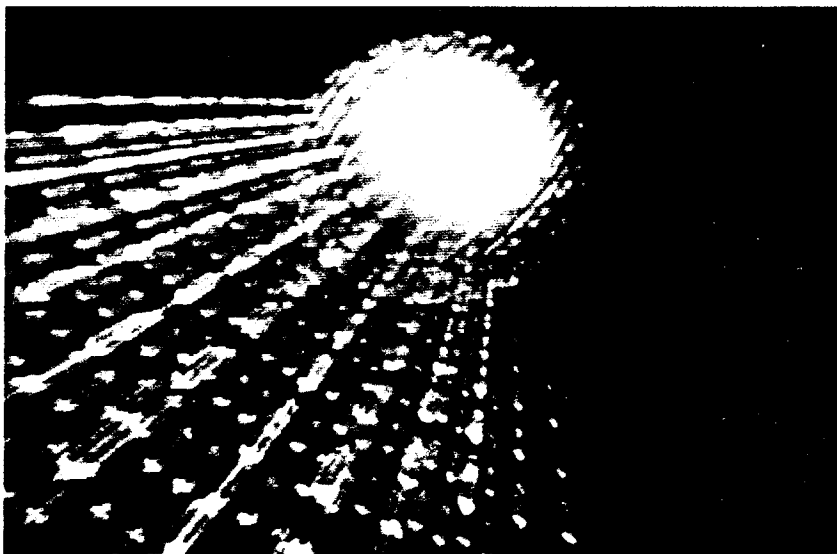
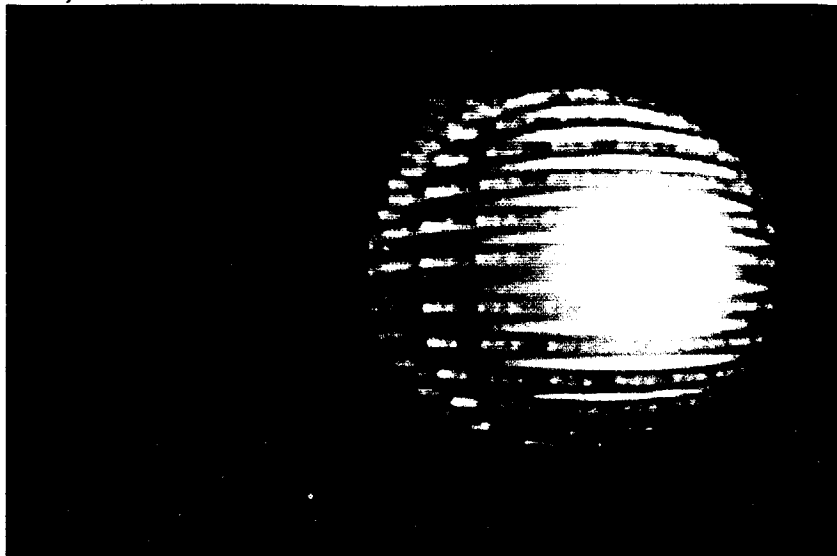


FROM BRIAN WALLIS, ED., *ART AFTER MODERNISM: RETHINKING REPRESENTATION*
(NEW MUSEUM, 1984)



Gretchen Bender. *AT&T in Slow Motion*, 1984 (from *Dumping Core*, a work in progress). Black-and-white video, sound, 1 minute 13 seconds

Eclipse of the Spectacle

JONATHAN GRARY

The pervasive imagery now enveloping us—a rationalized world of

digitized life and languages mediated by video display screens—is in part pre-figured in Nicola Tesla's 1901 plan for a World System of totally interconnecting, planetary communications. Although bound up with other futurist dreams of simultaneity, Tesla's ideas had more of an affinity with the needs of state and corporate power than other modes of modernism. He believed he could engineer a globe unified by the universal registration of time and fully traversed by flows of language, images, and money—all reduced to an undifferentiated flux of electrical energy.¹ Backed by J. P. Morgan, Tesla's first transmission station rose on the North Shore of Long Island; two hundred feet high, the Wardenclyffe Tower stood only from 1901 to 1903, never capped by the immense copper dome Tesla planned for it. No piece of sculpture better embodied the synchronous, history-rending aspirations of modernism than this tower. It could well be posed alongside Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* and Brancusi's *Endless Column* to represent the three variants of modernist absolutism: corporate, historicist, and aestheticist.

Although Tesla's vision was to prove the most durable of these three, its full realization was postponed for over eight decades. A major oil discovery at Spindletop, Texas, also in 1902, helped assure the continued dominance of the extensive, vehicular space traversed by the railroad and then the automobile well into the twentieth century. Nonetheless, Tesla's achievement was to transform Edison's relatively pedestrian notion of electricity as a commodity to be sold in units to consumers into an apprehension of electricity as an immanent substance into which anything was transcodable and which could instantaneously intervene anywhere, even to literally occupy the full body of the earth and atmosphere.²

1. For the text of Tesla's Wardenclyffe Plan see John J. O'Neill, *Prodigal Genius: The Life of Nikola Tesla* (New York: David McKay, 1944), pp. 210-211. See also Margaret Cheney, *Tesla: Man Out of Time* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

2. Compare Tesla's plan for arrogating earth and atmosphere as natural conductors with a Nazi scheme for a war-winning weapon through transforming the atmosphere into a high-voltage conductor, recounted in Albert Speer, *Infiltration*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 146-147.

ration of alternate actuality. And, at the cold, superdense core of this anti-finale is not absolute knowledge, but rather the absolute dominion of digitized memory-storage banks, not even dimly fathomable through the aqueous screens of video display terminals. Philip K. Dick, in his novel *A Scanner Darkly*, touched on what is also crucial in Baudrillard's work: "Biological life goes on, everything else is dead. A reflex machine. Like some insect. Repeating doomed patterns over and over. A single pattern."⁸

For Baudrillard, television is a paradigm of implosive effects: it collapses any distinction between receiver or sender or between the medium and the real. Like Mallarmé's Herodiade caught in a sterile closed circuit with her mirror, Baudrillard's subject is locked into an "uninterrupted interface" with the video screen in a universe of "fascination." Television, for Baudrillard, exists as a purely abstract and invariant function, from which any principle of disorder is excluded. The materiality of both viewer and television apparatus dissolves, along with any multiple or contradictory layers of institutional texture. His perfect circuit of viewer-TV, then, subsists on a single, formalized plane solely as an index of the nonworking of power and of the illusory essence of all signification.

Implosion announces the collapse of capital's ability to expand: it is an unprecedented social contraction and paralysis, the last unmasking of a long sequence of representational illusions in operation since the Renaissance. But perhaps it is not even a question of "the end of capitalism" or of "late capitalism." Deleuze and Guattari, for example, propose that capitalism is by its very nature always "neo-capitalism."⁹ While Baudrillard sees technological miniaturization as a symptom of implosion, Deleuze and Guattari read it as part of the reorganization of a global system of domination and circulation.¹⁰ Following from their model, geographical frontiers no longer exist and in their place are being manufactured vast microelectronic territories for expansion. Telecommunications is the new arterial network, analogous in part to what railroads were for capitalism in the nineteenth century. And it is this electronic substitute for geography that corporate and national entities are now carving up. Information, structured by automated data processing, becomes a new kind of raw material—one that is not depleted by use.¹¹ Patterns of accumula-

8. Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 83.

9. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Milles Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 30.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 572-575. Deleuze and Guattari outline an unfolding cybernetic phase of capitalism in which telecommunications and computers are part of a world apparatus of "generalized enslavement." They cite Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967-1970) for his account of the "megamachine."

11. Ernest Mandel's distinction between commodity production and a services sector is no longer tenable. He saw distribution of gas, electricity, and water as part of the former and the distribution of "communications" part of the latter, in *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London: New Left Books, 1978), pp. 401-403. The emergence, for example, of information "utilities" and their circulation of what Fredric Jameson calls "nonphysical and nonmeasurable 'commodities'" demand analysis outside of Mandel's categories. See, for example, Jacques Attali, *Les trois mondes* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), pp. 342-364.

tion and consumption now shift onto new surfaces. Against *this* scenario, implosion, in all its sublimity, seems like the death wish of a failed humanism, in which capitalism and mass culture are guilty—above all else—of the "liquidation of tragedy."¹²

However, Baudrillard is not wrong to proclaim the end of what Guy Debord called "the society of the spectacle." Clearly, a certain period in the initial deployment of television is over, a phase roughly coinciding with post-World War II U.S. hegemony. It is in the mid-1970s that the transformation of television and its insertion into a wholly different set of structures begins, alongside the reorganization of world markets on a non-bipolar model.¹³ The convergence of home computer, television, and telephone lines as the nexus of a new social machinery testifies to an undoing of the spectacular consumption of the commodity. And paradoxically, television, which had elevated the commodity to the height of spectacular space, is now implicated in the collapse of that space and the consequent evaporation of aura around the body of the commodity.

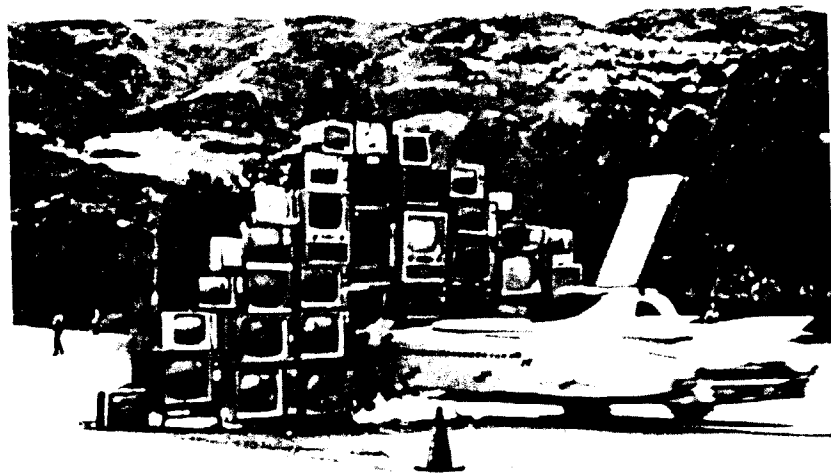
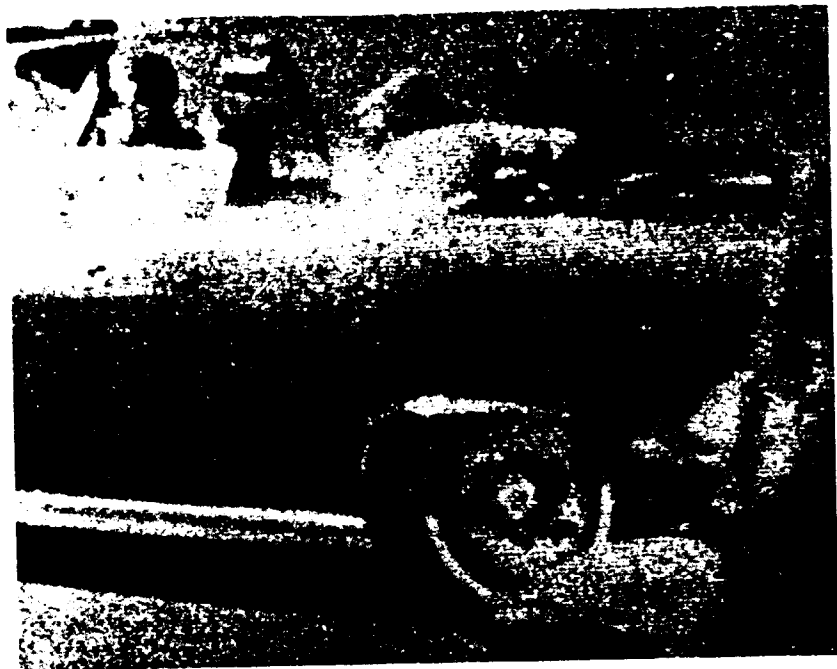
For Debord, writing in 1967, at the last high tide of the "Pax Americana," the auratic presence of the commodity was bound up with the illusion of its utter tangibility.¹⁴ But since that time, we have witnessed the gradual displacement of aura from images of possessible objects to digitized flows of data, to the glow of the VDT and the promise of access embodied there. It is a reversal of the process indicated by Debord, in which the seeming self-sufficiency of the commodity was a "congealment" of forces that were essentially mobile and dynamic. Now, however, with pure flux itself a commodity, a spectacular and "contemplative" relation to objects is undermined and supplanted by new kinds of investments. There is no more opposition between the abstraction of money and the apparent materiality of commodities; money and what it can buy are now fundamentally of the same substance. And it is the potential dissolution of any language of the market or of desire into binarized pulses of light or electricity that unhinges the fictive unity of spectacular representation. Figurative images lose their transparency and are consumed as simply one more code.

Consider *General Hospital*, allegedly the most widely watched afternoon soap opera. It is consumed essentially as strings of representations that never surpass their functioning as an abstract code. In its construction and effects, *General Hospital* announces the disappearance of the visual and narrative space that might seem to have authorized it and points toward a fully pro-

12. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 154.

13. See Immanuel Wallerstein, "Crisis as Transition," and Giovanni Arrighi, "A Crisis of Hegemony," in Samir Amin et al., *Dynamics of Global Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review, 1982). See also the overview in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 3-6.

14. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977). Original French publication in 1967.



Ant Farm. *Media Burn*, 1975. The Phantom Dream Car crashes through a wall of burning television sets before a cheering crowd at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, July 4, 1975. (Photo: John Frederick Turner)

grammable calculus of continually switching syntheses of figural and narrative units. The consistent repetition of "formulas" is no longer even a possibility. In *General Hospital* any character, relationship, identity, or situation is reversible, exchangeable, convertible into its opposite. With the eradication of any simulation of interiority, one invests not *into* images of actors but *onto* the formal management of those images. Discontinuities, substitutions, and duplications shatter the illusion which once would have been called bourgeois verisimilitude. More and more the so-called "content" of television shifts in this direction: it is not at all a question of the replication of life, but of its reduction to abstract and manipulable elements ready to be harmonized with a plethora of other electronic flows. Television was not destined finally for analogic tasks, but when it first appeared how could the networks in which it is now positioned have been foreseen? It seemed then, according to what McLuhan calls "rear view mirrorism," like one more refinement in five centuries of space-simulating techniques. Yet as reproductive technology attains new parameters of mimetic "fidelity" (holography, high-resolution TV) there is an inverse move of the image toward pure surface, so that whatever drifts across the screen of either television or home computer is part of the same homogeneity.¹⁵

Up through the 1960s television collaborated with the automobile in sustaining the dominant machinery of capitalist representation: in the virtual annexation of all spaces and the liquidation of any unified signs that had occupied them. The TV screen and car windshield reconciled visual experience with the velocities and discontinuities of the marketplace.¹⁶ As windows they seemed to open onto a visual pyramid of extensive space in which autonomous movement might be possible; instead, both were apertures that framed the subject's transit through streams of disjunct objects and affects, across disintegrating and hyperabundant surfaces. These latter are the trajectories that run through Straub and Huillet's *History Lessons* and so many of Godard's films. Although both car and TV were primary disciplinary instruments for the production of normalized subjects, the subject they produced also had to be competent to consume and co-exist with a tremendous field of free-floating signs that has previously been grounded. Privatization and control on one hand and deterritorialization on the other were engineered by the same machines. But the channeling horizontality of the highway (e.g., the conclusion of Godard's *Made in U.S.A.*) and the sequentiality of TV images masked the actual disorganization and nonlinearity of these networks. The vortex of overlapping

15. Video art, paradoxically, depends for its intelligibility on its isolation from television. It can exist only in the cloister of gallery-museum space or wherever the video monitor claims autonomy and independence from major networks of distribution. A case in point was the fate of Nam June Paik's *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, broadcast January 1, 1984, on network TV. Its insertion into that system rendered it invisible, indistinguishable from the adjacent texture of flow. Yet, as if to preserve its identity and visibility, a "live" viewing was organized at the art gallery space of The Kitchen in New York.

16. Virilio alludes to the affinity of windshield and TV screen in "La troisième fenêtre." See also his discussion of the automobile as an instrument of mass mobilization, in *Vitesse et Politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), pp. 33-37.

coverleaf interchanges and the delirious circularity of the channel dial are more authentic concretions of the impacted itineraries perpetually available on both roadway and TV: an infinity of routes and the equivalence of all destinations.

This was the proliferating field of post-World War II capitalism in the United States: the car defined a dominant socioeconomic mapping: it shaped forms of labor and temporality; codified a primary experience of space, its margins, and of access to the social; was the site of multiple intensities; and spawned a mass culture of its own. But beginning in the 1970s, this vehicular space began to lose its predominance. Television, which had seemed an ally of the automobile in the maintenance of the commodity-filled terrain of the spectacle, began to be grafted onto other networks. And now the screens of home computer and word processor have succeeded the automobile as "core products" in an on-going relocation and hierarchization of production processes.¹⁷ Video games may initially have dominated consumer software sales, but in the early 1900s the automobile was also originally inserted as a recreational form until the infrastructure of gas stations, parking lots, and the massive reshaping of urban spaces made car ownership synonymous with social participation. Similarly, the establishment of data services and information "utilities" has only just begun. But video games have been crucial in the reeducation and formation of a new subject ready to assume "interactive" links with VDTs, links altogether different from the prosthesis of body and automobile.

The charade of technological "revolution" is founded on the myth of the rationality and inevitability of a computer-centered world. From all sides, a postindustrial society is depicted that renders invisible the very unworkability and disorder of present "industrial" systems of distribution and circulation. Telecommunications and Paul Virilio's world of absolute speed will not supplant highway/railroad space, but instead these two domains will co-exist side by side in all their radical incompatibility. It is within the dislocation of this "unthinkable" interfacing that the present must be conceived: a planetary data-communications network physically implanted into the decaying, digressive terrain of the automobile-based city. One of the key roles of the expanding electronic "grid" (how this image of modernity endures) is exclusionary—to articulate a new social and geo-political stratification based on immediacy of access to transmitted data.¹⁸ And it is precisely the interstices of this grid, the diversity of rifts within its net, that its totalizing pretensions would disown and efface.

But it is the very persistence and immediacy of the rotting edifices of a previous theater of modernization that Baudrillard eliminates from his panorama of a flawlessly self-regulating world. His virtuoso delineation of the utterly monolithic surfaces of contemporaneity becomes complicit, at a certain point, in the maintenance of the myths of the same cybernetic omnipotence he intends

17. See André Gunder Frank, *Reflections on the World Economic Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), pp. 111-142.

18. See Juan F. Rada, "A Third World Perspective," in Günter Friedrichs and Adam Schaff, eds., *Microelectronics and Society: A Report to the Club of Rome* (Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon, 1982), pp. 213-242.

to deplore. What his texts exclude is any sense of breakdown, of faulty circuits, of systemic malfunction: or of a body that cannot be fully colonized or pacified, of disease, and of the colossal dilapidation of everything that claims infallibility or sleekness. This is the particular importance of the novels of Philip Dick and the films of David Cronenberg: they describe a world no less congested with the technology of everyday life than Baudrillard's, but they insist on a threshold at which the social domestication of the body produces unmanageable disruption, as in psychosis or contagion. For both, television and the sovereignty of the hyperreal are so effective in building a fully delusional world that the mechanisms of social rationalization rapidly corrode, including even Baudrillard's "circularity of media effects."

Another work signaling a limit to the hyperreality of spectacular space is J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969).¹⁹ In this exemplary psychotic text Ballard details the collapse of a landscape through which lines of territorialization have proceeded to absolute tolerances. Ballard explores fractured zones in which sheer contiguity replaces syntax and which extend only in terms of the ceaseless conjugation of bodies, architecture, and images that briefly abut, then detach to make new connections. *The Atrocity Exhibition* coincides with a dissolution of legibility generated by the very efficacy and supremacy of the spectacle. Ballard's landscape, the city interpenetrated by image/events of car crashes, assassinations, celebrities, astronauts, and war crimes, demands an unremitting effort of decipherment, an effort rendered impossible, however, by the equivalence of everything glutting the field. A fully saturated spectacular space neutralizes the interpretive delirium of paranoia at the very moment of inciting it. And for Ballard the events of the 1960s, those which authenticated the spectacle and guaranteed its transparency (Kennedy assassination, moon landing, Vietnam War, Zapruder frames, etc.) become part of an opaque text that cannot be read and no longer claims significance.

For Ballard, the crisis of the spectacle in the late 1960s follows from the disengagement of desire, its desultory floating-free from anchoring structures. His space explodes the possibility of cathecting with anything because every surface is available for investment. "Sex is now a conceptual act," says the omnipresent Dr. Nathan. "The perversions are completely neutral—in fact, most of the ones I've tried are out of date. We need to invent a series of imaginary perversions just to keep the activity alive." And it was the schizo interregnum of those years that compelled the consolidation of new networks in which to discipline potentially dangerous flows and to reinvest them productively. The late 1960s, whether in China or the West, witnessed a situation requiring more efficient management and the imposition of new regulatory grids: in China it necessitated recontainment of the forces unleashed by the Cultural Revolution; in the West it demanded a rationalization of the spectacle.

19. J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). Many parts of the book were published separately between 1966 and 1969. Ballard has called it "a collection of partially linked condensed novels." The first American edition was *Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A.* (New York: Grove Press, 1972), with preface by William Burroughs.

The lists running through *The Atrocity Exhibition* are like Foucault's description of Borges' Chinese Encyclopedia: they testify to the absence of any "homogeneous and neutral space in which things could be placed so as to display at the same time the continuous order of their identities or differences as well as the semantic field of their denomination."²⁰ The violence of Ballard's text occurs in this kind of absence. Founded on the heterotopia of television, it presents a space in which relations of proximity and of resemblance are hopelessly convoluted onto a single plane. For Ballard empirical and quantitative practices become the flip side of psychosis and its loss of identities. The simulation of coherence for him results only from the blank accumulations of clinical data, laboratory recording techniques, and the "objective" observations of scientific research. And as we now know, the computer was to be central to the remaking of the spectacle by offering the semblance of a "homogeneous and neutral" table on which one could know and manipulate the contents of the world without reference to the visible.

When Ballard writes, "The obsession with the specific activity of quantified functions is what science shares with pornography," he anticipates features of *Gravity's Rainbow*; but Pynchon's work is also important here for its exhaustive disclosure of the processes and lines of force which remade the world after World War II, producing the very landscape of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. When Pynchon particularizes the chemical and armaments industries and the German film industry, they stand for a much wider range of technologies and institutions which sought to render any subject or substance controllable, manipulable, and exchangeable, whether it was languages, raw materials, or neural reflexes. "How alphabetic is the nature of molecules . . . These are our letters, our words: they too can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, co-polymerized one to the other in world wide chains that will surface now and then over long molecular silences like the seen part of a tapestry."²¹ For Deleuze and Guattari, this is a shift from a linguistics of the signifier to a linguistics of flow. It is a transition coinciding with the processes of rationalization that Pynchon describes, the abstract coding of anything that would claim singularity, and also with television's annihilation of the "semantic field" in Ballard. What *Gravity's Rainbow* tells us better than any other text is how World War II was above all an operation of modernization: how it was the necessary crucible for the obliteration of outdated territories, languages, filiations, of any boundaries or forms that impeded the installation of cybernetics as the model for the remaking of the world as pure instrumentality. And it cannot be overemphasized how the development of cybernetics ("a theory of messages and their control") is intertwined with the commodification of all information and with the hegemony of what Pynchon calls the "meta-cartel."²²

20. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. xv-xiv. Also relevant here is Roman Jakobson's "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

21. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973).

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 239 and 566.

The masquerade television performed is over; we can no longer privilege as an independent agency what has now become primarily a switching device, one which derives meaning solely from the connections it makes, breaks, or modifies. The operation of television suggests similarities with the semiconductor, that quintessential object of 1980s capitalism. A product of "postindustrial" industry, the semiconductor chip is a conductive solid with infinitely alterable logical properties that amplifies and codifies flows of power. Unique specifications are produced, as Pynchon's German chemists would have understood, by actually rearranging the atoms of the substances. And recently it has become clear how some semiconductor materials (e.g., gallium arsenide) are optically as well as electronically active: circuits of light and circuits of electricity are interchangeable, subject to the same digitation, dollar quantification, and maximizations of speed. According to the same axioms, television and the semiconductor operate by decomposing and remaking a field to achieve optimum patterns of circulation. Both intensify distribution flows while at the same time imposing intricate circuitries of control.

The liquefaction of signs and commodities has advanced to a point where liquidity no longer spawns the nomadic or the fugitive. The repositioning of television within the web of telecommunications both facilitates the reduction of commodities to pure flux and simultaneously reroutes these flows, previously managed haphazardly and partially, into more easily controllable channels. The passive consumption of images that characterized the sixties spectator is over. If television then still allowed aleatory experiences of drift and anomie, the VDT imposes a highly articulated, coercive apparatus, a prescriptive mode of activity and corporal regimentation. Yet this more developed form of sedentarization, of cellular space mapped out on a global scale, is less the consequence of new technologies and inventions, than the banal legacy of the nineteenth century, and the dream fabricated then of the complete bureaucratization of society.²³

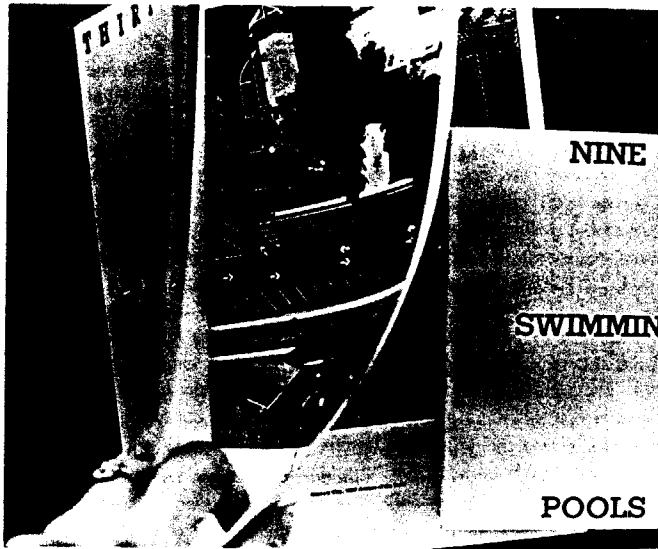
The compulsory, even carceral underpinning of cellular space is obscured by the overwhelming mass-marketing of the computer and its sham of "interactive" technology, of the "extensions of man," and the fraudulent homology between the computer "revolution" and the advent of printing.²⁴ But in rejoinder to critics like Enzensberger, who prematurely celebrated the egalitarian and emancipatory potential of "interactive" media, stands Barthes' contention

23. Michel Foucault writes: "Never, I think, in the history of human societies—even in the old Chinese society—has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization procedures." See "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 777-795. [Reprinted in this volume, pp. 417-433.]

24. See, for example, Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). This Pulitzer Prize sanctioned work is typical of hundreds of current books in its thorough mystification of the words "language," "systems," and "knowledge," and its rhapsodic assertion of the "natural" compatibility of mind and machine. Hofstadter's own account of human intelligence is founded on the terms "hardware" and "software."

that whatever compels speech is intrinsically fascist.²⁵ Most often advocacy of "alternative" uses of telecommunications and computers goes hand in hand with a naive belief in the neutrality of digital languages and a blindness to the immanence of binary notation within a specific system of technocratic domination.²⁶ The imperatives of that system were disclosed by Herman Kahn in identifying the key vocation of the future: "the extraction of the maximum information from whatever data is on hand."²⁷

Perhaps the most fragile component of this future, however, lies in the immediate vicinity of the terminal screen. We must recognize the fundamental incapacity of capitalism ever to rationalize the circuit between body and computer keyboard, and realize that this circuit is the site of a latent but potentially volatile disequilibrium. The disciplinary apparatus of digital culture poses as a self-sufficient, self-enclosed structure without avenues of escape, with no outside. Its myths of necessity, ubiquity, efficiency, of instantaneity require dismantling: in part, by disrupting the separation of cellularity, by refusing productivist injunctions, by inducing slow speeds and inhabiting silences.



Edward Ruscha.
Artist's books:
*Thirty-four Parking
Lots*, 1967, and *Nine
Swimming Pools and
a Broken Glass*, 1968

25. See "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," in Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Critical Essays*, trans. Stuart Hood (New York: Continuum, 1982). For Barthes, see "Lecture," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 5-16.

26. See "Meaning and Power," in Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1984).

27. Herman Kahn, *The Coming Boom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 73.

VI.

Cultural Politics