

INTRODUCTION

Psychedelic Slant Step. Oh, Timothy. Oh. Oooo. Wow. Wow. Wow.
Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow.
Wow. Bow wow. Bow wow wow. Arf. Buff. Aaah. Aaah. Eee. Eeeeeeee.
S-. S-s-s-s. S-Sl-. S-Slan-. S-l-ant S-. Slant St-. Can't say it. Words.
Words have no meaning. Oh. Oh. Oh. The texture of the linoleum.
The texture of the wood. The cosmic, the god-like shape of it. The
timeless curve. The slant of it. Oh, Timothy. Oh, Antonin. I, I think
I'm going to weep in ecstasy. The linoleum is God's kiss. The wood
the touch of His rough fingers on my breast. It's, it's a green jade
elephant. It's Moby Pickle.

WILLIAM WITHERUP, "SLANT STEP CHANT"

T HIS BOOK TRACES THE LIFE and afterlife of an iconic object that came to prominence in an out-of-the-way corner of the postwar art world—the object celebrated by this hymn.¹ Although its origins are mysterious, it is an object that was intended. Its weight and relation to the ground indicate that it is a kind of step. And its orientation is at a slant. Hence it came to be known as *Slant Step* (figure 0.1). Found in a junk shop, it eventually was offered as a gift from a teacher to a student. After that, it became, for a group of artists in the Bay Area, an object of fetishism. And after that, I will argue, it had an inordinate influence on those who could make use of their peculiar form of devotion in their art. *Slant Step* became a way to reposition their work with respect to their predecessors and contemporaries and, above all, to adopt a different stance toward their own projects and toward one another.

Elsewhere in the world, too, professional artists often collaborate on projects; they assemble in groups and work in similar



FIGURE 0.1
Slant Step.

idioms, forming tendencies and movements. At times, they readily borrow from one another. Even more often, they work in isolation. Yet, outside of overt political action and commercial work, it is highly unusual for them to explicitly take up a problem or hold up a common object as a totem of their joint attention. They no longer need to turn their work into ritual; that is what makes them modern and their art autonomous. Nevertheless, artists regress on occasion, or at least pretend to do so.

In an effort to decipher the significance of this shift to a common object, my study explores interactions among artists, critics, and their publics from the mid-1960s onward who encountered *Slant Step*. Although many of the episodes in this history

take place in Northern California, it is not a historical survey of a region, a medium, or a style but an exploration of the vital role of what I have called, following the sociologist and political economist Immanuel Wallerstein, “the semi-periphery”—neither those domains at the center of power and economic development, nor those peripheral regions excluded from it, but instead those suspended in between. The artistic communities located between the provinces and the metropole proved crucial to the development of contemporary art. Process art, funk art, mail art, and strains of Conceptual art, alongside ceramics, film, theater, and design, all have emerged in this space that mediates central practices and local concerns.

Slant Step traveled from the insular communities and anti-academic art schools of the San Francisco Bay Area to inform high-profile individual artists showing in New York, Bern, and Paris, before making its way to local high schools and college campuses in Burlington, Sacramento, and elsewhere. Its movements reveal how art and ideas circulated in the period. I argue that in the moment of transition presented by the 1960s and 1970s, the semi-periphery—whether extending to international exchanges or shrinking to local coteries—took on heightened significance by determining new orientations for the larger art world and its members.

My study centers around a loosely connected group of artists and critics including William T. Wiley, Dorothy Wiley, Gunvor Nelson, Mike Henderson, Philip Leider, James Monte, Stephen Kaltenbach, and Bruce Nauman, alongside scores of others who worked in and out of the Bay Area from 1959 to 1975. At times, these figures comprised a self-consciously regional group, while at other times they willfully disbanded the formalized strictures that bound their collective ethos, turning alternately inward and outward as they aligned with their cosmopolitan counterparts. Some figures, Nauman above all, gained access to the dominant channels of the art world and went on to successful international careers. Lesser known artists and critics, under the banner of “funk art,” engaged in debate with a range of factions: Italian Arte Povera, New York-based “postminimalism,” and Los Angeles “finish fetish” sculpture. Their arguments centered around the divergent meanings of otherwise similar uses of forms, surfaces, and materials. Still more obscure artist-instructors in the group reframed the terms of postwar arts education by creating predicaments around the socialization of their students, an approach that has had an impact on fine arts programs to this day.

Therefore, rather than discover, let alone recuperate, passed-over styles, forgotten artists, or neglected regions, this study delineates the particular strategies available to the semi-periphery as artists circulate new senses of artistic relevance and worth. The semi-periphery is marked less by a single place than by the bundle of processes it accommodates. Its artists are not outsiders but filterers. They shuttle back and forth across relatively more or less provincial and cosmopolitan milieus, as they alternately adapt to and completely avoid the social upheavals and geopolitical realignments of the moment. They might not have been able to control what flowed through their sieve, but they could design the shape of its holes.

But why did their peripatetic activities rely so heavily on irony? What did these artists set out to achieve through their mock devotion to *Slant Step*? What did they accomplish? And why did they need to place their devotion in brackets? Part of the answer has to do with their role as mediators of art world concerns, which required maneuvering for position, drumming up scandals, creating games of anticipation and debasement, denigration and offence. With *Slant Step*, members of rival artist factions needed to outwit one another through self-travesty and bluffing. And surveying their encounters with the found object, we witness an array of disputes, moments of gate-keeping, and tacit boundary maintenance related to the differential value spheres of competing artistic camps.

STRUCTURE AND APPROACH

Insofar as I sketch the path of *Slant Step* from its discovery and the early devotion of its acolytes forward, my approach builds on what George Marcus has simply called “follow the thing.” This is a method of research, which “involves tracing the circulation through different contexts of a manifestly material object of study . . . such as commodities, gifts, money, works of art, and intellectual property.”² As Marcus notes, “follow the thing” is one of the most common ways of studying “processes in the capitalist world system,” and seems to lie “at the heart of Wallerstein’s method for fine-grained study of process in the world system.”³ Tracing commodity chains from their planning and production stages through moments of consumption to the provisions planned for their waste is a way of spatially conceptualizing processes of manufacturing, the organization of labor, and the expropriation of property. Granted, the travels of the original *Slant Step*, its copies, and its artists were all a multisited regional affair, rather than the sort of global exchange Marcus and Wallerstein envision. Nevertheless this particular “thing” reveals new approaches to the production, display, and maintenance of contemporary art.

I am following the travels of the fetish object itself—which manages to make an improbable, circuitous loop through the various players and pecking orders of the art world. Yet I am also following the ways artists orient themselves toward it on its journey. In the early chapters, my book moves from recounting the charades around *Slant Step* to explaining how artists used renditions and related works to establish their historical, social, and political status. I describe how their ironic devotion to their art allowed them to consider the processes by which fetishization pervaded 1960s culture.

Here, I take up how William T. Wiley and others used age value and polychromy in their work in order to distance themselves from the romanticization of interiority and urban refuse by their predecessors including Wally Hedrick, Joan Brown, and Bruce Conner. The discovery of *Slant Step* was a key moment for Bay Area artists as they shifted from the hoarding assemblages of the so-called “Beats” to a new parodic, artificial, suburban art, engendered by Wiley and his circle and their early efforts as students and teachers. I explore how this younger generation exaggerated the over-

refined surfaces of middle-class consumer goods and accelerated their planned obsolescence. Drawing on the so-called “postindustrial” writers, including C. Wright Mills and Vance Packard, I present the artists’ varied approaches to accumulating trash and buying discarded items as responses to postwar ideologies about making and dealing with waste. I then show how Nauman’s *Slant Step* renditions and his contemporary sculptural “prototypes” and “streamers” indicate a new attentiveness to commodity cycles of production and perishability.

After outlining the proliferation of *Slant Step* exhibitions from the later 1960s onward, I explore a countermanding tendency where small communities of Bay Area artists assimilated into the art world under the auspices of *Funk*, a defining exhibition held at the Berkeley Art Museum in 1967, which included work by Wiley, Jean Linder, Sue Bitney, Mowry Baden, Peter Saul, and scores of others. Although there was a significant overlap in exhibiting artists, I read *Funk* as antithetical to the locally driven *Slant Step* shows. *Funk* collected and packaged hermetic irony for popular consumption. Its local and international reception significantly raised the problem of the cultural connotations of “funk” at the time. Funk came to be used by musicians, artists, architects, comedians, fashion designers, and even “new journalists” who hoped to enliven their writing by integrating themselves with their subjects. Here I discuss Mike Henderson’s student paintings and films, alongside his early collaborations at the San Francisco Art Institute with the filmmaker and professor Robert Nelson, among others. Through interviews, archival work, and readings of jokes, think pieces, advertisements, and architectural treatises, I uncover how funk allowed the Bay Area artists to make use of the sentimental jargon of authenticity and speculations on racial identities within the counterculture for their own purposes as they continued to raise disputes with other factions of the art world.

As the artists and critics turn outward, so does my study, which shifts its focus from the hermetic discursive and material variations around *Slant Step* itself to broad issues of the moment, including sixties-era cultural politics; institutional and pedagogical histories; and the concerns of mainstream Euro-American “neo-avant-gardes.” When their work became more widely known and more seriously considered, those working in the semi-periphery sought to renegotiate the terms that bound artists to critics and the market. Nauman, following his student *Slant Steps* at the University of California, Davis, entered into the New York gallery system armed with a discourse of lax intentions and behavior. Meanwhile, his classmate Stephen Kaltenbach resisted the market’s processes of absorption by shifting the responsibility for devising and making his work onto other artists. In the same milieu, Richard Serra used *Slant Step* to tie his work to industrial processes of fabrication. In this section, I go on to sketch the Italian reception of Nauman, Kaltenbach, and funk art, as Piero Gilardi and other prominent critics drew parallels to Arte Povera, promoting a new international style of “impoverishment.” These sixties-era critics, I find, pointed to the shifting means by which art connotes its value. I argue that efforts to locate connotations within the surface of

artworks throughout the 1960s was key to the semiotic discovery of connotation itself as a plane of meaning in the writing of Jean Baudrillard and others.

In the final chapters, I turn to the “gatekeeping rituals” of artists, critics, and curators, which would determine who was “in” and “out” of their communities. Through close readings of correspondence and printed work circulated among art world members, I outline the practical dimension of these rituals as they deflated dominant practices and denigrated outsiders. Here I focus on Saul’s dismissal of *The Slant Step Show* and the aspirations behind its false transgressions and ritual sacrilege. I examine, too, transcribed telephone conversations between Andy Warhol and the curator David Bourdon as they prepared to manage Saul’s public assault on their own group.

Semi-peripheral artists were acutely attuned to how artists learned these social techniques of gatekeeping and wielded them in the art world, which led them to exert an outsized influence at the time in the field of arts education. Through interviews and analysis of correspondence between administrators and professors, I show how international shifts in pedagogy over subsequent decades resulted from studio and classroom dynamics established at the San Francisco Art Institute, UC Davis, UC Berkeley, California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State), and other sites where artists were affiliated with *Slant Step* and funk art. We witness the legacy of their studies, I argue, in a new regime of intended “mediocrity” in which artworks no longer prompt aesthetic judgments. Instead, mediocre works are designed to provoke discussion of social, political, and moral issues through their very lack of distinction.

These intramural disputes, struggles over the connotations of common forms, and debates over the socialization of artists lead to a conclusion that treats the uneven development of the art world and the paths and opportunities available to its members. I survey existing approaches to cultural worlds that typify center-periphery relations. Here I explore the ways that political economists, including Wallerstein, have established a rubric for thinking about flows of cultural resources, and I point to the special role granted to semi-peripheries within world systems analysis, especially during periods of transition or decline like the 1968 moment.

Rather than reduce the art world’s “system” to the general economy, I argue that by the later 1960s and early 1970s, many members of the art world found that the fine arts had grown irrelevant to the everyday lives of their audiences and the projects of the New Left. In consequence, they looked to alternative media and modes of cultural production. Artists responded by forcing themselves to reskill. They flocked to new degree-granting programs where they conformed their ways of making and evaluating artworks to established methods in the liberal arts, which often centered on historical and ethical judgment.

In the end, the varied encounters with *Slant Step* and among artist factions testify to the uneven development of postwar and contemporary art. They point to how artists became assimilated into available trajectories and movements as their art became packaged, recognized, and misrecognized. In order to trace these paths beyond the

existing array of anecdotal accounts of *Slant Step* and the canonical histories of movements like funk, the book seeks to integrate the discoveries sociologists of art have made about the operation of art worlds with the formal and historical dimensions of social art history. Put another way, I present the social organization of postwar art through the historical processes by which artists, curators, critics, and audiences made sense of it at the time.

The consecration of *Slant Step* in 1965 and the subsequent activities of artists associated with it push us to reconsider the trajectory of 1960s sculpture, the transition to postmodernism, and the fate of the fetish within secular modes of artistic production as it moves between craft and the marketplace, and perhaps even help us understand why artists have so often turned to mediocre forms of art making today. In order to interpret these histories, I follow a range of period voices, which artists and their critics read and recited in their moment. Among them, I look at the commentary of advertising gurus and pundits. I discuss, too, postwar sociologists who saw artists and craftspeople as a salve for the increasingly depoliticized suburban middle class. And although my own argument does not rely on semiotics, its postwar exponents offer a helpful case study in thinking about systems of objects, whether they be ordinary consumer goods, trash assemblages, or *Slant Steps*. These voices are not eclectic for their own sake; rather, they help us understand how cultural artifacts travel in and out of the art world as they shift in scale and relevance.

Beyond the writers of the period, I consider an array of scholarship published in the past two decades. *Slant Step* sits within a matrix of design, craft, and sculpture and speaks to new ways of producing, teaching, evaluating, and collecting art. In recent years, historians have published monographs on the margins of the 1960s plastic arts, reading canonical movements against the grain by focusing on minor members and anomalous iterations. Many of these efforts have coincided with more detailed histories of the cross-connections between art, the countercultures, and the civil rights movements of the period. Often for the first time, scholars have moved beyond the strong explanatory voices of the moment to consider the reception of circulating ideologies, especially as they ramified through the art world. As part of this trend, a raft of conferences and exhibitions on arts pedagogy and the major Getty Research Institute initiative Pacific Standard Time have provided more nuanced views of the educational transformations of the period, the status of “outsiders,” and the socialization of artists. In an allied development, scholars have carved out a burgeoning subfield of the discipline that treats the assimilation of craft into the fine arts, its political and gendered valences, alongside its connections to housework, petty entrepreneurship, and industry.

These explorations into education, skill, craft, and politics prompt us to reconsider the social activities around *Slant Step*. Cast off and then worshipped, the step might once have fallen easily into fixed categories of fetishism and abjection. But today, debasement, which once stood under the purview of Marxism and psychoanalysis, is

increasingly thought of in terms of banal processes of recycling and “materiality.” Rather than resolve these competing claims, I turn to long-standing anthropological approaches to the fetish and sociological readings of art worlds for help in sorting out why the semi-peripheral artists held up *Slant Step* as a common concern. Nevertheless, as a corrective to social science models where art is quickly subsumed under rubrics of status, distinction, and collective engagement, artworks themselves play central, irreducible roles within this social history. After all, there would be no sociology or history to speak of without the art.

JOINT ATTENTION IN THE “ART WORLD”

Slant Steps is, therefore, an account of how artists orient themselves toward a common object during a moment of transition. Tracing encounters with the object offers a summary history of the way artifacts and their offshoots enable different forms of mutual recognition, directness, and possibilities for reciprocal address. These moments of mediation offer artists, critics, and their audiences a sense that they inhabit or belong to an art world and that their world is complex, linked across chains of semiosis. They need not worry that they are isolated within their practice and by their judgment.

But how does orientation work? How do artists establish shared values or express disagreement? In the art world, joint attention is achieved not only through pointing, talking, writing, and other relatively commonplace forms of communication but also through making art. As those art historians who adopted and eventually abandoned semiotics in the postwar period discovered, art making has its own traditions of material semiosis. Artworks demand and produce joint attention through the coordination of gazes in painting, internal variation in sculpture, iconism, dialogism, and other forms of “pointing,” which often require prior cultural knowledge about previous and contemporaneous works. Indeed, one way of reading the history of *Slant Steps* is as a heuristic device through which artists simplified and taught the strategies needed to produce joint attention for members of their scene, as well as outsiders and neophytes who might try to interpret their activities.

Their mock devotion, expressed in chants, pranks, thefts, and other covert and not-so-covert activities emphatically performed the nonhermeneutic processes sociologists have recently described where persons justify “orders of worth” through their common objects.⁴ *Slant Step* was a sociomaterial tool that hyperbolically staged the various commitments, entitlements, and conventions of those who participated in its ratification. It repelled and attracted; created agreements and disputes; and became valorized in business negotiations, gift exchanges, civic engagements, and other social relations; but it was never an object of sheer contemplation.

At the moment when artists began to highlight their joint attention through their “worship” and production of *Slant Step* iterations, social theorists were trying to account for the types of communication that constituted the art world. The aesthetician Arthur

Danto popularized the term “art world” in 1964, arguing that when people talk about art, they are implicitly bringing in a whole “world” of theory, history, and viewpoints.⁵ By 1966 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann seemed to echo Danto’s insight when they argued that social reality was established not by abstract theoretical laws but by shared forms of everyday knowledge: maxims, proverbs, myths, and other forms of common sense carried out over the course of a chain of interpersonal interactions.⁶

Nevertheless, in highly stratified and institutionally segmented societies, Berger and Luckmann emphasized, “socially segregated sub-universes” such as the balkanized art scenes of the 1960s developed their own idiolects, esoteric meanings, and forms of expertise.⁷ “In advanced industrialist societies, with their immense economic surplus allowing large numbers of individuals to devote themselves full-time to even the obscurantist pursuits,” they contended, “pluralist competition between sub-universes of meaning of every conceivable sort becomes the normal state of affairs.”⁸ In the affluent society that flourished from the end of World War II until the 1970s, any account of the art world would necessarily have to take into consideration the internal disparity within it, alongside its affinities with other sites of cultural production.⁹

The commentary and projected images of these “sub-universes”—what the perspicacious Bay Area art critic James Monte termed “sub-styles” at the time—were a crucial development in the postwar period. From the insights of the Birmingham School to queer theory, scholars have persuasively pointed to the way the burden of “style” shifted during this moment from the apparatus of mass culture onto oftentimes marginalized group scenes and seemed even to compensate its intellectuals and artists for their exile from—and repression within—the culture industry. Even, or especially, the most popular media provided porous, affective moments of identification among both close-knit communities and strangers who subsequently could construct a shared footing from which to schizophrenically adore and reproach its operations. Conversely, these publics—whether we consider them “counter,” “intimate,” or “phantasmic”—could devote a seemingly excessive amount of attention to “silly objects” like *Slant Step*.¹⁰ Such forms of wavering connection allowed them to provisionally bypass the prudery of late modernism and to find within mass culture a common sense.¹¹ Because these publics neither constituted the intended audience nor watched movies and television or read magazines or listened to pop music “seriously,” they discovered within those widely circulating representations their own values and desires and senses of aesthetic pleasure and disdain.

At the time, the sociologist Howard Becker argued that because San Francisco was beholden to neither long-standing civic and religious codes of conduct nor an entrenched publishing or entertainment tradition, it was uniquely positioned to absorb and proliferate these new “sub-styles.” As he assembled his materials for his study on art worlds, he edited the volume *Culture and Civility in San Francisco*, in which he and fellow writers attributed “the San Francisco mystique” to its “toleration of deviance” and “accommodative relation to difference.”¹² The cultivation of subcultures was a

“highly selective” process, Becker argued. “Coping with the periodic influx of new generations of bohemians who have heard that it is the place to be: the beatnik migration of the late fifties and the hippie hordes of 1967” was becoming a major source of contention, which played out in the generational struggles witnessed in the early chapters of *Slant Steps*.¹³

Indebted to Berger and Luckmann’s work on sub-universes, Becker showed in his slightly later book *Art Worlds* how “the art world” helped invent a social realm through which people identified themselves and felt a sense of collective belonging.¹⁴ Becker himself had studied photography at the San Francisco Art Institute, took part in many of the performances of the Bay Area arts scene, and became an important interpreter of funk art. He described art worlds through the activities its members take up together, noting ultimately that educated lay audiences support and maintain the “distribution system” of art worlds, even if they are rarely the artist’s intended public.

Where Becker looked at art worlds from the perspective of practitioners and local audiences, the sociologist Paul DiMaggio connected the operation and management of art worlds to the interests of social elites. Artists and their publics had little room to maneuver within this social structure, and their “competing claims” created conflict and complexity within given works and exhibitions.¹⁵ Where Becker saw the institution building of art worlds as a collective activity, DiMaggio described the forms of domination and coalition construction it required. Perhaps his most significant finding involved the way arts professionals who were most active in effecting institutional changes were “neither alienated, nor oppositional in their organizational roles.”¹⁶ Rather, they were intermediaries, negotiating the dynamics between their own group or workplace and their relation to the broader occupational field.¹⁷ His insight begins to explain how figures working on the semi-periphery could have altered the art institution without seeking out vanguard positions within it.

Some of the Bay Area artists who worked with *Slant Step* held radical political beliefs and subscribed to—and even participated in—the progressive free speech, civil rights, and antiwar struggles of the era. Wally Hedrick organized anti-Vietnam War protests, Mike Henderson attended Black Panther meetings, and Sally Hellyer eventually became active in the antinuclear movement, but they were, by and large, the exception to the rule. Still more artists expressed an attenuated sympathy with the counterculture’s efforts toward peace and liberation, importing them piecemeal into their courses, artworks, and statements. While some approached these progressive agendas opportunistically, quick to speculate on their gains or assimilate them into the spectacle of the market and fine art, others were apprehensive of the social upheavals that surrounded them. A minority even resorted to a thinly veiled racism and outright misogyny.

Indeed, if this study treats an avant-garde, whose members T.J. Clark once suggested in passing “ended up in California,” it also uncovers a history of those who “bypassed, ignored, or rejected it.”¹⁸ Many of the artists under discussion,

mired in a world of insular suburban white privilege, have been dismissed as lacking political will. They eschewed both the spartan aesthetics of critique and the sentimental spontaneity of everyday life and Happenings. Nevertheless, it is precisely their compromised, muddled activities and messages that make these figures worthy of attention, for they seem to inform us about how the parameters of the New Left loosened over time and eventually became available to constituents who originally had little interest or investment in its projects, especially within the art world.

Already in the 1960s and 1970s, art critics tried to account for the mediation of artists, artworks, and circulating political and aesthetic ideologies, which social theorists had tried to explain through that “art world” paradigm we have just surveyed. On the heels of Danto’s essay in 1966, the critic Harold Rosenberg claimed that “all works of art had become happenings” and that it no longer mattered how they looked or what they were made of. “In our century,” he contended, “the chief attribute of a work of art is not stillness, but circulation”; and here he imagined audiences passing through exhibition halls or encountering images in reproductions in books, in articles, and through television interviews.¹⁹

Arguably, these ideas find their culmination in Lawrence Alloway’s writing six years later. In his famous 1972 essay “Network: The Artworld Described as a System,”²⁰ Alloway showed how an artwork’s horizon of interpretation changed depending on one’s position within the art world. The art world ran on compromise and consensus: galleries profited from museum exhibitions, artists and curators worked as critics. The social roles and alliances of the late 1960s and early 1970s were extremely mobile and fluid, as were the works themselves. Meanwhile, there was a high degree of cooperation among publishers, between the journals and the market, and between dealers and collectors. This kind of cooperation did not amount to unethical collusion exactly, but it testified to the persistent structural inequalities nested within the “system” of communication. Alignments become available for different contingents given their relative position toward other actors in the field. Each response to *Slant Step*, for instance, is predicated on prior socialization, on the recognition of values that accrued to the object. And each evaluation of the object was also an attempt to align one’s own habits or personae with earlier responses, through parody, irony, or sheer repetition as a form of joint attention.

Eventually, whether ignored or rewarded, responses to artworks gradually become fixed to local meanings (for instance, laxity with youth, shoddiness with bohemia, or seriality with bureaucracy). And when these meanings become sufficiently fixed, social groups become premised and patterned on their types of response. Their variations in usage allow them—and us—to observe changes in a group’s behavior and in their ways of evaluating themselves and others. Accounting for these changes is key to understanding the way small-scale tokens of behavior, from worshipping a found object to making a sculpture, contribute from the ground up to larger transitions within the art world and beyond. We can begin to trace alignments whose motives and formal dimensions are not

immediately recognizable as belonging to a certain camp, which may lead to new grounds for considering originality, derivation, and mimesis. These, in turn, may lead to an aesthetics that arises not from the beholder's judgment but from the social history of the art world as it unfolds.

Nevertheless, the activities and fates of semi-peripheral artists, ferrying between their local scenes and widely attended and reviewed exhibitions and famous institutions, are particularly difficult to decipher. They do not operate from the periphery of the art world and go completely unrecognized in their moment, working solely for one another with little audience beyond their regional scene; nor are they dominant actors who exert hegemony over less powerful groups. Rather, the semi-periphery, like the fetish itself, is a transactional zone full of opportunities and missed chances, each an attack on or an accommodation of the ideologies of the moment. In order to explore these moments of "partial penetration" further, we might ask, finally, how the production of joint attention through investment in *Slant Step* allowed these artists to achieve internal solidarity in distinction to other social actors in the field.²¹ How did they determine the processes through which value was exchanged across the art world? And as part of this inquiry, where did their efforts fall short?

After all, the phrase "shoddy meaning"—from which one of my chapters takes its title—was originally uttered in a fit of frustration. Peter Saul used it to gesture to what his fellow artists had not accomplished and the limited repercussions of their ruse. Their joint attention to *Slant Step* had become a predictable and puerile antic. To connote a "shoddy meaning" would have meant doing something else entirely with their mock devotion, although it was hard to say what exactly—something Saul could name in a state of exasperation but never fully explain. By tracing a history of the Slant Steps, we might begin to see what he could have meant.