor Dreyer, whose work is greatly admired by Weiner. I shall remain focused, however, on the correspondences with Godard.

15 Weiner prefers the use of the term ‘performer’ over that of ‘actor’, since he likes to mix professional and non-professional actors in his films, who do not so much portray a fictional character as perform a series of speech acts.


17 The opening sequence of *A First Quarter* makes a direct link with the daily television reports on the Vietnam War. The camera tracks two army helicopters as they fly along the shoreline. Suddenly they appear to plunge to the ground as result of a swerve of the camera. The wartime atmosphere is thickened on the soundtrack of *A First Quarter* by blending the melody of the British war anthem “Bless them all, bless them all, the long and the short and the tall” into the improvisational music played by Richard Landry.


19 I adopt the capitalized format that Weiner uses for the statements.

20 Weiner, “Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky,” in *Having Been Said*, p. 239. Weiner reiterates this formula with minor variations in several texts and interviews.

21 The term ‘objectification’ must be understood in relation to a Brechtian aesthetic of defamiliarisation. Weiner’s films could not be more literal in their implementation of Brecht’s maxim that an actor should speak his part “not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation.” Bertolt Brecht, “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces and Alienation Effect,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 138.

22 In 1969 Weiner prepared a booklet called “Terminal Boundaries,” but it was never published.

23 The scene in which this statement occurs illustrates this point well: shot from the backseat of a car, the camera view passes back-and-forth between the two women, who recite in turn from a list of statements. After a cut, the scene is repeated only now each woman speaks the part previously quoted by the other. This device is repeated once more, at which point the car draws up to a tollbooth and the movie abruptly shifts to another location.


26 Weiner: “*A First Quarter* was almost all Godard.” Weiner, “Show (&) Tell: Interview by Bartomeu Mari,” in *Show (&) Tell*, p. 43. Weiner’s relation to Warhol’s work is more ambivalent. In conversation with the author, Weiner has stated that Warhol’s films represented a “timeless world” and “the trouble with the world was that [Warhol’s films] had to be made historical very quickly because they became dated after they entered the culture, because they were really just a reflection of this very spaced-out time-space that the entire art world and film world and fashion world was living in: there was a war, this might be the end of the world.” See also Weiner’s statement in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, ed. Kynaston McShine, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989, p. 443.

27 Weiner, “A Translation From One Language To Another,” in *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 130.

28 Weiner, “Intervention,” *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 132. Frederic Jameson’s comments in his essay “Periodizing the 60s” on the emergence of a ‘materialist’ theory of language during the 1960s is noteworthy in the present context. Jameson submits that the initial attempt “to formulate verbal propositions (material language) in such a way that they are unable to imply unwanted or ideological consequences” had to fail, resulting in a “violent and obsessive return to ideological critique in the new form of a perpetual guerrilla war among the material signifiers of textual formulations.” Frederic Jameson, “Periodizing the Sixties,” in *The Ideologies of Theory*, Volume 2. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 194. Weiner’s ‘materialist’ model of language should not be confused with the latter project of post-structuralism, but belongs to the former project in its attempt to avoid the imposition of “unwanted or ideological consequences” of language.

29 Weiner, “The Only Thing That Knows Its Own Essence Is The Thing Itself: Interview by Carles Guerra,” in *Having Been Said*, p. 336. Weiner is addressing the fundamental disagreement between Piaget and Chomsky concerning the nature of language. In the course of this discussion Weiner draws a fundamental distinction between an universal structure of language (whether the “generative grammar” of Chomsky or the “nomering” function of Piaget) and its idiolectical manifestation within the lived world of “necessity.” See the excellent discussion of Weiner’s adaption of language theory in Gregor Stemmerich, “Lawrence Weiner”: Material,
33 See Weiner’s discussion of his work SMASHED TO PIECES (IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT) that was installed on a Flakturn in Vienna in 1991 in “Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in Conversation with Lawrence Weiner,” in Lawrence Weiner, p. 26.
34 In the classical How to Do Things With Words, which announced a “revolution in philosophy” in the name of the performative, J. L. Austin underlines that speech acts need to be spoken under the appropriate circumstances or they will be spoken in vain: “Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that our word is our bond.” J. L. Austin, How to Do Things With Words (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 10.
36 See Weiner’s comments on public sculpture: “They have no place/They have no metaphor/They have no use/They seem to function as an attempt to find a place in the sun” Weiner, “In Relation to Public Sculpture,” in Having Been Said, p. 367.
37 Sartre develops an exemplary opposition between an instrumental and a metaphorical model of language. On the one hand, there is an active locutor who utilizes words as a kind of tool in order to name things and disclose situations so that they may be changed. Instrumental or committed language is gestural in nature: “The speaker is in a situation in language; he is invested with words…He maneuvers them from within; he feels them as if they were his body; he is surrounded by a verbal body which he is hardly aware of and which extends his action upon the world.” Metaphorical language, on the other hand, belongs to the poet who constructs a universe of mutually reflective “word-things” charged with affective qualities. The poetic attitude thus realizes “the metaphors which Picasso dreamed of when he wanted to do a matchbox which was completely a bat without ceasing to be a matchbox.” Weiner does not come down permanently on either side of this divide, although he clearly privileges the ‘engaged’ side of language. His statements, in other words, shuttle back and forth between the instrumental and the metaphorical principles of speech. Sartre, p. 13 & p. 15
39 The following two paragraphs form a paraphrase of Virno, “Common places and ‘general intellect’,” in A Grammar of the Multitude, pp. 33-37.
40 Jameson, “Periodizing the Sixties,” 194 & 208. In this text, published in 1984, Jameson seeks to unmask the liberatory rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s as a “historical illusion” that was enabled by a systemic shift between one stage of capitalism to the next. The text ends with the prediction that “‘traditional’ Marxism will become ‘true’ once more when the forces of exploitation and proletarianization slowly reassert themselves on a global scale. (p. 208) Paolo Virno’s A Grammar of the Multitude offers a very different perspective on the afterlife of the revolts of the sixties and the future of a class-based politics.
41 For brevity’s sake, I am giving the notion of ‘cultural revolution’ as it functioned within the sphere of the Western imagination during the sixties rather short thrift. My use of the term is indebted to Fredric Jameson in “Periodizing the Sixties.”
44 I am glossing, of course, the so-called ‘apparatus theory’ of cinema. See on this topic Rodowick, op. cit.
45 Weiner’s post-Brechtian aesthetic deserves more serious attention than I can give it here, but consider, for instance, his comment “With the objectification of the actor/there is no false sympathy/false empathy.” Weiner, “Towards a Theatrical Engagement,” in Having Been Said, pp. 174.
46 See Alice Weiner, “A First Quarter,” in Show (&) Tell, p. 11
47 To caulk these words on a Berlin wall immediately brings to mind the ‘guilt’ question that haunted the terrorist actions of the RAF.
49 Lawrence Weiner in conversation with the author.
Guillaume is named after Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister. One of the women in the cell is not a student, but the family maid who converts to the group. It is not the maid, who provides service labor, who supplies the ‘obsolete’ figure of the proletarian in the movie. The proletarian is symbolically represented by one of the students, who wears a worker’s cap, and is expelled from the cell because he remains faithful to the old Communist Party.

The students call themselves the Paul Nizan cell after the writer and former mentor of Sartre. The latter did much to transform Nizan into the prototype of the new ‘revolutionary’ in a famous foreword to Nizan’s work of 1960.


Rancière, p. 146.

See Weiner’s comments on Duchamp in Having Been Said, passim.

Rancière, p. 150.

Rancière, p. 150.


A Second Quarter appears to be structured as an alphabet on more level than one. It ends, for instance, on a zoom shot. It is tempting to perceive a link with the ‘alphabet film’ of Hollis Frampton, Zorns Lemma, but I shall not pursue this topic here. See note 22 above.

Rancière, p. 144.


Virno locates the origin of this notion of the “general intellect” in Karl Marx’s Grundrisse. For Virno’s comments on the ‘intellectuality of the masses’ in contrast to the knowledge of the ‘expert’ see Virno, p.108.

Virno, p. 65.

Virno, p. 55.

Virno, p. 111.

Weiner, “Notes from the California Lectures,” in Having Been Said, p. 112.