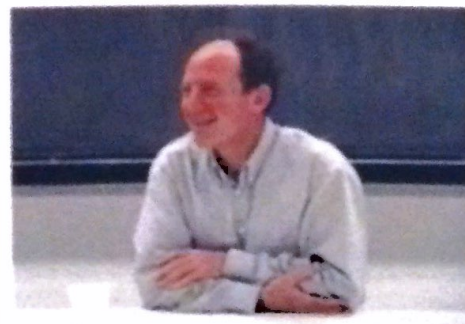
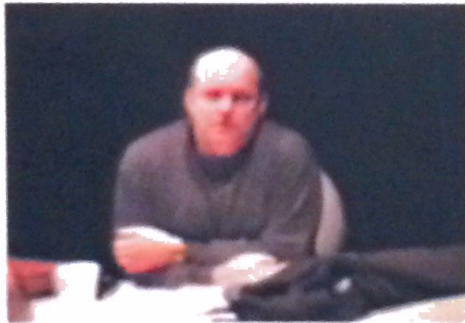
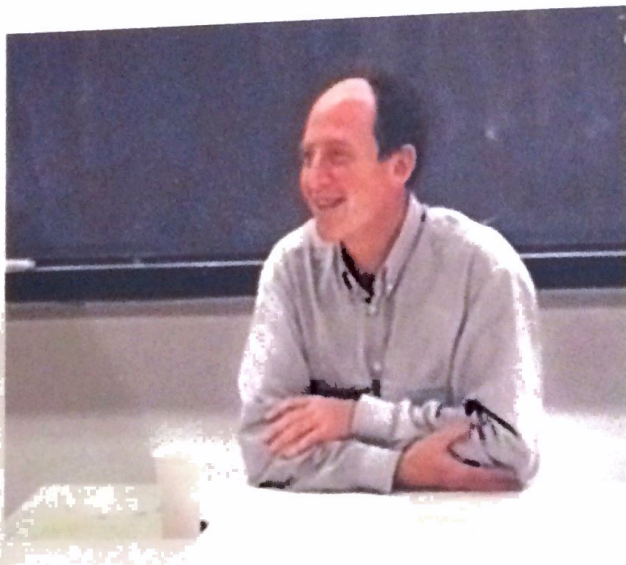
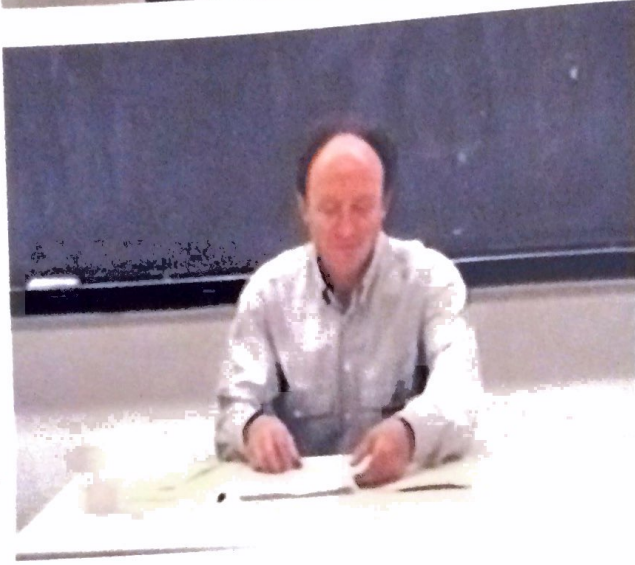
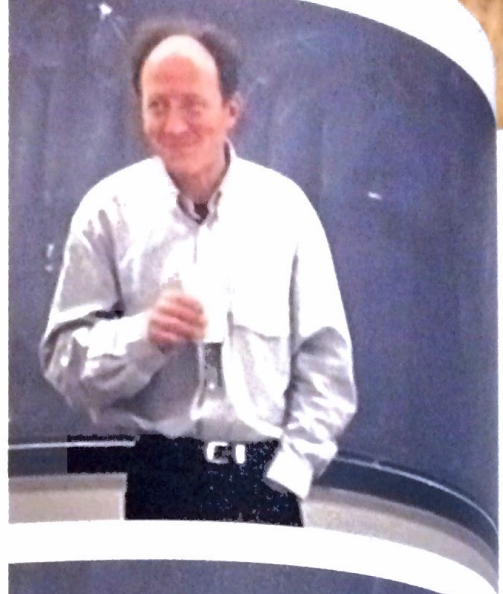
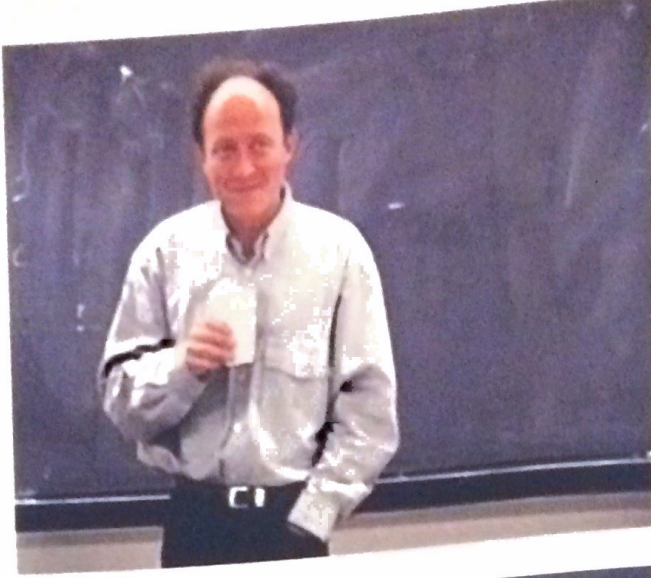


ARTCENTER TALKS

Graduate Seminar
The First Decade 1986-1995

EDITED BY STAN DOUGLAS





SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER: I want to give an overview of what happened in the '80s in relation to French theory. I've been editing a journal on some very specific strains of French theory.¹ And what happened to it puzzled me, because when I arrived in America most artists I met at that time, in the late '70s, were fiercely anti-intellectual. They met this highly theoretical language from France with some very crazy and hysterical reactions. They took it as intimidation, which it may well be, but not completely.

My idea at the time was to integrate theory into the mainline of American culture by trying to find some sort of language for it that Americans would understand more readily. A formative event was when I read a book of interviews with John Cage [1912–1992] titled *For the Birds*,² which was first published in French by the French musicologist Daniel Charles [1935–2008]. The interview was made in English, but Charles lost the tapes and I decided that I would have it retranslated into English. It was the first theory book I published here. I thought that Cage himself would have found it amusing.

Reading that book I was struck by Cage's involvement in Zen Buddhism and chance operations, but also with Nietzsche. I suddenly realized that he was getting very close to what is now called French theory, and I liked the fact that he was very humorous and direct, and anyone could connect to it. I thought that was exactly what theory should be, something that people read and relate to, that then energizes their work, rather than something they have to exert themselves over by going back to Ferdinand de Saussure [1857–1913] and the whole semiotic tradition, including Claude Lévi-Strauss [1908–2009], Roland Barthes [1915–1980], and Jacques Derrida [1930–2004].

I thought that I had discovered the perfect language of theory for American artists. What I'd been trying to do over the years in *Semiotext(e)* was to present theory as direct documents. Not to present it in isolation, as something that required extreme intellectual effort, but to connect it with the kinds of things people were working on, to make sure that a bit of theory was presented along with a political poster, along with a document taken from a psychiatric context, etcetera. In other words, theory as part of our thinking process when we integrate things in our world, get ideas, get information. We work from real-life material. I thought the best way of dealing with French theory for Americans was to make it as direct and pragmatic as possible.

To my big surprise, the reverse happened. Ten years later I started to see all sorts of critical writing, first in the art world, which tried to match French theory at the level of theorization. It wasn't so much the ideas that people were getting from French theory, it was the theories themselves that people were interested in. They would try to master the system the way it was in France. If there was maybe some reason for the French doing that, we didn't understand why Americans should do the same.

You could say that I was selfish, because I had already been through ten or fifteen years of French theory and then it started all over again. I saw it happening from the very beginning, when I studied at the *École pratique des hautes études* with Roland Barthes, where all those people were teaching. I saw how linguistics came about, how semiotics was theorized, and how in the span of five or six years it branched out in all sorts of directions. You could see which theory was growing, where it was coming from, where it was going, who was deconstructing it, criticizing it. Here, in the United States, French theory was absorbed as a massive block of ideas. In France it was generated in total excitement, but also in total conflict. These people who Americans put together very happily actually didn't even want to talk to each other.

In France the intellectual world, what the French call *inteligenza*, was directly connected to politics in the European sense: not to a representative somewhere in Washington, but to the actual thinking of political conditions in France. So when I arrived here, I was looking for the equivalent of French intellectuals, and I couldn't find it. I taught at Columbia University, and after a year or two I did, of course, find two or three interesting people. But there was no intellectual context to speak of. You had people working in a discipline, who were extremely specialized, competent, and disciplined, but they were not addressing society at large. Coming from a French context, it seemed to me that if you produce ideas, they have to be useful. They have to be useful not just in the context of a classroom, they have to give directions. The magazine I created, *Semiotext(e)*, was a way of reaching out to American intellectuals.

I finally found them in the art world; the art world paralleled the kind of theory that I had left in France, and was at that time hoping to go back to. It was what kept me going for quite a number of years. What I realized, going back to John Cage, was that he represented another form of community, as self-contained and reflective as the one I'd left behind. This was particularly true in Soho, where people didn't address the outside world. Dancers were performing for dancers, musicians were performing for musicians, and painters were financing the whole thing. It was a self-contained world where there was a common language, a common pre-occupation, because someone could immediately see what was going on and what was at stake.

So the idea I had, since at the time none of the artists were writing much, was that they would explain to me what they were doing in their own language, and

then I could reprocess it in my mind according to my theoretical models. What happened, and this is really the topic I want to address, is that within ten or fifteen years exactly the reverse happened. You never know exactly what will happen when you start something. I lived for two years in Australia, so I know that when you let loose a rabbit it can become a major continental catastrophe. [Laughter.] So I was surprised when I saw French theory become a sort of continent of its own, which people would either appropriate or attack. It became something extremely different.

What I've been trying to do is evaluate the varied strains of French thought and, like a virus, inoculate the culture with them. I had in mind specific groups of people who could use this kind of theory: the art world, writers, the gay world, etcetera. Not just to present French theory, but to really make it pragmatic somehow, to connect with the culture—that was my main concern.

In the mid-'70s I tried to get French intellectuals and American artists together. I organized a big convention at Columbia University called "Schizo-Culture," which eventually became an issue of the magazine,⁴ and included Michel Foucault [1926–1984], Gilles Deleuze [1925–1995], [Félix] Guattari [1930–1992], [Jean-François] Lyotard [1924–1998], and other people. I had them meet Cage and [Merce] Cunningham and [William] Burroughs and [Richard] Foreman, along with R. D. Laing and the antipsychiatry people, both in this country and in England. It was an attempt to really establish contact between them, at a time when the art world wasn't very involved with French theory.

Now I can reflect upon it, because the French intellectual world is dissolved. We still have a few major philosophers who haven't died, haven't disappeared. Actually, some of them are now better known here than they are in France. [Jean] Baudrillard [1929–2007], who is so important in the United States, and all over the world, had practically no career in France, and recently retired without having ever made an impact on the French scene.

[Paul] Virilio I met when I was doing an issue on the Italian Autonomists.⁵ I thought he was Italian, and I was told he was a captain in the French army, only to discover two years later that he was fiercely opposed to the military. The military for him is a total abomination. Virilio also was more known here, through his books, and eventually has gained an audience in France over the last few years.

The notion of postmodernism was conflated with various French theories, but most French theorists don't want anything to do with it. They think it was not

a concept that was developed by the French but some kind of American creation out of these amalgamative theories, and packaged and put on the market. It has become a major industry over the last few years; it's impossible to keep up with the books, which all deny the existence of postmodernism and yet spend three hundred pages describing it. The only one who really established a connection with postmodernism was Lyotard, who, along with Baudrillard, was a frequent presence in the United States. He picked up the postmodernist virus circulating here, brought it back to France, then it was retranslated into the English⁶ original, and so contributed to this complex elaboration.

What I'm talking about is the misleading sorts of interactions and misunderstandings that make up the relationship between cultures. I was trying to make sense out of this set of interactions when I realized that American artists had selected, out of the multiplicity of French theories, the ones I never would have thought were necessary in the United States. Americans seem to have gone for the theories that were the least useful for them. Perhaps these were the ones they were most ready to accept, because they took from French theory what they already knew without having the theory for it. But what could really be useful to them, what was more pertinent for American culture, was left to the side. And that was a very strange realization.

Historically there were instances of French theory used in specific contexts; for instance, Baudrillard's influence on the American art world. I published his *Simulations* in 1983,⁷ from two separate volumes of Baudrillard, one *Symbolic Exchange and Death* [1976] and the other *Simulacres et Simulation* [1981]. And around that time there was the inaugural Metro Pictures exhibition of the neoconceptualists.⁸ In his book Baudrillard talks about the simulacrum, about copies without originals, and the whole question of appropriation is already raised there. When Baudrillard arrived in America, came back around, the idea of simulacra was reappropriated in a very specific way, which accounts for the misreading that occurred. There was a consistent misreading of Baudrillard's concept, a misreading that, in a sense, could also be very creative. I think theory should be misread. To demand the integrity of a theory is a very strange concept mostly made for people who aren't theoreticians. For about fifteen years, I have maintained that theory was really a kind of French artwork, something to be seen as parallel to whatever was achieved in the American art world at the time. Having no outlet in art, French creativity was rechanneled into theory.

There's a difference between creating theories and reading theories. When you read theories, I don't think you should take a submissive position. Theories are tools. But this is only true for some of the French theories. Those were not really so welcome here.

Theories are something that we use pragmatically, in order to clarify problems and to create frameworks to deal with them. It's precisely the most nomadic, pragmatic, the most American of French theories, those which to my mind were the most illuminating for the American context, that were disregarded and put aside. One reason for this may be the relation of what I would call the postlinguistic theories to poststructuralist and structuralist theories.

By "postlinguistic" I mean those theories that limit themselves to deconstructing the structuralist theories of Roman Jakobson [1896–1982] and Lévi-Strauss, or deconstructing the subject of science, as [Jacques] Lacan [1901–1981] did in relation to the absence of subject in the context of linguistics and semiotics and the human sciences.

French theory had two or three stages. The first one, which occurred in total isolation, was the development by Saussure in the years before he died, in 1913, of the system or theory that established modern linguistics. Saussure was a specialist in dead languages and he tried his best to change living language into a dead system.

In trying to make sense out of the chaos of language, Saussure produced a new object, *la langue*, the system of signs or system of language, by eliminating everything from it. He eliminated the actual language in its specificity. He eliminated the organicity of phenomenal foundation. He eliminated the transmission of any sort of message through acoustics. In short, he built the total construction that is *la langue*. *La langue* stayed quiet for about half a century, and then the idea was picked up at the phonological level by Jakobson. It migrated from Russia to Prague, and from Prague to New York, where a relation between Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss was established. And then it moved back to France, where it influenced structural anthropology, which came to the attention of Roland Barthes, who applied it to sociology first, and then to literature. It was at that point that the second generation of structuralism was born, which we call poetics, with the emphasis now on the literality of the language rather than the message transmitted. This was established between '65 and '68, about three years before the events of May '68 shattered French politics.

I remember Lucien Goldmann [1913–1970] telling me, “That’s it, structures are finished.” They went down to the streets. The second generation of structuralism was an attempt to reintroduce subjectivity into the system. But it was a strange kind of subjectivity, because it was the tools of language that allowed it to be reappropriated by the interlocutor. It was not a way of dealing with subjectivity, but subjectivity in language. It was still part of a full-fledged structuralist theory, but it had absorbed some elements of what Saussure called *parole*, or speech, and had been eliminated from the science of linguistics.

As soon as a second-generation structuralism was born, you had a context in which to critique and deconstruct it. The first article by Derrida⁹ critiqued *The Savage Mind*,¹⁰ which is Lévi-Strauss’s major structuralist work. As soon as structuralism got theorized to a certain degree, it was immediately questioned in philosophical terms.

Between ’67 and ’72 the circle was closed on French theory. From then on each theory went in its own way and explored its own paradigm. And what we call French theory, in its various branches and through conflicting paradigms, was put together at that point.

The distinction I made regarding structuralism, poststructuralism, and post-linguistic philosophy is that they all rely on language, either to structure phenomena at some level, or to deconstruct them, explicate them, or criticize them, as a theoretical strategy is supposed to do. All of these maintained the supremacy of language, or what Lévi-Strauss called “the symbolic.” Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze proposed what they called a discourse that was not dependent on language, and didn’t rely on the semiotic model. Their conception of language was a kind of schizophrenic flux that could incorporate both words and things, bicycles, colors, a heterogeneous “language” that didn’t obey the linguistic model whatsoever.

These three strains are distinct. And for the most part I would say they’ve been confused in America. For the most part what Americans welcomed in the ’60s and early ’70s was structuralism, Lévi-Strauss, etcetera. But at the end of the ’70s, and especially in the ’80s, it became poststructuralist theory, which didn’t put the emphasis on language, which I call postlinguistics. The 1980s was a time when the American art world was being forced to open up to the rest of the world. From the end of World War II until the ’70s, the center of the art world moved from Paris to New York. As John Baldessari pointed out, if Italian or German artists wanted to be

exhibited in their own country, they had to become American. They had to become minimalists or conceptualists.

So, when the waves of Italian and German art came to this country, around 1979, 1980, all the American critics, whose hearts were on the left, who spent their time criticizing the powers that be that dominated culture, these critics unanimously attacked Italian and German art as an attempt to dethrone the great royal traditions of minimalism and conceptualism, which were the most "advanced," in spite of the idea that there was no progress in art. I think at that point some of the most Greenbergian notions regarding art were being reappropriated by American critics and aimed against the European tide.

If you go back to a publication of the time, *Art After Modernism*,¹¹ you see the total arrogance of American critics in relation to Italian and German artists. All the adjectives Europeans often used to characterize Americans were thrown at European art they were childish, immature, naive, misbehaved, scandalous. They were ahistorical, antihistorical. They were authoritarian. They were fascist. [Laughter.] You don't have to scratch very far to see how every single critic, Tom Lawson, [Benjamin H. D.] Buchloh, Hal Foster, [Donald] Kuspit, were shooting from the hip, in total cahoots, quoting each other, calling to their rescue the most disparate critical sources—[György] Lukács [1885–1971], [Walter] Benjamin [1892–1940], Lacan, Barthes, Marx. It was amazing. Anything was all right as long as one shot down the enemy.

You could see that they felt it was a threat to American supremacy, the American critics defending the tradition of American art against the foreign invasion. These critics were accusing the German and Italian painters of creating a prefascist context. But it was based on a total misunderstanding of what was happening in Europe. When there's an expressionist trend, it's always seen as a preparation for a fascist state. Everyone looked back to expressionism and connected it with the past, totally disregarding the fact that in Italy and in Germany a Green party and peace movement had been developing for nearly twenty years. And in Italy there was the only original autonomist movement in the West. Gilles Deleuze once wrote about Carmelo Bene [1937–2002],¹² an Italian dramatist who rewrote Shakespeare's *Richard III* by taking away the king and letting the play reshuffle itself around his absence.

That's exactly what the Italian Autonomists did to Marxism. They took away the notion of work, the dignity of work, the working class as representative of history.

and looked for other alternatives, thus anticipating post-Fordism. Paradoxically they came to the United States to learn not from the American trade unions, but from the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World, a neoanarchist, flowing, mobile type of union from the beginning of the twentieth century. They thought that was something they could learn from. So again, another element of misunderstanding.

Even though German painters were not a direct emanation of these theories, it is true that art was part of a cultural context informed by the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari. French theory was used to strengthen the American camp at the expense of the foreigners. This accounts to the fact that Baudrillard's radical idea of a simulation without an original was totally misunderstood, and reduced to simulation as critique, simulation as deconstruction, simulation as a "political" act, etcetera.

When Italian and German art were introduced in this country, they were associated with postlinguistic theories; that may be one of the reasons why they were brushed off, to the benefit of the American "royal" theories. There's a distinction that Deleuze and Guattari made in *A Thousand Plateaus*¹³ between "royal" and "nomadic" sciences. What I call postlinguistic theory is basically nomadic. In other words, it doesn't offer a complete system. It's very Nietzschean in its approach, it requires constant reevaluation of the forces at stake, which, whether active or reactive, have to be constantly distinguished and evaluated. Some strains have to be strengthened and others forgotten. It's all a matter of strategy; you can't just apply the theory like a recipe, which you can with Lacan, with Derrida, etcetera.

When I arrived in this country, in 1972, Derrida was already well known in the academic context, opening up the possibility of writing dissertations for centuries to come. "Writing in the margin" and deconstruction became a boon for academic institutions, which were on their way to becoming an industry, with competitive schools, stars, etcetera.

French theory happened just in time to feed the star system in America, and renew the fairly obsolete context in which knowledge was disseminated. But it is very difficult to reappropriate a nomadic art, a nomadic theory, because it's difficult to make it work in a systematic fashion.

That's why I never thought of working with a specific theoretical discourse. My idea was to create something, something that started from the university, and extend it somewhere else. In other words, my way of using Deleuze and Guattari was to do something with them. Instead of making theory a new field, you had to

use these theorists for a purpose. I wanted to use theory in a way that allowed me to escape, not into an institution, because you never escape from any institution, but to provide an irritant, something that would remain foreign to the academy, foreign to the art world, foreign to France, and foreign to America. That's how I saw it. I wanted to create a patchwork of forces, some inside, some outside, very fluid forces that could eventually generate something new.

In the meantime, in America, the first debates about the new expressionism were pretty muddled. Neoexpressionism was also here, the work of David Salle, Tom Lawson, not to mention Julian Schnabel, etcetera. But already some new American art was in the making. And the neoconceptualist trend was being born at the same time.

In terms of subjectivity, if you look back at minimalism, at conceptualism, you can see that the attempt is made to deterritorialize the object. You're struck not just by the fact that most of the work was produced by male artists, but also by the fact that it was a taking leave of the subjective factor.

The subjective factor was totally eliminated in conceptualism, and paradoxically it returned in the work of the American neoexpressionists. You have two poles between which American art tried to deal with subjectivity, and neoexpressionists were trying to define what American subjectivity could be in comparison to more traditional European cultures.

Language in America doesn't have the same status and the same function as in France. I have in mind a well-known analysis by Roman Jakobson in which he defined the six functions of language.¹⁴ He was translating Saussure in the context of theory of communication. For Jakobson the emphasis of any message has to be on the sender, the one who orchestrates all the other function. The emphasis can be on the receiver, on the reference, or it could be the metalinguistic function, like checking the code. Then there is the poetic function, where the attention is on the message itself. And there is another function called the phatic function. Jakobson doesn't dwell on it. It's the function of contact, making sure that the two people are actually communicating. If people don't talk to each other, there's no communication.

Living in this country and reflecting on the way things are being done here, it seemed to me that the phatic function is much closer to the way language is used in America in terms of Jakobson's model. What I mean is that independently of what

is being said, there is a dominant fact of American culture, which is that people are born alone here. It's a very subtle difference, but to see why language may be used in a different fashion here, I would say the dominant function in American culture is the phatic function. When you are on the phone, you always double-check. You say, "Yes, I'm here. You're not talking to a wall." In America there's always a possibility that people are not listening. Is there anyone there? You always need to be certain, independently of whatever meaning is being transmitted, that you're not alone, that there's someone there for you. Someone you can talk to. Someone who's able to be receptive. The very fact of communication is often more important, or more therapeutic, if you want, than what is actually being said. You could say that in America people always are looking for someone who will listen to you. It doesn't matter who listens, as long as someone is there, someone to receive the message. It's the fact of establishing a human contact. There is a special form of sociality in the United States, based on the fact that people are in this culture.

When you go to France, you realize that people are very inhospitable. They don't want to talk to you. [Laughter.] They don't want to introduce you to their wife. They don't want to invite you home. They don't want to have anything to do with foreigners, with the outside.

Whereas in America we always have to go to the street, go to the bar, go anywhere people are willing to talk, right? I was reflecting on that when I read Foucault's *History of Sexuality*,¹⁵ because what does he say? Sex is talk. Being in this country for twenty years, I thought, thinking of Foucault, "But this is obvious. There's nothing new here." In France the book was badly received, but not here. Here it seemed to be a pretty accurate evaluation of the situation. Sex, of course, is something that is done, but mostly it's something that is talked about. Sex is a way of establishing contact.

So the main element in sex was not so much the sexuality as the contact being established. Sex is a shortcut. Talking about sex is selling yourself, putting yourself in a seductive position, saying who you are. If it has a function, the main one is to establish a contact.

So, that led me to think that the idea of language as a universal code, Saussure's *la langue*, seemed very strange in the context of this phatic function of language. Why do Americans quote this linguistic model in a society that doesn't function according to such a model, where linguistics is mostly the pure fact of communication?

So I thought a bit about the status of subjectivity. All of this is on very shaky ground, because there's not such a thing as "America." There's not such a thing as "France." There's not such a thing as "Germany." But when you live in France, or live in Germany, or live in America, you see things stand out. And the truth is that it took me so long to give credibility to the most awful stereotypes that the French have about American culture.

The French find Americans very naive, very immature, exactly what Americans said about foreign European art. This is something I realized in relation to the French: Americans don't have any respect for the French. The French think they are the center of the world, but it took me some time to realize that everyone forgave me for being French. [Laughter.] In trying to define the specificity of a culture, and there is such a thing in the art world, each culture has a different way of making you pay for belonging to it. The idea that you are born free is an illusion; each culture uses explicit, even violent or very insidious means to make sure that you're paying for belonging. You're never given a free ride, anything for free.

Read Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* [1887]. In primitive societies "savages" mark you on the face. They torture you. But at least when you're initiated you really belong to the culture, and you don't have to worry about who you are. You're accepted. You don't have to internalize guilt as we do in our civilized culture. That was an important point of Nietzsche's, which Foucault updated in *Discipline and Punish*,¹⁶ the idea that in our culture we're supposed to shy away from violence. Of course there is violence everywhere in our culture, but it's part of the spectacle. We're supposed to shy away from violence. We don't want to see people executed, we don't want to see the blood.

In a society as open-ended, as fluid, as "democratic" as America, which came late into history, things are very nomadic and disseminated, people are moving all the time. So there has to be a minimal basis for the formation of subjectivity that's in the individual, instead of in the family, class, group, and the hierarchy that are imposed on you from the beginning. And then you find the box in which you are going to be encased for the rest of your life. In Europe you're defined from the very beginning and you struggle to get out of that box for the rest of your life. There's always someone who is above you. So in Europe they don't have to feel guilty for it. In a sense they unite, they have a feeling of being oppressed together by something that comes from above.

Here we're a society of peers: equal opportunity, equal rights, everything's possible. We are free, you know, the Protestant tradition. If you're rich, it's good, if you're poor, you deserve it. In other words, here the individual is a very shaky unit that's always looking outward for its construction, for its reaffirmation, for its reassurance. The subject is trying to prop up an image that's going to be bought. And he or she accepts it for themselves. Everyone tries to make sure that the image has a certain credibility.

I made a video once with someone who was in charge of a supermarket. I was trying to see how the culture functioned more precisely. This fellow was extremely competitive, joyously competitive, life was about being tough, being successful, being the best. I put him in front of the camera, and asked, "Can you sell me your car?" He said, "Sure." He started selling me his car. And I asked, "Can you sell yourself?" [Pause.] Hmm. And he said, "No. I can't sell myself." I asked, "Why?" He said, "I can only sell what I believe in." [Laughter.] This is a very strange thing. Another friend of mine, who is a psychiatrist, said something that's also very illuminating. He lived in Canada, and he said he has a hard time relating to Americans, because Americans have an outward shell, very hard, very self-contained, very autonomous. But once you push beyond the shell, he said, it's very spongy. [Laughter.] What I'm trying to convey here is the idea that there's a real problem in American culture, a real political problem. American culture defines it very well by saying that culture is founded on the individual. An individual is not a self-sufficient unit. It is something that's unaware of its constant elaboration.

It's like when a baby's being formed, there's always a little soft spot that slowly solidifies. It seems that American culture is such that its soft spot never does. [Laughter.] So that, instead of producing individuals who are encoded as individuals, and can be identified, closed off in a series of boxes, American culture brings out people who are not complete, who constantly need help from the outside to achieve a temporary, transitory, tentative, inchoate, very fragile form of closure, always subject to be questioned, to be shattered.

This formation of American subjectivity ensures that it doesn't derive from society as a whole. The individual himself has a craving for social identification, for social confirmation, he defines himself with an endless series of images. It doesn't matter where they're from, as long as they're reflected back. Not just images, but also reassurances.

The way the system works is through a schizophrenic form of subjectivity. Like in Woody Allen's film *Zelig* [1983], you have to know how to cope. You have to adapt yourself. So Woody Allen puts the same individual in various social contexts, which is actually what happens in society at large. We are split into various functions, and in each of these contexts there is a chameleon effect. The individual becomes a black American with black Americans, a woman with women, etcetera.

American society is founded on the idea that the individual is autonomous, has freedom of choice, initiative, free will, but the whole pressure of society is to make it totally malleable and adaptable and unenclosed and unformed.

That's why the phatic function is so important here. The meaning delivered by the message is a secondary construction. The pressure of society is to artificially reintroduce an identity, so that people can cope with the schizophrenic pressure of the system. Deleuze and Guattari point out that our idea of Oedipus doesn't account for the unconscious. It is a social construct within a capitalist system, which is loose, anarchical, impossible to stop anywhere.

So partial and global reterritorializations happen on a small or bigger level to reinforce the process of identification and oppression. But they are really the product of the system. The system itself is beyond theoretical construction.

If you accept the theory of that construction, it would mean that the American subjectivity is a creation of neurosis. Neurosis as a reterritorialization of the endless exchangeability, the constant loss of identity that is the result of human capital, which is at the same time a political process. To be a subject in American culture is to be always on the verge of collapse, always be in the condition of needing everyone, of needing every possible reassurance, every form of identification in order to maintain this shaky makeup. It's quite difficult to achieve.

The whole thrust of American art in this context was to get away from the spongy and get to firm ground. The clean, neat, sleek construction, with ideas. This didn't have to include any sort of subjectivity. It was, I think, a reactive gesture, but it became very productive. Because this construction of American subjectivity, the reverse of the global model, is that subjectivity is a constant creation.

Thus, to be American takes more resources than to be French or to be German, because one constantly has to recreate oneself to fit the demands of the culture. So here neurosis and creativity go very well together, especially a creativity that is the creation of a distinct identity as an art form. The most fundamental artwork being

enacted in this country is a creative neurosis. [Laughter.] That explains the widespread presence of therapy, and also the function of therapy, which, unlike psychoanalysis, is based on ego psychology. It strengthens the ego, which is a very tenuous construction and constantly has to be propped up, strengthened, and reasserted.

For the most part communication in America is therapeutic, because it is about establishing contact, which in itself is therapeutic. You have a therapeutic network of friends, family, etcetera, because of the intrinsic necessity of the formation of subjectivity in the culture.

Conceptualism needed to turn away from that and create a form of art that has its own autonomy. The return of the repressed, expressing what had been denied by conceptualism, was the early '80s East Village art, the new expressionism, where suddenly everyone became an artist, the way everyone became a punk or became a rock star. You could be a painter without any sort of reflection or elaboration, just by expressing yourself. The way people expressed themselves with friends, they could express it with painting.

So it is still very new conceptually that the positionality of subjectivity is being considered. Even in Sherrie Levine the idea was to establish some sort of distinction. Establish a certain form of subjectivity as opposed to another. Theories were being painfully constructed to allow a certain exploration of subjectivity. This became a dialectic through which the problem could be identified. It was recognized mostly by people who spoke on subjectivity involving life in particular ways, as women, gays, etcetera. Not because it's cool and fashionable, but because they didn't have a choice.

Paradoxically Americans didn't use the theory closest to them. They started very pragmatically from the artificial subjective construction that they were required to make, and used French theory in order to deconstruct and reposition it. So that at this point people might be ready to join together, because enough intellectual training could very well lead to an original type of reflection, as opposed to just parroting the French, or using them for money, by packaging the art as was done at the time.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: How would you position American performance art done at the time of the attempt to desubjectify American art in minimalism and conceptualism? That work is based on autobiography and the idea of the subjective. I would

say the work was incredibly annoying and unpopular, and was mostly put in the closet until now.

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER: Hannah Wilke [1940–1993] was bitching about Cindy Sherman, saying, “I did that fifteen years ago.” But at the time it was being marginalized in relation to the general thrust of conceptualism, so obviously made by male artists.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: The difference is with Cindy Sherman’s art, it’s a deep personalization, because it’s another character, compared to what Hannah Wilke does.

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER: It’s deceptive to talk about cultures as closed entities. In the same way, conceptualism was not a unified realm. Vito Acconci thought of himself as a conceptualist, but he would introduce the body and subjectivity in one form or another. In a sense, through neoconceptualism, some elements are being fought over. Maybe it’s happening because of the security of French theory. The royal, linguistic strain of French theory, structuralism, is nothing if not safe, secure. It tells you in advance where you’re going. Which is something that is a need in subjective terms. It leaves you room to grow, to deconstruct it, to displace it, to attack the phallogentrism of Lacan, etcetera, and slowly, by displacing it, to get to something that is more specific or singular through the cyborg problematic, where the idea of gender and difference within species was toppled as bourgeois. You might say the cyborg theory corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari, but it has to be reborn, within feminism, to be acceptable. I remember at the “Schizo-Culture” conference I had scheduled Félix Guattari and Ti-Grace Atkinson in the same evening, and it was a total catastrophe. [Laughter.] Because a whole generation of feminists had not recognized that to talk about the subject as a process, as becoming, as metamorphosis, you need to deny the specificity of the *female* position.

That type of theorization may be a sign that we’re getting closer to not just fetishizing French theory but bringing it closer to what’s really at stake in American culture, its very fluidity, and the fragility of the distinctions being made here, including things related to gender.

In one sense we’re going toward the conceptual, but another trend is heading naturally toward obstruction, as in Sherrie Levine’s most recent work. And that trend is trying to reclaim not so much a subjectivity as a positionality of subjectivity, in the same way Stuart Hall [1932–2014], in his article,¹⁷ defines not the idea of a subject but a positionality of race, sex, etcetera.

The illusion that allowed the penetration of French theory was that there was a critique, a critical position possible. The art world, the old art world, the modernist art world, as opposed to the "postmodern" situation we are in, didn't have to critique anything, because they were protected from it. They could close themselves off from the rest of the world, and make sure that they were not bought by the institutional system. You could say that it was pure theory, or an art that could be self-sufficient, that was being protected from the major currents of consumer society. But when in the late '70s, the alternative fashions, the neoexpressionists started collapsing high and low art, and introduced popular culture, punk, and new wave into the art world, this protection was denied.

Although it was done in the name of anarchy and political models like European terrorism, it was immediately denounced as a fallacious position. So in a sense what was opening up artworks to the world meant that everything could be turned into art, but eventually would be commodified. Opening the gate to consumer society and to the media eradicated the whole territory of the art world, and made it such that half of that world turned into its opposite.

What immediately took the place of the art world was the position of critique, in a kind of Barthesian fashion. If the media feeds on an analytic system, then you could build on top of this system another system that would reveal the artificiality of the mythological construct.

This was still neo-Marxist, neo-Sartrean, and in Barthes's case a neo-Brechtian kind of construct, which made it possible denounce the reigning ideology, to appeal to a transformation of society, all elements, which were simultaneously being eradicated. What happened over time was the collapse of all sorts of mediations. Media, consumer society, and technology were not just part of a "superstructure," they were shaping the environment, and Baudrillard perfectly expressed it, that there was no more reality. Everything was constructed. We left the society of production for the society of reproduction. Signs don't refer to anything anymore, they only refer to themselves.

Even though Baudrillard himself was being reappropriated by the conceptualists as a critical theorist, which he wasn't at all, he finally said, "No, no, I have nothing to do with your idea of simulation. Your simulation is no simulation at all. My form of simulation cannot tolerate any kind of representation. We are in a society where art has disappeared, collapsed, and dissolved, in a society that is totally

aestheticized. Everything can be art, and nothing can be art. There's no more status to art." At that time, American artists adopted Baudrillard as a kind of father figure but he rejected them, and then they rejected him, and that was that. [Laughter.]

We are in a society where there is no possibility left for consciousness. Consciousness is not an active factor in the transformation of society, especially if consciousness is built on subjectivity, which itself is a construct. I don't expect subjectivity to suddenly have an intellectual realization that would bring it into action. There are no more classes that could be called upon to struggle, so what is left is some sort of radical alternative, or critique, which rapidly became institutionalized. Critique has become the creed of the art world, and it is totally divorced from any sort of use or context. It has become a leftist rhetoric prevalent among art critics and in academia.

I'm not saying that the function of art is to provide what society doesn't provide. At least the neoconceptualists claimed to offer a critique of society. What they didn't realize was that the media is not something you can criticize. The media is the major form of mythology produced by American culture. That's why it is so contagious and spread all over the world. The media is not just a form of communication, it's an active, affirmative form created by American society.

There is a total misunderstanding about what myth is. According to Barthes and Lévi-Strauss, it's a logical construct meant to resolve contradictions and maintain the cohesion within a given society. You cannot get involved in myth without being caught in it. In structural anthropology, interpreting myth was just adding another layer to the myth.

Criticizing the media and consumer society is a total fantasy and it could be said that the intentionality of art is a fallacy. Art can be made from totally wrong premises, and still be art, valued as art in a way or another. Neoconceptualist art was based on a total misapprehension of the real situation the artists were in relation to media culture. The critical intent dissolves through sheer integration into the very media that it was meant to criticize. The more artists criticized media, the more the media got interested in art, and talked about it, inflating prices of their work, etcetera. The whole rhetorical, psychological discourse on their art was divorced from whatever they were actually doing. We may well be at the beginning of a period when American artists and intellectuals won't just reject French theory.

as they did at first, or fetishize it, but really put it to some use, exploring theories through art in a way that will be more specifically American.

NOTES

1. *Semiotext(e)* is a cultural/theoretical journal based in Los Angeles, founded by Sylvère Lotringer in New York in 1974, and has since become the foremost independent publisher of poststructuralist theory.
2. John Cage and Daniel Charles, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles*, ed. Tom Gora and John Cage (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981). First published 1976.
3. The "Schizo-Culture" conference, held at Columbia University, November 13–16, 1975, was conceived by the early *Semiotext(e)* collective to introduce post-1968 French thought to the American avant-garde. Participants included William S. Burroughs, John Cage, Gilles Deleuze, Richard Foreman, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari, R. D. Laing, Jean-François Lyotard, and others. Attended by over two thousand people, the countercultural event is remembered as a melting pot of radicals, students, provocateurs, and mental patients.
4. Sylvère Lotringer, ed., *Semiotext(e): Schizo-Culture 3*, no. 2 (1978). Reprinted 2013.
5. Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Semiotext(e): Autonomia: Post-Political Politics 3*, no. 3 (1980). Reprinted 2007.
6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). First published 1979.
7. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
8. Metro Pictures' opening exhibition in 1980 included Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, and James Welling, among other artists.
9. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966), in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). First published 1967.
10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962).
11. Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: David R. Godine, 1984).
12. Carmelo Bene and Gilles Deleuze, *Superpositions*, trans. Jean-Paul Manganaro and Danielle Dubroca (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).
13. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). First published 1980.
14. Roman Jakobson's six functions of language are the referential function, the poetic function, the emotive function, the conative function, the phatic function, and the metalingual function. Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1960), 350–77.
15. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vols. 1–3 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976, 1984).
16. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1975).
17. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework* no. 36 (1989): 68–81.