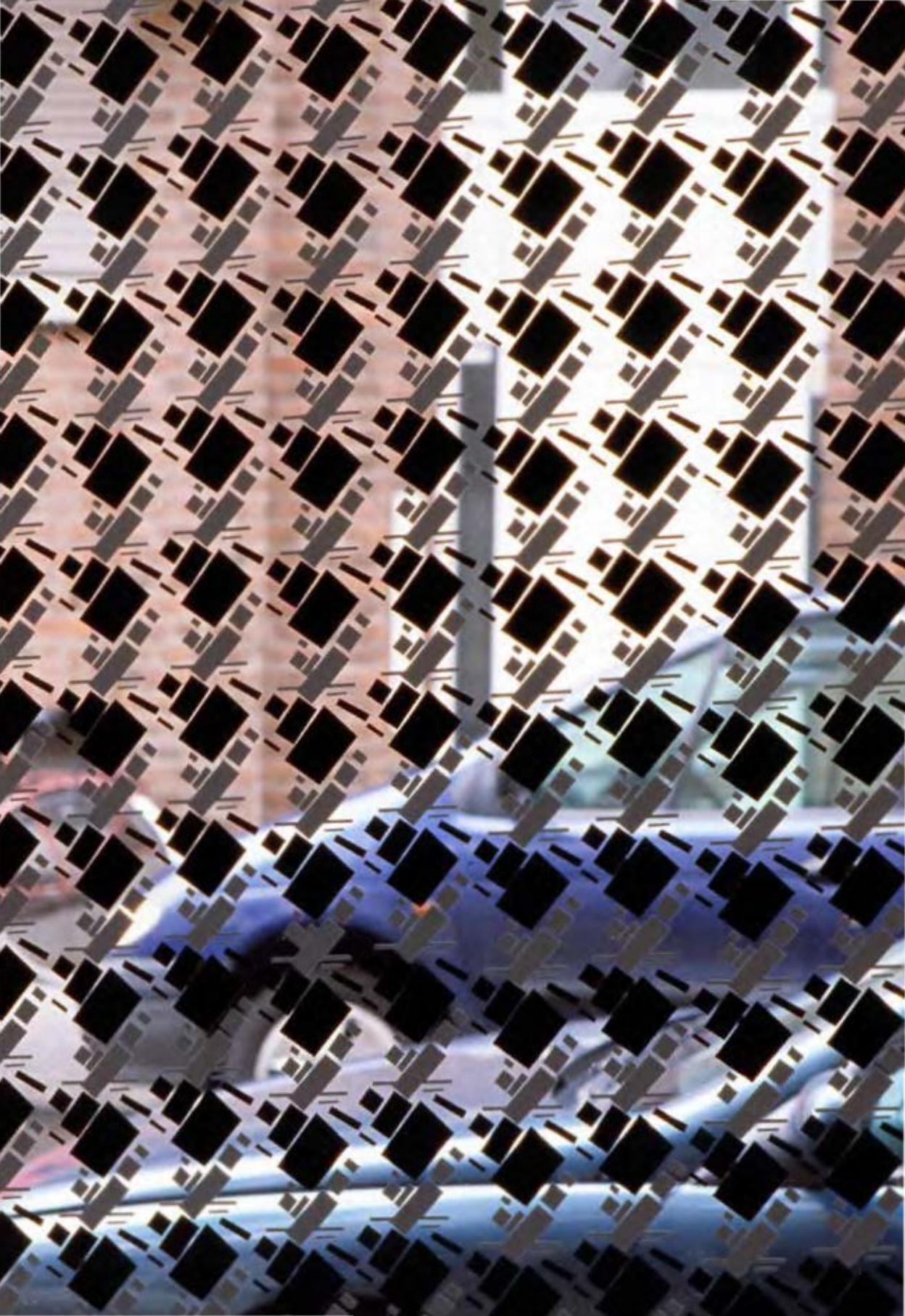


"Meredyth Sparks' Differentialism: The Art of Sublime Micrologies."
In Robert Hobbs and Nicolas Baurriaud, *Meredith Sparks*. Blau, France:
Monograph Editions, 2009.

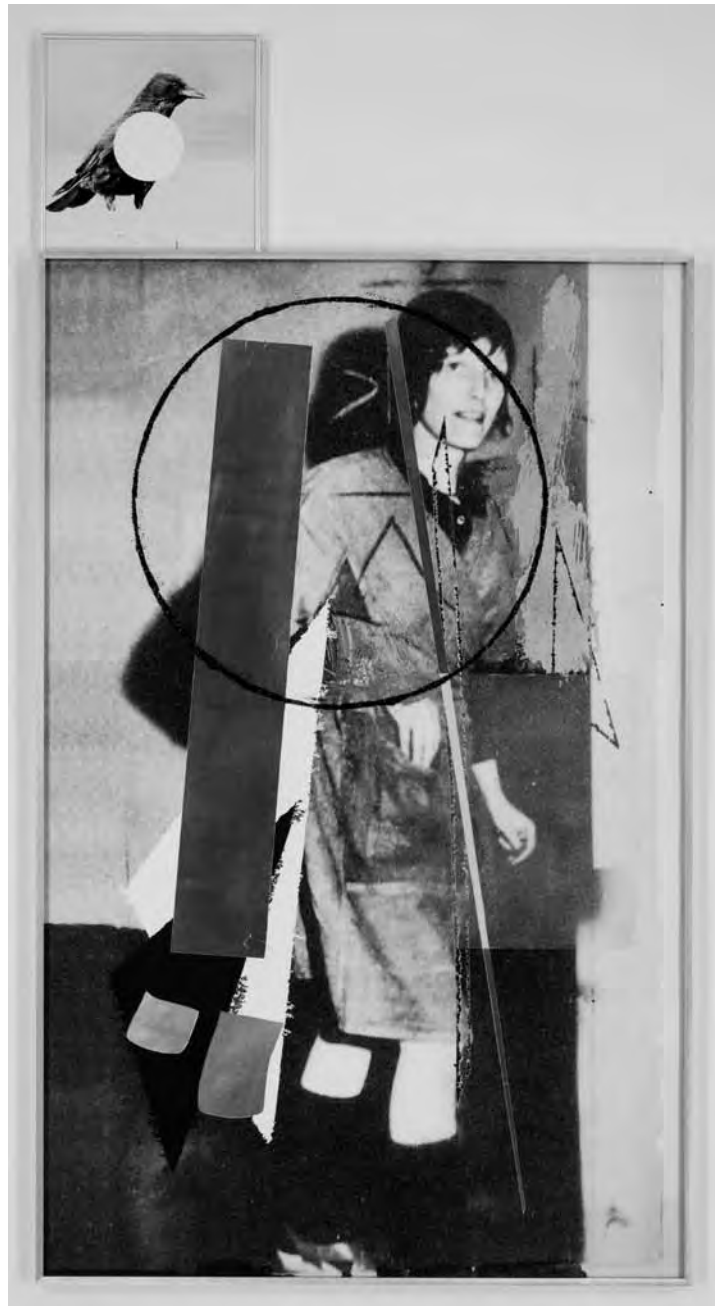
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Meredyth Sparks

with essays by
Nicolas Bourriaud
&
Robert Hobbs



Micrology is not just metaphysics in crumbs, any more than [Barnett] Newman's painting is Delacroix in scraps. Micrology inscribes the occurrence of a thought as the unthought that remains to be thought in the decline of 'great' philosophical thought. The avant-gardist¹ attempt inscribes the occurrence of a sensory now as what cannot be presented and which remains to be presented in the decline of great representational painting. Like micrology, the avant-garde is not concerned with what happens to the 'subject', but with: 'Does it happen?', with privation. This is the sense in which it still belongs to the aesthetics of the sublime.

—Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" in *The Inhuman*, 1988 (English translation, 1991)

Lyotard's postmodern sublime is "an art of negation, a perpetual negation [...] based on a never-ending critique of representation that should contribute to the preservation of heterogeneity, of optimal dissensus [...] [it] does not lead towards a resolution; the confrontation with the unrepresentable leads to radical openness."

—Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*, 1995

If we look for paramount changes in the late twentieth century and new millennium that have had an enormous impact on human beings' self-image, near the top of the list, together with genetic research, cloning, and global warming, is the democratization and decentralization of the heretofore unheralded wealth of information afforded by the global index known as the "World Wide Web." Although the concept for globally linking computers into the overall structure called the "Internet" originated in 1969,² this network needed a complementary system or platform that could store and connect documents in a hypertext format so that the Internet could become widely accessible to non-specialists. Initiated in 1989, this platform is the World Wide Web. Recognized by its characteristically abbreviated prefix <http://www.>, the Web is the crucial link and key that enables direct searches of documents and other resources through hyperlinks and Uniform Resource Locators (URLs). In 1991 America Online (AOL for DOS) made the Web more accessible, and in 1993 the graphical browser called "Mosaic" (later renamed "Netscape") enabled Web users direct access to sites integrating texts with graphics, images, and other media so that they would no longer be forced to open a new file or window each time they needed to look at a different type of information. In 1994, access to material on the Web became demonstrably easier for non-specialists with the first directory and search engines that AOL and Yahoo provided. In 1995, Microsoft Internet Explorer became a leader in the search engine category, and that same year AltaVista's researchers developed the phenomenal means for storing and indexing, in an easily retrievable manner, all the language on all HTML pages on the Internet. Working together, the triumvirate of World Wide Web, Mosaic browser, and AOL and Yahoo search engines made the Internet so user-friendly by the mid '90s that personal computers (PCs) were regarded as valued home appliances, and the word "Internet" became a household term.

Even before the appearance of this troika of innovations, a series of innovations established a basis for utilizing computers as artistic tools. In the 1960s the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) devised ways to convert analog images (based on electrical pulses) to digital signals (broken down into

binary codes) so that the surface of the moon could be photographed and mapped. In addition, NASA found ways to employ computers to enhance shots of the moon's surface, which their space probes were relaying back to earth. In the 1980s SCSI (small computer system interface) was innovated to serve as an accelerated means for transferring material from peripheral devices to computers; a decade later this bridge proved to be essential for linking digital cameras to computers. In 1990 Adobe produced Photoshop, a digital processing software, to facilitate the editing of computer graphics; it also made typesetting obsolete and ushered in an era of desktop publishing. Then, in 1994 Apple released the first digital camera to employ a serial cable, which could be connected to home computers; its lead was followed the next year by Kodak's and Casio's models, and then in 1996 Sony's version appeared. The same year that Apple's digital camera was being marketed to nonprofessional photographers, Lexmark Printers produced the first color printer for computers. Three years later, in 1997, Hewlett-Packard put on the market its user-friendly "PhotoSmart" system, consisting of a digital camera, printer, and film scanner. Computer artists were almost immediately able to avail themselves of many of these tools. And shortly thereafter, ingenious artists, who were not part of the computer art mainstream, were able to innovate ways to redirect the original functions of these new capabilities to unanticipated ends, ultimately creating paintings made with ink-jet printers and digital collages.

Among the most important artists making these types of works is the group of three friends—Wade Guyton, Meredyth Sparks, and Kelley Walker—who became closely associated in the early 1990s when they were all students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.³ Since that time, they have continued to nurture and sustain their friendship, even during the second half of the '90s, when one after the other moved to New York City; today they continue to maintain warm and mutually reinforcing relationships with each other. In addition to being friends and sharing a regional background, these three artists are united in preferring to work with an array of pirated imagery from the Web as well as scanned and printed copies of material from a number of print sources, including books and magazines. Sometimes they connect these reproductions with abstract elements that they generate in Photoshop, create by working directly on the glass faces of scanners, or make by employing more traditional means such as collage or silkscreen. They regard the glass of their scanners as surrogate painting or collage surfaces that enable them to create uneasy conjunctions of various types of images that are realized through the use of giant inkjet printers or silk-screens in Walker's case. Guyton and Walker are widely known for developing their own separate practices in addition to the collaborative one called "Guyton\Walker" (with an appropriate backslash): these three distinct bodies of work are each shown in separate cutting-edge New York galleries as well as in several European ones. As unfortunately has so often been the case with women artists, acceptance of Sparks' art has been slower than Guyton's and Walker's, but the velocity of critical approval has dramatically increased in the past couple of years with the wider exposure it has received at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York (2008), Galerie Frank Elbaz in Paris (2006 and 2009), Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels (2009), and *Projects in Art and Theory* in Cologne (2009).

At present, no single term coheres the remarkably innovative art of Guyton, Sparks, and Walker into an overall stylistic whole. One of the drawbacks of this oversight is that their combined groundbreaking artistic contributions in the areas of ontology and epistemology have not yet been recognized as advancing beyond the appropriation work of the late '70s and early '80s Pictures artists (Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman, among others), even though Guyton's, Sparks', and Walker's art has at times been compared with this earlier work. In consideration of the need for a stylistic designation that will enable people to appreciate the latter three artists' combined reconfiguration of art's means and effects,

I propose as a possible candidate the neologism "Differentialism" (which could be shortened to "Diffism" or "Differism").⁴ It is based on Jean-François Lyotard's theory of the differend,⁵ which refers to disaffiliated voices and consequent lack of common ground for arbitrating differences. The primary reason for employing this term is the internal evidence provided by Guyton's, Sparks', and Walker's work. But since all three are well versed in theory, there is also ample reason to believe that their early conscious knowledge of Lyotard's sublime and his related theory of the differend has also played a significant role in their development. One of Guyton's favorite professors at the University of Tennessee, literary critic Allen Dunn wrote in the early '90s an important essay on the Lyotardian sublime entitled "A Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend."⁶ Sparks has cited the London-based ICA publication on postmodernism, focusing on Lyotard and the sublime as the primary document that introduced her to the theories of recent art.⁷ And Walker, who has participated in theoretical discussions with the other two since the '90s, is so well versed in a range of critical theories, including Lyotard's, that he regularly punctuates his conversations with references to them.

In his 1988 book *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Lyotard addresses the problem of representing disenfranchised subjects, which he calls "the differend." He defines this term in the following way:

As distinguished from litigation, a differend [*différend*] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule). Damages result from an injury which is inflicted upon the rules of a genre of discourse but which is repairable according to those rules. A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse.⁸

Doubly victimized, people placed in differentialist situations not only suffer the customary injustices associated with injured parties, but they also experience the singular disadvantage of being unable to represent their claims within the framework of socially ratified discourses. In his essay "Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx" Lyotard points to the differend as both someone who has been disenfranchised and also a situation "between mental faculties, that is between regimes of heterogeneous phases," so it is both nominative and conjunctive.⁹ Later in this same essay, he illustrates the differend by citing Ludwig Wittgenstein's succinct observation in his *Philosophical Observations*, "you approach from one side, and you know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about."¹⁰ A historical example of the differend would be the frustrated effort undertaken by the real-life World War II German SS officer Kurt Gerstein in Constantin Costa-Gavras' 2002 film *Amen* to inform Pope Pius XII about Hitler's extermination of the Jews. Because of Gerstein's Nazi connections, most members of the Catholic Church did not take his information seriously, making it and him clearly differential. Considered in terms of painting and sculpture, an example of a differentialist situation would be the inability of naïve or self-taught artists to represent adequately their brand of folk or vernacular Platonic idealism¹¹ to neoclassical members of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French Academy and vice versa.

Viewed in terms of Lyotard's major subject, the postmodern,¹² the differend is a means for bringing the aesthetic category of the sublime into the realm of everyday

experiences; it can be found in individual works of art in which competing or divergent signs, representing diverse and nonalignable discourses, create a hiatus between them. Lyotard explores this aesthetic concept in "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" in which he begins by analyzing the New York abstract expressionist Barnett Newman's emphasis on the present tense of the sublime.¹³ This essay relates to a companion piece entitled "Newman: The Instant," in which Lyotard underscores the contradictory status of sublime works of art that enable them to disclose their own unrepresentability. He writes:

A painting by Newman is an angel. It announces nothing; it is itself an annunciation. [...] But Newman is not representing a non-representable annunciation; he allows it to present itself.¹⁴

In "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," Lyotard extols the capacity of individual works of art to focus on the non-representable aspects of the "now." He believes that these works can do so because of their ability to transport viewers beyond consciousness and deactivate conventional thinking by presenting the components of a differentialist situation, which in turn necessitates the sublime's transcendent reconciliation of difference and thus is able to cope with the unthought in thought, with that which exceeds the limits and purview of any given regime. According to Lyotard, art's ability to focus on the present is dependent on its reliance on Martin Heidegger's "*Ereignis*," which is an authentic historical event representing an actual change in people's understanding of the world and not just another occurrence. Lyotard determines that this type of momentous event, however, may appear as either an "agitation" or else assume the guise "of nothing [apparently] happening"¹⁵ at all, because it takes place outside the strictures of dominant ideologies and ongoing discourses and thus cannot be represented in terms of them. Transposing the crucially important event to the realm of sublime art, Lyotard writes enigmatically, "the paint, the picture as occurrence or event [*Ereignis*], is not expressible, and it is to this that it has to witness."¹⁶ This seemingly contradictory statement about the inability to articulate one's point of view (the differend) anticipates Lyotard's discussion of Edmund Burke's sublime and the terror evoked by its characteristic privation, which Lyotard describes in terms of a climactic happening that "does not happen."¹⁷ He connects this psychological deprivation to the sublime's traditional associations with indeterminacy and alludes as well to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological discussion of Cézanne's ability "to make seen what makes one see, and not what is visible,"¹⁸ since this latter approach allows Lyotard to move outside the work of art and consider the responsiveness of viewers approaching it.

Moving from Merleau-Ponty to the negative dialectics of the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, Lyotard cites the importance of "interrogative works of art," which are a shorthand reference to this German philosopher's theory of non-identity that manages either to break away from or to evade reified forms of identity in capitalist societies where even individuality has been fetishized as a commodity. Although Lyotard acknowledges that capitalism can transform the world into commodities, "making reality increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady,"¹⁹ he distinguishes between its effects on *ordinary information*, which is consumed as it is being disseminated, thereby losing its power, and *strong information* that jams circuits of communication. This latter type of information becomes a type of static noise or ongoing dissension, pertaining to open-ended statements that continuously displace referentiality. Strong information, pertaining to the sublime, as will be shown, maintains its importance as long as it exceeds the imaginative means for decoding it and continues to present its imperceptible contents by refusing paradoxically to signify them.²⁰

Although Lyotard picked up on Burke's primarily empirical and psychological view of the sublime as a method for intensifying observers' responses, he paid even greater attention to Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime. What appealed to him was the way that the Kantian sublime characterizes the type of reasoned understanding that takes over when the imagination collapses because of its inability to account for grandiose and dynamic forces or units multiplied into extraordinary magnitudes. Kant concludes:

Nothing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime. [What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling), and in contrast with that use any other use is small. Hence what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment.

Hence we may supplement the formulas already given to explicate the sublime by another one: Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense.²¹

Although the sublime has traditionally been associated with overwhelming experiences—Burke's proverbial detached danger—Lyotard brings it down to the scale of daily encounters or "micrologies." These sublime micrologies are consonant with the exponential growth of information in the late twentieth century and the increased speed with which it is disseminated. Lyotard's sublime can be catalyzed by an aporia within a work of art, creating an immanent aesthetic affect, resulting from a differentialist irreconcilability between different categories of signs that refer to competing or totally unrelated discourses. Since the differend circumscribes nonaligned situations, its unknowable otherness, according to Lyotard, is an intrinsic aspect of avant-garde works of art. In them, the differend's aporetic inexpressibility can serve as a catalyst for vertiginous feelings. And since the sublime is the aesthetic and transcendent realization brought about by the reasoned satisfaction that takes over when the imagination collapses, its response is extrinsic to works of art. Because this opposition between intrinsic differend and extrinsic sublime resolution is so significant, it can be rephrased in the following way: as a structural suit of opposing forces, comprising one or more disenfranchised victims, the differend's unrepresentability is discerned as an immanent unknowable gap lodged within a work of art between sensuous elements, resulting in a culminating or overriding concept that cannot be closed. And as a transcendent reaction, the sublime lies outside the work, becoming part of the viewer's domain and a sign of his or her reasoned response.

Since the differend circumscribes grievances that cannot be articulated according to prevailing discourses, one's understanding of it is akin to Kant's *reflective judgment* because first causes cannot be determined. In consideration of its inability to determine logical and natural causes, *reflective judgment* is preeminently aesthetic, since it, like a viewer's responsiveness to a work of art, necessitates imaginative efforts at understanding that are then submitted to reasoned arbitration. With the imagination's failure to do its work, the sublime character of judgment takes over, enabling one to take comfort in his or her ability to comprehend through "a supersensible power" the imagination's limits. This two-fold situation consists of the aggravation of first experiencing the imagination's collapse that in turn becomes the basis for the pleasure or satisfaction that one feels when reason demonstrates its ability to resolve

unknowable or overwhelming situations by regarding them as incomprehensible.

At a time in the twenty-first century when differences between types of information are regularly elided, nuances of meaning are overlooked, and the sheer plethora of globally accessible information on the Web is in danger of becoming watered down and homogenized, Lyotard's differend is crucially important for the distinctions it makes and preserves. If diverse aspects of the world are to be understood in their particularity, it is essential to maintain even the smallest gaps of difference between general and specific views and to appreciate the ensuing potent ellipses that can be ultimately referenced even if they cannot be represented directly. Aesthetically, Lyotard's *sotto voce* and barely discernable differend is revealed negatively through the sublime that contradictorily "bear[s] pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible."²² The differend characterizes the fecund elisions in representation that should not and, in fact, cannot be connected despite the many current and casual efforts of modern computer technology to gloss over essential differences.

Referring to both the differend and the sublime, Lyotard has pointed out that while modern art acknowledged the fact that aspects of the world cannot be represented, postmodern art attempts the unattainable by trying to communicate this impossibility. He has described this paradoxical situation in the following manner:

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations—not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable.²³

It might seem at the outset absurd to try to connect the work of Guyton, Sparks, and Walker, which is replete with different types of figurative and abstract references, with the unrepresentable aspects of Lyotard's sublime. But, in actual fact, the many incongruities and unbridgeable intervals between the heterogeneous categories of signs these three artists mine in their art is an eloquent testimony to the poignant, inarticulate lapses between dissimilar types or categories of information and imagery that makes their work so affectingly differentialist. A few telling examples of their work will dramatize the pregnant ellipses around which their art is configured; moreover this brief look will set the stage for examining more closely several of Sparks' arresting elaborations of this differentialist stylistic in order to discern the main features of her distinctly personal approach that sets up occasions for sublime micrologies.

Beginning in 2005 and then again in 2006, Walker became intrigued with the 1967 Braniff Airlines ad campaign that the celebrated mid-twentieth century advertising expert George Lois originated; Lois's ads were originally presented in the interrogative version of the statement, "When you got it – flaunt it,"²⁴ which subsequently came to be regarded as an assertion. In the '60s and early '70s Lois' punch line became so popular that it was regularly invoked as a quip for self-serving exhibitionism. Featuring such purposefully mismatched pairs of celebrities as Pop artist Andy Warhol and heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, crime novelist Mickey Spillane and poet Marianne Moore, and British comedian Hermione Gingold and Hollywood actor George Raft, Lois' campaign was predicated on the ostensible concept that celebrities from entirely different professions and known for their contributions to either high art or popular culture would be able to find common ground on Braniff's flights. The airline's advertising campaign, however, is actually predicated on the ironic view that Braniff, rather than the ad's participating notables, is the entity justified in touting its own celebrity status, since it creates the ultimate stage on which all these luminaries can congregate serendipitously. Instead of playing into Lois' homogenization of differences

between his pairs of conversationalists so that superstar rank preempts individuality, Walker's cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (CMYK) silk-screened images exaggerate the individuals' variances through the formal device of off-registration to suggest multiple selves without stable backgrounds. Through this stuttered visual effect, Walker underscores the complexities as well as the differentialist impediments preventing these luminaries from ever achieving a real basis for communication, thus creating a situation necessitating a sublime response. In a companion work, Walker reduces the sets of odd couples to the metonymic abstraction of Braniff's alternating striped upholstery on which they are seated. An extension of Lois' purposefully mismatched couples, Walker's paintings of alternating stripes underscore the difficulty, if not impossibility, of any type of rapprochement.

Personally uninterested in self-expression,²⁵ Guyton had appropriated stripes years earlier than Walker; he took them from a paper bookend page that he removed and then scanned. Despite this source, Guyton's stripes are relatively open-ended in terms of their references that can include the work of the French conceptual artist Daniel Buren, which consists almost entirely of a specific type of signature stripe. Guyton's open-ended work can also refer to such other semiotic uses as Braniff's upholstered seats and

Walker's art. Unlike the appropriation art of the Pictures Generation, particularly that of Levine, Sherman, and Prince, which is predicated on tensions between original sources and new uses for these images, the references afforded by Guyton's reliance on striped patterns in some of his works is indicative of essential differences between diverse semiotic modes that break up the works' unary foci and their alternating patterns so that they serve as emblems for the nonalignable discourses and ensuing semiotic gaps to which this art alludes. At times Guyton has combined this alternating pattern with such totally unrelated images as his signature glyph of roaring flames in his scanned and inkjet printed collages that can refer, among other things, to the ongoing liquidation of stable references in his work. The resultant disjunction in his art



points to irreconcilable disparities held in suspension in this highly differentialist art that sets up the conditions for a sublime resolution. Although Guyton was discussing his collaborations with Walker when he observed that their overall goal was to "create a system and then try to disrupt and challenge it by working against it,"²⁶ his remark points as well to his overall differentialist approach.

In August 2004, Sparks serendipitously discovered one component of a differend in the form of an anonymous piece of graffiti that announced prophetically, "you cant [sic.] erase history." Several months later she found that this pronouncement had been emendated to read, "u can erase history." These two cryptic comments, pertaining to alternate or differentialist views regarding whether or not history is indelible or transitory, appeared on the window of the alternative art space, located in the Dumbo section of Brooklyn, which Sparks had helped to develop and manage for almost a year between 2003-2004. She describes the fortuity of discovering these two views of history in the following manner:

The graffiti was left on the front door of a building that had been filled with artist studios and non-profit groups, including *year*, a project space that I ran with Ellie Ga and Bryan Savitz. The landlord, Two Trees Realty, had given [a number of us] the bottom floor of the building free for one year in order to develop cultural and artistic interest in the neighborhood—a kind of calculated gentrification. The photographs were taken several months

apart in August (you cant erase...) and October (u can erase...) of 2004, after we had all been kicked out and after the doors had been chained.²⁷

Sparks documented the two quips in a pair of photographs that present, in the first image, a close up of the assertion together with her camera's lighted flash. In the second she included the chain on the building's front door coupled with a reflection of the façade of the building on the opposite side of the street, so that the overall image denies the graffiti's claim of being able to obliterate history's reflected views.

In addition to using these two images as the basis for two collages featured in her 2009 one-person exhibition at Galerie Catherine Bastide, Sparks employed them as the recto and verso of a record sleeve that was included in this same show in the form of stacks of these paper envelopes. These sleeves were free to all visitors who wished to take them. The idea of working with a long-playing record (LP) and its attendant cover and sleeve has been very important to Sparks; she describes this connection in the following way:

For me, the LP does not signify a superannuated or obsolete format. In fact, beginning in the 1980s I bought records at thrift stores by the dozens and the LP was often cheaper and more widely available than other formats like the cassette or even the CD. In relation to the idea of the takeaway, I do not see the dust jackets as catering to obsolescence or a rarified collector culture, and I hope that the sleeves provide more than just a self-reflexive commentary on art and its commodification.²⁸

Sparks' record sleeve for the Bastide Galerie show is the third in a series that she has made. The first, created in 2007, depicts an image of a yellow finch that the artist had downloaded from the Internet and printed at a time when the colored inks in her printer were beginning to run out, so that the resultant image of the bird was etiolated while the uppermost sections of the image were emblazoned with pronounced yellow bands. Although Sparks has acknowledged "thinking a lot about [...] birds [...] as a lyrical device for movement and circulation,"²⁹ her intended purpose for this image both affirms and denies its gratuitous appearance as a work of art since it becomes, in the artist's words, a means for "challenging rarefied and removed status."³⁰ Sparks has elaborated on this point:

It is important to me that the sleeves can be used for their intended purpose, if the viewer so chooses—not so much that I expect them to be used as record sleeves, but that there is a *potential* for use. To that end, I view the stacks as incomplete works until they are taken out of the gallery. When viewers take the sleeves, they compound the absence referenced by the hole at the center of an LP's dust jacket with the movement of birds in flight and the distribution of images that my work engages.³¹

Both the image on this record sleeve and the sleeve itself, with its presciently symbolic hole or void in its center, comprise a figurative and structural differend that points up the sublime impossibility of communicating aurally since no companion LP has been provided for it.

Sparks has large numbers of her empty record sleeves printed so that she can offer them to visitors in a manner similar to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' presentations of the free-of-charge printed sheets comprising his paper stacks. Sparks' giveaways serve as metonyms pertaining to her overall differentialist approach since their presence alludes to related absences, including the missing LP. In this way her record sleeves become literal differends that the work of art enwraps and encloses

as well as opportunities for viewers to respond to them in the "supersensible" terms of Kant's sublime.

In Sparks' third record sleeve, the only one devoted to the found pieces of graffiti, she cites statements referring to history's extents and limits, and her consequent structural and symbolic differend eloquently frames a potent void. Its opposing views serve as front and back covers to the missing historical record [pun fully intended] that cannot be adequately represented in terms of the radical disjunction that these two assertions about history represent both figuratively, in terms of the relationship between the two pieces of graffiti, and, literally, in terms of the empty sleeve itself. In Sparks' record sleeve the in-between status of the differend is therefore maintained and affirmed as a catalyst for a sublimely cogent reply.

At this point in the discussion, it will help to distinguish between the differend's role in setting up occasions for the small yet intensely sublime moments of revelation pertaining to the minute differences between things in the world, which resist the imagination's ability to cohere them into comprehensible units, and the entirely different history of cohered disjunctive forms that has distinguished modern art. This latter history can be viewed as beginning with Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry and continuing with cubist paintings and collages, surrealist exquisite corpses, and appropriation art's tensions between its original sources and its redirected uses of them. Similar to these types of disjunctive forms, differentialist propositions are posed as openings that challenge traditional views of art's integral self-sufficiency; significantly, however, they are not resolved, as they were in these earlier works under art's traditional dual responsiveness to the outside world (representation) as well as its own necessary closure (an art-for-art's sake idealizing tendency).

In order to understand the change that differentialist art enacts, it helps to consider the dialectical tactics at work in both Mallarmé's and Picasso's art. When Mallarmé, for example, experienced a profound spiritual crisis at the beginning of his career in the mid-1860s that he characterized in terms of the alternative meanings for the word "*ciel*," which denotes both heaven and sky, he opened his art to profound differences between transcendent and prosaic meanings. This disjunction between the ideal and the real later served as the basis for his upper case and lower-case swans in his well-known sonnet of 1885 entitled "The Virginal, Vibrant, and Beautiful Dawn" ["*Le Vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*"]. The two swans in these poems refer respectively to (1) the constellation Cygnus [the Swan appearing in capital letters in the poem], representing art's idealizing approach, and (2) the more prosaic lower-case bird, which is buried underneath the frozen tundra of white paper and thus becomes both a self-reflexive representation of the poem as well as an element from the outside world. Similarly, in some of Picasso's cubist works, the word "jou" connotes a game [*jeu*] but also can serve as a shorthand notation for a daily newspaper [*journal*] as well as the collaged pieces of newsprint that appear in some of his works. In this double capacity, the word "jou" opens the work of art up to a dual perspective that looks inwardly to the types of visual puns it enacts and outwardly to sources that it presents both figuratively and literally. In both Mallarmé's poetry and in Picasso's cubist pieces, art acts as a supervening *hinge* that coheres and resolves differences under its eloquent auspices. The enormous distance between these examples and differentialist ones is to be found first in the metaphoric hinge or hybrid that connects differences in modern works of art versus the lack of sync and ongoing heterogeneity and incompatibility found in works in the latter group, coupled with the role that the sublime plays in this art when the imagination is convinced of its inability to reconcile specific types of differences and submits the matter by default to reason. This "supersensible" activity concludes that there are distinctions that cannot and should not be resolved, thus leaving the differentialist work of art perpetually open. This type of art then assumes the role of a cautionary view, pertaining to its inability and lack of a desire to do away with

micrological differences, which all too often have been glossed over in older art as enlivening juxtapositions that can be united under the auspices of metaphor, without giving them their just due as alternative and ultimately irreconcilable distinctions.

The differentialists' relationship to appropriation art is a complex one of often following the lead of the Pictures Generation members in the first phase of selecting topics for their work. Artists belonging to the Pictures Generation are known for subjecting images to compelling types of semiotic reframing, known as "appropriation," in order to create sets of oscillating and ongoing dynamics, resulting in a virtual tug of war between their own emendations of an image and its sources. Unlike this type of appropriationist work, differentialist art takes the additional step of setting up intractable voids between layered juxtapositions of images from vastly different categories, which resist being surmounted or eradicated. Unlike Sherrie Levine's and Richard Prince's art, which sets up ricocheting tensions between sets of past and present meanings, the differentialists move beyond an initial reworking of specific encoded images by implicating a second stage consisting of redirecting the different categories of images they take from the Internet and other sources in order to build successive and distinct layers in their art.³²

Moreover, instead of looking at art as constructed of only recognizable, abstract, or concretely self-referential images that the implicit mortar of such poetic tropes as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche hold together, differentialist art rethinks this operation by privileging the nonaligned spaces (voids) around which their figurative references traditionally congregate, so that various selected elements, representing distinct levels in individual works, maintain their separateness. The ensuing works of art are comprised of distinct layers of overlapping imagery in which each entity or set of signs maintains its distinctness from the one underneath it as well as the one superimposed over it. At times, however, they may appear to be similar to the ruins of ancient cities in which discrete historical layers have been partially erased or mixed up with others, thereby losing some of their distinctness, but differentialist works only give the appearance of knitting together the distinct elements comprising them—their separation is a crucial factor of this art that sets up the conditions for the Kantian sublime.

Since her days as an art student at the University of Tennessee from the Fall of 1990 to December, 1994, Sparks has equilibrated the role of the *other* in her life as well as in her art in order to give it, herself, and her work a stage on which to act. This double- or triple-voiced theater in which differences are suspended rather than resolved has placed Sparks in an excellent position to create mature work that concentrates on the differend's disjunctive spaces and the sublime's irreconcilable heterogeneity that together work to maintain ruptures in conventional representational modes instead of integrating them.³³

Among Sparks' interests during the years of her undergraduate studies were the Beat poets, whom she appreciated for embracing both art and life. The stream-of-consciousness style of a writer like Jack Kerouac provided Sparks with a wealth of material for inscribing herself in his milieu, and the same approach served as a basis for imaginatively entering the works of such other Beat writers as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. As a printmaking major, Sparks created a series of almost life-size woodcuts, presenting groups of these Beat writers together with herself as an additional member.

Reading Kerouac and especially Ginsberg's poetry led Sparks to biographies of a number of people related to the Beats, and she became particularly fascinated with Joan Vollmer, Burroughs' common-law wife and fellow drug addict, whom he accidentally shot and killed in Mexico while playing a game of William Tell in which she balanced a shot glass on her head as a target. Recognizing that Vollmer was often praised for her intellectual prowess by several members of this group, including Ginsberg who wrote a poem about her, Sparks decided that she would try to give

Vollmer a voice by dressing like her and making works of art depicting her, even though this young artist realized that she too was ultimately speaking for Vollmer and thus was re-presenting her. "My interest in Vollmer," Sparks has noted, "was piqued by the fact that I was only able to access her through the short descriptions by other, more famous, members of the group. I wasn't able to know her in the same way as the others."³⁴ At the same time that Sparks devoted almost all of 1992 serving as Vollmer's medium and/or ventriloquist, she also made a number of photographic self-portraits, thereby alternating and at the same time equilibrating both identities through herself.

In line with this preference for keeping dualities in suspension without resolving them, Sparks worked several years later, while enrolled as a student at Hunter College during the years 2000-2003, with photographs that oscillated between two and three dimensions.³⁵ She inverted the process of making photographs of her sculptures into incorporating her photographed images in her sculpture. Never comfortable regarding photographs as strictly two-dimensional images, Sparks found ways of considering them three-dimensional objects and also low-level reliefs. At times she mounted both cutout and found photographs on pedestals, sometimes with additional objects and plants included. She would also re-shoot old photographs or worn-and-scratched printed surfaces such as those found on the hundreds of old record covers which she had amassed at this time. For her M.F.A. thesis exhibition in Spring, 2003, Sparks created an installation in the form of a proscenium-stage tableau, presenting a snowy landscape, which she purposefully created in low relief so that it would resemble a photograph. Rather than resolving any of these two- and three-dimensional references into either one spatial realm or the other, Sparks preferred keeping them open-ended,

and this inclination presages her mature work in which she finds ways of inscribing differends as unbridgeable gaps that prevent figurative and abstract elements, representing diverse semiotic views, from coming together, thus becoming occasions for sublime responses.

Sparks' photographs of used record covers persuaded her that both the figurative and abstract elements that she was incorporating in her work were of great interest for reflecting aspects of their former lives, which she could then appropriate and redirect. "I was thinking about the act of photographing as a performance," Sparks has recalled, "in which re-photographic signs on the surface of the image (i.e. lens flare, scratches, etc.) allow the viewer to understand



that the image is in fact an object already in existence."³⁶ Her completed works of art characteristically incorporate two or more heterogeneous groups of nonalignable semiotic situations, such as those referring to British post-punk music and Russian constructivist geometric forms, that set up eloquently the basic conditions for her differentialist work. These figurative and abstract positions in turn allude to a series of open-ended metonymic associations such as post-punk's gritty connections with almost unprecedented unemployment of Great Britain's youth and constructivist associations with idealism that supplement the work, enriching its complexity by increasing viewers' points of entry.

A pertinent example that articulates clearly this generosity is the compound array of links suggested by the abstract components used in a number of Sparks' recent collages of '70s glam rock, punk, and post-punk music groups in addition to her works focusing on the c. 1960s-'70s convicted terrorist Gudrun Ensslin (1940-1977)—one of the leaders of the German revolutionary group, Baader-Meinhof, also known as

the Red Army Faction [*Rote Armee Fraktion*], abbreviated RAF—whom Sparks views as a radical counter-culture figure. Comprised of aluminum foil, either glass or plastic glitter, and vinyl, these works reflect the multiple origins and connections of both their figurative references and their materials. “My use of glitter and foil originally began,” Sparks has explained, “as a way to replace or cover over certain aspects of the printed image with materials that maintained the same qualities of the way the printed image was made—light hitting the surface of an object—the object here referring to anything that is laid on top of the scanner—a book, a record cover, etc.”³⁷ The associations conjured up by these works include, but are not necessarily limited to, the purposefully jerrybuilt, roughhewn, freely improvised look of these hand-cut and collaged elements, made with materials that at first appear to be only ad hoc choices and differ substantially from the inkjet prints with which they are juxtaposed. And these handmade associations stem from the sleazy sophistication of the light-reflecting aluminum and glitter-strewn paper that refer back to glam or glitter rock’s campy cross-dressing fashion, which was often adopted by heterosexual males in the early ’70s outfitting themselves with female or unisex clothing and makeup. A notable exception to this heterosexual practice of reserving transvestitism only for rock-concert appearances was David Bowie’s somewhat duplicitous and entirely campy announcement in 1972 that he was gay, coupled with his penchant for donning wonderfully outrageous costumes on a daily basis, so that his highly staged art began to be seen in terms of his everyday life and vice versa.

In light of the glam rock connotations of Sparks’ use of glitter and her many references to Bowie in her work, it is important to note that when she first moved to New York in 1997, the only image she chose to bring with her from Knoxville was one found in a *Circus* magazine pullout poster/calendar of the Ziggy Stardust-era David Bowie (January 1974) documenting his album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*.³⁸ Since this document is a poster depicting a single image of Bowie plus a small calendar printed on it, Sparks relied in 1997 on other images of Bowie to make a series of hairstyle drawings, without his face, that documented his entire career in terms of his many changing fashions and lifestyles. These drawings of abstracted hairstyles were limited to one per page, and then the pages were grouped into grids, thus anticipating by several years Ellen Gallagher’s works focusing on pre-Civil-Rights-era African-American hairstyles. Similar to Sparks’ approach to Vollmer, images of Bowie enabled her both the space and the freedom to explore an alien character by inscribing herself within their framework. “I did not want to be them,” Sparks has emphasized “but I wanted to figure out a way of including them in my world—‘claim’ them for my own.”³⁹ In several of her collages over the past few years, Sparks has employed scans of a photograph of David Bowie for his *Space Oddity* album of 1969 that anticipates his Ziggy Stardust work.

In addition to ricocheting between a number of connotations, including the roughhewn constructivism and *recherché* glam rock accouterments outlined above as well as the mechanically produced means that serve as backdrops for these elements, Sparks’ abstract components can be viewed as oscillating between allusions to Russian suprematist Kasimir Malevich’s and Bowie’s very different artistic approaches. Bowie’s popular culture, end-of-the-world narrative in *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* involves his alter ego, Ziggy Stardust, a space-age prophet who intends, through his rock-and-roll message, to bring hope to the world in the five



years before it is incinerated in a nuclear holocaust. As a charismatic messenger of this doomsday drama and not its initiator, Bowie’s Ziggy made a dazzling entrance with his exotic bespangled space-age outfits, spiky orange hair, androgynous features, and graceful bearing. Although only traces of Ziggy’s glitter and otherworldly elegance are discernible in Sparks’ abstract components, these very oblique references to Ziggy and his end-of-the-world scenario in terms of glitter and reflective aluminum are able to be understood as working in opposition to Malevich’s elitist constructivist art, which, according to Sparks, served as a model for the nonobjective elements found in her collages. She was struck particularly by this Russian artist’s ability to break out of conventional frames and move into the exhibition space in which his work was being shown; his example, moreover, was important for releasing Sparks’ work from the dictates of the frame, enabling it also to be open to the environment in which it is being exhibited. Her shows have consequently been over-installed purposefully so that individual pieces are necessarily viewed as part of an overall ensemble and less as discrete works. In her words, this practice “prevents viewers from maintaining a stable perspective from which to observe the work.”⁴⁰

Similar to Bowie’s Ziggy, Malevich is involved in an endgame scenario; only his goal is outdistancing technology’s progress, which in the early twentieth century had killed off beliefs in a God of nature. Malevich accomplished this feat of fast-forwarding to the future’s end, according to Russian avant-garde specialist Boris Groys, by finding “something irreducible, extraspatial, extratemporal, and extrahistorical to hold on to,”⁴¹ becoming a transcendent realization that this artist believed he had first realized in 1915 in his painting of a solitary black square. Rather than endorsing wholeheartedly, Malevich’s scenario of ultimate states, Sparks chooses carefully among his works:

I have a somewhat specific interest in Malevich, at least in the paintings I’ve chosen to use. I only use those suprematist paintings that have not yet reached their ultimate goal of attaining a new non-objectivity. These are the paintings that still refer to the “real” world in the sense that Malevich titles them after things in the world, such as *Aeroplane Flying*. I also am interested in Malevich’s eventual return to figurative painting. He’s a transitional figure and I only incorporated these transitional works *directly* in the Gudrun collage series and on various vinyl stencils.⁴²

Although the use of glitter reminiscent of glam or glitter rock’s outrageous panoplies in conjunction with the transcendent asceticism of Malevich’s art appears to clinch the two sets of discursive signs into a new hybrid in Sparks’ works, they never really come together, thus remaining differentialist in relation to one another, as well as catalysts for Kant’s sublime. The reason for this hiatus stems from the fact that the first is determinedly materialist in its extreme flamboyance while the latter refers to a nonobjective distillate that is intended to rise above the prosaic realm of sensuous forms. The lack of sync between these two stylistic approaches on different levels and can be viewed individually as *metonymic* by invoking each of this poetic trope’s references to relationships established through association, and together as *differentialist* by pointing to the irreconcilability of the layers comprised of the apocalyptic vision of Bowie’s Ziggy and the utopian idealism of Malevich.⁴³

This differentialist gap is exacerbated when the polyvalent semiotic of constructivist, jerry-rigged, glitter-rock, together with suprematist and more generalized constructivist associations that Sparks’ abstract forms elicit, is employed in works that point to either the post-punk rock of such a musician as Ian Curtis (1956-1980) or the leftist revolutionary tactics of Ensslin. In setting up these dissimilar components, Sparks opens her work to serious questions of ownership as different elements vie for primacy. In such situations, viewers are encouraged to assume the vantage point of either

the abstract components or the figurative references, and because the power of both parties is relatively balanced, the circumstances of looking at these works and understanding them revolves around the process of attributing a legitimate litigant to either one side or the other, with the disadvantage of relegating the unselected party to the disenfranchised position of victim. Once this break is forged, both the victim and the concomitant space it represents assume the role and position of the differend. In order to understand what is at stake in this type of work, it helps to look first at the perspective that scanned images of Curtis entail before considering the vantage point that those of Ensslin necessitate.

Just as the primarily United Kingdom-based highly artificial glitter-rock phenomenon of the early to mid-'70s, which Bowie and his music had epitomized, was a reaction against the nature-oriented late '60s hippies' revolution, so the late '70s punk movement, which followed closely on the heels of glitter rock, represented a studied contrast to this type of music with its attendant showy lifestyles. "The punk aesthetic," dance historian Tricia Henry writes in *Break All Rules: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style*, "with its 'working-classness, scruffiness, and earthiness' can be said to be an antithetical reaction to the 'extreme foppishness, insipient elitism, and morbid pretensions to art and intellect' of the purveyors of glitter rock."⁴⁴

Curtis, the vocalist and songwriter for the post-punk Manchester-based band, Joy Division,⁴⁵ assumes in such songs as "Love Will Tear Us Apart" some of the same estranged anguish that characterizes the punk movement, albeit with less anger and hostility. Even though he was only 23 years old when he committed suicide on May 18, 1980, Curtis had already found ways to incorporate in his songs lessons learned by reading such esteemed literary giants as J.G. Ballard, William S. Burroughs, and Joseph Conrad. Particularly tragic and no doubt a major factor in his suicide was Curtis' diagnosed epilepsy, which was exacerbated by both the strobe lights used in the clubs where he performed and the little sleep afforded by his lifestyle as a musician, working late at night, while holding down a full-time job during the day. Curtis was employed as a civil servant, who at first helped the unemployed and later took care of people with special needs due to physical and mental disabilities. In the late '70s and early '80s he became an important symbol of a disaffected generation of youth in the United Kingdom that was suffering from near record unemployment. During the last year of his life, when it was clear to his public that he was an epileptic, audiences became fixated on his illness, which had strangely enough been foreshadowed on stage by his jerky dance movements. After 1979, his epilepsy was unfortunately put on display several times when the intensity of his performances brought about seizures.

Instead of viewing this performer as a tragic figure, Spark's collages of Curtis feature pixilated and gritty scans of him intensely absorbed in his music. And the overall dystopian outlook of this dispirited vocalist is countered in these works by the far more positive glitter-rock and utopian orientation of the monumental constructivist geometric shapes that Sparks superimposes over him. In addition to the two unrelated sets of worldviews represented by Curtis' post-punk performances and a generic constructivism, coupled with the generous overlay of glam rock glitter, these works reflect the vastly different categories of images downloaded off the World Wide Web and hand-constructed geometric forms. The resultant disparities in both theme and fabrication methods are differentialist in the extreme, since the two sets of disjunctive signs resist being coalesced into unified views.

In the figure of Ensslin, Sparks finds an equally compelling yet very different protagonist for her work than Curtis. Ensslin was both the founder and the intellectual head of the RAF/Baader-Meinhof group; and she was also involved personally with the organization's co-ordinator Andreas Baader. An unlikely candidate for such a counter-culture organization, Ensslin was the daughter of an Evangelical Church pastor; she spent a year in the United States as a high-school exchange student living

in rural Pennsylvania and received a prestigious scholarship from the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes to pursue philosophy as well as English and German studies. In 1967 she became a political radical when a young man was killed in a political demonstration against the Shah of Iran during his visit to Germany. The day after this killing, Ensslin publicly charged West Germany with continuing fascism. Before being jailed in 1972, she was reported to have been involved in a range of questionable activities that included robbing German banks and exploding buildings. Regarding Ensslin's position within popular culture, Sparks has stated:

What interests me about Gudrun is that she can be seen as a sympathetic figure, a counter-cultural political actionist, depending on whom you consult. Most Anglo-American historians broadly group the RAF with the counter-cultural movements of the sixties and seventies. This no doubt has to do with the politics these historians import in their work, but I think it is important not to label Gudrun and the RAF unequivocally as "terrorists." My research has uncovered some troubling aspects of their politics and methodologies, but I am hesitant to characterize them in this way, especially in light of the post-9-11 usage of the term. When I was in Cologne in early 2009, some of the older generation of Germans still considered the group terrorists, but the younger generation was more ambivalent.⁴⁶

After her incarceration, Ensslin's actions as well as those of other convicted RAF members, including Baader, inspired a second generation of German activists (also known as the RAF). In early September of 1977, several of these second-generation members kidnapped Hanns-Martin Schleyer, a former Nazi, who was president of the Federal Association of German Employers, in hopes of exchanging him for incarcerated Baader-Meinhof members. In addition, the plight of these counter-culture prisoners became a *cause célèbre* among a group of like-minded Palestinians, who hijacked, on October 14th, 1977, a Lufthansa jet in an effort to force the release of Ensslin and three other convicted members of the Baader-Meinhof group. Soon after the Lufthansa jet was overtaken successfully by a German commando unit, a number of Baader-Meinhof members, who were being kept at the Stuttgart-Stammheim maximum-security prison were mysteriously found dead on October 18th, including Ensslin (from hanging) and Baader (from shooting). How the weapons responsible for these deaths were smuggled into prison has never been explained adequately. As art writer Rainer Usselman has noted:

In spite of strenuous efforts by the West German authorities to dispel any suspicion over the violent deaths, the many inconsistencies in the police report gave rise to unnerving speculation: murder or suicide, state execution or final act of defiance?⁴⁷

In 1988, eleven years after these horrific events, the noted German artist Gerhard Richter painted fifteen large-scale works memorializing the incarceration and fatalities of key members of the Baader-Meinhof organization. Conceived in the out-of-focus style for which Richter had become known in the '60s, the resultant group of paintings has been praised for their fragmentation as well as their recognition of the inability, and even impossibility, of being able to register the historical events they appear to be commemorating.⁴⁸ In addition, they have been commended for their strict avoidance of what art historian Benjamin Buchloh describes as any "claim to provide privileged access to 'seeing' and 'representing' history" that might make them "polit-kitsch."⁴⁹

Instead of appropriating Richter's paintings in her series of collages devoted to Ensslin, Sparks chose to use the marked-up photographs, which had served as a preliminary

step to making his paintings of this revolutionary figure. Sparks has noted:

Engaging Richter provides me with a means of exploring Gudrun's significance and her intertwined relationship to many systems of power—the mainstream, art historical, and even the countercultural. Animating her presence, whether through aluminum foil or through Malevich, suggests something beyond the failure of the RAF, and I do consider the tragedy and drama surrounding her death as inextricably tied up in the politics of her times, from which I try to withhold judgment.⁵⁰

She has emphasized, "I think using the filter of Richter to view Gudrun changes the direction of the argument, regarding whether she was a terrorist or counter-culture activist by directing it more towards art history and the role Richter has played in shaping it."⁵¹

All the images of Ensslin that Sparks has employed in her collages are scans of photographs, showing this young woman contradictorily appearing to walk through space while still in prison. These works correlate well with Sparks' long-time intrigue with the early motion studies by Eadweard Muybridge, among other photographers. Although Sparks discerns a correlation between Ensslin's movement implied in these images and Malevich's ability to move his work outside the picture's frame and into the space in which it is exhibited, this poetic connection breaks down when the activities of this founder of the RAF are compared to those of the suprematist artist who wished to liberate art from the ponderousness of objectivity in order to invoke a supernal feeling as the only reality worth considering. A potent differentialist situation is inscribed in the ensuing gap between the very materialist ideas of the Marxist-Leninist ideology professed by this RAF member and the transcendent ideals espoused by this suprematist mystic.

For a 2008 exhibition at Elizabeth Dee gallery, which featured a large folding screen comprised of Ensslin collages, Sparks created her second record sleeve as a give away. Her description of this specially printed envelope is as follows:

Th[is] [...] sleeve features an evidentiary image taken in Andreas Baader's cell the morning he was discovered dead. The image is of Baader's turntable, the one in which German authorities claim he had hidden the gun he used to commit suicide. On the record player is Eric Clapton's 'There's One in Every Crowd.' This is the original image that Gerhard Richter used for his *October 18, 1977* (1988) series. I used Clapton's title for my most recent show at Catherine Bastide, which adds another layer to this theme of circulation.⁵²

Both Baader's record player and Clapton's LP, which were reproduced on Sparks' empty sleeve gain additional poignancy when one realizes that the artist was haunted by Richter's offhand comment that Ensslin was the lead singer of this political group. Such a remark has the effect of turning the Baader-Meinhof tragedy of political idealists-turned-counter-culture revolutionaries into melodrama instead of real drama. Part of Sparks' achievement in her works focusing on images of Ensslin in prison and Baader's record player is evident in her dramatization of the unbridgeable gap between the paltry residual effects of a misspent life and the ideal suprematist realm that is so far removed from it.

Since this essay on Sparks' art has already (1) considered her work in terms of its redirection of '90s advances in computer software technology and digital imagery that have enabled her to create large-scale collages, (2) looked at her connections with both Wade Guyton's and Kelley Walker's art that result in the linked stylistic

approach herein named "Differentialism," and (3) reflected as well on her specific iconography and the various semiotics it puts into play, the fundamental question regarding this style's overall relevance and importance now needs to be addressed. Admittedly, the differentialists are not the first group of artists to move away from New York critic Clement Greenberg's mid-twentieth-century formula of a wholistic art that can be encountered and understood immediately. Among the first artists to do so was Robert Morris in the '60s with his Merleau-Pontian phenomenological strategy of projecting minimalist works of art outward to viewers. Others include the Pictures Generation's appropriative emphasis on the ongoing tensions between their sources and emendations of them that makes their works singularly permeable to these partially extrinsic and intrinsic forces.

However, in going beyond the Pictures Generation's appropriation techniques in order to set up heterogeneities and incongruities between different semiotic regimes, the differentialists have developed new ways of assaulting art's presumed integrity. They have accomplished this through the metonymic tactics of appropriation as well as the non-affiliation of internalized differentialist situations around which their figurative and abstract forms revolve. These strategies make their assault on the art preceding them ontological as well as epistemological. Relying both on Lyotard's concept of the differend and his diminution of the sublime so that it can be discerned in the subtle differences between particularities that resist being homogenized into larger categories, the differentialists affirm the sense of frustration, exhilaration, awe, and respect that comes from accepting the imperatives and even the tyrannies of these discrete unknowns, which persist in existing on the margins of the known. In doing so, the differentialists value mysteries for their own sake and reveal them indirectly in their work in terms of the unrepresentable interstices that their fragments from the world encircle and determine but do not erase. In the past these aporiai have all too often been elided in the interests of conforming to the very strict terms of ensconced ideologies, but in differentialist work they remain only indirectly discernable and stubbornly resistant to cooption.

Sparks' special contributions to this collective artistic undertaking, intent on revealing the unthought elements in thought, is to elaborate on the open-endedness of specific sets of signs. She does this so that the many metonymic associations suggested by her work, including glitter rock, suprematism, and computer scans as well as such conditions as age and mode of fabrication, at first produce a series of connected and often conflicting horizontal movements based on intuited allusions and semiotic affiliations that viewers are able to make. Sparks then embeds her sets of signs in vertical, overlapping situations in which entirely different encoded systems not only refrain from coalescing into inextricable wholes but also repel one another to create barely noticeable yet fecund differentialist spaces. In the artist's words, these gaps "question the ownership of images" and an ongoing type of "deconstruction, moving back and forth"⁵³ generates a dynamic operative and a possible safeguard against mindless cooption. In this way Sparks' work preserves aspects of the world's specificity and the allure of the unknown and often unknowable spaces that the discrete elements in her art help to articulate. Her work is thus important not only for its presentations of different categories but also for the compelling elisions it sets up between them.

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NOTES

1. Lyotard defines the avant-garde in terms of its criticality rather than as a historical time period, viewing it as responsible for questioning many of the conventional and/or traditional rules of art; and he considers postmodern sublimity as philosophically relevant since it plays an important role in identifying the avant-garde's aesthetic position.
2. The argument could be made that Paul Baran of the RAND Corporation initiated in 1962 the basis for the Internet when he devised a computer network capable of commanding and controlling the U.S. Air Force's missiles and bombers in the event of a nuclear attack.
3. Meredyth Sparks, Interview with Author, 16 February 2009. Information on Sparks' background and work comes largely from this interview as well as a subsequent one that took place on February 17th. A third interview was conducted on 5 April 2009.
- Sparks met Guyton and Walker soon after enrolling in the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) in 1990, but the two men did not become friends until several years later. A printmaking major when she was at UTK, Sparks had come in frequent contact with Walker in printmaking classes since he was also majoring in this subject.
- After George H.W. Bush's presidency ended in 1992, Guyton and Sparks became involved in protesting Dick Cheney's appearance as a speaker at the University of Tennessee and reworked his name "Richard 'Dick' Cheney," so that it would read "Hard 'Dick' Cheney" on the posters that the university had circulated to promote the event.
- In 1993 Guyton and Sparks, together with several other students, formed the organization "Lab," which sponsored temporary events around the city of Knoxville. The artists hoped these performances would evoke an experimental feeling through the quickly developed, almost impromptu performances they promoted. "Lab" subsequently became the basis for the permanent space known as "A-1" (named after the steak sauce and a joke about art as a commercial product), which they formed with several other students and continued until 1995. Although he had not been part of "Lab," Walker became involved with A-1. Because the space for this gallery was large, and there was no way of finding enough works of art to fill it, A-1's staff decided to back a number of related events. The young gallerists invited such New York artists as Robert Beck to exhibit in their space, screened such films as Todd Hayne's *Dottie Gets Spanked*, and Sonic Youth's *Death Valley '69*, conducted readings, and sponsored local art competitions.
- During the early and mid '90s Guyton, Sparks, and Walker often talked about relocating to New York. Guyton moved to New York to attend Hunter College in August 1996; Walker settled there six months later (early '97), and Sparks also relocated there in June of '97. Since Walker and Sparks had been roommates in Knoxville, they decided to share an apartment in the city and did so for several years. Sparks enrolled in Hunter's graduate program in 2000 and received an MFA in 2003.
- During his first six to seven years in New York, Guyton worked as a guard at Dia and the last two to three years he was in charge of the Dan Graham installation on Dia's roof. From 1999-2000, Sparks worked at Dia full-time as a guard, an attendant in the bookstore, and a member of the installation crew before she enrolled at Hunter; then she worked there part-time until 2003, including as a guard on Sundays for Walter de Maria's *Broken Kilometer* and *Earth Room* installations.
- Responsibility for this neologism is entirely the author's. The original idea had been to turn the second "d" of "differend" into a "t" and label this new stylistic category "Differentialism," but this term has too many negative connotations because of its connections with the French New Right's solution to multiculturalism by maintaining permanent difference, i.e. separation, between ethnic groups. For more on the differentialists and the New Right, cf. Alberto Spertkowitz, "The French New Right: Differentialism and the Idea of Ethnophilic Exclusionism," *Polity* 33, No. 2 (Winter 2000): 283-303 and Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Globalism and Culture: Three Paradigms," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, No. 23 (June 8, 1996): 1389-1393. Although "differentialism" might at first seem strange to pronounce, it has the distinct advantage of maintaining a clear connection with Lyotard's differend.
- Although the word "*differend*" takes an *accent aigu* in French, it is often left off in English. This essay will subscribe to this English usage.
- Allen Dunn, "A Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend," *Boundary 2*, 20, No. 1 (Spring 1993): 192-220. The essay provides an excellent overview of the differend. In an email to the author sent on 8 May 2009, Dunn confirmed teaching Lyotard's sublime to Guyton and having conversations with him about it. "The sublime, particularly Lyotard's sublime," Professor Dunn concludes, "seemed (and still seems) apt to Wade's life and work."
- Postmodernism*, ICA Documents 4 (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986), documents a 1985 conference on postmodernism and gives Lyotard and his theories a premier position. The publication includes his "Defining the Postmodern" as well as "Complexity and the Sublime," which is the centerpiece for this publication. It also contains pieces by Jacques Derrida, Martin Jay, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, among others. Because Lyotard's ideas of the sublime have been more thoroughly enunciated in some of his other publications, these publications have primarily been used for this analysis of the art of Guyton, Sparks, and Walker in general and Sparks' art in particular. Sources employed are cited in the relevant endnotes.
- Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Theory and History of Literature, 46 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. xi.
- Jean-François Lyotard, "Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx" in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), p. 333.
- Ibid.*, p. 351. In his highly acclaimed biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, Ray Monk describes the essential differences that ultimately separate Bertrand Russell from his chosen intellectual heir,

- Wittgenstein: "When attitudes of the most fundamental kind clash, there can be no question of agreement or disagreement, for everything one says or does is interpreted from *within* those attitudes. It is therefore not surprising that there should be frustration and incomprehension on both sides." Cf. Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p.53.
11. For a discussion of this concept, its origin, and ramifications, cf. Robert Hobbs, *Earl Cunningham: Painting an American Eden* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1994), pp. 44-51.
 12. Rather than viewing the postmodern as a specific historical time period, Lyotard considers it to be a tactical approach that has often served as a precursor to certain so-called modern developments, because it begins with a disbelief in the great meta-narratives that were first set in place in the eighteenth century by enlightenment philosophers and their followers. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
 13. Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 89-107. In consideration of Lyotard's interest in Newman's theories of the sublime and Guyton's familiarization with this French thinker's ideas, it is tempting to view his 2008 exhibition at Friedrich Petzel's New York gallery as a response to Newman's work. For this show Guyton ran folded pieces of canvas through inkjet printers multiple times, giving the works a painterly appearance. When the pieces of canvas were unfolded and stretched, the resultant unprinted vertical sections of the canvas played off Newman's zips.
 14. Lyotard, "Newman: The Instant" in *The Lyotard Reader*, p. 241. This reference to an angel appears to be informed by the first exploration of the sublime aesthetic in painting in 1725 by British, painter, collector, and theorist Jonathan Richardson, the elder. As an example of the sublime, Richardson cited Federica Zuccari's *Annunciation* not because of its less-than-noteworthy Madonna and angel but because of its immense open space in a sky otherwise populated by God and innumerable angels. Cf. Jonathan Richardson, *The Works of Jonathan Richardson*, eds. Horace Walpole and Thomas Egerton (Strawberry-Hill, England, 1792), pp. 96-101.
 15. Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," p. 91.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
 21. Immanuel Kant, "Book II "On the Mathematically Sublime: #25, Explication of the Term Sublime" in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1987), p. 106.
 22. Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," p. 93.
 23. Lyotard, "What is the Postmodern?" in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. Don Barry et al. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 15.
 24. For an extended discussion of Kelley Walker's art, cf. Robert Hobbs, "Kelley Walker's Continuum: Consuming and Recycling as Aesthetic Tactics" in Suzanne Cotter, ed., *Seth Prince/Kelley Walker: Continuous Project* (Oxford, UK: Modern Art Oxford, 2007). Also cf. <http://roberthobbs.net/essays.html> to download this essay.
 25. Wade Guyton, Interview with Author, New York, 13 April 2009.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. Meredyth Sparks, Email to Author, 20 May 2009.
 28. Meredyth Sparks, Email to Author, 30 May 2009.
 29. Sparks, Email to Author, 20 May 2009.
 30. Sparks, Email to Author, 30 May 2009.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. An argument could be made for viewing Sherrie Levine's series of *President Collages* of 1979 as differentialist works since profiles of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, in particular, frame vignettes of commercially oriented images that seem totally unrelated. However, Levine has indicated that the layering of images in her work should be understood allegorically so that one set provides keys for interpreting the other. Cf. "The Anxiety of Influence—Head On: A Conversation between Sherrie Levine and Jeanne Siegel" in *Sherrie Levine* exhibition catalogue (Kunsthalle Zürich, Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster - Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe; Rooseum-Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö; Hôtel des arts, Paris, 1992), p. 14. Addressing specifically a given photograph and her reproduction of it, Levine notes, "For me it's a way to create a metaphor by layering two images, instead of putting them side by side. This creates the possibility of an allegorical reading of the work." (p. 15).
 33. Meredyth Sparks, Email to Author, 3 June 2009. Responding to the idea of an ongoing double-voiced theater in her work, Sparks has added, "[this concept] certainly describes the collage pieces." In addition she pointed out "that the titles for my two shows at F. Elbaz and E. Dee ["We're treating each other just like strangers." (2006) and "We were strangers for too long." (2008) respectively] also allude to this kind of theatrical device in the sense that the 'we' of the two sentences/titles is unknown and can be attributed to several identities."
 34. Sparks, Email to Author, 30 May 2009.
 35. *Ibid.* Sparks has noted, "The record sleeves also oscillate between two and three dimensions as they

appear to create landscapes on the sides of the stack."

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Although one should be wary of making too much of the coincidence of dates, it is worth pointing out that Sparks was born in 1972, the year Bowie came out with *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. Since the calendar documenting this album and its star was so important to Sparks that it was the one keepsake she chose to take with her to New York, the coincidence between her birth and the album's release is worth noting.

39. Sparks, Email to Author, 30 May 2009.

40. Sparks, Email to Author, 3 June 2009.

41. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 15.

42. Sparks, Email to Author, 30 May 2009.

43. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, pp. 19-20. Groys captures the flavor of Malevich's question when he writes:

The absolute zero that was to mark the beginning of a new world in which the new 'white humanity' would be cleansed of all previous images, leave its former dwellings, and resettlement the suprematist *Planits*, was for Malevich still a matter of artistic imagination.

44. Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules! Punk Rock and the Making of a Style*, *Studies in the Fine Arts: The Avant-Garde*, No. 68 (Ann Arbor and London: U-M Research Press, 1989), p. x. In this passage, Henry cites observations found in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen and Co., 1979), p. 61.

45. Joy Division was named for the tragic group of Jewish females forced to work in a Nazi concentration camp's prostitution wing that is referred to in the novella, *The House of Dolls*, by Ka-Tzetnik 135633.

46. Sparks, Email to Author, 30 May 2009.

47. Rainer Usselman, "October 18th, 1977: Gerhard Richter's Work of Mourning and Its New Audience," *Art Journal* 61, No. 1 (Spring, 2002): 7.

48. Desa Philippi, "Moments of Interpretation," *October* 62 (Autumn, 1992): 118.

49. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18th, 1977*," *October* 48 (Spring, 1989): 100, FN 5.

50. Sparks, Email to Author, 30 May 2009.

51. Ibid.

52. Sparks, Email to Author, 20 May 2009.

53. Sparks, Interview with Author, 17 February 2009.

