1960a

Critic Pierre Restany organizes a group of diverse artists in Paris to form Nouveau Réalisme, redefining the paradigms of collage, the readymade, and the monochrome.

Recognizing the public-relations value to be gained from organizing artists into a group operating under the banner of a single name, the French critic Pierre Restany (1930–2003) convinced a group of artists gathered in Yves Klein's Paris apartment on October 27, 1960, to form an avant-garde movement. Such a project naturally warranted a manifesto. This was dutifully designed by Klein in an edition of approximately 150 copies (white crayon on International Klein Blue or pink or gold cardboard) and signed by Restany and the eight artists present for the occasion (Arman [born 1928], François Dufrêne [1930–82], Raymond Hains [born 1926], Yves Klein, Martial Raysse [born 1936], Daniel Spoerri [born 1930], Jean Tinguely, and Jacques de la Villeglé [born 1926]). The manifesto consisted of a single sentence, the one anodyne statement about which all the artists could agree: "The New Realists have become conscious of their collective identity; New Realism = new perceptions of the real."

Twenty minutes after the signing, a fist-fight broke out between Klein and Hains, leading most of the members to consider the movement no longer extant, even though from now on they would frequently exhibit together (and they would be joined a little later by César, Christo [born 1935], Gérard Deschamps [born 1937], Mimmo Rotella [born 1918], and Niki de Saint Phalle [1930–2002]). It was not until 1970, however, that the movement's death would be officially celebrated—with a banquet and the unveiling of Tinguely's sculpture *La Vittoria*, a giant phallic structure spouting fireworks in front of Milan Cathedral.

Neo-avant-garde and spectacle

If all this seems uncannily like a replay of typical avant-garde rituals, that is because this, in fact, is *one aspect* through which the group declared its relationship to the historical avant-garde. Yet if it also shows signs of posturing and ostentatious adherence to the forms of spectacle culture, that is because contemporary spectacle is actually the *other* major historical context within which the group was constituted. And it is this very ambivalence that marks Nouveau Réalisme, along with the Independent Group in London, Cobra, and the Situationist International, as one of the major instances of a neo-avant-garde formation in Europe in the postwar period.

The Situationist Guy Debord might have referred to the prewar avant-garde for his own formulation of a postwar aspiration "to constitute a new movement which most of all should reestablish a fusion between the cultural creation of the avant-garde and the revolutionary critique of society." But, as is typical of all these groups, the Nouveaux Réalistes were confronting a situation in which, for the first time in the twentieth century, the avant-garde's project had manifestly become problematic. Instead, as critic Peter Bürger has argued, the avant-garde itself had become a highly institutionalized set of themes, practices, and spaces. But perhaps Nouveau Réalisme is the movement that recognized one particular condition of the neo-avant-garde most programmatically: its precarious but unchangeable situation at the intersection between a spurious posture of critical negativity and the affirmative agenda of the culture industry.

In generating its forms, Nouveau Réalisme seems to have taken the ineluctable condition of the neo-avant-garde more literally than the other groups that were developing parallel to it, mentioned above. In an almost systematic fashion, its participants rediscovered, recycled, and redistributed among themselves the modernist paradigms of the 1916–36 period, anticipating the manner in which advertising agencies would later pilfer avant-garde culture: the readymade (Arman), the monochrome (Klein), constructed kinetic sculpture (Tinguely), and the collage (Dufrêne, Hains, Rotella, Villeglé). Yet in almost all instances, these paradigms now appeared as though they had been tuned to articulate the fundamentally different experience of objects and public spaces under a newly formed society of spectacle, control, and consumption. Not surprisingly, the most avid critics of that society at the time, the Lettrists and later the Situationists, would vehemently denounce Nouveau Réalisme as an art of affirmative collusion, a culture of right-wing politics and corrupt complicity.

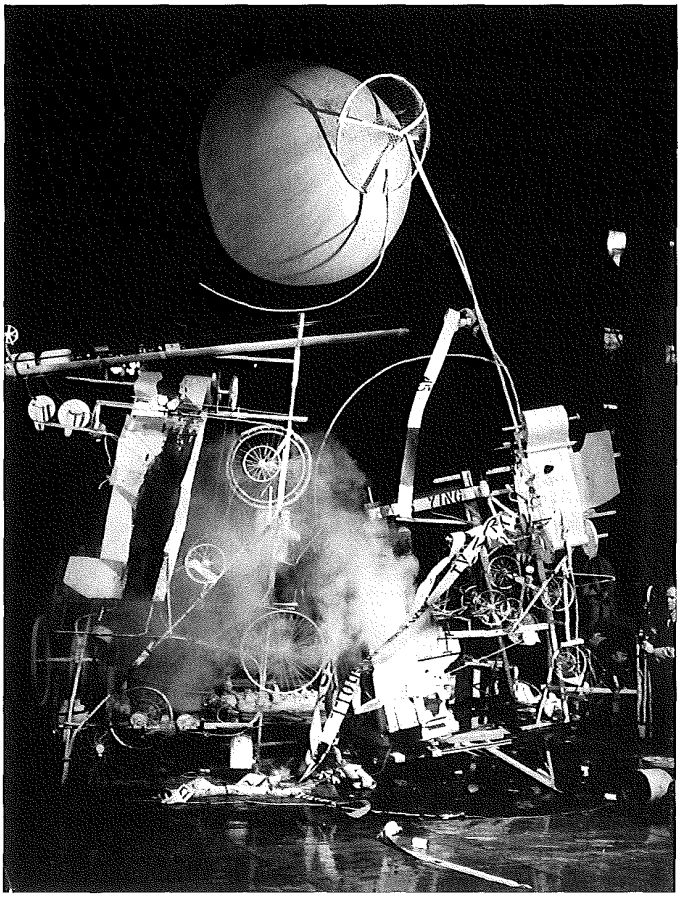
However, articulating the profound ambiguities of cultural production by inhabiting its contradictions is different from mere complicitous affirmation. What made their practices the most authentic articulation of postwar visual production in France is first of all the fact that these artists made clear the inescapable way that all of postwar culture was caught up in a dialectic of historical repression and memory on the one hand, and an aggressive mode of enforced consumption and submission to the conditions of spectacle, on the other.

▲ 1956, 1957a

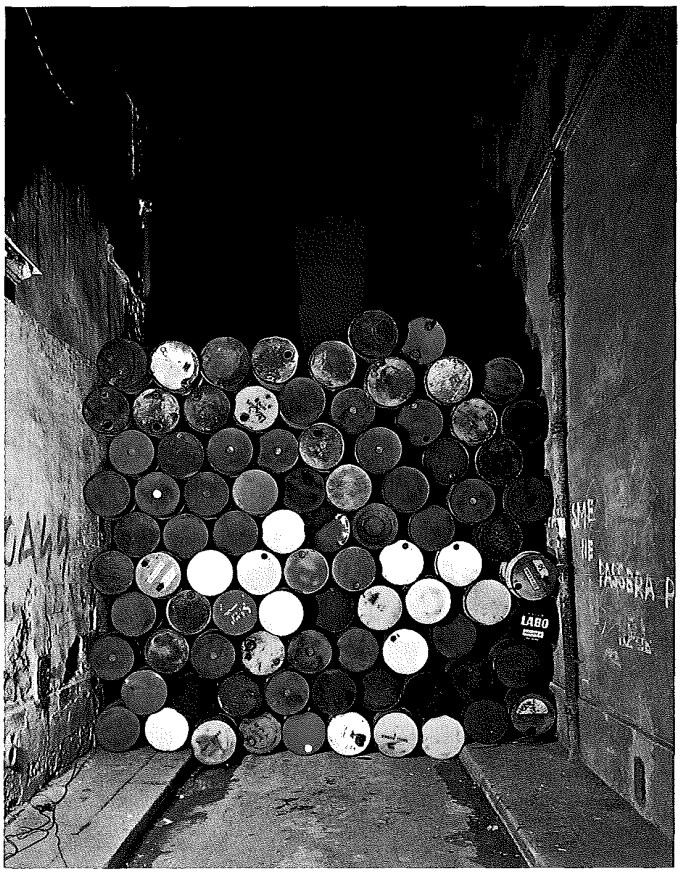
▲ 1914, 1918 ● 1913, 1915, 1921, 1928 ■ 1912

It is not surprising then that some of the most important contributions by the Nouveaux Réalistes shifted the status and sites of the work of art from the relative intimacy of the pictorial and sculptural object onto the level of public space. They repositioned the work from the frame of the picture, or the space of sculpture, to architecture, which is to say to institutional and commercial frameworks and to the spaces of the street that had always been presumed to be public.

Beginning with Klein's first installation of *Le Vide* (The Void)—in which the artist presented a completely empty gallery—in 1957 (to be followed by a more famous one in 1958) and culminating with Arman's corresponding *Le Plein* (The Full) in 1960—in which the window of Iris Clert's gallery was filled with a huge accumulation of garbage—the architectural dimension and interaction with public space would become central to the development of a Nouveau Réaliste aesthetic. This would be equally evident in Tinguely's large-scale, self-destructing installation *Homage to New York* [**1**], called by its author a "simulacrum of catastrophe," or in César's shift into Nouveau Réalisme in 1960, when he abandoned his successful career
▲ in welded sculpture, in the tradition of Picasso and González, to exhibit *Three Tons*: three cars that had been compacted by a hydraulic press into sculptural rectangular masses; or, in a shift that was equally emphatic, Spoerri was to declare the totality of a "found" grocery store in Copenhagen as an exhibition in 1961 (almost year



1 • Jean Tinguely, *Homage to New York*, 1960
Self-destructing installation



2 • Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wall of Barrels, Iron Curtain*, 1961–2
240 oil barrels, 430 x 380 x 170 (168 x 156 x 66)

▲ before Claes Oldenburg's *The Store*). Entering public space with equal drama in 1962, Christo and Jeanne-Claude (born 1935) would make *Wall of Barrels, Iron Curtain* [**2**], a blockade of 240 oil barrels in the rue Visconti in Paris, corresponding to the recently constructed Berlin Wall and initiating their lifelong project of expanding sculpture to the scale and the temporariness of spectacle culture and reducing its simultaneous material presence to a mere media image.

The same desire to situate the work within public space and position it within the discursive apparatus of consumer culture is evident in the transformation of collage by the *décollage* artists. From
• an object of intimate reading and viewing (for example, Kurt Schwitters), collage was reconceived as a large-scale fragment detached from advertising billboards. In an act of piracy, posters were ripped by the artists from public walls, not only in order to collect aleatory linguistic and graphic configurations but equally to make permanent the acts of vandalism in which anonymous collaborators (named by Villeglé's *Le Lacéré anonyme*) had protested against the domination of public space by advertising's product propaganda. In the first
■ Paris Biennial, inaugurated by André Malraux in 1959, the French *décollage* artists—Hains, Villeglé, and Dufrêne [**3**]—presented their work for the first time in a public institution, culminating in Hains's first "*palissade*," which consisted of the entirety of a large construction-site fence covered with an open field of anonymous acts of *décollage* intervention in a sequence of ravaging gestures.

Social spaces and frames

Repositioning their practices explicitly in these different social spaces and frames, the Nouveaux Réalistes created works that had an aesthetic of industrial production and collaboration. The sheer quantity of objects produced, their relative interchangeability and equivalence no longer foregrounded the originality of one author's vision or the unique features of an individually crafted work. Instead, we now not only encounter the intrinsically collaborative principle of *décollage* but also the actual collaborations between the artists, beginning with Villeglé and Hains's astonishingly early *décollage, Ach Alma Manétro* in 1949 [**4**] and moving to the subsequent collaborations between Klein and Tinguely, Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle, and many others.

More important, however, is the fact that the collaborative principle itself now became a central paradigm, as when Spoerri proposed a patent in 1961 to have his *tableaux pièges* [**5**] produced by other artists or by anyone else. This principle culminated in Klein's ultimate performances, a few months before his death in June 1962, in which the artist sold "Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility" to collectors who, in exchange for certain quantities of gold, received a certificate of ownership as the only legal proof of the work's existence. This protoconceptual critique of objecthood and authorship would gain considerable importance in the discussions of Minimalist and Conceptual art only a few years later.

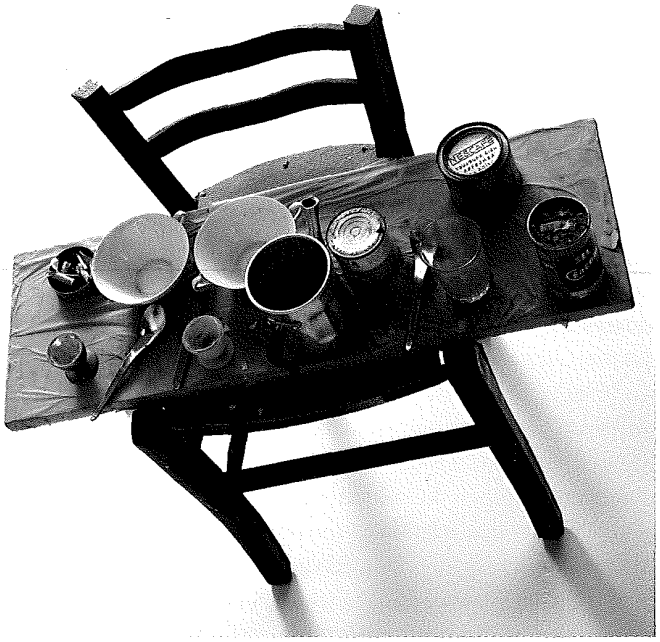
Adopting advertising strategies for the dissemination of their ideas, the Nouveaux Réalistes often operated in an apparent parallel to their politically more radical and theoretically more consequential opponents of the Lettrist International and the later Situationist International (among the *décollagists*, Dufrêne had in fact been a member of the former). The Situationists' key strategies, *dérive* (drifting) and *détournement* (diversion or misapplication), certainly share aspects of the *décollagist* principle of *ravir* (ravishment), that is, the transformation of reality in an act of violent abduction and seduction. Other spectacular examples, such as Tinguely's decision in 1959 to drop 150,000 copies of a manifesto on Düsseldorf and its suburbs, could certainly be recognized as a form of counterpropaganda strangely reminiscent of the Allies' attempts to enlighten the population of National Socialist Germany by dropping leaflets from airplanes behind enemy lines. By contrast, the publication in 1960 of Klein's *Journal d'un seul jour*, feigning the features of a newspaper that celebrates the universally victorious presence of Yves le Monochrome (including the notoriously fake photographic "proof" of Klein's levitation in space), deployed, rather than "*détourned*" (or subverted from within), all the emerging media and advertising strategies of disinformation and massive manipulation of the public.

3 • François Dufrêne, *⅛ of the ceiling of the first biennial of Paris*, 1959
Lacerated posters on canvas, 146 x 114 (57½ x 4 ⅞)

With the 1954 publication of Klein's books *Yves: Peintures* and *Hagenault: Peintures,* modernist abstraction had appeared for the first time transformed into a conceptual metalanguage. Pretending to give an account of Klein's extensive production of monochrome

4 • Jacques de la Villeglé and Raymond Hains, *Ach Alma Manétro*, 1949
Lacerated posters on canvas, 58 x 256 (22⅞ x 100¾)

▲ 1957a



5 • Daniel Spoerri, *Kishka's Breakfast, no. 1*, 1960
Wood chair hung on wall with board across seat, coffee pot, tumbler, china, egg cups, eggshells, cigarette butts, spoons, tin cans, etc., 36.6 x 69.5 x 65.4 (14⅜ x 27⅜ x 25¾)

paintings (their sizes and dates, their sites of production, sometimes even the location of their collections), the two books were entirely fictitious. Thus, at the very moment of Klein's (fraudulent) claim to have invented monochromy, he presents it already as absent, accessible only through fiction and technical reproduction. Insofar as these "paintings" constitute the first instance in which the central modernist paradigm of the monochrome (with all of its claims for presence and purity, optical and empiricist self-evidence) has been shifted to the registers of linguistic, discursive, and institutional conventions—presence displaced, that is, by a textual apparatus—they ▲ open onto what could be called an "aesthetic of the supplement."

Klein's notorious 1957 exhibition in Milan of eleven identical, differently priced monochrome blue paintings (subtle variations being discernible only in the surface texture of the works) could be seen as the first climax of this new aesthetic. The artist's decision to mount the seemingly identical paintings on stanchions made these panels appear as contingent hybrids between autonomy and function, in need of a prosthesis for public display. Suspended between pictorial convention as *tableaux* and their newly gained assignment as *objects/signs*, these paintings articulated a strange new dialectic of pure visuality and pure contingency. Thus, Klein initiated his painterly project as a paradox in which the spiritual transcendence of the aesthetic object is both energetically reclaimed and simultaneously displaced by an aesthetic of the spectacularized supplement. The latter aspect culminates in Klein's decision to subject the serialized paintings to a willful hierarchical order that articulated the opposition between "immaterial pictorial sensibility" and randomly • assigned price, anticipating Jean Baudrillard's semiotic formulation of the phenomenon of "sign exchange value". It is not just the exhibition's emphasis on painting as *production* that distances it from all previous forms of abstraction but, instead, the fact that it does not consider the order of the "exhibition" as a mere accumulation of individual works first made and then put on display but, rather, conceives of painting itself as always being on the order of an "exhi- ▲ bition" (a strategy to be deployed by Andy Warhol in 1962 in his first solo exhibition of "Campbell's Soup" paintings).

Expanding on these concepts in his first installation of *Le Vide* in 1957, Klein declared the empty gallery space itself a zone of heightened pictorial, protomystical sensibility. *Le Vide* was not, then, a reflection on the critical implications of reductivism; it refused to connect with the historical specificity of modernist conventions of vision, their discursive and institutional constructions of spectators and the order of architectural and museological systems of display. But, to the very degree that Klein recognized that a

The neo-avant-garde

Peter Bürger's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) divides the last hundred and fifty years of art practice into three distinct phases: the period of modernism, with its claim to the autonomy of the aesthetic field (and its institutions); the intervention of the pre-World War II avant-garde whose practices turned precisely on the critique of that autonomy; and the moment of what he calls the neo-avant-garde, a third phase during which European and American postwar culture produced a rerun of those critiques, albeit leveling them to a set of empty gestures. All three phases are interrelated, but Bürger grants only the second the status of avant-garde radicality since it is within the project of this "historical avant-garde" (the period 1915–25, roughly from Cubism through Russian Constructivism and Dada to Surrealism) that the traditional assumptions about modernism's claim to an autonomous status are rejected in favor of what Bürger calls an attempt to reposition artistic practices within the life practice itself. Examples of this would be, on the one hand, Surrealism's use of chance operations as a way of abolishing the separation between high art and mass culture as well as that between art and everyday experience and, on the other, Russian Constructivism's and German Dada's deployment of collage and photomontage as ways of breaking down the separateness of the bourgeois public sphere in favor of the conception of a newly emerging proletarian public sphere. In opposition to those, Bürger claims that all postwar avant-garde practices are mere farces of repetition of the original interventions, but ones that work neither to dismantle the founding modernist claim to autonomy nor to achieve a displacement of art practice into everyday life; rather they simply provide an existing and expanding apparatus of the culture industry with marketable goods and objects. As typical examples Bürger points to postwar Pop, either in its American or Nouveau Réaliste guise, in which he sees the mere replay of collage and photomontage operations, but now addressing neither the questions raised by the original avant-garde with regard to the institutions of aesthetic autonomy nor of art's necessary interrelationship with new mass audiences and new forms of distribution.

1960–1969

▲ Introduction 4 • 1980 ▲ 1960c, 1964

modernist aesthetic of spiritual or empirico-critical autonomy had failed, he made the persistence of abstraction's spiritual afterlife evident and questioned the fate of these aspirations once spectacle culture had taken over the spaces of the avant-garde.

Klein's merit is precisely to have constructed this couplet—spirit/consumption—in open public view, making clear that the attempt to redeem spirituality with artistic means at the very moment of the rise of a universal control of consumer culture would inevitably cloak the spiritual in a sordid guise of travesty. A typical acknowledgment of this is a remark by him like: "We are not artists in revolt, we are on vacation." By making his work manifestly dependent on all of the previously hidden *dispositifs* (for instance, the spaces of leisure and consumption, and the devices of advertisement), he would become the first postwar European artist to initiate not only an aesthetic of total institutional and discursive contingency, but also one of a seemingly inescapable affirmative assimilation.

When Arman, Klein's closest ally, decided to abandon his stamp paintings in 1953 in favor of the direct presentation of the object ▲ itself, the ramifications of Duchamp's readymades had hardly been recognized in France. Yet Arman's formal strategies not only derive from the readymade, they transfigure two other central ▲ paradigms of modernism as well: the grid and chance. If the post-Cubist grid still governs Arman's *accumulations* and works such as the slightly later *poubelles* and *portraits-robots* (as in the *Premier Portrait-robot d'Yves Klein* [**6**]) follow the organization of matter either according to the physical laws of gravity or the principle of chance encounter, Arman's object aesthetic neither shares the utopian promise of the techno-scientific avant-gardes, nor does it • generate the unconscious resonance of the Surrealist object that had been liberated—if by no other force than the passage of time—from its everyday functions. With Arman, all objects seem to emerge from a limitless expansion and a blind repetition of production, appearing as so many specimens of an unclassifiable world of arbitrary variations, merely arranged according to the universal administration of sameness. If Duchamp's readymade had still suggested a radical equivalence between the constitution of selfhood through the subject's acts of speech and the formation of subjectivity in a relation to the objects of material production, Arman's objects firmly opposed such a parallel. Linguistic repetition, the principle according to which subjectivity is constituted in the production of speech, finds its objective correlative here in the repetition of the act of choosing an object of consumption.

Arman had understood that sculpture from now on would have to be situated within the display devices of the commodity, and that conventions of museum presentation would merge increasingly with those of the department store (the showcase and the shop window). As in the climactic moment of Klein's *Le Vide*, Arman recognized that the changes in how the subject is constituted and how objects are experienced, as well as the dialectic between memory and spectacle, would become most apparent in the object's situation in public space. His window installation of garbage, *Le Plein* of 1960, would demarcate one of the single most important changes in the paradigm of sculpture in the postwar period.

In their extreme forms, Arman's *accumulations* and *poubelles* cross the threshold to become memory images of the first historical instances of industrialized death. Some objects in his warehouse seem to echo the accumulations of clothing, hair, and private belongings that filmmaker Alain Resnais had recorded in *Night and Fog* (1955), the first documentary of the Nazi concentration camps, which Arman saw at the time of its release. Yet these accumulations set up a temporal dialectic that holds past and future in tension; for at the very moment when they seem to contemplate the catastrophic destructions of the recent past they open up a glimpse toward the imminent future. Anticipating another form of the industrialization of death, Arman's immobile arrangements evoke an emerging ecological catastrophe resulting from an accelerating and expanding consumer culture and its increasingly unmanageable production of waste.

6 • Arman, *Premier Portrait-robot d'Yves Klein*, 1960
Accumulation of Klein's personal belongings, 76 x 50 x 12 (29⅞ x 19⅝ x 4¾)

FURTHER READING

Jean-Paul Ameline, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992)
Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Detail to Fragment: Décollage/Affichiste," *Décollage: Les Affichistes* (New York and Paris: Virginia Zabriske Gallery, 1990)
Bernadette Contensou (ed.), *1960: Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1986)
Catherine Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Editions du Regard, 1997)

▲ 1914 ▲ 1913, 1915, 1917, 1918, 1944a, 1953, 1957b • Introduction 1, 1931