

Introduction

The meaning of the word *dematerialization* is as conventional as it is polyvalent when applied to the discussion of art since the 1960s. The term has come to connote, in varying combinations, the style of art since conceptualism; art's apparent or real imbrication with other social practices; the extent to which art draws upon or mimics so-called "immaterial" forms of labor as the most advanced sites of capitalist production; the mediation of artistic technique and authorship by the look and technology of information; and the expression of the instability or flux—the "all that is solid melts into air"—that characterizes the experience of capitalist modernity. And yet, despite bearing all of these different connotations, dematerialization fulfills a mainly descriptive function in art historical discourse. It serves as a kind of shorthand in order to refer to works that questioned the organicity, social autonomy, and technique that had served to define art. In doing so, the common use of the term tends to naturalize the shifting relationship between art, aesthetics, and society that it also tries to name by identifying this phenomenon with a predetermined set

of Euro-American styles or movements. Dematerialization refers to a style or attribute of art, conjuring the antiformalist tendencies of the 1960s, from mail art to happenings to text-based conceptual art, at the same time that it attempts to capture art's social and historical relevance in a period in which formal conventions and schools have become obsolete.

This book studies Latin American art, industrial design, and criticism from the 1960s and '70s in order to reconsider the relationship between antiformalist art and sociopolitical transformation. Skeptical of the ability of art or design's formal conventions to criticize the expansive scope of the market or escape its disenchantment, the authors studied in what follows turned their attention from the form of art to the logic structuring society and from the issue of defining what art is when it refuses to be defined by its appearance to the role that appearance plays in ideology, or the inextricable misapprehension of that same logic. Each chapter deciphers a way of reading the becoming immaterial of the art and design object operative in the work of Oscar Masotta, Octavio Paz, Felipe Ehrenberg, Alberto Híjar, Tomás Maldonado, and Gui Bonsiepe. In doing so, the book as a whole proposes dematerialization as a concept that allows us to see how their work mobilized the materiality of art and design as a way of figuring the movement and reflexivity of the social both in and beyond the aesthetic qualities and sociocultural content of the object.

The works studied in the present volume share two important characteristics that distinguish them from other self-reflexive, conceptualist, or neo-avant-garde projects from the same period. First, like many such critical and artistic proposals from the period, they share a conviction about the caducity of modernism and realism. However, what distinguishes the authors in the present study is the way that, in attempting to locate a new space of aesthetic reflection, they subordinated the importance of formalist experimentation and thus the "objectness" of the work of art or design as such, and instead viewed the issue of the latter's social authority as the effect of a much broader sociocultural transformation. Each author conceived of this transformation differently: for Masotta it was the articulation of a seemingly ubiquitous urban mass culture; for Paz it was the ethical and political limitations of the national state; for Alberto Híjar, it was the horizon of the Communist Party; while for Maldonado and Bonsiepe this change had to do with the utopian possibilities of industrial design within the context of postwar consumerism and technological advances within the immediate processes of industrial production. Second, despite the different registers of their diagnoses, their projects not only denote these changes, but rather assume them as the impetus to radically rethink the nature of art and its capacity for social reflexivity. To the extent that their work locates

that reflexive operation in and beyond the materiality of the object itself—the operation that I am calling dematerialization—it does so in response to a historical appreciation of art and architectural form.

Dematerialization's attempt to treat its title term at a problematic rather than descriptive level dialogues with the history and criticism of conceptual art—in particular, beginning in the 1990s, as I will discuss in further detail below. Simultaneously, the impetus for and possible theoretical consequences of the present study pertain to a small but important corner of materialist aesthetics, namely Louis Althusser's writings on art and theater from the early and mid-1960s.¹ In these texts, the philosopher defines art's critical social function according to its capacity to draw attention to the naturalized appearance of social relations through recourse to a mode of presentation that distinguishes it at once from the totalizing logic of ideology and the formal representation of scientific knowledge. If, for Althusser, ideology defines the imaginary form of one's relation to the material conditions of one's own existence, he suggests that art allows us a certain kind of critical distance from our own perceptions by appealing to the prereflexive register of consciousness at which ideology becomes effective.

In “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre” (1966), Althusser defines art's critical function in epistemological terms: “What art makes us see, and therefore gives us in the form of ‘*seeing*,’ ‘*perceiving*’ and ‘*feeling*’ (which is not the form of *knowing*) is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art and which it *alludes*.”² Despite the different kind of knowledge that each produces, in Althusser's view, art and science share in common a certain kind of relation to ideology. As Michael Sprinker correctly signals, the contrast that Althusser draws between ideology and either art or science supposes a conventional distinction between form and matter. According to Sprinker, in Althusser's formulation, “art is that which gives form to the materials of ideology.”³ Both art and science “work upon” or seek to transform the naturalized appearance of social relations. However, “the end or effect of art . . . is not to give knowledge of ideology, but only to make ideology stand out, to render it visible.”⁴

Althusser's attempts to formulate both the nature and register of art's critical social function with respect to the social organization of production—the “material” at stake in historical materialism—eschewed mechanistic approaches to the class and economic determination of culture, that is, of both art and ideology. And yet, despite the suggestiveness and lasting influence of their intervention, Althusser's materialist aesthetics also gave short shrift to the issues of both materialism and aesthetics. He failed to consider either the historical specificity of the operation of estrangement by which he implicitly

defined art or to recognize the epistemological value of the mode of presentation specific to it. In Althusser's view, art is not a historically determinate site of aesthetic reflection, but rather a localized practice that would require its own science—the field of philosophical aesthetics—in order to formalize its characteristically phenomenological treatment of ideology.⁵ In other words, according to Althusser, while art can affect or appeal to the spectator at a nonreflexive level, it would fall to a science or theory of art to formulate the knowledge of this operation.⁶ Similarly, to the extent that it is precisely this ability to estrange ideology that defines art and distinguishes it from the imaginary perceptions or forms of representation that serve as its material, Althusser leaves unquestioned the conflation of art with modernist formalism. Despite “bathing” in the ideology or totalizing worldview of a determinate place and moment, as Althusser suggests in the lines cited above, art nonetheless does so through a formal, transhistorical operation that remains autonomous from the ideology that it assumes as its material and subordinate to an apparently ready-made concept of structural transformation.

As a project, *Dematerialization* began by asking how to consider the relationship between antiformalist art and ideology, assuming that we understand the latter, as Althusser suggests, as a logic structuring the perception of our own material conditions of existence, and not merely as a set of representations or historical narratives. As a book, it attempts to address the shortcomings of Althusser's materialist aesthetics through two intertwined maneuvers: first, by attending to the ways in which each set of texts formulated a response to the question of what art is or how to posit the appearance of the design object in relation to a determinate set of historical, that is, art institutional, political, and sociocultural circumstances; and second, by demonstrating the way in which the operative reflexivity of structure emerges from within this necessarily singular concatenation of texts and contexts in each case. However, rather than insist on the irreducibility of each conjuncture for its own sake, the chapters attempt to draw out the formal relation that each sustains with the others. To the extent that the present study responds to the insufficient materialism of Althusser's formulations, it does so by showing or unfolding this operational reflexivity simultaneously through the texts and projects of the authors themselves and at the level of their multiple social and political determinations. The point of this interpretive maneuver is to show that, for these authors, the “material” at stake in art and design's dematerialization is not only that of the physical, tangible object, but rather also the objective, historical specificity of the intertwined logic and ideology that produce and reproduce social relations. The materialist wager of *Dematerialization* is to

derive its problem from the works and contexts themselves and, inversely, to reveal the labor of the concept in the interventionist reconstruction of their overdetermination.

Before outlining the contents of the present book, let us briefly consider the function that dematerialization plays, in particular, in the history of Euro-American conceptual art. The close association between the two is indebted, in part, to the lasting influence of critic Lucy Lippard's landmark *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, a hybrid bibliography of commentaries, interviews, documents, and exhibitions published in 1973.⁷ The book was one of several surveys of "so-called conceptual or information or idea art" from the early 1970s that presented a seemingly unfiltered, documentary history of recent artists' statements and critical texts. However, *Six Years'* critical ambitions also made it unique. It aimed to question and experiment with the nature and role of art criticism in relation to new modes of artistic practice that increasingly positioned the artist as the foremost explicator and theoretician of her own work. Its purposefully nonnarrative, nonacademic style of presentation tried to exemplify the kind of art history and criticism implied by the obsolescence of formal schools and styles and of the symbolic meaning assigned to the mediums of painting and sculpture. As I will explore in greater detail below, we can also understand *Six Years* as Lippard's experimental response to her and critic John Chandler's own provocation in "The Dematerialization of Art" (1968) to do art criticism in an age that appeared to exclude any space for critique. However, despite the author's own, more complex set of ambitions, *Six Years* has perhaps proven most influential for advancing *dematerialization* as a generic term encapsulating and identifying conceptualism's critical and historical consequences with its antiformalist gestures, such as the emphasis on process or the dispersion of the artwork in time and space, and for suggesting that these same gestures opened it, if not to political "content," then to the "life style and political situation" of the artist beyond the walls of the museum.⁸

Lippard's was one of the first attempts to define an extremely diverse corpus of artworks whose only commonality was a highly self-reflexive antiformalism. Just as one finds in the common use of *dematerialization*, over the last twenty years, histories of conceptual art have noted the difficulty of identifying a common style or aesthetic among works whose only common thread was a self-conscious attempt to question the definition of art on aesthetic terms. As art historian Alexander Alberro notes, conceptual art could thus be described as "a contested field of multiple and opposing practices, rather than a single unified artistic discourse and theory" in the sense that it comprehended diverse

artistic genealogies and avant-gardist strategies and positions.⁹ Among the features common to much conceptual art, one finds a critical attitude towards the organicity of the work and materiality of the art object; a skepticism towards visuality and aesthetics as distinguishing art from other social practices and objects and, with this, the widespread use of language and language-like systems in place of pictorial representations; a growing awareness of the context of exhibition in terms of the physical space of the gallery, the social and economic determination of the institution, and the increasing commodification of art in different forms; a self-conscious attempt to blur the line between art and criticism; and a claim on the legacy of early-twentieth-century avant-garde movements through figures such as Duchamp, Tatlin, and Rodchenko.¹⁰

What is perhaps most notable about the literature on conceptual art is the extent to which it has produced its own prismatic object of study. To tell the story of conceptual art is to distinguish it from other, contemporaneous movements of the mid-'60s, such as minimalism or Fluxus, which also questioned the organic unity of the work or the hand of the artist as features that defined art; from postconceptual art, in other words, art that made recourse to text, serialized representations or the representational systems of other, heteronomous fields of social practice, or that similarly problematized the relationship between the conceptual and the aesthetic, though oftentimes in order to call attention to extra-artistic social or cultural issues or forms of representation; and from artistic movements and art critical discussions worldwide that questioned the definition and social autonomy of art under different names and through reference to different theoretical and critical vocabularies.¹¹ As critics Michael Newman and John Bird note, any attempt to accommodate the “diverse and disparate ebb and flow of texts, objects, media, exhibitions, performance, bookworks, etc.” that artists and art historians have placed under the banner of conceptual art would necessarily encounter other, alternative names, among them, conceptualism, post-object art, art-as-idea, theoretical art, and dematerialization.¹²

The list of names grows longer when art history responds to the demand to take stock of non-European metropolitan art movements that also questioned the aesthetic and social autonomy of the artwork. To cite one of the earliest and most influential examples, the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950–1980*, organized at the Queens Museum in New York in 1999 by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, presented artworks excluded from the growing number of largely Anglophone histories and exhibitions from the 1990s dedicated to conceptual art. It aimed to highlight the diverse ways in which artists both shared and interpreted the common impulse to question the formal conventions associated with artistic autonomy in relation to different local

political and art institutional contexts, to underscore the social and political valence of antiformalist experimentation among non-U.S.-based artists, and to disprove the commonplace notion that experimental art from non-Western countries was derivative of European or U.S.-based movements.¹³ The curators chose the word *conceptualisms* over *conceptual art*, in an effort to highlight the parochialism, together with what they viewed as the formalist bent, of the cadre of largely New York-based male artists who laid claim to the anti-aesthetic legacy of the avant-garde and, through it, the very definition of art. Camnitzer, Farver, and Weiss describe their choice of names in the following way:

It is important to delineate a clear distinction between conceptual art as a term used to denote an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of minimalism, and conceptualism, which broke decisively from the historical dependence of art upon physical form and its visual appreciation. Conceptualism was a broader attitudinal expression that summarized a wide array of works and practices, which, in radically reducing the role of the art object, reimagined the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political and economic realities within which it was being made. Its informality and affinity for collectivity made conceptualism attractive to those artists who yearned for a more direct engagement with the public during those intense, transformative periods. For them, the de-emphasis—or the dematerialization—of the object allowed the artistic energies to move from the object to the conduct of art.¹⁴

The curators' insistence on the distinction between U.S. conceptual art and global conceptualisms (and between formalist antiformalism and politically engaged antiformalism) is telling of the larger issue of identifying the principle defining the diverse ways that artists questioned art's autonomy. By removing "art" from the name of the rubric uniting these diverse practices and contexts, *Global Conceptualism* implicitly suppressed the self-reflexive gesture of questioning what art is or how it distinguishes itself from other spheres of social practice. Rather than showing how the singular sociocultural or institutional trajectories of the High Red Center in Tokyo or the Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires might have played a determining role in the way that artists questioned the autonomy of the artwork, the expanded field of "conceptualisms" effectively naturalized these same gestures as art, paradoxically, by identifying them through the supposedly political, rather than formal, valence of their antiformalism. Rather than suggesting that Eastern European or Asian "conceptualisms" simultaneously interrogated the ontology of art and its historical determinations, as we can see in the passage cited above, the curators split and recode the difference between Euro-American conceptual art and "global" conceptualism as an opposition between formalism and the immediate dissolution of art

into life. In this sense, *Global Conceptualism*'s gesture is illustrative of one that often defines the impulse to "globalize," or write a more inclusive version of the history of art since the 1960s: it confuses the issue of representing Latin American (and other non-European) art movements in histories and exhibitions with the implicit question of how antiformalist art in the period reflected on its own social and historical conditions.

By promoting an understanding of universality as the aggregation of regional particularities, *Global Conceptualism* also played an important role in promoting the idea that Latin American conceptualism was defined by its desire to fuse art with political praxis. In her often-cited essay for the *Global Conceptualism* catalog, curator Mari Carmen Ramírez expands Spanish art historian Simón Marchán Fiz's punctual characterization of the work of the Grupo de los Trece (Group of Thirteen), the young artists gathered around the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Center for Art and Communication) in Buenos Aires, as an "ideological conceptualism" in order to include the experimental artistic production of Latin America as a region.¹⁵ Commenting upon the work of artists such as Víctor Grippo, Cildo Meireles, and Eugenio Dittborn, she notes the implicitly formal parity that they achieved with their U.S. and European counterparts by refusing to "dematerialize" the art object and instead inserting it directly into heteronomous "circuits" or social contexts. Moreover, Ramírez suggests that it was through their "recovery of the object" that Latin American conceptualism unfolded its markedly "political" character. Ramírez thus argues that through this inverted Duchampian gesture, Latin American art became both universal, joining the ranks of European modernism and transcending the particularism and tropicalism of its place in the history of twentieth-century art, and, at the same time, distinctively "political," insofar as Latin American conceptualism supposedly used art in order to intervene into life and not merely to comment upon art's commodification, as was the case, she claims, for U.S. pop and conceptual art.¹⁶

By contrast, Uruguayan artist and writer Luis Camnitzer argues that through these same antiformalist gestures, Latin American conceptualism transcended the formalist aspiration of U.S. conceptual art, together with the question of political commitment.¹⁷ While Ramírez makes a claim on the fusion of universal form and particular political content, Camnitzer argues that what distinguishes Latin American "conceptualism" from mainstream U.S. conceptual art is instead the separation and mediation of art and politics by dematerialization:

In art historical discourse, 'dematerialization' has been a way of 'reducing' material, which has been part of the formalist reductionism typical of the early 1960s.

Formalism, in turn, generally excludes politics. In the Latin American context, dematerialization was not a consequence of formalist speculation. Instead, it became an expedient vehicle for political expression, useful because of its efficiency, accessibility, and low cost.¹⁸

In Camnitzer's formulation, it is "dematerialization," rather than modernist negation, that stands in for the universal. Camnitzer's point is not simply that many Latin American artists attempted to bring artistic experimentalism into the service of radical politics, but rather also the way in which this gesture marked their work for inclusion in the supposedly universal history of conceptual art. With "dematerialization," he designates the shared historical time and geographical diversity of conceptual art by equating artistic form with the sociocultural particularity of place. Camnitzer's emphasis on the socio-cultural uniqueness of Latin America and, by extension, Latin American art in the 1960s relies on a historicist logic like the one at work in Ramírez's account, but that appeals to a form of geopolitical periodization external to the development of artistic styles. In both cases, the problem of defining conceptual art's global nature collapses the problem of representing, empirically, the supposed totality of artistic production based on an alternately formal or sociopolitical periodization, with the speculative question of how art's antiformalist tendency in the 1960s was determined by the movement of capitalist accumulation.

As we have begun to see, the problem of periodization pertains to the case of conceptual art in a particularly acute way. This is so in one sense because of conceptual art's attempt to question what art is over and against its reduction to a given style or set of painterly techniques. Paraphrasing Thierry de Duve's analysis of the Readymade as a way of defining art beyond artistic technique, one could say that conceptual art made a generic claim on "art in general" by attempting to elevate Duchamp's gesture to the level of the concept.¹⁹ In other words, the anti-aesthetic attitude shared among so many artistic movements in the 1960s already subverts the attempt to identify their commonality on formal terms. In a second sense, the issue of historicizing so-called global conceptualisms both illustrates and intensifies the problem of periodizing the '60s more generally. As Fredric Jameson has argued, the confrontation between anticolonial movements and the reorganization of capital on a global scale that defined the era also signaled the limits or internal fissures of the narrative representation of history as class struggle, that is, as a social structure organized around one central antagonism. Despite questioning whether historical narrative might not have ceded its place to the "concept of history" or figuration of structural causality, Jameson argues that it is capital itself that ultimately periodizes

for us. The mechanization of agriculture in the Third World, a process that occurred in parallel with the commodification of entertainment culture in the First World, serves as evidence of the real subsumption of labor under capital on a global scale. In Jameson's formulation, the 1960s thus gave rise to late capitalism as "the moment when the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the Third World and the unconscious."²⁰

The extraordinary descriptive capacity of Jameson's formulation is also its limitation. It projects the sense or subjective perception of cultural uniformity onto the objective articulation of capitalism. Jameson's uniform vision of the historical logic of capitalist expansion is itself misleading. Indeed, an important strain of Marxist social theory in Latin America in the 1960s aimed to document and conceptualize the overlapping temporalities and modes of production implied by the development of capitalism specific to the region.²¹ Equally as important, it suppresses the unevenness or disjointed relationship between base and superstructure implied in the structuralist view of capitalism in favor of a phenomenological description of consumer society.²² Because Jameson portrays the real subsumption of Third World labor under capital in the 1960s as a process whose effects are homogeneous and final, his reading of late capitalism cannot register the experience of this economic transformation in the Third World, where its contradictions were expressed most acutely. The framework of dematerialization that I am proposing aims to underline how the crisis of artistic medium served as the terrain on which Latin American art and design responded to this same question. Rather than addressing the expression of historical change at a formal level, I attempt to show how these authors instead questioned the place of the aesthetic in the structure and experience of social transformation.

Having considered some of the ways in which the history of dematerialization and conceptual art are intertwined historically, let us begin again by examining how the word *dematerialization* attempted to think the relationship between antiformalist art and society in the 1960s. Nineteen sixty-eight provided two critical accounts of art's dematerialization: Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's essay titled "The Dematerialization of Art," published in *Art International*, and Oscar Masotta's "Después del *pop*: nosotros desmaterializamos" (After Pop: We Dematerialize), first delivered as a talk at Di Tella Institute's Centro de Artes Visuales (Center for Visual Arts) in 1967 and later published in the collection of essays titled *Conciencia y estructura* (Consciousness and Structure, 1968).²³ Just as Masotta adopted the term from Soviet constructivist artist El Lissitzky, whose essay titled "The Future of the Book" had been published in English for the first time in the

journal *New Left Review* earlier in the same year, it is likely the case that Lippard found inspiration in Masotta's revival of the term while she visited Buenos Aires as a member of the jury for the recently established prize *Materiales: Nuevas técnicas, nueva expresión* (Materials: New Techniques, New Expression).²⁴

With the term *dematerialization* both texts questioned the kind of criticism adequate to a moment in which the sensual qualities and metaphysical problems once assigned to art found themselves displaced onto the structure and appearance of society itself. The distinction between their uses of the word is irreducible either to the particularism of place—the United States and the United Kingdom versus Argentina—or to the nominal difference among artistic movements—conceptual art versus mass media art. It has to do instead with the way each author interpreted the methodological and critical consequence of this change in art's social and spiritual function.

Lippard and Chandler begin their essay with the following diagnostic:

During the 1960s, the anti-intellectual, emotional/intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the last two decades have begun to give way to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object.²⁵

In this passage, they propose dematerialization as a way of naming the displacement, in then recent works, of both the artist's hand and the sensual, aesthetic qualities of art, in favor of what they call the "thinking process." Recognizing the revival of practices and attitudes inherited from the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, for example, the incorporation of chance, the use of industrial techniques, and the fragmentation of the work across time and space, for Lippard and Chandler, art's dematerialization nonetheless represents a historical novelty. Dematerialization is what happens to art in what they call the "post-aesthetic era." Neither a new artistic style nor the elimination of style altogether, as the words *dematerialization* and *post-aesthetic* might suggest, Lippard and Chandler imply that the art of the 1960s represents a rupture with the kind of self-reflexivity associated with Clement Greenberg's definition of modernism as a self-conscious reflection on the medium. In their words, "the final 'post-aesthetic' phase supersedes this self-conscious, self-critical art that answers other art according to a determinate schedule."²⁶ In

this sense, the “increasingly non-visual emphases” of recent artworks thus served to question the aestheticism implied in Greenberg’s vision of the artwork’s autonomy.

Taking Lippard and Chandler at their word, “The Dematerialization of Art” argues that conceptual art defies formal analysis, instead inviting the “critic and viewer to think about what they have seen.”²⁷ The authors affirm that art has both absorbed and transformed the function of criticism, which they understand, implicitly, as a judgment about whether a given work has met with the preestablished conventions of its medium. For their purposes, the question of art’s dematerialization does not concern the future of art, but rather of art criticism: “There will be scholars and historians of art,” they write, “but the contemporary critic may have to choose between a creative originality and explanatory historicism.”²⁸

Paradoxically, contemporary scholarship championing Lippard’s insistence on the social, political, and institutional determinations of Euro-American conceptual art nonetheless takes for granted the identity between the heteronomy of the artwork and the fragmentation of its objectness. Treated as a generic stylistic marker of art in the 1960s, “dematerialization” participates in the historicism that Lippard and Chandler anticipated. Moreover, it does so by assuming the incorporation of extra-artistic social and political references into the self-referential language of conceptualism as part of a linear and teleological account of visual art since the Second World War. The reification of the word *dematerialization* in art historical discourse occludes the way in which Lippard and Chandler attempted to address the changing relationship between art, aesthetics, and society.

“The Dematerialization of Art” is an essay about the dematerialization of art insofar as the latter says something about the aestheticization of life in the information age. Citing the “beauty” of a mathematical equation, on one hand, and “the current international obsession with entropy” as a measure of time, on the other, Lippard and Chandler go on to observe that “perhaps even to impose order and structure on the universe rests on assumptions that are essentially aesthetic.”²⁹ According to their characterization, the “post-aesthetic era” is one that questions the imputation of aesthetics to artworks by reenchanting nature through technique.³⁰

Philosopher Peter Osborne’s recent writing on conceptual art offers a way of parsing the critical consequences of Lippard and Chandler’s analysis. In Osborne’s view, the failure on the part of some conceptual artists, such as Joseph Kosuth and the Art & Language group, to empty art of all of its sensible trappings demonstrated the extent to which the aesthetic, whether it is understood as precritical sensibility or as a

feeling produced by the reflexive operation of judgment internal to the subject, “is part of yet utterly fails to account for the ontological specificity of ‘art.’”³¹ Osborne argues, in this sense, that conceptual art unintentionally revealed the “misrecognition” between art and philosophical aesthetics characteristic of nineteenth-century aestheticism, whether in the guise of the aesthetic theory of artistic medium, or in the Jena Romantics’ projection of the subject’s reflexive and aesthetic structures onto the work of art. Rather than eliminating the sensible aspects of art, conceptualism freed aesthetics from the inherited conventions of painting and sculpture, demonstrating instead that its meaning could be derived contextually, in relation to heteronomous techniques and mass cultural languages, in each instance.³²

By observing that the mid-century obsession with organization “rest[ed] on assumptions that [were] essentially aesthetic,” Lippard and Chandler illustrate Osborne’s recent theory of conceptual art as marking a self-critical break with nineteenth-century aestheticism and its conflation of art and aesthetics.³³ One could argue, in this sense, that their theory of art’s dematerialization represents the inversion and full realization of the attempt, beginning with eighteenth-century German aesthetics, to rematerialize both nature and the modern critical subject in response to the disenchantment of the Enlightenment.³⁴ Clement Greenberg’s claim on modernist autonomy was the product of a longer philosophical genealogy in which Lessing’s theory of artistic medium played a pivotal role.³⁵ By mediating the synthesis of material nature and human freedom, the theory of artistic medium aimed to restore the possibility of meaning that Descartes and Kant’s metaphysics had definitively displaced from the passions of the body.³⁶ In Lippard and Chandler’s view, art’s dematerialization represents a rupture with this tradition. From their perspective, the mixing of mediums and antvisual attitude that characterized so many works at the time signaled the end, or at least the weakening, of art’s autonomous status.

What is perhaps most notable—and most limiting—about Lippard and Chandler’s notion of dematerialization is the way that it frames the historical change separating aesthetic reason from art. Implicit in their notion of the “post-aesthetic age” is the idea that the information age has overcome neither the disenchantment of nature nor the problem of the self-positing reflexive subject that the Jena Romantics had projected onto the work of art. Rather, their text implies that the “post-aesthetic era” has effectively rearticulated the relationship between matter and thought by displacing the aesthetic from art onto the technical knowledge and representation of organization. As I discuss in greater detail in chapter 4, cybernetics displaced the mediating function once assigned

to artistic medium onto the inscription and visualization of data and, in so doing, located the possibility of meaning onto the organization of nature. And yet, it is not nature or the passions themselves that cybernetics endowed with aesthetic reason, but rather the graphic representation of the laws governing its self-organization. It is in this sense that we can understand their observation regarding the “essentially aesthetic” assumptions behind the techno-scientific impulse to discover and impose order on the universe. Before the aestheticization of technique and the naturalization of social control, Lippard and Chandler question whether “if the object becomes obsolete, objective distance becomes obsolete.”³⁷ Despite the profundity of their historical observation, the theoretical consequences that they draw remain contained within an aestheticist framework, the caducity of which supposedly defined the intermedial and conceptual art of the 1960s, according to their own account. “The Dematerialization of Art” thus poses a question that it fails to answer: how to do art criticism, or how to pose the question of art’s relation to society, amidst the weakening of the normative authority of artistic conventions and the closure of the self-reflexive space of the subject.

Like Lippard and Chandler, Masotta’s notion of dematerialization concerned the loosening of art’s hold on aesthetics. However, whereas Lippard and Chandler noted how cybernetics had displaced the aesthetic experience attributed to art onto a purportedly self-regulating nature, Masotta attributed this change to the rise of a mass consumer culture. Moreover, whereas Lippard and Chandler saw the naturalized vision of social control as foreclosing the space of critique, Masotta assumed the commodification of social relations as the condition for its renewal. In contrast to Lippard and Chandler’s totalizing view of society, Masotta conceived of art’s role as underlining the logical and ideological registers of social experience under conditions of accelerated capitalist modernization. He was keenly aware of the ways in which modernism had ceded social authority to the images and technical channels of the mass media. However, he argued that if the commercialization of both art and social communication had rendered the norms of painting and sculpture irrelevant, then art and art criticism would address the aesthetic and reflexive structures of subjectivation directly in the structure and images of mass culture.

Masotta’s art criticism notably disregards the philosophical tradition of aesthetics with which Lippard and Chandler’s text dialogues. Instead, his writings on art formed part of a larger theoretical inquiry attempting to articulate phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and structuralism and, in this way, to explore the determining role of society in the reflexive operations of consciousness. Masotta was a largely self-taught philosopher and literary critic whose work began with the existentialist and praxis-centered

thought of the Argentinean New Left of the 1950s only to incorporate structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the 1960s and '70s. Through his brief engagement with U.S. pop art, happenings, and Buenos Aires-based *arte de los medios* (mass media art), Masotta attempted to articulate the relationship between subjective experience and the conflictive social reality in which it arises.

Masotta's text begins with two epigraphs. The first is taken from the opening lines of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology" (1939). The second is excerpted from Soviet constructivist artist El Lissitzky's short essay titled "The Future of the Book," which, first published in 1926–27, had recently appeared in 1967 in English translation in the journal *New Left Review*. Masotta takes the first epigraph from the opening lines of Sartre's essay: "‘He devoured her with his eyes.’ This expression and many other signs point to the illusion common to both realism and idealism: to know is to eat."³⁸ In the cited text, Sartre criticizes the Cartesian and neo-Kantian epistemology recurrent in French phenomenology at the time and, ultimately, the transcendental ego implied by Husserl's structure of perception. When viewed in light of the other essays in *Conciencia y estructura* (Consciousness and Structure), "Después del pop" can be seen as an attempt to escape the dualism of Sartre's own ontology of experience by proposing the idea of a self-producing social structure as the bridge between consciousness and material reality. Lissitzky's playful reference to dematerialization bears the weight of Masotta's theoretical ambition to articulate, or at least call for, a materialist notion of the subject:

The idea moving the masses today is called materialism, but dematerialization is the characteristic of the epoch. For example, correspondence grows, so the number of letters, the quantity of writing paper, the mass of material consumed expand, until relieved by the telephone. Again, the network and material of supply grow until they are relieved by the radio. Matter diminishes, we dematerialize, sluggish masses of matter are replaced by liberated energy.³⁹

Masotta takes as his starting point the false opposition between "materialism" and "dematerialization" in the passage above. If Lissitzky suggests the future of art is enmeshed with that of social technique, Masotta inverts the terms of the conversation. Rather than suggesting that avant-garde art "after pop" should mimic or incorporate the technological advances of material culture, he argues instead that by questioning the organicity and autonomy of the artwork, the latter's "dematerialization" reveals the intertwined structure and experience of social relations. In addition to serving as channels of

communication and material instances of ideology, Masotta implicitly viewed the mass media as articulating, rather than merely reproducing, the logic and experience of capitalist social relations.

“Después del *pop*” begins with a series of reflections on the happening. After observing the pop-cultural status that it had acquired in Buenos Aires in the mid-1960s thanks to its outsized presence in commercial magazines, its author goes on to note how the happening’s mixing of materials and genres had rendered the purity of artistic mediums an all but irrelevant question for defining art or its social function under capitalism: “If one talks about avant-garde art as no longer attending to the content of the work, this doesn’t mean that avant-garde art is aiming either at a new kind of purism or at an inferior kind of formalism. What one finds in the best works of art today is that the content appears to be fused with the media employed to transmit it.”⁴⁰ Rejecting the technological determinism of Marshall McLuhann’s dictum, “the medium is the message,” Masotta likely meant to propose the semiotics of advertising when referring to the fusion of the artwork’s content and medium. Composed of artists Roberto Jacoby, Raúl Escari, and Eduardo Costa, the Grupo Arte de los Medios (Mass Media Art Group) attempted to estrange the naturalized language of advertising by intervening directly into commercial magazines and television. And yet, while Masotta helped to inspire this idea, his approach to the social function and determination of art was overcoded by the problem of the social determination of the subject inherited from the critique of Marxist humanism.

In “Después del *pop*,” arte de los medios becomes the vehicle for a rupture with Sartre’s philosophy of consciousness and the articulation of a subject understood, implicitly, at once as an empty space of representation and activity. He announces the determinant role played by the imaginary perceptions of everyday life in his understanding of structure through an ironic use of the notion of artistic medium. Masotta thus describes the work of the Grupo Arte de los Medios in the following terms: “The (‘immaterial,’ ‘invisible’) material with which informational artworks are constructed are nothing other than the processes, results, facts and phenomena of the information unleashed by the mass media.”⁴¹ In Masotta’s view, breaking with the solipsism of Sartre’s ontology of experience implied neither embracing the immediacy and corporality of the happening nor simply abandoning the space of the gallery for that of the street, but rather working within the antagonistic structure and imaginary content of the social.

One could argue that for Masotta, the dematerialization of art projects the aesthetic structure of reflection onto a structural plane. As I examine in greater detail in chapter 1, we can trace this very movement over the course of his writings on art. In his semiotic