

THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE EVERYDAY: THEORIZING POINTS OF CONTACT

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## ABSTRACT

Dr. Philip Dickinson, Advisor

*The Avant-Garde and the Everyday* investigates two overdetermined terms in cultural theory: the avant-garde and the everyday. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate points of contact between the two ideas. Specifically, I hope to show that the avant-garde, in its mode of challenging and questioning authority and institutionalized discourses, is engaging in a complex project of reclaiming everyday life from corporatized mass-culture.

To accomplish this goal, I situated my investigation of avant-gardeist practice in the site of New York rock band The Velvet Underground as a specific instantiation of the avant-garde. I analyzed the theories of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and located The Velvet Underground as a neo-avant-gardeist critique of the institutional culture of music. This was compared against Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* as a way to explore the issues of the avant-gardeist critique. Other sites of inquiry included Joseph Branden's article "My Mind Split Open" and Victor Bokris' *Up-Tight* for information about the practice of The Velvet Underground as it was interpreted by the people who were involved at the time.

I believe that I demonstrated that Peter Bürger's theories of the avant-garde are too narrow; he locates the avant-garde in only two sources, both of them aesthetic. It is

my contention that the avant-garde is much more broad and explicitly political in its aims.

To Jackie, for being so patient; to Gabe for being so helpful; and to Arwen, Yvaine,  
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Jacqueline Fawcett deserves credit for inspiring the idea for this thesis. Although she does not remember it this way, it was her suggestion, “Could you do something about Lou Reed or The Velvet Underground?” that got the ball rolling.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Sorcery: The systematic cultivation of enhanced consciousness or non-ordinary awareness & its deployment in the world of deeds and objects to bring about desired results.”

-Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.*

### A PERSONAL HISTORY (AND SOME TERMS)

In the early to mid-'90s, rock music was changing rapidly; as a college student in those years who had a bass guitar and an amplifier, I was invited to become part of several bands in the music scene of my city. This was just a few short years after the release of Nirvana's *Nevermind* (and particularly important for the circles in which I ran, immediately after the release of Nine Inch Nail's *The Downward Spiral*). The youth music scene had a feeling that anything was possible. One band that I had the opportunity of knowing for a time described itself as “an avant-garde multi-media experience.” If you had asked any of the band members what “avant-garde” actually meant, they probably would have said “forward-thinking” or “cutting edge.” I certainly would have given that answer. The problem is that the term “avant-garde” is overdetermined: there are multiple sources or loci of “avant-garde” status in modern culture, and none of them are necessary conditions in all places where the avant-garde is located. Another overdetermined term is “everyday life.” People use the term in an unthinking manner: to describe the boredom of work and the respite of vacations, or to describe the minutia of their daily routines. The everyday is ignored as boring, unnecessary, and something to be shunned.

When terms like these are over-determined, they become meaningless. It is possible to apply the terms to virtually anything. Case in point, the “avant-garde” of the band I mentioned above. But a simple survey of the term will reveal that anything “cutting edge” is also “avant-garde” to

most Americans: the Austin alternative paper *Austin 360* described a 2011 performance of *The B. Beaver Animations* as an avant-garde performance; filmmaker David Lynch is often described as “avant-garde,” and the music of The Kronos Quartet is often labeled as avant-garde. There is even a body piercing shop in Wisconsin called “Avant Garde Body Piercing.” Yet when nearly every American under the age of 35 walks around with metal studs hanging from their faces, can body piercing still lay claim to the term “avant-garde?” If they can, what is the avant-garde, really?

Everyday life is equally desperate for clarification. Critic Ben Highmore in his text *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (2002), starts his inquiry into the issue of everyday life by looking at the character of Sherlock Holmes, and suggests that “Sherlock Holmes gets bored. He gets bored when the mysteries and enigmatic side of life is not taxing his rationalistic intelligences” (2). He further suggests that, for Holmes, the everyday is about boredom or the mundane when he writes, “however much he loves the strange and bizarre, his entire being is dedicated to puncturing its mystery” (3).

On the face of it, the avant-garde seems opposed to everyday life. The avant-garde is the leading edge; the term is French for “advanced guard.” The avant-garde experiments, does things differently, and challenges long-held notions. Everyday life on the other hand is that which is mundane, ordinary, and boring. The two things seem to stand in opposition to one another. In fact, the “everyday” is that which the avant-garde tries to undo. But this understanding is based on a loose, un-theoretical “common sense” formulation of the terms. When these terms are subjected to a more rigorous analysis, an interesting point of contact

occurs. Specifically, both terms are engaged in a kind of sorcery in that both are engaged in the development of a non-ordinary awareness.

Everyday life is not typically thought of as the site of enhanced consciousness or ordinary awareness. Instead, it is the argument of those who study everyday life that enhanced consciousness is something that needs to be *brought into* everyday life. Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre is one of the towering figures in this study of everyday life, and he brought an interest in alienation to his inquiry. For Lefebvre, technical progress was an alienating force. In Volume I of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, he addresses the idea that technology and media serves as a propaganda force that distracts and mystifies the populace. But, unlike many of his Marxist contemporaries, Lefebvre examines and then rejects this notion. In the foreword to his text, Lefebvre writes:

Far from suppressing criticism of everyday life, modern technical progress *realizes* it. This technicity replaces the criticism of life through dreams, or ideas, or poetry, or those activities which rise above the everyday, by the critique of everyday life from within: the critique which everyday life makes of itself, the critique of the real by the possible and of one aspect of life by another. (9)

The everyday, then, is that which exists constantly but is never fully explored. The everyday is a site that is all around us, but impossible to fully attend to. The everyday is like water, or air: absolutely necessary and constantly around us, but impossible to describe or pin down. Definitions can be given, but those simply abstract it, and add layers to the “real;” descriptions can never fully capture the things being described.

What is needed is not another description, but a new way of attending to the thing that is there. A radical, completely new method or practice of bringing attention to the everyday is

necessary if it is to be understood. But this forces the question: what is it that prevents the everyday from being understood?

Asking a person to describe their “everyday lives” will doubtless yield a list of some sort: appointments they have, responsibilities at their jobs, people that they know, or even material artifacts that they own or manipulate. This is not a description of a person’s life, but rather a list of “stuff.” The everyday is often reduced to an accumulation of “stuff.” But are physical objects, appointments on a schedule, or even relationships what human beings are? Can our fundamental beings be reduced to a list, even if that list seems exhaustive? Historian Ferdinand Braudel, in his text *The Mediterranean*, wrote that the first part of his book is “devoted to a history whose passage is almost imperceptible, that of man in his relationship to the environment, a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles” (48). This might not be everyday life, either, but it is a better description than any list of appointments or gadgets ever could be.

The essence of everyday life, then, is that of relationship. The relationship of humans to their environment is what makes everyday life. It is this relationship, this sense of connection or communion, which is everyday-ness. Yet that relationship is often not of man to his environment, nor even of a person to other people within the larger context of interrelated environmental needs that seems to be what makes up the stuff of everyday life. Instead, everyday life is the car one drives, the food one eats, the TV shows one watches. And all of these things are determined by mass culture.

Mass culture, for the purposes of this inquiry, is just that: objects developed through mass production. And what to make of mass culture has been an concern of the culture industry for

many years. Distinguishing oneself from a mass of conformist consumers would become the goal of the American counter-culture (and, by extension, American youth culture). Postwar America was a culture of scientific and technological progress as well as economic expansion: the twin forces of technology and capitalist production allowed nearly every family to own a car, a television, and new appliances. But this production did not serve only to fulfill desires, as Lizabeth Cohen suggests in *Consumer's Republic*: "Mass consumption in postwar America would not be a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility designed to provide 'full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation'" (Location 3240).

Buying and selling became a civic duty in postwar America, and the focus of a new American culture. Cohen suggests that the postwar American economy experienced a radical change, from a "producer culture" to a "consumer culture." This issue has been addressed in multiple texts, and it is not my intention to analyze this suggestion so much as problematize the issue: if Cohen and similar theorists are right, and American postwar culture *did* become a consumer culture, what impact would that have had on American art?

## **GOALS**

In light of the issues of consumer culture and mass-production, it will be the aim of this project to put the two overdetermined concepts of "the avant-garde" and "the everyday" into conversation with each other, to see what insights can be pulled from the meeting of these two ideas. It is my contention that the point of contact between these terms is a revitalizing, revolutionary project. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate that the "avant-garde" is engaged in a project of reclaiming "everyday life" from the forces that have made it into a banal, insipid site

of boredom and lack of stimulation. The avant-gardeist project, at its core, is attempting to return a vital sense of wonder to the everyday by bringing new forms of attention to bear on the daily routines and minutiae through which so many of us go every day.

It is my contention that the often used (and somewhat interchangeable) terms "bohemian," "avant-garde," and "cutting edge" are actually stand-ins for a complicated practice in art and culture to reclaim "everyday life" from a perceived co-optation and colonization of everyday lived experience by capitalism and commoditization. To avoid a theory so broad as to be meaningless, I seek to ground these issues in a particular site of postwar neo-avant-garde American culture: specifically, in the lyrics, cultural influence, and artistic practice of The Velvet Underground. Through analyzing The Velvet Underground, I hope to develop a critical language that can be used to talk about one form of cool; in doing so, I hope to demonstrate that different forms of avant-garde "cool" can be examined and theorized, as long as an attempt is made to delineate which avant-garde or "cool" is being discussed at a given time.

Of course, this leads to an obvious question: why study The Velvet Underground? What form of avant-gardeist practice is demonstrated through the band? Why hang this inquiry on a band that was commercially ignored in its day? Why focus this theoretical discussion on a band that broke up over forty years ago? The answer is that The Velvet Underground is a single instantiation of the contested terms and issues: "avant-garde" is frequently used to describe the band. But The Velvet Underground can help us explore more than just the ideas of the avant-garde and the everyday; they can help us to understand how those terms are enmeshed in a more complex discourse about culture and the nature of commoditization. For example, The Velvet Underground was not quite as "commercially ignored" in their day as the mythology

suggests; the “non-commercial” nature of the band is part of the cultural myth that has sprung up around them as part of the rhetoric of “authenticity.” But further, The Velvet Underground has become so deeply enmeshed in the cultural psyche as a site of avant-gardeist practice that they cannot be easily overlooked in any discussion of culture. The Velvet Underground is a resonating wave: the song “All Tomorrow’s Parties” has given its title to a Gibson novel, one of the most commercially successful and critically important British music festivals, and a film by Hong Kong director Yu Lik-wai; multi-platinum artists such as David Bowie, U-2, and R.E.M. all cite The Velvet Underground as an influence; several movies in the past twenty years have used The Velvet Underground as part of their soundtracks (all designed to invoke a sense of “authenticity” and “cool”); and many hipsters today, knowingly or unknowingly, take Lou Reed as a model of fashion.

This is not to construct a “Great Man” theory around the band. The issue of influence is not to argue for an inherent greatness as a reason for study. Instead, I suggest that the cultural rhetoric of today uses The Velvet Underground as a site of some kind of uncorrupted “authenticity.” In short, The Velvet Underground serves as a useful site to understand how the avant-garde functions in the cultural and artistic discourse of postwar America, particularly in terms of reclaiming some kind of “authenticity” or everyday lived experience from mass culture.

### **ISSUES IN CONTEXT (LITERATURE REVIEW)**

For the purposes of this project I will be examining a variety of sources, some current and some that are great thinkers and towering theorists in the field. Some current research being

done in the area of The Velvet Underground includes Branden W. Joseph's "My Mind Split Open"; this text examines the Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable (EPI) project in terms of the effect it had on its audience. His work explores the disorientation caused by the multi-media experience the EPI, a theme that I will take up in my discussion of the neo-avant-garde's relationship to the everyday. In the same vein, I will examine some of the suggestions made in Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, a text that explores the idea of sound as a new mode of interaction with the world at large. Attali's text is particularly useful for the discussion when put into conversation with Michele de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

Professor of English Brian McHale suggests in his paper "1966 Nervous Breakdown" that the year 1966, an important year for The Velvet Underground, was also a pivotal year for the formation of a postmodern aesthetic. Steven Hamelman's article "But Is It Garbage?" considers the role of "trash aesthetics" in music, a topic that I shall return to in my exploration of The Velvet Underground's sense of place in New York City in the mid-1960s. Hamelman particularly investigates the ways in which trash aesthetics (which are particularly interesting in light of Walter Benjamin's concept of the "ragpicker") dominate modern discussion of the music industry.

University of Reading's Roger Cook took up the issue of Warhol's aesthetic in relation to dominant capitalist production modes in his article "Andy Warhol, Capitalism, Culture, and Camp". Cook is particularly interested in the idea of Warhol's camp undermining heteronormativity in American consumerism; although gender and sexuality is not a central part of my argument, issues of gender and heteronormativity cannot be completely banished in

discussions of the heterogeneous nature of the bohemian avant-garde. Through these authors and other participants in the academic discussion of aesthetics, I hope to demonstrate how The Velvet Underground illuminate the critical issues in a unique way.

Thomas Frank, in *The Conquest of Cool*, gives some important insight to this idea of authenticity as it has influenced mass culture. His text explored the massive changes that occurred in advertising culture in the 1960s, pointing out that the changes in the advertising world sometimes mirrored those in the larger culture, and at other times actually anticipated those cultural shifts. "By the middle of the 1950s," he writes, "talk of conformity, of consumerism, and of the banality of mass-produced culture were routine elements of middle-class American life." It goes without saying that this contradicts the pop-culture myth that the 1960s were a time when a rogue youth culture "woke up" a nation of zombified consumers. But that is an issue best held for later; instead, it is important for now to note that as early as the 1950s, conformity and consumerism were seen as The Enemy. This is the language that would inform not only the Beat writers of the '50s, but the hippies of the '60s, the punks of the '70s, and every counter-cultural movement since then. This same discourse extends backwards: the Surrealists and Dadaists were desperately searching for something "authentic" in life in contrast to mass culture, and both Baudelaire and Balzac work with the figure of the *flâneur* or "stroller" as a figure who stands in tension with the consumerist culture of the nineteenth century. It is this discourse of the counter-culture and avant-garde as a site of resistance against bland consumerist conformity that is illuminated by the specific example of The Velvet Underground.

Any attempt to explore "everyday life" will also enter into a discussion, however brief, of "authenticity." While many postmodern theorists (Baudrillard, Barthes, and Derrida for

example) dismiss the idea of authenticity in a text, the quest for “authenticity” does exist outside of academic literary discourse as part of the daily concerns of cultural consumers. Sociologist Richard Lloyd comments on this mass-culture discussion in his book *Neo-Bohemia*. He describes an evening in the early 1990s when young hipsters flocked to a down-and-out Chicago nightclub to see the 90s Alternative band Veruca Salt. Lloyd described the band’s set as “delighting the crowd with a thundering set that fairly shook the little bar” (5). Lloyd then briefly described the band’s rise to commercial success, and noted that “Naturally, this rise to fame resulted in Veruca Salt’s repudiation by its former neighborhood supporters” (5). Lloyd’s use of “naturally” to describe the repudiation indicates that it is a process that happens over and over in modern American culture: a band, a writer, a film, or a neighborhood can only be “authentic” as long as a status of “inside” and “outside” can be maintained. The neighborhood is only “cool” until it is gentrified; the band is only “real” until their songs are used as jingles; the writer is only “cutting-edge” until he is acknowledged by Oprah.

The avant-garde, as we will see, engaged in a process of conflict and contest with institutions of culture. This, of course, forces us to consider what this conflict is all about, and will necessitate considering the role of the counter-culture in American life. Why does the “avant-garde” (whatever it *really* is) set itself up in opposition to “mainstream” culture (whatever that really means)? Cultural critic Daniel Belgrad in his book *The Culture of Spontaneity* explored the goals of one of the earliest American groups to stand against mass-consumerism: the Beats. Belgrad examined the specific practice of the Beat poets, claiming:

Beat opposition to the dominant culture focused on communicating subjective experience in a way that revealed the ideological contradictions of corporate-liberal society. Kerouac’s original conception of *On the Road*, for instance, was as the nighttime

confessions of an American businessman whose conscience would not let him sleep.  
(198)

In this description, we have an illustration of the counter-culture's critique of American society: it divides our consciousness, forcing us to subject our desires to our cultural needs. In other words, Freud's Id-Ego-Superego conflicts were being applied on a cultural level. The culture of contradictions needed to be exposed. In many ways, the Beat movement sought to expose the contradictions by setting "cool" and "hip" culture as one that was at odds with mass-produced, manufactured "straight" culture. In doing so, the Beats created an avant-gardeist critique of mass culture, locating the avant-garde in the practices of "being hip."

And the issue of "practice" brings us to Jesuit priest and cultural theorist Michel De Certeau , who suggested that the material conditions of the mass-produced culture colonized our lives so thoroughly that the only solution was to develop new practices of attention that can help to reconnect us to "everyday life." In particular, Certeau's developments of "tactics" and "strategies" gave a new theoretical language to understand how this attention functions in reclaiming everyday life from commoditized mass culture. Specifically, Certeau comments on the idea of the everyday as it exists in the arts writing that:

As indexes of particulars—the poetic or tragic murmurings of the everyday—ways of operating enter massively into the novel or the short story, most notably into the nineteenth-century realistic novel. They find there a new representational space, that of fiction, populated by everyday virtuositities that science doesn't know what to do with and which become the signatures, easily recognized by the readers, of everyone's micro-stories. (70)

To Certeau, the rational, technocratic culture of late-stage capitalism can measure, classify, and tabulate the data of society as much as it wants; those measurements and tabulations will give an idea of what people "think" and "do," but they fail to capture the actual details that texture

life. The arts, in contrast, can help reclaim an awareness of daily realities that “science doesn’t know what to do with.”

Other writers and thinkers have suggested ways to integrate an awareness of “the everyday” into a new practice of seeing the world. Walter Benjamin, for example, was quite concerned with the ways in which technology made human interactions with space new (not necessarily “better,” just new). In his essay “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, Benjamin wrote:

Announcing an upheaval in the relationship of art to technology, panoramas are at the same time an expression of a new attitude toward life. The city dweller, whose political supremacy over the provinces is attested many times in the course of the century, attempts to bring the countryside into town. In the panoramas, the city opens out, becoming landscape—as it will do later, in subtler fashion, for the flâneurs. (35)

In this way, Benjamin is writing of a specific technology that is not directly relevant to the inquiry. But he notes that technology can be used to bring new forms of attention to how people interact with the world on a daily basis, and this idea will return when we consider the role of film, amplification, and feedback on the aural landscape.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE AVANT-GARDE AND SPACE

“If you live in a big place,  
There’s many factions under the ground.”  
-Devo, “Through Being Cool”

### THE URBAN LANDSCAPE AND THE EVERYDAY

The Velvet Underground is connected deeply to New York City in the early ‘60s. In some ways, The Velvet Underground has come to exemplify the decadent, down-and-out nature of 1960s New York. Director Oliver Stone used that connection when he included a scene in his biopic about Jim Morrison and The Doors (called, unsurprisingly, *The Doors*) where Jim Morrison and his band mates travel to New York City. In the film, they attend a party at Andy Warhol’s Factory in New York City’s Lower East Side, and the music of The Velvet Underground saturates the scene. The members of The Doors, despite being seen by the media of their day as dangerous drug experimenters and sexual libertines, are appalled by the decadence they see and hear. In the background, the squalling, droning music combines with the strange lighting to create an experience of disorientation. An actor portraying Velvet’s singer Lou Reed walks by the camera, and one of “The Doors” calls the people of New York’s neo-avant-garde “frightening” and “vampires.”

In the 1960s (as with many decades before and since), New York City was the place to be for artists. It was and still is the largest city in the United States; at the time of the band’s activity, New York City was the home of 7.8 million people. But New York City was also the financial powerhouse of the nation, both in myth and fact. New York City was the home of Wall Street and the site of glittering cocktail parties: in reality and in imagination, New York City was like no other city in America. It was also a city of immigrants, with many New York neighborhoods

maintaining their ethnic identities. Italians, Poles, Jews, Latinos, and Chinese all had their own areas, many of which were on the Lower East Side. Culture and media critic Richard Witts, in his book *The Velvet Underground*, described the Lower East Side of the 1960s in these terms:

“Being south of Central Manhattan, the quarter was literally ‘down-town’ on the subway maps, but also ‘down’ in its degenerate, mongrel contrast to the diamond studded lifestyle of the ‘uptown’ lifestyle of fine wines and string quartets” (2). And it was this degenerate, mongrelized part of the city that many artists happily called “home.”

In fact, this is a common story in urban spaces. While degenerate, down-and-out districts often house the poor, they also often house young and hip artists. This is in part explainable by virtue of simple economics: rents in less-desirable parts of the urban landscape are low, and artists often have little money to spend. But it also points to something about the nature of the industrial city (and the post-industrial urban environment, as well): the rise of the industrial economy changed social relations. Artists and writers, people who would have found patrons in pre-industrial society, were forced as a result of industrialization to actually commoditize their art. Artists had to find jobs, and those jobs seemed to be more likely to find in urban spaces. In *Neo-Bohemia*, Richard Lloyd suggests that this had a particular social impact on the urban landscape, writing:

Potential creators were pulled to the metropolis by the centripetal forces also drawing peasants from the countryside. Too numerous to be absorbed by the professions and ill suited by disposition to the sweatshops, those who would constitute the citizenry of bohemia settled into the low-rent districts of the city to ply their self-appointed trades. (53)

These trades, of course, included painting, writing novels, composing poems, and (as technology allowed it to become profitable) writing and producing music. This, in turn,

generated an economic system. As artists, writers, and the “hip” creative types began generating money, an institution arose that allowed them to ply their trades. Magazines emerged in the industrial city that allowed writers to publish their work, and “Grub Street” houses of hack writers appeared in most cities. The art exhibition as a phenomenon can trace itself to the Paris Salon which opened to the public in 1737, and the Royal Academy of Arts in London which opened to the public in 1769. The rise of the industrial city, then, was giving rise to an urban class who were creators of culture.

As urban, industrial capitalism was ascending, the need of the artist to find a market for his work also was on the rise. This need for a market (and the associated decline of patronage) forced artists and creative types to seek their fortunes in the cities, as Lloyd indicates. And this led to poor artists congregating in the low-rent districts, as was suggested earlier. These low rent districts, now overflowing with musicians, artists, poets, and creators of culture developed a distinct reputation, which came to be known as “bohemian.”

But the issue of what a bohemian lifestyle actually is would serve to illuminate the important connections between avant-garde practice and the city. The term “bohemian” is often thrown around casually in the context of artists; for the term to serve a useful purpose, it must be explored. Bohemia was a medieval principality that became embroiled in the political struggles of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In time (and through a process that will distract from the more important issues if we engage it here), the political struggles of Bohemia were conflated with the wandering and displaced Romani people of Europe. “Bohemia” became a code or a stand-in for any place where displaced people gathered as a result of this conflation. And a new class of urban artists was emerging that constituted a “displaced” people. As capitalist modes of

production took hold throughout Europe and the Western world more generally, artists and creators of culture would flock to the city. And these writers and artists would come to remind the citizens of Paris and other urban centers of the displaced Romani people. According to Lloyd, these artists were people who would find a social identity thrust upon them. The designation “bohemian” was “particularly apt given that, like the scattered citizens of a defunct kingdom, many in this new class of penniless and passionate eccentrics had been violently dislodged from their own fixed place in the social cosmos” (53). These passionate and penniless creative artists found a new designation. According to Lloyd, “since the 1830s, participants and observers have used the word ‘bohemia’ to describe the activities of artists and lifestyle eccentrics as they cohere in and around urban districts” (50).

New York City contained districts that would serve as typical examples of this bohemian lifestyle, and the City turned out many important artists, including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning. The fact that many of these artists were transplants to the City is important to note. “Authenticity” in bohemia (and neo-bohemia, as with the Velvet) seems to be a function of willingly taking on the mantle of “bohemian.” One does not need to be born in the Lower East Side to be a part of the arts community. Jackson Pollock was from Montana, Joseph Cornell was (like Lou Reed) a suburbanite who adopted the City as his home, and both Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning were Europeans who came to New York later in life.

In fact, the idea of “the bohemian” seems to be one who intentionally and pointedly abandons bland suburban life (or even oppressive rural life) to find liberation and openness in the urban lifestyle. It is common to seek a physical space where others in the area re-enforce one’s own beliefs, lifestyles, and attitudes; since the low-rent districts were cheap and already

had some bohemians living there, they were ideal destinations. More bohemians and artists moved in, making the area more attractive to other artists and lifestyle eccentrics who would then also move in. Since bohemians and artists are frequently associated with “cool,” so too do the *places* become associated with bohemian “cool.” This cool is a form of cultural capital that gives the bohemian community a distinctive character. The physical space assumes the character that the denizens of that space carry.

More importantly, the historical avant-garde movements are all tied to a bohemian ideal of the artist as a neo-Romantic figure struggling against the prevailing artistic trends. For example, Dadaist Marcel Duchamp’s found objects position him as both a renegade thinker and bohemian lifestyle eccentric who re-invigorates the very notion of what art is and is not, embodying a “modern anxiety about the possibility and validity—the usefulness and seriousness—of art (Kuspit, 38). Duchamp stood outside of the artistic trends, and his “readymades” were made up the detritus of urban living. Similarly, André Breton, the “chairman” of Surrealism, is often depicted (and depicts himself in his novel *Nadja*) as an urban dweller who wanders the city as he contemplates his poetry, wondering if anyone will ever truly understand his work. The avant-garde, then, is invested in the city. Both Duchamp and Breton are bohemians, urban dwellers who are deeply involved with culture and the industries of cultural production. Duchamp’s ready-mades bear the traces of urban life, and his Dadaist work is often spatially associated with Zürich (though he settled in New York City later in life). Breton found his home in Paris, the city that gave rise to the idea of a bohemian lifestyle (Lloyd). Bohemia and the avant-garde are deeply tied to each other: the avant-garde

movements of Dadaism and Surrealism (and the problematic movement of Futurism) were all spatially located in the city.

These same lifestyle eccentrics and urban-dwelling members of the culture industry who were given the designation “bohemian” would eventually take on another designation: “cool.” It is this sense of “cool” that has kept The Velvet Underground such a part of avant-garde and “cutting edge” culture discussions because the terms “cool,” “cutting-edge,” and “avant-garde,” have some points of contact and overlap. It is the “cool” of The Velvet Underground as much as the neo-avant-garde status that allowed Lynden Barber of *Melody Maker* magazine to comment in 1983 (over a decade after the band’s dissolution), “The Velvet Underground were so far ahead of their time that hearing them now it seems scarcely believable that they’re not a contemporary group” (Thompson, 22). This sense that something past is still contemporary is part of what makes The Velvet Underground both a site of neo-avant-gardeist production and a site of a particular kind of urban “cool.” The avant-gardeist project is one that tries to engage art as a phenomenon and challenge artistic institutions. According to German literary critic Peter Bürger, the function of the avant-garde is serve as a critique of art that is a-historical, or more specifically not located to place and time. Bürger gives the example of Marxist criticism of religion, and writes, “system-immanent criticism within the institution of religion is criticism of specific religious ideas in the name of other ideas. In contrast to this form, self-criticism pre-supposes distance from mutually-hostile religious ideas” (21).

To paraphrase Bürger, to criticize a specific instantiation of religion is located in space and time. The criticism is only useful or valid for that instantiation. But criticism of the self in relation to the system (or of the system in relation to the self) is criticism that is dislocated from

any specific instantiation, and is “dislocated” in space-time. Bürger’s formulation of the avant-garde is that it attempted this dislocated criticism; it did not criticize a specific artistic or literary movement, but it criticized the nature of art and literature itself as a system of relationships to human beings and everyday lives.

The Velvet Underground seem constantly contemporary to the new generations who keep discovering the band for this exact reason: they adopted a stance that was outside of the trends of music, and in adopting this stance they criticized the institution of popular music itself. It is problematic to call The Velvet Underground “avant-garde,” because that term is often used to refer to a group of specific movements of Europe between World War One and World War Two. Bürger locates the avant-garde specifically in the movements of Dada and Surrealism; literature scholar and critic Richard Murphy expands this designation to expressionism as well. Specifically locating the avant-garde is not the immediate goal. Instead, for now any post-war artists who adopt a practice of institutional critique will be referred to as “neo-avant-garde.”

This neo-avant-garde status places the Velvets outside of temporality in a way; they are not timeless as much as dislocated in time. The avant-garde and its inheritors in the neo-avant-garde would try to make this temporal dislocation part of their practice, dislodging themselves from immediate concerns of art in terms of movements and schools. Instead, the avant-garde embraced a stance that makes them seem always contemporary. This is, in part, a legacy of the discursive traditions at the time. The late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries were periods of massive dislocations in space and time, but also in thought. Nietzsche and Freud were both immediate precursors to the avant-garde movements (and Freud even lived to be contemporary with them). And both thinkers were developing lines of thought that served to

critique cultural practice. Richard Murphy's text *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* deals with this issue of cultural critique as a foundation for the avant-garde. According to Murphy, Freud and Nietzsche, along with Ernst Mach and Hans Vaihinger, developed a practice of *Fiktionskritic*, or the "critique of fictions." According to Murphy, these thinkers attempted to demonstrate "that no systems of thought regarding man and social reality are anchored by any 'natural law' but possess the status merely of instruments of reflection and meaning" (53). In this formulation, no theories of social organization, including aesthetics (as a relationship of Man to Art) are transcendent or universal, but exist because of temporally-located social practices. By showing that no "natural law" anchors these systems, Nietzsche and Freud (among others) critiqued the discourses and ideologies that created those systems of human interaction. The critique of systems then becomes the practice that makes up the fundamental praxis of the avant-gardeist movements: criticism of artistic organizational discourses, specifically the institutionalization of art.

Peter Bürger examined the avant-garde as a movement and an ideology in his text *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger developed several theories which will inform this discussion, but his primary concept of importance at this point rests in his definitions of "work" and "art as institution." Bürger claims that art has become an institution in Modernity as a result of the specialization of work and division of labor that exists under modern capitalism, the same specialization and division of labor that forced artists and writers to find work in the city instead of the former practice of finding a patron. As capitalism developed, the need to continuously turn out products as commodities led to the specialization of labor because of technical necessity. This specialization and division of labor led to the rise of "institutional art," specialists

who gathered in professional societies and colleges to create their art or sold their art through specific channels that were developed to respond to economic needs. This institutionalization also led to the rise of readings, art shows, and galleries devoted to the selling of art. These institutions turn art (whether it is literature, painting, or music) into things that “are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works” (12). The “work” is an individual piece produced by an artist, but he or she does so within the boundaries and schema of the institution of art, such as the school or movement to which a particular painting or poem belongs. Bürger further suggested that the “category *art as institution* was not invented by the avant-garde movements... it only became recognizable after the avant-garde movements had criticized the autonomy status of art in developed bourgeois society” (liii). Connecting Bürger to Murphy is important here, because it is this *Fiktionskritic* suggested by Murphy that allows the avant-gardeist movements to perform the critique suggested by Bürger, or at least puts Bürger’s theories within a context. The intellectual currents directly leading up to the historical avant-garde as Bürger defines it were the critique of systems and of discourses. From that intellectual current springs Dada, which seeks to question the role of art and of the artist.

To Bürger, art’s institutionalization had one significant feature: it removed art from the everyday lives of non-artists. Institutionalizing art created a market for artists who could ply their trade, allowing for the professionalization of authors, artists, and musicians. “But because art is detached from daily life,” Bürger argues that the ability of art to truly impact and inform the daily lives of ordinary people “remains without tangible effect” (13). In short, Bürger’s argument is that art exists to help individuals integrate experience into everyday life. But the

institutionalization of art prevents that experience from becoming real for most people, because art has become a commodity to be bought and sold. This commodity status objectifies art and makes individual arts into “works,” or objects outside of life that mean nothing to the real lives of real people. Thus, the role of the avant-garde as Bürger defines it is to critique art as an institution, suggesting that it is the institutionalized, commoditized nature of art that is the problem. Only when art is liberated from the institutions of art can it truly perform its function: helping ordinary people to find a language for their experience that helps them integrate aesthetics, lived practice, and the internal world of desire.

Bürger’s argument is based deeply in his assertion that only the Surrealists and Dadaists were truly “avant-garde,” and that anyone who attempts to critique art as an institution other than the Surrealists and Dadaists are simply “neo-avant-gardeists.” Bürger notes that the attempt to critique the institutions of art still exists, but that this critique does so within an institutional framework that has incorporated and co-opted the language of the Surrealists and the Dadaists. Bürger writes that “[t]he revival of art as an institution ... suggests that today, the avant-garde is already historical. Even today, of course, attempts are made to continue the tradition of the avant-garde movements... these attempts... can no longer Attain the protest value of the Dadaist manifestations” (57). To Bürger, then, the kind of dislocation in time suggested for The Velvet Underground was not achieved by the avant-garde movements of Surrealism and Dada: Surrealism and Dada are dated, and these movements can clearly be “felt” by the audience who engages the work to be historically located.<sup>1</sup>

To Bürger, the avant-garde was a specific movement that tried to change art, failed to do so, and has been co-opted as a part of the very institution it tried to critique. But perhaps Bürger is

being too simplistic in his analysis. Critic Ben Highmore explores the work of philosopher Henri Lefebvre in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*. Highmore analyzed Lefebvre's work on "everyday life," writing, "whereas Surrealism remained within the aesthetic realm, Lefebvre insists that the everyday is the only site for such transformations and locates his critique in relation to new radical social movements, where the historical possibilities of transformation are due, precisely, to the [lived] experience of certain people" (130). In Highmore's analysis of Lefebvre, Surrealism and Dada failed precisely because they *were* aesthetic movements—they failed to enact institutional change because they encapsulated only one aspect of human experience: aesthetics. In this analysis of Lefebvre, the avant-garde did not end with Surrealism and Dada. The avant-garde is the right of anyone interested in critiquing institutionalized relationships, whether those relationships are in art, business, or the ordinary trivia of human life.

In fact, Lefebvre seemed unmoved by the avant-garde promise of Surrealist literature. In his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre wrote about Surrealist literature when read after the fact, stating "it is impossible not to be surprised by their shortcomings in both form and content" (114). Further, he writes, "The Surrealists promised a new world, but they merely delivered 'mysteries of Paris'. They promised a new faith, but did that really mean anything? Oh literature, what petty crimes are committed in your name" (114). Lefebvre would seem to think that, if the avant-garde was tied to Surrealism, then the avant-garde was meaningless and useless. But Lefebvre refused to accept that the avant-gardeist practice of institutional critique failed. To Lefebvre, this idea of *Fiktionskritic* inherited from the thinkers of the Nineteenth Century also had another key source: Karl Marx. Lefebvre was a Marxist, though not an

orthodox one. To Lefebvre, the most important issue for a Marxist analysis of culture was the one issue that Marx suggested but never rigorously theorized. That issue was *alienation*.

To Lefebvre, what is revolutionary and “cutting edge” is the radical “everyday.” It was a recapturing of everyday life from alienated Modernity that would bring true social justice and productive happiness to the world. According to Lefebvre, “quite a large number of working class couples have a washing machine, a television set, or a car, but they have generally sacrificed something else for these gadgets (having a baby, for example)” (9). To Lefebvre, the most radical and “forward thinking” act was the reclaiming of life from gadgets and fetishized objects that dictate the paths in our lives. He proposed a study of life that was unflinching in its connection to actual lived experience. He was not interested in the assumed lived experience shown in theatrical performances and propagandistic “folk rituals,” but in the actual lived reality of moment-to-moment *reaction*. In contemplating this reality of action, Lefebvre writes:

A keener awareness of everyday life will replace the myths of ‘thought’ and ‘sincerity’- and deliberate, proven ‘lies’- with the richer, more complex idea of *thought-action*. Since words and gestures produce direct results, they must be harnessed not to pure ‘internal consciousness’ but to consciousness in movement, active, directed toward specific goals. (135)

Lefebvre’s “thought-action,” then, is the actual practice of life. The things that are done, the objects created and used from day-to-day, the paths walked through a city, all made up thought-actions. According to Lefebvre, this examination of “thought-action” is the behavior of a person from moment to moment, but also the behavior of a community, and a culture. The fact that people lie and play roles does not frighten Lefebvre from this analysis; he writes, “In everyday life or in the full glare of theater footlights, human beings always behave like *mystifiers*, who manage to ‘play a role’ precisely by exaggerating their own importance” (136).

In Lefebvre's understanding of the everyday, it is far more important to study what people practice than what they say.

If this is so, and if we can accept that The Velvet Underground can at least in some sense serve as shorthand for something quintessentially "New York," then it should be possible to understand something about the "everyday-ness" of life in New York by examining The Velvet Underground. The Velvets can serve to help understand the thought-action of a specific kind of experience. And that experience is of the everyday life of the city. But this is deceptive: everyday life, in this sense, should not be taken to mean boring, humdrum existence. Instead, "everyday life" should be seen in terms of the "thought-action" suggested by Lefebvre. Everyday life is actual, lived experience in a way that is as unmediated as possible. It is the representation of actual lived experience that is, according to Lefebvre, the most radical and avant-garde practice one can engage with.

To speak of "unmediated experience" in terms of lyrical creations and musical practice is, of course, ridiculous. The experience is mediated through the very words and technical reproduction of sound that makes experiencing them possible. Instead, it is through the particular neo-avant-garde practice of The Velvet Underground that this mediation is broken down as much as was artistically feasible. The Velvet Underground challenged not only the realities of technical reproduction in the studio. They challenged the abilities of audiences to place the music into a context, a schema. This is a practice of the avant-garde generally: to question and challenge accepted modes of production. Dadaist artwork such as the collage and the "readymade" challenged ideas of what art was and what art could accomplish.

Lefebvre anticipated the issue of mediation, that discussing everyday life in ways that completely avoided mediation would be impossible. He wrote of this problem that all people at all times play roles, and that these roles we play in everyday life perform a specific operation:

[they] extend reality, and are equally as real; acting explores what is possible; in the abstract, play-acting does not preclude sincerity; on the contrary, it implies it, while at the same time adding something extra—something real: the knowledge of a situation, an action, a result to be obtained. It is precisely in this way that everyday life resembles theatre—and that theatre is able to resume, condense and ‘represent’ life for real spectators. (136)

This, then, is the solution to the idea of mediating the “real” in the neo-avant-gardeist practice of The Velvet Underground: in mediating the real, they do not *obscure* the real, they just make more of it. This could seem to bring Lefebvre into direct conflict with Bürger’s analysis. According to Lefebvre, the institutionalization of art does not obscure its ability to comment on the human condition, it simply makes more of the “human condition” to comment on: another layer of “the real,” in the form of the institution of art.

But this would be an overly-simplistic reading of Lefebvre’s argument. Lefebvre does indeed suggest that mediating “the real” simply makes more of “the real.” But that does not mean that the everyday and “the real” do not need to be explored and theorized. According to Lefebvre, “While taking care not to deny the importance of the leading players, more profound study takes the whole into account: spectators, situations, the canvas of the immense *commedia dell’arte*” (136). According to Lefebvre, then, Bürger’s analysis, while useful, lacked depth and nuance. Bürger, in focusing on the Surrealists, the Dadaists, and the institution of art, was unwittingly constructing a “great man” theory of avant-garde practice. In a reading of Bürger informed by Lefebvre, Bürger’s analysis is important but missed the point: the avant-garde should not be seen as a critique of the institution of art, but as a critique of the ability of art as

an institution to make a meaningful comment on the everyday lived experience of the consumers of art.

It is important to understand that a specific formulation of the term “avant-garde” is being used, and that a link can be forged between its formulation and the practice of thinkers like Henri Lefebvre. The term “avant-garde” is thrown around casually in popular culture. This French term literally means “advanced guard” or “vanguard.” In the original meaning, the avant-garde was the elite or forward part of an army that would push through enemy lines. After the initial attack of the avant-garde, the rest of the army could come through. In the creative arts, the “avant-garde” came to mean art that was experimental or “forward thinking.” Today, many different creative artists (from the film-maker David Lynch to the musical group The Kronos Quartet) are referred to as avant-garde.

However, Peter Bürger defined the avant-garde more narrowly. In his text *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger defined the avant-garde as a specific movement with specific social goals. “The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men” (49). Lefebvre would have been very familiar with the idea of an avant-garde, not only because of his French background, but because of his Marxist politics: the idea of a vanguard is a key idea in Marxist-Leninist thinking. To Lefebvre, an advanced-guard would be a familiar notion and one that could easily be imported to his philosophical project. In Lefebvre, we have the unification of an artistic avant-garde, a social avant-garde, and “everyday life.”

This inquiry into the relationship between the avant-garde and everyday lived experience will force a discussion of the city. If there is a connection between the figure of the bohemian and the practice of the avant-garde, then how the avant-gardeist relates to his or her surroundings in the city will be a particularly important site of inquiry. And so, perhaps this leads us to the first idea of how this neo-avant-garde functions: it seems to be tied to the idea of a location. Like-minded creators of culture tend to associate with and feed into each other. But this, in itself, is not a very interesting idea. Instead, perhaps the idea can be reformulated in more interesting and theoretically useful terms. Specifically, there is a tendency among creators of neo-avant-garde “cool” culture to come from somewhere outside of the bohemian spaces, but make those urban, bohemian spaces their home. Jack Kerouac came to New York City from Lowell, Massachusetts; the previously mentioned artists Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock all came to the city from elsewhere; and, to return us to our specific site of inquiry, Lou Reed, songwriter for The Velvet Underground, was a suburban boy who chose the Lower East Side as his home.

Looking specifically at Reed’s transformation from suburban dweller to bohemian can illuminate the issue further. Reed was born in Brooklyn, but his family moved to Freeport, Long Island, very shortly after his birth. Therefore, all of his formative memories would be of suburban living in Freeport. He struggled with his identity (according to biographer Victor Bockris, Reed identified himself as homosexual at age thirteen), and he found himself often in conflict with the culture around him. By all accounts, Reed found suburban life to be boring and lacking in stimulation.

It is a well-worn commonplace, however, to suggest that life in the suburbs is boring and lacking stimulation, particularly for the young. But what, specifically, does this mean? What is “boring” about them? Perhaps the issue is that the suburbs are sites of homogeneity. Lizabeth Cohen’s *Consumer’s Republic* examines a *Life* magazine spread, and suggested, “*Life* endorsed the increasingly common view that the health of the postwar economy would depend on Americans to own more commodities, here a suburban home, a convertible car, an electric stove, a washing machine, a television, and even a personal helicopter” (location 2046). Postwar suburban life was not about personal growth, it was about national growth. As I have already suggested, and as Cohen and others have written, national growth was to be achieved through consumption. Having a good, upstanding career with a good salary was becoming a civic and moral duty in postwar America, and the lifestyle of the artist was at odds with this consuming culture.

Reed seemed particularly affected by this inability to match his temperament with his culture: he was subjected to a series of electro-convulsive treatments beginning at age 17 (Witts, 17). Reed found himself a misfit in the consuming world of suburbia, and he suffered for his inability to conform. This, of course, simply feeds into artistic and cultural attitudes of the day. As Thomas Frank points out in his text *The Conquest of Cool*, fears of conformity and what today would be called “groupthink” were parts of the cultural landscape of the 1950s. Frank writes, “the triumph of ‘group-mindedness’ had serious negative consequences for the conduct of business as well as American life. The most deleterious effect of the ‘social ethic’ ... was that it inhibited creativity” (22). Reed was reacting to the “social ethic” that had been created by the needs of World War II America. The wartime economy needed a group effort, a culture that all

pulled in the same direction, and a culture that embraced sacrifice for a greater goal. But in the postwar era, these values were being passed on with no “greater goal” to pull towards. There was no longer the threat of Fascism and war; the Cold War served to channel some of those energies, but for most people the “Soviet Threat” was a far more distant one. Postwar American culture was one of “the social ethic,” propaganda and “groupthink” without the old, monolithic enemy. The new enemy was potential economic ruin, but in the affluence of suburbia this enemy seemed laughable.

Everyday life in the suburbs was a colonized life: advertising and consumer culture had taken hold of life and turned daily routine into a parade of commodities. If the avant-garde project is about re-integrating art and everyday experience into a useful whole, then something of that everyday experience has to be reclaimed from the colonizer. But to do so completely also denies the everyday materiality of the advertising and the consumer culture, and this is the bind in which the avant-garde finds itself. Specifically, what is left that is an authentic “everyday” experience, if the colonizing language and rhetoric of consumer culture has taken over? Turning briefly to the work of Father Michel de Certeau might help explore this predicament.

Michel de Certeau’s text *The Practice of Everyday Life* examines the nature of the everyday in terms of attention: he suggests that “the everyday” is something that is so present all the time that we generally don’t even notice it. To truly perceive the everyday requires new methods of attention, and these methods must be constantly “practiced” if people are to be truly aware of everyday reality. Certeau presents a vision of the everyday in which possibilities and potentialities play out constantly in all times and all places. Even in a space that is thoroughly

colonized by consumer culture and advertising, ghosts of other ways of seeing haunt the space. According to Certeau, “There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not” (108). For Certeau, even the thoroughly colonized suburbs contain within them traces of their existence before colonization. But this should not mean that the colonized, banal suburban spaces can ever be “reclaimed” by previous modes of everyday life. To Certeau, there is no way of stepping outside of the colonized everyday, because to do so would be to step outside of human existence altogether. Instead of constructing consumer culture as a conspiratorial “system” that tries to “keep us down,” Certeau suggests that consumer culture is simply everyday material reality. This is not a defeatist attitude, however; while Certeau does not hold that it is possible to get outside of consumer culture, he does find moments of libratory potential within consumer culture itself. According to Certeau, the issue is not one of striking a blow against “The Man,” but in analyzing the moment. Certeau writes:

Thus, once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analyzed, it remains to be asked what the consumer *makes* of these images and during these hours. The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in the supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends—what do they make of what they “absorb,” receive, and pay for? What do they do with it? (31).

It is this that determines the everyday for Certeau. Everyday life is colonized by mass culture and consumerism, most certainly. But the colonized do not necessarily do what the colonizers want or expect them to do with the objects that they consume. Returning to our specific site of inquiry, The Velvet Underground, will help to illuminate the ways in which these various ideas of the everyday and the avant-garde interact. Particularly important to note is that The Velvet Underground were asking the audience of their performances and recordings to re-orient the

ways in which they interacted with the material. For example, the first album by The Velvet Underground, called *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, featured a “peelable” banana on the cover (along with the words, “peel slowly and see.”) The cover and packaging itself asked the audience to interact with it in ways other than simple reception. The live performances of The Velvet Underground, particularly in the days of *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, forced the audience to re-construct their relationships with the space, aurally and visually (a topic that will re-emerge later).

Reed presented himself as a person who had difficulty in dealing with the colonized everyday of postwar America. Certeau asked “what do [people] make of what they ‘absorb,’ receive, and pay for” (31)? But in young, suburban Reed’s case, the answer might be “not much.” Reed found himself struggling against the banality of suburbia, unable to consume the culture as was expected, but also unable to “do” anything with it. He was, at this point, unable to re-purpose everyday life to listen to Certeau’s ghosts and spirits of the un-colonized past that haunt our colonized present. Reed, then, represents a wide group of people: those who were, by inclination and temperament, unsuited to the factory or the ad agency, but expected to conform and consume. And the cognitive dissonance that this created was one that led to mental and emotional turmoil. That turmoil was made worse by the spatial realities of Reed’s life. He was surrounded by the trappings of mass culture; as Reed would write in his semi-autobiographical song “Rock & Roll,” he was surrounded by financial success that brought no happiness: “Two TV sets and two Cadillac cars/ you know, they ain’t gonna help me at all.” To Certeau’s question of what people do with the material reality of the everyday, suburban Reed’s answer was to reject it. But his rejection led to instability and unhappiness.

Suburban life encouraged the conformity to which Reed was temperamentally unsuited. It is illustrative to continue examining the lyrics to “Rock & Roll,” one of the last songs Reed would record with The Velvet Underground:

“Jenny said when she was just five years old,  
 ‘You know there’s nothin’ happenin’ at all.’  
 Every time she puts on the radio  
 There was nothing going down at all.  
 Not at all.

Then one fine morning, she puts on a New York station,  
 And she couldn’t believe what she heard at all.  
 She started dancing to that fine-fine music,  
 Her life was saved by rock and roll.”

This song of course could be seen as biographical. Reed was a young suburban man who suffered under the pressures to conform to suburban life. His sufferings led him to severe psychological problems including ECT treatments and addiction to the sedative Placidyl (Witt, 17). But his life, just as Jenny’s, was saved by Rock and Roll. Rock music was a product of a culture and an economic system, certainly, but one that Reed felt inherently comfortable repurposing for his satisfaction. If the song is a semi-autobiographical piece, it is interesting for its suggestion: New York City called to him. The suburbs were a place of boring conformity, but the City reached out its excitement to him, as it did to Jenny, through its music. Perhaps this, then, is an element of the narrative of bohemia as it relates to the avant-gardeist practice. The city calls to those who are cool and bohemian, drawing them in. The ordinary and the conformist can stay where they are, but the “cool” are hailed by the city, and they cannot help but be drawn into its center. This should not be taken to be a “law” or a dogmatic pronouncement. But it is a tendency, as figures of bohemian cool often share this part of the

story. The city calls to them, drawing the “cool” into a community of artists and creatives. The city knows its own, and will gather them together.

This runs the risk of mythologizing and mystifying the city even further than it already is in Modernity. But the city does seem to exert a pull on those who have been bored by suburbia’s banal consumerist nature. Professor of English and American Studies Alan Trachtenberg analyzed the idea of “the city” in his text *The Incorporation of America*, and his analysis gives us some useful insights. Trachtenberg suggested that the city became a place of mystery, writing of the increasing size of American cities in the industrial age, “With the traditional image of the fallen city lay another image, less of moral condemnation and more of fear and anxiety: the image of the city as mystery, as unfathomable darkness and shadow” (103). And it is this that explains the lure, the call, of the city. Suburban life was seen by many postwar youth as boring and safe, while the city was mysterious, exciting, and dangerous. The city seemed to offer more opportunities for “re-purposing” materials given to them by everyday life. Trachtenberg continues his analysis of the growing American metropolis, writing, “Mystery had been raised to the level of the spectacle, the daily performances of city life now seemed to more and more commentators to be parades of obscurity, of enigma, of silent sphinxes challenging the puzzled citizen” (104). It is little wonder, then, that the city seemed to call to the restless youth of the suburbs. Where the suburbs offered consumption, conformity, and bland safety, the city offered mysteries, excitement, and danger. The avant-garde is by definition a movement that thrives on conflict: it must be at a leading edge, and it must be attacking something. The term is originally military in nature, and carries with it the implication of conflict. The zone of conflict

that the bohemian neo-avant-gardeists position themselves against in this case is suburban mass-consumption.

Reed would attempt to escape the conformity of suburban New York and heed the call of the City, willingly immersing himself in its mysteries and potential dangers. Reed's partner in The Velvet Underground, John Cale, was also pulled in by New York, and his observations of it are enlightening. Cale said of living in New York City, "you're not so much worried about eating as you are about people coming up to you for no reason at all and smashing you over the head or sticking you with a knife" (Thompson, 8). Reed found it equally intense, but he found that intensity stimulating.

As with many of the middle-class in postwar America, Reed sought freedom from his parents by attending college. He enrolled at the Bronx campus of New York University (eventually fleeing NYU for Syracuse University), and attempted to become part of the city landscape. The city was intriguing to Reed in part because of the creative atmosphere that could be found there. But perhaps this longing for the city reveals another important element of bohemian cool and the avant-garde as it relates to its space. According to media critic Richard Witts, Reed "often travelled to downtown Manhattan at nights [during his time at NYU]... to hear the latest style of jazz improvisation known as 'free jazz' at the Five-Spot Club, which was then still an abstract expressionist hangout" (18). And Witt continues, writing "Although these influential downtown excursions lasted a short period, less than a year, it is notable that Reed associated the trips with modernist improvisation, the musical avant-garde, and the sound (if not the countenance) of black pioneers"(18).<sup>2</sup>

Free jazz, of course, was a musical style that was the antithesis of everything postwar suburban: it was messy, as opposed to the suburban desire for order. It was improvised, as opposed to the highly-planned nature of life and space in the suburbs. And it was racially “other” (specifically African-American), as opposed to the postwar suburbs which were overwhelmingly white and/or Jewish. Finally, free jazz was “avant-garde” in Reed’s mind because it was cutting edge. It was something that mainstream, mass culture had not yet discovered, nor had mainstream culture been able to figure out how to make money off of it. Record producers had yet to exploit free jazz as they had swing and the blues; it remained somehow free of commercial taint. That free jazz was to be found in the city and not in the suburbs is unsurprising. Free jazz was a musical style that stressed improvisation and spontaneity, where the notes played had less to do with careful planning as with the feeling of the moment. Free jazz was a musical form where individual compositions emerged “organically,” as notes, chords, or even motifs built upon one another in an accumulation of musical materials. The city, similarly, is the site of multiplicity and heterogeneity, where an accumulation of new materials is constructed on top of the old; the city is, in its way, “organic” in that it responds to the needs of the moment with old buildings being torn down or repurposed as the current needs of the physical space dictate.<sup>3</sup> This is opposed to the deliberate and consciously planned nature of the suburbs. And, of course, free jazz was racially “other,” not having been accepted by white musical culture (yet).

The city, then, loomed large in Reed’s mind as a bohemian site as well as a site of the avant-garde: it was “other,” heterogeneous, mysterious, new (at least, in its artistic forms), and in the minds of the suburban neo-bohemians who flocked to it, the City *seemed* to be untouched by

commodity culture.<sup>4</sup> The city was everything that the suburbs were not. And that made them raw, untamed, and “cool.” One element of the bohemian avant-garde then, at least as it relates to space, is the *sense* (not necessarily the reality) of being free from commoditization because the very “otherness” and heterogeneity of urban spaces makes them unsuitable for cooptation and commoditization. Of course, as we shall see, that resistance to cooptation is at best temporary and can only ever be localized in temporary spaces.<sup>5</sup> Reed’s presence in the Bronx is temporary, just as the presence of a thriving free jazz scene is temporary. Otherness, heterogeneity, and the avant-garde are all temporary in a consumer culture because the drive to co-opt as a way of finding new product to sell is the prime directive.

### **THE AVANT-GARDE**

But Reed’s downtown odyssey to find avant-garde music forces us to return to our consideration of what the “avant-garde” actually *is*. To summarize literary and cultural critic Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, he suggests that art became an institution, a discipline with authority and socially proscribed roles, as a result of the rise of industrial capitalism. The division of labor that capitalism enabled forced artists to become specialists. As a result, an institution of art rose from that specialization. As art became specialized, it also became institutionalized: specific movements and schools emerged, and “art” became something that specialists did and everyone else appreciated. Bürger calls this “the autonomy of art,” and he claims that “[autonomous art] is conceived as a social realm that is set apart from the means-end rationality of daily bourgeois existence” (10). The purpose of avant-garde art is to challenge that notion, and to reconnect art to daily lived experience. According to

Bürger, “because art is detached from daily life, [the experience of art as a comment on life] remains without tangible effect; i.e., it cannot be integrated into that life” (13). In other words, according to Bürger, all art exists to allow people to experience the totality of life and to see something of themselves in art. But art’s ability to express the totality of life has been diminished (or completely erased) by art’s separation from daily life because of its specialization as an institution.

Bürger suggests that the avant-garde attempted to undo this situation and to allow art to reclaim a position in everyday life. The avant-garde attempted to accomplish this not by creating a new institution within art (a new school or artistic praxis), but by attacking the very notion that “art” as an institution should exist. Dada artist Hans Richter called Dada “anti-art.” “The avant-gardeist protest,” according to Bürger, “whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy [of art] and the absence of any consequences” (22). To paraphrase, Bürger suggests that art has no meaning to man’s everyday existence because the specialization of art has removed it from the realm of the “real” for most people; art has been taken out of everyday experience, and placed in a museum or a college. The idea of the avant-garde, then, was to return new ways of seeing art (or hearing it, or experiencing it) to the public. The avant-garde, which according to Bürger is a historically located movement of European writers, poets, and visual artists, attacked the institution of art by intentionally displaying the ways in which art has been co-opted and commoditized. As we have already explored, Bürger uses the Dadaists and the Surrealists as his prime examples. Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades, art made of found objects, serve as one of Bürger’s cites of inquiry: if a man can find a urinal on the street, sign his name to it, and thereby make it art,

what does that mean art is? Is art nothing more than what the artist says it is? Or is art in a complicated relationship with business, where the needs of capitalism dictate what art is?

Bürger suggests that art is dictated by the market when he writes, “What has occurred is the total subordination of work contents to profit motives, and a fading of the critical potencies of works in favor of training in consumer attitudes (which extends to the most intimate interhuman relations)” (30). In this context, a work like Duchamp’s *The Fountain* (the above-mentioned urinal) exists to pose the question: what is art? Would bourgeois consumers accept a urinal as art, and pay for it? Would they do so if a famous artist *told* them that it was art?

Bürger suggests that the avant-garde failed in its attempt to reclaim art as an everyday experience, and that anyone who engages in an avant-garde-like critique of art as an institution is doing so *within* the institution of art itself. The institution of art adapted to the avant-garde critique, and incorporated the avant-garde into its praxis without changing its fundamental relations (or lack thereof) to human life. Bürger writes:

The revival of art as an institution [in the wake of the avant-gardeist critique] and the revival of the category ‘work’ [as a transcendent object of artistic intent] suggests that today, the avant-garde is already historical. Even today, of course, attempts are made to continue the tradition of the avant-garde movements (that this concept can even be put on paper without being a conspicuous oxymoron shows again that the avant-garde has become historical). But these attempts... which could be called neo-avant-gardeist, can no longer Attain the protest value of Dadaist manifestations, even though they may be prepared and executed more perfectly than the former. (57)

So when Lou Reed went Downtown from his dorm in the Bronx to see free jazz performances held in a club frequented by the practitioners of abstract expressionism in America, he thought he was going to see something avant-garde. But according to Bürger, he was simply seeing something “cutting edge” or neo-avant-garde because the idea of the avant-garde was a specific one that had been tried, and had failed.

Perhaps, though, Bürger's assumptions are not accurate. Perhaps the avant-garde did not die with the Surrealist movement. Lefebvre did not think so, but he attempted to place the "avant-garde" in the realm of social movements, not aesthetic movements. If the avant-garde is an attempt to make the practice of art relevant to "the everyday," then the failure of the Dadaists and the Surrealists might not represent a total failure of the avant-gardeist project, but instead a localized failure. In order to see how this could be the case, we must return to the writings of Michel de Certeau.

### **THE EVERYDAY**

Jesuit priest Father Michel de Certeau was interested in how "the everyday" existed in practice. Similar to Bürger, Certeau suggested that "the everyday" had been colonized by the needs of capitalism to commoditize life. According to Certeau, to exist in modern capitalist commodity culture is to be "marginalized." In his text, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau writes:

Marginality today is no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority. (xvii)

For Certeau, to live in Modernity is to live in a world so thoroughly colonized by the relations of the "productivist economy" that any other way of organizing social relations seems impossible from within. This certainly seems to agree with Bürger in the idea that a critique of the institution of art is necessary; when one can see no possibilities outside of the frame established by an institution, that institution must be critiqued and examined. But Certeau does

not aim his critique at art alone. Instead, his critique is for everything in life. Life itself has been colonized by the consumer society. (In anticipation of critique, it is important to point out that Certeau does not assign conspiratorial motives to anyone; he simply suggests that the logical conclusion for capitalism is the attempt to turn everything in life, even life itself, into a product.)

Certeau, as Bürger, does suggest that this colonization of the everyday is a result of economic practices. But while Bürger is interested only in the economic practice of art and the avant-garde as a site of reclamation, Certeau is interested in, as his title suggests, a “practice of everyday life” that can reclaim all of everyday life from the commodity. Certeau situates his inquiry in “manipulation [of the objects of everyday life] by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization” (xiii).

This “manipulation” of objects by users who are not creators moves in the direction of Certeau’s most famous and celebrated notion: his development of “tactics” and “strategies.” According to Certeau, strategies are “the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an environment” (xix). Strategies are official, and are located spatially. Tactics, on the other hand, would be “a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other” (xix).

A “strategic” node within the network of everyday life, then, might be a city park: well-organized, planned, and laid out with paths for walking and places for sitting. But the “tactical”

node is what people actually *do* with the strategic space: perhaps they wade in the fountains (a purpose for which the fountains were not designed), or stray from the walking paths, or even fornicate in the bushes (a use which the strategic powers would probably find appalling, but which surely does occur).

Comparing Bürger and Certeau reveals a useful point of discussion. Bürger claims that the function of the avant-garde is to “re-integrate life into the praxis of art,” (22) and to criticize art that is removed from daily experience, because “only when art enters the stage of self-criticism does the ‘objective-understanding’ of past periods of the development of art become possible” (22). Through “objective-understanding” and re-integrating art to everyday life, art reclaims a significance that it has lost, Bürger argues, as a result of capitalist commoditization. Certeau claims the same thing, but on a much grander scale: everyday life has to be re-integrated to itself. This integration can be achieved through the tactical behaviors of people in strategic spaces. However, because the tactical practices are the behaviors and actions of an “other,” which is unofficial, this re-integration can never be permanent, nor can it be absolute.

The notion that everyday life *needs* to be re-integrated to itself is not one that can be simply accepted at face value. It is a notion that, if correct, has sweeping consequences for this inquiry into the nature of the bohemian avant-garde, and to the study of culture more generally. But Certeau certainly is not alone in his belief that the very fabric of daily life is somehow fractured and disjointed. Walter Benjamin worried greatly about the problems of a fractured, fragmented existence that suffered from its lack of cohesive integration. In his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936), Benjamin wrote, “A generation that has gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which

nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (84). For Benjamin, the world had changed in ways and at speeds that culture was not capable of accepting or even understanding. And the pace of technological (and economic) change has certainly increased since the time Benjamin wrote his essay. Benjamin suggests that we live in a fractured, partial existence. But more than this, according to critic Ben Highmore, Benjamin suggests that the fractures of our existence are the detritus, the trash of previous eras. Highmore suggests that:

The 'object' of fascination that animates Benjamin's later work is the Parisian arcade, not in its heyday but as a 'ruin' existing in a time when it has been superseded, outmoded. The rag-picker [Benjamin's image for those in an uneasy relationship with Modernity] deals in the second-hand, in the dreams of the past for a future that was never realized. (65).

Highmore asks us to consider Benjamin's project as one that is trying to piece together something coherent from the shards and fragments of society. Through this process of "rag-picking," the nature of Modernity can be given some kind of meaning. It is not a thorough and uniform re-integration of experience; that option is no longer available to us. Instead, it is about using the detritus of Modernity to form a new way of seeing. Highmore continues, suggesting that, "The focus on 'trash'... allows Benjamin to perform a double operation. On the one hand, it allows his account of modernity to refuse the lure of celebrating the new, of eulogizing progress. On the other hand it also prevents a sentimentalizing of the past" (65). In so doing, Benjamin's project seems to be one that is compatible with Bürger's understanding of the avant-garde (a practice that attacks institutionalized 'art' as a means to recover art's ability to comment on the everyday) and with Certeau's (which locates 'the everyday' in a complex interplay of official and unofficial forces, while valorizing neither). Finally, all of them are tied

together by Lefebvre's suggestion (as I have interpreted it) that the true domain of the avant-garde is in social movements, not aesthetic ones. Highmore makes one further comment on Benjamin's thinking that is important and illustrative for the purpose of this inquiry when he writes, "Benjamin potentially suggests a 'trash aesthetics' that could be used radically and critically to attend to the everyday" (65).

It is tempting to see this "trash aesthetics" as an approval of "low" culture, but this would be a grave misunderstanding. Instead of an embrace of "low culture," the trash aesthetics suggest an embrace of *all* culture, high and low, new and old, strategic and tactical, transgressive and conservative, in a patchwork that seeks to integrate modern life to modern experience. And this, then, can help us return to Reed's experience in downtown jazz clubs. Reed sought an experience in the jazz clubs and in free jazz particularly that would help him re-integrate his fractured experience. Benjamin found his example of re-integration in film, particularly with montage's ability to juxtapose contradictory images. Free jazz, similarly, juxtaposed contradictory sounds by avoiding standard rhythmic structures and scales for a radical improvisation that serves, in some ways, as an aural equivalent to the montage. In fact, one of the basic elements of music theory is the idea of "consonance" and "dissonance." Consonance happens when notes "work" together or sound pleasing: unison notes and octaves are examples, as are the perfect fourth and perfect fifth. Dissonance occurs when contrasting notes conflict in some way, such as a minor second or major seventh. Free jazz found no need to "resolve" dissonant intervals (by moving from a minor second to a perfect fourth, for example) and, instead, considered any interval appropriate for experimentation. Further, free jazz combined sounds often considered "harsh" or "grating" in standard commercial music through

unorthodox playing techniques (John Coltrane's overblowing, for example, or Charles Mingus' unusual bass-slapping style). This created a disjointed effect that needed to be heard in the context of the whole work. Much like the individual images in a montage that could be nonsensical, disturbing, or chaotic, but when seen as a whole often revealed a unique coherence and logic, the aural tones of free jazz could seem harsh or chaotic when compared to each other but created an interesting coherence when perceived as a whole. As we will see later, The Velvet Underground would use the traditions of neo-avant-garde jazz and other new musical styles as a part of their distinctive artistic praxis.

Reed, as the primary songwriter of The Velvet Underground, unites all of our sites of inquiry into one place. He intentionally and specifically saw himself as an avant-gardeist, at least initially. During an early performance at a New York City club called "The Dom," Lou Reed told the audience who were gathered to listen to The Velvet Underground, "Let 'em sing about going steady on the radio. Let the campus types run hootnannies. But it's in holes like this that the real stuff is being born" (DeRogatis, 55). In this way, Reed connected himself not only with the common idea of the avant-garde as "new," but also with Bürger's idea that the avant-garde attacks institutions. While Bürger specifically meant the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century European institutions of creative arts, Reed saw himself attacking the institutions of pop music and performance in general. In his eyes, The Velvet Underground was the new thing being born. But he also connects to Lefebvre's ideas in that he is specifically *not* behaving like a mystifier. The moment of something being born is perhaps the only moment when it is not being clouded and mystified, when it is fully real because all options are open to it: as a movement is being born, it is not yet formed and therefore not yet able to be co-opted. Reed did not know what the music

would bring, so how could any record label or management company know how to co-opt it? By encouraging something new to be formed outside of record label interference or music-industry meddling, The Velvet Underground could attend to Lefebvre's "everyday," the everyday-ness of the thought-action. And, as we will see, by locating themselves in New York City and allying with Andy Warhol, the members of The Velvet Underground would embrace both Benjamin's "rag-picker" culture and Certeau's tactical practices.

## CONCLUSIONS

For the moment, it is important to show that The Velvet Underground is engaged in a few behaviors that mark themselves as neo-bohemian, and as neo-avant-garde. The first of those behaviors might be termed "rejection of the suburbs." Suburbs, for a certain kind of postwar American neo-bohemian, came to signify mass culture and commoditization. The suburbs, as sites of corporate planning and codification of routine, were rejected as banal and stifling of the creative impulses. The rejection of the suburbs served as an attempt to recapture something about the everyday; according to Lefebvre, any critique of everyday life "will have as its prime objective the separation between the human (real and possible) and bourgeois decadence, and will imply a *rehabilitation of everyday life*" (127). For the purposes of this project, mass-culture commoditization replaces bourgeois decadence; the suburbs, as the prime sites of mass-culture commoditization, must be rejected in order to rehabilitate the everyday. If the real, the "true" everyday, is the polar opposite of mass-culture then mass-culture must be rejected for any rehabilitation to occur.

Of course, this is Lefebvre's view. Certeau's view suggests that the suburbs do not *need* to be rejected. Instead, rejection of the suburbs are simply one response to the wide array of choices one has when trying to rehabilitate the everyday. Certeau's assertions about movement apply equally well to the city as to the suburbs; in essence, Certeau suggests that how one uses space in large part dictates the material reality of the space. Strategic intention can only establish potentialities, while tactical behaviors dictate the materiality of the everyday. According to Certeau, walkers, pedestrians in an urban space, have the power to actualize "only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order... on the other [hand] he increases the possibilities" (98).

We could think of the second condition for the neo-avant-garde to be "the flight to the city." In the eyes of the neo-bohemian avant-garde, urban spaces had long ago negotiated an uneasy truce with the banal forces of capitalism. While they were clearly sites of capitalist strategic order and cooptation, they were also sites of heterogeneous "weirdness" and danger. The city reminded young, postwar artists and neo-bohemians of the romantic myth of the creative artist; for this reason, the city was a place of mystery and excitement. This excitement allowed for a tactical multiplication of possibilities of movement and existence that enhanced their relationship with the everyday.

Lou Reed, as a neo-avant-gardeist and neo-bohemian, was searching for these opportunities in the city as well. His life was saved by rock and roll, as he claimed in the song of the same name; how he constructed his own relationship to rock and roll was a tactical use of a strategic power. Rock and roll was, after all, an institution of art that was commoditized by business interests. Yet Reed saw it as a life-saving force. He, as an end-user, crafted a tactical

relationship with the strategic institution of rock and roll. In this, we see a conflation of the avant-garde and Certeau's practice of everyday life as new attention to everyday events. Political goals. In Bürger's formulation of the avant-garde, the key characteristic is that the goals of the artistic movement are political, not aesthetic. Bürger does not suggest that the Dadaists or Surrealists made being "cutting edge" or "new" their aim. The goal was nothing short of a complete systemic criticism of the institution of art. Their praxis had an aesthetic component, but re-orienting human relationships was the goal of the movements. For this reason, Bürger accepts only Dada and Surrealism, not Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Futurism, or Bauhaus as part of the avant-garde. They *might* be avant-garde in terms of "leading edge," but Bürger's definition of the term is more theoretical.

In this sense, Certeau and Lefebvre (along with Benjamin) most certainly *are* avant-garde: they are forward-thinking, but this progressive thought is in service of political goals, not aesthetic ones. It is important to define "political" goals in the sense of the Greek *polis*, which can be used to mean "body of citizens." The avant-garde is engaged in a project of re-negotiating relationships of human beings to social institutions and to each other. The Velvet Underground engaged in a similar practice of re-negotiating relationships through their use of aural, visual, lyrical, and discursive space.

A third condition for status as a neo-avant-gardeist project, then, would be "the desire for multiplicity." This urban hipster and neo-bohemian sought an environment where there was more than just bland corporatism. Urban spaces, despite their corporate origins and capitalist nature, were at least sites where different kinds of capitalist structures butted against one another. Cities were also racially and ethnically "other," which re-enforced their status as

opposition to the suburbs. The avant-garde emerged from a bohemian, urban environment of artists and creators of cultural capital. But the urban environment was also a place where the strategic modes of urban planners and the tactical modes of people in their daily lives created cracks and fissures that could be exploited by those who wished to practice a form of attention that would re-capture the importance of everyday life.

This idea of everyday life and the attention that must be brought to it needs further exploration, and will get that exploration. But not yet. Instead, how attention and the accumulation of everyday life interact should be left open-ended and vague—just like everyday life itself. Instead of exploration, at the moment I hope it will serve as a problem. For the now, I want it to gnaw at the edges of our inquiry. Everyday life and the attention we do (or do not) bring to it should hang over this inquiry. It will be explicated in time, but now is not that time.

## NOTES: CHAPTER ONE

1. The argument to this point has served to divorce art from its social and historical context.

What the Surrealists and Dadaists were trying to do only makes sense within the larger history of art. While it is not the purpose of this project to present a history of the creative arts, it is necessary to consider a few basic ideas. According to Shakespeare's Hamlet, art (in this case, drama) exists "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (III.ii.23). This is, of course, the idea of mimesis: to present a faithful representation of reality as the creative artist understands it. This idea followed art through its development in modern Western culture, with some artists reacting against the need for faithful representation (such as abstract expressionism and cubism in visual arts or romanticism in poetry), while other artists and movements embraced "the real" (such as artistic and literary realism). The avant-garde rejected the idea of mimesis altogether. This was not completely unique, and both abstract expressionism and cubism would be examples of other movements that rejected mimesis. But in this analysis, the avant-garde was the first collection of movements to reject mimesis as part of a further attack on art as an institutional form; the rejection of mimesis was not aesthetic, but political in the avant-garde.

2. The idea that Reed would connect his physical trips downtown with an avant-gardeist practice is not unique. Reed did not see his trips themselves as avant-garde, but he was attempting to pursue an avant-garde space as well as a space of authenticity by traveling, by drifting into the city. This practice bears a strong relationship to the Situationist practice of *dérive* (drift). This practice was a movement into the city with no particular place in mind, but instead a random wandering aided by the random chance of deliberately altered maps or of blindfolded wandering. The goal was "to capture an experiential, lived, and mobile city that

could be used against the vision of planners, capitalists, and bureaucrats” (Hetherington, *Capitalism’s Eye*, 41). While Reed’s project was less explicitly political, his wanderings downtown were connected with an experience of “authenticity” and simultaneously the avant-garde as he understood it.

3. Repurposing is a theme that has emerged in this study of the avant-garde. Repurposing, or the manipulation of an object for something other than its original intention, is not a primary characteristic of the avant-garde as formulated by any major theorist. However, it is an element of both Lefebvre’s political and Certeau’s sociological theories of the everyday. It is also an element of avant-gardeist practice: Duchamp’s readymades were found objects, turned into art; Tristan Tzara’s *The Gas Heart* combines idioms, metaphors, and clichés into a play of non-sequiturs; and Hannah Höch’s collages assembled pictures and newspaper clippings, cut and re-assembled into new artistic creations.

4. Of course, it was not actually “untouched by commodity culture.” That is a myth, and will be addressed later.

5. This notion of the city’s “unsuitability” for cooptation and commoditization is of course imaginary. The avant-garde is an idealistic movement, and can fall prey to wishful thinking. The avant-garde can even dip into romantic sentiment; André Breton wrote in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, “I believe in the pure Surrealist joy of the man who, forewarned that all others

before him have failed, refuses to admit defeat, sets off from whatever point he chooses, along any other path save a reasonable one, and arrives wherever he can" (46).

## CHAPTER TWO: THE CITY AS AVANT-GARDE SPACE

“The real consumer becomes the consumer of illusions.”

-Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

### NEW YORK AND THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE

The city is not only a source of reintegration of experience through the presence of jazz clubs, in an aural manner alone. The city is itself a space of fragmentation that has been re-integrated into a coherent place. The city is a patchwork, the result of millions of “ragpickers” who have brought together individual elements that on their own might be beautiful or functional but also might be squalid and depressing. Those elements are stitched together into something that is made whole only when seen at a distance, but when seen up close the logic does not necessarily hold together.

We can now look at Reed’s downtown jazz club journeys in a new light: perhaps Bürger is correct that the avant-garde no longer exists in the art world—the critique was tried, and it failed. But if Certeau is right, then the avant-garde did not fail in art. Instead, the inquiries and experiments of the avant-garde (and, by extension, the neo-avant-garde) should be seen as “tactical;” the “strategic” institution of art experienced a “tactical” critique of the matrix of institutional power. Certeau is adamant about this point: tactical practices are *not meant to be permanent*. “In our societies, as local stabilities break down, it is as if, no longer fixed by a circumscribed community, tactics wander out of orbit, making consumers into immigrants in a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it. But these tactics introduce a Brownian movement into the system” (xx). In Certeau’s analysis, the avant-garde of the Dadaists and the Surrealists didn’t fail; it was meant to be a temporary critique to the

strategic institution of “art,” and critiques are meant to “wander” about, sometimes presenting themselves directly and other times fading from view.

And this is what Lou Reed found when he went downtown to the jazz clubs. He found a temporary zone of critique against strategic power. Free jazz resists all of the things that mass culture generally and suburban life in particular is designed to create. While Bürger might be right in arguing that the avant-garde critique was localized and new artistic movements cannot be truly called “avant-garde,” the neo-avant-garde has picked up the tactics of the Dadaists and Surrealists, questioning the institution (in this particular case) of music.

And this questioning, further, could only have happened in the spatial context of the city. The suburbs, as a zone of postwar consumption and commoditization, were spaces of similarity and conformity. This is not a moral condemnation, but instead it is a representation of material reality. Mass production is just that: a production on a mass scale. One cannot have mass production and still have unique objects. There can be distinctions, but only those distinctions that are within the productive capabilities and financial interests of producers to actually make. Lizabeth Cohen suggests that suburbia was not a place where difference was encouraged, but where consumer behavior was encouraged when she wrote:

As home in the suburbanized Consumer’s Republic became a mass consumer commodity to be appraised and traded up like a car rather than a longstanding emotional investment in a particular neighborhood, ethnic community, or church parish, ‘property values’ became the new mantra. Of course, people still chose the communities they lived in from a range of alternatives, but increasingly they selected among homogeneous occupying distinctive rungs in a clear status hierarchy of communities. (Location 3636)

This, then, is the critique implicit in Reed’s artistic and physical practice: the suburbs are sites of homogeneity and “sameness,” while urban centers are sites of heterogeneity and

“difference.” By embracing the downtown jazz scene, Reed was rejecting suburbia. By embracing the tactical and temporary nature of the neo-avant-garde, Reed was aligning himself with something that opposed the homogeneous nature of postwar consumer culture. Reed was chasing bohemian cool by embracing that which stood in opposition to conformity. This critique of an institution (suburbia) would become an avant-gardeist practice, at least if Lefebvre’s analysis is correct. The city, in its very nature as different from the suburb, becomes in a limited sense (when connected to bohemian areas) an avant-garde space. The city criticizes the suburbs simply by its presence: the radical heterogeneity of the city stands as a critique of the bland homogeneity of the suburbs.<sup>1</sup>

This returns us to the idea of the city’s “siren song” that calls to those who are cool and bohemian. How could Reed’s figure of Jenny in “Rock & Roll” have known “when she was just five years old” that suburbia is bland, stifling, and banal? How did she instinctively know that she needed to critique banal suburbia? How did she know that her everyday life had been colonized, and that she needed to reclaim it through tactical practice? And which comes first—an innate need to critique that then finds the suburbs to be banal, or the feeling that the suburbs are banal, and therefore places worthy of critique? After all, many people live in the suburbs happily. A Marxist critique might suggest that happy suburban dwellers are those who have been mystified by the spectacle of the technologically advanced suburban lifestyle, and that alienation and dissatisfaction lurk beneath the surface. However, Certeau’s analysis might lead us to the conclusion that happy suburban-dwellers are end-users who have figured out how to repurpose the suburbs and the glittering objects of suburban life in subversive (or at least pleasing) ways.

This, then, is the problem with exploring the everyday: a concept like the everyday is a tangled knot, a recursive string. It is what cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter would call a “strange loop”—a self-referential or paradoxical system in which, by moving up or down the levels in a hierarchy, one comes back to the place where one started. But for all of its thorny problems, we can say this about bohemia and space: the perception exists that the avant-garde, or at least the “leading edge,” is more of a property of urban space than suburban ones simply because suburban spaces are thoroughly colonized by mass culture in ways that the urban space is not.

This returns us to the issue of material conditions. Suburban spaces are largely tidy products of postwar affluence, while urban spaces are products of a messier accumulation of industrial, economic, and cultural needs. Lizabeth Cohen indicates how deeply tied to postwar affluence the suburbs are when she writes:

Citing a Twentieth Century Fund projection for the economy in 1960, *Life* [magazine] argued that ‘a health and decency standard for everyone’ required that every American family acquire not only a ‘pleasant roof over its head’ but all kinds of consumer goods to put in it, ranging from a washing machine and a telephone to matching dishes and silverware. As each family refurbished its hearth after a decade and a half of depression and war, the expanded consumer demand would stoke the fires of production, creating new jobs and, in turn, new markets. (Location 3620)

The suburbs, then, were largely a cultural phenomenon of the postwar years. The suburbs were zones of consumption and commoditization. Using Certeau’s language, the suburbs were “strategic” zones, planned by some sort of “official” power, and they were deeply enmeshed in consumption as civic duty. Urban spaces, in their heterogeneous and messy accumulation of people, were sites of resistance to the commoditized and homogeneous suburbs. Urban spaces, despite their intention as triumphs of Modernity’s ordering principle, became sites of rebellion

for America's postwar youth. The fact that they had also long been sites of bohemia simply made the city more attractive and more "cool."

And so it is that the city has become, *within a specific site and context of bohemian cool*, not a site of squalor to be escaped from (as Cohen argues them to have been perceived by the prewar generation) but a place of "cool" and "authenticity" to escape *into*. But this is not to suggest that the city should be seen as a site of absolute freedom from commodity culture. In fact, as Alan Trachtenberg suggests, the city had been the site of manufactured, corporatized culture for many years. In his analysis of post-Civil War urbanization, *The Incorporation of America*, Trachtenberg writes, "the great city proved to be a source of mystification, the very place where incorporation, pervading the spheres of everyday life, disguised itself in continued spectacles such as Central Park" (112). And to this idea of the city as a source of mystification, Trachtenberg added the following:

The term 'metropolis' signified a commanding position within a region which included hinterland. New economic, social, and political relations between the center and its outlying districts manifest themselves in the postwar decades as rise and fall, prosperity and impoverishment. The revision of physical spaces produced in the great city a reflective image, a simulacrum of unseen economic and social relations. (113)

These economic and social relations play out, according to Trachtenberg, in physical relationships of the city: organization of space into class and cultural divisions, economic districts that cater to specific trades and industries, etc. In short, the critiques of the suburbs by the counterculture of the '50s and '60s and the neo-avant-gardeist project could have been directed at the city decades earlier.

What, then, is the reason for the change? Why did the critiques of the suburbs no longer hold for the cities? In part, the critiques shifted because of a lack of cultural memory. According

to Trachtenberg, “In the 1880s, as much as 40 percent of the population of rural townships seemed to disappear. Images of bustling, frenetic cities arose against a background of abandoned farmhouses and deserted villages, and many Americans pondered the change with regret and lament” (114). In the postwar economic boom of the 1950s, however, it was now the cities that were losing their populations to the suburbs, particularly the white, middle-class populations. While Americans of the 1880s looked to the abandoned farmhouses with longing and regret, Americans of the 1950s looked to the abandoned cities. This time, however, the look was not with regret, but fear (Cohen). Cities were changing their character; as white, middle-class families were leaving the cities, other classes and ethnicities were moving in. And this fear of the “other” who moved in also included a narrative of crime and squalor in the cities. This narrative is understandable, because lower economic classes do suffer through higher rates of crime. The reasons for this statistical fact are outside of the scope of the analysis; instead, it is important to understand that the suburban flight included a new narrative of inner-city crime.

To continue with Trachtenberg’s analysis, we can see how young suburbanites who are hungry for experience might be intrigued by the city, despite its history of commoditization and cooptation. Even before the “white flight” from the cities to the suburbs, the city was taking on a heterogeneous nature. Trachtenberg describes the city as a place that “had overspread old spaces, flowed into newly annexed regions, and formed giant metropolitan areas with uncertain boundaries” (116). This is in contrast to the planned and circumscribed nature of the suburbs, where boundaries such as school districts were carefully maintained. Trachtenberg also comments on the physical appearance of the cities, remarking on their “facades which in

their eclectic composition of classical, Gothic, and Renaissance styles suggested a new cultural imperialism, a confidence of appropriation” (117). The suburbs were bland and homogenous, but the city was multiple. This multiplicity existed not only in its ethnic makeup and neighborhoods, but in its very structure. Borders were porous and unclear, styles were mixed and appropriated in unusual ways, and the nature of the city was to repurpose old things for new use.

The city, then, was not a place to escape the forces of consumer culture so much as it was a place where consumer culture had already had room to run, and its consequences were written on every building. To think in the terms of Certeau, the city had been exploring the possibilities of what “end users” can actually do with the products that consumer culture creates. If the suburbs were places where colonization was taking place, then the city was a place that had been colonized and where the cracks were showing. The suburbs were being built; the city was where things were falling apart. The city was dangerous not because it was free from commoditization, but because commoditization was having unexpected consequences, including not only free jazz and bohemian lifestyles, but also crime and drugs. Cracks and fissures existed in the city that did not exist in the suburbs (according to official narratives). It is those “cracks” that the avant-garde tries to work its way into, and it is those cracks where “the everyday” in terms of Lefebvre’s *thought-action* were taking place constantly.

### **THE VELVET UNDERGROUND AND THE CRACKS IN THE CITY**

The city knows its own and calls them in, because restless bohemian “cool” needs an outlet. In the rigid, proscribed suburbs, those outlets are few and far between. But in the city, those

outlets can be found in the cracks left by the city's complicated relationship with commoditization and mass culture. We have already seen Lou Reed's student trips downtown as an attempt to engage the plural, heterogeneous nature of the city. But Reed was not alone. All four of The Velvet Underground came to New York City from suburban backgrounds with the exception of John Cale, who was the son of a Welsh coalminer. Sterling Morrison was from East Meadow, Long Island, and Moe Tucker was from Levittown, Long Island. But all of them were drawn to the city.

The members of the Velvets all came for different reasons, Reed's being perhaps the most useful to analyze for our discussion of the avant-garde's relationship to the everyday. Reed had come to the city to work for Pickwick Records, a rather exploitive record label that was known for having a stable of songwriters who could pen songs reminiscent of chart-topping hits. Reed had been a successful member of the Pickwick roster, scoring a minor local hit with a song that rather mockingly called to mind the dance-craze songs of the '50s and early '60s (like "The Twist" and "Mashed Potato Time"). The song, called "Do the Ostrich", mocked the dance craze songs by inviting listeners to perform odd movements, such as sticking their heads between their knees.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent mythologizing has the lyrics including an invitation to stomp on the heads of other dancers; although this is not accurate, there has been little attempt by anyone to set the record straight (Witts).<sup>3</sup> But whatever the situation, The story has Reed working for a small music publishing house, then quitting his job in order to form The Velvet Underground. The mythology of the artist who quits his "straight" job to engage in a more authentic and fulfilling artistic practice is just one part of the mythology that surrounds The Velvet Underground. This mythology is part of the avant-garde more generally. Duchamp was

academically trained as an artist, but was the winner of mathematics prizes in school, and worked during his compulsory military service as a typesetter; André Breton was a student of medicine before embracing Surrealist poetry; and Tristan Tzara was a journal editor before embracing Dadaist poetry. Any time a figure of “the cutting edge” is mentioned, it is likely that person abandoned a “straight job” to become part of the avant-garde.

And this mythology that surrounds the band and the avant-garde more generally should be seen in light of Certeau’s theories of the everyday. According to Certeau, mythologizing is a way of understanding, of placing information within categories and classifications. The act of mythologizing does violence to the thing being mythologized, however; John Cale, viola and bass player for The Velvet Underground would say in 1983, over a decade after the Velvets broke up, “The cult of The Velvet Underground is distasteful to me” (Thompson, 41). A year later he would elaborate, saying, “It’s like being a bar of soap in a shower that doesn’t have any water in it. It doesn’t work. Being a living legend is such a precarious livelihood” (41). Certeau discussed folktales and the methods for studying them, writing “Once the material [folktales or myths] has been collected, one can treat either the content... or one can study the modes of production” (19). In the case of the myths surrounding The Velvet Underground, I shall attempt to do both.

The first mythic story is that of the name itself. According to the legend, the band had not yet adopted a name, and had experimented with other names (such as The Primitives and The Warlocks).<sup>4</sup> Friend of the band, filmmaker Tony Conrad, allegedly found a book by journalist Michael Leigh; the book was titled *The Velvet Underground*, and was an exploration of rising trends in American paraphilia, such as wife-swapping, sado-masochism, and group sex. Critic

Richard Witts writes of the “discovery” of the book, saying, “[d]iffering reports claim that he found it in a gutter, on the pavement, or in the subway” (31). The varying stories factor into the mythology of urban bohemia and cool, but are far more important for the idea of space in what they suggest individually.

The suggestion that the book had been found “in the gutter” works with the idea both of the subject matter and with the idea of the avant-garde as it relates to the project at hand. The particular project of the avant-garde as it is understood by Bürger is one that rejects standard commodified modes of representation as they are perceived to exist in an institutionalized consumer culture. The city is a place, as been previously suggested, that people go to escape the highly ordered and sanitized, institutionalized zone of the suburbs. Embracing the city rejects the highly ordered and strategic zone of the suburbs. The idea of “the gutter” is one that would resonate as an opposition to the ordered and clean Long Island suburban tracts. But “the gutter” also calls to mind dirt, filth, and things that are unwanted, things that accumulate after being discarded. Things that can be repurposed. The Velvet Underground was engaging in an aesthetic project that attempted to bring attention to that which was unwanted: their first album alone contains references to sado-masochism (“Venus in Furs”), drug use (“Heroin” and “Sunday Morning”), drug dealing (“I’m Waiting for the Man”), and the unusual characters of New York’s neo-bohemian arts scene (“Femme Fatale”, “There She Goes Again”, and “European Son”). For the purposes of perpetuating the myth of “outsider” status, a theme to which we will return later, the “gutter” myth of the band’s name is an important one. The gutter is the site of that which is used up, filthy, and cast aside. The image that The Velvet Underground seized during their association with Andy Warhol’s Factory scene and the Lower East Side generally

was one of decadence and corruption, the image of having been spoiled by the city. The gutter is a good metaphor for this kind of image. But it also serves a double operation: The Velvet Underground is that which has been rejected and discarded, but the members themselves also engaged in the avant-gardeist rejection of the ordered spaces of mass-consumerist suburbia.

Finding the book in the gutter connects the band to an outsider status, a “down-and-out” myth that is enduring in this urban bohemian experience. But finding the book on the pavement, as has often been suggested as well, connects the band more directly to the life of the city, with its concrete spaces. If the suburbs can be seen as a place where every family has a yard or a lawn, then the city can be seen as a place of an almost total absence of green spaces. And of course, those green spaces that do exist are highly artificial, a spectacle just as grand and manufactured as those of the suburbs.<sup>5</sup> Alan Trachtenberg writes, “An intricate symbol of mystery, the great city proved to be a source of mystification, the very place where incorporation, pervading the spheres of everyday life, disguised itself in continued spectacles such as Central Park” (112). The spectacle was everywhere, but was on display in elaborate, ritualized spaces. “The pavement,” in contrast, was anywhere and everywhere, the subject of commoditization, and yet somehow slippery enough to be a source outside of that normal cooptation. It was these pavements on which the characters in Reed’s lyrics would walk: Teenage Mary of the song “Run, Run, Run” is “Gonna take a walk down to Union Square/ You never know who you’re gonna find there,” after all. And the pavement is, to return to Certeau, both a “strategic” and a “tactical” location in space-time: Certeau writes that strategies are “actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power ...elaborate theoretical places...capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed”

(38). While Certeau's language here is in terms of actions, the politicizing and commoditization of physical space are the actions; in short, the pavement is a place where the strategic actions of the city have been literally concretized. In contrast, Certeau explains tactics as "procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time—to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation" (38). The pavement therefore is literally a concretized strategic zone. But what one does with the pavement (or, really, *on* the pavement) is tactical. And it is very tactically-oriented that Conrad "found" the book on the pavement. Finding is an act of time and place coming together; had he been five minutes earlier to the place, perhaps the book would not yet have been "dropped;" if he had come five minutes later, perhaps the book would have already been picked up (and, perhaps, discarded). Further, the act of finding something on the pavement is tactical in that it was not the intended purpose of the pavement. According to Trachtenberg:

Acting on the speculative principle encouraged by the grid layout of space, bankers, merchants, and manufacturers, and their political allies, provided the impetus and economic means for filling in those spaces with uncoordinated but profitable enterprises. (116)

Finding something of value on the street or on the pavement certainly was the strategic intention of the bankers, manufacturers, and planners Trachtenberg describes. But that "something of value" was meant to be a commodity, something bought and sold through official (strategic) channels, not something that was found by happenstance and obtained at no cost through unofficial channels. In this sense, the story of the book contributes to the mythic status of *The Velvet Underground* by placing them outside of the official commercial economy. Things occur by happenstance, they are found and repurposed. And this repurposed nature of art and culture has a long tradition in avant-garde circles, including Duchamp's readymades, the

Dadaist collage, and the Surrealist tendencies to repurpose dream imagery as artistic fodder.

Sociology and geography scholar Kevin Hetherington, in his analysis of the city called *Capitalism's Eye*, examines Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, looking at this repurposing. In doing so, he claims that Benjamin finds:

in the arcades of the early Twentieth Century—by then run-down and decayed, given over to junk shops and street walkers, with just a few remaining out-of-fashion luxury shops—a “mythology of the modern” in the detritus, scraps, and ruins leftover from the culture of the previous century. Hidden in the montage of rubbish are the now outmoded dreams and fantasies of earlier generations turned into junk. (88)

Similarly, Conrad's “discovery” of the book on the pavement, a ruin leftover from someone else, gives the Velvets a connection to the patchwork “trash culture” that is the condition of those who embrace Modernity openly. An often used phrase of modern street culture (that finds its origins in the work of cyberpunk author William Gibson) is “the street finds its own uses for things.” But this street culture aphorism is more appropriately connected in the case of the Velvets to the readymade tradition and found objects of the Dadaist and Surrealist avant-garde. This tradition would find an outlet in the aural landscapes of *The Velvet Underground*, as we will explore in the next chapter.

Finally, we have the idea of finding the book on the subway. This has the most symbolic power, as it combines the qualities of the other two. The subway is dirty, and therefore is similar to the semiotic value of “the gutter.” Anyone who has ridden the New York subway can attest to that. Second, the subway is a convergence of the strategic and the tactical: it was created by official power and is maintained by official authority; it follows specific lines that are unchanging and clearly demarcated. But the subway is also strategic, in that wandering, drifting paths can be taken, whether by intent or accident. The subway has been a place where the

homeless take shelter, where illicit trade occurs. The subway is a frequent canvas for graffiti artists. The subway was designed for a specific strategic purpose, but its actual tactical use is often outside those conceptions. But further, the subway carries an important extra level of meaning: it is literally underground. While The Velvet Underground did consider stardom a possibility, they were under no illusions that their music carried mass appeal. Reed, as lyricist, was obsessed with ideas that were quite clearly outside of the public consciousness at the time.

According to Richard Witts:

Reed's [lyrical] output was locked into an outmoded Beat agenda of the 1950s: unadorned, disinterested observation of idiosyncratic characters, voyeuristic description of rough sex and indulgence in hard drugs, automatic writing, a desire to bring together 1950s Rock'n'Roll with the 'ever now' improvisational approach of 1950s jazz. Cale was relatedly concerned with elitist, vanguard, performative minimalism influenced by late 1950s jazz ... [n]either of them "reached out" to contemporary experience, which was in a prodigious phase of transition. (122)

The idea of being "underground," which is of course where the subway actually *was*, appealed to the Velvets. It represented the physical space that the band inhabited, but it also represented something about the way in which the band would culturally position itself.<sup>6</sup> This "underground" status is also important for its connection to the avant-garde: while both the Surrealists and the Dadaists did find mainstream success (as The Velvet Underground would years after their break-up), they positioned themselves as a different option, a counter-current in comparison to the artistic practices that were their contemporaries. This is of course a legacy that The Velvet Underground would consciously lay claim to. They intentionally positioned themselves as an option, a different choice when compared to pop music at the time. Reed constantly remarked on his disdain for the psychedelic trends coming out of California (Bockris),

and Sterling Morrison, the band's other guitarist, saw The Velvet Underground as an alternative to the slick Manhattan pop bands like Joey Dee and the Starlighters (Bockriss, Witts).<sup>7</sup>

### **VIBE AND FEEL: MOVING THROUGH THE CITY**

The city is a conceptual space that can mold and shape those who live there, but it is of course also a physical space; the physicality of the space dictates in some important ways how the individual is to understand his or her surroundings. This has already been explored in some ways: the tendency of artists to gather in low-rent districts, the actual physical location of "downtown" being used as a line of demarcation between classes, etc. But the physical nature of the city with its grids of streets and deliberate public spaces forces the denizens of the city to behave in specific ways. And those behaviors are most closely tied into consumption.

Trachtenberg writes of this reality, claiming, "The great city was a marketplace, a site of trade and consumption. And its inhabitants engaged with each other on the basis of property, of what each 'possessed.'" But what of the residents of the low-rent parts of town? In many cases, these people "possessed" very little. If the city is a marketplace spread out and built up, then those who possess little are disenfranchised, locked out of the workings of the city. The neo-bohemian turned to the one source of capital that he had: cultural capital.

According to Richard Lloyd's *Neo-Bohemia*, this turn to cultural capital has had a profound impact on American society. Lloyd writes of the neo-bohemian's cultural rise in the 1960s, claiming the following:

The New Left politics of the 60s converged with the rise of a countercultural identity, perceived by adherents as profoundly generational and historically original even while borrowing liberally from bohemian traditions (including conscripting beats like Ginsberg and Neal Cassidy into the movement)... This meshing took place in distinctive sites of

subcultural activity; rural communes may have proliferated, but urban districts retained crucial importance. During the 1960s, the avatars of the counterculture staked a claim on their own city spaces as sites of new bohemian fantasy, notably the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco and Berkley's Telegraph Avenue. (66)

While the examples Lloyd uses in the above quote are the California end of the counter-culture, New York had a thriving counter-culture as well. Greenwich Village had long been a site of bohemian "cool," including (but not limited to) the postwar avant-garde painters of Abstract Expressionism, the Beats, and the folk-protest neo-Beat poetry of Bob Dylan. The Lower East Side was finding a reputation for the same kind of neo-bohemian life, and with that reputation came a connection to the avant-garde. Several artists and creatives were associated with the Lower East Side, particularly the circle in which The Velvet Underground would run; luminaries such as Tony Conrad, Lamont Young, Angus MacLise, and of course Andy Warhol's Factory.<sup>8</sup> There was a certain "up-and-coming" and cutting edge cultural capital that came from the Lower East Side, largely because of its connection to the underground film industry.<sup>9</sup> Warhol's Factory had been putting out underground films, and the film underground was an idea that was catching on in neo-avant-garde circles. Victor Bockris, in his book *Up-Tight: The Velvet Underground Story*, quotes Velvet's guitarist Sterling Morrison as saying, "Whenever I hear the word 'underground,' I am reminded of when the word first acquired a specific meaning for me and for many others in NYC in the early Sixties. It referred to underground cinema and the people and lifestyle that created this purported art form" (20). Warhol was not alone in the filmic underground, but was a part of a larger scene. And his growing stature in art circles (and in American consciousness) gave the Lower East Side a new respectability among neo-bohemians. This respectability was also attracting attention from consumer society, of course. According to Richard Witts in his book *The Velvet Underground*, "The northern section of Lower

East Side came to be called the East Village, really to sanction rent rises and to underscore the groovy, ‘happening’ scene there” (3). He goes on to suggest that “for an artist to live in the Lower East Side in the 1950s or East Village in the 1960s betrayed a desire to associate oneself with the aesthetic radicalism of the area to the West [Greenwich Village]” (4).

The physical space that The Velvet Underground inhabited, then, was a space where artists and the “creative class” could define themselves in contrast to an institutionalized consumer capitalism. This of course situates the denizens of the Lower East Side into a tradition of critique that stands in opposition to formalized institutions. But by doing so and being successful, the Lower East Side was becoming a financial district with a specific commercial character just as surely as the meat-packing district or the garment district came to be known for the commercial activities that gathered there. The neo-avant-garde artists of the area were themselves becoming an institution. This is a problematic notion for our inquiry into the avant-garde. After all, if bohemian avant-garde sensibilities can be commoditized, then the flight to the city is nothing but smoke and mirrors; it is not rejection of mass-culture’s conformity nor is it an attempt to recapture the everyday, but rather it is simply conformity on a smaller scale. This is also a problem of the American counter-culture more generally: they exist to be “counter,” but also to proselytize. The counter culture hopes to engage in consciousness-expansion, and the avant-garde hopes to critique the institutions of art and culture. But if they are successful, they will *become* the mass consciousness, or they will *become* the mass culture.

But the very quality of everyday life that makes it so hard to explain, the unnoticeable accumulation of “ordinary stuff,” helps us respond to that criticism. The avant-garde positions itself as something that is in conflict with the institutions of art and culture, something that is

unique and stands outside of those institutions. But this binary understanding is incorrect.

There is no “inside” or “outside” of the institutions of art, or of mass-culture. Everyday life is all around, and it exists in all places and at all times. According to Michel de Certeau, the problem is one of language. He asserts that to attempt to construct a discourse of insiders and outsiders, or of institutions and an “avant-garde,” is inherently self-defeating. Certeau writes that we are “foreigners at home” because we draw bizarre conclusions from false information, and that false information comes from the limits of language to express the everyday. Certeau writes the following:

And since one does not “leave” this language, since one cannot find another place from which to interpret it, since there are therefore no separate groups of false interpretations and true interpretations, but only illusory interpretations, since in short there is no *way out*, the fact remains that we are *foreigners on the inside—but there is no outside*. (13-14)

According to Certeau, then, it is not a problem that the avant-garde becomes part of the institution of art, nor is it a problem that the commoditized cities become re-interpreted as zones of neo-bohemian freedom from mass-culture. All of these movements and ideologies, all of these critiques, come from the inability of language to generate truth. Language can only *approximate* truth. As a result, the avant-gardeist project is always undone by its own false understanding of itself as an outsider. But the institutional structure of art is always creating new “avant-gardeists” (or neo-avant-gardeists) because the ideological foundation of the institution is based on language that can never quite explain itself, nor be grasped by those who are attempting to apprehend it.

So the avant-garde and the counter-culture are constantly undoing themselves. But this assumes that the neo-bohemian and neo-avant-garde narrative of mass culture can be

accepted at face value. To do so, we must investigate further what the neo-bohemian critique of mass culture actually *is*. This idea has been explored in part: the neo-bohemian as represented by The Velvet Underground generally, and Lou Reed in particular, positions himself (or herself) in contrast to consumer culture and its banality. But is this critique an honest one?

Richard Lloyd's *Neo-Bohemia* questions this critique on a fundamental level. He points out:

Radical though they appeared, the stylistic innovations of the 1960s counterculture have played a part in the massive extension of consumer culture since. Though the bohemian fringe has always disproportionately affected modernist cultural innovations, after the 1960s the importance of the cultural marketplace to the economy more generally would surely elevate the economic relevance of the older bohemias' postmodern heirs. (67)

This critique echoes many of the issues in Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool*. Frank points out that "hip is ubiquitous as a commercial style, a staple of advertising that promises to deliver the consumer from the dreary nightmare of square consumerism" (32). Frank also suggests that the advertising industry often anticipated in the 1950s and early 1960s many of the cultural critiques that would be launched against consumer culture by the counterculture movements of the 1960s and beyond. To Frank, "[t]he counterculture has long since outlived the enthusiasm of its original participants and become a more or less permanent part of the American scene" (31). Counterculture ideals of the 1960s gave us The Gap and Whole Foods, while one of the greatest mass-culture success stories of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the rebirth of Apple Computers—it is important to remember that Apple was co-founded by a man deeply invested in counter-cultural ideals and influenced by the '60s counterculture movements.

Returning to Richard Lloyd, we see an interesting analysis of the problematic relationship between the counterculture (or, as Morrison would have it, the "underground") and mass culture. Lloyd writes:

The far-ranging political and cultural impacts of [the 1960s] were accompanied by more subtle developments in the economic realm. Fordist affluence enabled both expanded market power and increased levels of education for the children of the middle class, key features in the progressive shift from the suburban home-maker to the fashion-forward youth as the model consumer. At the same time, the foundations of Fordism were cracking, even if those cracks eluded the inspection of most of the period's experts. (66-67)

Lloyd continues, arguing that the crisis caused by the "cracks" in Fordism gave rise to new material production that gave a more privileged place to culture and cultural production as a commodity. Witts agrees with the expanded role for production, but puts the proximate cause with an earlier event: the Marshall Plan. Witts argues that the postwar American economic plan to rebuild Europe created a Europe that would grow in alliance with American economic interests and that "this ability to exercise control with the carrot not the stick, enabled the USA to move the cultural market in its favor, especially with regard to consumption and mediation—fast food and drink, film, television and popular music" (8). Witts continues, arguing that this created a cultural economy that emerged as part of the booming 1950s, a decade earlier than Lloyd's suggestion of the rise of the culture industry as a response to Fordist shortcomings. But both of these analyses should be read in light of Certeau's assertion that we are all foreigners on the inside of culture and that there is no outside to escape into. In this light, both Lloyd's analysis and that of Frank give us a counterculture, an avant-garde, and a bohemia that cannot ever undo the institutions of modern culture, but that instead reveal the cracks and fissures of the dominant cultural discourse.

## **“RUN, RUN, RUN”: THE FLÂNEUR AND THE CITY**

By the time the various members of The Velvet Underground had found a physical space that was cheap enough to rent and yet hip enough to have the right “vibe,” a culture industry was emerging (or had already emerged) that would enable them to ply their trades as creators of culture. The physical space in which they found themselves was one that tied into their cultural production in deep and resonating ways.

First, the physical space had developed a character of decadence, of being “past its prime” as an urban center. While still the financial capital of the United States and still the largest city, in many ways New York City remained stuck in Modernity; Los Angeles was quickly expanding, and becoming, as Eric Heikkila suggested in his introduction to *Southern California and the World*, the quintessential postmodern metropolis. The '67 Detroit riots were yet to happen, and for many people in America Detroit still had some of the glimmer of Big Business success about it. DC had yet to be devastated by the crack epidemic of the '80s, and was still associated with the power and success of the American “military-industrial complex.” New York City, on the other hand, was a site where pockets of success were pressed against squalor. It would be thirty years before mass-gentrification would cause climbing property values city-wide and Mayor Giuliani would ferociously crack down on the drug addicts and sex workers who made up a large number of petty criminals in New York City. In the 1960s, rising crime rates and economic troubles tarnished New York’s reputation.

And that reputation is something that the members of the Velvet Underground thrived on. Lou Reed said of New York City, “In New York I can pick up a phone and have anything I want delivered to the door. I can step a foot out into the street and get into a fight immediately. All

the energy, people going crazy, guys with no legs on roller skates. It's very intense" (Thompson, 8). That sense of tension in the physical space found its way into the lyrics Reed was writing. For example, the first verse of the song "Run, Run, Run" expresses a sense of frustration that can only be dealt with properly through restless movement. According to the lyrics:

"Teenage Mary said to Uncle Dave,  
I sold my soul, must be saved.  
Gonna take a walk down to Union Square;  
You never know who you're gonna find there."

Teenage Mary has no choice but to move. She feels compelled to walk down to Union Square. This compulsion should be seen in the context of her immediate concern: she sold her soul, and "must be saved." If the strangle-hold on life by commodity culture is the tragedy that the avant-garde is trying to correct, then this lyric explores the problem in four lines. Teenage Mary has sold her authenticity, her soul. She has become part of the banal system of modern capitalist culture. And her solution to the problem is to move, to wander. According to Certeau, the "ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (93). Visibility, for Certeau, belongs to the abstracted observer, one who looks down on the city from above, who read about the city in a text, or (as in our case) hear about the city in a song. But to move through the city is to craft a different kind of relationship with it. That relationship is not one of omniscient knowledge, but of subjective experience. The people of the city, people like Teenage Mary "are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it" (93). For Certeau, Teenage Mary is creating a real relationship for herself, an everyday relationship of wandering and drift. By allowing us to see Teenage Mary's drift, Reed draws our attention to the ways in which Teenage Mary's attending to her surroundings is different from our own. Teenage Mary

is trying to recapture “the real,” the authentic, and the everyday. She does so by wandering to Union Square. And she does so not because she knows what to expect, but precisely because she does *not*.

The reference to Teenage Mary having sold her soul is unclear. She might have had an illicit relationship with “Uncle Dave,” or she might, as do the other figures in the song, need “a fix.” But whatever her needs, they can only be taken care of with mobility, with a walk through the space of the City, with Union Square her goal. Union Square is a place where several distinct areas of New York come together in “union,” hence the name; it is bordered by 14th Street to the south, Union Square West, 17th Street on the north, and Union Square East. It serves as a link for several important streets, including Broadway and Park, and several NYU dorms and buildings for The New School open onto Union Square. The Square is a place of transients, artists, buskers, and peddlers, including small-time drug pushers.<sup>10</sup> Union Square is a perfect destination for someone who is wandering. She doesn’t know what she is going to find there, she is simply wandering there for the sake of wandering.

In Janet Wolff’s essay, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity”, the image of women in Modernity is taken up, and gives us a useful image for our analysis: that of the flâneur, or “stroller”. Wolff suggests, “The peculiar characteristics of Modernity, then, consist in the transient and ‘fugitive’ nature of encounters and impressions made in the city” (143). These transient and fugitive encounters are Certeau’s tactical moments. The flâneur is a middle-class male figure of urban Modernity, one who wanders the urban landscape engaging in tactical moments, drifting from place to place as a way of experiencing space and life; that experience is as much about being seen in space as it is about seeing the space around the

flâneur. However, the flâneur is specifically gendered as male. The flâneuse is the female, who did not have the same opportunities to be seen. She is the female equivalent, and one who has often been overlooked in the study of Modernity's relationship to space. As Wolff points out, the Nineteenth Century woman had to be very careful about signs of dress and other signifiers that distinguished class; women had to be careful to maintain the distinction between "respectable" and "loose" with more rigor than their male counterparts. The flâneuse is strategically limited by the material fact of her gender, changing (but not completely restricting) her tactical possibilities in the urban space.

But late Modernity in New York City sees a changing attitude. "Teenage Mary" can "take a walk down to Union Square." This option would not have been possible to Teenage Mary in 1910. Of course, this is not to say that Teenage Mary is free from obstacles, chief among them the male gaze. But as Wolff points out, women in earlier stages of Modernity had very proscribed roles in the city. She writes, "Modernity breeds, or makes visible, a number of categories of female city-dwellers. Among those most prominent in these texts are: the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, and the passing unknown woman" (148). But this does not capture the full range of feminine experience, of course. In fact, many forms of female experience are missing from the list.<sup>11</sup> And it is this freedom of the city that Reed picks up on in Teenage Mary's experience: whatever she is, other than "teenage" and deeply troubled, is left hidden from view. She has been given a tactical place to roam, a place to wander, and her sense of identity can roam, as well; it is not fixed by any strategic markers other than "teenage." She is also given a physical space to roam that is among the detritus of a damaged, battered, and broken New York City. This is, of course, an ambivalent

image. As has already been established, New York City was both a place of glitter and of trash; the fact that Teenage Mary feels that she can wander down to Union Square speaks both to her empowerment and to her disenfranchisement. She feels comfortable among the pushers and the hustlers of Union Square. She has no one who feels the need to look after her, to try to prevent her from going to where there is danger. She is empowered, but she is also alone.

Teenage Mary goes to Union Square not because she knows what to expect. She goes to Union Square precisely because “You never know who you’re gonna find there.” (Interestingly, some versions of the lyrics substitute “what” for “who.” Reed was known for making lyrics up on the spot or changing well-worn verses to suit his whims.) This implies that she is surrendering herself to the experience of walking, and whomever she encounters, she encounters. Buskers, peddlers, pushers, junkies, whores, dilettantes, bohemians, or other wanderers like herself, any of them could be there. According to Kevin Hetherington:

The street life and culture of the metropolis... have typically been taken as the key evidence for the shift in activity within consumer culture, from participating to spectating, brought about by capitalist-driven urban growth in the later years of the nineteenth century and its generation of the spectacle of the commodity. (25)

In this view, the spectacle that drives consumer capitalism has turned all people into “window shoppers,” turning their everyday experience away from production (and therefore creativity) and toward consumption (and therefore, passivity).<sup>12</sup> But it is not just our relationships with objects that are marked by spectating. Our relationships with people are marked with a similar spectator character. Reed, in his creation of Teenage Mary as a flâneuse who can wander to Union Square, has also illuminated something about the character of late Modernity: people treat each other as objects to be seen. The implication is unclear in Reed’s lyric—is Teenage Mary going to Union Square to meet up with friends who might be there, or to watch the

parade of troglodyte humanity who wanders the square? Is she planning to be a participant, or a spectator? Reed is engaging in a process that would be familiar to Bürger—Reed is questioning institutional relationships through art. But like Certeau, he is not limiting himself to questioning the institution of art. He using art to explore the commoditized institution of everyday life. But what is Reed’s specific critique?

The goal of the lyric is unclear, possibly because it stands as both an observation and a critique. In leaving the possibility open that Teenage Mary might simply be going down to Union Square to “people-watch,” Reed puts the consumerist nature of the city and of human relationships in the city up for examination. It is as if simply exposing the spectator nature of human relationships is enough; explicit critique would be overkill. In this, we find another key to the nature of the urban neo-avant-garde. The detached observation without blatant critique or comment is something that would come to be associated with this urban creative art.<sup>13</sup>

To suggest that the lyric stands without critique or comment does not mean to imply, however, that the lyric exists without a social purpose. Several commentators (including scholars of The Velvet Underground such as Witt and Bockris) note the textual connection of Lou Reed’s lyrics to Beat poetry and prose. As Daniel Belgrad suggests in his chapter analyzing Beat writing in his text *The Culture of Spontaneity*, “The beats sought to develop literary forms by which to communicate both experienced reality and the emotional energy that went with it. They hoped that the result would be an utterance that was nothing less than an action: a motivating, energizing force with potential social effects” (196). The “experienced reality” Belgrad mentions is what might be described by Henri Lefebvre’s *thought-action*. Experienced reality is the everyday, the “stuff” that textures our existence, but often goes without

description or analysis. The Beats sought to bring social effects to bear on experienced reality without moral condemnation or didactic calls to action. Often, this was done through simply exposing a figure or a character and letting the detached comment stand itself as social critique or call to action; simply exposing the figures of their utterances made action real in the moment of being named.

And it is perhaps to a similar effect that Reed presents the characters of his narrative in “Run, Run, Run”. To continue with a lyrical analysis, Reed’s narrator tells us of “Marguerita Passion,” who “had to get her fix/She wasn’t well, she was getting sick.” This second character now makes the oblique references of the first verse (with Teenage Mary) absolutely clear: whatever it was that Mary went to Union Square to find, Marguerita Passion is looking for her fix. Her sickness is withdrawal; Marguerita Passion is a heroin addict, much like William Burroughs, one of Reed’s Beat icons. Teenage Mary of the previous verse simply wanders down to Union Square, drifting, similarly to the Situationist practice of *dérive*, or drift.<sup>14</sup> Teenage Mary is engaging in a practice like that of the Situationists, in that she is drifting in order to find a hidden authenticity, an everyday-ness of thought-action, among the trash of modern consumer capitalism. Marguerita Passion, in contrast, is clearly engaging with the commodified status of the urban space. According to the lyric, she “Went to sell her soul, she wasn’t high/She didn’t know, thinks she could buy it.” Ms. Passion is enmeshed in the city in ways that Teenage Mary, with her flâneuse-like drift, is not. Marguerita Passion is so enmeshed in the consuming nature of the city that she is willing to sell her own authenticity, her soul.

It is important that Marguerita Passion is an addict, as much of the rhetoric around heroin addiction is that of consumption. It is tempting to suggest that Reed might have made

Marguerita Passion a heroin addict because of his own struggles as a heroin user, or because of the addict status of William S. Burroughs, one of his literary heroes. But neither of these arguments hold; Burroughs was an “equal-opportunity” addict, taking any drug he could, while Reed was at least a user of heroin, amphetamines, and prescription sedatives. Reed seems to have used heroin specifically for Marguerita Passion because of the way it can consume its users, just as the city is a space of consumption (an endless cycle of buying an object, using the object, and having to buy another). Unlike Teenage Mary, Marguerita Passion does not drift downtown. She is compelled downtown, forced by a consuming need to consume. The city serves both as consumer and commodity in the character of Ms. Passion.

This co-existence of consumer and commodity is an important one for Lefebvre’s ideas of the everyday. Coming from Marxist analysis, Lefebvre worries greatly about alienation and commodity fetishism. And Ms. Passion is an interesting site with which to engage. In his attempt to deal with the Marxist idea of *alienation* and *fetishism*, Lefebvre wrote, “Money, currency, commodities, capital, are nothing more than relations between human beings (between ‘individual’, qualitative human tasks). And yet these relations take on the appearance and the form of *things* external to human beings” (178). As a result of this conceptual move from information (the physical manifestations of ideas and relationships) to “things,” Lefebvre argues that “Human activities are swept along and torn from their own reality and consciousness, and become subservient to these things” (178-179). The fundamental information and relationships of everyday life are changed, in Lefebvre’s view, from something inherent in our lives to things that are divorced from us, separate from us. In the case of Marguerita Passion, the thing that has been divorced from her is her fundamental sense of self:

her soul. Ms. Passion is so separated from her everyday reality, her sense of self, that she has turned that self into a commodity to be bought and sold.

It is this sense of the everyday that is to be recaptured by avant-gardeist practice. If Ms. Passion's soul is what makes her truly "her," if her soul is that sense of self that she carries around with her every day, then Ms. Passion is alienated from her everyday-ness in a way that marks her as an alienated body under a totalitarian colonizer. Ms. Passion's body itself is forced into a discourse of buying and selling as a result of the social system in which she is enmeshed. That social system is one that allows Ms. Passion to divorce the one thing that she carries with her every day, her "soul" (whatever that might actually be) and turn her soul into an object. If Lefebvre is correct, that alienation and fetishism is what happens when we mistake relationships between people for material things, then Ms. Passion has mistaken her "soul" (a relationship of her perceptions about herself to her everyday experience) for a material thing that is distinct from herself. In this sense, Ms. Passion's soul is a relationship between her perceptions and her everyday experience; her "soul" is her understanding of her everyday lived experience.

Next is Seasick Sarah with her "golden nose" and "Hobnail boots wrapped 'round her toes." Sarah is also sick, quite possibly from withdrawal (which can cause nausea and headaches reminiscent of seasickness at early stages). But her character is one of less-than-complete consumption by the city, and by her habit. Seasick Sarah has "a golden nose," possibly a reference to cocaine (an expensive drug that is often snorted), but also possibly a reference to heroin (which, when pure, can be snorted like cocaine). But Seasick Sarah is in-between states: she has a "golden nose," meaning that whatever she is consuming is expensive. Both cocaine

and heroin were expensive, more so when taken through the nose as both had to be pure in order to snort. To “pay through the nose” is to pay an expensive, exorbitant price, and Seasick Sarah’s nose is “golden;” whatever the price is that she is paying for the drug, it is a high price and she can currently afford it. But Seasick Sarah is on the beginning of her consumption downward slide: she might have a golden nose, but she wears “hobnail boots.” These have long been the footwear of the working class, because they are cheap and sturdy. Seasick Sarah can’t afford leather pumps from Italy, because her “golden nose” takes whatever money she has. Seasick Sarah pays through the nose.

But Seasick Sarah’s hobnail boots are important for another reason: they mark her as dwelling in the seedier parts of town. Wherever Seasick Sarah lives, it is not a place with smooth, well-maintained floors that allow her to wear fashionable shoes. Instead, she likely lives in places with rough and dirty floors. Hobnail boots are also a form of workboot that is worn for durability and resistance to muck and grime. Soldiers in the trenches of the First World War were issued hobnail boots because they were more resistant to the mud and sludge than any other boot available at the time. Wherever Seasick Sarah lives in the city, it is not a pleasant place to be all the time. In giving us the image of a “golden nose” paired with “hobnail boots,” Reed is asking us to see both a woman and a city in decline. The corruption of the city and the corruption of Seasick Sarah are the same.

Finally, Reed gives us “Beardless Harry,” and describes him as “a waste” who “couldn’t even get a small-town taste.” Beardless Harry is an outsider to the drug culture that Reed offers us in “Run, Run, Run”. The fact that Beardless Harry can’t obtain the drugs that Seasick Sarah, Marguerita Passion, or even Teenage Mary could indicates that he is outside of the

consumption of the city. He is outside of the city's commodity structure: he is so far from the ability to consume drugs that he can't even get "a small-town taste." The city eludes him psychically and also eludes him as a commodity. But Beardless Harry is intent on being part of the commodity structure, because he "Rode the Trolleys down to Forty Seven/ Figured if he was good, he'd get himself to Heaven." But this lyric places Beardless Harry quite specifically: he had to ride the trolley "down to Forty Seven" because Beardless Harry is someone who lives uptown. As we have discovered earlier, uptown is the place of the glittering cocktail parties that Reed and The Velvet Underground, as well as the neo-avant-gardeist art scene more generally, are in contrast to. Beardless Harry is, perhaps, only on the start of his downward slide into drug addiction, because the others mentioned in the song are given characteristics that place them in the "down-and-out" portions of the city. Beardless Harry, in contrast, comes from uptown and his "descent" is not complete, because his travels only take him to midtown Manhattan; Forty-Seventh Street runs through the midtown business district, and does not take him all the way to the downtown squalor of the East Village. Further, Beardless Harry is most-likely young. Why else does Reed want us to know that he is "beardless?" Reed himself, the other male members of the Velvets, and the vast majority of the hangers-on at Warhol's Factory scene where the Velvets were established were all beardless. But "beardless" is, throughout much of history, a sign of youth. In fact, when Telemachus returns from his travels throughout Greece in Homer's *Odyssey*, the men of Ithaca note that he has a beard on his chin, and that makes him a man. Reed would have known this, as his degree from Syracuse University was in Literature, with an emphasis in the classics (Witts).

In “Run, Run, Run” Reed gives us many markers of how space plays out in the lives and the drug-related business of the characters. And I made the suggestion that the first character, Teenage Mary, was a flâneuse. While this characterization was a useful starting point, it breaks down in a further analysis of the lyrics. All four of the characters Reed presents us with have to “Run, run, run, run, run/Take a drag or two/Run, run, run, run, run/Gypsy Death and you/Tell you whatcha do.” The flâneur (French for “stroller”), and by extension the flâneuse, are not characters who “run.” In fact, just the opposite: they stroll and wander. In his monumental *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin discusses the flâneur. According to Benjamin, this figure is both consumer and consumed. Benjamin writes of the flâneur that “With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name” (417). The act of walking, of strolling, is, to Benjamin, an act of consumption: the flâneur consumes the psychogeography of the city, internalizing the space as a way of sustaining himself. But the city also consumes him, as he must continually stroll it for more sustenance. The flâneur is an addict, but his addiction is to the street.

Benjamin continues his discussion of the flâneur, writing, “Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts—until, utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and wears a strange air” (417). Benjamin describes the same experience that an addict has with his drug. And it is this experience, this restless consumption and wandering that brings no release, is both the emotional “addiction” of the flâneur and the

physical addiction of the heroin user. But the characters of “Run, Run, Run” fit into the figure of the flâneur only partially; it is Reed himself, as the narrator, who is the real flâneur in the song.

Reed has suggested in several places that his songs should not be taken as rigidly autobiographical; he draws on elements from his life as any writer will, but fills them in with invention and imagery (Witts, Bockris, Thompson). But, as both pusher and addict during his days at Syracuse University (Witts), Reed has seen all of the figures about whom he writes. Reed has seen Beardless Harry, the young man who is trying to break into the consuming drug culture; he has seen Seasick Sarah, who is on a downward slide; he has seen Marguerita Passion, who is willing to sell her soul for a “fix;” and he has seen Teenage Mary, whose soul is long-since sold. Reed presents the people of the song to us with detachment. They exist only as characters, people that Reed has seen and will not commit himself to. Reed is to the characters what the flâneur is to the city: he observes, but does not get involved, instead letting the act of observation be his mode of consumption. Benjamin comments on this idea of the flâneur as one who watches in a detached way when he writes that the “amnesiac intoxication in which the flâneur goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of an abstract knowledge—indeed, of dead facts—as something experienced and lived through” (417). The lived experience of the things the flâneur sees are recognized as being real (as “sensory data”), but they are not important enough for the flâneur to connect with (they are “dead facts”). The flâneur is a figure of detachment.

As such, the flâneur is a figure who is engaged in an artistic practice similar to that which I have suggested of the Beats: he observes, but does not comment, suggesting that the mere fact of his observation *is itself* a comment. He critiques not through grandiloquent speeches or

flowery written rhetoric. Instead, the flâneur, the Beat, and the neo-avant-gardeist represented by Reed all critique and comment just through display. If the purpose of art is indeed to hold the mirror up to nature, then Reed, the Beats, and the flâneur all see themselves as the mirror. The “nature” that Reed and the neo-avant-garde he represents is one that wants to use the mirror to show the fractures and the cracks of the urban landscape. But Reed’s mirror, as a victim of drug use and a commoditized figure within consumer culture, contains fractures and cracks that distort the view and create fragmentary, incomplete images. The practice of the neo-avant-gardeist creator of “cool” is one who knows that his view is fractured and fragmentary; perhaps it is this understanding of his fragmentation that prevents Reed from thinking that he can make grand pronouncements of social critique through didactic rhetoric. Instead, he allows his own fractures to be a part of his critique.<sup>15</sup>

These fractures return us to Lefebvre and Certeau. If there is no outside of the system of language and representations that language gives us, then any frustrations, and inabilities we have to make cultural practice properly work for human happiness are the result of the failure of language and discourse to satisfy the needs of our everyday lives. Certeau explains that failure of language by writing that “each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of ... relational determinations interact” (xi). This incoherent plurality is what engenders our frustrations, and our alienation. It is not consumer culture, but language that fails us.

But we look for something to blame, and we see all around us the trappings of consumer culture. We see Teenage Mary in the faces of many around us, and believe people to have “sold their souls.” We think that our fellow human beings have sold their souls to their employers,

their schools, their religions, or any other system of human relations. The everyday lives of people are thought to be colonized and enslaved by mass culture. This is the common language of the counterculture's critique: that people are enslaved and zombified consumers who need to be shaken awake to the beauty of a world that exists when one expands their consciousness. The Velvet Underground attempt to use their avant-gardeist practice of cultural and institutional critique here to reclaim human experience from this countercultural narrative: Teenage Mary, Seasick Sarah, Marguerita Passion, and Beardless Harry are not zombified consumers. They are trading part of their lives for a commodity, most certainly. And this is critiqued (in a detached way) through the lyrics of the song: the characters might be engaging in consumption, but they do so in ways that demonstrate an ambivalent agency.

But what is more important, what is far more relevant to this project, is that the lives of Teenage Mary and the others of the song are explored in the thought-action style of Lefebvre. What the characters of the song actually *do*, how they *actively practice life*, is the subject of Reed's lyrical inquiry. The avant-gardeist practice might be seen as one that privileges practice over language. While language must be used to explore those actual practices, it is the lived experience, the actual details of the events, that interest Reed in his lyrics. Teenage Mary wanders downtown; Marguerita Passion "went to sell her soul" (a practice she enacted); and Beardless Harry "rode the trolley" as a way to find a way into a culture. Reed was more interested in what the characters *did* than how they felt or what we, as the audience, should feel and think. Even Seasick Sarah, who is described physically but takes very little action, is a site of inquiry into practice, actual physical being: "when she turned blue/ all the angels screamed." Seasick Sarah might be turning blue because she has scored more of her chosen

drug, or she might turn blue because she is dying; the second option seems more likely, as “all the angels screamed” when she turned blue. But in either case, the lyrics focus on what people actually do, the details of their experience.

This could be seen as a recurring theme in the tradition of the avant-garde: a concern with practice. The Dadaists embraced collage as an artistic style, which forced the audience to consider the physical materials, the actual practiced reality, of the Dadaist artistic praxis: the collage pieces revealed their cut and torn edges, the glue that was used to hold the images in place sometimes would drip through and reveal itself. The Surrealists, similarly, were interested in practice: automatic writing, where a free-flowing set of ideas were associated and put onto paper without revision, was a dominant mode of their literary practice. If the label of avant-garde can be extended to the abstract expressionists (which Bürger would reject, but others such as Richard Murphy would embrace), then Jackson Pollock could be seen as embracing practice over “idea” or artistic intent. Indeed, Pollock’s action paintings were entirely without “meaning,” but entirely about the physicality of his artistic practice. And if free jazz can be called avant-garde, it achieves its critique of commoditized swing and blues by a practice of chaos, an energetic movement within the music.

In this light, the avant-garde is a movement that critiques, most certainly. But they achieve their critique not primarily through words, because words simply create more room for confusion and mystification. Instead, the avant-garde accomplishes its critique through practice: collage, action painting, free jazz. Even when words are used, as in Surrealist poetry or Reed’s lyrics, the words are less important than the practices that create them and the practices that they reveal.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mass culture exists as a part of everyday life, but also tries to colonize everyday life. As a result of mass culture's confused stance (part of everyday life, yet trying to colonize and dictate everyday life), a fractured and fragmented view of "the everyday" comes to be presented. But the critique of the avant-garde against mass-culture is no less confused: if Certeau is correct, then we are trapped by language and cannot ever hope to fully liberate the everyday through avant-gardeist movements. Those movements stand within the structures they seek to critique. Bürger's assertion that the avant-garde failed in its goal of reconnecting art to daily life is simultaneously right, wrong, and irrelevant. He is correct in that the institution of art still stands and the neo-avant-gardeist practice has been appropriated by the institutional structure. He is incorrect in so far as his assertion goes that the avant-garde was a temporally-located critique that completely dies with Surrealism. And his critique is irrelevant in that the institution can never be defeated: there is no outside to escape into, so the institution cannot be undone.

Instead of seeing the avant-garde as a specific movement that attacks artistic institutional practice, I have put forth the idea that the avant-garde is a tactical practice, located in space-time that is fluid and porous: in the case of The Velvet Underground, the avant-gardeist practice has been found in New York City. And it served not as a critique of artistic institution, but as a social practice-- a critique of mass culture. In this way, The Velvet Underground is more closely aligned with what I have suggested about Lefebvre. His work is an avant-garde politics and philosophy; he engages in Dadaist sociology. By questioning mass culture and setting

themselves up in opposition to mass culture's consumerism, The Velvet Underground engaged in a practice of avant-gardeist technique similar to Lefebvre's philosophical project.

And that practice is, in itself, *practice*: the avant-gardeist critique seems to be that language is limiting and therefore less useful for critique and theory than action and behavior. Lefebvre's thought-action is the cultural or psychological phenomenon that is revealed by the actions and the practices one engages in. Certeau suggests that language makes us foreigners in our own culture, but foreigners without a native land to which we can return. Our everyday condition is that of the refugee. The result of this reality is that we can only piece together a "trash culture," a practice that is based on using the culture that surrounds us and re-appropriating it for the immediate needs of our lives. The avant-garde, then, is that which re-appropriates, and does so as a practice.

This comes dangerously close to mysticism and irrationality: language fails us, but actions can "redeem" us in some way. While I do not wish to throw irrationality completely away (and I will return extensively to irrationality in the next chapter), I also do not wish to suggest that a simplistic embrace of chaos, of "living in the moment," is the practice that the avant-gardeists engage in. In the next chapter, I hope to make explicit how the "practice" idea explored in this chapter and the aesthetic ideas introduced in the last chapter come together as a specific practice.

One idea that is important to this practice is detachment. The urban neo-avant-gardeist presents a view of his subject that is ambiguous, leaving the specific critique up to the audience. It is the job of the audience to "fill in the gaps." The neo-avant-gardeist creator of

“cool” makes a critique, but leaves that critique open-ended. It might be a critique of himself as much as it is of consumer culture.

This detachment and critique is a tactical matrix: it does not demand or force moralistic pronouncements, but creates a space for end-users to determine their own relationships to the critiques being offered. But, as we have explored, the detachment and “otherness” of the city was problematic. The city was not a site free of capitalist commoditization, it was simply a site where that commercialization of space had played out. Capitalism, in urban spaces, was dirty and frayed around the edges. It was a place where Benjamin’s “ragpickers” could wander the streets and form a new aesthetic out of the bits and pieces of discarded older aesthetic systems. So, if the suburbs were places where mass culture’s colonization was total and hegemonic, then the urban spaces were places where an insurgency was fighting against the colonizers. The fact that this insurgency was half-hearted at times or ill-equipped to strike at the dominant systems of mass culture is irrelevant: the mere fact that there was an insurgency of some kind was enough to draw in a certain kind of person.

This urban/punk neo-bohemian avant-gardeist is generally that of disaffected youth, privileged enough to consider issues of creativity and aesthetics over issues of basic material survival (Reed, in particular, was the son of a well-to-do suburban businessman). This practice turns its critical lens both on the society and on itself, offering few (if any) answers, but instead asking as many questions and creating as many problems as possible. Further, this neo-avant-garde is also educated enough to articulate, in some way, an aesthetic vision (in our example of The Velvet Underground, the members of the band were generally well-educated, Reed and Morrison in Literature, Cale in music). Ambiguity is the nature of this aesthetic vision, however,

offering no concrete solutions to the problems that it poses. But that aesthetic vision is, as been suggested, a practice: ideology and grand theorizing is less important to this avant-gardeist practice than an actual thought-action, a behavior, or a practiced and lived reality.

Finally, it is important to note that the ideas of space were suggested in this chapter and explored in some length, but the connections between space and the current aesthetic project (the avant-garde as reclaiming the everyday) were not made absolutely explicit. This serves a specific artistic and intellectual purpose: in part, the next chapter will hope to demonstrate the wandering, flâneur-like practice that this reclaiming of everyday experience must engage in. But far more important, the everyday is a site marked less by language and more by the accumulation of “stuff,” some of which seems incoherent or incongruous on the surface. But once the audience can step back and see the organic whole, a full picture emerges that is dependent upon an interaction of seemingly divided individual parts.

## NOTES: CHAPTER TWO

1. If it goes one way, it can go another; the existence of the suburbs could be read dialectically as a critique of the messy, ad-hoc nature of the urban spaces.

2. Again, Reed is repurposing something for his own use. The particular style of the “dance craze” song was something that people were quite familiar with; Reed took that trend and created something different with it. Certeau refers to this repurposing as a “mutation,” and says of it the following:

This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own “turns of phrase,” etc., their own history[.] (xxi)

Repurposing is an act that is creative, because it takes something that has been developed for specific uses and then throws those uses and rules away. Mockery and parody are forms of repurposing: they take an object (or a relationship) and turn it into something other than that which it was originally intended to be.

3. Mythology about the early days of The Velvet Underground seems to be rampant. For example, Reed has often claimed that when he and Cale were first trying to form a band that would become The Velvet Underground, he ran into his old college-friend Morrison while “barefoot” and waiting for the subway; Morrison found this part of the mythology “idiotic” (Witts, 34).

4. Another band in existence at this time experimented with calling themselves The Warlocks: The Grateful Dead. Given Reed's distaste for the psychedelic music that was coming out of California, this is quite an interesting coincidence.

5. This notion of "spectacle" is along the lines of the "bread and circuses" (*panem et circenses*) that distract and placate people, as opposed to Guy Debord's Spectacle. Of course, there is an overlap between these two concepts. But it is important to note that this is "spectacle" and not "Spectacle."

6. It must be noted that the band had an ambivalent attitude toward fame and toward being part of "the underground": they sacked Andy Warhol as manager not out of creative differences, but because they didn't think he knew what he was doing (Witts); and their final album, *Loaded*, was an actual attempt at finding a commercial audience (the title being both a drug reference and a reference to the fact that their record label wanted an album that was "loaded with hits").

7. This conscious positioning of The Velvet Underground outside of mainstream music trends would give rise to the "alternative" music genre. Although "alternative" music is no longer underground, it is still "alternative" in the sense that it intentionally sets itself within a specific context. It should be noted, however, that in the days of The Velvet Underground, this "proto-alternative" stance was intentionally and aggressively contrarian, an intentional broadside

aimed at the music industry generally. Today, it is simply an aesthetic choice within the context of a larger music industry. Bürger rears his head once again.

8. This bohemian cool as it related to the Lower East Side “scene” would eventually take on different connotations as it was associated with The Velvet Underground: one of transgressive sexuality, artistic decadence, and drug experimentation.

9. Of course, this idea of the “cutting edge” is connected to notions of the avant-garde in cultural consciousness, though not in the sense that Bürger uses the term “avant-garde.” The avant-garde label has been so heavily used that it can be used almost indiscriminately today. Writer Chuck Palahniuk is often called “avant-garde” in a way that connects “avant-garde” to an artistic practice of intentional weirdness; and both John Cage and John Zorn have been labeled “avant-garde” in a way that connects the term to a perceived artistic practice that engages in a deliberate attempt to be difficult to experience. The term, as we have seen before and will see again, is overdetermined.

10. This reputation was far more menacing and ominous in the mid 1960s. Union Square today is a tourist destination and sight-seer’s hotspot, known more for its eccentrics and its pigeons than for any actual danger.

11. According to Lefebvre, “The same period which has witnessed a breathtaking development in the application of techniques of everyday life has also witnessed the no-less-breathtaking

degradation of everyday life for large masses of human beings” (9). Lefebvre seems to be positioning the everyday as an avant-gardeist project here; just as the Dadaists used a particular practice of art to critique the institution of art, so is Lefebvre using the everyday to attack the institutionalization of the everyday. Lefebvre is, in a sense, a philosophical Dadaist. He certainly created an avant-gardeist practice for sociology and philosophy.

12. Certeau would partially disagree with the producer/creative versus consumer/passive paradigm. For Certeau, whether consumption is creative or passive depends on what the consumer actually does with the object that is consumed.

13. This detached observation that refuses to get involved yet critiques from a distance fills the lyrics of endless imitators and disciples of The Velvet Underground (including, but not limited to, '70s post-punk icons Joy Division and New York art/noise rockers Sonic Youth) as well as becoming one of the primary aesthetic traits of the cyberpunk authors.

14. As we have seen earlier, the Situationists were an urban neo-avant-gardeist movement of France who sought to recapture a sense of wonder and authenticity in everyday life, and did so by violating the standard commodified practices of city life. Kevin Hetherington describes the process of *dérive* as something that they hoped would yield to them an older, more “authentic” Paris, that was “an uncommodified city with traces of authentic life that could be set against the newly zoned and planned urban forms of consumer capitalism” (41).

15. A final comment on the lyrics of “Run, Run, Run” would be that they have a surprisingly optimistic thread. The characters move in a specific order: Teenage Mary, who is so far in decline (even as a teenager) that she has “sold her soul” before her wanderings; Marguerita Passion is considering selling her soul; Seasick Sarah isn’t even considering her soul yet, because she has only just given up her fancy shoes; and Beardless Harry can’t even get enough heroin to force his move from uptown. The characters move from the state of greatest ruin to the least. It is as if Reed is giving us an inversion of Dante’s descent in *The Inferno*, and the characters represent a potential ascent out of the city and out of addiction. But that ascent is only a potential, and an equal potential for ruin exists.

### CHAPTER THREE: SELLING NOISE

“Rickenharp was listening to a collector’s item Velvet Underground tape, from 1968. It was capped into his earmite. The guitarists were doing things that would make Baron Frankenstein say, ‘There are some things man was not meant to know.’”

-John Shirley, *Eclipse*, 68

#### OUTSIDER STATUS

One of the cultural narratives surrounding the neo-avant-garde is that it must intentionally court obscurity and marginal status. This follows naturally from the issues raised previously, of course. If an artist wishes to formulate a legitimate critique against mass-culture and the commodification of everyday life, then one must reject the culture of the commodity. That rejection includes mainstream success. This is obviously a simplistic analysis, because even conducting minimal research will reveal figures in the arts who managed both critical and commercial success. Why, then, does the narrative hold such power? Musician Kurt Cobain shot himself rather than think that his music would become co-opted by some bland corporate machine; when Alan Moore’s graphic novel *Watchmen* was to be adapted as a movie, Moore insisted that his name be removed from the project; and when Jonathan Franzen’s book *The Corrections* was poised for national recognition as a result of being an Oprah’s Book Club selection, Franzen expressed discomfort, resulting in his book being removed from the list.<sup>1</sup>

Previously, I have suggested that this narrative is too simplistic and does not hold when truly examining the ways in which the avant-garde actually engages with everyday life. Specifically, mass-culture is part of the everyday, and the avant-garde is part of what it criticizes: there is no “outside” to escape to. Suggesting that there is such a thing as artistic purity or authenticity sets up a false binary, an “us against them” mentality that has little or no bearing on actual,

lived experience. These issues are, as Certeau suggested, a function of language.<sup>2</sup> And that language surrounds us, and we are enmeshed in its systems completely. Unlike *The Matrix*, we can't choose the red pill or the blue pill, where the right choice will suddenly break us out into some messianic place outside of space and time. We are stuck with the system of language that we have.

That system we are stuck with presents us with problems that we must face. First, there is the problem of the status of "outsider." Outsiders can find themselves the bearers of great cultural capital while still selling their work: Jackson Pollock and Pablo Picasso in the visual arts, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut in literature, and John Cage in music all come to mind. Clearly, there is a disconnect when the narrative of artistic purity and avant-gardeist practice requires outsider status, but many who stand within the avant-garde (and neo-avant-garde) still manage to find commercial and cultural attention.

The case of The Velvet Underground is particularly illustrative for this aspect of the neo-avant-garde's practice. It is an often-repeated "factoid" about The Velvet Underground that they never sold more than a few thousand copies of their albums, but that every person who ever bought one of their albums started a band. This "truism" about The Velvet Underground's relationship to commercial culture is a myth. The idea that every person who bought a Velvet Underground record started a band is often attributed to musician and critic Brian Eno, but nowhere in any of Eno's published writings can a quote even remotely like this one be found (DeRogatis). Further, the statement itself is absurd: the first record the band released, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, debuted on the *Billboard* top 200 as number 199, and rose to 171 at its highest. While number 171 is not a "hit" record by the record industry's terms, it

demonstrates that the band was not nearly as ignored as modern myth would have it (DeRogatis). How did a band with a minor hit and record deal come to be thought of as “The most powerfully innovative, enduringly influential and organically self-destructive musical group of its time” (Clapton, 24)? The Velvet Underground has gained an aura of grand stature, has taken upon itself the decadent romanticism of the lost cause, and the mythic role of the outsider whose uncompromising vision was years ahead of its time.

But these ideas are, of course, absurd: as has already been demonstrated, their debut album was a minor hit. The band was not above compromise for the purposes of success, such as allowing themselves to be managed by Andy Warhol and including German vocalist Nico as part of the band at Warhol’s insistence. Critics were not even universally negative in their reviews of the band, as many modern fans and music critics would have it. Timothy Jacobs of the music journal *Vibrations* suggested, “All in all, for what it is trying to express, this is a good album” (DeRogatis, 34), and there were some positive reviews in more mainstream publications as well. Most of the reviewers were actually neither positive nor negative, but somewhat bewildered (Witts).

This should not be taken to mean that The Velvet Underground actively courted acceptance from the critics or the musical mainstream. According to guitarist Sterling Morrison, commercial acceptance was not even on the band’s normal agenda. Diana Clapton, music critic and author of *Lou Reed and The Velvet Underground* quotes Morrison as saying, “We never gave a shit. We just had this... very good record. Let’s face it, it was not a serious, commercial pop music venture. My attitude was that I wanted to make the best rock and roll record with the songs I liked best—and here it is” (24). Morrison’s attitude, however, was counter-balanced by that of

viola and bass player, John Cale. According to Cale, “Our aim was to upset people, make them feel uncomfortable, make them vomit” (DeRogatis, 5). Reed seemed to have similar ideas about the band’s purpose (at least early on), and he certainly had no interest in bowing to musical fashion. He was interested in improvisation, but not in the sense of the extended “jams” of the psychedelic era. His interests were more in the improvisation of free jazz and bebop (Witts). He further disdained the hippy subculture that was taking over in music, saying, “We had vast objections to the whole San Francisco scene. It’s just tedious, a lie and untalented. They can’t play and the certainly can’t write. I keep telling everybody and nobody cares” (Bockris, 32). Considering the influence of the San Francisco scene on pop music of the mid 1960s, Reed’s stance in defiance of and opposition to psychedelic music positioned the band as outsiders.

What, then, can be made of a band that seemed to so aggressively court “outsider” status? How do we make sense of a commercial enterprise that seems to avoid any attempt at bowing to commercial pressure? It is at this point that the musical and artistic practice of The Velvet Underground, particularly in their association with Andy Warhol’s total-immersion performance art group The Exploding Plastic Inevitable, can be connected to the artistic stance of Dada. According to Richard Murphy’s *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, Duchamp’s readymades “[prod] the audience into supplying what is missing, confronts it primarily with its own automatized expectations... provokes the audience’s realization that its own horizons of expectations has been thoroughly conditioned by the ‘institution of art’” (94). According to Murphy, when Duchamp signed his name to a urinal and called it art, the result was that the audience was forced to reconsider its conceptual spaces and re-orient themselves to new modes of conceptualizing the relationship art had to their immediate conditions and everyday lives.

This change of perception is what Michel de Certeau argues for as well. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau suggests that in modern society, “know-how (*savoir-faire*) finds itself slowly deprived of what objectively articulated it with respect to a ‘how-to-do’ (*un faire*)” (69). The techniques of individual practice are chipped away, leaving only the rote, mechanical movements behind. This is the equivalent of the person who follows a recipe with precision, but does not allow for a momentary joy of cooking to come through. Or, more to the point, Certeau could be describing the increasing mechanization of labor, where individual craftsmanship is first replaced by industrial-scale labor, then replaced by the assembly line, finally to be replaced altogether by the robotic and mechanized equipment of modern industry. The avant-garde feared that this was happening to man’s relationships with art as well. Art was not an object separate from the pre-industrial worker: the pre-industrial blacksmith could design his door hinges with as much or as little elaboration as he wished. But as metalworking became more industrialized, individual elaboration became more and more difficult to achieve. Eventually, it became impossible (in an industrial setting).

But Certeau does not find the increasing mechanization and industrialization to mean that creativity and artistry has been banished from life. Instead, we must simply look for that artistry in new ways, because it is not immediately obvious. Certeau argues that some of this happens from moment to moment even within the confines of industrialized labor; he suggests that people engage in creativity while on company time, for example. “In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme,” Certeau writes, “he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work* and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through

spending his time in this way” (25-26). Certeau suggests that the act of working within the mechanical system can, itself, be a creative act.

But this is merely one example. By examining the creativity in which a taxi driver finds a

particular route to a destination or by examining the playful ways in

which a laborer interacts with the roof he is repairing, Certeau claims

that the gaps in the mechanical system can be exploited. And it is these

gaps in the “mechanical” perceptions of art that Marcel Duchamp tried

to exploit with work such as *Fountain* (1917).

Duchamp asked his audience to engage in a re-contextualization of

the image. A urinal was, of course, a place to deposit a very specific

bodily waste. But in this case, the urinal was on a pedestal, and had been signed. Was it still a

urinal? It was out of its context; not connected to any systems of plumbing, the urinal no longer

was able to perform its original function. Was it still a urinal? The avant-garde existed to ask

questions about relationships. Bürger was adamant on that point. But to engage that

fundamental issue, the relationships between art and people had to be re-examined. New

attention would have to be brought to the relationships. Certeau suggests in more than one

place the idea of a renter and his flat: the specific relationship of the renter to the space is

determined in some ways. But the renter can make the space “his own” by altering the way in

which he interacts with the space. He can hang pictures, he can sleep in rooms not intended for

sleeping, etc. Certeau makes this even more explicit when he writes about the poor who live in

public housing, “Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays



*Fountain*, Marcel  
Duchamp, 1917

down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation” (30).

This sense of plurality is important for the avant-garde (and their neo-avant-garde inheritors). The institution of art is singular. It is, after all, an Institution, an objective force that can dictate terms. Similarly, the suburbs are places of homogeneity that the neo-avant-garde feels the need to escape from. But more importantly, the sense of creativity is on how one perceives the space, the object, or the social relationship. Duchamp took a urinal for his sculpture because it was an object that the men in his audience would easily recognize. (The fact that Duchamp excluded women, at least to some degree, with his *Fountain* is a separate issue.) But this recognition was forced into an unfamiliar context, and it forced his audience to re-think old relationships with the urinal. Similarly, Surrealism relied on the unusual juxtaposition for much of its effect: Magritte’s painting “This Is Not A Pipe” combines a fairly

straight-forward painting of a pipe with the message “this is not a pipe.” Forcing people into new ways of perceiving is the key to the practice of the avant-garde.

And it is within this framework that The Velvet Underground can be seen as truly avant-gardeist in their practice, particularly in their time with Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable. The Velvet

Underground engaged plurality in their performance and their practice. Branden W. Joseph, in his essay “My Mind Split Open: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable”, describes the



Fig. 2- Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable

experience of the EPI as “one of disruptive multiplicity and layering, as the Velvet Underground, Nico, and other of Warhol’s superstars appeared amidst the barrage of sounds, lights, images, and performance” (240). At the time of The Velvet Underground, light shows and staging in a rock music context were in their infancy. But the EPI created a total sonic assault that mixed with visual effects and even spatial, physical aspects of performance such as dancers, unusual speaker-placement, and even audience interaction (see Fig. 2). The result was to take rock performance out of its standard context, forcing the audience to consider their direct relationship with the music. The “audition” for The Velvet Underground as part of Warhol’s factory scene actually took place at a most un-rock-like venue: The annual meeting of The New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry at Delmonico’s Hotel. The performance space was not the typical one for a rock band, nor was the audience a typical rock audience. But Warhol and the Velvets together were trying to create a new space, forcing the audience to reconsider their place. The event served to shock them out of their expected moment. It would be impossible to move through the event while on auto-pilot. The event would have to re-orient the psychiatrists to their environment; even if the response was only to make people angry, the band could not help but force people into discomfort. And it was not only the audience who were forced to bring a new form of attention to their moment: Velvet’s percussionist Moe Tucker said of the event, ““Why they asked us to play [at the Annual Dinner of the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry], I have no idea—two hundred psychiatrists and us, these freaks from the Factory” (DeRogatis, 46). If the avant-garde seeks to question relationships of power and authority in official institutions, then confusion (be it on the part of the audience or the artist) is one of the goals.

But the Velvets also engage with the everyday in terms of Lefebvre's idea of "thought-action:" specifically, the music and practice of The Velvet Underground was designed to short-circuit rote responses. To question relationships between audience and artist, or institutions and observers, one must force people in the relationship to see things in new ways. This necessitates new ways of seeing the relationships. The avant-garde, by definition (at least by Bürger's definition, requires new ways of seeing, new ways of attending. The avant-garde is engaged in a practice of constantly creating new forms of attention. The Velvet Underground and the EPI believed that people would not willingly engage in these new ways of seeing, and had to be dragged into them through what Branden Joseph called "personal confrontation between performer and audience" (248).

This personal confrontation takes on subversive, unusual forms. The avant-garde is not in a position of power; the avant-garde is an insurgency that questions power. For that reason, the avant-garde must claim for itself a space that springs up from unusual places, claiming for itself a space within that which is reserved for official power. The official power, as has been discussed earlier, functions in Certeau's language "strategically," because it is "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" (35-36). Bürger, of course, argues that the institution of art is isolated, and that the goal of the avant-garde is to question its isolation and re-integrate it into life. In this sense, then, the avant-garde must be seen in light of Certeau's "tactics," which are actions "determined by the absence of a proper locus" (37).

The avant-garde, then, is a place that cannot count on a headquarters or a base of operations. It exists outside of official rhetoric and official understanding. When the EPI performed before the psychiatrists assembled for their annual dinner, it was a tactical response to a strategic matrix of power—one that Lou Reed must have relished, bearing ill will toward psychiatrists for his ECT treatments as a teenager (DeRogatis). For Reed, the event was a strike at the heart of an unsuspecting enemy; like the Hashishin of Alamut, an unexpected but vicious blow came when the guard was at its weakest because no one expects to be attacked in their own headquarters. But it was not the institution of psychiatry that the EPI and the Velvets hoped to attack (the psychiatrists were simply a target of opportunity). A more apt description might be the jongleurs of Medieval Europe. These performers were often forbidden by law or tradition, because the jongleurs “incited lascivious and obscene dances” (Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, 60).

But the jongleurs are illustrative for another reason: not all of these medieval performers were forbidden to practice their art in society. Those who performed acrobatics, those who jested, and those who performed lewd or lascivious music were forbidden from polite company, but those who performed for an official power and did so within an appropriate context (such as a feast or to welcome dignitaries) were given official approval (Goff, 64). The avant-garde stands in tension with the institutional framework of those who would co-opt it for official use. This “official use” did enter into the practice of The Velvet Underground as the band came to a close, but that is an issue for later. Jaques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* suggests that the professionalization of music, an issue connected to the rise of the professional class and the division of labor, caused the musician to be “economically bound to a

machine of power, political or commercial, which paid him a salary for creating what it needed to affirm its legitimacy” (17). Affirming the legitimacy of power is of course the same as Bürger’s institutionalization of art.

Just as some jongleurs worked within lines of official power, some belonged to matrices of unofficial, unsanctioned, or even forbidden power. And it is within these zones that the avant-garde operates. But these zones exist in spaces that require an audience to re-orient their perceptions in order to perceive.

### **RE-ORIENTING PERCEPTIONS**

The re-orienting of perceptions in which the avant-garde (and the neo-avant-garde) engage is a practice of intentionally courting discontinuity and a-temporality. This was a tactic with which Warhol was quite familiar—even before the EPI and The Velvet Underground came fully into being, Warhol developed similar tactics. In a collaborative project with artist La Monte Young, Warhol developed installation pieces that included film, music soundtracks, and ambient sounds, all in forms that were overdubbed, and then played back at high volumes and slightly out-of-synch with one another. According to Branden Joseph, The result of these installation pieces was telling for its future impact on the practice of The Velvet Underground. Joseph writes:

Ambulant spectators, enveloped within the sound and passing through different complexes of standing waves, would become sensitized to the subtle acoustical differences audible at different points in space and thereby become cognizant of the role played by their own movements and perceptions in the production of the musical experience. (244)

Warhol was interested in understanding how the perceptions of the audience impacted the way in which the audience interacted with the environment. The result of these installation pieces was a sudden awareness of how place and sound interact. This is actually not new: humans rely on auditory clues all the time to understand the environment. But these auditory clues are seldom something of which we are consciously aware, and Warhol's installation served to make that awareness a conscious one, even if only for a moment. Warhol and Young created an installation that challenged the audience's notions not just of their physical space, but of their auditory space as well.

In doing so, Warhol and Young were experimenting with the re-orientation of Lefebvre's thought-action. This thought-action is, of course, the nexus of an intention and a practice. But even more so, a thought-action is the situational awareness that occurs when the familiar is greeted with a fully-present mind. According to Lefebvre, Surrealism and Bürger's avant-garde tried to create these moments in their work, but failed. Lefebvre writes of this attempt:

A word of our language pronounced by a foreigner-- a creaking door which sounds like someone groaning-- an unfamiliar expression which passes fleetingly across a familiar face-- and we say: "How bizarre..." Abruptly, familiarity is transformed into something new, but nothing too disconcerting or 'upsetting'." (118-119)

To Lefebvre, this is not truly revolutionary. According to Lefebvre, this kind of uncanny or unsettling moment is a spice for the mind, something that cannot serve as a permanent condition. Most tellingly, Lefebvre sees it as "a pseudo-renewal, obtained by artificially deforming things so that they become both reassuring and surprising" (119). In this sense, Warhol and Young fall into the trap of the other avant-gardeists Lefebvre finds so unsatisfying. Their project is immediate, and yields no long-term insights. It is a moment of feeling very strange, of being dislocated from context. But that is all, and no larger political project can be

pulled from the attempt. Lefebvre argues that this attempt is, in fact, a criticism of everyday life, but “a clumsy one,” (119) that is intent on capitalizing on a two specific elements of human existence: a sense that life has malfunctioned, and an expectation that something extraordinary *should* be happening (119-122). Lefebvre, in fact, argues that this practice of highlighting the bizarre serves to reinforce the very thing which it claims to undo—the banality of everyday life. The bizarre serves to vent some steam out of the system, reducing the pressure of the banal everyday and in so doing allow the subject to return to the slavery of the banal everyday.

Certeau seems to agree with Lefebvre, but only up to a point. Specifically, Certeau seems to think that the bizarre or the uncanny can have a place in an everyday of constant renewal *as long as that bizarre or uncanny experience is part of constant practice*. The moment-to-moment use of the uncanny, the fleeting and temporary removal from a matrix of power, is only of use if it is allowed space to renew itself. For Certeau, “if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities... and interdictions... then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge” (98). In examining the practice of the walker in a formalized (strategic) space, Certeau suggests that the very practice of walking will enact both the banal and the bizarre at the same time. Certeau further writes the following:

In the same way, the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else. And if on the one hand he actualizes only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions (for example, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory). (98)

It is in this sense that Certeau’s project differs from Lefebvre’s. According to Lefebvre, it is the “discreteness of the elements of the everyday (work – family and ‘private’ life –leisure

activities) implies an alienation" (32). To him, this alienation carries within it the possibility for renewal, but only if everyday life first explores the "confusion between the real in human terms and the real in capitalist terms" (127). Reclaiming the everyday is a project of Marxist economic analysis and ideology critique. For Certeau, on the other hand, the issue is not one that is dialectical, but one that is porous. According to the theories of Certeau, individuals in the practice of life create "a discreteness, whether by making choices of the signifiers of the spatial 'language' or by displacing them through the use he makes of them" (98-99). It is this sense of the everyday that wins out in Warhol, in the EPI, and in *The Velvet Underground*: the use they make of the objects and the space then determines how they attempt to reclaim the everyday from the mass culture in which they are immersed.

Lefebvre's everyday falls into the dualist binary of inside/outside, that there is a completely unclaimed and untouched authentic "everyday" that can be reclaimed through a concerted attack by the vanguard on capitalist mass culture. This does not capture the artistic practice of *The Velvet Underground*, who instead engage in a Certeau-ian repurposing, and engage with Benjamin's "trash aesthetics" as a way of creating new relationships with the environment. But Lefebvre should not be completely abandoned: his "thought-action" still hangs over any artistic practice that attempts to reclaim the everyday. It is this thought-action that reveals the undercurrent of behaviors. It is when this thought-action is allowed to surface that a person's behaviors express the liberated desire that bubbles up from beneath the repressive banality of the everyday in mass culture. In short, the everyday is a site where our desires can be actualized if we engage a practice of "walking" (a metaphor for immediate lived experience)

that is open to the possibility of moment-to-moment transformation that comes from the re-purposing of everyday experience.

In constructing the practice of The Velvet Underground as an avant-gardeist site that attempts to re-claim the everyday from mass-culture, the first and most important thing to do is to remember the reason for the bohemian's flight to the city: the suburbs were seen as boring and monolithic sites of capitalist commoditization. The cities might also have been commoditized sites, but they were multiple in their nature, heterogeneous instead of homogeneous. This is similar to the approach that The Velvet Underground took in finding a commercial outlet: reject the monolithic and embrace the multiple. Re-purpose the products and production lines of capitalist culture for a use that can explore paths formerly forbidden.

In fact, everything that The Velvet Underground did seemed to suggest not that they were rejecting commercialization, but that they were looking for alternative methods to find that commercial space. This has interesting applications to the idea of the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde: if Peter Bürger is correct in his assertion that the avant-garde attacked the idea of art as an institution, then that would include all of the trappings that come with the discipline being institutionalized. Education and instruction in the discipline would become institutionalized, as would the modes of production of the artifacts the institution creates. But further, the systems of exchange and finance that govern the institution would also be under attack; it is here that we can connect the avant-gardeist practice of the Surrealists and Dadaists to the neo-avant-gardeist practice of The Velvet Underground. Their attack on the institution of art (in its instantiation as music) was clear—Reed's vitriol aimed at the psychedelic music scene is evidence of that. But in every way, as we shall see, the members of The Velvet Underground

sought not to remove themselves from commercial consideration, but to engage in commercialism through subversive channels.

The first area to investigate when considering the relationship of The Velvet Underground to commercial culture is an area that we have already examined, namely their location. According to media critic Richard Witts:

The reason why the Velvets wanted to be part of the [Greenwich] Village circle was that artists who lived, worked, or socialized there (painters, writers, musicians, dancers, and later film-makers) dealt with truly new art forms and concepts, yet—instead of courting failure in terms of sales and public interest—some were astoundingly successful in terms of fame or finance, or both. (6)

The Greenwich Village and East Village scenes were zones of success, at least as far as a neo-avant-garde is concerned. And at the time of The Velvet Underground's residency in the Lower East Side, one of those success stories was Andy Warhol.

### **WARHOL, THE FACTORY, AND THE EXPLODING PLASTIC INEVITABLE**

The members of The Velvet Underground were aware of Andy Warhol and the underground film scene that had been developing in the East Village; when Tony Conrad's "discovery" of the book titled *The Velvet Underground* led to Reed, Cale, Morrison, and original drummer Angus MacLise to adopt the name for their band, it pleased Morrison because it reminded him of the underground film scene (Witts, Bockris). MacLise had even been in an underground film by director Piero Heliczer, and had contacts in the underground film industry. Through these contacts, The Velvet Underground was part of a Heliczer film, which was itself filmed for a CBS news piece hosted by Walter Cronkite.

Something was happening in New York City in the early 1960s: film-makers, dancers, musicians, and artists were coalescing into a “happening scene,” and part of that was The Velvet Underground. They had secured a residency at a small club called the Café Bizarre which was in the Village. Unfortunately, original drummer Angus MacLise had quit the band, because he didn’t like the idea that “gigging” in a formal sense meant that club owners and promoters could tell them when to start playing and when to stop. The final straw for MacLise was the offer of seventy-five dollars in payment for a gig; as a purist, MacLise found accepting money for music distasteful. But the rest of the band did not share MacLise’s opinions. MacLise fits perfectly into the mythic idea of the neo-avant-garde as holding artistic integrity sacred, refusing to “sell out” for commercial gain. MacLise might be seen as an ally of Lefebvre in this respect, as he was attempting to address the relationship of the real as capital while addressing the real as human practice. Of course, that sentiment can only take a creative artist so far: The Velvet Underground are known for their impact on music and culture, while MacLise, though a poet, musician, and sculptor in his own right, is now known primarily as having once been the drummer for The Velvet Underground.

This exposes the central problematic issue for the “authentic” neo-avant-garde creators of culture in modern capitalism: avant-garde culture still requires the mechanisms of cultural production. And in postwar capitalism, those mechanisms of production were becoming more intertwined with American culture itself. These problems of artistic representation and material production are further problematized by the discussion of “social class,” which can no longer be avoided. According to Douglas B. Holt’s essay “Does Cultural Capital Structure American

Consumption?” there is a strong link between consumption patterns and social class. Holt writes:

To be “cultured” is a potent social advantage in American society, providing access to desirable education, occupations, social networks, and spouses. Conversely, to grow up in conditions that deny the accumulation of cultural capital leads to exclusion from these privileged social circles and condescension and demands of deference from elites—a form of “symbolic violence”...that is rarely acknowledged because tastes are understood as idiosyncratic choices. (246)

In Holt’s analysis, we can see MacLise’s decision to leave the band as one that comes from a “cultured” standpoint that no longer holds true in modern art: the idea that the artist should be “above” capitalism. This attitude might have been valid for Romantic poets like Lord Byron who were financially self-sufficient, or for writers and artists who received patronage for their talents. But the rise of modern bourgeois capitalism with its division of labor and specialization of tasks has made patronage less likely; art must now compete with other forms of entertainment in a marketplace (Bürger). MacLise was unwilling to create his musical art in an environment where financial interests were taken into account, but the other members of the band had no such problems.

Not only did the remainder of the band find selling their art acceptable, they embraced the Café Bizarre residency previously described and took paying gigs wherever they could be found, including one at Summit High School in Summit, New Jersey. However, the band members had no illusions that their music would find a wide audience. Sterling Morrison claimed that, “all that was going on in Manhattan in the early ‘60s were those slick midtown club acts like Joey Dee and the Starlighters who wore matching suits. So we decided to forget about competing and just play songs we liked” (Bockris, 20). The intention was not to avoid commercial outlets, but instead to find commercial outlets that were “clued in” to the same cultural wavelength

that the Velvets were on. Those commercial outlets did exist, but as Morrison implied, they were not the “top-of-the-line” outlets. The Velvets would have to accept venues that were more attuned to their particular social circle. To be attuned to those outlets means to be able to perceive the art in ways that are different from the institutionalized perceptions; new modes of attention must be brought to bear on the avant-gardeist practices, not only by the avant-garde and the audience, but also the channels of production that enable the avant-garde to reach an audience. The everyday real and the capitalist real are not dialectical opposites engaged in a “push-pull” relationship, as Lefebvre thought; instead, the everyday real and the capitalist real exist simultaneously. Sometimes, their borders cross. Other times, they do not. Knowing which one is which then becomes an important element in the practice of everyday life.

It is important to note first that The Velvet Underground was not rejecting capitalism so much as they were rejecting certain modes and formulations of capitalism. They had no interest in wearing matching suits and crooning love songs, nor did they have any interest in being part of the California psychedelic sound. Instead, they insisted upon making the music that they liked, and trusting that a network of like-minded people existed. This did tend to bring them into conflict with commercial outlets that wanted musicians to do what they were told; according to Victor Bockris, “The band were pretty much fed up... and wanted to get fired [from the Café Bizarre], so when the manager told them if they played ‘Black Angel’s Death Song’ one more time they’d be asked to leave, they cranked out their best version ever” (23). They were, of course, fired on the spot. That was all right, because the band had found a social network

that was more in tune with what they had hoped to do: two days before the firing, they had met Andy Warhol and been tentatively accepted into Warhol's Factory scene.

The Velvet Underground was always keenly aware of their financial and commercial status and needs. They understood the need to play paying gigs if they wanted to remain a viable band, and they were always looking for appropriate venues. But they also understood what they were not, and primarily that was a pop band that would ever gain a mainstream following. It is this stubborn avoidance of changing to fit a dominant mode of production while always actively courting alternative or outsider modes of cultural production that set a standard for many bands, film-makers, writers, and artists who would follow in the years after The Velvet Underground. Their practice of the everyday did not avoid capitalism completely, but sought out capitalist modes that were in line with their own needs and desires. They enacted a practice of walking not unlike the characters in the lyrics of "Run, Run, Run". Specifically, they found a restless, mobile mode of production that enabled them to keep in motion both physically and psychically. For example, rather than going to record labels with demo tapes and lots of hopes, they were able to shop around a fully-completed first record that was recorded, mixed, and ready for packaging.

It would seem that avant-gardeist is in constant tension between commoditization and integrity, and it must embrace both while *seeming* to privilege integrity over commercialism: Dadaists held art shows and created installation pieces that were intended to be bought; the Surrealists created journals and magazines meant to push their aesthetic style in commoditized terms. While Bürger does not place Bauhaus within the avant-gardeist tradition, it was a

movement that questioned the accepted discourses of art and architectural design. And it, too, was interested in bringing its artistic product and practice to the marketplace.

The figure who helped bring the artistic goals and the commercial possibilities of The Velvet Underground together in one site was Andy Warhol. Warhol had been looking for a musical component to add to his underground films (Bockris), and his business partner had seen The Velvet Underground perform at the Café Bizarre. Warhol was a figure who, if the everyday was that of Lefebvre, could be very problematic because Warhol blurred the lines between art and commerce. Warhol was neo-avant-garde (in Bürger's sense of the term) and he was part of the culture-industry, having been associated both with the Pop Art movement and with the underground film movement. He was also a polarizing figure, with some Americans finding him fascinating, while others finding him dreadful (Lippard).

Part of the difficulties with Warhol's status as a cultural figure might have come from the fact that his sexuality was part of his persona, something that was still taboo in the 1960s. Cultural critic Pierre Bourdieu suggested in "The Aesthetic Sense as the Sense of Distinction" that "Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes" (205). By attaching themselves to Warhol, The Velvet Underground marked themselves as belonging to a specific social class. That social class was tolerant of sexual and lifestyle differences, and embraced a specific neo-avant-gardeist ethos that seemed to the culture at large as "libertine." But The Velvet Underground would work hard to retain a distinct sense of individual artistic creation, one that moved in similar ways to Warhol's Factory, but was its own entity—the Velvets re-purposed their commercial and artistic relationship with a specific artist for new needs. Warhol was less interested in re-claiming an unmediated everyday life

experience than he was in understanding what Roger Cook describes in his essay “Andy Warhol, Capitalism, Culture, and Camp” as “the expansion of education and the intrusion of mass cultural forms into everyday life” (71). For Warhol, there was no such thing as an everyday that was free of commercial taint. Warhol was the “ragpicker” of Benjamin’s Modernity. And through him, The Velvet Underground became ragpickers, too.

This ragpicking culture that re-purposed the detritus of culture into a patchwork whole was a culture of hybridity and mixing, a thrown-together assortment of “high” and “low” that acknowledged both, but bowed to neither. Richard Witts suggests that Warhol was seen as part of a “degenerate” New York City art scene (Witts, 96), and that the Warhol scene (and, by extension, The Velvet Underground) were part of the gay subculture of New York City (Witts, 96). While this certainly would not have helped The Velvet Underground in the ‘60s, this association with the gay subculture would become part of the tolerance for multiplicity and heterogeneity that would mark this bohemian cool as “cutting edge” in later years; “cutting edge” is the kind of forward thinking culture that often finds itself labeled “avant-garde.” The avant-garde is, after all, the leading edge of forward-most part of an army or a movement.

Warhol was young, hip, and urban. But most importantly, Warhol was confrontational: Warhol intentionally took on a persona that enacted camp in a culture that found homosexuality abhorrent and degenerate. But there were also problems in the collaboration between Warhol and the Velvets: while The Velvet Underground seemed to see itself in opposition to the “standard” modes of cultural production, Warhol seemed to embrace production as part of his art. According to art scholar Lucy R. Lippard’s analysis of the Pop Art movement titled, appropriately enough, *Pop Art*, “Andy Warhol was criticized in the early days

of Pop because he said he wanted to be a machine. This was misunderstood by a society whose long-standing values are threatened by mechanization” (10). Lippard’s assertion that society’s values were threatened by mechanization is an odd one, because American society’s values of expansion, growth, and progress are entirely compatible with mechanization. Instead, we should perhaps return to Thomas Frank’s assertion that the cultural discussion of the 1950s and 1960s in America included hand-wringing over how corporate culture and mass production was causing a crisis of creativity (Frank, 12).

In this light, Lippard’s comments make more sense. The Pop Art movement found Warhol’s assertion that he wanted to be a machine threatening to creativity and to the hand-made nature of artistic products. Warhol embraced screen printing and other design forms that allowed him to reproduce images in machine-like fashion; this practice called into question the very idea of an “artist.” In fact, Warhol’s assertion that he wanted to be a machine could be interpreted in the sense that Bürger interpreted the Dadaist and Surrealist project, specifically it was an attack on the institution of art itself. While the Surrealists and Dadaists were questioning the role of the artist and the institution of art, Warhol was questioning the idea that commerce and mass production remove something “authentic” about art. It is important to note that many of Warhol’s projects were not even “Warhol’s” projects, but projects he envisioned that were undertaken by someone else; his art studio was called The Factory for a reason. Warhol experimented with the very nature of the relationship between art and commercialism in ways that forced people to reconsider the act of the individual artist. Where did Warhol’s artistic contributions begin and end? If the idea was Warhol’s, but the project was accomplished by another under Warhol’s direction, was it still a “Warhol” piece? This

questioning of the relationships between the institution of art and the role of the artist were very much in the spirit of Dada.

But Warhol was putting this inquiry into the service of everyday life: while Bürger might be right that art in the sense of “high” art had indeed been removed from the everyday lives of real people, there is one form of art that is very much present and immediate in the everyday lives of real people. Advertising, and its psychic twin design, are present in American life to an overwhelming degree. It would be foolish to say that this form of art is not an absolute everyday; unless one is Amish or lives on a commune, advertising is present daily. Our clothes bear advertisements, public transportation has advertising plastered upon it, and television (the ever-present mass media machine) relies upon it. Warhol understood the everyday in advertising terms—he had worked in advertising and commercial art before opening The Factory.

Into this problematic artistic and commercial practice came The Velvet Underground. Warhol was not looking to produce a band for the sake of music itself; according to Richard Witts, “an old theater producer called Michael Myerberg phoned [Warhol] in November 1965 with a plan to have Warhol host a discothèque he was building” (108). Warhol had previously contemplated the merger of sound and visuals and found the idea of managing a band intriguing. One of the Factory regulars knew about The Velvet Underground’s residency at the Café Bizarre, and the connection was made. But to Warhol, The Velvet Underground was not simply a rock band. They were an artistic project, and Warhol began molding them right away.<sup>3</sup>

Warhol’s primary “molding” of the band came in turning them not into a rock band, but part of an all-out media spectacle. This spectacle became known as The Exploding Plastic Inevitable,

and placed The Velvet Underground into the context of a full sensory assault, including films, slide shows, lights of various kinds and intensities, other sonic stimuli, and dancers (often with props), all competing for sensory focus. Because of the nature of the EPI, “standard” venues were not always possible for the multi-media event. Warhol groomed the band to become part of his artistic practice.

Knowing that they were being groomed seems not to have been problematic for The Velvet Underground. Despite the cultural myths of “integrity” and “authenticity,” the band seemed willing to allow Warhol to have input. Here, then, we have another element of how this tactical bohemian avant-garde works in a commercial sense: it does not disparage commercial ties or commercial “meddling,” as long as those commercial ties are similarly “outsider” (or tactically-oriented) and the commercial ties are trusted. Warhol was not a music business “insider,” and he had no knowledge of how to manage a band. What Warhol was, in the eyes of The Velvet Underground, was a creative artist with a compelling vision that was compatible with their own. In fact, the relationship between Warhol and The Velvet Underground might be seen as “mutually advantageous use” and mutual re-purposing. After all, by managing The Velvet Underground, Warhol was able to expand his artistic project; by being connected with Warhol, the Velvets gained immediate neo-avant-garde credibility. At the same time, the Velvets were able to court an “outsider” status: while Andy Warhol was a popular artist with great cultural capital, he was not a Brian Epstein or a proto-Malcolm McLaren. Warhol was an outsider in the music business community. This is perhaps another quality of the tactical nature of reclaiming something of the everyday from mass culture, and something that The Velvet Underground held onto: it courts “outsider” status, but in a flirtatious way. To be truly “outside” keeps one

from having any access to the culture industry's modes of production. But to find alternative modes of production in tangentially related areas preserves a sense of "authenticity" and ideological purity. This "purity" might get us a step closer to understanding Lefebvre's "thought-action:" it is that which helps to unify ideological purity with immediate practice in a way that is as un-alienating as possible. It is important to note that later movements attempting to draw on this same neo-bohemian authenticity would do the same thing; many of the punk bands of the '70s and the post-punk bands of the '80s would form their own record companies, thus courting an outsider status while actually becoming the very thing that they seemed to rail against. Similarly, during the punk explosion of the late '70s, bands would manipulate record deals as the Sex Pistols would do with EMI Records.

But the acceptance by The Velvet Underground of Warhol's management should not be taken to mean that the Velvets were always pleased with commercial concessions. For example, Warhol's business partner Paul Morrissey did not think that Lou Reed had the stage presence necessary to be a rock band's lead singer and front man (Bockris, 21). Morrissey and Warhol thought that a recent addition to the Factory scene, German singer, actress, and hanger-on Nico, would make for a more powerful stage presence. Nico was, after all, a former model; she stood nearly six feet tall with Nordic features and long, blonde hair. Morrissey and Warhol thought that Nico would make for a powerful presence in the group. According to critic Richard Witts, Reed was not pleased with the suggestion. Quoting Morrissey, Witts writes of Reed's reaction, "Right away that sour little Lou Reed bristled. He was hostile to Nico from the start" (Witts, 41).

But that did not keep the band from accepting Nico's place in the project, even as an "extra." (The name of The Velvet Underground's first album was, tellingly, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, in violation of the normal practice of putting the named singer first.) Despite Reed's displeasure with the idea of having a singer imposed on them by Warhol and Morrissey, Nico became part of the band. Reed even wrote "Femme Fatale" and the touching "I'll Be Your Mirror" for her to sing, and "Sunday Morning" was originally written for her, though Reed sang lead on the song instead. Nico was even given the song "All Tomorrow's Parties" to sing, despite it having been worked up by Reed and partner Cale before The Velvet Underground even existed. The Velvet Underground recognized opportunities when they arose, and they enacted an intentional repurposing of material and conditions to suit the immediate needs of the artistic and commercial practice. The Velvet Underground, through their association with the artistic practice of Andy Warhol, demonstrates what Certeau calls the two moves in the "ways of making", which are to "cut out" and to "turn over" (62).

The first of these ways of making is to "[cut] out certain practices from an unidentified fabric, in such a way as to treat them as *a separate population, forming a coherent whole but foreign to the place in which the theory [or practice] is produced*" (62). This means that The Velvet Underground cut pieces from a fabric of practice that was associated with Andy Warhol's Factory. The Factory was a place of tactical power, because it was outside of the institutions of art as Bürger would have it. But The Velvet Underground, as people "brought in" to The Factory by Warhol's fiat, became tactically located within a matrix of strategic power: Warhol had seized the role of manager and producer, roles that gave him official, strategic power. The Velvet Underground cut pieces out of that strategic power, and made them their own. But the

Velvets then “turned over” the piece that had been cut out—they made these pieces their own, re-purposing them for their own needs and uses.

### THE EVERYDAY AND THE REAL: DADA, ABEX, AND FLUXUS

Repurposing material was not new to The Velvet Underground, of course. To Walter Benjamin, repurposing was the nature of modern culture, as we have seen with his figure of the ragpicker. But repurposing could be seen perhaps most clearly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dadaist collage work, where bits of existing work such as newspapers, colored strips of paper, found objects, or other materials were glued to paper. The idea was to create a new whole out of old work, one that would use disjointed individual pieces to create a new



1. Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, 1919

coherent whole. In this way, collage was attempting to create the same effect that free jazz would create a few decades later. The Dadaist use of collage has similarities to the use of filmic montage as well, and would have an influence on the sensibilities of the modern artists of postwar New York’s art scene. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City even hosted an exhibition in 1961 called “Art of Assemblage” that put this post-war collage-like work on display. According to art historian and critic Lucy R. Lippard, the show was “[a] comprehensive and historical round-up of the many aspects of ‘junk culture’, the broad collage concept, and aspects of post-Abstract Expressionism” (72). And it was this artistic climate of assemblage, collage, and “junk culture” art that The Velvet Underground would embrace.

The dominant artistic movement of New York City in the postwar era was Abstract Expressionism, or AbEx. This movement made a specific decision to situate itself within a tradition that reaches back to Surrealism, but marks itself distinctly in its relationship to that movement. According to Daniel Belgrad's text, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, "Abstract expressionists' interest in surrealism emphasized the technique of automatism, or the effort to paint spontaneously in order to allow the structures of the unconscious to manifest themselves as the subjects of art" (35). However, according to Belgrad, "[t]hey preferred the more abstract and automatic paintings of Joan Miro and Andre Masson to the carefully rendered dreamscapes of Salvador Dali" (35). The art world of New York City, then, was made up of "junk culture" on the one hand and spontaneous painting as a way of liberating the unconscious on the other.

This artistic project would please Reed greatly, as he was a fan of the spontaneous writing of the Beats and the liberated unconscious of free jazz; he also had a fondness for the found objects of New York City's "junk culture," though this was presented in lyrical form (through his interest in his distanced representations of city characters, for example). This does make for a strange match between Reed and Warhol on the surface, because as Richard Witts explains, Warhol came from a more realist artistic perspective that originated in commercial art. Witts writes that Warhol "wanted to be known as a 'real artist'" but was "easily dismissed by the critics, who [in 1952] were pondering over the New York phenomenon of abstract expressionism and had little time for the representational work of a commercial sketcher" (99). This would change by the early Sixties, but at first Warhol was seen as being soft and effeminate compared to the manly and physical work of AbEx. Jackson Pollock's work, for example, would come to be called "action painting," and was celebrated for its physicality and

power. In many ways, Reed's work had more in common with the spontaneous aesthetic of liberating the unconscious that could be seen in abstract expressionist work. But Warhol and Reed did have much in common.

One common area for the two men was in their sexuality: Warhol identified himself as gay and engaged in a purposefully campy representation of his sexuality (Cook, 67-68); Reed also identified himself as gay from a young age, though he performed a more masculine aspect of his sexuality and self-identified as bisexual later in life (Witts). To return to the issue of Reed's flight from the suburbs, part of his liberation might have been in the discovery that he could participate in an openly gay subculture. For both Warhol and Reed, sexuality was a subversive aspect of their practice. If the heteronormative aspects of culture were strategic, then homosexuality, whether masculine or "camp" and "swishy" were tactical, existing in a relationship of wandering. Much of modern culture's changing attitudes toward heteronormativity can perhaps be traced to Warhol as a successful openly gay producer of culture who refused to subject his sexuality to heteronormative expressions. Warhol and many of his "superstars" (including, at times, The Velvet Underground) "were practically engaged... in the performative subversion of forms of capital... associated with heteronormativity and patriarchal capitalism in the sociopolitical and cultural field" (Cook, 69).

While Reed and the Velvets were undermining standard modes of musical production through their association with Warhol, Warhol himself was undermining standard modes of cultural perception of homosexuality with his aggressive performance of camp. Cook suggests that Warhol might have engaged in a process of social exchange with the members of his Factory scene. Edie Sedgwick, as an example, was a beautiful heiress with a family who could be

traced back to the Eighteenth Century, while Warhol saw himself as unattractive (Cook, 69) and was a first-generation American of Eastern European extraction. Her place as a photogenic heterosexual gave her cultural capital that Warhol coveted, while Warhol's artistic "authenticity" (which existed in a complicated relationship with his performance of camp) was his source of cultural capital. In associating with each other, they gained at least partial access to each others' cultural capital. Warhol, in performing camp while maintaining a position of artistic authority, made it possible to be openly (and perhaps stereotypically) gay in the American art world. That was problematic previously: Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, for example, ended their romantic relationship because of social pressure placed upon them by the heteronormative culture around them (Cook, 69).

Reed might have participated in this cultural exchange with Warhol. While Reed did understand his sexuality as being open and fluid, his performance of sexuality included more of a masculine swagger. His performance of gender was more stereotypically "macho." Warhol might have gained some more masculine energy for the Factory scene with The Velvet Underground, while Reed gained more of an entrance into New York City's gay culture. Doing so allowed Reed and the Velvets to operate tactically within a matrix of strategic power that Warhol had created in The Factory. Through this attempt to re-purpose his relationship with Warhol, Reed was taking hold of momentary, lived experience in ways that allowed his everyday subjectivity, his "thought-action," to be more openly presented. To gain this access, however, the Velvets had to become part of a larger artistic project.

As Cook notes, Warhol came from a working-class background (70), and this might have an important impact for the project of the everyday. If authenticity is, in fact, an important aspect

of modern bohemian and neo-avant-garde (or “cutting edge”) as the rhetoric would indicate, and if cultural capital can in fact be exchanged as if it were a commodity, then The Velvet Underground can “borrow” authenticity as a result of the channels of production they used. The individual can engage in tactical behaviors which allow him or her (or the group, in the case of the Velvets) to develop their responses to their environments in ways that help to connect them to lived experiences—even experiences that they themselves did not have. Warhol can gain a degree of heteronormativity through his connection with Edie Sedgwick, and a bit of macho from Reed’s swagger; Reed and the Velvets can gain artistic authenticity through Warhol. They re-purposed each other, and in so doing re-oriented their relationship with their everyday lived experience.

Warhol’s authenticity in part comes from his working class background; when Warhol painted his famous Campbell’s Soup cans, he was recalling an iconic image from his youth. This should not be taken to mean that his appropriation of iconic commercial imagery was lacking in irony. But instead, it does mean that he understood the visual and cultural rhetoric of advertising and “low culture” imagery. Irony is, for the purposes of this aspect of everyday life, irrelevant. Warhol knew commercial culture, as it was part of his everyday experience. So when he incorporated commercial imagery and “low culture” icons into his work, there was no perception of fakery or distance. Even if he was ironic, it was not an irony of distance. According to Cook, “What was simply ‘material’ for [the artists of the ‘50s and early ‘60s] was for [Warhol] invested with meaning emanating from intense longing, the product of social deprivation. This makes the accusations of his naiveté or cynicism toward capitalist consumer culture a product of the lack of social imagination on the part of middle-class culture” (70). If Warhol

incorporated consumer culture images in his art, it was not from a lack of nuanced understanding of the culture, nor was it a result of an affected posture. It was because he actually knew how the images worked deeply.

Warhol's use of consumer culture's visual rhetoric might be seen in a linguistic sense, then. Warhol knew the language of consumer culture and "spoke" it like a native, while many of the other artists working at the same time "spoke" the language in heavily accented ways that used native idioms clumsily. Warhol's "authenticity" came from his ingrained position in working-class culture. He was the first-generation American from a working class background who "made it." But in making it, he became what The Velvet Underground seemed to stand against: commercial success and consumer culture.

Of course, any suggestion that Warhol's work is simplistic must be immediately rejected. While Warhol's Pop Art was finding an audience, there was another side to Warhol's production. In his Death and Disaster series of art ('63-'67), Warhol created disturbing images of American culture, including representations of car crashes and electric chairs. According to professor Michael J. Golec's "Media Aesthetics, Sense Perception, and Andy Warhol's *Blue Electric Chair*", "Warhol's *Blue Electric Chair* acted on space and body in ways that constituted a media aesthetics as a register of heightened perceptual responsiveness" (26). This perceptual responsiveness was unnerving to many audiences, and served to force new perceptions onto the audience. Golec suggested that "Warhol's media aesthetics challenged viewers of *Blue Electric Chair* to construct an ethical position—as if to ask, 'Where do you stand in relation to this?'" (26). But Warhol did not offer any clue as to where *he* stood in relation to it. His question did not provide any answers or any insight as to how the audience should answer it for

themselves. Instead, Warhol posed a distanced question, and asked the audience to answer the question in their own way. Warhol does not overtly comment on the meaning or on how one should relate to his work. He simply presents the work, letting his lack of comment in some way actually *become* his comment.

This, of course, is a point of connection between the visual art of Andy Warhol and the lyrical art of Lou Reed. If the lyrics of “Run, Run, Run” present a detached view without overt comment, then Warhol’s Death and Disaster series does the same. I have already suggested that detached observation without direct comment is an aspect of the avant-garde that connects directly to everyday lived experience; in setting up the detached comment, the audience must re-consider their immediate understanding of their environment and their connection to the everydayness of the artistic site. Lefebvre would have this as being merely “uncanny,” but it is this momentary uncanny that, when practiced repeatedly, can create new relationships with everyday life.

Warhol unites this detached observation with an artistic voice who natively “speaks” the language of the consumer. In doing so, perhaps Warhol was placing his native consumerist language up for view without comment. To return to Golec’s analysis, Warhol was asking the audience how they stand in relation to consumer culture as well. This distanced observation without overt comment allows the audience to read into it what they will. For those who want to see an ironic comment on commercial culture, they will see an ironic comment on commercial culture. For those who want to see a seamless blending of “high” and “low” culture, that is what they will see. For those who want to see cynicism or camp, that is what

they will find. Warhol, like Reed, turns a distanced observation into a site in which any number of meanings can be inscribed.

But this should not be taken to mean that either Warhol or Reed were creating a blank slate. The blank slate has little artistic value beyond giving the audience room to impose their own values upon the work. Instead, the work of both Warhol and Reed could be interpreted as the attempt to create a new kind of space, one where the audience has to fundamentally restructure the ways in which they perceive a work. The Exploding Plastic Inevitable created a space where perceptions were challenged through a process of total sensory immersion. Branden W. Joseph's essay "My Mind Split Open: Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable" describes the EPI as creating a "dislocating, environmental montage where different media interfered and competed with one another, accelerating their distracting, shock-like effects to produce the three-dimensional, multimedia equivalent of a moiré" (257). A moiré is a particular interference pattern that occurs when, for example, two grids are overlapped at slightly different angles. In the case of the EPI, the moiré serves a particular purpose; Joseph describes the effect as "one of disruptive multiplicity or layering" (240). The fact that it is a "disruptive" multiplicity is particularly important because it serves to create a space of challenge.

The essence of commercial society is not to distract, but to focus. If an advertising message is not clear, then the audience might be unclear on what product to buy or how they are to relate to the product. But it would be equally wrong to suggest that the EPI wanted to distract. Instead, perhaps the EPI was meant to create a different kind of focus. In his text *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali suggests that "[m]usic, as a mirror of society, calls this truism to our attention: society is much more than economic categories, Marxist or

otherwise, would have us believe" (4). Attali wants us to think that music serves a socio-political purpose, specifically one that breaks down barriers and systems of understanding. If Attali is right, then music (or any art), is far more than just entertainment. It is a way of understanding the world. And, to connect Attali to Bürger, that way of understanding the world is *inherently* avant-garde, because it asks the audience to reconsider its relationships to institutionalized systems of power. But when any system or praxis becomes codified and concretized, it loses its immediacy and simply fades into the background. We pay attention to that which is strange, unusual, or out of the ordinary. So, if music is to perform the task that Attali suggests it does, it must be constantly expanding its borders and moving in new directions. The ordinary must be banished for the sake of the unusual. This forces us to consider the relationship of "the unusual" to "the everyday." And the force that connects the two is the process of reclaiming and repurposing old material for new uses.

#### **NEO-AVANT-GARDEIST PRACTICE AS RECLAMATION**

Popular music, like any art that is to be sold, must appeal to a broad enough audience that record sales (or, today, music downloads) can pay for the process of recording, production, and promotion. As is the case with any segmented market, one does not have to have a "hit" to make money. If a market is big enough, even a relatively minor-selling item can have high financial returns. Music is a commodity, then, with the standard economic concerns applied to it that are applied to any commodity. In a sense, music has become a "widget." According to Attali's analysis, "music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its

consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning” (5). This analysis, of course, calls to mind the analysis of Bürger in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* when he writes that Modernity has achieved “the total subordination of work contents to profit motives, and a fading of the critical potencies of works in favor of a training in consumer attitudes” (30).

Turning an artistic form into a product, then, changes the form into something specialized in practice and generalized in consumption. Few can make art, but everyone can “appreciate” it. Unfortunately, that “appreciation” runs the gamut from active engagement with a work to passive consumption of it: when listening to a song, one can try to piece together meaning from the lyrics, listen to particular instruments, think casually about the time signature, or barely even pay attention to it, as well as hundreds of other reactions. These different ways of interacting with a work are described by Certeau in terms of “wandering lines” (xviii). Certeau describes the relationship of the consumer to the object consumed in the following way:

In the technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space. Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, supermarkets, or museum sequences), and although they remain subordinated to the prescribed syntactical forms (temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic orders of spaces, etc.), the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop. (xviii)

So while Attali and Bürger see the specialization of art and the generalization of consumption as restricting, Certeau sees possibilities in the consumption of materials created in a capitalist, technocratic mode. Certeau should not be read as openly embracing the liberation that comes from consumption. Instead, Certeau is recognizing that liberatory moments can exist, even in consumption of specialized forms.

But for Certeau to argue that moments of liberation exist is to first accept that there is something totalitarian from which escape is necessary. This does accept that both Bürger and Attali are at least somewhat correct in their analyses: cultural artifacts have been turned into objects of mass-production, and talking about them as having some kind of mystical aura of authenticity breaks down because of the reproduction of the object. Objects are no longer “authentic” when they stop being hand-made or developed in small batches. But to talk about the authenticity of a work of art and not acknowledge the systems of production that make it possible is to fail to grasp the material reality of the work.

That material reality of the work is further complicated by the fact that modern technocratic capitalist modes of production have performed their work on all aspects of human relations: as Attali points out, “music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society” (5). No aspect of human relations is free from commoditization. Attali argues that music can be a way of investigating human relations and problematizing capitalist modes of organization when he writes, “[m]usic is prophecy. Its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code” (11). Bürger argues that the avant-gardeist movements of the early Twentieth Century saw themselves in a similar light, and that “[t]he avant-garde not only negates the category of individual production [the great artist at his work] but also that of individual *reception*” (53). In other words, the avant-garde believed itself to be engaging in a practice that explored the entire range of possibilities in the given code of bourgeoisie art—both in terms of the creator of a work and of the audience for that work.

Within this context, returning to Certeau is insightful. If the purpose of a modern art is to attempt to recapture authenticity by calling into question the normal modes of capitalist technocracy, then one must ask a simple question: how do you propose to call those modes into question? If mass-culture capitalism is all around, then arguing for anything other than mass-culture capitalism will be shocking and incomprehensible to most people. But further, any attempt to find an audience for one's art automatically requires branding and a submission to the realities of the mass-culture marketplace. In short, it is not possible to step outside of capitalist mass-culture in any meaningful way and still hope to have one's art produced. Certeau would argue that stepping outside is not necessary, or even possible; instead, a new attention must be brought to how those artistic forms are developed and used. According to Certeau, "proverbs (and other discourses) are *marked* by uses; they offer to analysis the *imprints of acts* or processes of enunciation; they signify the *operations* whose object they have been, operations which are relative to situations" (21). In other words, mass-culture has, in fact, colonized everything. But mass-culture is multiple. What the "end user" does with a mass-produced artifact determines much of the object's value. There are cracks and fissures in the objects of mass-produced culture, because what Steve Jobs intended for us to do with our iPads and what we actually use them for might not always be the same thing.

This, of course, should return us to the discussion of the city, with its cracks and fissures. Capitalism and commodity culture cannot be escaped by going to the city, but a multiple and heterogeneous commodity culture can be found there. So too in all products of consumer culture: if one looks hard enough, one can find sources of multiplicity, cracks and fissures. It is the neo-avant-gardeist project, then, to exploit those cracks and fissures wherever they can be

found in the processes of cultural production. In this way, Certeau is compatible with Attali. In considering the nature of the musician, Attali touches on the power of the musician to exploit cracks and fissures, because he himself is a figure of plurality. Attali writes:

The musician, like music, is ambiguous. He plays a double game. He is simultaneously *musicus* and *cantor*, reproducer and prophet. If an outcast, he sees society in a political light. If accepted, he is its historian, the reflection of its deepest values. He speaks of society and he speaks against it. (12)

The fragmented nature of the creative artist is something that we have already explored in the context of the avant-garde. The avant-gardeist is ambiguous and reveals the cracks and fissures in his subject as he also reveals them in himself. In this way, the avant-gardeist is a reflection of society: he is forward-thinking, engaging in “prophecy” (11) as Attali would have it. But Attali makes this claim universally for all musicians. To return to our specific source of inquiry, Attali would position both The Velvet Underground and Joey Dee and the Starlighters in the same category of “musician.” And despite their success with the single “Peppermint Twist”, The Starlighters were certainly not avant-garde as this project is constructing it.

Attali would have all musicians seen as prophets, no matter how they relate to mass culture. But the reality is that the neo-avant-garde stands in a dialectical relationship with mass culture: they cannot be separated, but instead are constantly pushing and pulling against one another. This construction is localized and situated. But this localization is often in conflict with itself: the nature of the everyday is to exist in *both* the tactical and the strategic matrices of power simultaneously.

This was certainly the case with The Velvet Underground. Lou Reed found his lyrical inspirations in the work of the Beats, but not in the co-opted, mass-culture version of the Beats represented by films like *The Beat Generation* (1959) or the cartoon book *Beat, Beat, Beat*

(1959). Reed's Beats were found in the small time peddlers and pushers of Kerouac's writing, as well as the "degenerate" work of William S. Burroughs. Reed found further inspiration in the poet Delmore Schwartz, who had been largely forgotten by the mid 1960s. Down-and-out figures fascinated Reed; renegades and weirdoes populated his lyrics, as well as much of his social circle. But Reed was not alone in his connection to outsiders and strange thinkers. John Cale, Reed's friend and musical partner who became the other dominating musical force of The Velvet Underground, had different tastes than Reed's, but his tastes favored outsiders as well: Cale was a student of music with a taste for experimental and minimalist composers like John Cage and La Monte Young. Cale was particularly interested for a brief period in the Fluxus movement, a movement that "considered that the role of their art—and it had a directly social role—was to criticize conventions and assumptions, and to do so by playing on the absurdity of situations" (Witts, 25). Fluxus was a movement with a strong sense of humor, in contrast to what was perceived as the humorless work of most modernist artists (Witts, 26).

The Fluxus movement positioned Cale as an outsider, similar to Reed but of a different flavor. Perhaps it could be said, then, that there is no one kind of "outsider" status that has more of a claim to being avant-garde than any other. To be outside is to be outside, pure and simple. But that does not seem to hold on a deeper analysis: the hippies associated with the San Francisco scene of the mid-60s were certainly not the avant-garde that is being explored here, nor do they seem interested in recapturing the everyday, but in *escaping it* (through the drug culture, or communal living); yet they consciously and deliberately positioned themselves outside of the standards of mass culture in America. But this gives an interesting insight to the kind of avant-garde that is at issue here. Specifically, the hippies were outsiders, but the Velvets

were a second-order of outsiders, rejected by mainstream culture but also rejected by (and themselves rejecting) the “counter-culture” of the hippies. The avant-garde of The Velvet Underground was that of the double-outsider.

Richard Witts suggests that the place The Velvet Underground held, that of the double-outsider, was a result of four specific aspects of the band’s personality: irrelevance, absorption versus observation, blatancy, and presence. In short, Witts suggests not that the band was irrelevant, but that their lyrics were irrelevant to the hippy/counter-culture project of social change; the band was not absorbed in the consciousness-expanding project of the hippy and counter-culture movements, but was observing characters and events in a detached way. Second, the issue of blatancy comes from the band’s unflinching and open look at drugs (“Heroin”), sado-masochism (“Venus in Furs”), and the down-and-out nature of New York City life (“Run, Run, Run”). Presence dealt with the all-out sensory assault that the Velvets could have on the perception, and deals with an inability of one sensory mode to capture the totality of the experience.

These four elements of The Velvet Underground’s neo-avant-garde project, then, were important elements in developing a kind of bohemian avant-garde that would try to position itself as an outsider culture. Further, the idea of a “double-outsider” status, that of being outside both mass culture and the prevailing winds of counter-cultural movements, would influence later examples of this urban avant-garde, including punk, cyberpunk, NoWave, and industrial/rivethead culture.

But that double-outsider status should not be taken to be a fixed an unalterable condition. One element of this particular neo-bohemian neo-avant-garde seems to be that the status of

the doubled outsider is fluid, moving through the porous borders of culture. Both punk rock and cyberpunk seemed to exist in latent forms, ready to burst forth as a temporary, revitalizing force. For a brief moment, this kind of urban re-purposed culture takes hold and seems to dominate the discourse. When The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, The Clash, and The Damned all rose to prominence, they forced the music community to deal with their presence. Love them or hate them, the music industry could not ignore the punks. A similar event happened in cyberpunk, as a handful of writers, most of whom knew each other, rose from obscurity to dominate the genre for a brief time. Critics were torn as to whether cyberpunk was a messianic revitalizing force in science fiction or if the movement was all style and no substance. But their appearance forced discussion. Another aspect of this bohemian avant-garde, then, is that its presence forces discussion. Just as the Surrealists and Dadaists that they would borrow from did before, the punks, the cyberpunks, and particularly The Velvet Underground forced a discussion to take place.

Forcing the discussion is another way of re-ordering perceptions. In order to make something part of the discourse, the thing being discussed must be acknowledged. The acknowledgement might be partial or based on inaccuracies and half-truths, but a recognition must occur. When this bohemian avant-garde suddenly can dominate a discourse and bring a new topic into discussion, it is because the topic has been brought to the forefront of people's attention. This is a key in the reclaiming of everyday experience, and of rehabilitating the thought-action: awareness must be brought.

This awareness was part of the artistic practice of The Velvet Underground, and connects to Witt's idea of "blatancy." When Verve records first released *The Velvet Underground and Nico*,

there were several taboo subjects that were being spoken of openly in pop music for the first time. But to truly consider the context of the Velvets' first album, it should be placed in a context. The year of The Velvet Underground's first album was a year of some very impressive musical releases, including the following:

The Doors: *The Doors*-- January, 1967

Jefferson Airplane: *Surrealistic Pillow*-- February, 1967

The Velvet Underground: *The Velvet Underground and Nico*-- March, 1967

The Grateful Dead: *The Grateful Dead*-- March, 1967

The Jimmy Hendrix Experience: *Are You Experienced?*-- May, 1967

Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention: *Absolutely Free*-- May, 1967

The Beatles: *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*-- June, 1967

The Incredible String Band: *The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion*-- July, 1967

Captain Beefheart's Magic Band: *Safe As Milk*-- September, 1967

Cream: *Disraeli Gears*-- November, 1967

Love: *Forever Changes*-- November, 1967

This partial list is simply meant to demonstrate the enormous range of new and challenging music that was finding itself being made at the time. What, specifically, did The Velvet Underground bring to the music world that made them so different from everyone else? The Velvet Underground's song "Heroin" is an immediate point to consider. The Velvets were not unique in writing a song that was about drug use. Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" was released as an album track one month before The Velvet Underground officially released "Heroin" and was also a "drug song." But the Jefferson Airplane track coded its references,

although in a code that was easy to crack. The song was an exploration of drug use in the context of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with lyrics like "One pill makes you larger/ And one pill makes you small/ But the ones that mother gives you/ don't do anything at all./ Go ask Alice/ When she's ten feet tall." The song carries literary pretensions and uses the second-person. The song winks at the audience, making them complicit and saying, "You're in this with me, you know."

"Heroin", on the other hand, carries no pretentious pseudo-literary references, nor does it wink at the audience. It is an unflinching first person account of heroin use, something that Reed knew from experience. Reed sings:

"I have made the big decision,  
I'm gonna try to nullify my life.  
'Cause when the blood begins to flow,  
Oh, when it shoots up the dropper's neck,  
When I'm closing in on death.

You can't help me, not you guys.  
Or all you sweet girls with all your sweet talk.  
You can all go take a walk.  
And I guess that I just don't know.  
And I guess that I just don't know."

"Heroin" does not try to code itself in references to Victorian literature, nor does it wink at the audience. It does not try to make the listener complicit, drawing the audience in. Instead, it simply presents one man's view of his reality (in the detached, matter-of-fact sense of the everyday we have explored previously). And to Reed, this was his everyday. It was the everyday, lived, material experience for many Americans (particularly lower-class, urban Americans). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was quite specifically **not** everyday lived reality. Heroin addiction, for far too many Americans, was; according to Eric C. Schneider's *Smack*:

*Heroin and the American City*, “in 1963, 48 percent of the nation’s 48,535 ‘active addicts’ listed in the federal narcotics registry resided [in New York City]” (10). And it was an everyday, lived reality that strategic powers did not want to confront.

Similarly, while songs like “The End” by The Doors did present challenging lyrics, they were often either ambiguous (like “Can you picture what will be/ So limitless and Free/ Desperately in need of some stranger’s hand”) or challenging, but still within the bounds of culture’s ability to accept (such as the Freudian lyrics, “Father, yes son, I want to kill you/ Mother, I want to...”; the Oedipal complex was well-established as a pop-psychology talking point). The Velvet Underground, in contrast, released the song “Venus in Furs”, which contained lyrics such as “Shiny, shiny, shiny boots of leather,/ Whiplash girlchild in the dark/ Comes in bells, your servant, don't forsake him./ Strike, dear mistress, and cure his heart.” While “The End” contains an unspoken but clear implication of Oedipal desire, it was a desire that at least had been given a voice by Freud. Sado-masochism, the theme of “Venus in Furs”, was still “underground” as far as American culture was concerned. And yet, it too was part of “everyday life” for some; Reed and Cale made extra money in the early days of their band by posing for magazines that catered to vaguely sado-masochistic impulses (Witts, 30). The Velvet Underground, when seen within the context of their time, exist in a strange place. Specifically, they tried to use their music to bring a new attention to lives that existed, but were being marginalized. They did for heroin users, members of New York City’s gay culture, and the decadent underground life what they did for Teenage Mary in “Run, Run, Run”: they gave a voice to the everyday lived experience of those who were voiceless.

But if The Velvet Underground existed within a context of musical contemporaries, it should also be remembered that they themselves emerged from a context. The lyrics of the Beats, the experimentalism of Fluxus, and the “good time” rock and roll of the ‘50s all can be detected in The Velvet Underground (Witts). And when these came together, a new sound developed that took the institution of art and music by surprise. This form of avant-garde practice, then, is an insurgency. It is a group or a movement that cobbles together bits and pieces in the “trash aesthetics” of Benjamin, and forces its way into the discussion, rising from a position of the double-outsider to interrupt the discussion and re-set the agenda. This everyday practice wages an insurgency, and performs what Jean Baudrillard called, in his essay “The Spirit of Terrorism” a “terrorist reversal of the situation.” In this analysis, when a system develops too much power, or takes too much authority onto itself, then outsiders have no option but to change the rules. This can only be accomplished through shock, by stepping completely outside of the discourses and normative structures of the time. This reversal serves to seize control of a situation by changing the rules under which the situation normally operates.

It is this that The Velvet Underground chose to do. In signing on with Andy Warhol and the Factory scene, the Velvets understood that they were not going to be a part of the music industry as it was normally understood. By being part of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable and all that the EPI entailed, they knew that it would be difficult (if not impossible) to play “normal” venues (Bockris, 22). By writing songs that eschewed the standard psychedelic hippy fare, they understood that they would be outside standard channels of consumption. But that was all right, because the Velvets knew that they were not going to be able to compete with the fashions of the day. Instead, they took an opportunity to change the rules. Of course, that kind

of practice is at best localized and temporary, as the system of capitalist technocracy and mass-culture is capable of co-opting and incorporating any such insurgent movement. But this kind of everyday practice of the avant-garde always frames itself as an insurgency, complete with a mentality that is less “us against them” than “what else can we do?” According to Sterling Morrison, “We never cared much about touring. We did it once in a while by invitation, but we never solicited one. Why play Toledo, Ohio, where no one knows you and where people are not likely to be the least bit receptive?” (Thompson, 23) That kind of attitude seemed to follow the Velvet everywhere: people don’t understand us, but let’s keep doing what we like to do. This kind of acceptance of outsider status and the ability to draw strength from it seems to be an important component to what made The Velvet Underground able to mix their avant-gardeist practice with the concerns of the everyday.

But it also put them in a strange position to mass culture. The relationship of the avant-garde to mass culture is a complicated one, as has been explored previously: the avant-garde stands in opposition to mass-produced culture, but must find a way to sell its product while maintaining the oppositional status. This leads to alternative sources for outlets: The Velvet Underground found a commercial connection through Andy Warhol. But this raises the issue of purpose. Why, exactly, does the avant-garde feel the need to oppose mass culture? What do they gain from questioning and challenging strategic systems of power?

### **THE EVERYDAY (AGAIN)**

Mass-culture is, to a certain kind of temperament, stifling. The life of a suburban consumer is boring and banal. These things are taken simply as fact, and they inform much of the cultural

discourse of America. Films like *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* portray the American male as a divided, domesticated creature who has gone soft and needs to recapture his “authentic” self. Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* is simply one novel among many that portrays the modern American family as repressed and out-of-touch with authenticity. And television satirizes the banal lives of American families in sitcoms and animated series like *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *Modern Family*. The narrative is clear: American middle-class lives are boring, full of gadgets and gewgaws that do not actually provide fulfillment while being devoid of passion and creativity.

As has been discussed earlier, this impression of modern America goes back at least to the 1950s and the postwar fears of corporate culture and “company men.” But the narrative is clear: Americans are alienated from their authentic selves. And it is generally business and commodity culture that is to blame according to this narrative. Commodity culture, with its relentless need to purchase, consume, discard, and repeat has colonized the lives of modern Americans. It is this narrative that I argued fueled Lou Reed’s move to the city (and that fuels all neo-bohemians in their quest for authenticity), and this narrative drove him to seek satisfaction in the harsh urban spaces of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, as well as in heroin and amphetamines. It is this tension that author Philip K. Dick describes in *A Scanner Darkly*, a science fiction novel that explores themes of drug abuse and police surveillance in America. In Dick’s text, an undercover narcotics agent looks into the audience while delivering a speech to a Chamber of Commerce. He is disgusted by what he sees: overweight, over-privileged white people with no understanding of how the “real” world actually works. The narcotics agent

thinks to himself, "This is why you lurch off and become a dooper, this sort of stuff. This is why you give up and leave. In disgust" (27).

It is not the intention of this project to confirm or to deny the validity of this cultural narrative, but to explain how this narrative feeds into cultural attitudes and aesthetic representations of those attitudes. We will take the cultural rhetoric as a given, on a certain level: it exists, whether it is right or wrong. But these counter-cultural attitudes include an important belief. Namely, that everyday life is completely saturated with the banality of mass-market consumerism. The narrative suggests that our families, our homes, our schools, and particularly our places of business are overwhelmed by mass-culture. The narrative suggests that Americans wake up, eat their brand-name cereals, shower with the newest and greatest "body cleansing" product that they saw advertised on an expensive, top-of-the-line TV, drive to work in a car purchased as a marker of economic or cultural status, work for a soul-crushing corporation, drive home to eat a meal purchased at the local fast food franchise, then watch television for five hours before crawling into bed, simply to repeat the procedure the next day. Everyday life has become the place where capitalism's banality plays itself out in the endless line of indistinguishable widgets that capitalism produces and the endless franchise of human experience. This narrative is flawed and somewhat incoherent, because it ignores the creativity that individual consumers of culture practice every day (as well as ignoring the culture that they themselves create with family and friends). But the narrative is a part of modern culture, and it has gained traction. It is within this narrative that we must search for a response, because the inconsistencies within the narrative expose its flaws and incoherence. The avant-garde, as it is understood by mass culture, does not participate in the project of critiquing the narrative itself;

it assumes the narrative is accurate, and then tries to undo that narrative. The actual *practice* of the avant-garde is far more complicated, however. At least, it is more complicated when it does not fully buy into the mass culture narrative.

In volume one of Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre makes his project clear and his goals explicit. Lefebvre claims that "[t]he true critique of everyday life will have as its prime objective the separation between the human (real and possible) and bourgeoisie decadence, and will imply a *rehabilitation of everyday life*" (127). Lefebvre argues that we must reclaim the possibilities of everyday life from the capitalist technocratic modes of production and consumption that have colonized ordinary experience. It is this project that bohemia has long situated itself within. The bohemian practice of lifestyle eccentricity has been the antidote to conformist consumerism since the 1950s (Frank, 10). But Lefebvre would not accept that bohemia or aestheticism succeeds in being consumerism's antidote. He writes, "in the contemporary period, art and philosophy have drawn closer to everyday life, but only to *discredit* it, under the pretext of giving it new resonance" (130). Lefebvre would have found the rejection of the everyday implicit in the critique of *American Beauty* or *Family Guy* to be a reactionary one. Lefebvre writes, "[m]ake the rejection of everyday life – of work, of happiness – a mass phenomenon, a malady of the decaying middle classes, a collective neurosis... and you end up with the Hitlerian 'mystique'" (131). Lefebvre argues that when society's artists and philosophers turn against work and family life, they are rejecting the wrong things. It is not work that is banal, and it is not the family that is inane. It is the systems of commoditization and colonization, the capitalist technocracy, that is banal and soul-crushing.

This of course is in direct contradiction to the cultural narrative of the counter-culture in America. The counter-culture has been on a quest to “turn on, tune in, drop out” ever since Dr. Timothy Leary used the phrase at the “Human Be-In” in San Francisco, 1967. To return to *American Beauty*, the greatest and most revolutionary thing that the protagonist, Lester, can do is blackmail his boss and then leave his job to work as a fry cook. But Lester finds no satisfaction in that job, either, and really only took the job to make it easier for him to purchase marijuana from a local dealer. Lester commits the cardinal sin in Lefebvre’s formulation of the counter-culture: he mistakes “work” for “capitalism” and “production” for “commoditization.”

Lefebvre’s construction of the problem is, in itself, a problem. He does not provide proof that by denying the “everydayness” of work, of family, and of happiness the result is a slide into reactionary Hitlerism. But his critique of the counter-culture (though he did not use the term himself) is an interesting one. Specifically, Lefebvre seems to be arguing that the critique of artists and philosophers has been misplaced. The fault is not in society, thus requiring a utopian turn to new modes of social construction and social consciousness. The problem is in the material reality: the modes of production, the colonization of experience by capitalism. New forms of experience aren’t necessary, so much as new methods to strip experience of the colonizing forces of mass-production.

In this light, the conflict between the hippy counter-culture and the specific urban punk cool of The Velvet Underground takes on a new meaning. Hippy culture was organizing Human Be-Ins and Ken Kesey was hosting his “acid tests,” as a way to expand consciousness. Direct political action had been tried, and had failed. The hippies were no longer interested in changing society in material ways, and turned instead to psychedelic drugs and music as a way

of changing people's minds. The theory seemed to be, in keeping with Leary's "turn on, tune in, drop out" mantra, that if the inner world of human consciousness could be changed, then changes in the outer world of everyday life would follow. The Velvet Underground was also experimenting with human perceptions, but in a much more material way. According to John Cale, "our aim was to upset people, make them feel uncomfortable, make them vomit" (DeRogatis, 5). And according to Andy Warhol, the goal of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable was to push the boundaries of tolerance. "If they can take it for ten minutes, then play it for fifteen... always leave them wanting less" (Bockris, 29).

The hippies of California were retreating from the everyday with songs like Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit", an attempt to tie the drug culture of the hippy scene to the work of Lewis Carroll. They were further departing from reality with songs like The Grateful Dead's "The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)" which, although about a simple party, contains no sense of connection or attachment to anything; it is a simple "life is a party" message. And, as fun as a life-long party would be, that does not reflect reality. Some songs were departing from reality completely: the Chicago-based psychedelic band H.P. Lovecraft released "The White Ship" (a long song based on the story of the same name by horror writer H. P. Lovecraft). The song details a mystical white ship that sails from our world to the world of dreams on a bridge of moonlight, and the ship's visit to Thalarion, City of a Thousand Wonders. While these three songs certainly should not be taken to suggest that all songs crafted by the psychedelic bands of the Sixties were mystical and unreal, there was a trend in psychedelic music to turn away from the problems of the real world and seek solace in "inner space."

The Velvet Underground, in contrast, refused to write songs about unearthly mystical ships or comparing drug experiences to literary creation. The songs of the Velvets sought out real experience. And while it should be pointed out that sado-masochism and heroin addiction are not everyday experiences of *all* people, these experiences were reflective of the real world that The Velvet Underground inhabited. This particular avant-gardeist practice maintains a deep concern for the immediate material reality and the immanence of experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Velvet Underground was attempting to create an artistic practice that seized control of everyday life. But the band looked not at a bland, homogenized and ideologically-safe view of everyday life (such as that of the nuclear family). Nor did they create a utopian view of what they wanted everyday life to be (such as with the psychedelic culture of the hippies). They attempted to present a life that was real *as they saw it*. This practice was avant-garde in that the reality that they saw was in direct conflict with the social order of late-stage liberal capitalism, and also in direct conflict with the utopian visions of the counter-culture. But this particular practice was marked by a few important ideas.

“Outsider status” marks the first element of this particular practice. The avant-garde by its nature cultivates the status of an outsider; to exist, it must be in conflict with institutional forms. Without that conflict, the avant-garde has no reason to exist (in Bürger’s formulation). The Velvet Underground took on the mantle of the outsider, both in their status as counter-culture, but also as a second-order of counter-culture.

A second element of this avant-gardeist practice might be thought of as “re-oriented perceptions.” The avant-garde achieves its goals in part by changing the way people perceive something. The Surrealists changed the relationship of the consuming audience to poetry; Dada changed the way audiences understood the graphic arts. The neo-avant-garde engages in the same perceptual re-orientation: underground film engaged in a filmic rhetoric that broke conventional strategies, and free jazz combined sounds and techniques in ways that forced the listener to re-consider his or her role as the audience of a piece. The Velvet Underground engaged in a similar practice: by creating songs that were in direct conflict with the narratives (and moral standards) of their time, they forced people to ponder their relationship to the music. Even if the reaction was one of disgust or horror, it was still a reaction.

But the music itself also forced radical perception-shifts on the part of the audience. The music of The Velvet Underground was chaotic and a-tonal, partly based on the drone of John Cale’s viola. The drone was a technique that Cale had been using since his days as a music student (Witts), and it was this drone that often forced audiences to re-orient their perceptions. The drone of the music created a new relationship to aural space: drone had been significantly absent from Western popular music for well over a hundred years.

The third important element of this particular urban neo-avant-gardeist practice is “re-purposing.” The artistic project of The Velvet Underground was one that re-claimed the detritus of other forms and styles (Beat poetry, free jazz experimentation, drone, etc.) as well as re-purposing the standard modes of production (using Warhol’s name and cultural weight to get their record recorded and produced). Like collage, the Velvets brought together a wide range of materials for their work; like film montage, there were often disorienting and conflicting images

that were piled on top of one another to create a specific artistic impression. The Velvet Underground participated in Benjamin's "trash aesthetics," not by embracing low culture entirely (drugs, prostitution, the bohemian "down and out"), but by mixing low culture and high in a tactical re-thinking of artistic practice.

The final element of this avant-gardeist epistemology is the idea of "practice" itself. The artistic project of The Velvet Underground was one of practice. As Certeau suggests, walking, reading, and cooking are all examples of practices that mix the tactical and the strategic into one site. Similarly, The Velvet Underground engaged in practices of improvisation, confrontation, and experimentation that put them into a grid where the strategic and tactical interacted.

All of these techniques came together in The Velvet Underground to make an avant-gardeist site that explored their relationship to an everyday lived experience. Their lyrics, musical content, and relationship with the artistic and pop music communities created a practice of confrontation, examination, and questioning that served to alter perceptions and investigate the realities of personal experience.

But the Velvets did not seek to engage these issues for the purpose of momentarily taking the audience out of their banal, humdrum lives. The artistic project of the Velvets was one of confrontation as a way of changing lived experience for the audience. John Cale wanted to make people "vomit" and wanted people to be angry by the performances. But anger, disgust, and revulsion could, if properly nurtured, turn into new ways of thinking.

This is the way in which the practice of The Velvet Underground becomes political: they altered reality by engaging perceptions and presenting a lived, everyday "real" in an avant-

gardeist context. As a result of the Velvets, modern music looks the way it was today. Even if the “truism” that every person who bought a Velvet Underground record formed a band isn’t true (and how could it be?), they created a new relationship to music. That relationship has been taken up by new generations, including David Bowie, Joy Division, The Cure, Sonic Youth, and many others.

But if that is the case, then perhaps Bürger has been right all along (in a modified form): the critique that The Velvet Underground leveled at pop music was a valid one. But the institutional systems of music have simply absorbed the critique and made it historical. Did The Velvet Underground fail in their critique?

Their critique is only a failure if Lefebvre is right, and institutional mass-culture is the opposite of the avant-garde, and the two are locked in a struggle for purity and absolute control. But if Certeau is right, and if the avant-garde is a tactical instantiation of power while mass-culture is a strategic instantiation of power, then the avant-garde will continue to find its way to the surface. It will wander in and out of the systems of power, never laying claim to total victory, but never being completely crushed either.

**NOTES: CHAPTER THREE**

1. It is interesting to note that, in all three cases, the attempt to avoid or escape a particular kind of mass-culture recognition led to an increase in media attention.

2. Many others have made this observation before him, and many have since. That does not rob it of its importance.

3. The fact that The Velvet Underground allowed themselves to be “managed” and “molded” should immediately put to rest some notions of absolute fidelity to an imagined artistic “integrity” or “authenticity” in terms of the avant-garde. The Velvets were quite well aware of Warhol’s artistic vision and practice, and they understood that he sought to blur the lines between art and commerce. They allowed him to influence them in important ways. But in this sense, the Velvets might be seen as repurposing Warhol’s artistic practice for their own purposes, as well as allowing Warhol to re-purpose them for his own needs. This “mutual use” re-orientates the capitalist project of a corporate body who develops a product to sell; what could be more challenging to the institution of capitalism than a product who develops a seller? The product is, in standard capitalist modes, an inert object that is molded by the capitalist. The Velvet Underground problematized the institution of art and music by turning that relationship on its head.

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