

REALISM AND REPRESENTATION: ARMAN, 1954-1964

by
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Abstract

My dissertation, “Realism and Representation: Arman, 1954-1964,” examines the first decade of Arman’s career as a self-proclaimed realist, and offers a new account of four key series he produced in that period: the *Cachets*, *Allures d’objets*, *Accumulations*, and *Poubelles*. Arman’s early work, which involved first the indexing of real objects and then the display of the objects themselves, was understood at the time as an art of presentation rather than representation, a means of skirting the problems associated with transcribing or even altering “the real.” That interpretation was espoused by the critic Pierre Restany, who championed Arman as the ultimate practitioner of Nouveau Réalisme, a kind of neo-dada realism based in the direct appropriation and presentation of objects from the world, without any intervention on the artist’s part. Arman’s practice came to be seen as purely objective – a simple embrace of reality itself as art – and that reading has persisted in the scholarship since the 1950s. My dissertation instead contextualizes Arman’s artworks within the complex set of renegotiations occurring in his particular historical milieu, and argues that the former are part of a highly intentional and individual project which participates in the larger artistic, literary, and cultural conversations of his time, most crucially the interrogation of the notion of “the real.” I suggest that Arman’s early artworks represent a sustained and powerful engagement with the dialectics of directness and mediation, presentation and representation, and the possibilities for realism therein.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Situating Arman	12
Nouveau Réalisme	12
Restany's role	28
Problems with Restany	37
The Restanian view	42
Neo-avant-garde neutrality	54
Restany's apotheosis	60
"De-Restanization"	64
Chapter Two: "The Real" and Realism	76
Historical context	76
The new <i>société de consommation</i>	85
The object as sign	87
Reification and the everyday	90
Centrality of the question of realism	94
Literary realism and its implications for art	103
Artistic realism	129
Naming a movement	139
The problem of representation	149
Chapter Three: The Index	159
Arman before Nouveau Réalisme	159
Arman's early paintings	161
1954: <i>année charnière</i>	163
<i>Cachets</i>	170
At once warm and cold abstraction	174
Indexicality and representation	180
A shift toward the lyrical	186
Between objectivity and subjectivity	193
<i>Cachets</i> as accumulation	194
<i>Allures d'objets</i>	199
Restany's reading	203
Indexicality and representation	207
The role of gesture	212
The realism of the index	218
<i>Objets animés</i>	221
Projection and performativity	229
The question of agency	233

Chapter Four: The Object	243
The Nouveau-Réaliste years	243
<i>Accumulations</i>	248
Dialectic of presentation and representation	249
The question of agency	258
Selection of objects	272
Multiplication and the realization of critical mass	284
The role of the vitrine	301
The pictorial nature of the <i>Accumulations</i>	308
Privileging of vision	327
Dialectic of “real” and simulacrum	331
Chapter Five: The Event	342
<i>Action-spectacle</i>	342
<i>Poubelles</i>	345
De-composition and the myth of <i>déversement</i>	350
<i>Poubelles</i> and sociology	357
The role of the vitrine	367
<i>Le Plein</i>	372
<i>Le Plein</i> 's vitrine	382
<i>Vide-Plein</i>	389
Conclusion	393
Figures	399
Works Cited	455
Curriculum Vitæ	479

List of Figures

1. Pierre Restany, *Déclaration constitutive du Nouveau Réalisme*, 1960. 399
2. Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo and Antonio Recalcati, *Vivre et laisser mourir ou La fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp*, 1965. 399
3. Arman, *Untitled*, 1960. 400
4. Arman, *L'Amble de l'oeuf*, 1957. 400, 414
5. Arman, *Squelette d'Achille*, 1960. 400, 428
6. Arman, *Untitled*, 1952-53. 401
7. Nicolas de Staël, *Paysage*, 1952. 401
8. Arman, *Untitled*, 1954. 402, 403
9. Arman, *Untitled*, 1956. 402, 408
10. Arman, *Minuscules*, 1957. 402
11. Arman, *L'Enfance d'un chef*, 1960. 403
12. Andy Warhol, *192 One-Dollar Bills*, 1962. 404
13. Andy Warhol, *S&H Green Stamps*, 1962. 404
14. Jean Tinguely, *Méta-matic no. 9*, 1958. 405
15. Jean Tinguely, *Méta-matic 7*, 1960. 405
16. Jean Tinguely, *Untitled Méta-matic no. 4*, 1962. 405
17. Robert Rauschenberg, *Factum I*, 1957. 406
18. Robert Rauschenberg, *Factum II*, 1957. 406
19. Jacques Villeglé, *Rue René Boulanger/Boulevard Saint-Martin*, 1959. 407, 411
20. Jacques Villeglé, *Rue René Boulanger/Boulevard Saint-Martin*, 1959, detail. 407
21. Arman, *Cachet, Oeil du tigre*, 1959. 408, 409
22. Arman, *Government Property*, 1955. 408

23. Jacques Villeglé, *Porte Maillot-Ranelagh*, 1957. 409
24. Arman, *Untitled*, 1955. 410, 432
25. Arman, *Sombre dimanche*, 1958. 410, 413, 432
26. Jacques Villeglé, *Rue René Boulanger/Boulevard Saint-Martin*, 1959, p. 411
27. Arman, *Cachet carmelite*, 1957. 411, 413
28. Arman, *Cachet*, 1956. 412
29. Arman, *Cachet*, 1958. 412
30. Arman, *Rectangle noir*, 1958. 414, 429
31. Arman, *Untitled*, 1956. 414
32. Arman, *Pas trop loin*, 1957. 414
33. Arman, *Untitled*, 1960. 415
34. Arman, *Colère de Mandoline*, 1961. 415
35. Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage, *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953. 416
36. Photograph from Yves Klein, *Anthropométrie de l'époque bleue*, Galerie internationale d'art contemporain, Paris, March 9, 1960. 416
37. Yves Klein, *Anthropometrie de l'époque bleue (ANT 82)*, 1960. 416
38. Photograph from Yves Klein, *Anthropométrie de l'époque bleue*, Galerie internationale d'art contemporain, Paris, March 9, 1960. 417
39. Yves Klein, *Anthropometry: Princess Helena*, 1960. 417
40. Arman, *Femme stylisée en vert*, 1959. 417
41. Arman, *Rectangle rouge*, 1958. 418
42. Arman, *Allure d'objet*, 1960. 418
43. Arman and Jacques Brissot, *Objets animés*, 1960, stills. 419
44. Arman, *Fleurs*, 1959. 420

45. Marcel Duchamp, *Hat Rack*, 1917 (reconstructed 1964). 420
46. Arman, *Malheur aux barbus*, 1960. 421, 429
47. Arman, *Untitled*, 1960. 421, 431
48. Arman, *Miadulation de fritance*, 1962. 421
49. Arman, *Madison Avenue*, 1962. 422, 426
50. Arman, *Jericho (Trompes-Auto)*, 1960. 422
51. Arman, *Gaz à tous les étages*, 1961. 423
52. Arman, *Le retour des croisades*, 1961. 423, 450
53. Arman, *Ainsi font font...*, 1960. 424
54. Arman, *Grands perce-neige*, 1960. 424
55. Arman, *Home Sweet Home*, 1960. 424, 433, 440
56. Arman, *Untitled*, 1960. 425, 430
57. Arman, *La vie à pleine dents*, 1960. 425, 451
58. Arman, *Paradise for Asthmatics*, 1964. 426, 427
59. Arman, *Untitled*, 1963. 427
60. Arman, *Mille Soleils*, 1964. 427
61. Arman, *Untitled*, 1963. 427
62. Arman, *Artériosclérose*, 1961. 428
63. Arman, *Allure d'objets no. 2*, 1959. 429
64. Arman, *Busy*, 1960. 430
65. Arman, *Malheur aux barbus*, 1960, installation view. 431, 448
66. Arman, *Untitled*, 1963. 431
67. Arman, *Le Sénat*, 1962. 433

68. Arman, *Home Sweet Home*, 1960, detail, p. 434
69. Arman, *Cyclofiat*, 1960. 434
70. Arman, *Les Catadioptrés*, 1960. 434
71. Arman, *Clic-Clac Kodak, Hourra!*, 1960. 435
72. Arman, *Untitled*, 1962. 435
73. Arman, *Réveils*, 1960. 435
74. Arman, *Le Massacre des innocents*, 1961. 436, 441
75. Arman, *Le Massacre des innocents II*, 1961. 436
76. Arman, *Les Yeux*, 1961. 436
77. Page 31 of Denyse Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné, volume 2* (Paris: Editions de la différence, 1991). 437
78. Page 91 of Denyse Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné, volume 2* (Paris: Editions de la différence, 1991). 438
79. Page 29 of Denyse Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné, volume 2* (Paris: Editions de la différence, 1991). 439
80. Arman, *The Gay Gas Masks*, 1960. 440
81. Arman, *Untitled*, 1961. 441
82. Arman, *Argus extra myope*, 1961. 441
83. Arman, *Aleph to the First Power*, 1964. 442
84. Arman, *In Another Galaxy*, 1964. 442
85. Arman, *Le Village des damnés*, 1962. 443
86. Arman, *Untitled*, 1962. 443
87. Arman, *Petits déchets bourgeois*, 1959. 444
88. Photograph by Harry Shunk of Arman working on *Poubelle des Halles*, Paris, 1961. 445

89. Arman, *Poubelle des Halles*, 1961. 445
90. Arman, *Automatic Garbage Can (Cast Your Ballot Here for a Cleaner Dwan Gallery)*, 1962. 446
91. Arman, *Poubelle des enfants*, 1960. 446
92. Arman, *Premier Portrait-Robot d'Yves Klein*, 1960. 447
93. Arman, *Portrait-Robot d'Iris Clert*, 1960. 447
94. Arman, *Portrait-Robot de Daniel Spoerri*, 1962. 447
95. Arman, *Poubelle Ménagère*, 1960. 448
96. Arman, *Le Plein*, 1960, invitation (closed). 448
97. Arman, *Le Plein*, 1960, invitation (open). 448
98. Arman, *Le Plein*, Galerie Iris Clert, 1960, installation view from street. 449, 453
99. Arman, *Direct pour la Lune*, 1960. 450
100. Arman, *Hommage à la cuisine française*, 1960. 451
101. Photograph of Yves Klein making an *Anthropométrie*, 1960. 452
102. Harry Shunk, photograph of Arman assembling *Le Plein* at the Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, 1960. 452
103. Arman, *Le Plein*, Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, 1960, detail. 453
104. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wall of Oil Barrels - The Iron Curtain*, Rue Visconti, Paris, 1961-62. 453
105. Arman, *Le Plein*, reconstruction, 1994. 454

Introduction

Armand Pierre Fernandez, born in Nice in 1928 and later rechristened Arman, is best known as an assemblage or found-object artist. From 1959 until his death in 2005, he produced innumerable variations on the theme of the accumulated object. His penchant for working in “junk” materials is typically traced back to his involvement with the Nouveaux Réalistes, a lineage that provides an easy means by which to understand his motives and intentions in creating such works. Thanks to Pierre Restany’s constant championing of that movement as one that celebrated all that was new, modern, and industrial — that is, postwar capitalism in its various instantiations — Arman’s work has been widely understood as an effort to present directly the unmediated “real”: to appropriate and then to display the very things that make up modern urban life. As such, his works, especially the famous vitrines of found objects and detritus, have been read largely in terms of their sociological import. As an “archaeologist of the present,”¹ as the narrative goes, Arman offers, with his vitrines of preserved objects, a record of his time.

What such a reading neglects, however, are the striking differences not only in the way an archaeologist’s findings are meticulously organized and displayed, but also in the intents and purposes of the archaeological exploit: to ascertain the *use* of the found objects, their functions in their respective societies, and their inherent value to the people who made and utilized them. Arman’s vitrines of objects undertake none of that work; in fact, as a result of their format, they discourage any attempt to move beyond the transparent surface that encases the objects, to seek meaning in the articles held therein.

¹ See Jan van der Marck, “Arman: An Archeologist of the Present,” in *Arman: Selected Activities* (New York: John Gibson Gallery, 1973), 5-20.

The stacking, crowding, and amassing of objects inhibit the viewer's ability to learn about each individual item; confined behind the clear face of the enclosing case, the objects lose their use value, and the viewer, distanced by that clear pane, is given only visual data to take in.

Throughout this dissertation, I show that Arman's early artworks are grounded less in sociology or archaeology than they are in art historical as well as philosophical questions that challenged Arman's generation. In order to make my case, I will demonstrate, through the examination of various historical texts, the centrality of two contested notions in the 1950s and 60s in France: those of realism and representation. In demonstrating the currency of those two disputed topics, and the myriad ways in which they were being theorized in the face of what was understood to be a peak moment of technological, economic, and institutional change, I suggest how we might reconsider the implications of Restany's Nouveau-Réaliste narrative and the consequent understanding of Arman's work that commentators have for so long perpetuated.

It has only been recently — beginning, unsurprisingly, with Restany's death in 2003 — that scholars have begun to undertake a large-scale reexamination of the accepted discourse on Nouveau Réalisme and, increasingly, on certain of the movement's key players.² On the whole, this revisionism can be categorized as a “de-Restanization”

² The 2007 exhibition of Nouveau Réalisme at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in Paris was a major catalyst in the recent efforts to revise the scholarship on the movement. That show covered the period from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, and also included artists such as Alain Jacquet, Robert Malaval, Daniel Pommereulle, Jean-Pierre Raynaud, Günther Uecker, and Wolf Vostell, thus expanding the purview of Nouveau Réalisme beyond Restany's strictly maintained confines. See the catalog: Cécile Debray, ed., *Le Nouveau Réalisme* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2007). As Catherine Francblin points out, the “liberty taken with the Restany canon” at the 2007 exhibition represented an important departure from the previous retrospective of Nouveau Réalisme, at the Musée de l'art moderne de la ville de Paris in 1986, which “Restany almost completely controlled.” Francblin, “The Nouveau Réalisme at the Grand Palais,” *Art Press* 2, no. 4 (March 2007): 10. See also the catalog for the 1986 exhibition: *1960, Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1986).

of our understanding of the art of that period — an effort to shed many of the preconceived notions about process and intentionality that had become “givens” due to the persistence of Restany’s all-encompassing discursive force. New scholarship is increasingly moving away from the idea of Nouveau Réalisme as a coherent movement, focusing instead on either individual artists or particular strategies within the group’s collective repertoire. Thus far, Yves Klein has received the most comprehensive — and most beneficial — reconsideration, one that now rightfully recognizes his centrality in the development of postwar European art not only within his Nouveau-Réaliste circle but reverberating out to the many other artists who drew from him the way his own generation drew from Jackson Pollock.³

Arman, touted by Restany as the most Nouveau-Réaliste of all the Nouveaux Réalistes, has only very recently begun to receive the same reevaluation. An important retrospective of his œuvre, held at the Musée national d’art moderne in 2010-2011,⁴ presented the occasion for new scholarship and laid out, for the first time ever in Paris, representative examples of his entire corpus of work, an exercise that made clear the continuity of his vision, from the decade prior to the establishment of Nouveau Réalisme until his death some fifty years later, in 2005.⁵ Indeed, the exhibition as a whole, along

³ Among the most compelling revelations of Klein’s influence include his relationship with Arte Nucleare in Milan and ZERO in Düsseldorf. See, for instance, Stephen Petersen, *Space-Age Aesthetics: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

⁴ See the catalog: Jean-Michel Bouhours, ed., *Arman* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010).

⁵ Arman had been the subject of one previous Parisian retrospective, in 1998, at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, but that exhibition was much smaller in scale, ambition, and reach, and did not include the crucial work from the pre-Nouveau-Réaliste years, an oversight that reflects the endurance of the narrative that would have Arman’s entire œuvre traceable back to the 1960 founding of the movement, and not to the work he completed on his own, earlier. See the catalog: Daniel Abadie, ed., *Arman* (Paris: Éditions du Jeu de Paume, 1998). A more comprehensive exhibition dedicated to Arman was mounted in his hometown of Nice in 2001. (See the catalog: *Arman, Passage à l’acte* (Milan: Skira, 2001).) However, given the importance of Paris and especially Beaubourg for the canonization of artists, the delay in a full Parisian exposition is revealing.

with many of the essays in the catalog, sought to account for the very apparent continuity across the various series of works presented and to insist on the importance of Arman's logical development from one series to the next. Nevertheless, some of those essays again maintained aspects of the Restanian account — writing of sociology, direct presentation and lack of authorial intervention — thereby perpetuating the same narrow readings of his work that have persisted since 1960.

My dissertation offers, by way of response, a comprehensive examination of what I take to be the ten most important years of Arman's career, and the four most consequential series of his artistic output: the *Cachets*, *Allures d'objets*, *Accumulations*, and *Poubelles*. Each series is in fact a genre unto itself, a category of art-making that fits no pre-existing classification. Neither painting nor sculpture, not wholly figurative or wholly abstract: these works chart new territory and create what Henry Martin called “completely new categories of experience.”⁶ In focusing on the first decade of his ambitious production, I demonstrate that Arman's true artistic breakthrough came in 1954, when he began a personal realist project upon which he expanded during the Nouveau-Réaliste years, but which was already in place long before the group, in the person of Restany, began to establish the parameters of what “realism” could be in 1960.

Arman declared in 1966,

L'art d'aujourd'hui et d'hier sont de même essence: ils portent témoignage de leur époque et cela à un niveau où d'autres techniques sont moins efficaces. Il y a dans notre temps une conscience de l'universel bien traduite dans nos activités artistiques. Plus que jamais l'œuvre est bien un outil d'investigation et d'expérimentation de nos possessions physiques et psychiques.

Today's art and yesterday's art are of the same essence: they bear witness to their period and do so on a level where other techniques are less effective. There is in

⁶ Henry Martin, *Arman; or, four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie; or, why settle for less when you can settle for more* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1973), 9.

our time a consciousness of the universal that is well reflected in our artistic activities. More than ever the *œuvre* is a tool for investigation and experimentation of our physical and mental possessions.⁷

He expanded on that thought in 1998, when he remarked, “*Les goûts, les techniques, le monde changent désormais à une telle vitesse, qu’on ne sait même pas si l’idée d’œuvre existera encore dans 100 ans* (Tastes, techniques, the world now change at such a speed that one does not even know if the idea of the *œuvre* will still exist in 100 years).”⁸ These two proclamations, made more than thirty years apart, invite us to think about Arman’s project as a continual questioning of what constitutes a work of art at *his* specific moment in history. I shall argue that, in experimenting with various modes of presentation and representation, “the real” and “realism,” Arman was working to establish what might constitute the *œuvre* in postwar France.

This dissertation thus asks a historical question with ontological overtones: it seeks to understand the notions of realism and representation as they mattered to Arman, as part of his particular generation. The question is not whether Arman’s work is realist. The fact that he belonged to the Nouveau-Réaliste movement, that the terms “new realism” or “Réalisme d’aujourd’hui” were applied to his work, the fact that he referred to his own practice as realist, are reason enough to accept that his breakthrough works are realist. The question, then, is what it meant for Arman to create such works as part of a realist project.

⁷ All translations in this dissertation are my own unless otherwise indicated. Arman made this statement upon being granted the Premio Marzotto in 1966. His hand-written text, dated November 1966 and reproduced here (Figure 2.4), appears on the Marzotto Group’s website dedicated to the history of the prize. See “Pittura,” Marzotto Group, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.marzottogroup.it/premio-pittura>.

⁸ Arman, in Daniel Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” in *Arman* (Paris: Éditions du Jeu de Paume, 1998), 63.

In addressing that question, I want to shift the focus from the objects Arman uses and their sociological resonance, to the compositions as works of art, and to investigate Arman's engagement in *artistic*, rather than simply sociological, questions of his time. Of course the two are interrelated, but I want to suggest that Arman's engagement in social issues of the "real" and the simulacral, the genuine and the spectacle, are manifested not so much in the objects he chooses but in the way he arranges and displays them. It is the *works* that speak to the reality of his particular society; their composition and presentation, and not just the materials, are the connection between art and life.⁹

Otto Hahn has argued that the history of the object in art is not so much tied to its own nature, but rather to its integration in the work of art — the ways in which that object is manipulated and presented.¹⁰ "*Il ne suffit donc pas d'être conscient d'un phénomène social[;] . . . encore faut-il trouver l'alibi artistique pour en rendre compte* (It

⁹ Bouhours, curator of the 2010 retrospective of Arman's work at Beaubourg, understood quite well that the transformation that Arman enacted on the found object was crucial to his work. Such awareness enabled the exhibition to approach Arman's œuvre from a more open perspective, one that invited non-Restanian analyses of the work. Asked in an interview what distinguished Arman within Nouveau Réalisme, Bouhours replied, "*Ce n'est ni le choix de l'objet ni la typologie de l'objet utilisé, mais la procédure qui est opérée sur cet objet. L'Accumulation armanienne, pour ne prendre que cet exemple, illustre ou renvoie au mode de production industrielle de l'objet moderne: sa répétition à l'identique, sa consommation de masse et sa destruction rapide* (It is neither the choice of the object nor the typology of the object that is used, but the procedure that is operated on that object. The Armanian *Accumulation*, to take only that example, illustrates or refers to the mode of industrial production of the modern object: its identical repetition, its mass consumption and its rapid destruction)." Bouhours, in Philippe Piguet, "Arman, le grand féticheur," *L'Œil* no. 628 (2010): 66.

¹⁰ "*Les artistes apparus au début des années 1960 ont été expliqués par la sociologie et par le refus de la peinture abstraite. Chez Arman . . . on se plaisait à voir la découverte de la société de consommation, et les plus naïfs y projetaient même des velléités de dénonciation. En fait, les problèmes se posaient d'une façon plus complexe. Entre les courants dominants d'une époque et la manière dont les artistes en rendent compte, il y a l'intervention des justifications culturelles* (The artists who appeared in the beginning of the 1960s were explained by sociology and by the refusal of abstract painting. In Arman's work . . . one was pleased to see the discovery of consumer society, and the more naïve among us even projected vague desires of denunciation. In fact, the problems were posed in a much more complex way. Between the dominant currents of a period and the manner in which artists account for them, cultural justifications intervene)." Otto Hahn, "Matériaux et techniques chez Arman," *Art Press* no. 16 (February 1975): 14-17.

is therefore not enough to be conscious of a social phenomenon[;] . . . one must still find the artistic alibi to account for it).”¹¹

Of his own aims, Arman reflected in 1989,

Je vous montre des objets dans différentes situations, de leur évidence dans l'accumulation . . . jusqu'aux effets plus complexes et byzantins d'objets mélangés ou transformés par des procédés sculpturaux, car à travers des situations parafilosophiques et sociologiques, je reste un sculpteur et un peintre dont l'ambition, avant que de faire un discours sur nous-mêmes ou notre civilisation, est de produire une œuvre d'art, une sculpture, une peinture ou une peinture-sculpture, un assemblage à destination visuelle et esthétique. A travers tous ces gestes, je suis fermement décidé à rester un artiste plus qu'un sociologue ou un anthropologue. Si mon intention avait été de démontrer, je crois que je me serais servi de la plume plus que de la brosse.

I show you objects in different situations, from their obviousness in accumulation . . . to the more complex and byzantine effects of objects mixed or transformed by sculptural procedures; for, through para-philosophical and sociological situations, I remain a sculptor and a painter whose ambition, before making a discourse on ourselves or our civilization, is to produce a work of art, a sculpture, a painting or a painting-sculpture, an assemblage with visual or aesthetic purpose. Through all these gestures, I am determined to remain an artist more than a sociologist or an anthropologist. If my intention had been to demonstrate, I believe that I would have taken up the pen rather than the brush.¹²

It should be noted that Restany, in an effort to maintain his own sociological position, referred to the above statement by Arman as a “crisis” in the artist’s thought.¹³ But as I aim to show in this dissertation, a careful examination of Arman’s œuvre leaves no doubt that his ambition was, above all, an artistic one. And it was in pursuit of that ambition that Arman entered into the contemporary conversations on questions specific to art that resonated beyond that realm: notions of realism and representation, and their relationship to the “real” itself.

¹¹ Ibid., 14.

¹² Arman, quoted in Pierre Restany, “Un destin de star, enfin,” in *Arman, Passage à l'acte*, 22.

¹³ Ibid.

In the first chapter, “Situating Arman,” I provide the context for both Arman’s emergence as an artist and the establishment of the specific realist discourse that was quickly attached to his name. I begin by introducing Nouveau Réalisme as a movement, since Arman’s participation in it has dominated the scholarship on his work for the past five decades. As I shall make clear, the Restanian discourse on Nouveau Réalisme and, by extension, on Arman, has been held up as the definitive interpretive model for the experimental work that Arman and his colleagues were making in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In situating that discourse historically, I shed light on the various forces that led not only to Restany’s development of a particular narrative, but also to the critics’ and public’s willing embrace of that narrative.

Chapter Two, “‘The Real’ and Realism,” expands on the contextualization of the first chapter to offer insight into the historical moment and artistic milieu in which Arman was living and working, and out of which both he and Nouveau Réalisme developed. I argue that in the new consumer society of postwar France, as the notion of “the real” grew increasingly charged, the literature, cinema, and plastic arts of the period became increasingly invested in the question of realism. My aim is to highlight the various political, social, and artistic factors that led Arman to take up a realist task and made possible and perhaps even predictable the kinds of discursive strategies that Restany employed in his founding and promotion of Nouveau Réalisme, especially as regards the problem of representation.

After laying the groundwork for my approach to Arman’s œuvre, I turn in Chapter Three to the close examination of specific artworks, beginning with the period before the founding of Nouveau Réalisme, from 1954 to 1959. This chapter is entitled “The Index,”

as it addresses Arman's first two key series of the 1950s, the *Cachets* and *Allures d'objets*, both of which involved fixing the traces or indexical marks of "real" objects. I argue that these early works, largely overlooked in the Arman scholarship, represent the foundation of Arman's realist project. It is with the *Cachets*, made by covering the support with the inkings of commercial rubber stamps, that Arman begins his career-long practice of mapping surfaces and fixing traces of "real" objects. With the *Allures d'objets*, he takes that practice further, using a variety of inked objects to record the indexes of their movement as he rolls, bounces, or smashes them on the support. In both series, Arman works through some of the problematics that would remain central to his realist project: the questions of authorial distance, in the removal of his autographic mark; of agency, in the objects' quasi-autonomous movement; of representation versus presentation, in the very definition of the indexical mark. These earliest forays into a self-defined realism shed light on the work that Arman would come to make under the banner of Nouveau Réalisme, and suggest that the definition of realism provided by Restany misrepresents Arman's personal realist project that was already underway.

Chapter Four, "The Object," takes up Arman's most well-known series, the *Accumulations*, which he began to produce in 1959, just before the founding of Nouveau Réalisme. The *Accumulations* are collections of multiple variants of the same object, deposited in vitrines and displayed on a wall, like a picture. They represent Arman's transition from the index-based works on paper or canvas to the object-based works that would seal his reputation and dominate the rest of his career. Turning away from the Restanian narrative of the *Accumulations* as "direct presentations of the real," I consider

instead the indirectness and representational quality of those works, and explore the implications of a realism that comprises a mediated “real.”

In the fifth and final chapter, “The Event,” I study Arman’s monumental exhibition-event of 1960, *Le Plein*, and the related series of works begun in 1959, the *Poubelles*. Both entailed the amassing and display of garbage; *Le Plein* involved filling the Galerie Iris Clert from floor to ceiling with neighborhood waste, while the *Poubelles* were small vitrines of household trash. Countering the sociological discourse that has defined our understanding of these works, I focus on the means of display rather than simply the contents, and argue that the works are engaged less in the politics of trash *per se* than in the reality of our relationship to the object. *Le Plein* and the *Poubelles* were carefully designed and configured by Arman to give the appearance of an authorless auto-composition, a directness of presentation befitting of Nouveau Réalisme. And yet that appearance was a fabrication, and one that, upon close inspection, gives itself away. I thus find in *Le Plein* and in the *Poubelles* the ultimate expression of Arman’s probings of the dialectics of reality and simulacrum, presentation and representation.

I conclude the dissertation by addressing what I take to be the stakes of my study, both for a new understanding of Arman’s œuvre and for a richer appreciation of the work still to be done in the field of postwar European art. Elucidating the nature of Arman’s engagement with concepts of realism and representation as the latter were construed by the artist and his contemporaries furthers our understanding of the critical import of his work. Moreover, it illuminates the urgency of thinking anew about the discourse of Nouveau Réalisme in particular and of the role of individuals in artists’ groups more broadly. This study thus serves as a model for the ways in which an approach committed

to close looking at objects and close reading of historical texts can begin to reshape the narrative of postwar art in France and beyond.

Chapter One: Situating Arman

Nouveau Réalisme

On October 27, 1960, eight artists and the critic Pierre Restany signed a declaration stating, “*Les nouveaux réalistes ont pris conscience de leur singularité collective. Nouveau Réalisme = nouvelles approches perceptives du réel* (The nouveaux réalistes have become conscious of their collective singularity. Nouveau Réalisme = new perceptive approaches to the real)” (Figure 1.1).¹ The original roster of artists included Arman, François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely, and Jacques Villeglé. Later, César, Christo, Gérard Deschamps, Mimmo Rotella, and Niki de Saint-Phalle would join the group. The Nouveau-Réaliste movement would be short lived — the members disbanded officially in 1963 — but its significance far exceeds its duration. In this section, I introduce the history of the movement and its artists and explore the trends in the criticism and scholarship on the art the latter produced, attempting at each turn to sift through the myths and realities of the group’s formation and tenure.² Once a foundation for the movement is established, I turn my focus to Arman and probe his particular relationship to Nouveau Réalisme, its stated goals, and its principal analyses.

It has become a commonplace of scholarship on the movement and its artists to declare the irrelevance of the Declaration of Nouveau Réalisme signed in 1960. The

¹ This document was hand-scrawled on each of nine monochrome papers (seven blue, one pink, and one gold).

² The movement was immediately the subject of myth and the object of mythologization, not only by Restany, who was known for his aggrandizing prose, but by the artists themselves, and later by critics. For a new account of that very mythologization, see Kaira Cabañas, *The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme: Art and the Performative in Postwar France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

practice of artists organizing into named groups and promoting themselves via manifesto was by 1960 a convention of the European art world.³ But in the case of Nouveau Réalisme, in order to bring together such diverse artists, the founding declaration had to be rather general — and thus, some argue, quite meaningless. As Arman attests, the eighteen-word text on which the group finally settled was the result of long debates: “*Tout le monde s’est disputé et, pour finir, on s’est mis d’accord sur une petite phrase sans grande signification* (Everyone fought and, in the end, we agreed on a little sentence without much meaning).”⁴ Arman described the relationships among the founding artists as unstable, both in the de facto division of members into three groups — the Parisians, the Swiss, and the Niçois⁵ — and in the evident heterogeneity of artistic pursuits of the various members. Discussing the distance between Klein’s mysticism and his own and Spoerri’s materialism, Arman explained: “[*avec*] *tous ces gens-là, il y a eu des discussions, même assez violentes, parce qu’on n’était pas d’accord* (with all those people, there were discussions, even violent ones, because we did not agree).”⁶ Restany, too, admitted that the final wording of the declaration was simply “*le seul texte sur lequel*

³ Van der Marck argues that the Americans’ unfamiliarity with that model hampered their ability to recognize the radicality of Nouveau Réalisme in its “innovative balance between the conceptual and the material.” The failure of comprehension was particularly damaging in the late 1950s and early 1960s when American art was on the rise internationally, and American artists, despite acknowledging their roots in a French tradition, began to see that tradition as bankrupt and to consider “Frenchness” as a liability. Van der Marck, “Arman: An Archeologist,” 5.

⁴ Arman, in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 46-47.

⁵ “*Les Niçois étaient très copains avec les Suisses, mais pas avec les Parisiens. . . . On se disait bonjour, on était copains comme ça, mais c’était très superficiel* (The Niçois were good friends with the Swiss, but not with the Parisians. . . . We said hello to each other, we were friends like that, but it was very superficial).”

Arman, in *ibid.*, 49. Arman listed among the Parisians Hains, Villeglé, and Dufrêne; the Swiss were Tinguely, Saint-Phalle, and Spoerri; and the Niçois comprised Arman, Klein, and Raysse. In fact Hains and Villeglé were originally from Rennes but had been working in Paris, and Saint-Phalle was French-American but was living with the Swiss Tinguely, whom she later married. Spoerri was born in Romania but had escaped to Switzerland during the war and met Tinguely there in 1949. Arman’s recollection was that those three distinct groups had come together, with some trepidation, to become one group.

⁶ Arman, quoted in Renaud Bouchet, “Arman et les Nouveaux Réalistes. Origines et acquis d’un ralliement circonstanciel,” in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 65.

les Nouveaux Réalistes se sont mis d'accord, et encore, il ne s'agit que d'une simple déclaration d'intentions (the only text on which the Nouveaux Réalistes agreed, and still, it was nothing but a simple declaration of intentions).⁷

The gathering that saw the production of that document devolved, as the story goes, into an argument and a proclaimed dissolution of the movement within twenty minutes of its founding.⁸ Clashes inevitably arose because Nouveau Réalisme united a group of distinct artists, each of whom, by 1960, had already established his or her own practice independent of any kind of overarching goal or attitude determined in conjunction with like-minded artists of that generation. While the particularity of the individual artists is quite evident, it is also the case that the stark simplicity and strategic vagueness of the movement's declaration highlight one thread that can be said not so much to unify the artists, but to isolate two chief concerns for each of them, individually:

⁷ Pierre Restany, *60/90. Trente ans de Nouveau Réalisme* (Paris: Éditions la Différence, 1990), 73.

⁸ Arman described the founding of Nouveau Réalisme as a powerplay by Klein and Restany, each of whom expected to be the leader of the group. According to Arman, the fights that erupted as a result of ego clashes led to the immediate dissolution of the movement; he claimed, "The group lasted twenty minutes exactly." Arman tells the story of an argument that broke out after the declaration had been signed, and Restany had left Klein's studio to celebrate. The artists, still in the studio, soon began insulting each other, accusing each other of not being adequately "new realist." As abuses were thrown around and a physical altercation ensued between Klein and Hains, Klein declared the movement over, and threatened to "make a new group and we will call it the Group of Nice." At this moment, claims Arman, "the group was broken and it was never built back again." Arman saw Restany a couple hours later and told him his group no longer existed. For Arman's full account, see "Oral History Interview with Arman," April 22, 1968, sound recording, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-arman-13125>. The "Group of Nice" to which Klein alludes is a reference to the fact that Klein, Arman, and Raysse were all from the city of Nice, and Raysse had already suggested an "École de Nice" composed of the three of them, as well as others such as Robert Filliou, Ben, and Bernar Venet. This unofficial school of artists would gain traction as a concept in the 1960s, especially after Nouveau Réalisme's official end in 1963, and has recently become a topic of more focused scholarly interest. See for instance Rosemary O'Neill, *Art and Visual Culture on the French Riviera, 1956-1971: The École de Nice* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012). François Pluchart affirms that Klein and Arman founded the École de Nice in 1955 by being the first artists of great ambition who came from and worked in that city, as opposed to just vacationing there. Raysse joined their ranks in 1960 through the establishment of Nouveau Réalisme, but by 1965 there was no École de Nice to speak of: Klein had died, Arman had moved to New York, and Raysse had broken with the "neo-realist" style. It was at that moment that a new generation of Niçois artists took advantage of the fame brought to the city by Klein, Arman, and Raysse, and adopted the name École de Nice for their group. See Pluchart, "Sur la tombe de Klein, l'école de Nice compte ses sous," *Combat*, August 22, 1966, 7.

that of “*the real*,” and that of the *singularity* of each artist’s approach to harnessing it.

Whereas the very existence of that declaration has led many critics and scholars over the years to treat the Nouveaux Réalistes as a bloc, I believe that the particular diction of the statement deliberately allowed for the individual artists to pursue distinct and not always assimilable paths in their quest for a realism for their time, a way to account for the present state of “the real.”

That “the real” was, at that very moment, a source of widespread contention only adds to the pertinence and indeed the consequence of the Nouveaux Réalistes’ voices in the discussion. Throughout this chapter I will address the various ways in which the concept of “the real” was being challenged and reformulated throughout the 1950s and 60s, leading to a perceptible plurality of “reals” or “realities,” layered and intertwined in ways that made them all the more exigent to account for in realist art.⁹

Despite many of the artists’ documented discomfort with collectivity in general and Restany’s definition of the movement in particular, they nonetheless remained united under the aegis of Nouveau Réalisme until 1963. During those three productive years, Restany organized numerous group exhibitions, threw two Festivals of Nouveau Réalisme (in Nice in 1961 and Munich in 1963), wrote three manifestos for the

⁹ The Centre Allemand d’Histoire de l’Art in Paris is in the midst of a multi-year project, supported by a European Research Council Starting Grant, on the topic of the multiple realities perceived and conceived during the Cold War period, particularly in France, West Germany, East Germany, and Poland. Entitled “*A chacun son réel* (To Each His Own Reality),” the project seeks to unite scholarship in multiple fields in order to begin to understand the multifarious ways in which “reality” came to be a disputed concept between 1960 and 1989. In April 2013, I participated in a three-day workshop at the Centre, entitled “*Réalité(s), Fiction, Utopie dans l’art des années 1960 à 1989 en France, RFA, RDA et Pologne* (Realit(ies), Fiction, Utopia in the art of 1960 to 1989 in France, West Germany, East Germany and Poland).” I am indebted to the director, Mathilde Arnoux, and to my co-presenters for helping to illuminate the complexity of the topic of reality in that particular period of history. In addition, a 2010 exhibition at the Museu Reina Sofia provided a host of new scholarship on the topic of “realisms” in their various forms in postwar Europe; see the catalog, Julia Robinson, ed., *New Realisms, 1957-1962: Object Strategies Between Readymade and Spectacle* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

movement,¹⁰ and promoted each of the artists individually under that banner and all that it immediately came to connote.¹¹ And even following the group's disbandment, the artists involved have largely been seen to continue working in the Nouveau-Réaliste vein for years after.¹²

There are many reasons for that loyalty. Renaud Bouchet, in an essay on the group's founding, suggests that the chief motivation for the union was "*l'impératif de carrière* (the career imperative)," that it was the only way for the artists to gain recognition for their experimental work given the particularity of the artistic milieu.¹³ As Abstract Expressionism took off in the United States and made its way onto the European scene, the major institutions of the Paris art world sought to counter the American behemoth in two ways: first, by promoting their own brand of abstract painting, and second, by insisting on a European lineage for Abstract Expressionism's innovation. Restany's account has "the big Paris mafia"¹⁴ uniting to propose a connection between

¹⁰ The first manifesto, entitled "Les Nouveaux Réalistes," was written in 1960 and published in the catalog of the group's first collective exhibition at the Galerie Apollinaire in Milan. The second manifesto, entitled "A 40° au-dessus de Dada," was the preface to the catalog of the 1961 exhibition by the same name, organized by Restany at his wife Jeanine de Goldschmidt's new Parisian gallery, the Galerie J. The third and final manifestation came in 1963, in the catalog of the second Festival du Nouveau Réalisme, and was entitled "Le Nouveau Réalisme: Que faut-il en penser?" All three texts are reprinted in *1960, les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 264-273.

¹¹ As Benjamin Buchloh has argued, Restany organized the artists because he "recogniz[ed] the public-relations value to be gained from . . . a single name." Buchloh, "1960a," in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Vol. 2, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 434.

¹² Claude Lorent pointed out, "*le groupe maintiendra des activités communes pendant trois ans mais on sait que chacun des membres continuera à travailler dans la voie définie à l'époque* (the group will maintain common activities for three years but we know that each of the members will continue to work in the direction defined at the time)." Interestingly, Lorent named Arman and Spoerri as the two Nouveaux Réalistes who "*abandonnent le principe de non-intervention de l'artiste* (abandon the principle of the artist's non-intervention)." See Claude Lorent, "Les Nouveaux Réalistes 1960-1963," *A.A.A.* (May 1986), n.p.

¹³ Bouchet, "Arman et les Nouveaux Réalistes," 65.

¹⁴ Restany, in Michèle C. Cone, "The Late Fifties in Europe: A Conversation with Pierre Restany," *Arts Magazine* 64 (1990): 67. Restany repeatedly spoke of the École de Paris as "*soutenue par une mafia des grandes galeries* (supported by a mafia of the big galleries)." See, for instance, Pierre Restany, "Les années soixante vues par Pierre Restany," *Opus International* no. 101 (Spring-Summer 1986): 40.

what the Americans were doing and what the Paris-based Cubists had done decades before. Further, according to Restany, “They tried to invent a parallelism between Abstract Expressionism and the post-cubist abstract line – Villon, Poliakoff, de Staël, etc.,”¹⁵ and in so doing, they skirted Masson, Surrealism, and automatism “because they realized that the strength of Abstract Expressionism was due to a similar kind of continuity of Expressionism.”¹⁶

In the unified effort to counter what was felt to be the insidious influence of the New York School, the most established Parisian galleries threw their support behind France’s abstract painters whom they considered the fittest competitors, facing off against the Americans at their own game, but with the added benefit of having the whole weight of French pictorial tradition behind them. Restany cites Galerie Louise Leiris, Galerie de France, Galerie Maeght, Galerie Charpentier, and the nascent annual exhibition Salon de Mai as “totally integrated into that promotional system,”¹⁷ showing works only by artists who adhered to the omnipresent lyrical-abstract pictorial language.¹⁸ To this list Bouchet adds Galerie Ducbourg, Galerie Nacenta, the Salon de l’École de Paris, and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, as well as numerous small exhibition structures, all equally committed to lyrical abstraction.¹⁹ As Jean-Pierre Van

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Restany also discusses the Parisian art scene in the 1950s and 60s in *Une vie dans l’art: entretiens avec Jean-François Bory* (Neuchâtel: Ides et calendes, 1983), 38-40. For a broader overview of the institutions and systems in place in the period, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

¹⁷ Cone, “The Late Fifties,” 67-68.

¹⁸ Restany also referred to “*la mafia conformiste de la bande des quatre* (the conformist mafia of the band of four),” those four being the Galerie de France, Galerie Maeght, Galerie Leiris, and Galerie Nacenta. Pierre Restany, letter to Daniel Abadie, curator of the Musée national d’art moderne, January 7, 1988. Fonds Nouveau Réalisme, Centre de documentation du Musée d’art moderne et d’art contemporain, Nice.

¹⁹ Bouchet, “Arman et les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 67. See also Julie Verlaine, *Les galeries d’art contemporain à Paris. Une histoire culturelle du marché de l’art, 1944-1970* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2012).

Tieghem recounts, Paris in the 1950s was acting both as a school and as an art market, “s’exprim[ant] en termes de post-cubisme abstrait et d’abstraction lyrique. C’était une configuration asphyxiante (express[ing] itself in terms of abstract post-cubism and lyrical abstraction. It was a suffocating configuration).”²⁰ Despite the efforts of marginalized artists to react against that situation, however, Paris — that is, the museums and the major galleries, the Ministry of Culture and the leaders of the art world — managed to impose its tastes.²¹ Restany described those efforts as Paris “making a big screen, trying to keep a hegemonic type of situation.”²² But such endeavors would fail, thanks to a combination of America’s postwar financial power and cultural dynamism, and France’s misguided strategy for artistic promotion — misguided in that it failed to anticipate the changing tide toward assemblage art and instead fought a losing battle with the decidedly superior abstract painting coming from New York.²³

In light of that situation, the founding of the Nouveau-Réaliste movement was a strategic one.²⁴ As Arman remembers, “The idea actually was . . . to take a position to fight against something established. It was to make a coordination of the move against . . . tachiste-expressionism, in Paris; . . . to try to get some place in a salon, to get some exhibitions, to get some recognition.”²⁵ The artists that would, in 1960, sign the

²⁰ Jean-Pierre Van Tieghem, “Le langage de la matière,” *Clés pour les arts* no. 4 (December 1970): 8-10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Restany, in Bouchet, “Arman et les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 67.

²³ *Ibid.* For more on France’s failed efforts to compete, belatedly, with American Abstract Expressionism, see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

²⁴ See Valerie Hillings, “Experimental Artists’ Groups in Europe, 1951-1968: Abstraction, Interaction and Internationalism” (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2002). Although Hillings focuses on movements associated Op and Kinetic Art (including, in France, the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel), she provides a thorough analysis of the artistic milieu — dominated by *tachisme*, *Art informel* and Abstract Expressionism — which made it necessary for artists of the second postwar generation to engage in collective art practices of various kinds, particularly after 1957.

²⁵ Arman, in “Oral History Interview.”

Declaration of Nouveau Réalisme had each been working for the past decade or more to hone individual practices that did not fit the criteria desired by the Parisian galleries bent on competing directly with Abstract Expressionism.²⁶ Despite being an early champion of lyrical abstraction, Restany, after discovering the work of a few new young talents, came to see himself as a sort of evangelist of the neo-avant-garde. It thus fell on him to draw a connection between the varied practices of the innovative young artists so that they might unite to counter the “abstract dictatorship”²⁷ — the reality that, as Villeglé observed, “*hors de l’abstraction, il n’était point de salut* (outside abstraction, there was no salvation),” for the consensus in the French capital was that the avant-garde “*ne pouvait être qu’abstraite* (could be only abstract).”²⁸

All debates, it seemed, were internal to abstraction: lyrical versus geometric, *tachiste* versus *informel*.²⁹ As Catherine Francblin points out, while the critics defending various forms of abstraction battled,

²⁶ By the time Restany first used the term “Nouveau Réalisme” to describe the work of these artists, they had each established their own practices and in many cases worked and exhibited together as friends. Hains and Villeglé had met as students of the École des beaux-arts de Rennes in 1945; Arman and Klein had met in a judo school in Nice in 1947; and Spoerri had met Tinguely in Basel in 1949 and later became his studio assistant. See Catherine Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 1997), 22.

²⁷ Jacques Villeglé referred to “*la dictature abstraite*” in his discussion of the Nouveaux Réalistes’ struggles to show their work. Villeglé, quoted in Hannah Feldman, “Of the Public Born: Raymond Hains and *La France déchirée*,” *October* 108 (2004): 79

²⁸ Villeglé, *Urbi et Orbi* (Mâcon: Éditions W, 1986), quoted in Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 16. Pontus Hulten agreed, writing in 1955 that figurative art was out of fashion in Paris and belonged only in New York. Hulten condemned the works of Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet by proclaiming that they “*semblent plus actuels à New York qu’à Paris, où on les classe parmi les figuratifs désormais passés de mode* (seem more current in New York than in Paris, where they are classed among the figurative artists who are now out of fashion).” Hulten, *Jean Tinguely, une magie plus forte que la mort* (Paris: Éditions Le Chemin vert, 1987), quoted in *ibid.*

²⁹ In 1950, Estienne, who supported *tachisme*, published *L’art abstrait est-il un académisme?* (Paris: Éditions de Beaune, 1950), in which he declared that French abstraction had become “*non pas une mode mais quelque chose de plus grave: une nouvelle routine, une nouvelle usure de l’œil et de l’esprit* (not a mode but something more serious: a new routine, a new erosion of the eye and of the spirit).” In response, Michel Tapié wrote an article in *Combat* in 1954 entitled “Le tachisme est un académisme.” That essay is reprinted in *Un art autre, un autre art*, (Paris: Artcurial, 1984). Both articles cited in Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 14.

la déferlante du courant abstrait et de ses multiples variantes continu[ait] de croître et de prospérer. . . . Elle s'amplifiera tout au long des années cinquante. . . . Et rien ni personne, au cours de ces années, ni l'intensité des critiques, ni l'exacerbation des querelles n'empêchera l'installation de l'esthétique abstraite dans la position d'un art officiel et bourgeois.

the surge of the abstract current and of its multiple variants continued to grow and to prosper. . . . It would get bigger all throughout the 1950s. . . . And nothing nor no one, over the course of those years, neither the intensity of the critics nor the exacerbation of the quarrels, would prevent the abstract aesthetic's installation in the position of an official and bourgeois art.³⁰

As a result, by the end of the 1950s, abstraction in its various forms, practiced by several generations of artists, “*design[ait] la quasi-totalité de la création française de l'époque* (made up the quasi-totality of French creation of the period).”³¹

Nouveau Réalisme emerged at a moment of what Restany called the “*Crise de l'art abstrait* (Crisis of Abstract Art).”³² With the “golden age of painting” had come the proliferation of self-taught painters-by-trade, working in a self-expressive, abstract mode. But after forty years of abstraction's reign, the vocabulary was felt to be exhausted. François Pluchart recalled the academicism of lyrical abstraction, stating that by the mid-1950s, “*Dans l'ensemble, sa médiocrité était si flagrante qu'elle a . . . contraint la jeune génération des années 1955-1960 à la ridiculiser avec le plus profond irrespect, à la mettre à mort* (On the whole, its mediocrity was so flagrant that it . . . forced the young generation of 1955-1960 to ridicule it with the most profound disrespect, to put it to death).”³³ Artists felt, according to Restany, “*le besoin de remettre les pieds sur terre* (the

³⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

³¹ Ibid., 15. Francblin cites, for instance, the simultaneous success of such artists as Bissière, Manessier, Bazain, Lansoy, Poliakoff, and de Staël.

³² Pierre Restany, manuscript for the lecture “Art et technologie,” Saint-Luc Gand, May 23, 1964. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

³³ François Pluchart, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” *Combat*, March 18, 1968, 10.

need to put their feet back on the ground).”³⁴ The question, then, was how; and the answer was not through a return to past modes of figurative painting, but through new means: “*la découverte d’un nouveau sens de la nature moderne . . . celle du film et de la télévision, du néon et de la publicité massive, de la production en série* (the discovery of a new sense of modern nature . . . that of film and of television, of neon and of broad advertising, of mass production).”³⁵ The emergent technology and concomitant sociology of the new urban reality provided the artist with both “*la matière (infiniment diverse et renouvelée) et les moyens (infiniment plus puissants et précis) d’une nouvelle forme d’art réaliste* (the material (infinitely diverse and renewed) and the means (infinitely more powerful and precise) of a new *form of realist art*).”³⁶ For Restany, in this period, man found himself at the center of the world, with two fundamental opportunities at hand, thanks to technological progress: the means to a new and direct appropriation of “the real,” and the possibility of expression by quantity.³⁷ Nouveau Réalisme was established on the grounds of those two characteristics. And art, in this period, became a means of communication.³⁸

The only galleries supporting the Nouveaux Réalistes in the 1960s were those of Iris Clert, Jean Larcade, Mathias Fels, and Jeanine de Goldschmidt, wife of Pierre

³⁴ Restany, manuscript for the lecture “Art et technologie,” Saint-Luc Gand, May 23, 1964. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Emphasis original. Ibid.

³⁷ “*L’homme en un mot, retrouve sa place au centre du monde. Le progrès technique lui donne des moyens nouveaux d’appropriation directe du réel. Il prend par ailleurs conscience de la possibilité d’une expression par la quantité* (Man, in a word, finds his place at the center of the world. Technological progress gives him new means of *direct appropriation of the real*. He recognizes furthermore the possibility of an *expression by quantity*).” Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Restany.³⁹ Larger and more established galleries focused on Poliakoff, Vieira da Silva, and the like. Mathias Fels, instrumental in the showcasing of important painting in his eponymous gallery from 1955 on, recalled that in the Fifties in Paris, French abstraction reigned.⁴⁰ “*A ce moment-là, à Paris . . . l’Abstraction dominait la scène contemporaine. Elle était aux mains de quelques galeries très importantes. . . . Il fallait passer par elles[;] . . . elles avaient les critiques d’art dans la main, elles les manipulaient* (At that time in Paris. . . . Abstraction dominated the contemporary scene. It was in the hands of some very important galleries. . . . It was necessary to pass by them[;] . . . they had the art critics in their hands, they manipulated them).”⁴¹ Fels acknowledged that the major galleries were so convinced that they were selling masterpieces that they ignored the younger generations: “*Au lieu de prendre en charge des artistes plus jeunes, les grandes galeries en sont restées à leurs choix abstraits. Pour les jeunes, elles n’avaient qu’une seule politique: le barrage* (Instead of taking charge of younger artists, the major

³⁹ Goldschmidt ran the Galerie J, which she and Restany envisioned as more of a “laboratory” than a gallery; its ambition was first to give the Nouveau-Réaliste artists a space to create and collaborate, and second to allow them to exhibit their work. It was also, as Henry Périer put it, “*un utile instrument de promotion* (a useful promotional tool)” for Restany’s artists. Périer, *Pierre Restany: L’Alchimiste de l’art* (Paris: Éditions Cercle d’Art, 1998), 188. But the audience was small and specialized; the modest start-up gallery had nowhere near the cachet of some of its New York contemporaries. For more on the Galerie J, see Elienne Michelle Wells Lawson, “Pierre Restany, Jeanine de Goldschmidt, and the Galerie J (1961-1966): The Art of Marketing Nouveau Réalisme,” (master’s thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2002).

⁴⁰ He named in particular Manessier, Bazaine, Hartung, Poliakoff, and Vieira da Silva as those abstract painters who “*étaient considérés comme les plus grands peintres de l’époque* (were considered the greatest painters of the period).” And their popularity was not limited to France: Fels recalls his clientele being fifty percent international; “*ces peintres étaient recherchés par le monde entier. . . . Nous étions sûrs d’avoir les meilleurs artistes du moment* (these painters were sought by the whole world. . . . We were sure that we had the best artists of the moment).” Mathias Fels and Thierry Laurent, “Entretien avec Mathias Fels, souvenirs d’un marchand de tableaux: ‘Quelle vie merveilleuse j’ai eue!’,” *Verso: arts et lettres*, no. 27 (July 2002): 39. Pierre Nahon reflected that the abstract work being shown in the gallery of Pierre Loeb, who was “*le ‘grand’ marchand de l’époque* (the ‘big’ dealer of the period),” was already beginning to show its age. At the Galerie J, by contrast, one had “*le sentiment de participer directement, présentement à l’histoire* (the feeling of participating directly, presently in history).” Nahon, along with his wife Marianne, has been among the most important collectors and dealers of Nouveau-Réaliste artwork since the 1970s. See Alain Macaire, “Un marché dont les jeux sont faits: entretien avec Pierre Nahon,” *Panoramique* (1986): 12.

⁴¹ Fels named in particular the Galerie de France and the Galerie Maeght, which were showing Manessier and Bazaine, respectively, when he opened his gallery in 1955. Fels and Laurent, “Entretien,” 39.

galleries stayed with their abstract choices. For the young artists, they [the galleries] had only one policy: barricading).⁴²

With the foremost private galleries disregarding the new art and the few existing State institutions catering to established modern masters like Matisse, Léger and Picasso, it was left to the many new galleries that had opened since the War's end to showcase the work of young artists.⁴³ Since the State was not interested in the development of contemporary art, artists and gallerists relied on art critics to advance their cause. Among the most influential critics of the time were Léon Degand, Charles Estienne, Michel Ragon, and Michel Tapié, who not only published regularly in art journals, but also organized exhibitions in an effort to promote the particular forms of art that they found most compelling.⁴⁴ Catherine Francblin argues that it was that environment, defined by “*le dynamisme des marchands et l’engagement des critiques à leur côté* (the dynamism of the gallerists and the commitment of the critics on their side),” that paved the way for the emergence of Nouveau Réalisme.⁴⁵

⁴² Fels specified that by “young artists” he was referring to both the Nouveaux Réalistes and the artists of Figuration Narrative, and especially to the dynamic personalities of Klein and Arman. Ibid.

⁴³ Among the first galleries to open was that of Denise René, founded in 1945, which focused on geometric abstraction and showed Mondrian's work for the first time in France, in a major exhibition of forty works that no Parisian museum had wanted to undertake. Next to open was the Galerie Colette Allendy, in 1947, on the first two floors of the gallerist's villa, where she showed the works of Kandinsky, Arp and Picabia, and later, Yves Klein and the *affichistes*. Other galleries opening after the war included the Galerie Nina Dausset, where Michel Tapié organized the first French-American confrontation in 1951; the Studio Paul Facchetti, where Pollock had his first Parisian show in 1952; the Galerie René Drouin, which showed Wols and Fautrier; the Galerie Iris Clert, which hosted both Klein's *Vide* in 1958 and Arman's *Plein* in 1960; and the Galerie Daniel Cordier, which introduced the work of Dubuffet and Michaux and also welcomed Rauschenberg in 1961. Also opened were Jean Larcade's Galerie Rive Droite, the Galerie Arnaud, Jean Fournier's Galerie Kleber, the Galerie Stadler, the Galerie du Haut Pavé, the Galerie Craven, and the Galerie Lucien Durand. See Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 11-12.

⁴⁴ Degand supported geometric abstraction; Estienne defended *tachisme* and lyrical abstraction; Ragon introduced the group CoBrA; and Tapié defended *art informel*. Each of these critics published frequently in *Art d'aujourd'hui*, *Cimaise*, and *Combat*. Ibid., 12-13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 13.

Whereas the American artists had figures like Leo Castelli, Ileana Sonnabend, and Sidney Janis, institutions in their own right, to promote their work both at home and abroad, the French market worked differently. The lack of institutional support for the Nouveaux Réalistes was a grave matter in the French market in particular, because the private market was much smaller and less influential than that of the American juggernauts like Castelli, Sonnabend, Janis, and others.⁴⁶ Public, state-sponsored support was the only means to recognition, and the State was, at the time, blind to the innovative young artists working in the margins of French art.⁴⁷ As Jouffroy put it,

[L]es artistes américains bénéficient du soutien publicitaire gigantesque qui leur est offert par leurs marchands et leurs collectionneurs, et les artistes européens dont l'orientation est tout autant nouvelle et significative ne trouvent pas, dans leurs pays respectifs, de défenseurs aussi puissants. C'est le drame des jeunes artistes contemporains d'Europe que de lutter, à l'âge des fusées interplanétaires et des lévitations exorbitantes, contre la sordide routine, la sordide mesquinerie, la sordide indifférence.

[T]he American artists benefit from the gigantic promotional support that their dealers and their collectors offer them, and the European artists whose orientation is just as new and significant cannot find, in their respective countries, such powerful defenders. It is the drama of the young contemporary artists of Europe to

⁴⁶ Périer observes that the 1950s were a time when "*les critiques influents [en France] se comptent alors sur les doigts de la main* (influential critics [in France] could be counted on one hand)." Among them were Tapié, Estienne, Ragon, and Julien Alvard, all of whom were committed to abstraction. Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 44.

⁴⁷ As Restany put it, in much more polemical terms, France is "*un pays qui se paie le luxe d'une vie culturelle enfermée dans le plus hermétique et suffocant carcan politico-administratif. L'État est partout. Il nous étouffe. . . . Il n'y a absolument rien qui ne peut se décider en France sans le contrôle de cette structure politico-administrative nationale et régionale* (a country that pays for the luxury of a cultural life enclosed in the most hermetic and suffocating politico-administrative straightjacket. The State is everywhere. It suffocates us. . . . Absolutely nothing can be decided in France without the control of that national and regional politico-administrative structure)." Restany, in "Colloque Nouveau Réalisme: Table ronde," transcript, September 8, 1998. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes. The French market was so hostile to its own artists that the Nouveaux Réalistes' work was not shown in a Parisian museum until 1986. And even then, it was the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, and not the Musée national d'art moderne at the Centre Pompidou, that hosted their work. As of 1986, only Yves Klein had shown at Beaubourg, and even then, only because the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston had organized the exhibition. Arman's work would wait until 2010 for the honor of an exhibition there. As Pierre Nahon rebuked, "*La France est ainsi faite qu'il faut qu'on lui montre du doigt — d'un doigt étranger — ses propres artistes pour qu'elle les reconnaisse* (France is made such that it is necessary to point out to her — with a foreign finger — her own artists in order for her to recognize them)." In Macaire, "Un marché," 13.

struggle . . . against the sordid routine, the sordid pettiness, the sordid indifference.⁴⁸

One way contemporary artists could gain exposure was by participating in salons, annual public exhibitions prevalent in Paris in the 1950s, an era Francblin called “*l’âge des Salons* (the age of the Salons).”⁴⁹ Such exhibitions afforded emerging artists the opportunity to display their work in a more visible forum than the small galleries. Most promising (in theory) was the Biennale de la jeune peinture, also known as the Biennale de Paris, inaugurated in 1959. Its purpose was to showcase the emerging trends in international art, all the while confirming Paris’s centrality in the increasingly international art market already established through the biennials of Venice and São Paulo. With an age limit set at 35, the Biennale de Paris was particularly dedicated to presenting what were likely to be the trends of the future, since the young artists were apt to determine the shape of the art scene in the coming years. But the French establishment’s preference for convention thwarted the avant-garde artists of Arman’s generation. Rather than embracing the cutting edge, as the salon’s mission seemed to imply, the French section at the first Biennale de Paris comprised nearly all abstract painters. Annette Michelson described the 1959 exhibition as a political maneuver, part of the Fifth-Republic culture of “self-assertion and reassurance . . . another aspect of the

⁴⁸ Alain Jouffroy, “Pour une révolution du regard,” in *Une révolution du regard: À propos de quelques peintres et sculpteurs contemporains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 200. Périer, citing interviews with gallerist Jean Larcade, adds, “*Il faut vraiment avoir la foi du charbonnier pour vendre de l’art contemporain à Paris. . . . Jasper Johns et Rauschenberg y sont plus faciles à vendre que Klein ou Arman, car soutenus par toute une stratégie commerciale américaine* (It is necessary to be truly naïve to sell contemporary art in Paris. . . . Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg are easier to sell there than Klein or Arman, since [the former are] supported by an entire American commercial strategy).” Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 210.

⁴⁹ Among the most important were the Salon de Mai and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. The latter, created in 1946, focused exclusively on non-figurative painting: geometric abstraction, constructivism, *art concret*, orphism, lyrical abstraction, *art informel*, *tachisme*, etc. Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 12. See also Dominique Vieville, “Vous avez dit géométrique? Le Salon des réalités nouvelles, 1946-1957,” in *Paris-Paris, 1937-1957* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981), 270-285.

policy of *le rayonnement de la culture française*,” the propagandistic program bent on spreading French language and culture in both the East and the West.⁵⁰ Since Minister of Culture André Malraux had just declared that “*la grande peinture n’est plus figurative* (great painting is no longer figurative),”⁵¹ the total dominance of abstraction at the Biennale came as no surprise.

Pierre Schneider observed of the show, “It seems as if the organizers secretly hoped to prove not only Paris’ continued rule as capital of the arts (hence the financial support of a government enamored with *grandeur*), but also the continued supremacy of the École de Paris.”⁵² He noted the disproportionate swell of French paintings admitted on various pretexts — invited by the organizers, selected by painters, chosen by critics, etc.: “The attempt, it appears, backfired, for the massive homogeneity ensuing oversaturated one with those very qualities of sober workmanship and good taste which the Paris School, at its most self-conscious, advertises.”⁵³ Worse, nearly everything on display seemed to be imitating the modern masters — Picasso, Matisse, Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, and so on.⁵⁴ The “amazing standardization of style in the avant-garde art throughout the world” was the most striking feature of the whole exhibition.⁵⁵

Michelson, too, described the young painters exhibiting at the first Biennale de Paris as “a strangely sedate and homogenous group,”⁵⁶ and Roger Van Gindertael agreed: “*la Biennale de Paris a été presque en tous points détestable et a fait seulement*

⁵⁰ Annette Michelson, “Paris,” *Arts* 34 (November 1959): 15.

⁵¹ Cited in Alexander Watt, “Paris Commentary,” *The Studio* 159 (1960): 61.

⁵² Pierre Schneider, “Art news from Paris,” *Art News* 58 (1959): 46.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Schneider quipped, “I saw the same painting by Sam Francis reproduced by an Englishman, a Pole, a German and a Swiss.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Michelson, “Paris,” 16.

apparaître l'universalisation d'un nouveau conformisme (the Biennale de Paris was detestable on almost every point and only demonstrated the universalization of a new conformism).⁵⁷ Alexander Watt deemed the whole exhibition a complete “flop,” its galleries filled with an “excessive number of worthless works by totally insignificant abstract painters.”⁵⁸

In the midst of the suffocating domination and oversaturation of abstract art, and given the lack of institutional support for their artwork, the benefits of group incorporation were clear to the artists that came to unite under Restany. Daniel Abadie and Patrick d'Elme add:

L'histoire de l'art est riche de quelques-uns de ces moments qui relèvent moins d'une prise de conscience collective des créateurs, comme on nous l'assure si volontiers, que de leur besoin instinctif de se regrouper provisoirement, par-delà des divergences fondamentales, pour instaurer, contre le mouvement qui les précède et dont les mots d'ordre réfutent toute possibilité évolutive ou dialectique, une esthétique nouvelle.

The history of art is full of some of these moments that arise less from a collective realization on the part of the creators, as we are so readily assured, than from their instinctive need to group themselves together temporarily, despite fundamental divergences, in order to install, against the movement that precedes them and from which the words of order refute all evolutionary or dialectical possibility, a new aesthetic.⁵⁹

Abadie and d'Elme cite Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism as precedents to the Nouveau-Réaliste situation of “*catalys[ant] l'énergie* (catalyz[ing] the energy)” of artists as fundamentally different as Monet and Degas or Picasso and Léger, as part of a strategy of forming “*une structure sociale capable d'attirer sur elle une attention moins distraite*

⁵⁷ R[oger] V[an] Gindertael, “À propos des Salons parisiens et de la première Biennale des jeunes artistes,” *Quadrum* no. 7 (1959): 168.

⁵⁸ Watt, “Paris Commentary,” 62.

⁵⁹ Daniel Abadie and Patrick d'Elme, “L'objet-roi: réflexions sur le Nouveau Réalisme,” *Études* (July, 1969): 66.

*et de lui assurer une plus grande force d'impact auprès du public et de la critique (a social structure capable of attracting a less distracted attention to it and assuring it a greater force of impact in the eyes of the public and critics)."*⁶⁰ That Nouveau Réalisme could offer such structural security was due in large part to the dogged promotional efforts of Pierre Restany.

Restany's role

The enormity of Restany's role in the establishment, development, and promotion of Nouveau Réalisme cannot be overstated. By his own account, Restany himself founded the movement, "in the presence of" Arman, Klein, et al.⁶¹ The critic's hand was everywhere in the movement and in the careers of its artists. Restany was such a prolific writer of catalog essays, journal articles, and books on the movement and its artists that his voice alone came to define Nouveau Réalisme as well as the individual œuvre of each artist. Arman later claimed that the whole of Nouveau Réalisme was nothing but an invention of Restany's, that he "*a eu envie d'être le pape d'un mouvement* (wanted to be the pope of a movement)."⁶² Even a cursory study of the art criticism from the period attests to the power of Restany's voice: critics both friendly and hostile to Nouveau Réalisme borrowed his terms and phrases to explain the artwork they were reviewing;

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66-67.

⁶¹ Restany asserted, "I founded the group of Nouveaux Réalistes, in the presence of Arman, Dufrêne, Hains, Klein, Raysse, Spoerri, Tinguely and Villeglé." Pierre Restany, "Modern Nature," trans. Joachim Neugrosschel, in *Breakthroughs: Avant-Garde Artists in Europe and America, 1950-1990* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 36.

⁶² In fact, during the banquet celebrating the tenth anniversary of Nouveau Réalisme in Milan in 1970, Restany was crowned with an enormous papal tiara made of bread, symbolizing his role as "pope" of the movement. Hélène Lassalle, "Art criticism as strategy: the idiom of 'new realism' from Fernand Léger to the Pierre Restany group," in *Art Criticism Since 1900*, ed. Malcolm Gee (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1993), 211. Asked by Abadie whether Nouveau Réalisme "*n'est qu'une invention de Pierre Restany* (is nothing but an invention of Pierre Restany's)," Arman replied "*Exactement* (Exactly)." Abadie and Arman, "L'archéologie du futur," 47.

they echoed his claims about the pieces' meaning without necessarily acknowledging that they were doing so; and they made claims that suggest more familiarity with Restany's proclamations than with the artworks themselves.

In an effort to unite artists whose "aesthetic kinship could hardly be more vague,"⁶³ Restany relied on a florid and unspecific prose, and borrowed the kinds of semantic strategies that advertisement agencies used to sell commercial goods. Restany's biographer, Henry Périer, describes the way that, after taking on the role of Klein's early defender, Restany came to rethink his task as art critic: "*Très vite, Restany passe du simple stade du constat, de l'écriture critique, à celui de l'écrivain qui veut créer physiquement sa propre écriture. Le langage devient style, le jargon critique une écriture spécialisée* (Very quickly, Restany passes from the simple stage of review, from critical writing, to that of the writer who wants to create physically his own writing. Language becomes style, critical jargon a specialized writing)."⁶⁴ So, for instance, when Restany claimed that the group's unity was based on a relationship to the object, he accounted for Klein's inclusion by defining that artist's immateriality as a "super-object."⁶⁵ As Hélène

⁶³ Lassalle, "Art criticism as strategy," 209.

⁶⁴ Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 56. It is worth noting that many at the time were troubled by criticism's trend toward advocacy, rather than objective evaluation. Georges Boudaille wrote in 1962, "*Que des critiques dont la vocation est de juger en toute objectivité entrent dans la bataille picturale . . . constitue une attitude dangereuse. . . Ils ne sont plus juges, observateurs impartiaux, ils deviennent parties, ils se font les avocats d'une tendance, ils renoncent à être ce regard infallible qui sait d'un coup d'œil séparer le vrai du faux* (That critics, whose vocation is to judge objectively, enter into the pictorial battle . . . constitutes a dangerous attitude. . . They are no longer judges, impartial observers; they become parties, they make themselves the advocates of a tendency, they give up their status as the infallible eye that knows from a single glance how to separate the true from the false)." Boudaille, untitled typescript, 1962. Fonds Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

⁶⁵ Restany wrote, "*Le Nouveau Réalisme est une vision du monde où l'objet a une place centrale. C'est une volonté délibérée de prendre dans ce que produit la société industrielle et urbaine tous les éléments d'inspiration, toutes les motivations du langage. Mais on peut considérer que le pigment pur c'est aussi l'objet. L'immatériel, c'est un sur-objet, c'est l'énergie* (Nouveau Réalisme is a vision of the world in which the object has a central place. It is a deliberate will to take from that which industrial and urban society produces all the elements of inspiration, all the motivations of language. But one can consider that pure pigment is also the object. The immaterial is a super-object, it is energy)." Restany, quoted in Périer, 172-173.

Lassalle points out, “semantically speaking, we are within pure sophistry.”⁶⁶ And nowhere is the ambiguity of Restany’s prose more evident than in his repeated invocation of the notion of “the real,” which he treats as a whole thing, a “vague totality” as Meredith Malone put it,⁶⁷ as though it were at once a concrete and present entity and a flexible and inexhaustible concept.⁶⁸

Restany’s voice, despite its vagueness, drowned out the voices of the individual artists in the 1950s and 60s, not only in overshadowing the latter’s own writings and statements, but in actually silencing the works of art themselves. His proclamations were so prevalent that they largely blinded audiences to the works of art as autonomous entities, to the point where it seemed that Restany’s language was as much a part of the works as the pieces of debris or pigment that composed them. Lassalle relates Restany’s promotion of Nouveau Réalisme to F.T. Marinetti’s sponsorship of Futurism fifty years prior: both share “the same feeling for provocation through the media,” but whereas Marinetti defined his doctrine before recruiting artists who could be united by “the single power of the word,” Restany first found his artists, and then sought the “common denominator” among them. “But once again, the word was essential,”⁶⁹ and indeed, it became all-consuming.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 209.

⁶⁷ Meredith Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme: Performative Exhibition Strategies and the Everyday in Post-WWII France” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 31.

⁶⁸ Restany wrote in the first manifesto that the fragments of the world-as-painting that the Nouveaux Réalistes appropriate represent, synecdochically, “*la réalité sociologique toute entière, le bien commun de l’activité des hommes, la grande république de nos échanges sociaux, de notre commerce en société, qui est assignée à comparaître* (the entire sociological reality, the common good of man’s activity, the great republic of our social exchanges, of our commerce in society, which is summoned to appear).” Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 265.

⁶⁹ Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 207.

⁷⁰ Already in 1959, critics — Alain Jouffroy the most vocal among them — had begun to lambaste Restany for pigeonholing “his” artists. Raymond Hains recounts, “*Au lendemain de la première Biennale de Paris, certains critiques ont reproché à Restany de nous avoir enfermés sous une cloche de verre* (The day after the first Biennale de Paris, certain critics reproached Restany for imprisoning us under a glass dome).”

Restany was a myth-maker,⁷¹ and he was so concerned with the branding he had created that he treated the Nouveaux Réalistes — as a group and as individual artists — like a product he was advertising.⁷² To that end, he employed the great advertising trope of repetition: he reiterated the same key phrases over and over, in every text he published, letter he wrote, speech he delivered, and conversation he had.⁷³ Even when he was dealing with a sympathetic ear, as when writing to a friend who knew the history of Nouveau Réalisme and accepted Restany's interpretation of it, he would still repeat its myth. Thus in a 1965 letter to Robert Giron, even though he begins by saying that he knows Giron understands and accepts his claims and that he need not repeat them, he

Hains, in "Colloque Nouveau Réalisme: Table ronde," transcript, September 8, 1998. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes. Périer also reports on Jouffroy's attitude toward Restany: "*Jouffroy se méfie de ceux qui font du spectacle en transformant l'art en une sorte de promotion personnelle* (Jouffroy is wary of those who make a spectacle by transforming art into a sort of personal promotion)." Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 184.

⁷¹ For more on Restany's mythologizing tactics and their relationship to the intellectual life of his period — including most importantly Barthes's 1956 essay, "Le mythe, aujourd'hui" — see Annie Claudres, "Le rôle de Pierre Restany dans l'historiographie de l'art français après-guerre. Le mythe en question," in *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, ed. Richard Leeman (Paris: Éditions des Cendres, 2009), 467-482.

⁷² Restany became possessive of the terms Nouveau Réalisme and Nouveaux Réalistes, and made a concerted effort to protect their usage, especially following the 1962 Sidney Janis exhibition "The New Realists," which Restany saw as a disaster propagated by an American gallerist with an agenda of vanquishing the European artists. This exhibition, held in Janis's New York gallery in 1962, was supposed to be a reiteration of Restany's exhibition "Les Nouveaux Réalistes à Paris et à New York" at the Galerie J in Paris in 1961, which included the Europeans plus the Neo-Dadaists that were widely seen to be engaged in similar artistic pursuits: Rauschenberg, Johns, Chamberlain, Stankiewicz. But when Janis mounted his show, he made changes to the list of artists without consulting Restany: rather than including these Neo-Dadaists, Janis invited the new Pop artists like Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Wesselmann, and as a result, critics largely agreed that the Europeans' work looked old, dusty, feeble, and outdated in comparison. Restany wrote a polemical account of the exhibition and the shady dealings by Janis, and from then on became increasingly protective of his Nouveau-Réaliste "brand." In 1962, Restany learned that the Neue Galerie in Munich intended to host an exhibition of Nouveau Réalisme and quickly wrote the director of the museum a letter demanding that any exhibition of Nouveau Réalisme may include *only* the thirteen artists officially associated with the group. He wrote that if the curator, Rolf Becker, accepted the list of thirteen artists, then the two of them — Becker and Restany — could work together to make an exhibition of Nouveau Réalisme. In other words, he would not allow anyone else to use the name Nouveau Réalisme or to imply that it had any meaning other than that ascribed to it by Restany, as though it were trademarked. See Restany, letter to Friedrich Bayerthal, December 8, 1962. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

⁷³ Malone points out that Restany's experience as press attaché and speech writer for various government functionaries had contributed to his ability to traffic in the discourses of modernization, rationalism, and categorization which were becoming in the 1950s and 60s the reality of daily life. Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme," 26.

goes on to recount his entire argument about the difference between Nouveau-Réaliste presentation and Pop representation, and then reiterates the history of the group's founding, repeating the original declaration, listing the artists involved, and insisting on his crucial role as founder.⁷⁴ Reading Restany's personal correspondence, one finds countless examples of this kind of repetitive relating of the same few fundamental concepts and "historical" points.⁷⁵

Futhermore, Restany was keen to perform the same act of repetition in his published texts, where he would often replicate whole phrases and paragraphs verbatim, or would simply reuse the same essay in multiple exhibition catalogs or journals, even years apart.⁷⁶ There is documented evidence of his requesting a museum director to simply reuse his essay from a previous catalog,⁷⁷ and the essays speak for themselves: the same key phrases about "direct presentation" and "modern, urban, industrial nature" recur with the frequency of a mantra. He even used the same phrases anecdotally, as when he recounted in an interview with Henry Périer a conversation he had had with Arman in 1959, in which he recalled saying to the artist,

Voilà Arman, tu as réussi. . . . Une seule solution logique s'impose: c'est cette réalité qui doit être assignée à comparaître. A l'opposé de l'attitude représentative traditionnelle de l'artiste, tu définis ainsi un art de présentation basé sur la quantité. Présentation de la nature moderne dont chaque fragment objectif est doué d'un pouvoir de signification universelle. Arman, ton acte concrétise l'affirmation de la volonté directement appropriative du réel.

⁷⁴ Pierre Restany, letter to Robert Giron, January 19, 1965. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

⁷⁵ See Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

⁷⁶ Malone points out that Restany also used repetitive imagery as a means of "visual branding," using many of the same images in the catalog for the Second Festival de Nouveau Réalisme in 1963 that had already appeared in *A 40° au-dessus de DADA* in 1961. Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme," 39-40.

⁷⁷ Restany asked Giron, who was organizing an exhibition on Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme at the Palais des beaux-arts in Brussels, to simply reuse his text from an exhibition in the Hague. See Restany, letter to Robert Giron, January 19, 1965. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

Arman, you've done it. . . . Only one logical solution is essential: it is that reality that must be summoned to appear. As opposed to the traditional, representative attitude of the artist, you are defining an art of presentation based on quantity. Presentation of modern nature of which each objective fragment is endowed with a power of universal meaning. Arman, your act concretizes the affirmation of the directly appropriative will of the real.⁷⁸

The exchange that Restany recounts is in fact a verbatim repetition of phrases from several of his most pervasive writings. The "reality that must be summoned to appear" recurs in both the first and the second manifestos of Nouveau Réalisme in 1960 and 1961, respectively;⁷⁹ the "art of presentation" that stands in opposition to the "traditional representative attitude" appears in an early essay on Arman;⁸⁰ the "objective fragment endowed with the power of universal meaning" is invoked in the second manifesto;⁸¹ and the "directly appropriative will of the real" is referenced in another early essay on Arman.⁸² That each of these exact phrases recurs in an ostensibly casual anecdote about a prior conversation exposes the extent to which Restany had mastered his narrative and delimited its terms.

The strategic branding not only of Nouveau Réalisme but of the language used to describe it is why Restany's voice ended up infiltrating the prose of other critics and

⁷⁸ Restany, quoted in Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 141.

⁷⁹ In the first manifesto, Restany wrote that in directly presenting the real and avoiding conceptual or imaginative transcription, "*C'est la réalité sociologique qui est assignée à comparaître* (It is the sociological reality that is summoned to appear)." Restany, "Les Nouveaux Réalistes," 265. In the second manifesto, he claimed that through the appropriation of fragments of the real, "*c'est la réalité toute entière . . . qui est assignée à comparaître* (it is the whole of reality . . . that is summoned to appear)." Restany, "A 40° au-dessus de DADA," 266.

⁸⁰ "*A l'opposé de l'attitude représentative traditionnelle de l'artiste, l'art d'Arman est un art de présentation* (As opposed to the traditional representative attitude of the artist, Arman's art is an art of presentation)." Pierre Restany, "Arman et la logique formelle de l'objet [1966]," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 265.

⁸¹ In the second manifesto, Restany declares that the Nouveaux Réalistes consider the world a painting from which they appropriate "*des fragments dotés d'universelle signification* (fragments endowed with universal meaning)." Restany, "A 40° au-dessus de DADA," 266.

⁸² Restany wrote that the *Poubelles* precisely "*concrétisent enfin l'affirmation de la volonté directement appropriative du réel* (finally concretize the affirmation of the directly appropriative will of the real)." Restany, "Arman: un regard toujours neuf sur le monde [1968]," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 269-270.

scholars of his time. The phrases he conjured and ceaselessly repeated became as associated with Nouveau Réalisme as were the works of art themselves, just as Restany was as recognizable a figure as any of the artists, if not more so.

The ubiquity of Restany's voice can be heard echoed in art criticism by a variety of writers addressing a range of artists throughout the 1950s and 60s and beyond. In a review of an exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's work at the Galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris in 1961, Françoise Choay employed phrases extracted verbatim from Restany's reviews of his own Nouveau-Réaliste artists. Choay wrote that Rauschenberg asks us to find the world via its fragments, and she stated that the artist's work drives us to "*considérer le monde entier comme un tableau* (consider the entire world as a painting)."⁸³ This is a direct quotation of Restany's oft-repeated language regarding his artists; it features prominently in the second manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, where Restany writes, "*Les nouveaux réalistes considèrent le Monde comme un Tableau, le Grand Œuvre fondamental dont ils s'approprient des fragments dotés d'universelle signification* (The Nouveaux Réalistes consider the World as a Painting, the Great Fundamental Work from which they appropriate fragments endowed with universal meaning)."⁸⁴

The fact that Choay used those exact words without attributing them to Restany or even mentioning his name is a testament both to the way his voice and his language had saturated discussions of contemporary art, and to the way the terms he invented and defined, and the interpretations he put forth, seeped into the lexicon of art criticism of the time. In the same article, Choay went on to claim,

⁸³ Françoise Choay, "Dada, Néo-Dada, et Rauschenberg," *Art International* 5, no. 8 (October 1961): 81.

⁸⁴ Pierre Restany, "A 40° au-dessus de DADA," 266-267.

en face de dada ou du surréalisme Rauschenberg apparaît singulier, par sa foi candide en le monde réel, par son acceptation, son désir ‘des choses mêmes’ qu’il capte immédiatement dans leur présence. Mais cette attitude n’est-elle pas également celle des néo-réalistes de l’École de Paris . . . ? Eux aussi ont choisi de bannir l’image, l’illusion, la représentation, au profit de choses réelles.

opposite dada or surrealism, Rauschenberg appears singular, by his candid faith in the real world, by his acceptance, his desire ‘for things themselves’ that he captures immediately in their presence. But is that not also the attitude of the neo-realists of the School of Paris . . . ? They, too, chose to ban image, illusion, representation, in favor of real things.⁸⁵

Once again, Choay adopted Restany’s language to describe the Nouveau-Réaliste project, and she used it as a practical tool for explaining the work of Rauschenberg. Perhaps she thought that her Parisian audience, aware of the work of the Nouveaux Réalistes, would better understand the American’s œuvre if she analyzed it in terms familiar to them: those that Restany used to explain Nouveau Réalisme. Or perhaps she herself had come to understand Rauschenberg’s work only through the prism of Restany’s language. Given such evidence of Restany’s diction percolating in other critics’ writing, it is no wonder that the assimilation of Restany’s voice extended into the decades following Nouveau Réalisme’s tenure; the indoctrination of a particular generation of art critics had already begun within those first few dynamic years.

Herta Wescher, in a 1963 report on the latest developments from the Nouveaux Réalistes, reiterated Restany’s precise terminology in regard to those artists’ aims and practices: “In their common program the founders [of Nouveau Réalisme] showed their determination to demonstrate, by their presentation, reality as it exists, and to reduce to a minimum individual contribution to artistic creation.”⁸⁶ In that one sentence, Wescher restated Restany’s buzzwords of presentation, reality *per se*, and the non-intervention of

⁸⁵ Choay, “Dada, Néo-Dada,” 82.

⁸⁶ Wescher, “What is new with the New Realists?,” *Cimaise*, no. 64 (March-June 1963): 38.

the artist. And Sacha Sosnovsky performed a similar repetition when he wrote in 1961 that the Niçois artists of Nouveau Réalisme, in seeking their intense realist expression, used everything they saw, from junk to new objects — “*en un mot, ILS DESCENDIRENT SUR TERRE* (in a word, THEY CAME DOWN TO EARTH).”⁸⁷ Such phrasing is a gloss of Restany’s repeated definition of Nouveau Réalisme as “*une façon plutôt directe de remettre les pieds sur terre* (a rather direct way of putting one’s feet back on the ground).”⁸⁸ Further, in adding that “*il n’y a pas chez eux de passions polémiques, de volonté d’écœurer le bourgeois* (there is not, in their work, any polemical feelings or any will to dishearten the bourgeois),”⁸⁹ Sosnovsky again echoed Restany’s claim that the Nouveaux Réalistes functioned “*à quarante degrés au-dessus du zéro dada, sans complexe d’agressivité, sans volonté polémique caractérisée* (at forty degrees above the dada zero, without the aggressivity complex, without the typical polemical will).”⁹⁰

Such perpetuation of Restany’s claims has long outlasted the movement. In 1986, the Musée d’Art Moderne de la ville de Paris, under the direction of Bernadette Contensou, mounted the first major retrospective exhibition of Nouveau Réalisme. At that time, twenty-six years after the movement’s founding and twenty-three after its demise, the Restanian account of its origins and intentions remained fully intact. In his review of the show, Michel Thomas introduced the art as “*l’art sociologique* (sociological art)” and the artists as those who “*ont appris à intégrer le monde moderne*

⁸⁷ Sacha Sosnovsky, “Tendances du Nouveau Réalisme niçois [1961],” in *Chroniques niçoises, Genèse d’un musée* (Nice: Musée d’art moderne et d’art contemporain, 1991), 194.

⁸⁸ Restany, “A 40° au-dessus de DADA,” 267.

⁸⁹ Sosnovsky, “Tendances,” 194.

⁹⁰ Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 265.

au-delà de la représentation (learned to integrate the modern world beyond representation).”⁹¹

Problems with Restany

The fact of the Nouveaux Réalistes’ cohesion as a group, however shortlived, was due almost entirely to the efforts of the “bulldozer” Restany,⁹² who worked tirelessly to unite and promote the artists and to insist on their originality and importance as a movement.⁹³ The group of artists that came together under the banner Nouveau Réalisme was heterogenous to be sure; but, as Pierre Courcelles asserts, Nouveau Réalisme already existed, “*en état brut, en ordre dispersé, individualité par individualité* (in raw state, in dispersed order, individuality by individuality),”⁹⁴ before Restany put forth its constitutive declaration. The impulse was there; a new form of realism was there; the official creation of the movement required Restany only because of his promotional skills, his ability to make the public aware of this current that had sprung up on its own, artist by artist, over the last decade.

Courcelles argues that Restany’s discourse, however limiting or compartmentalizing it may have been, in fact served the artists if for no other reason than that they were no longer entirely alone in their battle to survive in an art market hostile to

⁹¹ M[ichel] Thomas, “Nostalgie . . . des Sixties,” *Textile/Art* no. 19 (June 1986): 11.

⁹² Pierre Cabanne used this term for Restany in the article, “Les nouveaux réalistes, de la décharge au musée,” *Le Matin*, May 15, 1986.

⁹³ Restany’s prominence was certainly exceptional, but it is also true that art criticism in general took on more weight in the postwar period. André Chastel, reflecting on developments in the French art market since 1950, declared, “Innumerable recent movements, American or others, need the lifebuoy of criticism. Its task is not only that of provoking in mental space the disposition, the hollow which will be receptive to the acceptance of a work whose impact is not obvious: it directly or indirectly furnishes the operator with the concepts which must be exploited. Hence the genuine coupling of intellectuals and artists. This phenomenon will doubtless remain as one of the specific characteristics of our time.” André Chastel, 1972. quoted in Lassalle, “Art Criticism as Strategy,” 215.

⁹⁴ Pierre Courcelles, “Les objets du ressentiment,” *Révolution*, June 20, 1986.

everything but École-de-Paris abstraction. However, as Pierre Cabanne relates, Restany's able discourse of the Nouveau-Réaliste locomotive was the frequent cause of the individual cars' "*tendance à brinquebaler ou à quitter la voie* (tendency to rattle around or to go off track)." ⁹⁵ That is, his insistent consolidating of all the artists under one generalized umbrella of objectives and significations was as divisive and distorting for the artists as it was unifying and clarifying for the audience taking it in. ⁹⁶ Thus, while Nouveau Réalisme gained more traction as a movement, and as the public became more able to grasp the works offered by the artists — according to Restany's prescribed meanings of them — the artists became increasingly disillusioned with the lengths the critic would go in order to campaign for the group. ⁹⁷

Nowhere was the discrepancy between the critic's claims and the artists' intentions more pronounced than in Restany's insistence on the Dada lineage of Nouveau Réalisme — a heritage that most of the artists wholeheartedly rejected, and that turned out to be more harmful than beneficial to their project. ⁹⁸ In fact, in 1961, angered by Restany's promotion of a Dada filiation for Nouveau Réalisme, Klein sought to break

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Périer referred to Restany's behavior as "*un peu comme un dictateur* (a bit like a dictator)," particularly the way in which he dealt with other critics who were unfriendly to his artists or unwilling to accept his reading of their work. Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 131.

⁹⁷ Yves Klein was never comfortable with Restany's definition of realism as grounded in modern, urban, industrial nature. Klein saw immateriality, and not materiality, as the most authentic realism. Klein, "Le Réalisme authentique d'aujourd'hui [1959]," cited in Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme," 42-43. For that reason, he was particularly unsympathetic to Restany's claim that Nouveau Réalisme was related to Dada, and in 1961 he disseminated his text "La réalité dépasse la fiction, le réalisme dépasse l'objet" to fellow artists (Raysse, Dufrêne, Hains, Villeglé, and Arman) and critics (Descargues, Jouffroy, and Ashbery), as a means of contradicting Restany's claims and reproaching him for speaking on behalf of the artists without consulting them. Ibid., 45.

⁹⁸ The Dada comparison that was foisted on the Nouveaux Réalistes by Restany and by a series of curators of exhibitions seeking to link the current trends to past avant-gardisms, inevitably disadvantaged the new artists, who were seen as less radical than their predecessors. As Gindertael put it in 1961, the Nouveaux Réalistes claiming to be "40 degrees above Dada" "*ne peuvent être que de pâles et malins conformistes qui essayent de distraire pendant quelques instants un public blasé* (can be only pale and shrewd conformists who try to distract a blasé public for a few moments." R[oger] V[an] Gindertael, "France," *Quadrum* no. 10 (1961): 175.

with the critic, and recruited Alain Jouffroy and Pierre Descargues to replace him. Klein called a meeting with with fellow artists Raysse, Dufrêne, Arman, Villeglé, and Hains, as well as Jouffroy and Descargues, and asked the latter to take up the helm of Nouveau Réalisme and define a new strategy with new criteria. But they turned down the offer, declaring such a move disloyal,⁹⁹ and in the end, all that Klein's meeting accomplished was to galvanize a feeling of revolt among the artists seeking to distance themselves from the overly powerful Restany.¹⁰⁰ Eventually, as Cabanne reports, each artist understood that it was better, "*pour éviter que le langage collectif ne devienne système, suivre sa propre fortune, quitte à tourner le dos à l'aventure initiale* (in order to avoid having the collective language become a system, to follow one's own fortune, leave and turn one's back on the initial adventure)."¹⁰¹

It is necessary to appreciate the profound impact of Restany's voice in order to recognize how thoroughly our understanding of Arman's work has been governed by it. Nearly two decades into his friendship with and promotion of Arman, Restany reflected on the nature of their relationship, writing, "*J'ai la tentation parfois de prendre l'œuvre d'Arman pour le miroir de mes options fondamentales: toute une chaîne associative de ma conscience y est liée, toute une qualité structurelle de ma perception* (I am sometimes tempted to consider Arman's œuvre as a mirror of my fundamental biases: a whole associative chain of my consciousness is tied to it, a whole structural quality of my

⁹⁹ According to Périer, Jouffroy agreed that "*le contenu théorique [du Nouveau Réalisme] est très superficiel* (the theoretic content [of Nouveau Réalisme] is very superficial," but he was shocked that Klein would question Restany, the critic who had gone to bat for him. Jouffroy and Descargues told Klein he should be thanking Restany for everything he had done. Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 192. Périer reports on this meeting and the views expressed within it based on interviews with Arman, Jouffroy, and Descargues.

¹⁰⁰ Klein's reason for calling the meeting was simple: "*le critique prend trop de poids* (the critic holds too much weight)." Ibid., 193.

¹⁰¹ Cabanne, "Les nouveaux réalistes."

perception).”¹⁰² This rumination represents an important admission on Restany’s part: that Arman’s œuvre has essentially served as a tool for Restany to put forth his theories on art and society. He further acknowledged, “*C’est à travers le regard d’Arman que j’ai appris à déchiffrer la logique expressive de la quantité, à en pressentir les effets pratiques sur le langage des objets* (It is through Arman’s eye that I have learned to decipher the expressive logic of quantity, to sense its practical effects on the language of objects).”¹⁰³ And he concluded, “*Le travail d’Arman est un peu le baromètre de ma sensibilité* (Arman’s work is a bit the barometer of my sensibility).”¹⁰⁴ The imperative of separating Arman’s artwork from Restany’s interpretations of it is thus glaringly evident, for those interpretations were put forth as a means not of objectively enlightening the import of Arman’s œuvre, but rather of advancing Restany’s personal — and highly motivated — notions of “the real,” realism, and the role of art therein.¹⁰⁵

An interview with Arman on the role of the art critic is revelatory. Asked whether the art critic “must just show the work of art as it is” or whether he or she “has to interpret it,” Arman responded:

¹⁰² Pierre Restany, “Vingt-cinq ans de bonheurs, cinq ans d’état de grâce,” typescript, 1984. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique, d’art, Rennes.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ An anecdote from 1966 is revelatory. In September of that year, Arman was awarded the prestigious Premio Marzotto during the Venice Biennale, due in large part to Restany’s intervention. The critic had asked Martial Raysse to withdraw from the competition in order to improve Arman’s chances of winning; as Restany explained in a letter to Arman, “*Toute ma tactique est basée sur le fait que tu es le leader actuel du Nouveau Réalisme et que tu mérites le prix en fonction de la position éminente que tu occupes dans ce secteur de l’art actuel. De Wilde [Eduard ‘Edy’ De Wilde, directeur du Musée Stedelijk, Amsterdam, de 1963 jusqu’à 1985] le sait bien, il n’en a jamais disconvenu et il votera pour toi si je défends jusqu’au bout cette position* (My whole tactic is based on the fact that you are the present leader of Nouveau Réalisme and that you deserve the prize in function of the preeminent position that you occupy in this sector of current art. De Wilde [Eduard ‘Edy’ De Wilde, director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, from 1963 to 1985] knows it well; he has never denied it and he will vote for you if I defend that position right to the end).” Restany, letter to Arman, 1966. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes. See also Marie Bertram, “Chronologie,” in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 311.

The art critic is a, must be a kind of witch doctor[;] . . . he has to help the artist sometimes to bear, to give birth to this world or his imagination by some positive or negative position. The artist has to be enough individual to keep his individuality anyway. And to bring those to the audience, too, . . . because the audience is not completely aware and can take most everything as a good product. . . . [T]he art critic has a very difficult position like a *découvreur*. . . . A talent scout; a searcher. But it's a little bit different than the talent scout because he has to be, not aware of what is the need of the audience, but aware of what he's bringing the artist. . . . He can be wrong. He is wrong a lot of times. . . . It's a little bit like a judge will separate the good con from the bad one. . . . And the artist in the society has a kind of *le barrage de la virilité*, the virility obstacle to pass, dam to pass. . . . And one role of the critic is to make things difficult for the artist, but in a good way, a positive way, and easier for the audience in a good way, too.¹⁰⁶

It is evident that Arman had Restany in mind — that figure who helped the audience to accept the new artwork, at the sometime expense of the accurate representation of the artist's own voice.

Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, critic and champion of Figuration Narrative, the easel-painting movement that directly succeeded and attempted to rebuff Nouveau Réalisme, was condemnatory already in 1960 of Restany's heavy hand in defining the group and characterizing the projects of the individual artists: "*Les principes de base*," Gassiot-Talabot wrote, "*étaient . . . moins l'effet d'une contestation scientifique et objective des liens qui pouvaient réellement unir les artistes du nouveau groupe, que la projection de la volonté de puissance, nécessairement déformante puisque ordonnatrice, du théoricien* (The basic principles [of the group] . . . were less the effect of a scientific and objective contestation of the connections that could really unite the artists of the new group, than the projection of the theorist's will for power, necessarily distorting because of its commanding nature)."¹⁰⁷ Gassiot-Talabot thus made the same observation Arman would make years later, but with much less sympathy for Restany's task, suggesting that the

¹⁰⁶ "Oral History Interview."

¹⁰⁷ Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, "À propos du Nouveau Réalisme," *Opus 2* (July 1967): 77.

latter's approach was not the accepted duty of the art critic but rather an extreme and detrimental advocacy that did a disservice to the artwork it purported to support.¹⁰⁸

The Restanian view

Ironically, Restany had actually begun his career in art criticism as a champion of the very abstract painting he would soon denounce.¹⁰⁹ He later claimed, in a 1990 interview, that he had dropped lyrical abstraction in favor of Klein, Tinguely, and other young innovators because he “understood that there was not going to be a second generation of gestural painters.”¹¹⁰ But in the mid-1950s, and even through his writing in 1958 of the text *Lyrisme et abstraction*, Restany was still defending abstract painting while Arman had already embraced realism.¹¹¹ Restany later averred that he had started to sense in 1955, as soon as he met Klein, that an aesthetic based on shutting out the “real” world could not endure.¹¹² But given the date of *Lyrisme et abstraction*, it is evident that his *volte-face* came decidedly later. By 1960, however, when he composed a new preface for that book in order to address the new directions art had taken in the past

¹⁰⁸ Malone has written extensively on the problems associated with Restany's promotion of the group, including the many ways in which his repeated theories of realism, of “sociological art,” and of Nouveau Réalisme's Dada heritage provided ammunition for the group's detractors. See especially the first chapter of Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme,” 18-73.

¹⁰⁹ Restany's earliest exposure to art in Paris was through his daily visits to the Studio Paul Fchetti, a gallery dedicated to abstract painting that was showing the work of such artists as Karel Appel, Camille Bryen, Jean Dubuffet, Sam Francis, Georges Mathieu, Henri Michaux, Alfonso Ossorio, Jackson Pollock, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Wols. Beginning in 1956, Restany wrote for the journal *Cimaise*, a review dedicated to abstract art, alongside Michel Ragon, who was a champion of such figures as Hans Hartung, Pierre Soulages, Serge Poliakoff, Jean Dubuffet, and Jean Fautrier, as well as the group CoBrA. In his early writings, Restany argued for a “lyrical abstraction,” notably in his texts “Le geste et le rythme,” *Cimaise* 5, no. 1 (1957): 30-36; and *Lyrisme et abstraction* (Milan: Edizioni Apollinaire, 1960).

¹¹⁰ Cone, “The Late Fifties,” 69. Restany took interest in abstract painters like Mathieu, Bryen, and Fautrier, and he organized an exhibition in 1957 that included the abstract artwork of Bellegarde, Bertini, Bruning, Hundertwasser, Halpern, Vallorz, and Delahaye. The exhibition, entitled *Espaces imaginaires*, was held at the Kamer Gallery in January 1957. Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 208.

¹¹¹ Restany wrote *Lyrisme et abstraction* in 1958 but it was not published until 1960, at which time he added a preface that accounted for the changes to his position in the last two years.

¹¹² See Marie J. A. Colombet, *L'humour objectif: Roussel, Duchamp, “sous le capot”: l'objectivation du surréalisme* (Paris: Publibook, 2008), 451.

two years, Restany had come to see several inventive new artists as presenting an almost inevitable alternative to abstraction. Even the abstract painters themselves, Restany maintained, realized what was happening: that Klein's monochromes and Tinguely's machines and Hains's appropriations amounted to "a cancelation of gestural painting, the opposite of the priority given to the physical gesture."¹¹³ Restany saw in the marginalized artists' efforts a rejection of the "*vision égocentrique d'un monde intérieur contre l'immanence du réel* (egocentric vision of an interior world *against* the immanence of the real),"¹¹⁴ which characterized abstract painting, and instead an attempt "to build a new language tied to the reality of the world, the economic boom, to the consumer society, to technology, the space legend."¹¹⁵ What he did not see in these artists' works was a *critical* approach to any of those realities. Restany continuously and arduously worked to dispel the notion that the Nouveaux Réalistes took up a critical position in relation to consumer society, and stated time and again that Nouveau Réalisme represents an "embrace" and a "celebration" of the contemporary modern, industrial world.¹¹⁶

For Restany, a particularly key concern was to distinguish his European artists from the Americans who would quickly garner the limelight in the new mode of realism. He first set his sights on the so-called Neo-Dada generation — especially Rauschenberg, Johns, Chamberlain, and Stankiewicz — who were by 1958 fixtures on the American

¹¹³ Cone, "The Late Fifties," 69.

¹¹⁴ Pierre Restany, "L'art jeu chasse l'art pour l'art," *La Galerie des arts*, no. 41 (February 1967): 26.

¹¹⁵ Cone, "The Late Fifties," 69.

¹¹⁶ Restany reflected in 1986, "*Le pari sur les ressources autonomes du langage de la ville et de l'usine constitue la référence optimiste sur laquelle se fonde l'adhésion des Nouveaux Réalistes à la société de consommation* (The gamble on the autonomous resources of the language of the city and of the factory constitutes the optimistic reference on which the Nouveaux Réalistes' participation in consumer society is founded)." Pierre Restany, "Le Nouveau Réalisme, l'art du monde riche," *Galleries Magazine* (May 1986): 63.

scene, and increasingly present in Europe as well.¹¹⁷ Much of Restany's criticism of the American artists stemmed from his fundamental understanding of art history as a series of ruptures.¹¹⁸ His unrelenting commitment to that conception motivated his first manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, which declared easel painting, along with all other conventional modes of art-making, decidedly finished. But the Neo-Dadaists seemed to Restany to be seeking aesthetic continuity with the preceding generation, the great Abstract Expressionists of the New York School. For Restany, the impression that the American artists lacked any will toward breaking with their predecessors, and instead evidenced a certain respect or even veneration of them, undermined the force of their own work. For these artists were, according to Restany, not simply allowing the found object to stand as the work of art, but rather "*l'insér[ant] dans le champ pictural de l'Expressionnisme Abstrait* (inserting it in the pictorial field of Abstract

¹¹⁷ After 1962, when American Pop art arrived in full force with the exhibition "The New Realists" at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, Restany had a new rival with which to contend. His writing from that point on took aim at Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Wesselman and the rest of the players in the "American New Realism," staking the claim that the whole movement, whatever its merits, was indebted to the European Nouveaux Réalistes' trailblazing efforts. In a 1963 missive, Restany wrote that, after the success and then the waning of action painting, the United States was in the process of finding a new national style — one that was definitively preceded by his European movement, the original "new realists": "*Après l'action painting, l'Amérique est en train de se trouver un second style national: l'American New realism. Tant pis ou tant mieux. Mais cette confusion américaine aidant, il est temps de 'déposer la marque,' d'en retracer l'histoire et d'en affirmer l'incontestable antériorité européenne* (After action painting, America is in the process of finding for itself a second national style: American New Realism. For better or for worse. But given this American confusion, it is time to 'lay down the mark,' to retrace history and to affirm the incontestable European anteriority)." Pierre Restany, untitled typescript, January 1963. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹¹⁸ Restany's vision of art history as a series of ruptures aligned with the rhetoric of the avant-garde — that each successive avant-garde moment was its own revolution, breaking with that which had come before it. But it was also part of his understanding of history in general. In describing the way the "new cityscape was forcefully imposed" on Europe by the two World Wars (as opposed to its natural emergence in the United States), Restany referred to "modern nature" as a "philosophical rupture." It was for this reason that when American artists of the 1960 generation looked to the previous generation of artists, they held them in esteem and sought continuity with them, whereas the Europeans were "far more extremist" and "had no special regard for the uncharismatic personalities of the previous generation." Restany, "Modern Nature," 33.

Expressionism).”¹¹⁹ This criticism was directed most pointedly at Rauschenberg, whose Combines appeared to Restany as nothing more than “*assemblages d’objets sur des toiles peintes* (assemblages of objects on painted canvases),”¹²⁰ which is to say, weaker in force and less directly “sociological” than the assemblages *tout court* that he saw Arman and his Parisian colleagues producing.¹²¹

Restany’s invocation of a “sociological” imperative in the Nouveaux Réalistes’ artwork was his means of establishing the objectivity of their practice, in opposition especially to the eminently subjective model of abstract or *informel* art.¹²² Restany repeated his argument that Nouveau Réalisme was a phenomenon founded in the exaltation of the object, declaring “*C’est en s’emparant de l’objet qu’il [Nouveau Réalisme] a pu se placer sur un autre terrain que celui de la peinture et refléter la structure socio-économique et culturelle de son époque* (It is in seizing the object that it [Nouveau Réalisme] was able to place itself on a different terrain than that of painting and reflect the socio-economic and cultural structure of its period).”¹²³ It was important for him to emphasize that total rupture with painting, not only because his entire vision of

¹¹⁹ Restany, “Le Nouveau Réalisme, l’art du monde riche,” 68.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Otto Hahn repeated that analysis of Rauschenberg’s work, stating, “*Rauschenberg . . . reste le proche cousin de Schwitters. Les objets sont utilisés comme de la peinture, pour leur texture, leurs formes, leur expression* (Rauschenberg . . . remains the close cousin of Schwitters. The objects are used like paint, for their texture, their forms, their expression).” Hahn, “Matériaux et techniques,” 14.

¹²² In organizing and writing about the 1961 exhibition “Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York,” which included Restany’s artists alongside Johns, Rauschenberg, Chamberlain, Lee Bontecou and Chryssa, Restany positioned his own artists as logical, exacting, and meticulous in their approach. The Americans, by contrast, were “*Romantiques de cœur, cubistes d’esprit et baroques de ton, plus disponibles aussi à la tentation surréalisante . . . en train de reconstituer un fétichisme moderne de l’objet* (Romantics at heart, cubist in spirit and baroque in manner, more susceptible to surrealizing temptation . . . employed in reconstituting a modern fetishism of the object).” Restany, “La réalité dépasse la fiction [1961],” in *1960, les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 267. As Lassalle points out, Restany thus pigeonholed the American artists as “a catch-all for all of old Europe’s cultures,” whereas the French group was presented as entirely new and radically different. See Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 210.

¹²³ Restany, “La prise en compte réaliste d’une situation nouvelle: Un entretien avec Pierre Restany,” in *1960, Les nouveaux réalistes*, 21.

art history was based on the notion of continuous rupture, but because it set his artists apart from their international colleagues and it established more radically their alleged commitment to a sociological project.

It was on the basis of that “sociological” charge that Restany repeatedly trumpeted the Nouveaux Réalistes’ superiority to their American co-generationists, insisting on the greater directness of their appropriation and presentation of “the real,” which, he claimed, they carried out without recourse to artistic intervention.¹²⁴ While many critics consented to this distinction, not all saw the Americans’ approach as the inferior one. In fact, many praised the Neo-Dadaists’ ability to go beyond the simple deployment of junk materials by adding a lyrical dimension; that approach, some argued, made their work feel more like art, with a meaning, a subversive quality, a social or political or art historical engagement that appeared to be missing from the more “complacent,” “facile,” and “unimaginative” works of certain Nouveaux Réalistes.¹²⁵

Arman in particular was the object of such condemnation, his *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* appearing too easy to produce in infinite variations for years upon years, now that the art world had officially sanctioned that kind of simplistic-seeming appropriation work. Indeed, it is true that within one year of his “discovery” of the *Accumulation*,

¹²⁴ Malone offers a thoughtful analysis of Restany’s faulty claims to a sociological practice in “Nouveau Réalisme,” 27-29.

¹²⁵ Robert Benayoun and José Pierre made these critiques in response to seeing Rauschenberg’s and the Nouveaux Réalistes’ works side-by-side at the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition in 1961. Pierre wrote, “*Les autres cherchent à découvrir un ordre esthétique, et uniquement esthétique, dans les choses viles, abjectes. Rauschenberg vise plus haut* (The others seek to discover an aesthetic order, and only an aesthetic order, in vile, abject things. Rauschenberg aims higher).” See Benayoun and Pierre, “Alchimie de l’objet, cabotinage du déchet,” *La Breche* 2 (May 1962): 53. Jouffroy, too, found that Rauschenberg’s retention of certain pictorial concerns was a positive attribute of his Combines: “*Rauschenberg réussit ce tour de force d’ouvrir toute grande une porte sur la réalité d’aujourd’hui sans pour autant fermer celle de l’art* (Rauschenberg accomplishes this tour de force of fully opening the door onto today’s reality without for all that closing the door of art).” Jouffroy, “Pour une révolution,” 196.

Arman had already made more than sixty.¹²⁶ Reviewing the landmark 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*¹²⁷ Robert Benayoun condemned Arman's contribution and its implications for the art of the future:

La grande license qui règne maintenant donnera des nuits et des années faciles à des artistes comme Arman, qui après les petites cuillères, utilisa les mains des poupées, puis les ampoules électriques. . . . On sent qu'il n'y a aucune raison de ne pas improviser à l'infini des 'œuvres' sous vitrine avec tout ce qu'on peut trouver par ordre alphabétique dans un dictionnaire.

The great license that now reigns will give easy nights and years to artists like Arman who, after the little spoons, used doll hands, then electric bulbs. . . . One senses that there is no reason not to improvise *ad infinitum* 'works' in vitrines with everything that one can find in alphabetical order in a dictionary.¹²⁸

Restany's account of Nouveau Réalisme privileged choice as the sole role of the artist, but as Benayoun pointed out, when quantity and abundance are the subject matter, and works are made of anything and everything, then the very notion of choice is weakened, as is its importance and indeed its legitimacy. Art-making thus becomes more of a gesture of non-choice, via the acceptance of all. As Benayoun lamented, "*Si l'art*

¹²⁶ Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 48.

¹²⁷ In 1961, Arman was included, alongside many of his European and American colleagues, in the important exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Museum Director William Seitz had organized the show in order to highlight the explosive trend of "junk" art, and to situate it historically by also displaying found-object artworks from throughout the twentieth century, especially the collages and readymades of the Cubist and Dada eras. Bringing together the various contemporary instantiations of assemblage, as well as their apparent historical precedents, allowed for a new kind of clarity about the present state of art and the direction it seemed to be taking. See the catalog, William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

¹²⁸ Benayoun, in Benayoun and Pierre, "Alchimie de l'objet," 53-54. In a similar vein, Jean-Jacques Lévêque expressed concern that the idea of the *Accumulation* had already become, by 1962, a "process," infinite in its character: "*Il suffit . . . d'ouvrir le dictionnaire à la lettre A, de passer en revue tous les objets jusqu'à la lettre Z. Qui aura le courage de compter combien d'accumulations Arman peut nous composer?* (It suffices . . . to open the dictionary to the letter A, to review all the objects until the letter Z. Who will have the courage to count how many accumulations Arman can make for us?)" Lévêque, 1962, quoted in Denyse Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2 (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1991), 118. Michel Thomas, too, wrote of the problematic facility of Arman's practice: "*On peut même se demander si Arman . . . une fois [sa] notoriété établie (et en particulier par la vente de multiples) ne s' [est] pas coulé confortablement dans les délices de la société de consommation qu' [il avait] voulu contester* (One may wonder if Arman, . . . once [his] notoriety was established (and in particular by the sale of multiples), did not slip comfortably into the delights of the consumer society that [he] had wanted to contest)." Thomas, "Nostalgie," 12.

constitue un choix, la prolifération en est le refus le plus facile, et le plus niais (If art constitutes a choice, proliferation is the easiest and the simplest refusal).”¹²⁹

Cleve Gray, remarking in 1962 on the current trend toward artistic anonymity in everything from geometric abstraction and abstract expressionism to Neo-Dada and Nouveau Réalisme, recognized that art was moving toward a potentially dangerous openness and inclusiveness:

Maybe the idea will triumph that the individual’s importance in art must be subservient to the participation of All in art — for this is the inevitable result (or cause) of the participation of Everything as art. The result, an art that can easily be duplicated by men or machines, is a leveling conception which leaves no room for the singular, the distinctive, the sources of the new.¹³⁰

And Benjamin Buchloh later posited that the radicality of certain Nouveaux Réalistes’ “assault on the traditional (painterly) values” was menacing their visibility because it was frightening collectors, curators, and critics alike. Buchloh wondered, “[H]ow can one invest money and time if, by definition, the work’s production seems to be unlimited due to its notion of objectivity and anonymity tending out for the (symbolic) annihilation of the individual producer as a socially determined form of production?”¹³¹ Thus the facility came not only from the form of the artwork but from its attendant debasement of the artist’s traditional role.

The refusal to make a choice in the appropriation of “the real,” and the attendant loss of authorial subjectivity, were seen to degrade the works of the Nouveaux Réalistes: if this is realism, wrote José Pierre, then what they are presenting is “*une image dévaluée*,

¹²⁹ Benayoun, in Benayoun and Pierre, “Alchimie de l’objet,” 54.

¹³⁰ Cleve Gray, “Aspects of Anonymity,” *Art in America* 50, no. 3 (1962): 96.

¹³¹ Buchloh was referring specifically to the *affichistes*, but acknowledged that aside from Klein, all the Nouveaux Réalistes had largely been ignored in both European and American art criticism and scholarship, despite participating in many major exhibitions at home and abroad. Benjamin Buchloh, “Formalism and Historicity: Changing Concepts in American and European Art Since 1945,” in *Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1977), 110.

misérable de la réalité (a devaluated, miserable image of reality).¹³² But the negation of choice and of subjectivity can also be seen as an appropriate account of “the real” in its quotidian form. If one considers that the everyday, as defined by Henri Lefebvre, is a subjectless, objectless, indifferent medium, wherein the question of value has no place,¹³³ then non-choice reveals itself to be the appropriate means of taking the everyday as both material and subject matter. Thus in selecting their fragments of “the real” for their works of art, the Nouveaux Réalistes also claim to make no value judgments: not aesthetic, not economic, not utilitarian.¹³⁴

For Restany, the expressive power of the sociological “real” is a value intrinsic to that “real” itself: “*chaque fragment objectif de la réalité en est doté, au même titre que la réalité elle-meme dans son ensemble. Chaque parcelle du réel enferme en soi une virtualité signifiante* (each objective fragment of reality is endowed with it [that value], in the same way as is reality itself as a whole. Each piece of the real holds in itself a meaningful virtuality).¹³⁵ It is because of the inherent signifying value of the object that the artist who selects it does not, according to Restany, engage in any operation that might alter or adulterate that fundamental aspect of its status as “fragment of the real.”

Anne Richard has argued that Restany’s incantation of a “sociological realism” based on certain attitudes, patterns, and behaviors, went beyond the mere principle of assemblage. The act of accumulation, for instance, was not only a form of immediate

¹³² Pierre, in Benayoun and Pierre, “Alchimie de l’objet,” 54.

¹³³ Maurice Blanchot, “Everyday Speech,” trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies* no. 73 (1987): 19.

¹³⁴ Malone has made a compelling argument that the Nouveaux Réalistes seized on the contradictory character of the everyday, which is at once “known/unknown, obvious/enigmatic, repetitive/uncertain.” Rather than mindless acceptance of consumer society, Malone finds in the Nouveaux Réalistes’ artwork “questioning and/or blatant manipulation of that society,” expressed through their experimentation with various “types of subjectivity, forms of representation, and modes of participation.” Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme,” 75.

¹³⁵ Pierre Restany, *Le Nouveau Réalisme* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1978), 45.

appropriation but also a primary gesture that represented the “*reduction à l’instance minimale d’intervention* (reduction to the smallest instance of intervention),” an anonymous gesture inscribed “*dans un souci d’objectivité caractéristique des années 60: distanciation de l’acte créateur, refus de toute projection affective, narrative, symbolique* (with a concern for objectivity characteristic of the 1960s: distancing of the creative act, refusal of all affective, narrative, symbolic projection).”¹³⁶

The claim of non-intervention, on those bases, lies at the heart of the presentation/representation dyad that Restany endorsed so insistently. And indeed, the question of presentation versus representation was at the center of much of the art criticism of Arman’s time. This fact, I believe, can be seen as symptomatic of the culture of images that was felt to be colonizing French daily life: media representations were ubiquitous, and even began to be conflated with the “real” things they mimicked. An artist’s ability to avoid representation and to give the viewer a glimpse or fragment of “the real,” in its raw state, was taken as a measure of the artist’s success. Even Gassiot-Talabot, noted detractor of Nouveau Réalisme, praised the movement for being, from the onset, “*fondé sur une approche réelle et sensible de l’objet et non sur un décalage mécanique ou scolaire de sa reproduction, ou sur un jeu cérébral avec l’ustensile* (based on a real and sensible approach to the object and not on a mechanical or scholarly displacement of its reproduction, or on a cerebral play with the utensil).”¹³⁷ By the same token, Gassiot-Talabot criticized the American Pop artists for having “*aggrand[i] l’écart*

¹³⁶ Anne Richard, “Nouveau Réalisme et sociologie,” *Opus International* 101 (Spring-Summer 1986): 54. Here we find echoes of the literary theory of the 1950s and 60s: the goal of detachment, of pure description separated from metaphorical implications or narrative voice. I will address the literature of the period, and its relationship to Nouveau-Réaliste art, in greater detail later in this chapter.

¹³⁷ Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, typescript draft for an article to appear in *Art Aujourd’hui*, enclosed in a letter to Pierre Restany dated January 22, 1965. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

entre objet et l'œuvre (enlarged the gap between the object and the work of art),¹³⁸ which he saw as a regression toward the kind of expressionism that the previous generation of artists, the Neo-Dadaists, had worked to cancel or move beyond. He criticized Pop Art for getting lodged in a fundamental deadlock of imagery; and imagery, in that historical moment, was the enemy of art.¹³⁹ Artistic values had shifted away from imagery just as — and indeed because — social values had shifted toward it.

Gassiot-Talabot concluded, however, that both Nouveau Réalisme and Pop Art failed to achieve an authentic realism. He believed that art would cycle back to a humanism and a subjectivity that are necessary for art to be art, and not just “*une vitrine de fétiches morts* (a vitrine of dead fetishes).”¹⁴⁰ That slight seems to have been addressed directly to Arman’s accumulations of “fetishistic” objects in glass or Plexiglas cases, and suggests that for Gassiot-Talabot, the perceived lack of artistic intervention in those works makes them barely qualifiable as art. Gassiot-Talabot closed with the pronouncement, “*Contrairement à une confusion savamment entretenue le Monde ne sera jamais l’Art et le choix ne sera jamais un acte créateur* (Contrary to an eruditely maintained confusion, the World will never be Art and choice will never be a creative act).”¹⁴¹ That condemnation, clearly directed at the erudite Restany and his view of “*le Monde comme un Tableau* (the World as a Picture),”¹⁴² put at its center the question of agency; for Gassiot-Talabot, the artist-agent must actually *act* on the materials at hand,

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Gassiot-Talabot, in an untitled typescript of ca. 1965, described “*l’élément traumatisant que constitue pour le peintre la présence, dans la société où il vit, des autres modes de diffusion des images* (the traumatizing element for the painter that is constituted by the presence, in the society where he lives, of other means of diffusing images).” Fonds Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

¹⁴⁰ Gassiot-Talabot, typescript draft for an article to appear in *Art Aujourd’hui*, enclosed in a letter to Pierre Restany dated January 22, 1965. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Pierre Restany, “A 40° au-dessus de DADA.”

must in some way transform them into art, for they alone can only stand as the “real” things that they are.¹⁴³ Gassiot-Talabot thus asserted that presentation alone does not suffice as a creative act; it is only an everyday gesture that fails to transcend everyday life to enter the realm of art. For that realm requires *creation*; artists must not simply appropriate reality but “*la soumett[re] à leur propre clef de décryptement, et . . . effectu[er] le filtrage nécessaire pour que, entre cette réalité et l’œuvre, s’établissent un écart, un hiatus, une transposition* (submit it to their own deciphering key, and . . . perform the necessary filtering so that, between that reality and the work of art, there is established a gap, a hiatus, a transposition)”¹⁴⁴ — the very elements denied by Restany’s realist doctrine of direct and unmediated presentation.

The view of Arman’s work as merely presentation has led to the widespread understanding of his project as one of directly reflecting “consumer society,” that new concept so important to postwar French thought. Francblin, for instance, maintains that “*Son œuvre est comme l’enregistrement immédiat, spontané, de cette présence quotidienne, envahissante des objets* (His œuvre is like the immediate, spontaneous recording of that everyday, invading presence of objects).”¹⁴⁵ And yet, Francblin does not fully embrace Restany’s claim that that immediate and spontaneous appropriation of “the real” precludes artistic intervention. Indeed, while she agrees with Restany that objects

¹⁴³ In an earlier text, Gassiot-Talabot praised those artists who “*se sont refusés à être de simples témoins indifférents ou blasés, auxquels la réalité s’imposait par sa propre inertie, par son envahissante et obsédante présence* (refused to be mere indifferent or blasé witnesses on whom reality imposed itself by its own inertia, by its invasive and obsessive presence).” The reference to the notion of artist as “witness” is another clear condemnation of Nouveau Réalisme, which Gassiot-Talabot here connects to the accusation of inert acceptance and therefore complicity with spectacle culture. See Gassiot-Talabot, “Mythologies quotidiennes,” typescript, 1964. Fonds Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

¹⁴⁴ Gassiot-Talabot, untitled typescript, ca. 1965. Fonds Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

¹⁴⁵ Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 90.

have their own intrinsic “expressive potential” that the artist brings to light,¹⁴⁶ she recognizes the importance of *transformation* in Arman’s artistic process. She quotes Arman’s description of his two-phase method — “*Premièrement, usage de l’objet; deuxièmement, mode opératoire pour transformer l’objet* (First, use of the object; second, operational mode to transform the object)”¹⁴⁷ — and then argues that for Arman, the Duchampian gesture of simply presenting a readymade object in a museum in order to baptize it as art is not sufficient. “*Si expressif soit-il, . . . un objet, pour Arman, ne peut être exposé tel quel. Si évocateur soit-il, un objet doit être apprêté, provoqué et contraint de se révéler* (No matter how expressive it is, an object, for Arman, cannot be exhibited as is. No matter how evocative it is, an object must be prepared, provoked, and constrained to reveal itself).”¹⁴⁸

Malone, too, has argued against the Restanian claim of direct appropriation and presentation, arguing in her revisionist thesis on Nouveau Réalisme that the very heart of the movement were the acts of transformation that the artists enacted upon the objects they appropriated: “What was at stake was nothing less than a radical shift away from an autonomous art and towards an emphasis on process, action, and reception.”¹⁴⁹ In Arman’s early work, I believe that reception in particular was the key component of his artistic intentions; as I shall argue throughout this dissertation, the artworks he created were envisioned entirely as displays, as objects of visual contemplation, and thus offer

¹⁴⁶ “*Les objets parlent. . . . Encore faut-il les amener à sortir de leur silence, c’est-à-dire leur faire subir un minimum de traitement favorisant leur expression* (Objects speak. . . . It is still necessary to bring them out of their silence, that is to subject them to a minimum of treatment favoring their expression).” Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Arman, in Arman and Otto Hahn, *Mémoires accumulés: entretiens avec Otto Hahn* (Paris: P. Belfond, 1992), quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁴⁹ Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme,” 19.

compelling insight into the question of Arman's agency and its relationship to his navigation of the presentation/representation dyad.

Neo-avant-garde neutrality

Nevertheless, in the 1950s and 60s Restany's take on the artists' non-interventionist stance remained the most widely accepted understanding of their work, and consequently opened the Nouveaux Réalistes to the critique not only of their complicity with the societal changes underway, but also of their general passivity.¹⁵⁰ Pierre Schneider echoed in 1962 the oft-repeated distinction between the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde: that while the Dadaists had used raw materials as a means of protesting against art, "no defiance can be sensed in the work of the Neo-Dadaists," which remains "evasive and vague, despite firmness of tone."¹⁵¹ And yet in the face of Restany's narrative and its wide acceptance in the criticism, Schneider also failed to see "a positive return to reality" in the new artists' works: "Rather, the New Realism is characterized by a minimal threshold of resistance against the pressure of things-and-

¹⁵⁰ This critique was common for the American artists, as well, though for different reasons. The postwar generation in the United States was variously described as "beat," "silent," and "uncommitted," and was held up in stark contrast to the "men of action" of the previous generation: those who had lived through the Depression and fought in the War. As Barbara Rose argued, the passivity of the new generation, who had no role in the major events of the first half of the twentieth century, was observable in their approach to art, which she described as "passive, acquiescing, and accepting." She noted a detachment between the artist and the everyday objects he or she employed in his or her art, a distance that was intensified by the utter lack of a political position vis-à-vis these remnants of daily life. Barbara Rose, "Dada Then and Now," *Art International* (January 1963): 25. See also Alan Solomon's comment that "The new artists operate . . . in complete esthetic freedom, and politically they have disengaged themselves totally." In Solomon, *Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1963). Jouffroy also commented that Rauschenberg's combines exhibited "*Pas de jugement[,] . . . pas d'attitude morale et donc ni optimisme, ni pessimisme, mais l'accueil de tout ce que le présent voile et nous dévoile, comme s'il s'agissait pour l'artiste de capter le filigrane des événements, leur texture secrète, leur apparition-disparition continue*lle (No judgment[.] . . . no moral attitude and thus neither optimism nor pessimism, but the reception of everything that the present covers and uncovers for us, as if it were for the artist a matter of capturing the implicit of events, their secret texture, their continual appearance-disappearance)." Jouffroy, "Pour une révolution," 197.

¹⁵¹ Pierre Schneider, "Paris," *Art News* 61, no. 7 (1962): 48. By "Neo-Dadaists," Schneider was referring to the entire neo-avant-garde generation, both European and American.

stuff.” The result was “preposterously crammed” canvases which, Schneider argued, “[found] extreme illustration in the accumulations of Arman.”¹⁵²

Cécile Debray, writing in the catalog for the important 2007 retrospective of Nouveau Réalisme, blamed the artists’ avowed political neutrality for the paucity of meaningful studies of the movement, other than those written by Restany, which heralded their apoliticism as a positive trait and another manifestation of their utmost commitment to objectivity. The “neutrality” of the Nouveaux Réalistes elicited attacks by both the intellectuals and the artists of their time, making it very easy for Restany’s voice to stand out above the din and take its place as the principal interpretation of their work.¹⁵³

Chief among the Nouveaux Réalistes’ detractors were the radical leftist group, the Situationist International, led by Guy Debord. In a 1963 letter to Dada pioneer Raoul Hausmann, Debord explained the Situationist attitude toward both Dada and its contemporary revival in artists such as the Nouveaux Réalistes. Dada, for the Situationists, represented the dominant revolutionary moment of the twentieth century, which had brought about a great number of innovations that had become important bases for the progress of modern art. Neo-Dada, by contrast, was simply “*une reprise . . . de l’allure formelle du dadaïsme assorti d’une idéologie, d’une ‘justification’ qui sont toujours réactionnaires* (a reprisal . . . of the formal allure of dadaism accompanied by an ideology and a ‘justification’ that are always reactionary).” Debord cited the Nouveaux

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Debray cites, for example, the Figuration Narrative movement, a group of artists championed by Gassiot-Talabot whose aim was in part to denounce “*le culte idolâtre de l’art moderne américain et de ses avatars (le Nouveau Réalisme)* (the idolatrous cult of modern American art and its avatars (Nouveau Réalisme)).” To this end, Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo and Antonio Recalcati produced together the movement’s eight-painting “manifesto,” *Vivre et laisser mourir ou La fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp* of 1965, the final panel of which depicts a flag-draped casket, implied to be holding an assassinated Duchamp, surrounded by (from left) Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Raysse, Warhol, Arman, and Restany (Figure 1.2). Cécile Debray, “Du Nouveau Réalisme,” in *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Debray, 18.

Réalistes in particular as guilty of “*l’enveloppant [ce fonds réactionnaire] de quelque brume* (enveloping it [this reactionary basis] in some haze).”¹⁵⁴

The Situationist International accused the Nouveaux Réalistes of practicing an aesthetic that proposed “*aucune différence entre l’art et les ordures* (no difference between art and garbage),”¹⁵⁵ and claimed, pejoratively, that they truly were the artists of today, for they were successful in expressing

notre temps de vieilleries solennellement proclamées neuves; ce temps d’incohérence planifiée; d’isolement et de surdit  assur s par les moyens de communication de masse; d’enseignement universitaire de formes sup rieures d’analphab tisme; de mensonge garanti scientifiquement; et de pouvoir technique d cisive   la disposition de la d bilit  mentale dirigeante

our time of obsolete ideas solemnly proclaimed to be new, this time of planned incoherence, of isolation and deafness assured by the means of mass communication, of higher forms of illiteracy taught in the university, of scientifically guaranteed lies, and of overwhelming technical power at the disposal of ruling mental incompetence.¹⁵⁶

That is, Nouveau R alisme achieved its goal of capturing reality but, problematically, it captured the negative, scornful parts of that reality without critiquing it. For Debord, “*la vie quotidienne non critiqu e, cela signifie maintenant la prolongation des formes actuelles, profond ment d grad es, de la culture et de la politique, formes dont la crise extr mement avanc e . . . se traduit par une d politisation et un n o-analphab tisme g n ralis s* (Daily life that goes uncriticized now signifies the extension of the current, profoundly degraded forms of culture and politics, forms whose extremely advanced crisis translates into a general depoliticization and neo-illiteracy).”¹⁵⁷ That is, when

¹⁵⁴ Guy Debord, letter to Raoul Hausmann, March 31, 1963. Published in Debord, *Correspondances*, vol. II (Paris: Librairie Arth me Fayard, 2001), 204.

¹⁵⁵ “Encore une fois, sur la d composition,” *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 6 (August 1961): 12.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵⁷ G[uy]-E[rnest] Debord, “Perspectives de modifications conscientes dans la vie quotidienne,” *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 6 (August 1961): 22.

people — including artists — simply embrace daily life without critique, they only contribute to the further impoverishment of that life.

The question of the political charge of Arman's work, especially the object-based *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, which the artist himself sometimes referred to as archaeological, sociological, or anthropological “records” of his historical place and time, has been a central focus of Arman scholarship over the last several decades.¹⁵⁸ As Jaimey Hamilton points out, the opposition established between critique and complicity has defined art historians' interest in issues of subjectivity as pertains to Arman's œuvre, and she herself sets out to deny the mutual exclusivity of those two poles of Arman's practice.¹⁵⁹ In that effort, she follows the precedent of Buchloh, who conceded that the accusation of complicity is perhaps overstated, when the Nouveaux Réalistes could be seen as instead “articulating the profound ambiguities of cultural production by inhabiting its contradictions.”¹⁶⁰ Indeed, as Meredith Malone has argued, the Nouveaux Réalistes' greatest distinction was “their particular adeptness at exploiting the power of unresolved contradictions that lie at the heart of the everyday.”¹⁶¹

Buchloh famously argued that the Nouveaux Réalistes,

in an almost systematic fashion[,] . . . rediscovered, recycled, and redistributed among themselves the modernist paradigms of the 1916-36 period[:] . . . the readymade (Arman), the monochrome (Klein), constructed kinetic sculpture

¹⁵⁸ Jill Carrick, Meredith Malone, and François Pluchart are among the few scholars to see in Arman's work a critique of spectacle culture, rather than an embrace of it or a neutral (read: accepting) relationship to it. See Carrick, “Le Nouveau Réalisme: un détournement de la profusion des choses,” in *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Cécile Debray, 176-209; Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme”; and Pluchart, “Enrichissantes contradictions d'Arman,” *Combat*, April 3, 1972, 8.

¹⁵⁹ See Jaimey Hamilton, “Arman's System of Objects,” *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008): 54-67.

¹⁶⁰ Buchloh, “1960a,” 434. Buchloh's essay on Klein's *Vide* and Arman's *Plein* also argues for a deeper confrontation with the question of historically specific subjectivity, rather than simple conclusions about an artist's political stance. See Benjamin Buchloh, “Plenty or Nothing: From Yves Klein's *Le Vide* to Arman's *Le Plein*,” in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 257-284. For Hamilton's discussion of Buchloh's argument as it relates to her own, see Hamilton, “Arman's System of Objects,” 55-56.

¹⁶¹ Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme,” 12.

(Tinguely), and the collage (Dufrêne, Hains, Rotella, Villeglé). Yet in almost all instances, these paradigms now appeared as though they had been tuned to articulate the fundamentally different experience of objects and public spaces under a newly formed society of spectacle, control, and consumption.¹⁶²

Such is the case, I claim, in Arman's use of the vitrine to enclose and delimit his "readymades," and I shall argue in great detail in Chapters Four and Five that the vitrine itself served to mediate the viewer's relationship to the objects in much the same way that spectacle culture mediated that relationship between humans and things in everyday life.

Buchloh acknowledges the Situationist critique of Nouveau Réalisme, which the latter saw as "an art of affirmative collusion, a culture of right-wing politics and corrupt complicity."¹⁶³ But he argues that the artists' "inhabiting" of the contradictions inherent in the new culture is "different from mere complicitous affirmation."¹⁶⁴ Drawing on the same impression, Hamilton concludes that Arman's position is that of a participant-observer: he is both witness to his time and participant in it; from such a stance, "critique is never entirely disengaged from complicity."¹⁶⁵ She points to Arman's obsessive practices of acquiring, hoarding, arranging, and caring for his objects; he became a consuming subject even as he set out to "witness" those behaviors.¹⁶⁶ The only aspect of

¹⁶² Buchloh, "1960a," 434.

¹⁶³ For decades, scholars have reprised this accusation of passive acceptance of spectacle culture or, as Anne Richard put it, "*l'absence total de position critique ou politique par rapport à la société de consommation* (the total absence of a critical or political position in relation to consumer society)." Richard, plan for a thesis on the aesthetics of detritus, undated typescript sent to Pierre Restany for review. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹⁶⁴ Buchloh, "1960a," 434. Buchloh argues that Nouveau Réalisme was the "most authentic articulation of postwar visual production in France" because those artists "made clear the inescapable way that all of postwar culture was caught up in a dialectics of historical repression and memory on the one hand, and an aggressive mode of enforced consumption and submission to the conditions of spectacle, on the other." However, in this assessment, Buchloh focuses on the instances in which the Nouveaux Réalistes "shifted the status and sites of the work of art from the relative intimacy of the pictorial and sculptural object onto the level of public space," an important innovation that is largely outside the purview of this dissertation, other than a brief exploration in Chapter Five of Arman's 1960 installation *Le Plein*.

¹⁶⁵ Hamilton, "Arman's System of Objects," 56-58.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 59. Asked directly whether his *Accumulations* were an intentional comment on waste in consumer society, Arman replied, "Well, it was just a sign of the times. . . . It was both pleasurable — as I've always

Arman's artistic practice that sets it apart from typical consumerist practice, Hamilton argues, is the "sheer consistency of his program . . . a consistency that could indicate a social scientist collecting data as much as a consumer organizing his hoard."¹⁶⁷ Hamilton refers to Arman's position as sociological witness through his "literally enacting the way the system of objects had become so pervasive."¹⁶⁸

Of course, an even more conspicuous manifestation of Arman's participant-observer position is the fact that the works of art he made, however well they reflected back to the spectator the disturbing reality of capitalist consumerism, also *became* consumer products, offered for sale, made desirable by their status as art objects. As Hamilton argues, that Arman's vitrines of found objects could be purchased as *art* was "a further sign of postwar abundance, thus becoming integrated into the sedimenting cultural assemblages that they so clearly describe and even lament."¹⁶⁹ Arman's entanglement in the very system he was purportedly just "witnessing," if not critiquing, was what led Debord to denounce the artist for becoming implicated in that very system.¹⁷⁰ Once again, it bears repeating that many of the assumptions on which criticism of Arman's and the Nouveaux Réalistes' works were based were the direct result of Restany's insistence on the proper meaning of the work, and not necessarily on the work itself.

As Malone points out, Restany had no choice but to actively ignore his artists' acts of transformation and transcription, for the denial of artistic intervention was the only apparent common denominator, the only thread precariously holding together the

been an accumulator myself — and a criticism." Arman, "Interview conducted by Susan Hapgood, New York City, November 4, 1992," in *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art, 1958-1962*, ed. Susan Hapgood (New York: American Federation of Arts in association with Universe Publishing, 1994), 109.

¹⁶⁷ Hamilton, "Arman's System of Objects," 59.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

group.¹⁷¹ Rather than recognizing the tensions and contradictions that Arman and his colleagues intentionally introduced into their works, Restany remained committed to a narrative of directness and immediacy. As Malone affirms, such a narrative was familiar to the advertising of the period, which boasted the directness and immediacy of new media and technologies without acknowledging the associated effects of such phenomena — which were, in fact, inversal to those promises.¹⁷² Media and technology, as much as they seemed to make information more accessible, at the same time created a new relationship to that information, one that was necessarily mediated and thus, paradoxically, distanced.¹⁷³

Restany's apotheosis

Restany's beatification of his artists is rivaled only by the type of glorification that he himself enjoyed during his lifetime. Not only were his claims, his neologisms, and his strategic turns of phrase repeated by his contemporary critics, but retrospective looks at the Nouveau-Réaliste movement heaped praise upon Restany for his vision and genius in uniting and promoting his group. As Périer explains, others were "*séduit par la cohérence intellectuelle que le critique donne à tous ces signes qui paraissent embryonnaires à ses yeux, les décryptant comme s'il en avait la clé* (seduced by the intellectual coherence that the critic gave to all these signs that appeared embryonically before his eyes, deciphering them as if he had the key)."¹⁷⁴ When Restany's first full-

¹⁷¹ Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme," 31.

¹⁷² Ibid., 31-32.

¹⁷³ Malone describes the postwar years as "a period marked by intense optimism concerning France's economic prosperity and the possibilities presented by new technology and media communications, while at the same time evincing clear misgivings about the negative social effects resulting from the rapid modernization and urbanization." Ibid., 347.

¹⁷⁴ Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 187.

length book on Nouveau Réalisme was published in 1968,¹⁷⁵ François Pluchart declared, “*plus encore qu’un manifeste [c]’est une page de l’histoire de l’art, l’une des plus importantes, l’une des plus exaltantes, l’une des plus belles* (even more than a manifesto, [it] is a page of the history of art, one of the most important, one of the most exalting, one of the most beautiful).” In fact, the story was so significant that he admonished, “*Ne pas lire ‘Les nouveaux réalistes,’ ce serait tout simplement refuser notre époque* (Not to read ‘*Les nouveaux réalistes,*’ would be quite simply to refuse our epoch).”¹⁷⁶ Thirty years later, Périier wrote a biography of Restany, whom he deemed “*l’alchimiste de l’art* (the alchemist of art)”; the text opened with the lines, “*Pourquoi une biographie de Pierre Restany? Parce qu’il est unique et exceptionnel. Grand maître de la critique d’art, il est le seul Français à avoir porté sa fonction à un tel degré de participation directe et personnelle à l’opération esthétique, marquant de son sceau l’histoire de l’art de ce demi-siècle* (Why a biography of Pierre Restany? Because he is unique and exceptional. Grand master of art criticism, he is the only Frenchman to have brought his function to such a degree of direct and personal participation in the aesthetic operation, leaving his stamp on the history of art of this half-century).”¹⁷⁷ Périier described Restany as “*une légende vivante, un véritable mythe* (a living legend, a veritable myth),” and declared, “*sans lui, tout [dans l’histoire de l’art moderne] ne se serait pas passé ainsi* (without him, everything [in the history of modern art] would not have happened the way it did).”¹⁷⁸ And Arman agreed: he told Périier, “*Pierre Restany n’est pas un critique d’art, il*

¹⁷⁵ Pierre Restany, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Planète, 1968).

¹⁷⁶ Pluchart, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 10.

¹⁷⁷ Périier, *Pierre Restany*, 5.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

n'est pas non plus un historien d'art, il est une part de l'histoire de l'art (Pierre Restany is not an art critic, neither is he an art historian; he is a part of the history of art).¹⁷⁹

One of the more telling pieces of evidence of the way the scholarship has equated Nouveau Réalisme with Restany appears in Alfred Pacquement's 1991 study of the movement. Reflecting on the art of the 1960s in Paris, Pacquement referred to Nouveau Réalisme as "a gift to the art historian," and "a perfectly structured movement."¹⁸⁰ He listed a host of reasons for the movement's perfection:

It has its critic-founder in the person of Pierre Restany; it has its 'Constitutive Declaration' . . . summed up in a single lapidary formula . . . ; it has a succession of exhibitions covering the period down to 1963, if not later, and affirming the group as a body of artists sharing similar aims; and it has not one but several manifestos, which define its scope in theoretical terms.¹⁸¹

Significantly, every reason listed refers to the activity of *Restany*, and not of the artists. Restany wrote the declaration; Restany organized the exhibitions; Restany identified the "common denominator" among the artists; Restany composed the manifestos; Restany defined the theoretical terms. Pacquement's acclaim for the "perfect movement" was in fact a tribute to its founder and champion, whose promotional activity provided an account of the new art that was easily assimilable into art history's larger narrative.

Art critics, as Donald Kuspit has argued, play an important role in art history: "Indeed their conceptions have become the means by which art history assimilates the art they deal with, showing that art criticism at its best is the innovative cutting edge of art history."¹⁸² Such has certainly been the case with Restany's criticism, which has placed

¹⁷⁹ Arman, quoted in *ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸⁰ Alfred Pacquement, "The Nouveaux Réalistes: The Renewal of Art in Paris Around 1960," in *Pop Art: An International Perspective*, ed. Marco Livingstone (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1991), 214.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Donald Kuspit, *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1984), 95. Lassalle credits Kuspit's study with illuminating the way in which certain "deconstructivist"

Arman and the Nouveaux Réalistes firmly in a position of affirmative embrace of the “new,” the “real,” the “directly present.” And it has also galvanized Restany’s reputation as the internationally-minded, all-embracing defender of new and innovative art more broadly. Michèle Cone wrote in 1990 that Restany was “the least parochial of French critics, and has always looked beyond national borders with a sympathetic eye.”¹⁸³ That claim holds some truth: Restany *was* committed to internationalizing art, to opening the borders across Europe and across the Atlantic. But to read his prolific output is to recognize the pattern of his consistent slights of and affronts to other countries’ art movements and his unrelenting lionizing of Nouveau Réalisme as always *more* innovative, *more* avant-garde, *more* realist than its American or other European counterparts. So while the so-called Neo-Dadaists Rauschenberg, Johns, Chamberlain, Stankiewicz and the like may have been making works that similarly engaged the “real world” and “junk culture,” they were, in Restany’s eyes and in his vociferous proclamations, nevertheless a step behind the Nouveaux Réalistes, who did it with a “more direct” relationship to those objects.¹⁸⁴ Restany was also known to reject artists who wanted to participate in Nouveau Réalisme — including members of Zero, such as Otto Piene — which is further testament to the exclusivity he practiced. Given the opportunity to recognize what is now readily acknowledged as a shared vision or

criticism is able to “generate the myth of art’s depth. It attempts to go beyond the surface of the given by charging it with implicit meaning.” Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 213.

¹⁸³ Cone, “The Late Fifties,” 67.

¹⁸⁴ Restany explained, “*La différence essentielle entre nouveaux réalistes et néo-dadaïstes réside dans le fait que ces derniers ont introduit l’objet trouvé . . . dans un contexte pictural expressionniste abstrait alors que les nouveaux réalistes ont eu une attitude de rupture plus radicale avec ce qui les avait précédé, ont fondé leur langage sur un geste plus extrémiste: l’appropriation directe du réel* (The essential difference between Nouveaux Réalistes and Neo-Dadaists resides in the fact that the latter introduced the found object . . . in an abstract expressionist pictorial context whereas the Nouveaux Réalistes had an attitude of more radical rupture with what had preceded them, founded their language on a more extremist gesture: the direct appropriation of the real).” Restany, “La prise en compte,” 21.

Zeitgeist igniting the work of many European artists at the time, Restany chose instead to denigrate those not part of his initial cadre of realists, claiming they were mere copyists or insufficiently realist.¹⁸⁵

“De-Restanization”

It is important to consider how and why, given the visible problems with Restany’s stance, his discourse on Nouveau Réalisme and Arman became — and has remained — so thoroughly entrenched. Recent scholarship has begun to undertake the gargantuan task of separating the artwork from Restany’s analysis of it.¹⁸⁶ The necessity of such an endeavor had been recognized already in 1963 by Arman himself: in a letter to Restany dated October 14 of that year, Arman wrote that he had begun to seek other critics and writers to author the catalog essays and articles on his latest works and exhibitions. He assured Restany that he did not intend to be aggressive or negative toward him, but that it was rather a matter of what he called “*un processus de*

¹⁸⁵ See Cone, “The Late Fifties,” 70. For a study of the networks that developed, despite varying group/movement loyalties, among European artists working in some form of realism in the 1950s and 60s, see Robinson, ed., *New Realisms*. Catherine Grenier has also proposed “new realisms” as a general term for the many and varied artists and movements that immediately preceded Pop art and that worked with real objects from daily life. The plurality of the term is intended to suggest the diversity of realisms possible and indeed achieved by artists in nearly every country of Western Europe and both coasts of the United States, particularly between 1957 and 1960. See Grenier, “Nouveaux réalistes et pop art, l’art sans l’art,” in *Les années Pop: 1956-1968* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2001), n.p. It is also worth noting that the 2007 retrospective of Nouveau Réalisme, the first major revisionist exhibition of the group, expanded the movement’s chronology into the 1950s and beyond 1963, which allowed for the inclusion of several marginal artists whose work was close to Nouveau Réalisme. As one reviewer noted, “*Le Nouveau Réalisme constitue en effet une mouvance esthétique dont les artistes affiliés ne détiennent pas d’exclusivité. Le temps est venu de le désenclaver d’une lecture par trop monocorde* (Nouveau Réalisme is indeed an aesthetic movement whose affiliated artists do not hold exclusivity. The time has come to open it up from a too-monotonous reading).” “Le Nouveau Réalisme,” *Nouvelles de l’estampe*, no. 213 (2007): 56. See also the catalog for that exhibition, Debray, ed., *Le Nouveau Réalisme*.

¹⁸⁶ Among the revisionist scholarship of the last decade are: Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme”; Cabañas, *The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme*; Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Topographies of Chance and Return* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Robinson, ed., *New Realisms*; and Debray, ed., *Le Nouveau Réalisme*. Each of these books, catalogs, and theses purposefully steps away from the Restanian account of Nouveau Réalisme in order to re-evaluate the movement on its own terms.

'*dérestanysation*' *mûrement pensé* (a carefully thought out process of 'de-Restanization')."¹⁸⁷ After more than three years under Restany's almost exclusive auspices, Arman recognized the need to distance his artwork from the insular narrative that had come to define it.

Recall that Klein had waged a similar endeavor in 1961, after Restany launched the exhibition *40° au-dessus de Dada*. Klein never identified with Dada and resented being labeled as a Neo-Dadaist. According to Arman, when Klein saw the title of the exhibition, he "got mad and . . . decided to take over by replacing Restany with new art critics."¹⁸⁸ He contacted Jouffroy and Descargues, among others,¹⁸⁹ and "excommunicated Restany in the same Surrealist manner experienced earlier by André Breton by his peers."¹⁹⁰ Further, in a "debate" about Nouveau Réalisme, moderated by Sacha Sosnovsky in 1961, Arman, Klein, and Raysse all expressed a certain frustration with the way their work had come to be dominated by Restany's fervent promotion of it. Raysse declared, "*Je crois qu'aujourd'hui il est temps de se défendre nous-mêmes, et le créateur doit être son propre explicateur. . . . [I]l n'y a pas de raison pour qu'il n'explique pas mieux que personne les œuvres* (I believe that today it is time for us to defend ourselves, and the creator must be his own explainer. . . . [T]here is no reason that he could not clarify the work better than anyone else)."¹⁹¹ Asked by Sosnovsky whether a

¹⁸⁷ Arman, letter to Pierre Restany, October 14, 1963. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹⁸⁸ Arman, "Interview conducted by Susan Hapgood," 108.

¹⁸⁹ Arman remembers Klein reaching out to Gassiot-Talabot, in addition to Jouffroy and Descargues, and suggests that there were others as well, though he does not name them. Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. Restany was aware of this meeting because Arman later told him about it, but the critic recalled that "*il ne sortit rien de cette réunion confuse* (nothing came of that confused meeting)." Restany, quoted in Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 192. This meeting resulted in Klein, Hains, and Raysse signing a déclaration, "*Le Nouveau Réalisme est dissous* (Nouveau Réalisme is dissolved)." Ibid., 194.

¹⁹¹ Raysse, in "Klein, Raysse, Arman: des Nouveaux Réalistes," transcript of a debate moderated by Sacha Sosnovsky [1961], in *Chroniques niçoises*, 208.

shift to self-explication on the part of artists would spell the death of criticism, Arman responded, “*Ce n’est pas la mort de la critique picturale, mais je pense que les critiques vont reprendre une place qu’ils auraient toujours dû avoir: c’est-à-dire celle de poètes, d’écrivains d’art, mais nous ne voulons plus leur accorder le respect de critiques* (It is not the death of pictorial criticism, but I think that the critics are going to take up again a position that they should have always had: that is to say, that of the poets, of art writers, but we no longer want to grant them the respect of critics).”¹⁹² And Klein added that there were many precedents for self-defending artist groups, such as the Nabis and the Barbizon School, where “*la critique est alors considérée comme une critique objective et non pas engagée* (the criticism is thus considered as an objective and not a committed criticism).”¹⁹³ Klein assured, “*un critique littéraire comme Pierre Restany ne peut être le chef d’une école* (a literary critic like Pierre Restany cannot be the leader of a school)”¹⁹⁴ — and yet that was precisely the role the latter saw himself performing.

The artists’ struggle to wrest their legacy from the Restanian discourse continued well beyond the brief period of the movement’s existence. In 1983, in anticipation of the upcoming retrospective of Nouveau Réalisme at the Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, Nouveau-Réaliste artist Gérard Deschamps wrote an open letter to then-mayor of Paris Jacques Chirac condemning the show for its cooperation with “*un critique, Pierre Restany, qui prétend avoir conçu nos œuvres* (a critic, Pierre Restany, who claims to have conceived our works).”¹⁹⁵ Deschamps alleged, among other accusations, that Restany had

¹⁹² Arman, in *ibid.*

¹⁹³ Klein, in *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Gérard Deschamps, open letter to Jacques Chirac, Mayor of Paris, May 10, 1983. Collection Gérard Deschamps. Reprinted in Lawson, “Pierre Restany,” appendix II.

manipulated information as he monopolized the catalogues on “his” artists, fraudulently referring to his texts as “manifestos” and claiming to have founded the movement, “à la stupeur des artistes qui se demandent où il veut en venir et ne disposent malheureusement d’aucun moyen pour rétablir la vérité, ce genre de publication ne comportant aucun droit de réponse (to the astonishment of the artists who wondered where he was going and unfortunately did not have any means available for establishing the truth, this genre of publication entailing no right of response).” Deschamps points to a recent article in which Jacques Michel had explained “*que Restany a révolutionné l’art moderne par sa parole qui nous a rassemblés et indiqué un programme esthétique, que ‘ses mots ont précédé les œuvres, lesquelles étaient souvent comme des illustrations concrètes [de la pensée restanienne]*’ (that Restany revolutionized modern art by his speech which brought us together and indicated an aesthetic program, that ‘his words preceded the works, which were often like concrete illustrations [of Restany’s ideas],” thus implying that the artists had not conceived their own œuvres.¹⁹⁶ As Lassalle points out, “The passionate violence of the tone [of Deschamps’s letter] shows us what is at stake for an artist in the relationship between his creation and the words which introduce him to the artistic scene, a mandatory viaticum, but which, at the same time, deprives him.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Recall that this was the model established by Marinetti’s Futurist movement, but that in the case of Nouveau Réalisme the chronology was inverted: the artists produced works first, and then Restany wrote essays drawing connections among them. Deschamps explained, “*Le système restanien ne repose sur rien: même ses propres articles ne parlent pas du nouveau réalisme avant mai 1961. . . . Voici donc des artistes, qui sont d’abord des concepteurs, dont on écrit plus de vingt ans après, que ce ne sont pas eux qui ont conçu leurs propres œuvres* (The Restanian system is not based on anything: even his own articles do not speak of Nouveau Réalisme before May 1961. . . . So here are some artists, who are first of all conceivers, who are being written about more than twenty years later, as though it were not they who conceived their own œuvres).” Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 213.

As I have indicated, Restany considered Arman the most representative of the theoretical foundations he laid out for the Nouveau-Réaliste group.¹⁹⁸ The critic claimed that, as Arman progressed from the early works on paper to the later object-based works, “*son œuvre . . . est apparue à juste titre comme le discours de la méthode du Nouveau Réalisme* (his œuvre . . . emerged quite rightly as the discourse of the method of Nouveau Réalisme).”¹⁹⁹ Critics and scholars have long echoed Restany’s claim, declaring that Arman “*se tient au plus près de la position théorique des nouveaux réalistes* (stands closest to the theoretical position of the Nouveaux Réalistes);”²⁰⁰ that “French New Realism is mainly Arman;”²⁰¹ that “*in seno all’azione collettiva, la sua posizione [quella di Arman] è esemplare* (at the heart of the collective action, his [Arman’s] position is exemplary);”²⁰² and that it is he who “keeps most literally to the postulate according to which the data of reality should not be transformed.”²⁰³ Arman himself always had a much less straightforward view of his relationship to Nouveau Réalisme, and by extension, to Restany’s doctrines. In a 1998 round table at a colloquium on the movement, Arman struggled even to define Nouveau Réalisme, and Restany repeatedly

¹⁹⁸ Restany wrote in 1961, “*Parmi tous les nouveaux réalistes, Arman est peut-être celui qui a poussé le plus avant sa démarche appropriative. Il y a en lui un instinct d’appropriation du réel qui est la clé de son aventure, un besoin fondamental d’exprimer, à l’état brut la réalité contingente.* (Among all the *nouveaux réalistes*, Arman is perhaps the one who most pushed forward his appropriative practice. There is in him an instinct of appropriation of the real that is the key of his adventure, a fundamental need to express, in the raw state of contingent reality). Restany, “Arman, Martial Raysse et le bon sens [1961],” in *Chroniques niçoises*, 192.

¹⁹⁹ Restany, “Un destin,” 21. He repeated this assertion in a letter to Lourdes Cirlot in 2000: “*Arman illustre parfaitement ‘le discours de la méthode du nouveau réalisme’* (Arman illustrates perfectly ‘the discourse of the method of Nouveau Réalisme’).” In the same letter, he added that Arman’s significance to the history of art lay more in his conceptual approach than in his actual œuvre. See Restany, letter to Lourdes Cirlot, November 25, 2000. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

²⁰⁰ Hahn, “Matériaux et techniques,” 15.

²⁰¹ Donald Judd, “Arman,” *Arts Magazine* 37, no. 9 (1963): 106.

²⁰² Pierre Restany, untitled text, in *Arman o l’oggetto come alfabeto: Retrospettiva 1955-1984* (Parma: Palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, 1984), n.p.

²⁰³ Wescher, “What is new,” 40.

interjected his own corrections to Arman's understanding of what the movement was about and what it stood for.²⁰⁴

As Bouchet reports, Restany's principle of objective appropriation of the sociological "real" was early on considered by Arman and his Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues as "*discours sans fondement* (unfounded discourse)."²⁰⁵ For the sake of not jeopardizing the exposure that their connection to Restany and their incorporation as a group afforded them, the artists chose, as Arman disclosed, "*s'accommoder de la pancarte que Restany nous avait collée sur le dos* (to put up with the placard that Restany had stuck on our backs)."²⁰⁶ He continued, "*La théorie de l'appropriation était fausse. Mais nous en avions besoin pour faire notre entrée sur la scène artistique* (The theory of appropriation was false. But we needed it in order to make our entrance on the artistic scene)."²⁰⁷

The call to de-Restanize came not just from Arman and his artist colleagues, but also from other critics of the period who began to recognize the problems inherent in Restany's position. Already in the early months of Nouveau Réalisme, certain commentators were taking note of Restany's penchant for inflated speech using vague terminology as a means of distracting from the lack of applicable meaning behind his lofty proclamations. In 1961, an episode of the television program "En français dans le texte" was dedicated to the Nouveaux Réalistes and, naturally, Restany played a starring role, introducing the artists' works to a broad audience largely unfamiliar with the avant-

²⁰⁴ Asked at one point in the discussion whether he still identified as a Nouveau Réaliste, Arman responded simply that he identified as a survivor of the movement. "Colloque Nouveau Réalisme: Table ronde," transcript, September 8, 1998. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

²⁰⁵ See Bouchet, "'Poubelles' et 'Accumulations': Le Nouveau Réalisme de Pierre Restany à l'épreuve de l'œuvre d'Arman," *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 96 (2006): 82.

²⁰⁶ Arman, in Arman and Hahn, *Mémoires accumulés*, 37-39. Cited in *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

garde.²⁰⁸ Reviewing the episode for *France-Soir*, Jean Cotté described Restany as “*se gargarisant avec un parfait pédantisme des mots les plus vagues du vocabulaire philosophique* (gargling with a perfect pedantry the most vague words of the philosophical vocabulary).”²⁰⁹ Guillaume Hanoteau’s review in *Télé 7 jours* echoed that sentiment, condemning “*les grands mots et les fameuses explications qui n’expliquent rien* (the big words and the famous explanations that do not explain anything).”²¹⁰

Restany’s writing is widely seen, as Lassalle put it, as “more mystical than analytical,” full of excesses, contradictory references, and incompatible concepts — a rhetoric that “frequently seems very far away from the work it is supposed to discuss.”²¹¹ Its one merit is that it did bring attention to the artists and the “newness” of what they were offering, but at what cost?

In the mid-1960s, in his regular “Lettre de Paris” for *Art International*, Gassiot-Talabot wrote repeatedly and disparagingly of the “dogmatism” of Nouveau Réalisme.²¹²

²⁰⁸ The fact that a popular television show dedicated an episode to avant-garde art at all is a testament to Restany’s promotional prowess. Périer recounts Restany’s successful effort to convince Jacques Mousseau and Louis Pauwels to produce the show: “*Jacques Mousseau et Louis Pauwels ont compris, grâce à l’inlassable travail didactique de Restany, que, dans ce groupe des Nouveaux Réalistes, se trouvaient peut-être les grands artistes de demain* (Jacques Mousseau and Louis Pauwels understood, thanks to Restany’s tireless didactic work, that the great artists of tomorrow could perhaps be found in this group of Nouveaux Réalistes).” Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 187. Mousseau also invited Restany to contribute to his and Pauwels’s review, *Planète*, because he understood “*que Restany est très convaincant. Il peut donner une cohérence intellectuelle à ce qui paraît informe et décrypter les signes qui sont à l’état embryonnaire dans l’évolution de l’art* (that Restany is very convincing. He can give an intellectual coherence to that which seems formless and decipher the signs that are in an embryonic state in the evolution of art).” Périer, from interview with Mousseau, in *ibid.*, 206.

²⁰⁹ Jean Cotté, “L’avant-garde,” *France-Soir*, April 27, 1961.

²¹⁰ G[uillaume] Hanoteau, “Derrière l’extravagance,” *Télé 7 jours*, May 6, 1961, n.p.

²¹¹ Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 211.

²¹² Gassiot-Talabot regularly applauded those artists who either evaded Nouveau Réalisme entirely or managed to escape its grasps. In a 1965 letter detailing the sixteenth Salon de la jeune peinture, Gassiot-Talabot praised those artists who refused “*de sacrifier à la mode du constat et de l’objectivation dogmatique* (to sacrifice to the fashion of analysis and dogmatic objectification),” that is, Restany’s stance. Gassiot-Talabot, “Lettre de Paris,” *Art International* 9, no. 1 (Feb 1965): 51. In another letter of the same year, he recognized Tinguely’s exhibition at the Galerie Iolas, citing in particular the handsome catalog which “*est éloquent autant par ses références que par ses silences. On verra par exemple que ni le nom de Pierre Restany, ni le terme ‘Nouveau Réalisme’ n’y sont imprimés une seule fois: ingratitude d’artiste ou*

And in 1968, Michel Ragon accused Restany of treating art criticism as a personal creation: “*Il crée avec des peintres et des sculpteurs, comme d’autres avec des couleurs en tubes. . . . [L]’artiste est le matériau dont il se sert pour s’exprimer* (He creates with painters and sculptors, as others do with tubes of paint. . . . [T]he artist is the material he uses to express himself);”²¹³ that is, Restany used his artists as the medium for constructing a work of his own, Nouveau Réalisme.²¹⁴ To that end, he manipulated the artists in the way that one might manipulate artistic materials, all in the service of creating the overall picture of a unified movement with clear objectives that fit Restany’s vision for a new art. Pluchart described Restany as “*promoteur autant que témoin, dialecticien autant que regardeur . . . critique essentiellement créateur* (promoter as much as witness, dialectician as much as viewer . . . a critic who is essentially a creator).”²¹⁵ Indeed, Lassalle, in her study of art criticism as strategy, echoes Ragon and Pluchart’s assessments, affirming that Restany saw himself as “the creator of artists.”²¹⁶

prise de distance de qui ne veut pas se laisser enfermer dans une formule? Sans doute les deux. En tous les cas bien qu’il ait signé quelques manifestes fondamentaux et participé à des expositions de groupe, Tinguely apparaît comme l’un des artistes les moins réductibles à la doctrine de l’objet (is eloquent as much by its references as by its silences. One will see for example that neither the name of Pierre Restany, nor the term ‘Nouveau Réalisme’ is printed there a single time: ingratitude of the artist or distancing of someone who does not want to allow himself to be imprisoned in a formula? Without a doubt, both. In any case even though he had signed some fundamental manifestos and participated in some group exhibitions, Tinguely seems to be one of the artists least reducible to the doctrine of the object).” Such a refusal, he noted, was a growing wave, marked already by the Salon de mai and by Gassiot-Talabot’s own exhibition, *Mythologies quotidiennes*. Gassiot-Talabot, “Lettre de Paris,” *Art International* 9, no. 2 (March 1965): 38. ²¹³ Ragon continued, “with Pierre Restany, criticism can really be seen as a personal creation. . . . I have often found that Restany was creatively superior to some of the artists whom he served up to us. Can one blame him? . . . He moves as an artist in a world of artists . . . who may never have known that, for Restany, they were themselves the objects of his dreams.” Michel Ragon, “De la critique considérée comme une création,” in *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, ed. Restany, n.p. Quoted in Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 213. ²¹⁴ Ragon had already remarked on the phenomenon in 1961 when he asked, “Is criticism nowadays more creative than the artist it is supposed to represent? After Tapié and Alvard, Restany seems set to prove it.” Michel Ragon, “Lyrisme et abstraction à 40° au-dessus de Dada,” *Cimaise* (July-August 1961). Quoted in *ibid.*

²¹⁵ Pluchart, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 10.

²¹⁶ She cites, for instance, Restany’s claim regarding Yves Klein: “I think that what I brought him . . . was the opportunity to pin down through concepts and their labels the morphological units of his language. He needed that lexicological support. He used my words to construct his dreams’ factory and his institutions’

Ironically, in his early writing on lyrical abstraction, Restany decried what he saw as the authoritarianism of the immediate postwar generation, whose academicism, he claimed,

signale l'apparition et la croissance proliférante de cet éternel cancer de l'art: la copie gratuite, l'emprunt opportuniste, le truquage au goût de jour, le psittacisme du langage pictural. Ce danger était accru d'ailleurs par le caractère exhaustif de la démarche des premiers 'pionniers,' leurs positions dogmatiques, leur tendance au messianisme prosélytique.

signals the apparition and the proliferating growth of that eternal cancer of art: the free copy, the opportunist borrowing, the cheating to the taste of the day, the parroting of the pictorial language. Furthermore, this danger had been acquired by the exhaustive character of the practice of the first 'pioneers,' their dogmatic positions, their tendency toward proselytizing messianism.²¹⁷

Restany thus criticized both the ease of this kind of painting — a growing criticism of Pollock-style abstraction — and the means by which the artists of that generation promoted their artistic style. The irony is, of course, that Restany himself would become even more patently culpable of this proselytizing approach to art criticism, and Nouveau Réalisme would be censured as a too-facile approach to art-making, which would invite too-simple proliferation.

When it came to the criticism lobbied against himself and his movement, however, Restany discovered early on that he welcomed such attacks because they gave him an opportunity to defend himself, to re-state his views with ever-increasing force; and it meant that people were paying attention. Périer described him as “*Pierre Restany polémiste, un aspect de sa personnalité qui fait aussi partie de son folklore* (Pierre Restany, polemicist, an aspect of his personality that is also a part of his folklore).”²¹⁸

laboratory.” Restany also took credit, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, for the development of Arman’s early series. Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 212.

²¹⁷ Restany, *Lyrisme et abstraction*, 10.

²¹⁸ Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 205.

Restany came to be described as “*un mélange de théoricien et de militant* (a mixture of theoretician and militant),” as he expanded the art critic’s domain from simply writing, analyzing, and judging, to taking a variety of actions: organizing exhibitions, serving on juries, grouping together artists, defining terms, creating movements, defending manifestos, and promoting artists on television, radio, and film.²¹⁹ Restany’s ambitions went far beyond supporting artists, and his “*offensive médiatique* (media-centered offensive)”²²⁰ tilted heavily into the domain of self-promotion. And that self-promotion was effective: the Nouveau-Réaliste artists were rarely discussed, individually or as a group, without mention of Restany’s name; indeed, they were even dubbed by Hahn “*l’équipe Restany* (the Restany team).”²²¹

As Lassalle put it, “Pierre Restany’s main work of art is himself.”²²² Such an understanding of Restany’s objectives provides insight into his motivations for advocating a particular reading of Arman’s and the Nouveaux Réalistes’ artwork. Reflecting on the new kind of art critic/promoter — ushered in, one could argue, by Restany’s activities in the early 1960s — Donald Kuspit described the art critic as “not searching for the work’s organizing concept but his own organizing sensibility.”²²³ Such an aim aligns with Restany’s admission that he saw Arman’s œuvre in particular as a tool

²¹⁹ Michel Ragon made these observations, and compared Restany’s militant efforts to those of Duranty, Zola, and Fénéon before him, and especially to those of Apollinaire and Breton, who, like Restany, combined their militancy with their theoretical ambitions. See Ragon, “De la critique,” n.p.

²²⁰ Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 188.

²²¹ Otto Hahn, “Dans le vent,” *L’Express*, July 16, 1964, 25.

²²² Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 211.

²²³ Donald Kuspit, *The Critic is Artist*, 13. Cited in Lassalle, “Art Criticism as Strategy,” 214. Lassalle adds that Restany set the tone for future art criticism in being the first “to have imposed in such a spectacular manner the role which the art critic assigns himself today: more than the art historian, that unhappy pedestrian dealing with facts and documents, more than the philosopher, limited in his conceptual logic, more than the artist himself, blind to his own creation, the art critic is the visionary who detects truth in art.”

for sharpening his own discourse, and reflects a phenomenon that Lassalle observed in twentieth-century art criticism: that of the “double promotion . . . of the artist and his critic.”²²⁴

Given the compelling evidence of Restany’s personal motivations for “seeing” his artists’ works in a particular way, and in turn imposing that view on a public thirsty for an explanation of the works’ radically new forms, the mounting appeal for a revision of the Nouveau-Réaliste narrative is unsurprising. Of course, with all the recent effort to “de-Restanize” the scholarship on Nouveau Réalisme has come a wave of Restanian defense, most notably from Renaud Bouchet, who avowed in a 2001 letter to Restany that his project, in studying Arman’s *Poubelles* specifically, was “*redéfinir et réaffirmer, face à l’actuelle tentation d’une orientation abusivement révisionniste qui tendrait à relativiser les efforts de votre influence, la responsabilité historique qui est la votre dans la fondation et l’épanouissement de la syntaxe Armanienne* (to redefine and to reaffirm, in the face of the current temptation of an abusively revisionist orientation that would tend to relativize the efforts of your influence and your historic responsibility in the foundation and the development of the Armanian syntax).”²²⁵

I wish to clarify that the effort to “de-Restanize” is not aimed at denying the critic his unquestionable importance to the development of Arman’s work and career. Indeed, as I have by now made abundantly clear, Restany’s significance to the postwar European

²²⁴ Such a dual promotion was achieved by the “double effect of recognition and promotion: recognition of a phenomenon not perceived in the amorphous mass of artistic production, simultaneously with the first outlines of the criteria which will allow the identification of the new phenomenon and the isolation as an object for future analysis.” Ibid., 215.

²²⁵ Renaud Bouchet, letter to Pierre Restany, May 12, 2001. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

avant-garde, Arman included, is unparalleled.²²⁶ My contribution to the conversation instead opens the floor to other voices long silenced by Restany's stridency, and to ensure that our understanding of Arman's work is not being clouded by *a priori* notions of its meaning, spoon-fed to us by decades of Restany's able rhetoric. I will continue to maintain throughout this dissertation that Restany's capacity to theorize Arman's work at the moment of its first creation was essential to the latter's success — not only in his career, but also in his own personal development as an artist. Throughout this thesis I will return to the question of Restany's influence on both Arman and his audience, and will continue to insist on the critic's pivotal role in both, which was in some cases for the better and in some for the worse.

²²⁶ As Yves Klein put it in 1961, "*Pierre Restany est un de nos plus brillants critiques, des plus intéressants, mais il n'arrive pas à être assez droit, assez vrai, assez pur; en même temps, on pourrait dire qu'il est très humain* (Pierre Restany is one of our most brilliant critics, one of the most interesting, but he does not manage to be straight enough, true enough, pure enough; at the same time, one could say that he is very human)." Klein, in "Klein, Raysse, Arman," 208-209.

Chapter Two: “The Real” and Realism

Historical context

Le monde n'a jamais été engagé à ce point dans un processus de transformation accélérée et simultanée. Toutes les structures sociales et mentales de la vieille Europe et de la déjà vieille Amérique sont en train de se démanteler définitivement.

The world has never been engaged to such an extent in a process of accelerated and simultaneous transformation. All the social and mental structures of the old Europe and of the already old America are in the process of being dismantled definitively.¹

Arman emerged as an artist, and Nouveau Réalisme as a movement, at a critical moment in French history. The postwar period in France was defined at once by a struggle to rebuild and to recover from both the physical and the psychological devastation of the Second World War; by political unrest in the country's dealings with unraveling colonialism in North Africa; and by the changing face of the urban landscape in the wake of the sudden explosion of mass production, mass media, and mass consumption during the boom period later referred to as the *Trente Glorieuses*.² It was also a moment when Charles de Gaulle, hero of the Liberation, made his return to French public life, establishing a political strategy of what one might call presentism: an insistent focus on the present (and future) that intentionally left no room for revisiting the humiliation and trauma of the recent past.

As I have suggested, there are several overlapping and intertwining narratives that are important to understanding this period of French history. The sweeping changes to the

¹ Alain Jouffroy, “En dehors de toutes querelles personnelles, pour un art révolutionnaire vraiment indépendant,” typescript, September 1, 1960. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

² “*Trente Glorieuses*” was the nickname given to the thirty-year period after World War II in France, from 1946-1975, in which the country experienced widespread economic growth and an elevated standard of living. The term was coined by Jean Fourastié in *Les Trente Glorieuses: ou, La Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

political, economic, and social landscapes created a widespread feeling of a “vertiginous present,”³ which led French citizens to seek stability in a variety of ways, many of which bear on the forms that art would take.⁴ In this chapter, I address the various historical narratives at play and suggest ways in which we might see Arman’s work as emerging from or engaging with them.

With the Fourth Republic crumbling under the weight of the crisis of decolonization, de Gaulle garnered widespread support as a potential savior of France and was appointed head of the government in June of 1958; the establishment of the Fifth Republic would follow that October, and his presidential election in December. As president, de Gaulle made a concerted effort to turn France’s attention toward the new stability offered by the new government, the new prosperity, and the new technological development. His insistence on embracing the new was an intentional maneuver if not to expunge the recent past then at least to repress it, to keep it out of view. That past — riddled with collective trauma from the physically and morally debilitating German occupation, and collective shame for the Vichy government’s willing cooperation with the Nazis — was the source of much renegotiation in the decade following the war, in terms both of national identity and of artistic expression. The question of where to go with art, or of what art could and could not do, was fueled also by that “new” to which de Gaulle sought to turn. His imploration to leave behind the past and accept the present went hand-in-hand with the postwar youth culture that, in the aftermath of the war’s

³ Susan Weiner, “The French Fifties,” *Yale French Studies* no. 98 (2000): 1.

⁴ For instance, Weiner points out that many French citizens sought a firmer foundation in maintaining connections to the more distant past, while Barthes’s writings from the period evidence the grasping for “the real” by eliminating the distinction between sign and referent. See *ibid.* and Barthes, “L’Effet de Réel,” *Communications* no. 11 (1968): 88-89.

destruction, felt a certain “*fureur de vivre* (lust for life)”⁵ — a will to live and to embrace their world, a determination to avoid retreating from it, especially by dwelling on memories of the past.

Restany would capitalize on that very *fureur de vivre* when he promoted the Nouveaux Réalistes as artists who considered the present world as a tableau, suggesting that all wonders of the modern, urban environment — the industry, the technology, and the media included — were worthy of the status of art. The “new perceptual approaches to the real” to which the Declaration of Nouveau Réalisme refers, attest to a will to accept “the real,” which is to say, the present: the artist’s new task is to seek particular approaches to that “real” that will allow for it to be experienced as art. This attitude was of course envisioned as a counterapproach to the eminently popular abstract painting, which seemed to represent a retreat from “the real,” a fleeing from the world into the unconscious or the nonobjective. Restany explained,

The basic artistic utterance of doubt and angst following the Second World War was the rejection of the world through the rejection of injustice. The painterly gesture of individual revolt and the rejection of the outer world produced an art of nonfigurative escape. The artists of 1960 no longer shared this postwar mood; they wanted to participate in the reality of the contemporary world rather than flee into imaginary spaces. . . . [T]his reality was the world of the factory, of the serial object, of publicity and mass media, the world of consumerism and big cities.⁶

⁵ Tita Reut, *Arman: La traversée des objets* (Paris: Hazan, 2000), 20.

⁶ Restany, “Modern Nature,” 33. Jouffroy, too, described abstract painting as a form of evasion: “*Les peintres peignent leurs nature-mortes et leurs abstractions-mortes comme si de rien n’était, sachant bien que les Russes et les Américains ne sont pas assez fous pour se jeter des bombes atomiques par-dessus le pôle les uns aux autres, et que rien ne les empêche donc de continuer la prestigieuse histoire de l’art occidental en y ajoutant une variante de plus, un déplacement de virgule* (Painters paint their still lives and their still abstractions as if nothing happened, knowing well that the Russians and the Americans are not crazy enough to throw atomic bombs over the [North] Pole at each other, and that therefore nothing is stopping them from continuing the prestigious history of Western art in adding to it another variation, a shifting of a point).” Jouffroy, “En dehors de toutes querelles personnelles, pour un art révolutionnaire vraiment indépendant,” typescript, September 1, 1960. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

Restany's promotion of the Nouveaux Réalistes as engaged positively with the world around them thus created a strategic parallel with youth culture at large, and aligned with the Gaullist endeavor to refocus on the present as a means of laying the past to rest.⁷

Kristin Ross has written extensively about the particular social challenges faced in France in the 1950s and 60s, challenges that she attributes to the rapidity with which the entire cultural landscape shifted after the war.⁸ Whereas the United States experienced modernization as a more gradual series of rational developments in technology, marketing, and consumer behavior, France seemed to transform overnight. Unlike in the United States, therefore, modernization in France was, according to Ross, "experienced as highly destructive, obliterating a well-developed artisanal culture, travel culture, and grassroots national culture."⁹

Above all, the transformation was felt as "the coming of *objects*"¹⁰ — the arrival of new consumer items in the homes, workplaces, and streets of the French populace. Ross quantifies the abruptness of the change by enumerating the acquisitions a rural woman might make in the space of a single decade: "electricity, running water, a stove, a refrigerator, a washing machine, a sense of interior space as distinct from exterior space, a car, a television, and the various liberations and oppressions associated with each."¹¹

⁷ It is worth noting that Restany was himself an unabashed Gaullist. As Périer reports, living in Morocco during World War II, "*Chez les Restany, la grande idôle est de Gaulle* (At the Restanys' home, the great idol was de Gaulle." Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 13.

⁸ See especially Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22. Ross has also asserted that both "the world of work (labor, *métier*, the space of the factory or industry) and the world of agriculture or the countryside . . . were definitively relegated to a shadowy prewar past by the strenuous efforts of postwar French modernization." Ross, "French Quotidian," in *The Art of the Everyday: The Quotidian in Postwar French Culture*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 26.

¹⁰ Emphasis mine. Ross, *Fast Cars*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

That the sudden changes to daily life and to social relations in postwar France were brought about by the influx of objects — and not just any objects, but objects of a new order — is particularly significant for our consideration of the œuvre of Arman, who took as his raw material the very objects that were in many cases displaced by the upheaval, made obsolete in the face of newer, more disposable models.¹² As Henry Martin put it, “When Arman began to work primarily with objects themselves, he was giving notice that today to come to terms with ourselves and with the world we live in means first of all to come to terms with them.”¹³ Even more important than his use of objects, I argue, is the way in which Arman presented those objects, a presentation that recreated the effects of the new consumerism: homogenization and “evenness.”

Evenness, Ross argues, was not only a result of modernization but its “most important promise”: “Modernization is even because it holds within itself a theory of spatial and temporal convergence: all societies will come to look like us, all will arrive eventually at the same stage or level.”¹⁴ The kind of homogenization achieved by the process of modernization in postwar France was a key catalyst for much of the Nouveau-Réaliste artwork that would be produced in the 1950s and early 1960s. A further description of modernization’s steamrolling effect underscores the point:

Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been leveled or smoothed away[,] . . . where class conflict is a thing of the past, the stains of contradiction washed out in a superhuman hygienic effort, by the new levels of abundance and equitable distribution.¹⁵

¹² Henry Martin picked up on this, as well: “One of the two or three things that Arman, like Jean-Luc Godard, knows about our consumer civilization is that today the spiritual and physical terrain across which we must make our pilgrimages is a terrain highly encumbered with objects — encumbered in ways that bric-a-brac-laden Victorian mantelpieces never came close to.” Martin, *Arman*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ross, *Fast Cars*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

That is, it was quantification itself that was supposed to “even out” society, and I believe that that very process incited Arman’s realist project. I shall argue in the chapters that follow that the pristine vitrines in which Arman encased the objects of his *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* serve intentionally to even, smooth out, and homogenize the contents that they protect. I see his choice of format as bearing importantly on the critical substance of the work, which offers to the viewer both cause and effect of modernization: a surfeit of objects, a homogenization of differences, a hygienization of vision.¹⁶

The confining limits of Arman’s vitrines, especially in the densely crowded *Poubelles*, seem to refer also to the “movement inward” that Ross recognizes as a central phenomenon of the period, another result of modernization and, on a broader scale, decolonization. Ross argues that just as France was withdrawing from empire and retrenching itself within its borders, there was a concurrent withdrawal happening in the everyday life of the French people: the new middle classes were retreating to their “newly comfortable domestic interiors,”¹⁷ now filled with every desirable consumer durable, and their private automobiles, enclosed and self-sufficient. Ross describes the world of the new middle class as “sealed off, secure, privatized, and endlessly self-reproducing”¹⁸; might not those descriptors conjure also the hermetic vitrines of Arman’s object-based works?

Importantly, the rapid changes that Ross examines retrospectively were widely observed and theorized as they were taking shape. Much of the intellectual debate of the

¹⁶ The ideal of a kind of “hygienic effort” attached to modernization intrigued Nouveau-Réaliste artist Martial Raysse, who conceived of his works as objects capable of enacting a “hygiene of vision.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 137.

period centered on the notion of “the everyday” or “everyday life,”¹⁹ and the various forms of alienation, reification, and communication that came to define it and the social relations within it as a result of the upsurge of capitalist consumerism.²⁰ As Ross put it, the French “1950s and 60s were awash in a kind of sociological fascination . . . with the transformed rhythms and accoutrements of daily lived experience.”²¹

For Restany, the differences between the 1950s and the 1960s in France were stark and significant, and the changes took shape immediately and drastically. “*La fin des années 50 est marquée par l’entrée de la France dans le concert des nations du monde riche, le passage à une nouvelle dimension économique avec toutes les conséquences que cela pouvait impliquer . . . [y compris] la définition d’une nouvelle qualité de la vie* (The end of the 1950s is marked by France’s entrance into the league of nations of the wealthy world, the passage to a new economic dimension with all the consequences that that could imply . . . [including] the definition of a new quality of life).”²² The changing economic conditions led, according to Restany, to an important shift in the experience of the everyday, most notably in the felt translation of daily life into “*un langage visuel* (a visual language).”²³ If modernization is defined by the three moments of the commodity form — first, production; next, transformation into discourse, through advertising and

¹⁹ “The everyday” as a category had been elevated to the status of a theoretical concept with the publication of the first volume of Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique de la vie quotidienne* in 1947. Importantly, Lefebvre’s conception of the everyday embraced the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in daily lived experience, rather than assuming its negative charge as banal, ordinary, and repetitive. (Ross notes that earlier theorists like Lukács and Heidegger, and even Lefebvre himself in his writing from the 1930s, categorized the everyday as “simply a negative category: dull, ordinary, rote existence, the dreary unfolding of trivial repetition.”) See Ross, “French Quotidian,” 19-20; and Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Paris: L’Arche, 1958).

²⁰ Ross, *Fast Cars*, 5-6.

²¹ Ross, “French Quotidian,” 19.

²² Restany, “Le Nouveau Réalisme, l’art du monde riche,” 63.

²³ *Ibid.*

media representations; and finally, consumption and use²⁴ — then what Restany is asserting is that the quotidian came to be experienced as that second moment, wherein products — “real” things — are transformed into discourse, both linguistic and visual. Restany’s observation reverberates in Debord’s writing, in which it is described as the spectacularization of lived experience. Debord wrote, “*La réalité considérée partiellement se déploie dans sa propre unité générale en tant que pseudo-monde à part, objet de la seule contemplation* (Reality considered *partially* unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world *apart*, an object of mere contemplation),”²⁵ and he defined the spectacle as the place “*où le monde sensible se trouve remplacé par une sélection d’images qui existe au-dessus de lui, et qui en même temps s’est fait reconnaître comme le sensible par excellence* (where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence).”²⁶

Michèle Cone, glossing Debord and Baudrillard, explains that as modernization progressed, communication became so degraded that “‘information’ and ‘dis-information’ were almost indistinguishable, . . . [R]eality threatened to merge with its sign form, and . . . ambiguity reigned supreme. . . . [W]hat lay ahead was an everyday life that had no contact with the real and no space for freedom.”²⁷ There thus emerged what Barthes called “*le besoin incessant d’authentifier le ‘réel’* (the incessant need to

²⁴ Ross argues that “Taylorization,” characterized by the introduction of the assembly line, the vertical integration of production, the interchangeability of workers, and the standardization of tools and materials, was developed in the process of producing the ‘car for the masses,’ not the inverse. Ross, *Fast Cars*, 19.

²⁵ Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* [1967] (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁷ Michèle C. Cone, “‘Métro, Boulot, Dodo’: The Art of the Everyday in France, 1958-72,” in *The Art of the Everyday*, ed. Gumpert, 53.

authenticate the ‘real’),”²⁸ which he saw reflected in the contemporary developments in photography, reporting, exhibitions of ancient objects, and the tourism of monuments and historic places, as well as in the new approaches to literary realism.²⁹

Given the felt distinction between the two decades, the 1950s and the 1960s, it is all the more significant that Nouveau Réalisme developed exactly at their crux, at the seam between the two. The individual artists honed their personal practices in the 1950s, organized in 1960, and exhibited as Nouveaux Réalistes in the 1960s. Such a chronology made it possible for Waldemar Januszczak to argue that it is a mistake to think of Nouveau Réalisme as a movement of the Sixties, when in fact “its roots were sunk deep into the mucky post-war experience of Europe in the Fifties.”³⁰ For Januszczak, there is an indisputable correlation between the look of most Nouveau-Réaliste art — faded, fragmented, made of recycled or rejected materials — and the “spiritual state of post-war Europe, jerry-built, reliant on the ration-card.”³¹ These works, rooted in the Fifties, stand in stark contrast to the most “Sixties” of art movements, Pop: it is as though the American Pop artists, with their flashy, witty, colorful works, “celebrate life in an untouched consumer paradise, [whereas] the Nouveaux Réalistes, scouring their own urban context, emerge with armfuls of rusty junk.”³² Catherine Grenier reinforces this claim in her 2001 text on the various “new realisms” and pop movements of the period: *“La quasi-simultanéité de la naissance publique des ‘nouveaux réalistes’ et du pop art ne doit pas nous faire perdre de vue que la première des deux mouvances est*

²⁸ Barthes, “L’Effet de Réel,” 87.

²⁹ Ibid., 87-88.

³⁰ Waldemar Januszczak, “Radical cheek with slogans of despair,” *Arts Guardian*, August 21, 1986, 8.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

organiquement liée au contexte des années cinquante, alors que la seconde s'inscrit de plain-pied dans la culture naissante des années soixantes (The quasi-simultaneity of the public birth of 'new realisms' and of pop art must not make us lose sight of the fact that the first of the two movements is organically tied to the context of the Fifties, whereas the second subscribed full force in the nascent culture of the Sixties).³³ Thus it is not simply a matter of chronology — that new realisms came first — but of situation in two distinct cultural moments, the Fifties and the Sixties.

The new *société de consommation*

A new generation of sociologists emerging in postwar France focused their attention on what seemed to be the gradual systematization of consumption: the way certain cycles of production, consumption, and disposal were becoming the very rhythms of culture at large. For Roland Barthes, commercial products were becoming mere signs, developing into mythologies of their own³⁴; for Jean Baudrillard, the whole of the commercial world had become so systematized that it could be classified in the same way as was the natural world.³⁵ As Mauricio Segura argued in an essay on the French

³³ Grenier further points out that whereas the term "pop art" corresponds to a mass cultural movement and attitude and thus resonates specifically with its period, the name "Nouveau Réalisme" is instead "*un énoncé combattant, qui prend position dans l'histoire de l'art du siècle en préconisant une attitude particulière de l'artiste dans le monde* (a combative statement, which situates itself in the history of the art of the century by encouraging a particular attitude of the artist in the world)." That attitude is marked by a "*rupture avec les abstractions et par une pratique du collage, de l'assemblage, du déplacement, de la performance qui place au cœur de l'art l'objet réel, emprunté à l'univers quotidien et vulgaire* (rupture with abstractions and by a practice of collage, assemblage, displacement, performance that positions at the heart of the artwork the real object, borrowed from the quotidian and vulgar universe)." The different instantiations of such practice, which appear all over Europe and the United States, vary widely from artist to artist, but "*recouvrent toutes une même attention au réel dans ses composantes les plus ordinaires, voire dévaluées, le monde de la rue, les magazines, la voiture, les objets ménagers, les déchets, tous éléments prélevés au vif d'une vie quotidienne urbaine* (all include a same attention to the real in its most ordinary, that is devalued, components : the world of the street, magazines, cars, household objects, trash, all elements ripped from an urban everyday)." Grenier, "Nouveaux réalistes et pop art," n.p.

³⁴ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957).

³⁵ See Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968). (Originally his doctoral thesis, written 1962-63.)

literature of the 1950s and 60s, in that period, consumerism quickly became the axiomatic site of obsession in all aspects — political, economic and sociological:

Il devient le mal social. . . . [P]ar un glissement sémantique, la ‘société capitaliste’ devient la ‘société de consommation.’ L’expression avait déjà cours avant 1960, mais ce n’est qu’alors que la thématique sera sur toutes les lèvres, donnant des sueurs froides aux journalistes, aux intellectuels et aux écrivains.

It becomes *the social ill*. . . . By a semantic slippage, ‘capitalist society’ becomes ‘consumer society.’ The expression was already current before 1960, but it was not until then that the thematics would be on everyone’s lips, giving journalists, intellectuals and writers chills.³⁶

And along with the increased discussion of consumerism came discussions of its effects: the way the alienation of the worker extended now to the alienation of the consumer.³⁷

The term “alienation” recurs in discussions of the literature of the period, but is largely missing from art criticism, particularly that addressing Arman’s work, where I believe it would be quite apt. The alienation recognized in 1950s and 60s novels is, Segura suggests, that of the German *Entfremdung*, which means, essentially, the state of the individual who, due to his or her social conditions (economic, political, religious), is deprived of his or her humanity and is subjugated.³⁸ I argue in Chapter Four that Arman’s object-based artworks of 1959 to 1964 invoke the thematics of alienation in offering consumer objects to the viewer in such a way that they are present directly and immediately, and yet are distanced by a transparent but untraversable barrier. That barrier that separates the “consumer” from the “consumable” — that is, the spectator from the

³⁶ Mauricio Segura, “Société de consommation: phantasmes et sueurs froides chez Le Clézio, Perec et Robbe-Grillet,” in *Imaginaire social et discours économique* (Montreal: Université de Montréal, 2003): 49.

³⁷ In his Situationist writings of the 1950s and ’60s Debord described the way the spectacular world creates the desire or the illusion of needing things, and leads to alienated consumption just like the alienated production previously described by Karl Marx. Just as the worker does not possess anything of his own work, our relationship to the commodities we buy is equally distanced.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50. Segura draws this definition from *Le Petit Robert I*, and points out that the concept of *Entfremdung* is generally attributed to Hegel and was taken up again by Marx.

objects displayed — reinforces the sense of alienation inherent in one's relationship with the world in this period.

The format of Arman's vitrines reproduces, even literalizes for the viewer, the alienation that is the byproduct of consumerism. Here are objects, offered up in great quantities, projecting the kind of abundance and wealth to which consumers aspire, giving the impression, like advertisements, of attainability. And yet that apparent availability is a ruse: Arman's objects, despite their physical presence before the viewer, are as distant and unattainable as those represented in the advertising images that have "colonized" French public and private space, through both street posters and magazine advertisements, billboards and television commercials. Arman's objects are ungraspable, unusable, functionless. What kind of possession is possible in these conditions? Visual only. Appearance reigns; one may take something in optically but one may not have any kind of intimate confrontation with the objects of one's gaze. Arman's objects thus make abundantly clear the kind of alienation produced by consumerism, by rendering it not in images but in the objects themselves.

The object as sign

Baudrillard theorized the way in which objects' meaning, rather than being concentrated in their use-value, had shifted in the postwar period to now be concentrated in their materiality — which is to say, in their primarily visible qualities, which allowed them to function as signs. His important 1968 text *Le Système des objets* took as its focus the objects of daily life that fill the middle-class home, and analyzed the ways in which those objects had come to participate in what one might call a certain form of representation. Domestic objects (furniture, knickknacks, reading materials, etc.) had

long served to convey a message to guests — a message about a family’s wealth, power, culture, or education, cultivated through its possession of certain kinds of objects.³⁹ In order to communicate such messages, object-function in the modern home came to be superseded by organization.⁴⁰ Objects’ intimate, human significances erode or are willfully obscured by attention to appearance, by way of organization and display in the home. Baudrillard explained: “*On n’investit plus les objets d’une ‘âme’ et ils ne vous investissent plus de leur présence symbolique: la relation se fait objective, elle est d’agencement et de jeu. La valeur qu’elle prend n’est plus d’ordre instinctif et psychologique, mais tactique* (One no longer invests objects with a ‘soul’ and they no longer invest you with their symbolic presence: the relationship becomes objective, it is of arrangement and play. The value that it takes on is no longer of the instinctive or psychological order, but the tactical order).”⁴¹ The shift from the “soulful” object, tied to memories, sensations, and sentiments, to the “tactical” object, related to appearance alone, reflected a parallel shift in social and interpersonal structures in society at large.⁴² Baudrillard enumerated a series of objects, formerly given positions of prominence in the bourgeois home, that were missing from the modern apartment. Most notable were the

³⁹ Baudrillard’s text begins by describing the way furniture and its arrangement reflect family and social structures of a period, and notes that whereas the more traditional bourgeois home of the past tended toward accumulation, occupation of space, and enclosure, today’s modern homes are more functional, more open, freer — and as a result, less structured and more parceled among their various functions. Adhering to the former model, it is possible to speak of an ideal home — and even to observe one in a review dedicated to luxury furniture and home décor, such as *Maison Française* or *Mobilier et Decoration*. Such an ideal does not exist for the modern home, nor could such reviews exist for modern mass-produced furniture: instead we have only catalogs. The model luxury homes represent “*le monde de l’unique* (the world of the unique),” whereas today’s modern homes “*ne sont plus des créations de rêves, non commerciales, ce sont au sens propre des modèles* (are no longer dream creations, not commercials, they are *models* in the proper sense).” Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, 21-29.

⁴⁰ “*Les valeurs symboliques, et les valeurs d’usage s’estompent derrière les valeurs organisationnelles* (Symbolic values, and the values of usage, fade behind organizational values).” *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

mirrors and clocks, both of which carry symbolic meaning as analogs of the individual: the mirror, reflecting our subjectivity back to us, the clock, ticking, reminding us of our own beating heart. The absence of such items in the modern home reflects again the decline of the individual, the loss of a certain soul in the home and the objects that fill it.

Home décor had shifted from a kind of poetic discourse, where objects were in intimate conversation with each other, to an almost commercial kind of communication. The objects no longer had a singular presence, but at best, functioned as a kind of ensemble, each object just an anonymous element in the calculated structure that was designed to promote a certain message about the proprietor.⁴³ It is in the new type of inhabitant recognized by Baudrillard, the “*homme de rangement* (organizing man)” that we can see the image of Arman, and recognize his belonging to this particular milieu. Baudrillard described the *homme de rangement* as less concerned with owning or using his possessions than he is with distributing them in the space that he controls:

Ce n'est ni la possession ni la jouissance, c'est la responsabilité qui lui importe. . . Sa praxis est toute d'extériorité. L'habitant moderne ne 'consomme' pas ses objets. . . Il les maîtrise, il les contrôle, il les ordonne. Il se retrouve dans une manipulation et dans l'équilibre tactique d'un système.

It is neither possession nor enjoyment: it is responsibility that matters to him. . . . His practice is one of total exteriority. The modern inhabitant does not ‘consume’ his objects. . . . He manages them, he controls them, he orders them. He ends up in a manipulation and in the tactical equilibrium of a system.⁴⁴

And what is the result of that system? A certain “abstraction” of the man himself, who lives in a world not given but *acquired*.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 40.

Reification and the everyday

In a move typical of scholarship on the Nouveaux Réalistes, Bouchet credits Restany with “develop[ing] an artistic reflection integrating the sociological component [of modern reality]”⁴⁶ — as though Restany himself had created the art. There is some truth to this claim, however, if one considers it in the sense that Restany created that *reading* of the works that the Nouveau-Réaliste artists were making. Bouchet cites François Dagognet’s characterization of French society at that moment as chiefly defined by “shameful wastefulness,”⁴⁷ and argues that that characterization was what led Restany to “develop” Nouveau Réalisme. I contend rather that certain sociological realities, including the wastefulness of the new consumer society, were what led Restany to see in the Nouveaux Réalistes’ works the opportunity to advocate a certain form of a vaguely defined “sociological” imperative — what he called a “*relais sociologique*.”⁴⁸

As Bouchet explains, Restany envisioned the artist as at once witness and author of his or her inventions; he or she thus becomes “*le catalyseur de l’émergence expressive de l’objet, le médiateur qui assure le passage d’une situation virtuelle à un fait précis*”

⁴⁶ Bouchet, “‘Poubelles’ et ‘Accumulations,’” 72.

⁴⁷ Bouchet quotes Dagognet: “*Les nantis ne cessent de renouveler ce qui les entoure, à la moindre panne ou au premier dysfonctionnement. Ils y sont conduits par le fait que la réparation coûte plus cher que le neuf et que nous n’aimons plus le rafistolé (il faut aimer les choses pour les raccommoder, les ravauder, les rapiécer). On jette dans les poubelles ce qui ne sert pas; on brûlera des montagnes de déchets, et on s’en débarrasse avec d’autant plus de hâte que certains détritiques peuvent corrompre, infecter et polluer.* (The well-off do not cease to renew what surrounds them, at the least failure or at the first dysfunction. They are driven to this by the fact that the repair costs more than the new and that we no longer like the fixed up (it is necessary to like things to fix them, to mend them, to patch them up). We throw away what is not useful; we burn mountains of waste, we get rid of it with even more haste than certain detritus can corrupt, infect and pollute).” François Dagognet, “Pourquoi l’objet, mais surtout pourquoi l’objet usé, délabré,” in *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Daniel Abadie (Paris: Éditions du Jeu de Paume, 1999), 57. Quoted in *ibid.*, 71-72.

⁴⁸ Restany wrote in the first manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme that the mark of the new “adventure of the real” was “*l’introduction d’un relais sociologique au stade essentiel de la communication* (the introduction of a sociological relay to the essential stage of communication).” Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 264-265.

d'expression, capable d'éveiller chez le spectateur les mêmes réactions émotives que suscite ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler une œuvre d'art (the catalyst of the expressive emergence of the object, the mediator that assures the passage from a virtual situation to a precise fact of expression, capable of awakening in the spectator the same emotive reactions as those elicited by what is accepted as a work of art).⁴⁹ What Bouchet describes is the effort to give form to what has slipped into the realm of the virtual. The risk, of course, is that this attempted “return” to “the real,” to a substantive fact instead of a virtual concept, might instead amount to a reification rather than a return.

Such a risk was particularly timely given the presence in Paris since 1957 of the Situationist International, which organized itself around a Marxist critique of reification. Drawing on Hegel's concept of *Verdinglichung* — the transformation of idea into material form — Marx had further theorized a concept of *Versachlichung* or “thingification” — the transformation of concrete products of history into abstract ideas.⁵⁰ As Edward Ball explains, the consequence of reification is an understanding of history — especially social history — as a series of images or “frozen tableau[x].”⁵¹ As human experience is translated into a product, according to Marxist doctrine, reification and commodification reveal themselves to be interrelated; for the Situationists, the notion of spectacle supplants that of the commodity. As Ball clarifies, in the society of the spectacle, “One does not buy objects; one buys images connected to them. One does not buy the utility of goods; one buys the evanescent experience of ownership. Everywhere,

⁴⁹ Bouchet, “‘Poubelles’ et ‘Accumulations,’” 77.

⁵⁰ For a full discussion of these concepts, see Edward Ball, “The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International,” *Yale French Studies* no. 73 (1987): 26-29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

one buys the spectacle.”⁵² The impression that the sign or the image had replaced the material product as the commodity form is reflected, as Ball highlights, in the subtitle of Baudrillard’s *Le Système des objets, la consommation des signes* (*System of Objects, Consumption of Signs*).⁵³ It is thus no wonder, given the perceived conditions in 1950s and 60s France, that a cultural imperative to define “the real” would develop. If the image connected to the object is the new reality, then the new realism must be a realism *of the image*, or must at least account for this newly elevated aspect of “the real.”

Drawing on Lefebvre, Maurice Blanchot explains that our desire to be aware of everything that happens as it is happening is met the only way it can be: through images and words, transmitted instantaneously to our screens and in our ears. “In the end,” he avows, “there is no event other than this movement of universal transmission: ‘the reign of an enormous tautology.’”⁵⁴ Hence the feeling, expressed most disapprovingly by the Situationists, of reality being constituted solely by “what can be seen or what shows itself,” that which is not *lived* or *experienced*, but is rather immediately and publicly observable.⁵⁵ The consequence is that “The whole world is offered to us, but by way of a look. We are no longer burdened by events, as soon as we behold their image with an interested, then simply curious, then empty but fascinated look.”⁵⁶

The degradation of attention that Blanchot describes is the same observed by Debord, and one often alluded to in the film, literature, and artwork of the period. In fact, Debord’s 1967 treatise *La Société du Spectacle* opens with an epigraph treating just that

⁵² Ibid., 28.

⁵³ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁴ The desire Blanchot describes is what Lefebvre referred to as “the Great Pleonasm.” Blanchot, “Everyday Speech,” 14.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

subject: “*Et sans doute notre temps. . . préfère l’image à la chose, la copie à l’original, la représentation à la réalité, l’apparence à l’être* (And without a doubt our era . . . prefers image to thing, copy to original, representation to reality, appearance to being).”⁵⁷

Empty contemplation of purely retinal phenomena, of *images* offered up as reality for the world-weary passerby: this is what Restany claimed the Nouveaux Réalistes were combating. The essential trait of the everyday, according to Blanchot, is that it is “the unperceived” — so banal that it goes unobserved.⁵⁸ The Nouveaux Réalistes, then, according to Restany, set out to force its perception: the “new perceptual approaches to the real” are in fact newly perceptive; they set out to bring the everyday to the attention of the anonymous everyman, to arrest and isolate it, to put it on display where it cannot but be seen.⁵⁹ The irony of such an approach, as I will show, is that the arrested and isolated fragments of the everyday that the Nouveaux Réalistes present are in fact always already images, or rather become them by the means of their presentation.

In 1973, Henry Martin reflected on Restany’s term “Nouveau Réalisme” and observed:

Even though it is primarily used to pull together under a single label the work of a particular group of European artists who were ‘art-historically’ involved in the avant-garde’s return to figuration after a precedent period of abstraction, it can also be made to reveal the more pregnant notion of an art that structures itself about a new *concept* of realism. As far as Arman is concerned, it is less profitable

⁵⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, preface to the second edition of *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 1843, quoted in Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 13.

⁵⁸ Blanchot, “Everyday Speech,” 16.

⁵⁹ Jouffroy, discussing the invention of assemblage, reflected, “*Paradoxe destinée des objets, qu’il faut réunir, morts, en constellations assemblées, pour qu’ils servent à la survie de notre mémoire. Comme si l’on avait besoin d’eux pour se voir, se sentir exister, vérifier à chaque instant que nous vivons dans un monde réel et que nous sommes en train de le penser* (Paradoxical fate of objects, which it is necessary to bring together, dead, in assembled constellations, so that they serve the survival of our memory. As if we needed them to see ourselves, to feel ourselves exist, to verify at each instant that we are living in a real world and that we are in the process of thinking it).” Jouffroy, “Théorie de l’assemblage,” undated typescript. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes. Jouffroy, like Restany, positions objects as confirmation of reality — as a kind of physically present guarantee of real existence, as opposed to the spectral simulacra of images.

to think of New Realism as a new kind of art that is realistic than to think of it as a kind of art that deals with a realism that is new — as a kind of art that deals with a new concept of what is real.⁶⁰

In the pages that follow, I shall elucidate that new concept of “the real” and reveal the ways in which Arman and his co-generationists developed a new concept of realism in correspondence with it.

Centrality of the question of realism

As I have begun to suggest, central to the consideration of Arman’s practice in the 1950s and 60s is his self-identification as a “realist.” Such a designation is particularly noteworthy because of its currency, and indeed its contestation, in that specific period in France. In this section, I shall highlight the prevalence of debates surrounding the very definition of “realism” as it was theorized in the midst of concurrent discussions of the unsteady state of “the real” in postwar France. Drawing on literature and cinema from the period, as well as the attendant literary and cinematic criticism, I aim to situate Arman’s practice within a larger cultural conversation about “the real,” realism, and representation.

Arman’s early practice, and the founding of Nouveau Réalisme, coincide with two important developments in French cultural output: the Nouveau Roman (or New Novel),⁶¹ and Nouvelle Vague (or New Wave) cinema,⁶² both of which were practiced

⁶⁰ Martin, *Arman*, 11-12.

⁶¹ The term “Nouveau Roman” was coined by Bernard Dort in 1955, but the principle practitioners of the genre had already been writing experimental novels in that form since the early 1950s. Chief among the novelists of the Nouveau Roman were Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Marguerite Duras, Claude Ollier, Robert Pinget, Jean Ricardou, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon, among others.

⁶² The term “Nouvelle Vague” first appeared in an article in *L’Express* in 1957, in which journalist Françoise Giroud used it to define an entire generation of youths born between 1927 and 1939. Giroud’s sociological study, based on a 25-question survey that readers of *L’Express* were invited to answer, was published as *La Nouvelle Vague: Portraits de la jeunesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958). It addressed the political, social, and personal issues relevant to the new generation of 18- to 30-year-olds and the future

and theorized beginning in the 1950s and throughout the 1960s. The simultaneity of these phenomena in art, literature, and film — all of which, importantly, stake a claim to realism — is no mere coincidence. Indeed, each stands as a testament to the most pressing concerns of a certain moment in social and cultural history: the establishment of a realist practice that could account for the present state of “the real,” which was felt to be threatened by its own representation.

It is difficult to speak of such concerns as belonging to a particular generation, since the artists and authors in question ranged so greatly in age and experience.⁶³ But the fact remains that the cultural production of the 1950s and 60s, by artists, writers, and filmmakers concerned with posing, rather than evading, questions about “the real” and realism, share many strategies in both form and technique. Lynn Higgins points to several important events in the early 1950s that spurred what could be seen as a *Zeitgeist* of the period. First, in 1950, came a widespread call for a new literary aesthetic, in an essay by Nathalie Sarraute published in *Les Temps modernes*. Entitled “L’Ère du soupçon” (“The Age of Suspicion”),⁶⁴ the manifesto-like text declared the end of the character’s reign as the central pillar of the novel. Four years later, in 1954, François Truffaut published “Une Certaine Tendance du cinéma français” (“On a Certain Tendency in French Cinema”) in

they envisioned for themselves and for France. The term “Nouvelle Vague” came to be applied more specifically to a certain set of filmmakers in 1958, when Pierre Billard used the term in his review of that year’s films, and again in 1959, when the young directors’ entries to the film festival at Cannes were promoted as such. Among the filmmakers associated with the Nouvelle Vague were Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, and François Truffaut.

⁶³ Lynn Higgins, in a study of the literature, film, and politics of the period, addresses the problem of how to define a “movement” and its limits, whether by adhering to a select set of individuals, a select period of time, or a select set of criteria by which certain works approach their task. Higgins concludes that the essential, in the period in question, was the “shared approach to certain problems of representation and a relation to history.” Lynn A. Higgins, *New Novel, New Wave, New Politics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 5.

⁶⁴ Nathalie Sarraute, “L’Ère du soupçon,” *Les Temps modernes* V, no. 52 (February 1950).

the *Cahiers du cinéma*,⁶⁵ in which he condemned the tendency toward psychological realism and called for the creation of a cinematic language all its own — a new aesthetic that was specific to filmic experimentation, and was not based on the mere adaptation of literature.⁶⁶ One might see Restany's first manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme in a similar light: as a call for an end to the “outmoded” forms of artistic creation — namely easel painting — and their replacement by new criteria for the work of art, no longer centered in the subjectivity of the artist-creator but instead open, “objective,” and encompassing of the direct and present “real.”⁶⁷

Thus an important point of overlap among the Nouveau Roman, Nouvelle Vague cinema, and Nouveau Réalisme is evident in the very means of defining each “movement's” collective concerns.⁶⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet claimed in a 1961 essay that the new novel was not a theory but a research, and that the writers involved were not seeking to “codify a law” or establish a literary school in which everyone was essentially writing the same thing. However, what the new novelists did share, across their individual *œuvres*, was “*surtout la volonté d'échapper à une sclérose, le besoin de quelque chose d'autre* (above all the will to escape a sclerosis, the need of something else).”⁶⁹ Jérôme

⁶⁵ François Truffaut, “Une Certaine Tendance du cinéma français,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 31 (January 1954).

⁶⁶ Higgins, *New Novel*, 6.

⁶⁷ Pierre Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 265.

⁶⁸ Périer asserts that Restany deliberately aligned Nouveau Réalisme with the Nouveau Roman and Nouvelle Vague as a means of establishing the objectivity of the artists' practice. Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 157.

⁶⁹ Robbe-Grillet and his circle do not propose to create new rules or theories for others nor for themselves, but rather simply to combat the too-rigid laws of literature that are already in place — the notion of the “real novel,” which is not possible without strong protagonists, a lucid plot, a solid analysis of character. For Robbe-Grillet's circle, there is no “*vrai roman*”; they are as much against the very concept as they are against the rules that have thus far defined it: “*nous savons seulement que le roman d'aujourd'hui sera ce que nous le ferons, aujourd'hui, et que nous n'avons pas à cultiver la ressemblance avec ce qu'il était hier, mais à nous avancer plus loin* (we know only that the novel of today will be what we make it, today, and that it is not our job to cultivate a ressemblance to what it was yesterday, but to advance beyond).” Robbe-

Lindon added in 1962 that the term Nouveau Roman, invented by critics, was intended to group together writers whose “principal quality was to be profoundly original and different each from the others. . . . If they have anything in common, it is to be found more in their refusal of certain attitudes about literature than in any true program.”⁷⁰

Likewise, as regards the Nouvelle Vague, Pierre Sorlin wrote that “the New Wave was mostly an idea, a sign. Once the young film-makers, who had begun by merely inveighing against their predecessors, were gathered under the same flag by newspapers, they felt obliged to question their own practice and . . . permanently to modify their approach to the cinema.”⁷¹ Such claims reverberate with much of the discourse surrounding Nouveau Réalisme, including that of Restany who, upon the dissolution of the group in 1963, reflected: “*beaucoup plus qu’un ‘groupe’ et bien mieux qu’un ‘style,’ le Nouveau Réalisme européen apparaît maintenant comme une tendance ouverte* (much more than a ‘group’ and even better than a ‘style,’ European Nouveau Réalisme now appears as an open tendency).”⁷² From the beginning, it was evident that the common denominator among the Nouveau-Réaliste artists was their resistance to past forms and their desire to maintain their own individuality as artists while forging, collectively, new modes of artistic possibility.⁷³

Grillet, “Nouveau roman homme nouveau [1961],” in *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 145.

⁷⁰ Lindon, “Littérature degagée,” *New Morality* 2, nos. 2-3 (1962): 112. Cited in Higgins, *New Novel*, 13.

⁷¹ Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939-1990* (London: Routledge, 1991), 143-144. Cited in *ibid.*

⁷² Pierre Restany, “Le nouveau réalisme: Que faut-il en penser?,” 273.

⁷³ Recall the simple declaration to which they all agreed: a declaration that emphasized *singularity, newness* and *the real*: “*Les nouveaux réalistes ont pris conscience de leur singularité collective. Nouveau Réalisme = nouvelles approches perceptives du réel* (The nouveaux réalistes have become conscious of their collective singularity. Nouveau Réalisme = new perceptive approaches to the real).”

The sense of urgency in the face of the obsolescence of conventional art forms resonates across the French art and literature of the 1950s and 60s and their attendant theorizations. Robbe-Grillet lamented the archaism of the traditional novel in a 1965 essay in which he declared, “The art of the novel . . . has fallen into such a state of stagnation . . . that it is hard to imagine such an art can survive for long without some radical change. To many, the solution seems simple enough: such a change being impossible, the art of the novel is dying.”⁷⁴ The refrain was familiar in the plastic arts as well: in the postwar period, in the wake of Jackson Pollock’s radical innovations at the limit-edge of pictorial art, the “death of painting” was declared time and again. All past modes were tired, and Pollock seemed to have dealt the final blow. Restany’s first manifesto, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” began with the straightforward proclamation: “*La peinture de chevalet (comme n’importe quel autre moyen d’expression classique dans le domaine de la peinture ou de la sculpture) a fait son temps* (Easel painting (like any other classical means of expression in the domain of painting or sculpture) has served its term).”⁷⁵ Conventional painting, like the traditional novel, could no longer serve as an effective means of expression in the postwar era, and thus had to be entirely eschewed in favor of new forms, non-pictorial and non-representational.⁷⁶ Of course, the crux of my

⁷⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “A Future for the Novel [1956],” in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 17.

⁷⁵ Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 264.

⁷⁶ Higgins proposes that the “new” in Nouveau Roman and Nouvelle Vague — and, I would add, Nouveau Réalisme — could, according to the movements’ own definitions excerpted above, be taken to mean “oppositional.” Higgins, *New Novel*, 14. Each group defines itself as in some way operating in counterdiscourse, which Richard Terdiman defines as “discursive systems by which writers and artists sought to project an alternative, liberating *newness* against the absorptive capacity of . . . established discourses.” See Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 13, 15-16. Cited in *ibid.* Emphasis original. Terdiman was referring specifically to the 19th-century novel in this case, but Higgins takes his definition to open up an idea of counterdiscourse as “new whenever it appears.” There is, however, a tension in that diagnosis. For while the Nouveaux Réalistes’ embrace of the “new” can be seen to align with De Gaulle’s political strategies, the novelists and filmmakers of the Nouveau Roman and

argument in this dissertation hinges on Restany's shortsightedness on the matter of painting's death; indeed, I contend that Arman's œuvre is rather a new mode of painting, a modernization of painting that, like the Nouveau Roman, finds a way for that form to live on in the midst of mass social and cultural change.⁷⁷

Robbe-Grillet had become the de facto leader of the circle of writers who came to be identified with the Nouveau Roman, thanks not only to his innovative novels but also to his prolific theoretical texts on the novel, its past, and its future.⁷⁸ Already in 1955, he was writing of a literary revolution, and he made the important observation that historically such upheavals had always been made in the name of realism, and for good reason:

When a form of writing has lost its initial vitality, its force, its violence, when it has become a vulgar recipe, an academic mannerism which its followers respect only out of routine or laziness, without even questioning its necessity, then it is indeed a return to the real which constitutes the arraignment of the dead formulas

Nouvelle Vague, respectively, align more with the "resistant" strain of counterdiscourse. Much more politically outspoken, and indeed reactionary, the writers and cinéastes of the period were resistant not only to established forms of creation but also to the establishment itself, the De Gaulle administration.

⁷⁷ Anne Richard has disputed this long-held Restanian assertion of the Nouveaux Réalistes' non-pictorialism: "*Qu'on le veuille ou non, toute tentative pour réduire les formes à ce type d'illustration sociologique est vouée à l'échec, car elle méconnaît la nature indivise de ce 'double investissement' qu'est l'assemblage. Mais il est impérieux, dans les années 60, de fixer (de mettre à l'épreuve) le genre, la catégorie, l'espèce. Comme la peinture et la sculpture, l'objet devra s'y soumettre* (Whether one sees it or not, any attempt to reduce forms to this type of sociological illustration is destined for failure, for it is ignorant of the indivisible nature of this 'double investment' that is assemblage. But it is urgent, in the 1960s, to fix (to put to the test) the genre, the category, the species. Like painting and sculpture, the object will have to submit to it)." This is why, Richard claims, Restany reproached Schwitters for having organized his Merz pictures according to the Cubist grid, and accused Rauschenberg of maintaining a similarly axial geometry and color-field aspect of his Combines. But, Richard argues, the Nouveaux Réalistes' appropriative works were equally dependent on a pictorial vocabulary. "*Le Nouveau Réalisme, pour une bonne part, se loge dans cette ouverture de la peinture à certaines circonstances matérielles, prend appui sur une définition élargie du tableau, repoussée jusqu'à ses plus extrêmes limites* (Nouveau Réalisme, for the most part, lodges itself in that opening of painting to certain material circumstances, leans on a broadened definition of the painting, pushed to its most extreme limits)." Richard, "Nouveau Réalisme et sociologie," 54.

⁷⁸ The essential collection of his essays on the novel was published in France as *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), and in the United States as *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

and the search for new forms capable of continuing the effort. The discovery of reality will continue only if we abandon our outworn forms.⁷⁹

The discovery of reality — first understanding “the real” and then finding the means to express it — was certainly a widespread aspiration in the 1950s and 60s. And just like every previous generation that had turned to realism, the realists of postwar France were faced with a new kind of reality — one that had changed materially as well as symbolically, and one which was now understood differently thanks to advances in science and philosophy. As one art critic put it, given the circumstances of 1950s Europe, the establishment of a “new realism” felt inevitable: “*A ce stade du développement intellectuel, social et économique du XXe siècle, le nouveau réalisme devait être inventé* (At that stage of intellectual, social and economic development in the 20th century, Nouveau Réalisme had to be invented).”⁸⁰ Robbe-Grillet explained:

The objective modifications of reality, combined with the ‘progress’ of our physical knowledge, have reverberated profoundly — and continue to reverberate — in our philosophical conceptions, our metaphysics, our ethics. Hence, even if the novel were only to reproduce reality, it would scarcely be natural for the foundations of its realism not to have evolved in parallel with these transformations.⁸¹

The historical conceptions of realism — the notion of an objective, factual, faithful reproduction of the truthful “real” — had to be reconceived now that “the real” itself had evolved: no longer straightforward, “the real” had become a plurality: multiple realities were felt to present themselves in the age of the three-step modernization described above (production; transformation into discourse; consumption). However, Robbe-Grillet was keen to remind us that while the novel must evolve alongside reality, and must

⁷⁹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism to Reality [1955 and 1963],” in *For a New Novel*, 158.

⁸⁰ “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” *Panoramique*, (1986): 11.

⁸¹ Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism to Reality,” 159.

account for its new forms, the novel is not itself a tool for “reveal[ing] to the masses the evils of today’s world and the remedies in fashion.”⁸² The novel “does not serve to set forth, to translate things existing before it, outside it. It does not express, it explores, and what it explores is itself.”⁸³ The same could be said of Arman’s realism of the period: contrary to much of the criticism launched against it — and even much of the praise bestowed upon it — Arman’s œuvre is not simply a commentary on or an expression of an exterior reality; it is an exploration of the work of art itself, a questioning of the possibilities for art, and in particular realist art, at a moment when reality — or realities — looked the way that they did.

The Nouveau Roman sought to critique the novel as form from within the novel itself; as a result, the writing often comments on itself within the story, creating a sort of *mise-en-abîme* of the process of narration. The apparently objective narration reveals the difficulty of full, unfragmented expression and the impossibility of true objectivity. In a similar way, Arman seems to use his highly pictorial artworks to critique painting itself, to deconstruct its values by reimagining them within a framework that, by all accepted standards, should be outside its purview. His artworks of the 1950s and early 60s disclose, via their very form and materials, the impossibility of “direct presentation” and the objective, unmediated conveyance of “the real.”

Arman’s œuvre, like the Nouveau Roman, thus addresses a central problem with the concept of realism, as it has been conventionally understood: the implied claim of objectivity. The realist work is traditionally believed to be a faithful copy of reality, untarnished by the subjectivity of the copyist, who instead maintains the utmost loyalty to

⁸² Ibid., 160.

⁸³ Ibid.

the factual truth laid out before him or her.⁸⁴ But such objectivity in representation, as Robbe-Grillet was keen to observe, is an utter impossibility:

Objectivity in the ordinary sense of the word — total impersonality of observation — is all too obviously an illusion. But *freedom* of observation should be possible, and yet it is not. At every moment, a continuous fringe of culture (psychology, ethics, metaphysics, etc.) is added to things, giving them a less alien aspect, one that is more comprehensible, more reassuring.⁸⁵

By this claim Robbe-Grillet intended that our very perspective is corrupted by the “literary”: “a gesture vanishes from our mind, supplanted by the emotions which supposedly produced it, and we remember a landscape as *austere* or *calm* without being able to evoke a single outline, a single determining element.”⁸⁶ He thus asserted that there is no such thing as a neutral object, much less an objective observation of one.

Robbe-Grillet referred to the phenomenon of literary perception as the “systematic appropriation of the visual,” and claimed that even if something breaks out of that system, the tendency is to relegate it to the convenient category of “the absurd” in order for it not to disrupt the system. However, Robbe-Grillet’s key claim was that both sides of the coin are false: “the world is neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply.”⁸⁷ He explained, “Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things *are there*.”⁸⁸ The goal of the realist novel, then, should be for

⁸⁴ Charles Baudelaire famously defined the realist as a positivist who proceeds by saying, “*Je veux représenter les choses telles qu’elles sont, ou bien qu’elles seraient, en supposant que je n’existe pas* (I want to depict things as they are, or rather as they would be, supposing that I did not exist).” That is, realism represents “[l]’univers sans l’homme ([t]he universe without man).” The *réaliste* was thus contrasted with the much more compelling *imaginatif*, who proceeds from the thought, “*Je veux illuminer les choses avec mon esprit et en projeter le reflet sur les autres esprits* (I want to illuminate things with my mind and project their reflection onto the minds of others).” Charles Baudelaire, “Salon de 1859,” in *Curiosités esthétiques* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1868), 275.

⁸⁵ Robbe-Grillet, “A Future,” 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the gestures and objects to “be *there* before being *something*.”⁸⁹ Presence itself is the hallmark of reality, and thus of realism. The simplicity of this claim belies its complex implications, which would be born out in the “opaque” novels and artwork created in postwar France.

Literary realism and its implications for art

Throughout this dissertation I argue that Arman’s particular brand of realism in the 1950s and early 1960s, like that of Robbe-Grillet, strives at base to lay bare the utter impossibility — as well as the falsity and indeed undesirability — of “objective,” “factual,” “impartial” artistic representations or presentations of “the real.” In order to situate Arman’s project within its historical moment, I shall briefly focus on the important literary developments of the 1950s and 60s in France, developments which revolutionized the very structure, aim, and indeed definition of the French novel, in ways that I believe resonate quite compellingly with Arman’s ambitions for his own work. It is my contention that the theorizations and criticism of the realist novel in that period can go a long way in illuminating not only the relevance of the questions Arman’s realist art was asking, but also the various ways in which those questions might come to be understood.⁹⁰ The parallel developments in the Nouveau Roman and its critique provide

⁸⁹ “Henceforth . . . objects will gradually lose their instability and their secrets, will renounce their pseudo-mystery, that suspect interiority which Roland Barthes has called ‘the romantic heart of things.’ No longer will objects be merely the vague reflection of the hero’s vague soul, the image of his torments, the shadow of his desires. Or rather, if objects still afford a momentary prop to human passions, they will do so only provisionally, and will accept the tyranny of significations only in appearance — derisively, one might say — the better to show how alien they remain to man.” The notion of objects having meaning only in appearance resonates with the vitrine-based works of Arman. As I will argue in Chapters Four and Five, the objects those works contain, oftentimes heavily connotative, are imprisoned behind a barrier that teases the viewer with meaning but in the end requires that his or her attention rest on the surface, since it cannot penetrate any deeper, physically or metaphorically. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁹⁰ Jouffroy, too, drew the connection between contemporary art and the contemporary novel, arguing that both forms address the viewer cerebrally in order to “*changer dans notre esprit notre vision du réel* (change in our mind our vision of the real).” Jouffroy, “Pour une révolution,” 195.

an alternative means of accessing Arman's practice, outside and, importantly, *prior* to the Restanian discourse.

Throughout his many essays on literature, compiled in the 1964 book *Pour un nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet characterized the twentieth-century novel in opposition to that of the previous century, particularly the realist novels of the great Honoré de Balzac. In contrast to Balzac's abundant descriptions, rich with symbolism that pointed to a meaning much deeper than the descriptive language itself, the new novel rested on the surface, without implying any hidden signification to be uncovered.⁹¹ Indeed, Robbe-Grillet claimed that his own novels, laden with a wholly different kind of abundant description, presented merely "a *flat* and *discontinuous* universe where each thing refers only to itself."⁹² Such an approach to realism, he argued, was appropriate for the world that simply "*was*."⁹³

Robbe-Grillet stated, "In this new realism, it is . . . no longer *verisimilitude* that is at issue. The little detail which 'rings true' no longer holds the attention of the novelist, in the spectacle of the world or in literature: what strikes him . . . is . . . on the contrary, the little detail that rings *false*."⁹⁴ Such details might include "partial objects, detached from their use, moments immobilized, words separated from their contexts."⁹⁵ The very

⁹¹ Robbe-Grillet's essay, "Sur quelques notions périmées [1957]," addresses the way literature has changed from the great novels of the nineteenth century to today, and the way those changes reflect shifts in values of nineteenth-century society. He confronts the tripartite foci of the character, the story, and the commitment of a novel, outlining the way each aspect mattered to nineteenth-century writers and readers, and the way they must now change to meet the demands of the twentieth century. Those demands reflected, for instance, the replacement of the individual by the anonymous mass; the rejection of representation (that is, storytelling) as unacceptable artifice; and the elimination of the didactic or moralistic function of art. This essay is published in *Pour un nouveau roman*, 29-53.

⁹² Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Enigmas and Transparency in Raymond Roussel [1963]," in *For a New Novel*, 86.

⁹³ Robbe-Grillet, "A Future for the Novel," 18.

⁹⁴ Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality," 163.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

elements that, because of their seeming falseness, appealed to the novelist, make up also the contents of the Nouveaux Réalistes' artworks. Fragments of objects no longer in use and no longer usable populate Arman's vitrines; Spoerri's *tableaux-pièges* arrest for posterity the final moment of a meal; the *affichistes'* *décollages* comprise words, letters and images displaced from their contexts and thus stripped of their meaning. For such elements to be the raw material of the new realism, in both literature and art, speaks to the falsity of "the real" itself — best represented by these odd details, characterized by "obviousness, . . . unmotivated presence, . . . inessential necessity."⁹⁶ Things that simply are, *tout court*.

The Nouveau Roman is characterized by frequent and lengthy descriptions of static objects or fragments of spaces and scenes. Robbe-Grillet wrote that while such descriptions were generally met with satisfaction by the reader, the critics found them to be "useless and confused: useless, because without real relation to the action; confused, because not playing what should be, apparently, their fundamental role: to make the reader see."⁹⁷ Worse, the protracted descriptions were taken to be inferior substitutions for what a film could do better — to show, in a matter of instants, all that the prose represented over the course of dozens of pages.⁹⁸ But such condemnations, Robbe-Grillet argued, missed the point of those very descriptions in the new novel. Descriptions that aim to make the reader see belonged to the novel of the past, Balzac's nineteenth-century novel in particular. In those works, the objects described with the utmost precision "guaranteed, by [their] resemblance to the 'real' world the authenticity of the events, the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Time and Description in Fiction Today [1963]," in *For a New Novel*, 145.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 153.

words, the gestures which the novelist would cause to occur there.”⁹⁹ Like the pictorial realism of the nineteenth century, the precise details “could only convince the reader of the objective existence . . . of a world which the novelist seemed merely to reproduce, to copy, to transmit, as if one were dealing with a chronicle, a biography, a document of some kind.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, realism in art has frequently borne comparison to journalism, to “mere” reportage.

In the novels of the previous century, those descriptions served as a kind of “frame” for the story — a frame that “happened to have a meaning identical to that of the picture it was to contain,” since all the settings described served as representations of the people who inhabited them, and foretold the same destiny.¹⁰¹ In the *Nouveau Roman*, the descriptions are no longer the frame but the whole content of the work; thus, the reader who might have passed over the descriptions in nineteenth-century novels in order to get more quickly to the heart of the story, would find herself completely at a loss if she applied the same practice to the *Nouveau Roman*: “when this same reader skips the descriptions in our books, he is in danger of finding himself . . . at the end of the volume whose contents will have escaped him altogether; imagining he has been dealing hitherto with nothing but the frame, he will still be looking for the picture.”¹⁰² The difference, of course, is that in the *Nouveau Roman*, description no longer serves its former purpose of “situat[ing] the chief contours of a setting, . . . cast[ing] light on some of its particularly revealing elements;” it no longer claims to faithfully reproduce a pre-existing reality or to

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

make the reader see things.¹⁰³ Instead, in the Nouveau Roman, description now serves a creative function; it deals only with insignificant objects and aims, and in discussing them, “destroy[s] them . . . blurring their contours . . . making them incomprehensible . . . causing them to disappear altogether.”¹⁰⁴

Robbe-Grillet’s obsessive and complex prose uses repetition and description with such detail that it goes beyond reality and approaches a kind of hyperreality that confuses rather than clarifies. As I shall argue in Chapter Four, Arman uses repetition and multiplication in much the same way. In the *Accumulations*, the quantification of objects and their direct presentation behind a transparent pane — so that all details are present and observable — turns out to have the opposite effect of what such practices might be expected to produce. That is, rather than offering an abundance of information, as the objects and settings of Balzac’s novels do, the objects are obliterated by their own overwhelming quantity and concentration. The various methodological approaches that literary critics pursued in order to deal with Robbe-Grillet’s descriptive prose thus provide a useful parallel with those contending with Arman’s profuse accumulations.

Robbe-Grillet’s novelistic descriptions resonate also with the very form of Arman’s *Cachets* and *Allures d’objets*, which I analyze in Chapters Three and Four. In those chapters, I argue that Arman’s effort to make present the “real” objects of his daily life — the office inkstamps he employs in the *Cachets* and the small knickknacks in the *Allures d’objets* — ends up obscuring those very objects. Robbe-Grillet portrays his own descriptive writing as having a similar effect:

such description particularly seems to be inventing its object when it suddenly contradicts, repeats, corrects itself, bifurcates, etc. Yet we begin to glimpse

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

something, and we suppose that this something will now become clearer. But the lines of the drawing accumulate, grow heavier, cancel one another out, shift, so that the image is jeopardized as it is created . . . when the description comes to an end, we realize that it has left nothing behind it: it has instituted a double movement of creation and destruction . . . whence the *disappointment* inherent in many works of today.¹⁰⁵

The fits and starts and interruptions that Robbe-Grillet illustrates are akin to the overlappings, the intertwinings, and the fragmentations of the indexical marks recorded in Arman's works on paper. The result of the surfeit of marks is not some privileged excess of information about their referents, but rather an annihilation of those very referents. The disappointment that Robbe-Grillet acknowledged in his own novels is to be found equally in Arman's works on paper, where the promise of the index — that it will point to its referent, corroborating the reality of the thing that has created it — is thwarted by the very practice of distilling it. Arman's indexing is exactly the “double movement of creation and destruction” that Robbe-Grillet described: a simultaneous preservation and loss of the reality that is being recorded.

Extending his discussion to cinema, Robbe-Grille declared:

What disturbs the spectators fond of ‘realism’ is that there is no longer any effort to make them believe in anything. . . . The *real*, the *false*, and *illusion* become more or less the subject of all modern works; this one, instead of claiming to be a piece of reality, is developed as a reflection on reality (or on the *dearth of reality*, as Breton calls it). . . . So that we rediscover here, in the cinematographic style, a function related to that assumed by description in literature: the image thus created keeps us from believing at the same time what it affirms, just as description kept us from seeing what it was showing.¹⁰⁶

The duality of creation and destruction that is present in the literature, cinema, and art of the period reflects the character of “the real” itself as it came to be understood in the postwar years: “It is matter itself which is both solid and unstable, both present and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 148.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 150-151.

imagined, alien to man and constantly being invented in man's mind. The entire interest of the descriptive pages . . . is therefore no longer in the thing described, but in the very movement of the description."¹⁰⁷ If we permit ourselves to think of description as akin to the kind of presentation that Arman enacts with his objects, then we can see the truth of this dictum as regards his work: the subject of an *Accumulation* or a *Poubelle* is not the objects contained therein, but their means of presentation: their multiplication, their anti-composition, their enclosure within a vitrine. What Robbe-Grillet called the "movement of the description" is analogous to Arman's presentation of the objects; it is there that lies his questioning of "the real" and realism and his proposal for an art that leaves those questions open.

Confronted with the open questions posed by the extraordinarily original Nouveau Roman, critics took up the task of theorizing the new realist turn in literature. They tended to adopt one of two approaches: to read the descriptions either as superficial or as armaments for ideology. Roland Barthes encouraged the former, "matte" reading,¹⁰⁸ staying on the surface of the text, not attempting to penetrate to some deeper level of meaning; whereas critics like Jacques Leenhardt, for instance, advocated a kind of code-breaking of the hidden significations of the objects described.¹⁰⁹ A similar debate was familiar in the art criticism of the period dealing with artists like Arman and his Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues, as well as their American counterparts like Rauschenberg and his Neo-Dada circle. In all cases, the work seemed to require critics to take a stance

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 148.

¹⁰⁸ Roland Barthes, "Le point sur Robbe-Grillet? [1962]" in *Essais critiques* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 205-213.

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman: La jalousie d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973).

on one side or the other: to treat the assemblage-style works as (intentionally) superficial accumulations of stuff, or to delve into a kind of deciphering work, analyzing the constituent parts and their individual and collective meanings.¹¹⁰ In Chapters Four and Five, I will address the competing, and sometimes complementary, methodologies in greater detail, and will draw on the literary criticism of the Nouveau Roman to bolster my analysis of Arman's work and its reception.

Barthes not only defended Robbe-Grillet's innovations but offered instructions on how best to read the new form of prose. In his 1962 essay, "Le point sur Robbe-Grillet?," Barthes discussed the problem of literary realism in general, which, as he pointed out in the opening line of the text, "*s'est toujours donné pour une certaine façon de copier le réel* (has always presented itself as a certain way of *copying* the real)."¹¹¹ The problem with such an understanding of realism, he continued, is that it acts on the assumption that "*il y avait d'un certain côté le réel et de l'autre le langage, comme si l'un était antécédent à l'autre et que le second ait pour tâche en quelque sorte de courir après le premier jusqu'à ce qu'il le rattrape* (there is on one side the real and on the other language, as if reality were antecedent to language and the latter's task were somehow to pursue the former until it caught up)."¹¹² Barthes's rebuff of the conventional dichotomy required to understand literary realism resonates with Arman's plastic realism as well.

¹¹⁰ The dichotomy of art critical approaches is well known in the Rauschenberg scholarship, where figures like Brian O'Doherty, proponent of the superficial "vernacular glance," square off against figures like Charles Stuckey, advocate of the psychoanalytical parsing of materials. See O'Doherty, "Rauschenberg and the Vernacular Glance," *Art in America* 61 (September 1973): 82-87; and Stuckey, "Minutiae and Rauschenberg's Combine Mode," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 211-230. I will address the conflicting approaches to perceiving Arman's work in great detail in the chapters that follow, especially in Chapter Four when I discuss the *Accumulations*, which have been the greatest object of disagreement in methodological approach.

¹¹¹ Roland Barthes, "Le point," 205.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Arman's artistic production can be seen as an effort to capture "the real" without "pursuing it," because he does so without using a different language — that is, without representing it in painting or sculpture — but instead offers "the real" itself, making "the real" and realism one and the same, instead of two opposing poles.

Barthes claimed,

les choses signifient tout de suite, toujours et plein droit: et c'est précisément parce que la signification est leur condition en quelque sorte 'naturelle,' qu'en les dépouillant simplement de leur sens, la littérature peut s'affirmer comme un artifice admirable: si la 'nature' est signifiante, un certain comble de la 'culture' peut être de la faire 'désignifier.'

things signify right away, always and automatically: and it is precisely because meaning is in some way their 'natural' condition, that in simply stripping them of their meaning, literature can affirm itself as an admirable artifice: if 'nature' is signifying, a certain limit of 'culture' can be to make it 'un-signify.'¹¹³

What Barthes is articulating here is in a sense the dialectic of "real" and representation — the acknowledgment that two seemingly oppositional poles, one apparently prior to the other (things as antecedent to language) are in fact interdependent and simultaneous. The implications that such a dialectic has for literature — or, for our purposes, for art — include the embrace of its fundamental and inescapable artifice as a potentially affirmative complement to "the real." The empty, flat descriptions of meaningless objects that Robbe-Grillet seems to offer, turn out, as Barthes observes, to expose inevitably a certain content and meaning. "*L'œuvre de Robbe-Grillet devient alors l'épreuve du sens vécu par une certaine société, et l'histoire de cette œuvre sera à sa manière l'histoire de cette société* (Robbe-Grillet's œuvre thus becomes the test of meaning lived by a certain society, and the story of that œuvre will be in its way the story of that society)."¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ibid., 211-212.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 212.

Certainly, literature does not have the option of eschewing language in favor of “the real” in the way that the plastic arts can eschew their respective “languages” (painting, sculpture, etc.) and take up “real” objects from the world as their sole material. However, literature does have the possibility, as Barthes noted, of refocusing itself away from the “*monde de rapports inter-humains* (world of inter-human relations),” which is to say, the subjective world, and instead toward “*l’objet lui-même* (the object itself),”¹¹⁵ or the objective world.¹¹⁶ The aim would be to shed the “transcendent” aspect of objects by ignoring or casting off the human relationships to them, and to embrace instead only the pure, realist detail of the objects themselves.

The problem with representation is that it implies that the representation itself — the novel or the work of art — consists in referring to or speaking of something else, something exterior to it. The world of the representation and the “real” world are taken to be two separate things: as Robbe-Grillet put it, the first world is “the only visible one, the second the only important one.”¹¹⁷ The role of the author or artist in that scenario would be simply to evoke the second world, the reality hidden behind what is visible.¹¹⁸ What the experimental writers and artists of the 1950s and 60s were trying to do, however, was to make those two worlds one: where the representation is so direct and immediate that it *is* absolute reality.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 205.

¹¹⁶ Barthes argued that “*le ‘réel’ est réputé se suffire à lui-même, qu’il est assez fort pour démentir toute idée de ‘fonction,’ que son énonciation n’a nul besoin d’être intégrée dans une structure et que l’avoir-été-là des choses est un principe suffisant de la parole* (the ‘real’ is reputed to suffice in itself, that it is strong enough to belie any idea of ‘function,’ that its enunciation has no need to be integrated into a structure and that the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient principle of speech).” Barthes, “L’Effet de Réel,” 88.

¹¹⁷ Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism to Reality,” 164.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 165.

¹¹⁹ Barthes writes of the “*détail concret* (concrete detail),” which is characterized semiotically by “*la collusion directe d’un référent et d’un signifiant; le signifié est expulsé du signe, et avec lui, bien entendu la possibilité de développer une forme du signifié, c’est-à-dire, en fait, la structure narrative elle-même. . .*”

Whether or not the detail and the objects that the novelist (or artist) takes as his or her subject matter have meaning is open to debate — and that question is the center point of Barthes’s essay, in which he argues that, in the exemplary work of Robbe-Grillet, both modalities coexist. There are, for Barthes, “deux *Robbe-Grillet*: d’un côté le *Robbe-Grillet des choses immédiates, destructeur de sens . . . et d’un autre, le Robbe-Grillet des choses médiates, créateur de sens* (two Robbe-Grilletts: on one hand the Robbe-Grillet of immediate things, destroyer of meaning . . . and on the other, the Robbe-Grillet of mediate things, creator of meaning).”¹²⁰ The dichotomy that Barthes establishes in Robbe-Grillet’s novels can be found equally in Arman’s artworks, which present the viewer with objects that are at once immediate — directly present, just as themselves — and mediate — distanced by a transparent barrier, which imbues them with a new status and implies for them a further meaning.

The Robbe-Grillet of immediate things, according to Barthes, “*décide que les choses ne signifient rien* (decides that things do not mean anything).” However, for this decision to ring true, there is work to be done:

. [S]upprimé de l’énonciation réaliste à titre de signifié de dénotation, le ‘réel’ y revient à titre de signifié de connotation; car dans le moment même où ces détails sont réputés dénoter directement le réel, ils ne font rien d’autre . . . que le signifier . . . nous sommes le réel; c’est la catégorie du ‘réel’ (et non ses contenus contingents) qui est alors signifiée; autrement dit, la carence même du signifié au profit du seul référent devient le signifiant même du réalisme: il se produit un effet de réel, fondement de ce vraisemblable inavoué qui forme l’esthétique de toutes les œuvres courantes de la modernité (the direct collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it, naturally, the possibility of developing a *form of the signified*, which is to say, in fact, the narrative structure itself. . . . [E]liminated from the realist enunciation as the signified of denotation, the ‘real’ returns as signified of connotation; for in the very moment when these details are reputed to directly denote the real, they do not do anything other . . . than to signify it . . . *we are the real*; it is the category of the ‘real’ (and not its contingent contents) that is their signified; in other words, the very lack of the signified in favor of the referent alone becomes the very signifying of realism: it produces an *effect of reality*, foundation of this unavowed *vraisemblable* that forms the aesthetic of all the current œuvres of modernity).” The new *vraisemblable*, according to Barthes, is founded in the intention of altering “*la nature tripartite du signe pour faire de la notation la pure rencontre d’un objet et de son expression* (the tripartite nature of the sign in order to turn the notation into the pure encounter of an object and its expression).” Barthes, “L’Effet de Réel,” 88-89.

¹²⁰ Barthes, “Le point,” 206.

Mais comme ces mêmes choses sont enfouies sous un amas de sens variés, dont les hommes, à travers des sensibilités, des poésies et des usages différents ont imprégné le nom de tout objet, le travail du romancier est en quelque sorte cathartique: il purifie les choses du sens indu que les hommes sans cesse déposent en elles.

But since these very things are buried under a pile of different meanings with which people, through sensibilities, through poetry, and through different uses, have impregnated the name of every object, the work of the novelist is in a sense cathartic: he purifies things from the undue meaning that people ceaselessly deposit upon them.¹²¹

And the means by which to carry out this work? Description. Barthes argues that Robbe-Grillet manages to eliminate all the layers of meanings and connotations by qualifying the objects so obsessively that his descriptions “*décourag[ent] toute induction vers le sens poétique de la chose* (discourage any induction of poetic meaning on the thing).”¹²²

Arman can be seen to be undertaking a similar approach in offering so much detail (by providing so many exemplars of the same object in the *Accumulations*, or by showing the various trajectory patterns of an object in the *Allures d’objets*, for instance) that he erases or begins to erode the meanings of the individual objects. In the untitled *Accumulation* of clasps from 1960 (Figure 2.1), for instance, the surfeit of detail in both quantity and variety of clasps renders the objects meaningless, as they are subsumed to the mass and become merely elemental; their form, as part of a larger *Gestalt*, supercedes their function or poetic meaning. Their mere presence *is* their significance.

For Barthes, the first Robbe-Grillet, the Robbe-Grillet of immediate things, practices a “classic” form of realism, one that is founded on a relationship of analogy, where the famous tomato slice painstakingly described in *Les gommes* of 1953 resembles

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

a “real” tomato slice.¹²³ Barthes cautions, however, that Robbe-Grillet’s realism, despite its classicism in adopting the model of the direct analogy, nevertheless is new,

parce que cette analogie ne renvoie à aucune transcendance mais prétend survivre fermée sur elle-même, satisfaite lorsqu’elle a désigné nécessairement et suffisamment le trop fameux être-là de la chose (ce quartier de tomate est décrit de telle sorte qu’il n’est censé provoquer ni envie ni dégoût, et ne signifier ni la saison, ni le lieu, ni même la nourriture).

because that analogy does not refer to any transcendence but claims to survive as a closed system, satisfied once it has designated necessarily and sufficiently the notorious *being-there* of the object (this slice of tomato is described in such a way that it is not meant to provoke desire nor disgust, and not to signify the season, nor the place, nor even sustenance).¹²⁴

A surplus of description with a dearth of meaning attached — thus could be described Arman’s realist artwork of the same period. His will to capture the reality of “real” things necessarily passes over the multi-layered meanings of those things. In multiplying the objects *ad infinitum*, Arman distracts the focus away from the individual stories of each object — clues as to its previous owner, its use, its age; and in indexing those objects or placing them behind a transparent pane, he further emphasizes that we are to observe only their surface characteristics, never grasping their tactility or fulfilling their utilitarian

¹²³ Ibid., 207. The description in question reads as follows: “*Un quartier de tomate en vérité sans défaut, découpé à la machine dans un fruit d’une symétrie parfaite. La chair périphérique, compacte et homogène, d’un beau rouge de chimie, est régulièrement épaisse entre une bande de peau luisante et la loge où sont rangés les pépins, jaunes, bien calibrés, maintenus en place par une mince couche de gelée verdâtre le long d’un renflement du cœur. Celui-ci, d’un rose atténué légèrement granuleux, débute, du côté de la dépression inférieure, par un faisceau de veines blanches, dont l’une se prolonge jusque vers les pépins — d’une façon un peu incertaine. Tout en haut, un accident à peine visible s’est produit: un coin de pelure, décollé de la chair sur un millimètre ou deux, se soulève imperceptiblement.* (A tomato slice in truth flawless, cut up by the machine into a perfectly symmetrical fruit. The peripheral flesh, compact and homogenous, of a nice chemical red, is of an even thickness between a strip of gleaming skin and the hollow where the yellow, graduated seeds appear in a row, held in place by a thin layer of greenish gel along a swelling of the heart. This heart, of a slightly grainy, faint pink, begins, from the side of the inner hollow, with a cluster of white veins, one of which extends toward the seeds — somewhat uncertainly. Above, a barely visible accident has occurred: a corner of the skin, stripped back from the flesh for a millimeter or two, is raised imperceptibly.)” Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Les gommes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1953), 160.

¹²⁴ Barthes, “Le point,” 207.

purpose. Arman's objects, like Robbe-Grillet's, could thus be said to be lacking what Barthes called "*une valeur anthologique* (an anthological value)," and engaging instead in a kind of "*silence de la signification* (silence of meaning)."¹²⁵ Just as Barthes found the meaninglessness of things in Robbe-Grillet's "*chosiste*"¹²⁶ novels to refer back to the insignificance of things and situations in the "real" world,¹²⁷ Arman's empty shells of objects, displayed as mere surfaces, can be seen to refer back to the emptiness of consumerism and of human life in the grips of consumer society.

Robbe-Grillet proposed that, rather than performing literature's prior task of digging ever deeper in order to uncover some greater truth or some more intimate level of meaning, today's writer must concern him- or herself with the *surface* of things — for it is now evident that that surface "has ceased to be for us the mask of their heart."¹²⁸ There is no source of metaphysical transcendence to be uncovered behind or beneath it, he argued; "since it is chiefly in its presence that the world's reality resides, our task is now to create a literature which takes that presence into account."¹²⁹ Robbe-Grillet thus touched on the perceived distancing of "the real," our alienation from the very things that surround us and make up our world. In a passage that anticipates Debord's 1967 *Société du Spectacle*, Robbe-Grillet described the futility of the attempt to "control it [the world around us] by assigning it a meaning," a task to which the entire art of the novel had long seemed dedicated.¹³⁰ "But this was merely an illusory simplification; and far from

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ "*Chosiste*" is a term frequently ascribed to the Nouveau Roman in general and Robbe-Grillet in particular. From the French "*chose*," or "thing," it refers to the writer's concern with things in and of themselves — not things as symbols or metaphors or agents of human emotion or experience.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Robbe-Grillet, "A Future," 23-24.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

becoming clearer and closer because of it, the world has only, little by little, lost all its life.”¹³¹ Debord’s contention that the world had retreated into image, distancing itself from its inhabitants, touched on the same fundamental phenomenon — an evacuation of life from the world, and of authenticity from our relationship to it.¹³²

Once again, Barthes’s guidance in how to read the Nouveau Roman is apt: he argued that Robbe-Grillet’s novels should be read “*d’une façon mate; il suffit de rester à la surface du texte, étant bien entendu qu’une lecture superficielle ne saurait plus être condamnée au nom des anciennes valeurs d’intériorité* (in a *matte* way; it suffices to stay on the surface of the text, it being understood that a *superficial* reading could no longer be condemned in the name of the former values of interiority).”¹³³ Barthes credited Robbe-Grillet with rendering obsolete the “natural” qualities of introspective literature of the past — namely that the profound was deemed preferable to the superficial — in favor of promoting a kind of “*être-là* (being-there)” of the text and denying the reader any sense of a meaningful world.¹³⁴

In describing the kind of superficial perception that is ideal for the reader of Robbe-Grillet’s writing, Barthes drew on a point that he would later expand in *La chambre claire (Camera Lucida)*¹³⁵ about the erosion of the subject matter in the face of a too-deep perception:

Robbe-Grillet semble alors manier un certain contenu parce qu’il n’y a pas de littérature sans signe et de signe sans signifié: mais tout son art consiste

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Debord wrote, “*Là où le monde réel se change en simples images, les simples images deviennent des êtres réels, et les motivations efficaces d’un comportement hypnotique* (Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior.)” Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, 23.

¹³³ Barthes, “Le point,” 207.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

précisément à décevoir le sens dans le temps même qu'il l'ouvre. Nommer ce contenu . . . c'est donc dépasser ce que l'on pourrait appeler le meilleur niveau de perception du roman, celui où il est parfaitement et immédiatement intelligible, tout comme regarder une reproduction photographique de très près, c'est sans doute en percer le secret typographique, mais c'est aussi ne plus rien comprendre à l'objet qu'elle représente.

Robbe-Grillet thus seems to deal with a certain content because there is no literature without signs nor signs without signifieds; but his whole art consists precisely in *disappointing* the meaning at the same time that he opens it up. To name this content . . . is thus to go beyond what one could call the best level of perception of the novel, that by which it is perfectly and immediately intelligible, just as to look at a photographic reproduction up close is without a doubt to pierce its typographic secret, but it is also to no longer understand anything of the object it represents.¹³⁶

Two decades later, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes re-addressed the superiority of the immediate grasp of the work (in that case, the photograph), reasoning that, in looking closer and longer at a photograph, one becomes less and less aware of the subject matter — that is, what is represented or, more specifically, indexed by the picture — as one's attention is dispersed into the minute pixels of color or grains of the paper's surface.¹³⁷

What makes Barthes's reading of Robbe-Grillet particularly compelling in relation to Arman's art is that Barthes sees the second Robbe-Grillet, the Robbe-Grillet of mediate things, coexisting with the first and indeed imbuing the work with a more nuanced purpose than mere meaningless description. Barthes claims that the objects Robbe-Grillet describes manage, without becoming symbols, to adopt "*une fonction médiatrice vers 'autre chose'* (a mediating function toward 'something else')." ¹³⁸ Bruce Morrisette made the groundbreaking revelations of the potential meanings to be found in

¹³⁶ Barthes, "Le point," 208.

¹³⁷ "To scrutinize means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper's depth, to reach its other side (what is hidden is for us Westerners more 'true' than what is visible). Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper: I undo the image for the sake of its substance; and if I do not enlarge, if I content myself with scrutinizing, I obtain this sole knowledge, long since possessed at first glance: that this indeed has been." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 100.

¹³⁸ Barthes, "Le point," 208.

Robbe-Grillet's objects — meanings located not in the objects themselves, but in their repetition through and across novels. Those objects, for Morrisette, are not so much symbols but, as Barthes puts it, "*simples supports de sensations, de sentiments, de souvenirs* (simple supports of sensations, of feelings, of memories)."¹³⁹ The ambiguity between the apparent neutrality of the objects and their potential signification as parts of a larger system or structure is precisely what Barthes found to be Robbe-Grillet's contribution to literature in his time, because it introduced the notion of the work of literature *as question*:

Qu'est-ce que les choses signifient, qu'est-ce que le monde signifie? Toute littérature est cette question, mais il faut tout de suite ajouter, car c'est ce qui fait sa spécialité: c'est cette question moins sa réponse. Aucune littérature au monde n'a jamais répondu à la question qu'elle posait, et c'est ce suspens même qui l'a toujours constituée en littérature: elle est ce très fragile langage que les hommes disposent entre la violence de la question et le silence de la réponse. . . . L'histoire de la littérature ne sera plus alors l'histoire des réponses contradictoires apportées par les écrivains à la question du sens, mais bien au contraire l'histoire de la question elle-même.

What do things mean, and what does the world mean? All literature is that question, but also, one must immediately add, since it is what makes its specialty: *it is that question minus its response*. No literature in the world has ever responded to the question that it posed, and it is that very suspense that has always constituted it as literature: it is that very fragile language that men place between the violence of the question and the silence of the response. . . . The history of literature thus will no longer be the history of contradictory responses brought by writers to the question of meaning, but on the contrary the history of the question itself.¹⁴⁰

The notion of literature as question helps to frame what I see as Arman's artistic project: a project that perpetuates questions rather than answers them. Barthes makes a point to insist that literature is not only technique (*l'art pour l'art*), and I would argue that Arman's effort to downplay technique (both traditional and experimental) in his work

¹³⁹ Ibid., 209.

¹⁴⁰ Emphasis original. Ibid., 210-211.

reflects a similar sentiment. As Barthes put it, technique remains important “*parce que la technique est la seule puissance capable de suspendre le sens du monde et de maintenir ouverte la question impérative qui lui est adressée; car ce n’est pas répondre qui est difficile, c’est questionner, c’est parler en questionnant* (because technique is the only power capable of suspending the meaning of the world and keeping open the imperative question that is addressed to it; for it is not responding that is difficult, it is questioning, it is speaking in questioning).”¹⁴¹

The goal of openness and irresolution is observable in the way that both Robbe-Grillet and Arman treat the objects that make up their works’ respective subject matter and content. The object Robbe-Grillet describes is always insignificant, and so its description, Barthes contends, “is never allusive, never distills from the sum of lines and substances a certain attribute meant to signify economically the entire nature of the object.”¹⁴² Such an analysis of the meaningless objects in Robbe-Grillet’s novels might help us to understand the objects in Arman’s *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* as perhaps equally meaningless, despite Restany’s contention that they signify, metonymically, the entire nature of the object or even the whole “real” itself.¹⁴³ I argue that, contrary to Restany’s claim, the surplus of detail given to the viewer who observes multiple exemplars of the same object does not then give that viewer some specialized access to the “meaning” of that object as such. As I shall discuss in Chapter Four, there is a school

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 211.

¹⁴² Roland Barthes, “Objective Literature [1954],” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 14.

¹⁴³ Recall, for instance, the second manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, in which he claimed that the artists appropriate “*des fragments dotés d’universelle signification . . . [et] nous donne à voir le réel dans des aspects de sa totalité expressive. Et par le truchement de ces images spécifiques, c’est la réalité toute entière . . . qui est assigné à comparaître* (fragments endowed with universal significance . . . and show us the real in aspects of its expressive totality. And through the intervention of these specific images, it is the whole of reality . . . that is summoned to appear).” Restany, “A 40° au-dessus de DADA,” 266.

of criticism of Arman's work that pretends to find the "platonic ideal" of a particular object in Arman's accumulation of it. I contend, however, that the effect of both the quantification and the enclosure of the objects in the *Accumulations* have the inverse effect: rather than revealing some deeper truth of the object *per se*, it strips the object of any potential for meaning and presents it as mere optical material.

Barthes argues that "traditional realism," which refers, in both literature and painting, to nineteenth-century naturalism, "accumulates qualities as a function of an implicit judgment: its objects have shapes, but also odors, tactile properties, memories, analogies, in short they swarm with significations."¹⁴⁴ By contrast, Robbe-Grillet's novels — and, I would add, Arman's artwork — eschew this "sensorial syncretism" in favor of a single, tyrannical order of apprehension: vision. "The object is no longer a center of correspondences, a welter of sensations and symbols: it is merely an optical resistance."¹⁴⁵ Barthes reminds us that Robbe-Grillet's entire project, his whole art, "is to give the object a *Dasein*, a 'being-there,' and to strip it of 'being-something.'"¹⁴⁶ Of course, Robbe-Grillet is still working with language as his raw material, whereas Arman is able to go a step further and work directly with the objects. But it is by multiplying and then encasing them that Arman is able to erect the same kinds of limits on his objects that Robbe-Grillet imposes on his. Arman's objects' presence is their whole content and purpose. In that sense, they are a literal adherence to Restany's call for an art of presentation, in that they are *merely* presentations. As Hahn put it, "*Dans son œuvre, il n'y a plus de transposition, d'intervention picturale. L'objet est assumé dans sa présence*

¹⁴⁴ Barthes, "Objective Literature," 14.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

et son épaisseur de sorte que la réalité s'exprime elle-même. Il établit un langage direct où l'art de présentation remplace l'art de représentation (In his œuvre, there is no longer any transposition, any pictorial intervention. The object is assumed in its presence and its density in such a way that reality expresses itself. It establishes a direct language where the art of presentation replaces the art of representation)."¹⁴⁷ The objects are given, with the sole purpose of being there — being fully and radically present, as opposed to being represented allegorically or metaphorically. Moreover, the objects themselves cease to represent some other metaphorical meaning. Robbe-Grillet's stripping down of language aimed at the same end result: a rejection of allegorical or metaphorical evocations of objects that suggest for them some signification or poetic meaning beyond the simple fact of their presence.

As I shall argue in Chapter Four, the amassing of countless examples of the same or similar objects in Arman's *Accumulations* serves to abstract the individual objects as they are subsumed by the overall, homogenous mass. The objects come to form an image; no longer associated with their functions, they become simply visual material. Robbe-Grillet's prose achieves a similar effect by way of excessively detailed descriptions, which transform the objects from practical tools to optical matter. Barthes describes that effect:

the object [described] is never unfamiliar, it belongs, by its obvious function, to an urban or everyday setting. But the description persists beyond — just when we expect it to stop, having fulfilled the object's instrumentality, it holds like an inopportune pedal point and transforms the tool into space: its function was only illusory, it is its optical circuit which is real: its humanity begins where its use leaves off.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Otto Hahn, *Arman* (Paris: Éditions F. Hazan, 1972), quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 16.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

Robbe-Grillet thus uses description in the way that Arman uses repetition: as a means of “persisting beyond” the obvious and the everyday, of obliterating the use or function of an object in order to reveal its essential object-form, as a visible and therefore material thing. For Barthes, it is only that optical aspect of the object that is “real”; the function is illusory. Barthes’s revelation speaks importantly to the growing embrace of vision as the privileged sense of apprehending the world, and to the redefinition of what exactly constitutes “the real”: that which can be touched, held, and used? Or that which can be seen — which may include not only things, but images of things? Barthes argues for the latter, and Arman, in calling his optical boxes of objects “realism,” appears to agree.

“Robbe-Grillet never permits an encroachment upon the optical by the visceral, he pitilessly severs the visual from its extensions.”¹⁴⁹ Is this not, too, the work of Arman’s strategies of multiplication and containment? Barthes claims that the first step in Robbe-Grillet’s “assassination” of the classical object is to “isolate objects, to sever them from their function and from our biology.”¹⁵⁰ Certainly, the de-contextualization that Robbe-Grillet carries out through isolation is apparent, too, in Arman’s *Accumulations*, where objects are removed from their functions and their contextual situations, and amassed in quantities that would scarcely be found anywhere but a highly specific flea market stall. Robbe-Grillet’s Nouveau Roman aspires, as Barthes put it, “to an exhaustive interrogation of the object, from which any lyrical diversion is excluded.”¹⁵¹ Such a project resonates with and reaffirms the project that Restany defined for Nouveau Réalisme: a project of presenting objects, directly and immediately, without any kind of

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 22-23.

authorial intervention seeking to imbue them with some lyrical dimension outside of what they bear out inherently.

In Robbe-Grillet's hands, as Barthes put it, the object is at the center, and as a result

the novel becomes a direct experience of man's surroundings, without this man's being able to fall back on a psychology, a metaphysic, or a psychoanalysis in order to approach the objective milieu he discovers. The novel . . . teaches us to look at the world no longer with the eyes of a confessor, a physician, or of God . . . but with the eyes of a man walking in his city with no other horizon but the spectacle before him, no other power than that of his own eyes.¹⁵²

In a passage that anticipates the argument that Debord would make about the ascendance of vision as the "privileged human sense,"¹⁵³ Robbe-Grillet wrote in 1958, "The sense of sight immediately appears . . . as the privileged sense. . . . Optical description is, in effect, the kind which most readily establishes distances: the sense of sight, if it seeks to remain simply that, leaves things in their respective place."¹⁵⁴

I want to press on the idea that the establishment of distances was a hallmark of realism, because those distances that crop up in various forms in the art and literature of the period are also a hallmark of the new "spectacular" society. Higgins, in her study of the literature, cinema and politics of the French 1950s and 60s, argues that although the novels and films "rarely make unambiguous statements or take polemical stands with regard to the historical and political pressures," those pressures nonetheless "haunt

¹⁵² Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁵³ Debord wrote, "*Le spectacle, comme tendance à faire voir par différentes médiations spécialisées le monde qui n'est plus directement saisissable, trouve normalement dans la vue le sens humain privilégié qui fut à d'autres époques le toucher; le sens le plus abstrait, et le plus mystifiable, correspond à l'abstraction généralisée de la société actuelle* (The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see by means of various specialized mediations the world which can longer by grasped directly, naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense, which for other epochs was the sense of touch; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society)." Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 23.

¹⁵⁴ Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy [1958]," in *For a New Novel*, 73.

them.”¹⁵⁵ But it is just that haunting — that inevitable, inescapable patina of a particular historical moment that inflects the work produced in that period — that provides the interest for the kind of socio-historical study of the artistic production of the period — a production that is deliberately opaque. Despite the evident, superficial clarity of their form — the straightforward descriptions, the exacting detail — the novels and films do not let the reader or the viewer “in.”¹⁵⁶ Likewise, Arman’s artworks play on the transparency/opacity dyad by offering up the most literally transparent form — the glass or Plexiglas vitrine — while at the same time using it as a means of distancing the viewer from the content that should seemingly be so graspable.¹⁵⁷

In 1985 Claude Simon, a novelist associated with the Nouveau Roman who published his seminal works in the 1950s and 60s, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, much to the consternation of French literary circles and the press. In his acceptance speech, he addressed two related terms that had been used consistently in the denunciation of his works: “labor” and “artifice.” It had been claimed that, because his novels were “a product of ‘labor,’ they were necessarily ‘artificial.’”¹⁵⁸ Simon cited the dictionary definition of artificial as “Made with art. . . . Anything which is the product of

¹⁵⁵ Higgins, *New Novel*, 2.

¹⁵⁶ The opacity of the works of this period led critics unfriendly to the Nouveau Roman and the Nouvelle Vague to reproach the authors and filmmakers for “promoting a vision that was asocial, antihistorical, excessively formalist, and solipsistic and generally for adopting a head-in-the-sand posture toward the world.” But at the same time, other critics faulted the same novels and films for exactly the opposite problem: not that they ignored the world, but that they reflected too clearly the “depersonalization and alienation of postwar capitalism.” In the first camp, Higgins cites Pierre de Boisdeffre and Jean-Bertrand Barrère, both of whom blamed the artists’ own frivolity or perversity for the trivial content of their work. In the second, she names Jean Bloch-Michel and Lucien Goldmann, whose criticism she deems less polemical and more convincing than that of Boisdeffre and Barrère. See *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵⁷ The same criticisms launched against the too-opaque or too-transparent novels and films of the period were lobbed at Arman as well, particularly the latter complaint — that Arman not only reflected the negative aspects of consumerism but celebrated them, lifting them up as though they were to be admired.

¹⁵⁸ Claude Simon, “Nobel Lecture [December 9, 1985],”

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1985/simon-lecture.html.

human activity and not of nature.”¹⁵⁹ Of course, such a definition, on its own, would have been perfectly acceptable; but the pejorative connotations of the term tended to overshadow its literal meaning:

For if, as the dictionary adds, “artificial” also implies something “factitious, fabricated, false, imitated, invented, supererogatory,” the thought immediately occurs that art, which is the acme of invention, and likewise factitious (from the Latin *facere*, “to make”) and thus “fabricated” (another word which should be reinstated) is par excellence imitation (something which also obviously postulates falsity).¹⁶⁰

On the question of labor, Simon reflected on the way in which labor had become devalued at the very moment, in the nineteenth century, when it was allowing for the escalation of industrial growth in France. As a result of the depreciation of labor, the ideal for the writer was not to be thought of as having *worked* to create his novel, but instead to have been “inspired.” The author or artist became “a simple intermediary . . . a copyist,” rather than a laboring creator.¹⁶¹ The devaluation of work on a broad scale can go far in accounting for the vision of Nouveau-Réaliste creation that Restany endorsed. His artists did not *construct* representations, they did not *work* on compositions: instead, inspired by the world surrounding them, they simply presented that world as they found it, without exerting any effort at transcribing or polishing it.¹⁶² The result, both for the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Sacha Sosnovsky expressed the imperative of avoiding artifice and labor when, in 1961, he described the work of certain Nouveaux Réalistes (the Niçois — Arman, Klein and Raysse) by claiming, “*Il y a là QUELQUE CHOSE DE DIRECTEMENT COMMUNICABLE. On n’a plus besoin d’avoir recours dans le langage avec le public à la traduction conceptuelle qui était jusqu’alors le cas. Le tout est de rendre possible une telle communication instantanée; là se place l’artiste qui doit promouvoir une hygiène de la vision plus générale que celle des siècles passés, de telle manière que l’étrange ne sera plus le tableau d’avant-garde, mais un objet de tous les jours. Ce qui entraîne L’ABSOLUE NECESSITE POUR LE CREATEUR DE NE PAS FAIRE DE L’ART* (There is SOMETHING DIRECTLY COMMUNICABLE there. One no longer needs to have recourse to conceptual translation in speaking with the public, as was formerly the case. It is all about making possible such an instantaneous communication; that is where the artist stands who must promote a more general hygiene of vision than that of past centuries, in such a way that the strange will no longer be the *avant-garde picture*,

Nouveau-Réaliste artist and for the Nouveau Romancier is that the author “is in himself nobody.”¹⁶³

In a 1954 essay, Robbe-Grillet wrote of “a novel that invents itself,”¹⁶⁴ the achievement of the contemporary writer Robert Pinget. He described the way the characters in Pinget’s *Mahu ou le Matériau*

make themselves, but instead of each of them creating his own reality, it is an *ensemble* that is produced, a kind of living tissue each cell of which sprouts and shapes its neighbors; these characters continuously create each other, the world around them is merely a secretion — one could almost say the *waste product* — of their suppositions, of their lies, of their delirium.¹⁶⁵

The language of self-creation, of a kind of self-producing work, where the raw materials take on the role of agents, leaving the author conspicuously outside the realm of decision-making, order-imposing, and even creation itself, aligns with an enduring discourse on Arman’s realist work of the period in question. From the *Cachets* and the *Allures d’objets* to the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, a recurring theme in the criticism and scholarship is the notion of a kind of anti-authoriality, the supposition that the works were created by the materials and not by the artist. It is not Arman who composed the rhythmic patterns of wavering lines in *L’Amble de l’oeuf* (Figure 2.2), so the criticism goes, but rather the egg which bore those traces, determining for itself which way it would roll and turn.

Likewise, it was not Arman who decided that the shoe trees piled up in *Squelette d’Achille* (Figure 2.3) would appear in this particular configuration, pressed up against the vitrine in just this way, but rather it was the shoe trees themselves who self-organized,

but an *everyday object*. Which leads to the ABSOLUTE NECESSITY FOR THE CREATOR NOT TO MAKE ART).” Emphasis original. Sosnovsky, “Tendances,” 196.

¹⁶³ Claude Simon, “Nobel Lecture.”

¹⁶⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “A Novel That Invents Itself [1954],” in *For a New Novel*, 127-132.

¹⁶⁵ Emphasis original. *Ibid.*, 128.

who “auto-composed,” to borrow Arman’s own term. And in those works, the apparent lack of authorial intervention is to be applauded, for the objects themselves create arrangements that are felt to be truer — and thus more realist — than any artist-imposed composition could be. Robbe-Grillet remarked of Pinget’s novel, “the last hundred pages of the book are of no more than raw material, brief fragments of decomposed reality which turn out to be at least as curious as all that preceded, as rich, as fascinating.”¹⁶⁶ In other words, in the absence of a “composition” — that is, a plot or storyline — the raw material, the fragments of reality, bear all the strength and intrigue without any of the authorial imposition.

Of course, in both Pinget’s novel and Arman’s artwork, the impression of self-creation is false. In the novel, the characters that create their own world were created by the author; it is he who put in place the structure in which they could appear to come into being autonomously. And in the artwork, the objects that “self-compose” were first selected and gathered by the artist, who equally put in place the structure (the paper or the vitrine) in which the composition could then seemingly coalesce on its own.

Simon calls attention to the absurdity of relating realism to actual “reality,” where the ideal form of realist literature lies somewhere in the writing’s self-effacement behind a story and events; for those stories and events “have no other reality than the writing which brings them into being.”¹⁶⁷ The novelists of the Nouveau Roman challenged the accepted practices of both writing and reading in an attempt to subvert or deny the referentiality of language.¹⁶⁸ But the literary act itself is defined as “the transfer of an

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 129-130.

¹⁶⁷ Simon, “Nobel Lecture.”

¹⁶⁸ Higgins, *New Novel*, 3.

object of habitual perception into the sphere of a new perception”; the goal, then, according to Simon, is to “not demonstrate, but show; not reproduce, but produce; no longer express, but discover.”¹⁶⁹ As Robbe-Grillet put it, “I do not transcribe, I construct;”¹⁷⁰ such a claim resonates strongly with the Restanian proclamation about Arman’s and all of the Nouveaux Réalistes’ work — that it evaded transcription or representation in favor of direct presentation.¹⁷¹

Artistic realism

Nous n’étions pas tous d’accord, loin de là, mais il y avait, entre nous, un projet clandestin commun: changer la donne de l’histoire de l’art moderne et se relier, de différentes manières, à cette chose gigantesque, incernable et toujours à redéfinir qu’est le réel.

We did not all agree, far from it, but there was among us a common clandestine project: to change the order of the history of modern art and to relate, in different ways, to that gigantic thing, ungraspable and always needing to be redefined, which is the real.¹⁷²

As I have begun to show, the imperative to address, account for, or otherwise contend with the increasingly elusive concept of “the real” permeated the cultural production of the 1950s and 60s in France. In this section, I shall highlight that concern as it manifested specifically in the art and art criticism of the period. My aim is again to contextualize Arman’s personal realist project within a complex set of renegotiations

¹⁶⁹ Simon, “Nobel Lecture.”

¹⁷⁰ Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism to Reality,” 162.

¹⁷¹ Recall Restany’s first manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, in which he described the movement as “*la passionnante aventure du réel perçu en soi et non à travers le prisme de la transcription conceptuelle ou imaginative* (the thrilling adventure of the real perceived in itself and not through the prism of conceptual or imaginative transcription).” See Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 264.

¹⁷² Alain Jouffroy, reflecting on the networks of artists and critics who had begun to organize around 1960, including not only the Nouveaux Réalistes but also the members of Fluxus, the Situationist International, and the Lettrist International, plus many other unaffiliated individuals. Jouffroy, “Arman: un réinventeur du réel,” in *Arman, Passage à l’acte*, 17.

occurring in his particular artistic milieu, each relating to the relationships between “the real,” realism, and representation.

By now it is clear that Arman and the Nouveaux Réalistes envisioned their realist artwork as in some way challenging or subverting the reigning pictorial language of the day, lyrical abstraction. They saw such painting as “*un refus du réel* (a refusal of the real),”¹⁷³ an evasive practice that did not engage directly with reality but instead retreated to the psyche or concerned itself only with *l’art pour l’art*.¹⁷⁴ But Gérard Durozoi proposes that the “refusal of the real” observed in abstract painting was not simply a choice made by artists who preferred to disengage from the world or who enjoyed the facility of painting in the popular mode; rather, it was the result of the “*caractère proprement irréprésentable de la réalité historique récente* (truly unrepresentable character of the recent historical reality).”¹⁷⁵ That is, the postwar popularity of abstraction, in all its many guises — warm, cold, constructed, geometric, *tachiste*, gestural, lyrical, and so forth — is a testament to a global crisis of representation. The rejection of all kinds of figuration was a necessary reaction to the horrors of wartime

¹⁷³ Gérard Durozoi, *Le Nouveau Réalisme* (Paris: Hazan, 2007), 4.

¹⁷⁴ But even within the circles promoting lyrical abstraction, an undercurrent of criticism and theory related such painting to “the real” through the invocation of scientific parallels with the artworks’ forms. Jean Paulhan famously wrote in 1962 that thanks to the new technologies and improved scientific instruments such as the electronic microscope, one could now observe that an abstract painting in fact revealed scientific realities such as the oxidic structure of aluminum or the musculature of a uterus. See Jean Paulhan, *L’Art informel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 49-50. As Anne Malherbe points out, such claims on Paulhan’s part were significant given the popular discourse on the art of the 1950s. Malherbe observes, “*On voit poindre ici, entre les lignes, l’idée d’une prescience de l’artiste, doté d’une intuition qui le ferait toucher à des aspects cachés du monde — mieux que visionnaire, l’artiste serait voyant* (We see emerging here, between the lines, the idea of a prescience of the artist, endowed with an intuition that would allow him or her to touch upon hidden aspects of the world — better than visionary, the artist would be clairvoyant).” And furthermore, the art in question reveals itself to be more than its appearances, and in fact belongs to the domain of science. See Anne Malherbe, “Le réel et le sensible: Quelques mythologies dans le milieu de l’abstraction lyrique,” *Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, no. 84 (2003): 67. Malherbe gives a detailed and nuanced account of the many historical arguments for a “scientific” reading of abstract painting, which were particularly current in Michel Tapié’s circle.

¹⁷⁵ Durozoi, *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, 4.

reality, horrors that, no matter how authentically represented, could not be understood.¹⁷⁶

The Nouveaux Réalistes' solution to that crisis was, naturally, to no longer paint at all — and by extension, to no longer represent.¹⁷⁷

For Restany, the new developments in art as abstraction came to be abandoned reflected a drive to embrace “*la réalité qui nous entoure et qui conditionne notre comportement* (the reality that surrounds us and that conditions our behavior).”¹⁷⁸ Restany characterized the Parisian avant-garde's ambition as seeking means of expression that would be “*plus immédiats, plus directs, plus actuels, en un mot plus réalistes* (more immediate, more direct, more current, in a word more realist).”¹⁷⁹ Despite his insistence that the claim to a “new realism” was exclusively the province of the group of artists that signed his declaration, Restany conceded, “*ainsi conçu, le Nouveau Réalisme correspond à une orientation générale de la pensée artistique* (conceived this

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Sosnovsky, referring to Arman, Klein, and Raysse as “painters,” explained, “*Ces peintres ont en commun une prise de conscience qui a bouleversé entièrement leur destinée d'artistes; à un moment de leur carrière ils n'ont plus vu de différences entre la peinture figurative et la peinture abstraite parce que cette dernière n'est que la transcription d'un état psychique actuel, avec des moyens traditionnels (pinceaux, couteaux, toiles, chevalets, etc.). Si la facture peut paraître différente, la méthode est la même. La sclérose leur a paru évidente. Après quelques recherches, ils se sont aperçus que L'ART C'EST N'IMPORTE QUOI. . . . [U]n critique comme Alain Jouffroy a très bien compris cette profonde transformation quand il écrit: 'Il est bien évident que c'est le regard que nous jetons sur le monde qui a changé, et que chacun de nous est libre de considérer aujourd'hui les choses comme des foyers de contemplation et de méditation, c'est-à-dire comme des œuvres d'art. L'idée de réalité est à réinventer, on le sait bien.'* (These painters have in common a realization that completely disrupted their destiny as artists; at a certain moment in their career they could no longer see any differences between figurative painting and abstract painting because the latter is only the transcription of an actual psychic state, with traditional means (paintbrushes, knives, canvases, easels, etc.). If the facture may appear different, the method is the same. The sclerosis was clear to them. After some research, they realized that ANYTHING IS ART. . . . [A] critic like Alain Jouffroy understood that profound transformation very well when he wrote: ‘It is quite clear that it is the way we look at the world that has changed, and that each of us is free today to think of things as centers of contemplation and meditation, that is, as works of art. The idea of reality stands to be reinvented, we know this.’” Sosnovsky, “Tendances,” 194.

¹⁷⁸ Restany, manuscript for the lecture “Art et technologie” at Saint-Luc Gand, May 23, 1964. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹⁷⁹ Restany, “Un Nouveau visage de l'Europe: le Nouveau Réalisme parisien,” undated typescript, Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.”

way, Nouveau Réalisme corresponds to a general orientation of artistic thought).”¹⁸⁰ That is, the thirteen artists officially associated with the movement were not acting in a vacuum but were rather participating in a much larger collective exercise of exploiting the new reality around them for artistic means.¹⁸¹

While the turn to an art of “presentation” may have addressed the “unrepresentability” of “the real,” it revealed at the same time a newer, deeper problem: the very *ungraspability* of “the real.” As Robert Benayoun observed, in response to the landmark 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, the unifying bond among all the found-object artwork being proposed was a certain characteristic of the modern sensibility:

Tout se passe comme si nous nous étions rendu compte, au XXe siècle, que nos moyens d’appréhender le réel sont fatalement insuffisants par rapport à l’ampleur du réel lui-même, et que ce décalage introduit la constatation de ce qu’il nous est impossible de connaître par le moyen de nos sens, mais aussi la volonté de compenser dans une certaine mesure cette insuffisance.

Everything proceeds as though we realized, in the 20th century, that our means of apprehending the real are fatally insufficient in relation to the magnitude of the real itself, and that this gap makes us aware of what it is impossible for us to know through our senses, but also the will to offset in some way that insufficiency.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ In March 1964 Restany compiled a list of the various forms of realism that had developed throughout the world since 1945. The document is divided into three categories: “Forms of Realism after ca. 1945,” which includes such names as Ben Shahn, Jean Dubuffet, Fernand Léger, and Diego Rivera; “Nouvelle Figuration,” which counts Willem de Kooning, Asger Jorn, Francis Bacon, Nicolas de Staël, Karel Appel, and Botero, among others; and “‘Nouveau Réalisme,’ object-painting, pop art, décollage etc.,” which lists Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Jim Dine, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Man Ray, Larry Rivers, James Rosenquist, George Segal, Wayne Thiebaud, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Enrico Baj, and Michelangelo Pistoletto alongside the familiar names of Arman, Christo, Hains, Klein, Raysse, Spoerri, Villeglé, and Rotella. The names I cite here are by no means exhaustive, and represent only those most pertinent to the discussions to follow in this dissertation: namely, the artists based in the United States and France. The document, typewritten with the heading “New Realism” and dated March 1964, is otherwise uncategorized in the archives, but appears to have perhaps been part of Restany’s preparations for his lecture on art and technology at Saint-Luc Gand on May 23, 1964. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

¹⁸² Benayoun, in Benayoun and Pierre, “Alchimie de l’objet,” 49.

The knowledge of the shortcomings of our perception of reality brought about an increased awareness of vision and its role in the reception of artwork. In a thoughtful, contemporary study on the avant-garde, Hahn argued that throughout the progression of modern art, stylistic evolutions had come about via successive re-adaptations of the same fundamental givens of painting, but vision and perception *per se* were never reevaluated — until, that is, Yves Klein conceived his monochrome paintings. Those works represented for Hahn the major turning point in the production of art at mid-century. Klein’s first exhibition of the monochrome canvases in 1955 was met with incomprehension, Hahn believed, because “[h]is work was not so much a new ‘way’ of painting as a new way of looking. Color was given not as the transcription of an emotion, but as reality. This solution, the turning-point in contemporary art, eliminated the problem of representation, hence that of vision, as well as the dilemma of relationships between image and object.”¹⁸³ Thus, already in 1965, Hahn defined the “return to reality” and the flight from representation as the fundamental imperatives of Klein’s generation of artists, and the catalyst of the permanent changes to the definitions of art and the avant-garde.

Just three months prior to the opening of *The Art of Assemblage*, Jeanine de Goldschmidt’s Galerie J in Paris had hosted its inaugural exhibition, *40° au-dessus de Dada*, organized by Restany and featuring the found-object artwork of the Nouveaux Réalistes. Georges Boudaille wrote that the show constituted “*un véritable manifeste* (a veritable manifesto)” — but of what, he wondered?

L’avant-garde prétend instaurer un nouveau réalisme qui se limite souvent à l’annexion pure et simple d’éléments concrets: tôles, déchets, affiches, ballots de chiffonnier. On revient ainsi au ‘ready-made’ cher à Dada, sans pour autant

¹⁸³ Otto Hahn, “The Avant-Garde Stance,” *Arts Magazine* 39, no. 9 (1965): 22.

atteindre à un réalisme authentique ni à cette métamorphose de la matière qui demeure à nos yeux une des caractéristiques de l'art.

The avant-garde claims to establish a new realism that is often limited to the pure and simple annexation of concrete elements: sheet metal, trash, posters, bundles of rags. We thus return to the 'readymade' dear to Dada, without for all that achieving an authentic realism nor that metamorphosis of the material that remains in our eyes one of the characteristics of art.¹⁸⁴

In this brief text, Boudaille questions the very notion of realism, as defined by Restany: is it enough for the work of art simply to present "real" things as such? Or must there be some kind of transformation of the stuff of everyday life in order for it to constitute art? If it is transformed in some way, is it still authentically "real"?¹⁸⁵

An anonymous critic for *France Observateur* denied the "art" of anything in the Galerie J and suggested, "[Q]ue nos néo-réalistes ou néo-dadaïstes . . . mettent leurs sacs de chiffons, leurs vieilles godasses . . . au coin des rues. Et sans signature, s'il vous plaît! ([M]ay our neo-realists and neo-dadaists . . . put their bags of rags, their old shoes . . . on the street corner. And without a signature, please!)"¹⁸⁶ To this critic, objects simply presented as such — without some kind of artistic transformation or productive creation — did not rise above the status of objects. The purportedly synecdochic extractions from the "real" world — those "fragments imbued with universal significance" — could not simply become art by virtue of their display in a gallery; to put a signature on them was absurd, for the artist had done nothing that a ragpicker or sanitation worker does not do on a daily basis.

¹⁸⁴ Georges Boudaille, "40° au-dessus de Dada," *Les lettres françaises* no. 878 (June 1961): 11.

¹⁸⁵ Jouffroy, too, wondered whether Arman was truly a realist, since he appropriated, rather than reproduced, the object. Jouffroy referred to Arman as a revolutionary artist, "*un ennemi de la réalité immédiate, un briseur de carcans, un perturbateur* (an enemy of immediate reality, a breaker of constraints, an agitator)." Jouffroy, "Arman [1963]," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 266.

¹⁸⁶ "Le Piéton de Paris chez les 'néo-réalistes,'" *France Observateur* no. 578 (June 1961): 20-21.

Irving Sandler's assessment of the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition echoed the concerns cited by the French critics confronting the Galerie J show. Sandler argued that the lesson of *The Art of Assemblage* should be the discarding of the "ideas that non-traditional substances are vicious because they undermine art, or, on the other hand, that they have any special avant-garde value apart from the artistic vision which they serve."¹⁸⁷ He thus rejected the premise upheld by Restany that everyday objects of "modern Nature" are imbued with some special force of power and meaning by virtue of their belonging to the "real" world and their ability to metonymically stand for the totality. For Sandler, those real-world items are only valuable insofar as they contribute to an artistic expression — that is, insofar as they are used in the service of an artistic transformation, executed by an artist who is anything but non-interventionist. Sandler argued that it was, by 1961, impossible to create art solely from "shocking materials," because by then all materials had become common to art. The successful assemblages in the show managed to "express the artist's heightened sensitivity to his environment and condition with formal inventiveness and brilliance," that is, they used the quotidian objects of the real world in the service of a greater artistic vision.¹⁸⁸ The emphasis on "inventiveness," read creation, challenges Restany's de-emphasis of the artist and insistence on the autonomy of the pure objects themselves.

Vivien Raynor's faint praise of the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition as a whole hinged on a similar impression that what was presented was not art but objects: "The

¹⁸⁷ Irving Sandler, "New York Letter," *Art International* 5, no. 9 (1961): 54-55.

¹⁸⁸ Sandler preferred those works that demonstrated a kind of alchemistic effect on the everyday objects that were used as materials, praising those works "in which discarded chunks of environment are transmuted into metaphors for the poverty and richness of city life, its particular terror, poignancy, tempo and spectacle." *Ibid.*

majority of the pieces I found dull as individuals . . . but as a whole, they seem to have a kind of historical value, like old theater programs.”¹⁸⁹ In other words, and in contradiction to her prior claim within the same review that the stronger works were those that surmounted their found-objecthood and achieved art status (in mostly conventional ways),¹⁹⁰ Raynor concluded that the value of the exhibition on the whole was tantamount to the sociological value of the odds and ends accumulated therein. Like old theater programs, the doll hands and silverware in Arman’s two *Accumulations*,¹⁹¹ for instance, served as records or souvenirs of this particular historical moment.

The conflation of the objects themselves with the works of art quickly became the *modus operandi* for art critics confronting Nouveau Réalisme, and especially Arman’s object-based compositions. The confusion, I believe, can be attributed at least in part to Restany’s doctrine, which urged viewers to see the sociological value of the “directly presented,” “unmediated” objects, and thus invited them to ignore or overlook the means of display — in Arman’s case, the vitrine. Harold Rosenberg, reviewing the 1962 *New Realists* show at the Sidney Janis Gallery, discussed Arman’s *Accumulations* as though the objects that composed them were the sole contents of the work of art, as though the vitrine were merely the museum’s display mechanism, like a pedestal or a picture frame. In his review, Rosenberg praised Klein’s sponge sculpture and reliefs, Peter Agostini’s

¹⁸⁹ Vivien Raynor, “The Art of Assemblage,” *Arts Magazine* 36, no. 2 (1961): 19.

¹⁹⁰ Raynor wrote, “the serious national difference occurs between Europe and the United States, for the pieces that are nearest to being works of art, creating new life out of the death of their components, come from this [the American] side.” She cites as justification for such a ruling the difference between César’s crushed car, “a yellow Buick metamorphosed into a rhomboid,” and John Chamberlain’s *transformed* car, which he “turns . . . into a spectacular bouquet of colored metals and hangs . . . on the wall.” The Europeans, she claims, are “still working in an orderly, almost classical way, with amusing new materials perhaps, but that’s all.” *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Arman’s entries to the exhibition were *Little Hands* (*Ainsi font, font . . .*) of 1960 (dolls’ hands in a glass-fronted wooden drawer) and *Arteriosclerosis* of 1961 (forks and spoons in a glass-covered box).

plaster clothesline, and Robert Moskowitz's glued-down window shade, all of which were, for him, "in the same category of work in accepted art forms created out of odd stuff."¹⁹² That is, Rosenberg, unlike Restany, found laudable the kind of artistic practice that deployed "real" objects but only in the service of more conventional art forms like painting and sculpture. "In contrast to these things-as-art," Rosenberg continued, "other works in the exhibition do not belong because they are simply *things*, without overtones of dream or the power of self-comment. These include accumulations of swords and faucets by Arman, Martial Raysse's 'Hygiène de la Vision,' and Jean Tinguely's skeletal radio receiver, 'WNYR 7,' all from France."¹⁹³ Rosenberg thus echoed Restany's appraisal of Arman's work (and that of his Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues), finding in the *Accumulations* mere things, unmediated, untransformed into art. Such a lack of artistic intervention rendered those works, in Rosenberg's eyes, mere objects and not worthy of the label "art."

More important than Rosenberg's conclusions about the non-art status of Arman's work, is the fact that he overlooked the mediating factor of the vitrine which, like the canvas on which Moskowitz glued his window shade, carries the objects into a pictorial register, transforming their object-quality into an image-quality, and inviting the resulting tension as the content of the work. Sonya Rudikoff, in her review of the same exhibition, did pick up on that tension between the immediacy of the "real" objects and their mediated state behind the vitrine. She noted, regarding the term "new realism," that special emphasis should be applied to the modifier "new," because "[i]n none of this art

¹⁹² Harold Rosenberg, "The Art Galleries: The Game of Illusion." *The New Yorker* (November 24, 1962): 165.

¹⁹³ Ibid. The swords and faucets to which Rosenberg refers were Arman's two entries to the exhibition, the *Accumulations* entitled *Les mousquetaires* of 1962 and *Que d'eau que d'eau* of 1961.

is there any attempt at a convincing representation of objects or persons, although there are various efforts of evocative or compelling representation of real *experience*.”¹⁹⁴ She thus touched on that elusive quality of Arman’s *Accumulations*: that more than presenting the “real” object themselves, they present our “real” experience of those objects: removed, distanced, mediated through appearance rather than physical touch or use. Rudikoff elaborated, “Indeed, what we see is a curious, jagged, disjointed, an almost *abstract* use of an already destroyed realist image to construct occasions for sensation;” by way of example she names Tinguely’s construction that “says nothing,” Oldenburg’s food that “is inedible,” and Arman’s sabers and faucets that “are not to be used but are really real, actual, massed behind glass.”¹⁹⁵

Rudikoff also rightly noted that the many critics who had already deemed the new artists sociologists were rushing to judgment:

[T]here has developed a powerful avant-garde ideology which celebrates these artists as acute social critics examining the detritus of our modern suburban culture, etcetera. This seems to me very much mistaken. I’m convinced that there’s much more at play than sociology in the new realism and that, like almost any art movement we can think of, it has far more reference to the history of art than it does to the present state of our culture.¹⁹⁶

Rudikoff thus invited us to think of the new realism in art in much the way that Robbe-Grillet and Barthes asked us to think of the Nouveau Roman: to see that the medium itself was being used to question and comment on the medium — that it was, first and foremost, an artistic enterprise.

¹⁹⁴ Sonya Rudikoff, “New Realists in New York,” *Art International* 7, no. 1 (January 1963): 39.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

Naming a movement

As evidenced by the contemporary reviews cited above, much of the debate surrounding the new object-based art stemmed from critics' struggles to understand it *as realism*. The line between realism and reality, especially in the apparent absence of representation, was the source of much consideration. It is clear, then, that one of the most important single factors in the establishment of Nouveau Réalisme was the choice of that unifying name, which opened the door to the kinds of ontological questions about realism, reality, and representation that were consistent with broader social and cultural concerns at the time.

Lassalle points out that while labeling movements is a common practice in the history of the avant-garde, it is also an important strategy in the world of advertising: "the word 'invents' the object and enables it to sell."¹⁹⁷ With Nouveau Réalisme or "new realism" in particular, the vagueness of the term was also its flexibility. As Lassalle put it, "Far from being an aesthetic concept, the expression 'New Realism' had a basically tactical function. Restany positioned his group as a contradiction of abstract art, of the informal painters, by placing them under the banner of the absolute opposite, realism."¹⁹⁸ Jouffroy, too, saw the "*étiquette contestée et contestable* (contested and contestable label)" of Nouveau Réalisme as having nonetheless "*le mérite de marquer cette rupture avec l'abstraction dont Pierre Restany était jusqu'à ce moment l'un des défenseurs les plus assidus* (the merit of marking that rupture with the abstraction of which Pierre Restany had up to that moment been one of the most assiduous defenders)."¹⁹⁹ Restany

¹⁹⁷ Lassalle, "Art criticism as strategy," 210.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁹⁹ Jouffroy suggested that "nouveau surréalisme" would have been a more apt label, since the artists, "*sur des bases nouvelles . . . remettaient en question les rapports de l'homme et du monde* (on a new basis . . .

recounted that the name “*eut un pouvoir coagulateur immédiat* (had an immediate coagulating power).”²⁰⁰

The tendency to attach a label to each of the rapidly emerging new ideas and movements on the art scene in the 1950s and 60s — or, as Françoise Choay put it, the “*nécessité de les individualiser, donc de les nommer* (need to individualize them [each movement], thus to name them)” — led to an overabundance of neologisms whose relative meanings were unclear.²⁰¹ Choay cited *informel* and *tachisme*, as well as Neo-Dadaism and Nouveau Réalisme, as instances of such terms whose significations are imprecise, and whose pairings — as supposedly distinct strains of art-making — seemed unnecessary, redundant, or simply confusing rather than clarifying.²⁰²

Jouffroy, too, lamented the alacrity with which critics pasted labels on every new artist, attempting to create “isms” that only in fact led to more divisions than were actually there.

On s'est empressé de désigner ces tendances par des étiquettes . . . Cette hâte a augmenté la confusion, et l'on a vu, par exemple, se creuser artificiellement un fossé entre les recherches accomplies par les jeunes artistes européens, et celles des artistes américains qui leur sont les plus proches. . . . De subtiles affinités les lient . . . et les différentes bannières sous lesquelles on croit devoir successivement les présenter dans les expositions collectives: Nouveau Réalisme, Néo-Dada, Pop Art, etc., ne traduisent pas toujours ces affinités. De plus, elles

called into question again the relationships between man and the world)." Such a claim was, however, motivated by Jouffroy's own adherence to surrealism and his belief that much of the new art and the revolutions and objections mounted by new artists, were indebted to the surrealist example. See Jouffroy, "L'avant-garde internationale de Paris (depuis 1959)," typescript, ca. 1964. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

²⁰⁰ Restany, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 16.

²⁰¹ Choay, "Dada, Néo-Dada," 81.

²⁰² Restany echoed this criticism, though to different ends, in an undated archival document entitled "Pop-art, neo-dada, nouveau réalisme," in which he lamented "*non seulement la prolifération des genres mais aussi des étiquettes* (not only the proliferation of genres but also of labels)," particularly the three titular terms that are used interchangeably. In the text that follows, Restany sets out not to dispose of unnecessary redundancies in terminology, as Choay calls for, but rather to define the precise distinctions between the three related terms in order to justify their coexistence in the art critical lexicon. Restany, "Pop-art, neo-dada, nouveau réalisme," undated. Typescript. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

censurent ce que chacun de ces artistes a d'unique et de séparé, qui fonde l'individualité absolue des moyens d'expression de chacun d'eux.

We have rushed to label these tendencies. . . . That haste has augmented the confusion, and we have seen it, for example, dig an artificial ditch between the research done by the young European artists, and that by the American artists who are closest to them. . . . Subtle affinities unite them . . . and the different banners under which we think we have to successively present them in collective exhibitions — *Nouveau Réalisme, Neo-Dada, Pop Art*, etc. — do not always translate those affinities. Furthermore, they censure what is *unique* and *separate* about each of these artists, which establishes the absolute individuality of each of their means of expression.²⁰³

Such labeling, then, presents a danger — a danger of undermining the whole project of an avant-garde artist, which consists in establishing oneself individually, against the grain.

The term “Nouveau Réalisme” in particular combined two highly connotative words, both of which had special significance in postwar France. The “Nouveau” or “new” aspect resonated with Restany’s vision of art history as a series of ruptures. It emphasized the break with the past not only in terms of art but in terms of history and culture at large. The 1950s were the decade in which the ground was laid in France for massive social and cultural change. Henri Lefebvre wrote that by 1957, all the “*symptômes précurseurs* (precursory symptoms)” of the economic growth and prosperity to come, as well as the attendant hypercriticism of all established practice, had appeared.²⁰⁴ As Francblin points out, the emergence of Nouveau Réalisme thus came at

²⁰³ Jouffroy, “Pour une révolution,” 193-195.

²⁰⁴ “*Tout est prêt pour quelque chose de nouveau. Ce sera d'une part la croissance accélérée, la prospérité 'miraculeuse' dans les pays non socialistes . . . et d'autre part, en un violent contraste, la contestation radicale, la critique et même l'hypercritique de l'État, de la vie quotidienne, de l'art et du savoir, bref de tout ce qui semblait établi. Mais en 1957, rien de tout cela n'a eu lieu; seuls apparaissent des symptômes précurseurs* (Everything is ready for something new. This will be on one hand accelerated growth, ‘miraculous’ prosperity in the non-socialist countries . . . and on the other hand, in violent contrast, radical contestation, criticism and even hypercriticism of the State, of daily life, of art and of knowledge, essentially of everything that seemed established. But in 1957, none of that happened; only the precursory symptoms appear.)” Henri Lefebvre, “Autour de deux dates,” in *Paris 1937-Paris 1957: Créations en France* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981), 406.

the exact moment where those traditional years of the 1950s were coming to an end and the French were beginning to anticipate the arrival of a new culture.²⁰⁵ Nouveau Réalisme thus played on the “tradition of the new,” as it had been established by the historical avant-gardes of the earlier twentieth-century: “the new is confirmed by a break.”²⁰⁶

Among the many contradictions in Restany’s writing is his attitude toward the term “Réalisme.” In deploying it, he necessarily (and consciously, it would seem) invited comparison to past iterations of realist art, particularly nineteenth-century French painting and the more recent European phenomenon of Socialist Realism. Indeed, as Alfred Pacquement has asserted, “There was something provocative about the very word ‘Réalisme,’ for it was adopted by Restany during a highly politicised period, when the polar opposite of abstract art was called Socialist Realism, which was abominated in all avant-garde circles for its reactionary hostility to all the achievements of modern art.”²⁰⁷ Yet Restany wrote in 1963, “We are not dealing with realism as a traditional term . . . but with a new awareness of reality which has engendered a completely new set of problems and solutions.”²⁰⁸ He thus implied that Nouveau Réalisme trafficked in “*the real*,” and not *realism*. Jouffroy, taking up the same position, suggested that the group should have called themselves the “Nouveaux Réalistes,” to emphasize “the real” (*réel*) rather than realism.²⁰⁹ And yet in another moment, Restany claimed that the reference to historical

²⁰⁵ Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 19.

²⁰⁶ Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 209-210.

²⁰⁷ Pacquement, “The Nouveaux Réalistes,” 215. In fact, Lassalle points out that Restany initially borrowed the term “new realism” from Léger, and was very conscious of the connotation of socialist realism: “Restany went from the exaltation of the worker, that is to say the producer, which the communist and committed artists shared with Fernand Léger, to the power of the market and of consumption which was, precisely, what communism was attacking — a procedure of ‘displacement’ which frequently occurs with Restany, and which is quite deliberate.” Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 207.

²⁰⁸ Pierre Restany, “The New Realism,” *Art in America* (February 1963): 102.

²⁰⁹ Jouffroy saw Nouveau Réalisme as a resurgence of the historical avant-gardes of Dada and Surrealism, the first movements to privilege the object itself over the depiction of the object. But in 1961, he began to

realism was intentional: “*Le Nouveau Réalisme, pour moi, a . . . été une allusion synthétique à l’histoire du réalisme. . . . L’étiquette était doublement chargée de sens* (Nouveau Réalisme, for me, was a synthetic allusion to the history of realism. . . . The label was doubly charged with meaning).”²¹⁰

Indeed, as Catherine Grenier has argued, the new realisms of the 1950s “réintroduisent . . . l’art dans l’éclairage de ce ‘réalisme’ qui avait placé la création du XIXe siècle en contact direct avec la réalité sociale, aux antipodes de l’idéalisme et du romantisme comme de l’art pour l’art (reintroduce . . . art in the perspective of this ‘realism’ that had placed 19th-century creation in direct contact with social reality, the very antithesis of idealism and romanticism as well as art for art’s sake).” The Dada parentage thus appears as more of “*une filiation spirituelle* (a spiritual filiation)” than a formal or structural one; realism is indeed its more apt heritage.²¹¹ Figures like Allan Kaprow bolstered the sense of a realist return by asserting that the current work that embraced ephemeral materials was “in essence, a continuation of the tradition of Realism;”²¹² as Grenier put it, such work, made of perishable, changeable, fallible,

wonder whether Nouveau Réalisme was in fact only a reaction to the preceding avant-gardes, a mere revolt against abstraction or, as Jean-Clarence Lambert would soon posit, a “capitalist realism,” the Western version of Soviet “socialist realism.” Alain Jouffroy, “Arman: un réinventeur,” 13-14.

²¹⁰ Restany, “La prise en compte,” 19. In naming his group Nouveau Réalisme, he was well aware of the historical connotations of the term “realism.” He wrote, “*Le style réaliste est toujours la métaphore d’un quelconque pouvoir: celui de l’Église et de la Foi, celui des seigneurs de la guerre, celui de l’idéologie partisane* (The realist style is always the metaphor of some kind of power: that of the Church and of Faith, that of the warlords, that of partisan ideology).” For the artists of the early 1960s, that power was “modern nature,” which Restany saw as the “*émanation directe de la société de consommation* (direct emanation of consumer society).” Restany claimed that the new artists saw consumer society and its attendant powers in the same way that the Romantics had seen their sublime nature: the Nouveaux Réalistes “*consid[èrent] ce monde nouveau comme leur nature, c’est-à-dire à la fois comme une vision des choses et la philosophie de cette vision: [ils] consid[èrent] l’état socio-économique et culturel de la France de 1960 comme la matière première d’une expressivité directe, une source de langage* (consider this new world as their nature, that is, at once as a vision of things and the philosophy of that vision: [they] consider the socio-economic and cultural state of the France of 1960 as the primary material of a direct expressivity, a source of language).” Restany, “Le Nouveau Réalisme, l’art du monde riche,” 67.

²¹¹ Grenier, “Nouveaux réalistes et pop art,” n.p.

²¹² Allan Kaprow, “‘Happenings’ in the New York Scene,” *Art News* 60, no. 3 (1961): 39.

everyday materials, “*injecte au cœur de l’art une réalité tangible mais fragile, humaine mais anonyme, aux antipodes du geste héroïque ou emblématique* (injects into the heart of art a reality that is tangible but fragile, human but anonymous, the very antithesis of the heroic or emblematic gesture),” thus inviting a “*renaissance d’une pensée réaliste* (renaissance of a realist idea).”²¹³

Lassalle points out that “realism” as a term worked extremely well as a promotional tool on the art market, due in large part to the dynamism its semantic flexibility afforded. And she credits Restany’s “inbuilt sense of provocation and mediatisation [*sic*]” for seeing that term come to function in the way that it did.²¹⁴ In fact, Restany’s manipulation of the term took on particular importance as a result of the departure from past models of realism, namely in the populism that Nouveau Réalisme abandoned. Grenier highlights the esoterism of Nouveau-Réaliste works:

Si les matériaux utilisés par ces artistes, si leurs sources (la rue, le marché aux puces, la décharge . . .) et, souvent, leur formes sont directement issues de la réalité d’un quotidien populaire, leur art ne peut cependant pas être qualifié de populaire, ni au sens de la naïveté primitive d’un art brut ni au sens d’une communication immédiate avec un public non averti. Outre le fait que, contrairement à tous les autres mouvements réalistes, ces œuvres échappent aux lois de la représentation traditionnelle, c’est surtout leur élaboration intellectuelle qui en confie le rayonnement.

If the materials used by these artists, if their sources (the street, the flea market, the dump . . .) and, often, their forms come directly from the reality of a popular everyday, their art nonetheless cannot be qualified as popular, neither in the sense of the primitive naïveté of an *art brut* nor in the sense of an immediate communication with an uninformed public. Apart from the fact that, contrary to all the other realist movements, these works escape the laws of traditional

²¹³ Grenier, “Nouveaux réalistes et pop art,” n.p.

²¹⁴ Lassalle argues, “In Pierre Restany’s hands, the word [realism] has two roles, to signal and to promote. It then acts as a catalyst between artists who have little in common but who share a similar attitude towards artistic production. These artists are all breaking away from what went before: for them art is less in the work than in the act.” Lassalle, “Art criticism as strategy,” 211.

representation, it is above all their intellectual elaboration that grants them their prestige.²¹⁵

The “intellectual elaboration” to which Grenier refers is clearly an allusion to Restany, whose theorization of the often abstruse works came to function as part of the works themselves — out of necessity almost as much as strategy.²¹⁶

In a roundtable discussion of Nouveau Réalisme in 1998, Olivier Mosset, who had worked as an assistant for certain of the movement’s artists,²¹⁷ highlighted the problem of the group’s name:

Il y avait dans l’objet trouvé un caractère . . . disons personnel. Déjà le mot ‘réalisme’ s’approchait de la figuration. Ce qui m’intéressait n’était pas tellement le réalisme mais plutôt la réalité. Nous pensions ainsi qu’il y avait dans l’objet trouvé un caractère sentimental et subjectif qui nous posait un problème, et nous avons essayé de réagir à cela.

There was in the found object a certain character . . . a personal one. Already the word ‘realism’ came close to figuration. What interested me was not so much realism but rather reality. We thus thought that there was in the found object a sentimental and subjective character that posed a problem for us, and we tried to react to that.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Grenier points out in particular the semantic structure that organizes much of the artwork of the Nouveaux Réalistes and Neo-Dadaists, so that various games of association, repetition, alliteration, and elision inform the work, making it less straightforward than Pop art and therefore less resonant with the general public. See Grenier, “Nouveaux réalistes et pop art,” n.p.

²¹⁶ It is also true that the 1950s and 60s saw a rise in artists’ writings about their own work. Choay identified that self-interpretive tendency as “*un phénomène significatif de la situation actuelle où les avatars successifs de l’art ne sont plus compréhensibles qu’à travers une série de médiations intellectuelles* (a significant phenomenon of the current situation wherein the successive avatars of art are no longer comprehensible except through a series of intellectual mediations).” Choay, “Dada, Néo-Dada,” 81. What is more, the tendency to self-explain, to constantly reflect on the process of making and guide the viewer through the process of looking or understanding was prevalent in literary and cinematic circles of the period as well. Lynn Higgins observes the tendency among writers and filmmakers of the “new wave” generation to “spin off from their difficult and often opaque fictions in order to write theoretical essays, explanatory prefaces, *prières d’insérer*, to review their own books, to make new films about the process of filming the previous ones, to give interviews, attend conferences, accept visiting professorships. . . . They jump at every opportunity to explain themselves.” Higgins, *New Novel*, 12.

²¹⁷ Mosset once worked with Tinguely and Spoerri and was close to the group, but broke completely with the Nouveaux Réalistes in 1966 in order to create, with Daniel Buren, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni, the group BMPT. Michel Baudson, in “Colloque Nouveau Réalisme: Table ronde,” transcript, September 8, 1998. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

²¹⁸ Mosset, in *ibid.*

Mosset's aversion to the "sentimental and subjective character" of found objects echoes Robbe-Grillet's outspoken appeal to subverting the "human" attributes of the objects he took as his novels' subject matter. And the former's distinction between realism and reality provides a helpful entrée into the heart of the debates over the art of that period. Realism, as Mosset avows, implies figuration because it necessarily entails a transcription of reality in or as a work of art. If the Nouveaux Réalistes were avoiding transcription, as Restany claimed, then what they were interested in was not realism but rather, as Mosset prefers, reality itself, in its raw state. Why the ism, then?

Mosset's break with Nouveau Réalisme was based chiefly on the differentiation between realism and reality: for Mosset, the transcription of reality that the Nouveaux Réalistes enacted by creating their realist artworks from their found objects removed the works from the sphere of objective reality and placed them firmly in the realm of the personal or subjective. The fundamental difference between a certain personal or subjective reality and the raw, objective, impersonal "real" was essential to Mosset, and the Nouveaux Réalistes' failure to adhere to the latter was what led him to break with the group. Of course, Restany maintained that the Nouveaux Réalistes were seeking and achieving just that "objective" reality, but as I have argued and as I will continue to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, that claim does not line up with the actual Nouveaux-Réaliste works, especially those of Arman, which exhibit a conscious and intentional recourse to subjective modes of art-making, and even representation.

Rosenberg claimed that the "most pervasive term in modern art [was] 'New Realities,'" citing the many art magazines, movements, and exhibitions by that title.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Rosenberg, "The Art Galleries," 161.

But he was mistaken, and his mistake is revealing: it was not new *realities* that recurred, but new *realisms* and new *realists*. The will to conflate the two, to see realism as synonymous with reality, reflects the widespread artistic ambition to elevate realist art to become akin to reality instead of merely imitative of it, and to elevate reality to be akin to art rather than merely its subject matter.

Rosenberg points out that the currency of the terms “realism” and “realist” have the effect of stripping those words of any applicable meaning. Everyone from abstract artists like Josef Albers to “ultra-representational” artists like Ben Shahn were calling themselves Realists, and since that term “signifies something different for everyone who uses it, the label is meaningless.”²²⁰ I would add, then, that the art historian’s task is to understand what that label meant for each artist who deemed it appropriate for his or her work. In Arman’s case, identifying as a Realist — before officially becoming sanctioned as a Nouveau Réaliste — revealed the ambition behind his earliest index-based artworks, and established his practice as a kind of pursuit of some parity between “real” and realism.

In 1963 Restany was invited by the editors of *Art in America* to write about the development of the “new realism” in the wake of the Sidney Janis show that had introduced that term to a broader American audience. In his text, Restany explained that in both New York and Paris, the avant-garde was “no longer abstract — in either the geometric, lyrical or expressionist sense — but ‘realist,’” and he expressed the importance of understanding the exact meaning of that word, since “we are not dealing with realism as a traditional term defining a school, but with a new awareness of reality

²²⁰ Ibid.

which has engendered a completely new set of problems and solutions.”²²¹ In defining realism so broadly, as a kind of attention to reality, Restany implied an elision of the distinction between the two terms that Mosset found so importantly divergent. The conflation of realism and reality was a strategic move on Restany’s part, one that allowed him first to unite such divergent artists under one banner and second to trumpet the superiority of “his” artists, whose realism, he claimed, was in a more direct relationship to “the real” since it eschewed transcription.

In that same essay, Restany even used the word “realism” where he clearly meant “reality”: “The language of neo-realism derives its entire vocabulary from contemporary social realism.”²²² The “social realism” he invokes is the “world of social interchange, of direct communication between human beings, of the most dynamic aspects of our civilization, of the world of commerce, industry and public relations,” that is, of *reality*.²²³ But for Mosset, the difference between realism and reality was crucial, and he used Arman’s object-based works as a means of explaining the distinction, since he saw them as exemplary of the former: “*Au moment où on s’approprié la réalité, et si on doit le faire en mettant la réalité dans une boîte en plastique ou dans un cadre, on peut s’interroger sur son geste* (At the moment when one appropriates reality, and if one must do so by putting reality in a plastic box or in a frame, one may question his actions).”²²⁴ That is, the fact that Arman does not simply appropriate reality, but rather appropriates and then *encases* reality, places his work firmly in the camp of realism, which is to say,

²²¹ Pierre Restany, “The New Realism,” 102.

²²² *Ibid.*, 104.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Mosset, in “Colloque Nouveau Réalisme: Table ronde,” transcript, September 8, 1998. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

reality *deferred*. Critic Grégoire Müller, writing in praise of Arman's art of presentation in 1969, attempted to extol the directness of that presentation but ended up revealing its indirectness along the same terms that Mosset used:

Arman est un de ceux qui, les premiers, ont osé abandonner le jeu de la représentation ou de l'évocation artificielle du réel pour agir directement avec et sur ce dernier. . . . Arman est celui qui a ouvert la voie d'une action directe, presque charnelle, sur le réel; celui qui a permis à l'artiste d'abandonner son rôle de témoin exemplaire pour devenir non seulement présentateur, mais un 'acteur,' un homme qui s'exprime en agissant sur les objets de son environnement vital.

Arman is one of the first [artists] who dared to abandon the game of representation or of the artificial evocation of the real in order to act directly with and on the latter. . . . Arman is the one who opened the way for a direct, almost carnal action on the real; the one who allowed the artist to abandon his role as exemplary witness in order to become not only a presenter, but an 'actor,' a man who expresses himself in acting on the objects of his vital environment.²²⁵

That final qualification, that Arman acts on the objects and thus expresses himself and not just the objective reality of the objects, misaligns with the notion of a pure and unmediated realism interchangeable with reality itself. For Mosset, the fact of Arman's intervention is a weakness — as it would be for Restany if he recognized the distinction; for reality itself, and not a mediated picture of reality, was the purported aim.

The problem of representation

Restany's insistence on the Nouveaux Réalistes' adherence to a non-representational practice was essential to his promotion of those artists as distinct from — and indeed superior to — their American contemporaries. For Restany, representation was a negative value, something to be avoided, for it was too far removed from "the real," that supreme value to which today's realism aspired. Restany accused the

²²⁵ Grégoire Müller, 1969. Quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 64.

American Neo-Dadaists of using real-world elements in aesthetic arrangements that turned them into representative elements, and he condemned the Pop artists for not presenting “real” things but rather representing them in painting, sculpture or prints. Repeating a familiar refrain, Restany wrote in a 1965 letter to a museum director organizing an exhibition of Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme, “*le Nouveau Réalisme n’est pas la variante européenne du pop-art, mais un courant dont l’esprit et la finalité sont nettement différents des productions made in USA* (Nouveau Réalisme is not the European variant of Pop Art, but a current whose spirit and purpose are completely different from the American-made productions).”²²⁶ To illustrate the difference between the two currents, Restany offered the following explanation:

Les nouveaux réalistes s’expriment directement avec l’objet trouvé ou l’article de série. Les œuvres qu’ils proposent à partir de ce traitement de l’objet (assemblages, accumulations, selections) sont matériellement différentes des œuvres pop qui reproduisent le réalité [sic] quotidienne avec des moyens traditionnels ou semi-traditionnels (peinture, collage, etc.).

The Nouveaux Réalistes express themselves directly with the found object or the mass-produced article. The works that they propose from this treatment of the object (assemblages, accumulations, selections) are materially different from the Pop works that reproduce everyday reality with traditional or semi-traditional means (painting, collage, etc.).²²⁷

Restany closed his letter by lamenting the public’s failure to grasp the fundamental difference between the Europeans’ direct presentations and the Americans’ mere representations.²²⁸ The Pop artists, for Restany, were guilty of “*reportage pictural de la*

²²⁶ Pierre Restany, letter to Robert Giron, director of the Société des expositions at the Palais des beaux-arts in Brussels, January 19, 1965. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ “*Dans le fond les nouveaux réalistes s’expriment directement avec ce que leurs collègues américains peignent ou reproduisent. Cette différence fondamentale n’est pas toujours saisie par le public* (At base the nouveaux réalistes express themselves directly with that which their American colleagues paint or reproduce. That fundamental difference is not always recognized by the public).” Ibid.

réalité quotidienne (pictorial reporting of quotidian reality),²²⁹ rather than the direct seizure of that reality itself.

In contrast to the advantage given to the Nouveaux Réalistes by Restany (and many of his followers), based on those artists' practice of presentation rather than representation, some critics made the same distinction between the European and American artists but saw the Americans' work as the richer result. Otto Hahn, for instance, described Pop thus:

Le problème central, pour les artistes pop, c'est la transcription. Cela implique une suite de questions qui relèvent de la pure tradition humaniste: 'qu'est-ce que la réalité?', 'Comment saisir la réalité?', 'Quel est le lieu mental de la toile?.' Des réponses données à ces questions dépend le tableau. . . . La démarche du Pop Art est extrêmement classique: prendre un concept (photo, affiche, bande dessinée) et le mettre en situation. La mise en situation commande une série de modifications au niveau de la composition comme à celui des caractères. La signification ne vient pas par la sensibilité de la matière (comme chez les expressionnistes abstraits ou chez les Nouveaux Réalistes), mais par la nouvelle lisibilité du réel (comme chez les abstraits géométriques).

The central problem, for the pop artists, is transcription. It implies a suite of questions that fall under the pure humanist tradition: 'what is reality?' 'How does one seize reality?', 'What is the mental space of the canvas?' Responses given to these questions depend on the picture. . . . Pop Art's approach is extremely classical: take a concept (photo, poster, comic strip) and put it in a situation. The situation demands a series of modifications to the composition as well as the characters. Meaning does not come by way of the sensibility of the matter (as it does with the abstract expressionists or the Nouveaux Réalistes), but by the new legibility of the real (as with geometric abstraction).²³⁰

And that greater legibility, that greater clarity, was a positive value that was missing from the work of the Nouveaux Réalistes. Hahn saw the crucial difference between Nouveau Réalisme and Pop as residing in "*la conception de la peinture* (the conception of painting),²³¹ as keyed either to emotion or to comprehension, respectively. It is worth

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Otto Hahn, "Lettre de Paris et de Bruxelles," *Art International* 9, no. 3 (April 1965): 67.

²³¹ Ibid.

noting further that Hahn considered both groups to be engaged in a pictorial endeavor. Jan van der Marck, on the other hand, accepted Restany's claim that the Europeans were acting in opposition to painting, but still found the Americans to have developed a better mode of expression. He observed, "the *Nouveaux Réalistes* aimed at replacing and transcending traditional pictorial conventions, whereas Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the Pop artists . . . remained faithful to these conventions. Since it is impossible to escape or work outside established conventions, the more 'realistic' Americans had a critical advantage."²³² That is, it is because the Americans recognized the impossibility of avoiding representation as such that they mastered representation, whereas the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, in endeavoring to skirt or subvert representation, only arrived at it through the back door, thus inhibiting their ability to refine it.

Van der Marck's assessment of the impossibility of eluding established conventions echoes a statement made by Robbe-Grillet in 1956: "if the norms of the past serve to measure the present, they also serve to construct it."²³³ Robbe-Grillet described the contemporary writer, aiming for independence, as nevertheless "situated within an intellectual culture and a literature which can only be those of the past. It is impossible for him to escape altogether from this tradition of which he is the product."²³⁴ In fact, the new forms the writer or artist produces often turn out to reinforce the past forms they set out to oppose; such is the case, I shall argue, in Arman's œuvre as well, where, despite the attempt to eschew pictorial representation, the format turns out to reinforce the

²³² Van der Marck, "Arman: An Archeologist," 8.

²³³ Robbe-Grillet, "A Future," 18.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

limiting edge of the frontal composition even more intensely than would the edges of a painted canvas.

Pierre Courcelles suggests that it was only at Restany's insistence that Arman and his Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues renounced what was otherwise an artist's fundamental prerogative: to transcribe or transpose "the real."

Prendre acte du réel ne suppose pas un geste créateur. En revanche, les "prélèvements" des Nouveaux Réalistes constituent des gestes de célébration et de redoublement. Et donc d'enfermement. Le réel est tel qu'il est, on le montre pour ce qu'il est, nul n'est censé pouvoir s'en échapper. C'est ainsi une philosophie de la résignation qui se trame selon laquelle l'artiste se soumet à l'autonomie de l'objet.

Taking note of the real does not involve a creative act. However, the Nouveaux Réalistes' "samples" constitute gestures of celebration and of doubling. And thus of confinement. The real is as it is, one shows it for what it is, nothing is supposed to be able to escape from it. It is thus a philosophy of resignation according to which the artist submits to the autonomy of the object.²³⁵

The 1986 retrospective of the group's collective activities between 1960 and 1963 left Courcelles with the impression that "*la religion forcenée du nouveau telle que la prêcha Pierre Restany n'engage jamais l'avenir de l'art* (the forced religion of the new, as Pierre Restany preached it, never engages the future of art),"²³⁶ that is, what Restany prescribed as the way of the new — the replacement of representation with presentation, the embrace of the object's autonomy and rejection of artistic intervention — would not have the stamina to endure beyond the short-lived moment of Nouveau Réalisme. Neither the artists who played the game from 1960-1963 nor the generations that followed after would maintain this apparent allegiance to artistic non-intervention; the future of art

²³⁵ Courcelles, "Les objets."

²³⁶ Ibid.

turned out to be much more classically oriented — as it was ushered in by the American and British Pop artists just two years into the lifespan of Nouveau Réalisme.

The irony of the Nouveau-Réaliste turn away from painting and away from representation is that it heralded the return of both, in the form of the much more enduring and impactful movements that would succeed Nouveau Réalisme. What is more, those succeeding movements — Pop Art in England and the United States, and Figuration Narrative in France — both maintained a commitment to the “return to the real” that their predecessors had spearheaded.²³⁷ For the Nouveaux Réalistes to lead that return required a certain amnesia of the recent past²³⁸ and a willful focus on the decontextualized present. Once that shift was carried out, the doors were open for Pop to surge forth: those artists, too, eschewed acknowledgment of historical reality in favor of only the newest, most present, present. But they did it through pictorial means, heralding, just a few short years after the radicalism of Nouveau-Réaliste presentation, the return of representation.

²³⁷ Reflecting on the immediate dominance and surprising staying power of Pop art, Restany noted some twenty years later that Pop’s vigor worked and lasted because it corresponded to the one ongoing tradition of American art: realism. “*Depuis les premiers pionniers, toutes les vagues de peuplement successives ont jeté le même regard éperdu et ébloui sur l’espace ambiant. C’est sur ce phénomène d’approche sensible que se fonde la continuité absolue de la vision réaliste dans l’art américain depuis la peinture primitive et anonyme des pionniers, jusqu’à la new-wave d’aujourd’hui en passant par les différentes formes de réalisme romantique, magique, socialiste, hyper-photographique* (Since the first pioneers, all the successive population waves have thrown the same frenzied and starry-eyed glance on the surrounding space. It is on this phenomenon of a sensitive approach that the absolute continuity of realist vision in American art is founded, from the primitive and anonymous painting of the pioneers to today’s new wave, passing by different forms of romantic, magic, socialist, and photographic realism along the way).” The one parenthesis, of course, was Abstract Expressionism — but even that movement contained allusions to figuration and a treatment of space that linked it to realism. Given this history, Pop art seemed in retrospect like “*un simple épisode* (a simple episode)” in a long tradition of documentary and folkloric American painting. Nouveau Réalisme, on the other hand, benefited from the retrospective glance, in that such a look revealed its singularity, its historical specificity, its complete originality. Restany, “Le Nouveau Réalisme, l’art du monde riche,” 87-88.

²³⁸ As Durozoi points out, the “return to the real” that was felt to be such a necessity around 1960 was possible only by willfully forgetting “*des pans entiers de la réalité historique* (entire swaths of recent history).” See Durozoi, *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, 5.

While the swift shift from an object-based art back to an image-based one may appear retrograde, I argue that in fact it is perfectly in keeping with Nouveau Réalisme, whose “anti-pictorial” stance was never as firm as Restany claimed it to be. Nouveau-Réaliste strategies, even if they did not involve putting paint to canvas, retained a fundamental relationship to painting, none more compellingly than Arman’s.²³⁹

As Durozoi points out, the fact that Rauschenberg won the grand prize for *painting* at the Venice Biennale in 1964 shows to what extent a broadened definition of what constitutes a *tableau* was becoming not only popular, but officially sanctioned. I would argue that Arman’s frame- and surface-oriented *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, as well as the highly pictorial “inaction paintings” of the *affichistes* and the *tableaux-pièges* of Spoerri, among others, were already, and quite consciously, part of the gradual expansion of the term *tableau*.²⁴⁰ That the *tableau* was now “*capable d’accueillir la présence d’objets en volumes* (capable of receiving the presence of volumetric objects)”²⁴¹ was not an innovation of Rauschenberg alone, nor did it belong to the Pop generation. Rather, it was part of Nouveau Réalisme *and* Neo-Dada concurrently; both

²³⁹ Scholars like Durozoi continue to insist that the Nouveaux Réalistes, or at least the most radical among them, “*s’obstinent à ne rien vouloir connaître (sinon son fantôme) [d’une pratique picturale]* (insist on knowing nothing of [a pictorial practice], if not its phantom).” Ibid., 6. I disagree, as my analysis of Arman’s practice, in the chapters that follow, will make clear.

²⁴⁰ François Pluchart noted in 1965, “*Arman est . . . l’un de ces novateurs qui . . . ont donné de nouvelles chances à la fois à la peinture et à la sculpture en ouvrant une voie intermédiaire qui enrichit en même temps les extrêmes de l’une et de l’autre* (Arman is . . . one of those innovators who . . . gave new possibilities at once to painting and to sculpture by opening an intermediary path that enriches the extremes of both at the same time).” Pluchart, “L’insolite et le mental suffisent rarement à donner une œuvre d’art,” *Combat*, December 20, 1965, 11. Jouffroy, too, praised Arman as “*l’un des très rares peintres contemporains qui ont changé la notion même de ‘peinture,’ telle qu’elle avait encore cours au lendemain de la dernière guerre* (one of the very rare contemporary painters who have changed the very notion of ‘painting,’ as it was still understood after the last war).” Alain Jouffroy, “Le premier ‘objecteur’: Arman,” undated. Typescript. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

²⁴¹ Durozoi, *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, 6.

movements, despite Restany's effort to distinguish them on this point, were essentially working in a pictorial mode, thus paving the way for the "return" to painting.²⁴²

I believe that the fundamentally pictorial address of Nouveau-Réaliste "presentations" has very much to do with the conflation of object and image in the midst of the mass media juggernaut that was "colonizing" daily life in postwar France, and that had already established its dominance in the United States. As Debord put it in the opening lines of his 1967 treatise, *La Société du Spectacle*, "*Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les conditions modernes de production s'annonce comme une immense accumulation de spectacles. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s'est éloigné dans une représentation* (In societies where modern conditions of production reign, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation)."²⁴³

The perceived replacement of "real" things by their mediated image became an important part of the debates surrounding realism and representation, and their relationship to "the real." In an essay on Dada's resurgence among American artists of the period, Barbara Rose wrote in 1963 that the common denominator uniting the Neo-Dadaists and the Pop artists was "a dedication to the image, the recognizable object as we

²⁴² Jouffroy argued in 1965 that the continuation of the history of painting was due in large part to those artists who ostensibly renounced painting in favor of object-based pursuits: "*En mesurant les conséquences de la démarche d'Arman et de Spoerri, qui furent — peut-être inconsciemment — les initiateurs de cette aventure [de l'objet], on peut redécouvrir un sens nouveau à la peinture elle-même. . . . Ils rendent service à la peinture — à la peinture future — et c'est dans cette perspective ouverte sur l'avenir qu'il faut saisir le sens de leurs objets présents* (In assessing the consequences of the interventions of Arman and Spoerri, who were — perhaps unconsciously — the initiators of that adventure [of the object], one can rediscover a new direction of painting itself. . . . They help painting — future painting — and it is in that open perspective on the future that we must grasp the meaning of their present objects)." Alain Jouffroy, "Les objecteurs," typescript, 1965 or 1966. Typescript. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

²⁴³ Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 15.

encounter it in everyday experience.”²⁴⁴ Rose thus established the image and the object as equally “real”: the image was the means by which one encountered the object; it had come to replace the object itself in our everyday interactions in the world. Rose went on to suggest that the objectivity or factualism of the Neo-Dada artists depended not on a commitment to non-intervention or to presentation rather than representation, but rather on the “realness” of the objects they appropriated: “What is important,” she argued, “is that no matter how they combine, remake or transform the objects of the real world, these objects retain that property which relates them to life and everyday experience.”²⁴⁵

Rose’s position was thus firmly opposed to that of Restany, who outright rejected the “remaking” or “transforming” of objects, deeming such practices to be non-objective and thus anti-realist. The art of the reproduction or the representation that Rose praised again established the artists as trafficking in *realism* and not in “*the real*,” as Mosset observed.

Decades after the fact, Alain Jouffroy, looking back on the fraught period of new realist developments in which he himself had played an important role, reflected on the increasing mediatization of consumer society and the way in which, as the Situationists had described in 1966, “*le spectacle . . . vise à obliger chacun à se reconnaître, à se réaliser, dans la consommation effective de cette production répandue partout* (the spectacle . . . aims to force one to recognize him/herself, to realize him/herself, in the effective consumption of that widespread production).”²⁴⁶ Given those conditions, Jouffroy wondered: “*Pierre Restany, obéissant au ‘Zeitgeist’ . . . et au ‘pouvoir’ de la*

²⁴⁴ Rose, “Dada Then and Now,” 25.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Jouffroy is quoting *L’Internationale situationniste*, no. 10 (March 1966): 45. Jouffroy, “L’assemblage, considéré comme un moyen d’échapper au réel fictif, avant-avant-dernière version,” typescript, July 7, 1990. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

société de consommation, a-t-il confondu le réel fictif engendré par ladite société avec le réel lui-même? La question reste posée (Did Pierre Restany, obeying the ‘Zeitgeist’ . . . and the ‘power’ of consumer society, confuse the fictive real engendered by that society with the real itself? The question remains)."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Ibid. The notion of a “fictive real” recurs in Jouffroy’s writing, and refers to the kinds of simulacra that were becoming conflated with reality — the phenomenon of “l’invasion des illusions, des mensonges.” Jouffroy, untitled typescript, after 1965. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

Chapter Three: The Index

Arman before Nouveau Réalisme

Armand Pierre Fernandez¹ was born in Nice in 1928. His mother, Marie Marguerite Jacquet, was a French maid with peasant roots; his father, Antonio Francesco Fernandez, a Spanish-Algerian small business owner from a wealthy family. Antonio maintained a secondhand shop and later a furniture store where Arman would work. He was also an amateur painter and musician, and he trained his son in oil painting as well as various musical instruments. Arman cites this early exposure to painting and music, as well as the childhood hours spent honing his packrat tendencies in his father's shop, as formative experiences in his development as an artist.

Arman recounts being profoundly affected by the experience of living in Italy-controlled Nice during the Second World War: there was not enough food, rationing was severe, and Arman and his family had to kill cats and birds to eat. Arman conjectures that those struggles and that scarcity influenced the artwork he would later create: "Maybe all those insecurities . . . lead [*sic*] me to that very securizing [*sic*] image of accumulation."²

¹ Fernandez, along with his close friends Yves Klein and Claude Pascal, began in 1947 to sign his work simply by his first name, Armand, in a gesture of reverence to Vincent Van Gogh, who famously signed his paintings "Vincent." An invitation to the exhibition *Micro Salon* at the Galerie Iris Clert in 1957 misprinted his name as Arman; he decided to adopt that spelling for the remainder of his life and career. For simplicity's sake, I refer to him as Arman throughout this dissertation, even when referring to his early years before he assumed the name.

² "Oral History Interview." The term "accumulation" refers not only to the artist's series, the *Accumulations*, but to his general artistic strategy of collecting or amassing objects or forms, which recurs throughout his entire career. One might further infer that the war years also incited Arman's fascination with decay — both the decay of organic matter and that of society. Arman recounts his family's efforts to gain access to food by way of their relatives in the country, who would mail them meat from their farm; if delivered at all, the food would arrive rotting. Such experiences could only have intensified Arman's consciousness of and sensitivity to the wastefulness, just a few years later, of a postwar society that so quickly forgot how little it had had and how immediately resources could become scarce. As a close look at his oeuvre makes clear, Arman's work speaks to both the exuberance of postwar abundance after a period of extreme austerity, and the carelessness with which society squandered the new profusion of capital.

Arman's family encouraged him to become an artist from an early age, and he excelled at the *École des Arts décoratifs* in Nice, where he won numerous prizes for his classical drawing. Despite his success there, he did not finish school and instead departed in 1949 for Paris where, not confident in his ability to pass the entrance examinations for the prestigious *École des beaux-arts*, he enrolled at the *École du Louvre*, where he studied the history of art. Arman's early exposure to and engagement with the art of the past is a significant detail that has often been overlooked in the study of his work. Arman and his Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues have long been accused of lacking a sound comprehension of past art, and of pastiching techniques or materials from artists and movements they little understood.³ Arman claims that his study of art history taught him about the importance of the progression of artists and of history, and the connectedness of movements and styles over time. According to Arman's description of his education, it would appear that he developed an understanding of art history as continuity and

³ This criticism has been especially prevalent in regard to the Nouveaux Réalistes' appropriation of Dadaist tropes. It has been claimed that the former's understanding of Duchamp came largely filtered through the American neo-dadaists such as Rauschenberg and Johns, who exhibited often in Paris and had a personal relationship with their French contemporaries, and who also benefited from an arguably better familiarity with Duchamp's work, thanks to the latter's presence in the United States since 1943. See Camille Morineau, "La 'filière' Duchamp," in *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Cécile Debray, 98-104. While it may be the case that certain Nouveau-Réaliste artists were less cognizant of the meanings and implications of Dadaist work — especially the New York brand of Dada to which Duchamp subscribed — Arman's biography disproves this allegation at least on his part: in addition to his formal education in the history of art, he was a voracious reader who both followed contemporary art and continually studied the art of the past. Arman became familiar with the work of Duchamp, Man Ray, Jean Arp, Tristan Tzara, and the like through a catalog of a Surrealist exhibition that Yves Klein had given him in 1948: "Through that catalogue I started to become aware of different ways of working as an artist. Before that, I had no documentation, nor any idea of what was going on. There were very few art magazines at that time, and no galleries. So it was very difficult to see anything." Arman was also connected to those artists through Jacques Matarasso, an acquaintance in Nice who collected Dada and Surrealist books and documentation. But Arman came to know the work only through reproduction, and never saw Duchamp's work in the flesh until he first visited New York in 1961. Arman, "Interview conducted by Susan Hapgood," 107-108.

evolution, rather than as a series of ruptures, as Restany's avant-gardist stance would have it.⁴

Arman's early paintings

Although he was studying the history of art and not its practice, Arman did begin painting seriously while in Paris — in a surrealist style at first, inspired chiefly by books he was reading on the movement.⁵ After finishing his degree in 1950, Arman spent time with Yves Klein and Claude Pascal in Madrid,⁶ worked as a billposter and a bodyguard for political campaigns,⁷ and was called up for military service in Antibes and Fréjus before finally settling again in Nice in 1953. During those years he was simply a “Sunday painter;” his main pursuits even after returning to Nice were his work in his father's furniture store and selling the catches from his deep-sea fishing expeditions. His artworks were painted in oils and sought to emulate the popular post-Cubist styles of the period, both figurative and abstract. He described his working process thus: “*Sur une table je dessinais des courbes, des diagonales, et sur ce schéma j'étais la pâte au couteau, puis je traçais dans cette pâte un nouveau réseau de lignes* (On a table I drew some curves, some diagonals, and on this schema I spread paste with a knife, then I traced in this paste

⁴ As I have begun to elucidate in Chapters One and Two, Restany's promotion of the Nouveaux Réalistes relied heavily on his conception of their place in the history of art — a history that he believed progressed not by evolution but by fissures and upendings, as though reinvented at every turn. His goal in uniting the Nouveaux Réalistes was to establish them as the successors to, and not the descendants of, lyrical abstraction.

⁵ Arman describes his education and his early experiments in painting in “Oral History Interview.”

⁶ Klein and Pascal were teaching judo in Madrid; along with Arman, they spent the entire spring of 1951 there. Arman had met the artist and the poet in Nice four years earlier and the three had become close friends and travel companions; they took trips together to Italy, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, and England prior to this Spanish stay. While in Madrid, Pascal began writing the book *Miracle Smith*, which Arman would illustrate for its publication in 1955.

⁷ Arman was a billposter for Senator Édouard Corniglion-Molinier and for Marcel Dassault. By coincidence, Restany was Corniglion-Molinier's secretary at the time; he and Arman would meet around the 1951 elections, but they would not discuss art and Restany would not remember that meeting. See Bertram, “Chronologie,” 283.

a new network of lines).”⁸ Arman painted in this manner for several years, drawing inspiration from the works of Serge Poliakoff, Nicolas de Staël, and to a lesser extent, Wassily Kandinsky. His absorption of those artists’ styles and techniques is a testament to Arman’s engagement in the art scene in Paris, where abstract painting was at the forefront. In an interview with Daniel Abadie, Arman professed:

Au début des années 50, j’étais précisément baigné par ce qui était alors en vogue. J’avais une grande admiration pour Poliakoff, pour de Staël, et j’ai fini par faire, entre 1951 et 1953, des peintures qui mélangeaient un peu les deux manières, basées sur ce que Léon Degand appelait “la logique du monde extérieur.” C’est-à-dire qu’elles se présentaient comme des constructions abstraites, mais conservaient dans leur processus une logique non abstraite, celle du paysage ou de la figure.

At the beginning of the 1950s, I was literally steeped in everything that was then in fashion. I had a great admiration for Poliakoff and for de Staël, and I ended up making, between 1951 and 1953, some paintings that mixed both methods, based on what Léon Degand called the “logic of the exterior world.” That is, they were presented as abstract constructions, but retained in their process a non-abstract logic, that of the landscape or of the human form.⁹

From this statement one can ascertain that even in pursuing abstraction, Arman had an innate impulse to maintain a relationship with “the real” — the tangible, the visible, the knowable. As he avows, his compositions refused the pure logic of abstraction and followed instead a logic based on real things in the world: the landscape, the figure. *Untitled* of 1952-53 (Figure 3.1), with its expansive horizontal format and sweeping brushstrokes, gives the vague suggestion of a landscape, in much the way that de Staël’s paintings from the same period do (Figure 3.2). In both cases, what is given is an abstraction that hints at its origin in reality: the imprecise form of a horizon line, striations intimating changes in terrain or atmosphere.

⁸ Arman, in an interview with Sylvain Lecourbe in *Art Press*, November 22, 1978, quoted in *ibid*.

⁹ Arman, in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 37.

The interplay between the abstract and the figural, or rather their dialectics, remain a fundamental thread through Arman's various series from 1954 through 1964. As I shall demonstrate, Arman's works continually toe the line between something like "the real" or realism and what is conventionally conceived as its ontological opposite, abstraction. In the four series that constitute the scope of this dissertation, the *Cachets*, *Allures d'objets*, *Accumulations*, and *Poubelles*, Arman aspires to realism by presenting the tangible "real" in the form of indexical marks, in the case of the former two series, or of fragmented or whole objects, in the latter works. Paradoxically, it is through the utter "realness" of the index or the object that these works enact an abstracting of that very "real." This claim will become clearer as I deal directly with specific works from each series in the pages that follow. I will argue that if realism has traditionally been broadly defined as making artworks that look like the world, then Arman's pursuit of realism reveals itself to be a complex reimagining of what it meant to "look like the world," particularly at a historical moment when the world was seen to be making itself over as image.

1954: *année charnière*

The year 1954, the beginning of this dissertation's purview, marks the first major turning point in Arman's artistic career. It was at that time that he abandoned abstract painting and began to seek his own artistic voice and to express it in a new language. The works that he produced at that moment propelled him on his trajectory from the realm of the abstract and *informel* to the object-based realism for which he would come to be known. Arman remembers:

[Prior to 1954] I was painting like 10,000 other painters. Not very individualist. . . . I didn't bring much to these paintings but it was a very good exercise. . . . [I]t's

very important to afford to do a lot of bad things, of wrong things, of weak things. . . . [M]aybe one day you can do some good things, too. And, the first personal things I did, it was rubber stamps.¹⁰

Arman recounts that he first began his more experimental artworks by accident, as he was tinkering with rubber stamps at work; his playful stampings developed, “under the influence of Kurt Schwitters and Pollock,”¹¹ into the *Cachets*.

As Jean-Michel Bouhours points out in the catalog of Arman’s 2010 retrospective, the crucial period from 1954 until 1959, in which Arman made the two series known as the *Cachets* and the *Allures d’objets*, has often been overlooked or purposefully ignored. Such was the case in his prior major retrospective, organized by Daniel Abadie at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in 1998, which began with the breakout works of 1959 and excluded any and all works on paper, effectively asserting that the artist’s career, and by extension his larger artistic project, began with the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* of his Nouveau-Réaliste period.¹² That omission reflects a long-held misconception that the early works, by and large works on paper, fabric or canvas, had little import in comparison to the crucial works of 1959 and beyond — a misconception spurred by Restany’s claim that “*C’est entre 1960 et 1962 que s’est joué l’entier destin de la démarche d’Arman, la cristallisation d’une démarche appropriatrice du réel en un langage quantitative qui devait s’élever immédiatement à la puissance d’un style* (It is between 1960 and 1962 that the entire fate of Arman’s process played out, the

¹⁰ "Oral History Interview."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Even on the occasion of the 2010 retrospective, for which he wrote a review, Abadie held on to his view that Arman’s “inventive period” spanned from 1959 to 1964. He cites the *Accumulations*, *Colères*, *Poubelles*, *Coupes*, *Portraits-robots*, and *Combustions* as among Arman’s important work from this period, notably excluding once again the *Cachets* and *Allures d’objets* from consideration, effectively demoting them to the status of immature and insignificant work. See Daniel Abadie, “Pourquoi l’œuvre d’Arman est l’objet de questions,” *Beaux Arts Magazine* no. 316 (2010): 92.

crystallization of an appropriative approach to the real in a quantitative language that would immediately rise to the power of a style).”¹³ Restany dismisses the *Cachets* and *Allures d’objets* of the preceding period as being “*encore au niveau de la transcription calligraphique* (still on the order of calligraphic transcription),”¹⁴ which is to say, representation, and therefore not realism.

In this dissertation I insist, as did the 2010 retrospective, on the fundamental continuity between Arman’s earliest works and his most impactful ones. I go further, however, than simply acknowledging that Arman’s experimentations with the *Cachets* and *Allures d’objets* led him to the development of the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, a fact that Arman himself openly avowed.¹⁵ I argue that at stake in each of these series is the address to the same fundamental problem: namely, the probing of the limits and parameters of representation as such, and of realism in its most historically specific sense.

Arman relates that once he decided in 1954 to become a painter by profession, he became also a voracious consumer of art:

Every kind of magazine, every kind of invitation, every kind of book about painting. I always have the character to become specialist when I do something. . . . I have never been a . . . dilettante. If I study chess I study chess. I get books on it, I want to become good. I dig a lot about. . . . Books, history of surrealism, and everything I could find. . . . I was really collecting every kind of information. I never do just one things [*sic*] instinctively. I always work.¹⁶

¹³ Pierre Restany, “Objets de luxe et fétiches raisonnables,” in *Arman* (Milan: Galleria Arte Borgogna, 1972), n.p.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Beate Reifenscheid, too, in the catalog essay for the 2001 exhibition of Arman’s works on paper, argues for the importance of these early series as part of a continuum in which Arman’s later works are also inserted. However, she stops short of pinpointing the critical issues at play in these works, beyond the narrative of Arman’s development of one series from another. See Reifenscheid, “Arman – The Draughtsman,” in *Arman: Werke auf Papier = Works on Paper* (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2001), 151-166.

¹⁶ “Oral History Interview.”

Arman lists among the most important events of his early development as an artist two exhibitions that he saw in Paris in the early 1950s. The first was Jackson Pollock's European premier at Studio Paul Facchetti in 1952; the second, a retrospective of Kurt Schwitters's work at the Galerie Berggruen in 1954. Pollock's drip paintings had been a minor success in Paris;¹⁷ for Arman, they had been a revelation. The dynamic, all-over compositions of Pollock's pictures opened Arman's eyes to the possibilities of moving beyond the *informel* style he had borrowed from de Staël and Poliakoff, and of developing a manner of painting, freed from personal touch, that could successfully activate the entire canvas as a whole.¹⁸ To this end, Arman began to think about alternative means of putting pigment on canvas, and, inspired further by Schwitters, whom he claimed "*m'a libéré de l'idée qu'il n'y avait que la peinture à l'huile* (freed me from the idea that there was only oil painting),"¹⁹ Arman reached for objects from his daily life to employ as tools for painting: inkstamps.

Schwitters's 1927 text, "Merz 20," which was reprinted in the catalog for the Berggruen show, had encouraged the use of materials cast aside in daily life:

I don't see why one shouldn't use in a picture, just as one uses colors made by the paint merchants, things like old tram and train tickets, scraps of driftwood,

¹⁷ The exhibition attracted little positive attention from the French press at the time, and only two paintings were sold. It would take a few more years for the French market to absorb American painting, but French abstract painters such as Mathieu and Dubuffet were quick to recognize and acknowledge Pollock's strength. See Alfred Pacquement, "La première exposition Pollock à Paris: Studio Paul Facchetti, mars 1952," in *Paris-New York*, ed. Pontus Hulten (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, 1977), 536-541.

¹⁸ Arman recounted, "suddenly when I saw the paintings of Jackson Pollock I said, 'That's it!' That feeling the surface had of all-over action really had an effect on me." See Nicholas Wegner, "Arman in London: Destructions and Accumulations," *Cv Journal of Art and Crafts* 2, no. 3 (September 1989): 8. In the pages that follow I will argue that Pollock's technique of applying paint by dripping or flinging it, without physical contact between the brush or tool and the support, revealed to Arman the potential for *abstraction chaude* — that painting perceived as warm, expressive, and personal — to be achieved by relatively impersonal or "cold" means. As I will show, this interplay between the personal and the impersonal will be important to Arman's first works on paper, and will reemerge to a degree in the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*.

¹⁹ Arman, in Arman and Hahn, *Mémoires accumulés*, 24.

cloakroom tickets, ends of string, bicycle wheel spokes — in a word all the old rubbish which you find in dustbins or on a refuse dump.²⁰

Schwitters's embrace of unconventional materials, coupled with Pollock's achievement of a wholly charged surface, at once relief-like and dizzyingly optical, led Arman to the development of his first ambitious body of work, the *Cachets*. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the gesturality of Pollock's process also had an impact on Arman's *Cachet* technique, and the material nature of Schwitters's *Merzbilder* inspired Arman's experimentation with his own works' compositions.

In addition to taking in these important exhibitions, Arman was also known to have read regularly the review *Art d'aujourd'hui*, in which he discovered the Dutch artist Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman, who worked with stamps and typography in repetitive motifs.²¹ Those works, too, served as a model for the lyrical and expressive possibilities of a mechanical medium and a repetitive gesture. Arman recalled the force of these three artists' influence on his work:

à la suite de la découverte dans la revue Art d'aujourd'hui, d'un article sur le graphisme et, parallèlement, de la visite d'une expositions de Kurt Schwitters, à Paris — ma vision change tout à coup. . . . Avec l'exposition de Schwitters, les quelques Pollock que j'ai vus au studio Facchetti et surtout ce numéro d'Art d'aujourd'hui sur le graphisme, j'ai commencé à expérimenter avec des tampons encreurs, avec des empreintes d'objets, des choses comme cela. Il y a eu ainsi, petit à petit, dès le milieu des années 50, l'introduction de l'objet, non pas en tant que tel, mais sous forme d'empreintes et de traces.

after [my] discovery of an essay on graphism in the magazine *Art d'aujourd'hui* in 1953 or 1954 and, at the same time, [my] visit to a Kurt Schwitters exhibition in

²⁰ Reprinted in Alan Bowness, *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Lord's Gallery, 1958), n.p. Schwitters's manifestos and theoretical writings of the 1920s advocated the use of whatever materials one had access to, and proclaimed that such things — string, rope, wire mesh, cotton balls, scrap metal, etc. — were as valid and valuable as paint and canvas in the production of artworks.

²¹ Arman remarked that what drew him to Werkmann were his “very interesting repetitions in printing, like M M M M M or Lenin Lenin Lenin Lenin.” See Wegner, “Arman in London,” 8. Arman's attraction to Werkmann's technique of repeating the same form over and over makes the work he would begin to do in his first series, the *Cachets*, a logical move. It also foreshadows the type of compulsive collection of like objects that he would later do in the *Accumulations*, to be discussed in Chapter Four.

Paris — my vision suddenly change[d]. With the Schwitters exhibition and the few works by Pollock that I had seen at the Studio Facchetti, and above all that issue of *Art d'aujourd'hui* on graphism, I started experimenting with inkstamps, with imprints of objects, things like that. There was thus, little by little, from the mid-1950s, the introduction of the object, not as such, but in the form of imprints and traces.²²

In this statement Arman relates — and at first almost conflates — the object itself and its index. He considers the inclusion of the object's imprint or trace to be in the category of “introducing the object”; this understanding of his will be important to my interpretation of his early works as an integral part of his pursuit of an object-based realism. If he envisions realism as the inclusion of the literal “real” in the work of art, and if he sees the index as equal or at least analogous to “the real,” then the *Cachets* and *Allures d'objets*, despite their abstract pictorial form, figure among Arman's earliest realist pictures.

Arman's interest in the index and its expressive capacity as “the real” is well documented in his earliest encounters with experimental art. The artist remarked in a 1960 essay that he had been impressed by a project that his friend Yves Klein had undertaken in 1947: the artist had used blue paint to imprint his hands on fabric and paper and had expressed his desire to similarly imprint the bodies of judokas during combat.²³ That aspect of Klein's work, which Arman deemed to be on equal footing with his experiments with space and color, seems to have resonated with — or perhaps had an impact on — the latter's artistic sensibility, as the imprint would shortly become an essential aspect of his own work. The shared interest in the physical impression represents a concern for the possibilities of the indexical mark: the creation of something

²² Arman in Abadie and Arman, “L'archéologie du futur,” 37-38.

²³ Arman, “L'esprit de la couleur,” in *Yves Klein* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1983), 260.

that is at once the presentation and the representation of a physical reality by the imprinting of that real entity onto a second surface.²⁴

For this and many other reasons, Arman's friendship with fellow Niçois Klein turned out to be a central factor in Arman's early artistic growth.²⁵ The two had met at the judo school in Nice in 1947; at the time, Klein was not yet a painter by career, but Arman had already begun his amateur artistic practice. As their relationship developed, Klein began making art in a serious way, and his painting career picked up quickly. He would offer Arman advice on his work, but more importantly, he would invite Arman to Paris, where he was showing his work and where his artist parents ran in intellectual circles, and the two would look at art and meet artists and gallerists together. Arman was thus exposed to the Parisian art scene and the way was paved for him to make his entrance there.²⁶

²⁴ For Klein, this interest would play out throughout his career, in such works as the *Cosmogonies*, made by imprinting natural phenomena such as wind, rain, and dust into a painted surface, or, more famously, the *Anthropométries*, made by covering nude women — “*pinceaux vivants* (living paintbrushes)” — in blue paint and directing them to press their bodies against a blank canvas, leaving the imprint of their breasts, stomach and thighs. For Arman, the index would be the key to his first two series of ambitious works, the *Cachets* and the *Allures d'objets*.

²⁵ On the topic of Klein's influence on Arman, Restany would make typically grandiose claims about the artists' fateful meeting, declaring that Klein's “*délire imaginatif* (imaginative delirium)” sparked in Arman “*une pensée anticipatrice . . . une perception cosmique* (an anticipatory thought . . . a cosmic perception).” Their meeting, according to Restany, was what inspired Arman to seek “*une dimension expressive supérieure*[.] . . . *une façon de voir et de sentir mieux adaptée aux exigences du présent* (a superior expressive dimension[.] . . . a way of looking and feeling better adapted to the demands of the present).” See Restany, “Arman: un regard,” 269-270. In Restany's eyes, Klein was the genius of his generation, and his aura as an artist was the life force of what would become the Nouveau-Réaliste movement. Although Restany's language is characteristically hyperbolic and his claims overblown, his fundamental point is true: Arman's friendship with Klein was crucial to the former's development as an artist and to his insertion in a certain artistic scene: one found not in the major galleries but in a small cadre of newly opened spaces run by progressive gallerists looking for the new avant-garde. Despite their divergent artistic projects — and without simply accepting Restany's claim of a shared sensibility to ascending to a “superior expressive dimension” — there is an early indication that the two artists had in common an interest in the key artistic strategy of the index, which would turn out to be vital for both of them as each worked through his own definition of “realism.”

²⁶ Arman was conscious of *art brut* and of the lingering presence of Surrealism, to which he had been exposed at the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, designed by Duchamp, Breton, and Frederick Kiesler at the Galerie Maeght. He also knew Mathieu's performative painting actions, as well as — beginning in 1957 — the *décollage* practices of his future Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues Hains, Villeglé, and Dufrene. Michel

Cachets

Tout avait commencé par les cachets.

Everything started with the *Cachets*.²⁷

As I have suggested, Arman's strategies for realism began with his explorations into the possibilities of the indexical mark. His first mature series, the *Cachets*, involved his using inkstamps to create compositions on pieces of patterned fabric (Figure 3.3) or blank canvas or paper (Figure 3.4). These works are certainly rooted in the pictorial: they are paintings made by another means. More specifically, they are abstract paintings in all-over compositions that remove the artist's autographic touch from the equation and substitute a mechanical gesture and a regular, predetermined form whose repetition generates the composition. Restany would later argue that Arman's turn to the use of real-world objects for the making of his pictures was part of his disillusionment with the perceived evasiveness of lyrical abstraction, the way abstract painting as an art form allowed the individual artist to retreat into his or her own psyche and ignore or deny the reality of the exterior world. Thus, for Restany, the *Cachets* were a first step in what would become Arman's "sociological" realism, one grounded in the reality of consumer society in the period of the *Trente Glorieuses*, and one in which "*chaque fragment objectif de la réalité en est doté [du pouvoir expressif du réel sociologique], au même titre que la réalité elle-même dans son ensemble* (each objective fragment of reality is

Giroud has tracked Arman's familiarity with contemporary art in the early years of his career. He remarks that, in addition to his consciousness of the trends noted above, Arman was marginally aware of the "dada spirit" lingering in Camille Bryen's circle, as well as lettrisme. Arman's knowledge of these movements, however, was mostly secondhand — he learned from Klein, who ran in these circles in Paris. See Michel Giroud, "Arman et Fluxus," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 82-87.

²⁷ Michel Conil Lacoste, "Arman: colères et cumuls," in *Le Monde*, April 19, 1972, 24.

endowed with [the expressive power of the sociological real], on the same basis as is reality itself as a whole).”²⁸

But Arman’s reaching for “real” objects, for the index of a tangible, real-world referent, can be seen also as a more complex and nuanced engagement with issues of representation and realism within this artistic and social context. That is, Arman’s combination of indexicality with mechanicity — his use of the unique imprint of a physical object, but one that is repeated as though by a machine — and his combination of lyrical compositions with standardized forms, may be seen as problematizing key artistic issues of subjectivity and anonymity, of the human and the machine, of expression and rote repetition. He makes explicit the coexistence in his works of the personal and the standardized in such *Cachets* as *Minuscules* of 1957 (Figure 3.5), in which he juxtaposes the mechanically produced shapes that the picture comprises with his own hand-scrawled signature, whose scale is exaggerated so as to command as much attention as any other element of the work.

Further blurring the lines of painterly expression and industrial technicity, Arman exhibited the *Cachets* alongside his early abstract paintings at the Galerie du Haut-Pavé in 1955 and at the Galerie La Roue in 1957, thus putting them in direct relation and encouraging the viewer to draw a connection between the expressionist paintings and the stamped prints.²⁹ He described the contents of the 1955 exhibition thus: “*Des peintures et des gouaches légèrement de-staëliennes et poliakoffiennes, presque géométriques, mais*

²⁸ This was Restany’s refrain about Nouveau Réalisme in general: a sort of synecdochic understanding of how the work of art could comprise solely the real of everyday life. Pierre Restany, *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, 45.

²⁹ Asked about the strategy of exhibiting the abstract paintings and the *Cachets* together, Arman replied, “*le point commun entre les gouaches et les Cachets pourrait être des relations de couleurs et d’harmonie.* (the common point between the gouaches and the *Cachets* could be the color relations and harmony).” Arman, in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 38.

assez lyriques . . . [et] les premiers ‘Cachets’: deux out trois petits formats, faits uniquement d’empreintes de cachets en caoutchouc de différentes couleurs (Some paintings and gouaches, slightly De Staëlian or Poliakoffian, almost geometric, but pretty lyrical . . . [and] the first ‘Cachets’: two or three small format ones, made only of imprints of rubber stamps in different colors).”³⁰ Here, Arman points to the coexistence of the expressionistic and the geometric in his abstract paintings, thus positioning himself in the middle of the *chaude/froide* quarrel where, I argue, his *Cachets* take up even more compelling residency.

Arman later described that first exhibition of paintings and stampings as “*un mélange bizarre* (a bizarre mix),” and he acknowledged that the unifying factor among the paintings, gouaches and *Cachets* was their shared harmony of form and color relations, an acknowledgment that amounted to an admission of somewhat of a formalist practice, what he called “*une certaine recherché esthétique malgré tout* (a certain sought-after aesthetic in spite of everything).”³¹ Despite that cohesion among his diverse works in the 1956 show, he did not consider the exhibition a success. He recalled reading the criticism of the show, especially that lobbed by Restany: “*Il [Restany] disait . . . ‘Une exposition très intéressante, mais ce que j’aimerais voir se développer chez lui, c’est plutôt la partie la plus nouvelle de son exposition, les choses faites avec les tampons. J’aimerais qu’il se laisse aller.’ Alors, je me suis laissé aller* (He [Restany] said . . . ‘A very interesting exhibition, but what I would like to see him develop is more the newer

³⁰ Arman, in Alain Jouffroy, “Arman,” *L’Œil* no. 126 (1965): 25.

³¹ He clarified, “*A la grande différence des artistes dada, je n’ai jamais refusé l’esthétisme (c’est, je crois, ce qui caractérise d’ailleurs des gens comme César, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Tinguely ou moi-même)* (In great contrast to the dada artists, I never refused aestheticism (it is, I believe, what also characterizes people like César, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Tinguely, or myself).” Arman, in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 38.

part of his exhibition, the things done with stamps. I would like him to let himself go.’ So, I let myself go.)”³² For his second exhibition, at the Galerie La Roue in 1957, Arman made the *Cachets* the central focus; as he recounts, “*La couverture de l’invitation représentait un ‘cachet.’ Cela prouve que j’y attachais plus d’importance qu’au reste* (The cover of the invitation showed a *Cachet*. That proved that I attached more importance to those than to the rest).”³³

As Arman turned his attention to the *Cachets*, he unceremoniously abandoned the abstract painting that had preoccupied him for the past several years. In developing the *Cachets*, Arman did more than begin a new series of artworks: he established a new category of artmaking. As Henry Martin argues,

Even though it [*Cachet*] is a very simple word that defines a genre in the same way that ‘collage’ or ‘still life’ or ‘portrait’ does, it clearly enough is not one of the recognizable terms of ‘art history.’ The genre it describes has no precedents. When Arman gave up ‘nice’ painting, he did more than simply change from one genre to another; he was beginning to work with a totally new and totally personal genre. The artist is no longer a maker of objects within a tradition defined by objects that others have made before him: he is the inventor of regions of sensibility so new and so different that he must also create a new descriptive terminology.³⁴

Such was the situation, one could argue, for many of Arman’s co-generationists who were working outside the bounds of painting and sculpture and forging new terrain. Thus the artists who would come to form the Nouveaux Réalistes were, around the same time, establishing personal practices in heretofore uninvented genres: *décollage*, *tableau-piège*, *tir*, *méta-matique*. For Arman, the *Cachets* mark the beginning of a singular project that

³² Arman, 1998, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 1, 38.

³³ Arman, 1992, quoted in *ibid.*

³⁴ Martin adds, “Arman’s rejection of his early work is the rejection of one creative identity and the assumption of a new one, the rejection of one concept of culture and the acceptance of another. It is no accident that he is known by his first name only. He has dispensed with genealogy and chosen to be defined only in the present.” Martin, *Arman*, 9.

continually probes the questions of “the real,” realism, and representation in successive series of newly invented artistic categories.

In an important but highly understudied monograph on Arman, Martin staked the claim that the *Cachets* were the key moment in Arman’s œuvre because they represent the first moment in which Arman demonstrated his implicit intention to define a new genre of art-making — an exercise that he would then repeat throughout his career.

Martin explains:

The *cachets* . . . are a new genre not because they are an unmistakable visual departure from all of the world’s art that preceded them. They are a new genre because such — implicitly — was the intention of the author. Sufficient proof for this assertion is in the existence of the word *cachet* itself. The invention of the word is proof of the felt necessity for its existence. Arman has chosen to think of these objects as *cachets* and not as paintings, and there is therefore no reason to think of them as anything else.³⁵

Such an argument resonates with my approach to Arman’s self-definition as a realist: rather than arguing about whether that term is befitting of the kind of work he produced, we must accept the term and treat the works as realist, and seek to understand what realism meant to Arman and his œuvre. Likewise, as Martin makes clear, we must acknowledge the artist’s will to define a new genre in the *Cachets*, and seek to understand why he felt compelled to establish a practice outside those that already existed historically — why it was that he found painting, sculpture, collage and the like to be inadequate for his particular artistic vision.

At once warm and cold abstraction

The earliest *Cachets*, despite their comprising standardized forms, bear a resemblance to the kinds of gestural abstraction that, as Bouhours puts it, privilege

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

“*l’agir contre le faire, l’action contre le fait* (acting over making, the action over the made).”³⁶ The repetitive, almost obsessive gesture of stamping in the *Cachets*, with its evident speed, is equally vulnerable to accident and chance. There is thus a significant strain of disorder that coexists with the order imposed by the regularity of the stamped shapes.³⁷

The lyricism of certain of the *Cachets*’ compositions works in concert with a sort of mechanicity attained by the standardized forms of the stamps used to produce them. In this sense, these pictures, which are very much in the language of painting — two-dimensional forms on a flat, rectangular support, hanging on a wall — do not outright reject or deny either of the dominant currents within French pictorial expression at this moment, that is, warm and cold abstraction. Rather, the *Cachets* operate in the liminal zone between the two, or indeed allow for the unnerving coexistence of each form of abstraction. There is a certain humanness — a warmth — in the intuitive composition of the stamped shapes. The arrangement of the regular, repeated forms on the linear support is not based on a grid or a pattern, but on the artist’s intuition; they thus do carry a quality of the personal and even the lyrical. There is a sense of spontaneity of placement that runs counter to our understanding of the regularity and mechanicity of the motion of repeatedly impressing the uniform stamp onto the support.³⁸

³⁶ Jean-Michel Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 27.

³⁷ As I shall argue in Chapter Four, Arman’s later series, the *Accumulations*, retains this duality via the hint of an almost grid-like order to the objects that are otherwise arranged in a haphazard manner — that is, with some objects upside-down or with labels facing in various directions (Figure 3.6).

³⁸ Barbara Rose has compared the *Cachets* to Andy Warhol’s paintings of dollar bills (Figure 3.8), which she claims were made, in their earliest manifestation, by repeatedly imprinting a banknote-shaped inkstamp. The Warhol catalogue raisonné disputes this, describing the process as involving rather the silkscreening of a drawing of a dollar bill. Warhol’s earlier series of *S&H Green Stamps* (Figure 3.9) were, however, achieved by inking stamps carved from art-gum erasers, so these perhaps make for a more apt comparison. Nevertheless, Arman’s *Cachets* did come first, but more important, they have a different effect that rests on the irregularity of the composition. Whereas Warhol’s stamps are arranged in a grid, covering

In *Untitled* of 1954 (Figure 3.7), for instance, it is that regularity and mechanicity — the homogeneity of the forms and the blatancy with which the repeated shapes declare the mechanical nature of their emergence via stamping — that want to force the *Cachet* into the camp of geometric or cold abstraction. As Bouhours suggests, the added element of the machine-made floral motifs on some of the fabrics Arman uses as a support augments this personal-mechanical juxtaposition, where the factory-fabricated textile stands in contrast to the erratic, hand-stamped forms atop it.³⁹ Bouhours sees that “*action automatique et obsessionnelle* (automatic and obsessive action)” by which Arman imprints the *Cachets* as “*caractérisant, selon la définition qu’en fit Harold Rosenberg, l’action painting* (characterizing, according to Harold Rosenberg’s definition, action painting).”⁴⁰

It is the ironic subjectivity of Arman’s *Cachets* that established, already in 1954, a project that functions within a dialectic of the genuine and the spectacle. The authentic expression of the artist is still at least partially present; his personal mark is stamped out, so to speak, not as immediately as a calligraphic brushstroke, but in the directness with

every square inch of the support evenly in a geometrical and symmetrical pattern, Arman’s inkstamps travel spontaneously across the surface of the canvas, conveying a sense of the artist’s choice and intuition and injecting a feeling of dynamism that the Warhol pictures lack. Warhol’s *S&H Green Stamps*, though uneven in ink density, are more strictly mechanical, whereas Arman’s *Cachets* play on the boundary between the human and the machine, the intuitive and the standardized. For more on Warhol’s stamp and dollar-bill paintings, see George Frei and Neil Printz, eds., *The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 116-150. For references to Warhol’s stamped paintings in relation to the *Cachets*, see Rose, “Arman à New York,” in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 42.

³⁹ Bouhours discusses the juxtaposition of “*deux réalités visuelles fort disparates, l’imprimé mécanique d’un motif de décoration florale fabriqué par une machine selon une trame parfaitement régulière . . . et un effet de ‘surcharge’ des Cachets affirmant au contraire une finesse du trait, appliqués selon un mode répétitif, erratique et irrégulier du fait qu’il est le produit d’un geste humain* (two strongly disparate visual realities, the mechanical printing of a motif of floral decoration fabricated by a machine according to a perfectly regular weave . . . and an effect of ‘surcharge’ of the *Cachets* affirming on the contrary a fineness of line, applied according to a repetitive, erratic, and irregular mode by virtue of the fact that it is the product of a human gesture).” Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

which the *Cachets* make evident the process of their realization. The overlapping forms compromise the integrity and the content of the individual stamps, to make the composition more about the arrangement of those forms into an all-over record of the artist's liberated gesture. Upon seeing an early *Cachet*, one grasps instantly the method of its making: one sees Arman's arm stamping repeatedly, and one understands that the resultant composition is the fruit of the decisions he made — even in a state of automatism — as an individual creating a harmonic, unified picture. He employs the “cold” — uniform shape, mechanical gesture — and arrives at the “warm.” A process that would seem to produce an anonymous, anti-subjective form — the form of bureaucracy, most familiar to these stamps' quotidian use — turns out to be an expression of that very artist, via the intervention of accident, chance, and intuition. Compounding the concurrence of the personal and the standardized, each of the *Cachets* is, significantly, a unique work. While these pictures have the character of a print — literally, in that the images they comprise are printed onto the surface — each is in fact a single work, an edition of one. The individuality of each *Cachet* adds to the sense of a lingering authorship in spite of the mechanical technique that tends to subvert it.

One might best understand the simultaneous objectivity and subjectivity present in the *Cachets* by comparison: such an effect would be achieved again, by different but related means, in the future Nouveau-Réaliste Jean Tinguely's *Méta-matics*, which he began producing in 1958. The *Méta-matics* are “painting machines”: Tinguely used scrap metal, found objects, and mechanical parts to create machines that would allow the viewer to select and attach a marker, press a button, and watch as the contraption used that marker to create an abstract composition (Figure 3.10). These apparatuses operated

as a system of mechanically producing works that mimicked the personal, gestural style of expressionistic abstract painting. The resultant “paintings” (Figures 3.11 and 3.12) have the appearance of spontaneity, a composition that was not predetermined but that emerged impulsively. But the gestures retain some of the cold anonymity of the machine that produced them: the machines’ movements are jerky and spastic, and the resultant marks on the page have a roughness to them that speaks to the convulsiveness of the sputtering machine rather than the controlled and fluid gesture of the human hand.

The *Méta-matics* thus share with Arman’s *Cachets* that striking discord between the gestural and the mechanical, the personal and the anonymous. In both cases, the artists can be seen to be engaging critically with an art form that they found to be an inadequate mode of expression. Tinguely and Arman both mocked abstract painting’s claims of being the highest expression of the individual, the representation of an interior life or spirit. By reproducing the highly personal form of individual expression through mechanical means, Tinguely and Arman demystified it, deflated its authority.⁴¹ And at the same time, they called attention to a slipperiness between individuality and anonymity. Like Arman’s *Cachets*, Tinguely’s *Méta-matics* leave no indication of the identity of the “artist” who produced them — that is, the viewer who selected the marker and pressed the button to make the machine operate. The marks, despite their unique character, are anonymous, and declare themselves so by their automatized look and their lack of calligraphic or gestural fluidity.

⁴¹ Rauschenberg can be seen achieving a similar effect in his celebrated pictures *Factum I* and *Factum II* (Figures 3.13 and 3.14) of 1957. For this pair of paintings, Rauschenberg first imitated the sweeping, dripping, impulsive gestures of the Abstract Expressionists in *Factum I* and then created a nearly identical replica in *Factum II*, demonstrating the fallacy of those gestures’ spontaneity, individuality, and uniqueness.

Arman's *Cachets* likewise play with the anonymity-individuality dyad, for although the composition speaks to an individual's expressive choice in arranging the forms, the identity of that individual is nowhere in the signs themselves: they are not autographic brushstrokes but uniform, repeated, mechanical marks. In that sense, they share a certain characteristic with the torn-poster works by the *affichistes* Raymond Hains, Jacques Villeglé, François Dufrêne, and Mimmo Rotella, all of whom would become members of Nouveau Réalisme. Those artists' *décollages* — literally, ungluings — were made by cutting or ripping down sections of street posters that had been torn and defaced by anonymous passersby (Figures 3.15 and 3.16). The tears in the top layers of advertisements or political propaganda reveal fragments of the layers beneath, and the play of form and color — in the rips themselves and in the juxtapositions of colors, words and images that they engender — create compositions that, like Arman's *Cachets*, have much in common formally with abstract painting. The difference here, as with the *Cachets*, concerns the means by which such abstract compositions were produced. The tears in the street posters of the *décollages* have a quality of individuality, even of personal expression. But at the same time, they are anonymous — made by any number of unknown and unknowing hands over a period of time. As with the *Cachets*, one understands by looking at the *décollages* just how they were made: one can envision the gesture of the tear, whether it is the controlled ripping of a small section, or a dramatic sweep of the arm across a large expanse of the poster (Figure 3.15).⁴² And in both cases, the resulting rips and stamps, respectively, stand as indexes of a gesture.

⁴² The issues of individuality and anonymity had a particular charge at that particular moment of artistic inquiry. The position of the individual within the rapidly developing consumer society was in crisis. Debord speaks of the loss of the individual in favor of a collective mass, a uniform bloc of "public opinion." We see this reflected in the literature and films of the period that exploit the notion of the

Indexicality and representation

The *Cachets* were Arman's first foray into a protracted interest in the index. In his quest to move beyond abstract painting, Arman grappled with a fundamental problem, related to abstract painting and to Art writ large: that of representation. According to Restany, the perceived inevitability of representation in pictorial expression was a key motivation for the Nouveaux Réalistes' abandonment of painting and painting materials altogether. For the danger of representation, as he perceived it, was the distance between the representation and "the real," the necessary loss of reality in the transcription to a representation — even if that representation was abstract. What Arman and the Nouveaux Réalistes sought to do, according to Restany, was to close the gap between "the real" and the representation, by subverting representation itself. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Arman's turn to the object as artistic material was part of his effort, related to the effort of the Nouveaux Romanciers, to skirt the dichotomy between "real" and realism. However, the notion of *presentation* as an alternative to *representation* — principle tenet of Restany's Nouveau-Réaliste doctrine — was highly problematic and certainly more complex than Restany portrayed it to be. The *Cachets* and the *Allures d'objets* provide crucial insight into the way Arman personally navigated the relationship between realism and representation, and illustrate the complexity of his individual realist project. The

anonymity of modern life, the way individuals are incapable of making decisions and rely instead on magazines or advertisements to tell them what to like or want or buy. Georges Perec's seminal novel *Les Choses: une histoire des années soixante* (Paris: Julliard, 1965) is dedicated entirely to the phenomenon of the near-mechanization of the individual, the way he or she becomes an unthinking cog in a well-oiled consumerist machine. In that novel, Perec adopts the language of advertising to narrate the story of the two protagonists, a couple named Jérôme and Sylvie, who navigate their young adult life via the whims of *L'Express* magazine and the commercial advertisements that dictate for them their tastes and ambitions. We also see in Jean-Luc Godard's films characters who almost lack agency. There is a sort of ennui that overtakes Godard's personages, where their individual expression is subsumed by their shallow, consumer pursuits — just as Debord theorized as a general paradigm shift in society at large.

Cachets, as Arman's first ambitious series, represent a pursuit of a more direct relationship to "the real" through what I consider to be a *subversion* of representation, but not an outright rejection of it. And, I shall argue, Arman's will to approach without fully embracing something like presentation, carries through in his most important works of his Nouveau-Réaliste period, the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*.

In order to operate in the liminal zone between presentation and representation, Arman relied on the index, whose crucial characteristic is that its referent is made eminently *present* in the representation. Because the referent itself is used to create the representation — the inkstamp's form is physically impressed onto the support — its actual, tangible reality is not in doubt. Rosalind Krauss defines the index thus: "As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify."⁴³ The impression of a particular inkstamp carries in it the evidence of that inkstamp's existence, testifies to its substantive physical reality, its actual form; the referent inheres in the indexical sign in a way not possible in the symbolic or iconic signs of traditional painting. In an interview in 1975, Arman discussed his most recent drawings and contrasted them to the type of work he was doing in the 1950s with the inkstamps:

[With the *Cachets*] I was doing drawings with rubber stamps; they were not drawings actually, but there was a resemblance because, first of all, they were on paper, and I used ink and watercolor. They were more imprints or tracks of objects, which, to me, was different. . . . It was a technique for stealing the direct image from the object as an action. They were more action drawings than simple drawings.⁴⁴

⁴³ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (1977): 70.

⁴⁴ Arman, in "Romanticism of the Object: Arman's New Drawings," *Arts Magazine* 50, 4 (December 1975): 75.

Here Arman emphasizes the directness — key realist concept — of the transfer of the object's trace onto the support. And he highlights the action of obtaining that direct trace, of “stealing” the image of the object from the object itself, rather than recreating it anew in what would conventionally be called a realist representation. Further, we see that Arman understands the object to contain its own image, which he simply coaxes out onto the support. Arman's notion of an image or sign of the object inherent in the object itself resonates with the contemporary theory of the object-as-sign. Capturing that sign from the object itself is Arman's version of realism. In that sense, it is a form of presentation, rather than representation. Arman's will to capture, contain, and display “the real” itself was thus already fomenting in his first mature series, with the index as its key catalyst.

Nevertheless, when the index is employed as it was by Arman in the *Cachets* — as an aesthetic element, as the building blocks of a picture as though it were simply a substitute for brushstrokes in a painting or pieces of paper in a *papier collé* — the measure of reality gained by the fact of the indexicality of the mark is moderated. It is not wholly compromised — for it is still clear that these marks were made by the imprint of particular objects — but it is diminished in value in favor of the marks' role as contributors to the harmony of the allover composition.

The fact that Arman made the first *Cachets* soon after taking in Schwitters's exhibition and reading the latter's Merz manifesto is telling; for it is clear that Arman has absorbed Schwitters's lesson not only of expanding his cache of materials, but also, crucially, of composing a picture with those materials, of integrating them into a harmonious whole. Arman professed an admiration for Schwitters's “fairly aesthetic material,” including the “quite pretty” collages and rubber-stamp pieces he had seen at

the Galerie Berggruen show.⁴⁵ He affirmed, “Schwitters inspired me to do something different in my own work. And I never refused to include aestheticism.”⁴⁶ I contend that Arman’s esteem of Schwitters’s compositions and his willing embrace of aesthetics continued in his later works, the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, which are often seen as “uncomposed” and “anti-aesthetic.” As I will argue in the chapters that follow, many of those later works exhibit an inclination toward the surface arrangement of forms and colors in much the way that the *Cachets* — and Schwitters’s Merz pictures — do. In making that case, I go against another claim Arman himself made about his relationship to Schwitters — a claim that I believe was influenced by Restany’s insistence on distancing Arman from the too-aesthetic Dadaist. Arman wrote in 1960 that “a fundamental and definitive difference exists in the result and the approach” of Schwitters’s work versus his own. He continued:

Chez Kurt Schwitters, nous assistons à une recherche délibérée d’harmonies et d’assemblages esthétiques; pour lui, plus importante que le matériau, se trouve d’abord la possibilité de la valeur plastique des objets et celle de leur conjugaison; de plus, Kurt Schwitters fut toujours sensible au sens littéraire des éléments choisis. J’affirme que l’expression des détritius, des objets, possède sa valeur en soi, directement, sans volonté d’agencement esthétique les oblitérant et les rendant pareils aux couleurs d’une palette.

With Kurt Schwitters, we witness a deliberate search for aesthetic harmonies and assemblages; for him, more important than the material is first of all the possibility of the plastic value of objects and the value of their conjugation; furthermore, Kurt Schwitters was always sensitive to the literary meaning of the chosen elements. I affirm that the expression of detritus, of objects, possesses its value in itself, directly, without a will to aesthetic arrangement obliterating them and rendering them equal to the colors of a palette.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Arman, “Interview conducted by Susan Hapgood,” 107. Arman contrasted Schwitters’s pleasant artworks with the merely “shocking” readymades that Duchamp produced.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Arman, “Réalisme des accumulations [July 1960],” in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 251.

Arman stakes the claim that Schwitters eradicates the specific object qualities of the materials he employs, and treats them rather like raw form, the building blocks of a composition. At the same time, he notes that Schwitters remains attracted to the “literary” connotations of the various elements that his collages comprise. His own practice, he suggests, breaks with both those features: in the first place, his objects are not simply signs awaiting “conjugation” or subsumption to a structure to generate meaning; but nor are they carriers of “literary” meaning in the usual sense of the term. Arman’s claim that objects possess their own inherent value that would be disturbed by some kind of artistic intervention is a clear glossing of Restany’s own theories that were just beginning to be disseminated. Restany had published in April 1960, three months before Arman wrote the above passage, his first manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, in which he famously referred to “*la passionnante aventure du réel perçu en soi et non à travers le prisme de la transcription conceptuelle ou imaginative* (the passionate adventure of the real perceived in itself and not through the prism of conceptual or imaginative transcription).”⁴⁸

Arman’s statement, written just after his participation in an exhibition, organized by Restany, that included six of the artists who would soon sign the Declaration of Nouveau Réalisme, was clearly motivated by his involvement in that new circle. Not only does he take up Restany’s position on the autonomy of the object as art and the non-intervention of the artist, but he also echoes the latter’s imperative to establish the originality or exceptionality of his work.⁴⁹ Despite courting certain associations with

⁴⁸ Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 265.

⁴⁹ Indeed, as Restany worked to unite his group of artists, he insisted that they talk and write about their work more frequently. Périer reports, “*Les artistes du groupe doivent s’exprimer le plus souvent possible et expliquer leurs démarches. Restany juge ce travail très important* (The artists of the group must express themselves as often as possible and explain their processes. Restany considers that work very important).” Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 183. It comes as no surprise that the texts produced by Restany’s artists, upon his urging, would echo the claims he was so fervently promoting about the new realism.

historical precedents, particularly Dada, Restany — and here, Arman — was careful to affirm the differences in their respective approaches, in order to repudiate criticisms of derivativeness that were often deployed against the so-called neo-avant-garde.⁵⁰

To look at the works themselves, without allowing the artist's or the critic's motivated claims to interfere, is to see clearly the affinity between Schwitters's practice and Arman's, particularly the *Cachets* that Arman began creating in 1958, in a larger format, as Restany had suggested he do. Both artists harmonize and aestheticize, and the professed "directness" of Arman's presentation of the object is difficult to conjure when one is confronted with the abstracted and aestheticized compositions of the newer *Cachets*, where it is often difficult or impossible to identify the specific objects the artist has appropriated to make these works. In fact, in a statement made just a few years later, Arman contradicted his own prior claims and declared, "*Ce qui nous différencie également des dadaïstes, c'est que nous cherchons la beauté. . . . Si vous voulez, nous serions beaucoup plus consciemment artistes que les dadaïstes* (What differentiates us [the Nouveaux Réalistes] from the dadaists is that we seek beauty. . . . If you will, we would be much more consciously artists than the dadaists)."⁵¹ It is noteworthy that the

⁵⁰ Restany's praise for "Réalisme des Accumulations" attests to the potential coercion of his ideas on Arman. Restany wrote that Arman's text "*témoigne de la définitive clarté de cette prise de conscience. . . . Ce texte est capital, du fait-même de la netteté de la prise de position. Tous les développements ultérieurs de l'œuvre d'Arman sont en germe dans cette déclaration de principe qui est en même temps une auto-définition* (is a testament to the definitive clarity of [Arman's] realization. . . . This text is essential, owing to the sharpness with which he takes up a position. All further developments of Arman's œuvre are latent in this declaration of principle which is at the same time a self-definition)." Restany, 1967-1968, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 26.

⁵¹ Arman gave the example of Spoerri's selective ordering of his *tableaux pièges*, in which he did capture the reality of a meal, "*mais il n'a pas tout collé autour de lui. Il a choisi le format, le lieu, la situation* (but he did not glue everything around him. He chose the format, the place, the situation)." Arman also invoked Villeglé's intervention, which "*consiste à rechercher l'emplacement idéal permettant d'optimiser plastiquement le rapport entre le matériau et sa présentation* (consists in seeking the ideal placement allowing him to optimize plastically the relationship between the material and its presentation)." Arman, quoted in Bouchet, "'Poubelles' et 'Accumulations,'" 80.

pro-art stance and embrace of aesthetics were precisely what set Schwitters apart from his Dada contemporaries as well — and Arman had even praised Schwitters in particular for maintaining those commitments despite the “diehard Dadaists’” rejection of aesthetics in favor of more literary and political aims.⁵²

A shift toward the lyrical

After seeing the first *Cachets* and being “[f]rappé par l’incroyable richesse du résultat, la somptuosité des couleurs d’encre, la densité de texture de l’image (struck by the incredible richness of the result, the sumptuousness of the colors of ink, the density of the image’s texture),”⁵³ Restany had implored Arman to work in a larger format, in order to transcend the pictorial boundaries of easel painting in much the same way that Abstract Expressionism had.⁵⁴ He saw the *Cachets* as the “*répétition d’un geste tendant à une accumulation d’empreintes objectives* (repetition of a gesture tending toward an accumulation of objective imprints).”⁵⁵ This practice of accumulation — here, the accumulation of indexical marks, but later the accumulation of actual objects — is, as I noted earlier, fundamental to Arman’s project. It is also what led Restany to describe

⁵² Arman, “Interview conducted by Susan Hapgood,” 107. In fact, Schwitters’s aestheticism and pro-art stance were the grounds on which he was refused membership in the Berlin Dada group. See Hans Richter’s account of Richard Huelsenbeck’s rejection of Schwitters and the latter’s subsequent establishment of his own pro-art brand of Dada in “Hanover Dada,” in *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 137-154.

⁵³ Restany, “Arman: un regard,” 269.

⁵⁴ Restany was at the time a champion of *informel*, so it comes as no surprise that he would advocate for an expansion of scale and a turn to the more freestyle arrangement of marks. But even beyond the *informel* association, Restany’s suggestion hinted at a preference for the new American abstract painting. According to Jan van der Marck, Restany wrote of Arman’s 1957 show at the Galerie Iris Clert that he regretted seeing such a talented artist limiting himself to the scale of needlepoint and boudoir painting. See van der Marck, “Arman: An Archeologist,” 11. This lament echoes the American rhetoric of French painting at the time as feminine or decorative, in contrast to the raw and masculine American painting. Restany’s incitement that Arman expand the pictures’ scale was in part a push toward overcoming the “Frenchness” — now a liability — of his style, by adopting the format of the new American painting.

⁵⁵ Restany, “Arman: un regard,” 269.

Arman's work in terms of an "*expressivité quantitative* (quantitative expressivity)," which he saw as the hallmark of the artist's œuvre.⁵⁶

Arman did indeed expand the scale of the *Cachets* at Restany's behest. The works of 1958 took on grander dimensions, their structure often loosening to a more expressive finish. *Cachet, Œil du tigre* of 1959 (Figure 3.17), for instance, represents a significant departure from earlier works such as *Untitled* of 1956 (Figure 3.18) or *Government Property* of 1955 (Figure 3.19). At just 47 by 37 centimeters, *Government Property* conjures a small advertising poster, and the cleanliness of the composition — the pure whiteness of the support and the crisp lines of the all-black stamps — strengthen the graphic association. The work feels familiar, like something one might encounter in daily life, particularly in the notoriously poster-plastered metropolises of postwar France. In fact, there is an observable relationship between this type of *Cachet* and the *décollages* of Arman's future Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues, the *affichistes*, such as Villeglé's *Porte Maillot-Ranelagh* of 1957 (Figure 3.20). Both genres of work comprise mechanically produced words, phrases, and images whose overlapping and fragmentation render them nearly indecipherable and yet still tantalizingly legible, as they also serve to create patterns and forms reminiscent of abstract painting. And both also retain the familiarity of their association with the experience of daily life in urban centers whose public spaces have been occupied by layers of superimposed words and pictures.

As Arman increased the dimensions of his *Cachets* to those of a work like *Cachet, Œil du tigre* (Figure 3.21), which measures 150 by 254 centimeters, the internal scale had to be adjusted as well. And the result is a different kind of picture: the all-overness of the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

composition is exaggerated by the proliferation of stamped elements and the inclusion of brushed-on color in addition to the stamped impressions. The stark clarity of *Government Property* has given way in *Cachet*, *Œil du tigre* to an explosion of forms and tones that overlap to the point of obscuring each other, the individual stampings becoming at times indistinguishable. Here Restany's use of the term "accumulation" to describe these compositions feels apt. It seems that in expanding to the larger canvas format, Arman encountered a technical problem: how to make the same everyday, human-scale inkstamps work on a wall-sized support, when the stamps' own dimensions are logically more suited to the small scale of the earlier *Cachets*. The stacking or accumulating of imprints, no doubt inspired by Pollock's layered webs of dribbled paint, was Arman's solution to this challenge. And the resulting picture does read like a work of Abstract Expressionism or *abstraction lyrique* in its engulfing size, its thicket of twisting and tangling forms, its evocation of spontaneity. Indeed, as Jan van der Marck has suggested, the later *Cachets* left behind the tightly structured, almost Constructivist-like compositions of the earlier ones, in favor of "the expansive sweep of the School of Paris painters already aware of Jackson Pollock."⁵⁷ Arman's personal exposure to Pollock's work at the Studio Facchetti exhibition can be credited with what van der Marck identifies as "a recurring tendency in Arman's work toward atomization of image and a concurrent submergence in texture."⁵⁸ It is a tendency that I will argue continues into Arman's subsequent object-based series of his Nouveau-Réaliste years, where even

⁵⁷ Jan van der Marck, "Arman: The Parisian Avant-Garde in New York," *Art in America* 61, no. 6 (November-December 1973): 91.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

whole objects are made to dematerialize as they are subsumed by an overall surface pattern.

The difference between the early *Cachets* and the late is a difference not only of scale but of complexity. And thus while the former versions allow us to read what the stamps say, to ascertain their individual meanings, the latter instead invite us only to behold a kind of all-over pattern, a field of indistinct marks. As a result, each format engenders a different mode of perception in the viewer; as Martin observed,

The first is best seen from up close, the second from a distance. In the first, the individual signs with their individual meanings come clearly into relief, and in the second they disappear into the interstices of a texture. Whereas the first offers an experience that is above all cerebral, the second is more highly visual. . . . In the first, what counts is the force of the idea, and in the second the idea has been rendered subordinate and incorporated into an aesthetic.⁵⁹

Martin adds that in the early *Cachets*, the neutral backgrounds behave as simple supports for the marks — “like so many gratuitous acts in an empty bureaucratic universe.” In the later *Cachets*, the complex backgrounds of “studied and harmonious” color combinations create “an aesthetic universe . . . [that] has been prepared to receive the artist’s gestures, and the gestures are organized in terms of it.”⁶⁰

Arman’s development of the *Cachets* thus represents a curious oscillation between abstraction and figuration, painterliness and mechanicity. He initially abandoned abstract painting to begin making the first *Cachets*, small and minimally aesthetic, “reminiscent of a page in somebody’s passport,”⁶¹ and for that task he favored the legible indexing of “real” objects over their abstraction into a pictorial surface. But his next move was to return, by new means, to the very abstract pictorialism he had renounced,

⁵⁹ Martin, *Arman*, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

but this time maintaining his use of “real” objects and their indexical marks. The result is a series of highly charged pictures that clearly demonstrate an ambition of achieving a new kind of *tableau*, and of doing so via an embrace of the “objective real,” the quotidian objects familiar to all but sentimental to none. Arman himself marked the change in this attitude and practice in a 1959 letter to his then wife Éliane Radigue, in which he described one of the new, larger *Cachets* as “*un peu moins cachet que les autres et un peu plus . . . propositions picturales concrètes* (a little less *Cachet* than the others and a little more . . . concrete pictorial propositions).”⁶² That is, he saw his own newly invented genre evolving toward the aesthetic, maintaining ties to pictorial concerns, all the while evading categorization in an established artistic category. The term “propositions,” notably used also by Restany and Klein, reflects a failure of language to account for a new visual form; a “proposition” is simply a new offering, a new expression, a heretofore unseen mode of art-making. The *Cachets* were beginning to push at the limits of even their own genre.

On the subject of Arman’s aesthetic objective, van der Marck has argued that the primacy of Arman’s “gestural style” in the later *Cachets*, the fact that he deploys the inkstamps in such lyrical compositions, “made the effect of the stampings more important than their readability. In other words, it no longer mattered what Arman used to make the imprint as long as the overall effect was satisfactory.”⁶³ Such an interpretation — which is supported by the illegibility of the stamps and their increasing subsumption to an

⁶² Arman, letter to Éliane Radigue, ca. June 1959, quoted in Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” 29-30. Bouhours explains that the terminology “*propositions picturales concrètes*” is borrowed from the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM)’s *musique concrète*. Arman and Éliane had been in contact with Pierre Schaeffer, GRM’s creator, since 1957. Arman’s artistic practices — especially, as I will argue at the end of this chapter, the *Allures d’objets* — were highly influenced by his exposure to Schaeffer’s theories of music and the “*objet sonore*.”

⁶³ Van der Marck, “Arman: The Parisian Avant-Garde,” 92.

overall motif — challenges Arman’s claims about his belief in the primacy of the object, autonomously signifying.

While I think it is right to test Arman’s claims that he avoids “aesthetic arrangement,” I disagree with van der Marck that Arman’s interest in and even privileging of the overall effect of the composition necessarily implies that the objects used to make the imprints have no bearing on the work. Given Arman’s investment in the index as a means of inserting reality into his work, it is a mistake to dismiss the inkstamps as nothing but a substitute for a paintbrush. Certainly, the abstraction and lyricism of the imprinted motifs are problematic. But that Arman followed up this series with another set of works based on the index (the *Allures d’objets*) and then graduated to using the objects themselves (in the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*), attests to his dedication to the object as such, at first through its trace and then through its physical presence, if not *instead* of compositional harmony, then at least in addition to or in partnership with it.

To understand the primacy of the object and its index in the *Cachets*, despite the lyrical and abstract appearance of the compositions, it is helpful to consider the crucial differences between a Pollock and an Arman. Both artists were seen to be trafficking in a certain form of realism, in that both were “appropriating reality” — Pollock through a brute gesture that tapped into a primordial, universalizing reality; Arman through the literal seizing of “real” things.⁶⁴ Martin reminds us that, despite their mutual claim to

⁶⁴ Raoul-Jean Moulin described the abstract painting of the period as undertaking the “*appropriation totale de la réalité, par la franche manifestation du geste de l’homme. L’artiste d’aujourd’hui cherche pour s’affirmer et s’expliquer l’expression la plus directe, voire la plus brutale; il ne calcule pas ses effets, mais son efficacité est juste et visible. . . . Il libère de leur métaphysique les formes de toutes les civilisations du passé et nous laisse voir à travers elles les traces originelles de nos préoccupations présentes. . . . Le geste seul, pris en tant que mode d’action et de figuration, affranchi de toute servitude de représentation . . . peut entrer en prise directe sur la réalité* (total appropriation of reality, by the free expression of human gesture.

“capturing reality,” each artist’s endeavor is grounded in fundamentally divergent sets of assumptions about reality. Pollock’s paintings are Jungian, universalizing archetypes that are “always pertinent as structure to any mind and all emotions in every place, but without specific relationship to any particular mind in any particular place.”⁶⁵ Arman’s *Cachets*, on the other hand, are deeply rooted in the specifics of time and place and mind and body: those of the contemporary man in modern urban society.⁶⁶ Thus, as Martin averred so succinctly,

Whereas Pollock was dealing with the repetition of gesture, Arman was dealing with the repetition of the peculiar gesture of applying a rubber stamp to a piece of paper. Paint is neutral — simply something that leaves a trace; paint can be collocated only within the purity of a tradition of the fine arts (Pollock used house paint, yes, but one doesn’t need to make an effort to forget it when looking at one of his paintings, and note that he was working with the paint and not with the cans); but a rubber stamp is specific to bureaucracies, border officials, and warehouses (which is something usually difficult to forget when looking at one of Arman’s *cachets*).⁶⁷

That is, the reality of the stamps is inscribed in the surface of the pictures, their specificity as bureaucratic instruments imbuing the semi-abstract compositions with a connection to a particular reality of the exterior world. This is the work of the index, and this is the means by which Arman first distinguishes his pictorial practice as a new form of realism.

Today’s artist seeks to assert and express the most direct, the most brutal expression; he does not calculate its effects, but its effectiveness is correct and visible. . . . He liberates from their metaphysics the forms of all past civilizations and through them shows us the original traces of our present concerns. . . . The gesture alone, taken as a mode of action and of figuration, free from all bondage of representation . . . can come into direct contact with reality.” Moulin, “L’impulsion ou la nature du geste,” typescript, 1962. Fonds Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

⁶⁵ Martin, *Arman*, 13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Between objectivity and subjectivity

In the context of the lyricism of the later *Cachets*, it is important to establish the role of the object and of “objectivity” in those works. Recall Restany’s description of the *Cachets* as the “repetition of a gesture tending toward an accumulation of objective imprints.” What does he mean by “objective”? The term is characteristically — perhaps deliberately — vague. Does he intend that the imprints are free of subjectivity? That they are factual, direct, inarguably “real”? Or is he rather using “objective” as the adjectival form of “object,” meaning simply that these imprints are “of objects”? Restany is, I think, purposefully unclear in his inflated language that seeks always to produce a sort of mythological aura about his artists and their work. The play on “objective” as meaning at once impersonal, factual, and object-based allows Restany to argue for the realism of these imprints in two ways. The anti-subjective sense aligns with contemporary theories of realism in literature, notably by Barthes and the proponents of the Nouveau Roman, who spoke of the end of subjectivity. The *Cachets*’ standardized, repetitive forms and lack of calligraphic marks identifiable with a single artist-subject correspond to that vision of an anti-authorial realism. At the same time, the other sense of “objective” — that of the factual, the tangible, or simply the object-based — insists on Restany’s notion of realism, which he refers to as sociological: a realism grounded in the direct presentation of “real” objects. That definition, too, insists on the non-intervention of the artist, for presentation can be direct and “without transcription” only if the artist removes his or her subjectivity from the equation. In that sense, Restany’s imprecise use of the term “objective” allows for his definition of realism and his interpretation of Arman’s

work to address a number of characteristics pertaining to form, content, and process, and to align with contemporary thoughts on such matters.

***Cachets* as accumulation**

In a recent catalog for an exhibition of Arman's work in Milan, Marco Meneguzzo echoed the notion that the repetition of the stamping gesture in the *Cachets* obliterates in its paroxysm the sense of the individual stamp, "instead creating streams of words that become generic energy flows, completely divorced from their meaning." But rather than accepting the *Cachets* as pure abstractions whose means of creation — that is, whose indexicality — bears no relation to their meaning, Meneguzzo likens the obliterative effect of the rhythmic stamping to a mantra or the Christian rosary, where "the repetition cancels the meaning of the individual words, attaining something higher, revealed by the reiterations and the loss of meaning in the given unique thing," which, he claims, is the case in all of Arman's works.⁶⁸ As I intimated in Chapter Two, and as I will show more completely in Chapter Four, such an understanding of the repetition of a gesture or a form becomes all the more important when Arman begins repeating whole objects in his later series of *Accumulations*. To recognize that such a repetitive impulse and the resulting effect began with the *Cachets* is to identify a fundamental strain coursing through Arman's artistic project: that of pressing up against the limits and parameters of representation, of a sign's ability to signify — or, later, even the referent's ability to stand for itself.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Marco Meneguzzo, "Le plein de l'art," in *Arman: Le plein de l'art* (Milan: Galleria Fonte d'Abisso, with Mazzota, 2003), 21.

⁶⁹ It is worth noting that Arman's preoccupation with repetition and accumulation began with his earliest photographic experiments, which also suggest a certain decontextualization and abstraction of the compositional elements. Asked what gave him the idea of accumulation, Arman replied, "*C'est une chose que j'ai dû ressentir d'abord d'une manière sous-jacente, depuis très longtemps. Quand je prenais des*

A single stamped mark on the canvas would act as a straightforward indexing of the rubber stamp itself: it would function in the same way and with the same value that any index does. To take Barthes's definition of the photographic index, the value of this mark is that, since it *requires* the physical presence of the referent in order to be created, the resulting index declares that "*the thing has been there.*"⁷⁰ This is, for Barthes, photography's *noeme*: "That-has-been," or, "what I see has been here . . . and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred."⁷¹ Barthes poses the photograph against painting, which could never, no matter how "true" it seems, compel him to believe that its referent had actually existed.⁷² The photograph, because of its status as index, provides "a *certainty* that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality."⁷³

That quality of the index — its ability to corroborate reality — is what seems to have attracted Arman's interest and inspired his deployment of the practice of stamping "real" objects. Recall that he was influenced by Schwitters's collages — that is, by works of art that include actual, "real" objects, albeit mostly two-dimensional ones. Here Arman is seeking a way to do the same thing with three-dimensional objects, while producing a two-dimensional work of art; the indexical mark, like the photograph, would appear to be an ideal solution. It declares the reality of the thing that made it, and declares that that

photographies, j'étais attiré par les fourmillements; je prenais par exemple des pigeons sur une place et j'aimais avoir pour finir, en agrandissement, une image composée uniquement de pigeons, ou uniquement de poissons dans l'eau (It is something that I must have at first felt implicitly, for a very long time. When I took photographs, I was attracted by swarms; I took for example [pictures of] pigeons on a square and I liked to end up with, in enlargement [after cropping], an image composed only of pigeons, or only of fish in the water)" — that is, decontextualized masses of apparently infinite sameness. Arman, 1965, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 82.

⁷⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 80.

thing was at one time present (That-has-been), without having to accommodate the thing itself in the work of art. The challenge of the *Cachets* arises, then, when Arman does not stop at the single indexical mark. As I suggested earlier, if Arman had made only one stamped mark on the canvas, there would be no question as to the identity, reality, and former presence of the referent; the mark would function similarly to a photograph in its ability to point to and substantiate it. Arman's *Cachets* veer from such immediacy and substantiality, however, as a result of the strategy of repetition: the compulsive stamping of the object to the point where its identity as an object is subsumed within an abstract composition. This subsumption is the result not only of the overlapping of marks, which obscures their form and content, but of the sheer quantity and ubiquity of those marks, which create an all-over pattern that dominates the viewer's attention. Rather than focusing on a single mark, we are encouraged to take in the composition as a whole, and it is in that orientation of the work that the indexical quality of the stamped marks is compromised. Such is the case both in the early, small-format works such as *Untitled* of 1955 (Figure 3.22), and in the later, larger works such as *Sombre dimanche* of 1958 (Figure 3.23). In *Untitled* (Figure 3.22), though the marks are more discrete and distinguishable, the sense of the index is still overtaken by the global pattern — one that almost resembles a grid, with its near-regularity and near-symmetry. In *Sombre dimanche* (Figure 3.23) the expanded format has only exacerbated the subordination of the index to a compositional whole; here, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between discrete marks, and nearly impossible to identify their referent. The progressively more concentrated thicket of overlapping marks makes literal the loss of the index to the composition. Furthermore, the apparent gestural fluidity of the whole works against the

impression that these marks are meant to stand metonymically for their physical referents.

Despite the clear challenge posed to indexicality by the nature of Arman's pictures, I am unwilling to fully cede the power of the *Cachets*' indexes. And Beate Reifenscheid, in her catalog essay for the important 2001 exhibition of Arman's works on paper, agrees that the indexical quality of the stamped images guarantees their force as works of realism. She goes so far as to agree with Arman about his art's distance from that of Schwitters, and to fortify his claims by analyzing the artists' respective use of objects and indexes. She argues that in contrast to the *Cachets*, Schwitters's Merz pictures do not achieve the same reality effect that Arman's works are able to realize because the "fragments of everyday reality" (newspaper clippings, cigarette papers, ticket stubs, and other found objects) that Schwitters integrates into his compositions are fundamentally "fragmentary," and thus "can only very superficially be considered synonyms for reality."⁷⁴ I would add that Arman's stamped imprints, by contrast, aspire to synecdoche rather than synonymy: the index — which is only a partial or fragmentary trace, recording only the two-dimensional form of one plane of a three-dimensional object — conjures and stands for the whole in the same way that a footprint evokes a whole body. But what Reifenscheid is getting at is the ability of the fragment or the imprint to stand for "reality" at large — and not just for some specific "real" object. This was, for Restany, a fundamental pursuit of the Nouveaux Réalistes, and the critic considered synecdoche (though he never named it as such) to be the key strategy by which these artists could achieve something like the figuring of "the real."

⁷⁴ Reifenscheid, "Arman – The Draughtsman," 153.

Restany declared that the fragments of the “real” world that the Nouveaux Réalistes appropriated are “*dotés d’universelle signification . . . [et] nous donnent à voir le réel dans les aspects divers de sa totalité expressive* (endowed with universal significance . . . [and] show us the real in the various aspects of its expressive totality).”⁷⁵ That is, the fragment contains and expresses all the reality of the whole. By this Restany did not intend that a scrap of newspaper, as Reifenscheid suggests, could express the entire newspaper — that is, become a synonym for that whole reality; rather, he meant that, for example, a portion of layered and torn subway posters (Figure 3.24) could express the whole of “the real” *tout court* — this inexpressible totality that is our reality, “*le Grand Œuvre fondamental* (the fundamental Great Work)”⁷⁶ that is our world. To this point, I think Debord’s analysis of spectacle is useful: the “totality” that Restany saw Nouveau Réalisme “expressing” can be understood as the spectacle — the reified “real” of that moment, “*une Weltanschauung devenue effective, matériellement traduite* (a Weltanschauung that has become actual, materially translated).”⁷⁷ Debord described a situation in which a stream of images, detached from the felt experience of living, creates a “*pseudo-monde à part, objet de la seule contemplation* (pseudo-world apart, object of mere contemplation).”⁷⁸ The simulacral second world is superimposed over “the real,” genuine world, and comes to replace it, until finally, “[*t*]out ce qui était directement vécu s’est éloigné dans une représentation ([e]verything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation).”⁷⁹ Restany’s invocation of synecdoche — his notion that

⁷⁵ Pierre Restany, “A 40° au-dessus de DADA,” 266.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 17.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

fragments of images or objects can represent the whole of reality — correlates with the Debordian notion of reality as representation, that is, as detached and detachable images supplanting a phenomenologically experienced world. Such a pseudo-world, flattened into appearances, is eminently representable.

Arman's dwelling in the interstices between realism and abstraction, between the revelation of the actual "real" and the substitution of representation for it, can be seen as an engagement with the problematic nature of those distinctions in the "real" world itself. Martin has suggested that the core of Arman's œuvre lies in its oscillation between extremes: "The very fact of its being so firmly rooted in present-tense objectivity dictates the impossibility of its being univocal. . . . Arman . . . humbly accepts the destiny of reflecting the inconsistencies in the patterns of thought, feeling, and action that exist in the world around him."⁸⁰ As I shall argue in the following chapters, Arman's œuvre develops in such a way as to suggest that the fundamental duality of "real" and representation was at the heart of his artistic inquiry and indeed defined his realist project.

Allures d'objets

As Arman worked on the *Cachets*, especially on the later, more expressive ones, he recognized the possibility of expanding the technique: objects other than rubber stamps could be inked and impressed in the same way, and he could thus fix the traces of any small item he chose. He began to make use of everyday objects such as jewelry,

⁸⁰ Martin continues, "In terms of the lives we actually live, the elimination of the various modes of dialectical contradiction is no more than an aspiration — one of society's fledgling tendencies that we can do our best to strengthen; but nonetheless, this tendency itself remains a contradiction within the fabric of things as they stand today. . . . The world as yet refuses to be a homogenous 'organism-as-a-whole,' and Arman does not treat it as though it were." Martin, *Arman*, 13.

stones, pieces of glass, needles, and eggs, and in doing so, confirmed that his interest lay less in the mechanical regularity of the repeated stamped form and more in the indexicality of the mark — the character of that sign that is charged with the force of its referent by virtue of its nature as a direct impression of the physical object in question. Furthermore, as I have suggested, the inkstamp and the act of impressing it were in the end not far from the paintbrush and the painter's gesture. Rather than composing in brushstrokes, Arman was seen to be composing in regular stamped forms, but the emergence of the work was not altogether different in kind. Despite his dedication to the power of the index in those works, the lyrical quality of the compositions led many viewers to see the stamps in terms of a mere substitution for a paintbrush — just another means of transferring pigment to surface. Restany surmised that Arman's evolution beyond the *Cachet* technique developed from the realization of that situation: "*Pourquoi se limiter à l'acte fonctionnel du timbrage, si proche somme toute de la plume ou du pinceau?* (Why limit himself to the functional act of stamping, so close in the end to the pen or the paintbrush?)."⁸¹ Arman affirmed his own recognition of the *Cachets*' painterly quality in 1960 when he told fellow Niçois artist Sacha Sosnovsky that the impetus for his move away from the series came from a desire to "*supprimer le pinceau* (do away with the paintbrush)."⁸²

Of course, as I have argued, the standardized look and mechanical nature of the stamps used in the *Cachets* have implications beyond mere painting, chiefly related to touch: they remove the autographic mark of the artist and replace his personal trace with

⁸¹ Restany, "Arman: un regard," 269.

⁸² Arman, in "Klein, Raysse, Arman," 208. Martin pointed out in 1973 that at that point, the *Cachets* were the only series that Arman had ever "called to a complete and irrevocable halt," which he did in 1960 with a work entitled *La Fin des cachets*. Martin, *Arman*, 16.

the uniform trace of the object. But as Arman experimented with and developed the *Cachets*, he began to play with process: he no longer simply stamped, but now threw the inkstamps at the support or dragged them across the surface. He combined various types of stamps within the same composition, and began inking and impressing other objects alongside the inkstamps. *Cachet carmelite* of 1957 (Figure 3.25) comprises just such an amalgam of forms and traces. The standardized stamps of numbers and letters come in with impressions of an apparent wire mesh, as well as scrawl-like traces of some object that appears to have been pulled across the surface in various patterns, from the circular to the zigzag. The expressionist markings recur in *Cachet* of 1956 (Figure 3.26), *Cachet* of 1958 (Figure 3.27) and *Sombre dimanche* of 1958 (Figure 3.28), and anticipate the form and technique of his next series, the *Allures d'objets*.

The progression from these types of hybrid *Cachets* to the early *Allures d'objets* was natural; as Arman's attention shifted from the regularity of the stamping gesture and the imprinted trace to the spontaneity and expressivity of the alternate forms of marking, his focus turned also to the ways in which an object's trace could be the index of that object's behavior as it moved onto or across the surface. Arman described his use of objects: "*Dans les allures, il y avait l'idée de la trace, de la marque, de l'instantané, du déroulement plus que de l'empreinte* (In the *allures*, there was the idea of the trace, of the mark, of the instantaneous, of the continuity more than of the imprint)."⁸³ No longer exactly an impression, the index was now a mapping of the object's spatial and temporal

⁸³ Arman, in Jouffroy, "Arman [1965]," 26.

displacement on the support. Arman described his practice as “collecting” the object’s writing on the paper.⁸⁴

One can already detect a kind of “writing” in certain of the hybrid *Cachets*, such as *Cachet Carmelite* (Figure 3.29), where the forms of some of the black and ochre lines, particularly across the lower-central portion of the canvas, mimic cursive script as if to highlight the metaphor of the object’s calligraphy. Of course, those calligraphic lines, so evocative of handwriting, are ironic in the context of contemporary theorizations of authorial distance and Arman’s own anti-autographic stance — that is, his intentional removal of his own handwriting. Arman replaced the paintbrush with the inkstamp in part to get away from his own autographic mark. But as soon as he began to drag the stamps rather than simply impress them, he enacted a form of handwriting. In such cases, the objects simply became surrogates for the pen or the paintbrush; since their material properties were no longer evident in the traces, the hoped-for “objectivity” gained by the use of non-art objects was thus nullified by that very use. The move to the *Allures d’objets* can therefore be seen as expressing a will to self-effacement and a re-activation of the object as object and not as tool. If it is the trace of the object that interests him, then he must remove himself from the equation in order to allow that trace to express only the object, and not the artist-agent’s will upon it.

In the *Allures d’objets*, the artist’s unique touch is replaced by the *object’s* unique touch, and that transfer is highlighted and problematized by the analogousness of the two. Arman’s works suggest that the object has a behavior and a handwriting specific to itself,

⁸⁴ “Arman emploiera le terme ‘catalyse’[:] . . . l’artiste ‘recueille’ sur le papier la graphie (Arman will use the term ‘catalyze’[:] . . . the artist ‘collects’ the writing on the paper).” Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” 30.

and that the artist's role is simply to bring it forth. The works, Arman tells us, are the objects' own autographic works — it is *they* who represent themselves, who mark their own forms and actions on the support. The artist's own avowal that he is a mere "collector" of the *objects*' "writing" securely locates agency with the object. The resultant compositions emerge not from Arman's willed direction of or violent gesture against the objects, he implies, but from the objects' own inherent physical properties that determine their behavior.

Restany's reading

The *Allures d'objets* were shown for the first time at the Galerie Saint-Germain in Paris in March of 1960. On the occasion of the exhibition, and as an accompaniment to the invitation, Restany composed a text with the playful title "À toute allure" (a pun on the French expression *à tout à l'heure*). In that essay, the critic privileged the notions of the organic and of motion, and implied a sort of natural emergence of the marked forms. But he was keen also to distinguish Arman's works from familiar forms of graphic automatism to which the audience might be tempted to relate them. He explained that while the practices of surrealist automatism "*tendent toutes à réduire à l'extrême la participation consciente de l'artiste au profit d'une spéculation organisée sur les bonheurs du hasard* (all tend to reduce to the extreme the conscious participation of the artist in favor of a speculation organized on the haphazard),"⁸⁵ Arman was instead an active decision-maker, who asserted a certain amount of control that the surrealists readily conceded. Restany wrote:

Arman choisit ses objets en fonction de leur parcours possible sur le papier. Il aménage ainsi une vision fonctionnelle du monde: le resort à boudi, la pelote

⁸⁵ Pierre Restany, "À toute allure [1960]," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 264.

d'aiguilles, le collier de perles fausses ou le galet en forme d'oeuf ne sont rien en eux-mêmes. Notre auteur ne les considère pas en soi mais très précisément et très lucidement dans leur cheminement possible, dans leur virtualité d'inscription au travers d'un espace théorique. Ils sont dynamisés en leur essence. . . . L'objet choisi est baptisé au badigeon, Arman le projette. La finalité dans le geste est strictement graphique: l'allure de l'objet, c'est l'écriture organique de son existence en mouvement. Chaque objet a sa façon d'écrire, qui lui est naturelle. Et Arman ne travaille pas contre nature.

Arman chooses his objects in function of their possible course on the paper. He thus lays out a functional vision of the world: the coil spring, the pincushion, the faux pearl necklace or the egg-shaped pebble are nothing in themselves. Our author does not consider them in themselves but very precisely and very lucidly in their possible progression, in their virtuality of inscription over the course of a theoretical space. They are dynamized in their essence. . . . The chosen object is baptized in distemper, Arman projects it. The finality of the gesture is strictly graphic: the *allure* of the object is the organic writing of its existence in movement. Each object has its way of writing, which is natural to it. And Arman does not work against nature.⁸⁶

Restany makes here a puzzling claim about Arman's relationship to chance. He maintains that Arman's practice is not automatism, because he does not give his project over entirely to chance; he does not surrender his own conscious involvement in the creation of the work. But what he does do, is to *defer* to the objects; that is, he allows the objects that he has selected to determine the nature of his own gesture and of the final composition. Restany used the analogy of orchestral music to explain this notion:

C'est un chef d'orchestre qui travaille sur partition en tenant compte des registres spécifiques de chaque instrument. L'intensité, l'intention, l'envergure de chaque geste varient en fonction de l'objet employé. A chaque objet est assigné un geste et la synchronisation des gestes crée l'intensité harmonique de l'œuvre.

He [Arman] is an orchestra conductor who works on the score while taking into account the specific registers of each instrument. The intensity, the intention, the scale of each gesture vary in function of the object used. To each object is assigned a gesture and the synchronization of gestures creates the harmonic intensity of the work.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Restany thus restores a certain agency to the artist in the process. And yet he concludes his interlude on Arman's divergence from automatism by curiously touting the autonomy of the object, its freedom in determining the composition with no mind to the will of the artist:

Mais l'objet une fois lâché reprend une part de sa liberté. Vivant entre les mains du peintre, il retourne à l'inerte dès qu'il échappe à celui qui l'a choisi et qui l'a lancé. . . . A la volonté de l'homme vient se heurter la raison de l'Objet. Le geste affective est objectivé.

But the object, once released, regains part of its liberty. Living between the hands of the painter, it returns to the inert as soon as it escapes from he who chose and it and who threw it. . . . With the will of man collides the reason of the Object. The affective gesture is objectified.⁸⁸

In a few short sentences, Restany deftly introduces several complex notions that he neglects to define or otherwise unpack. According to Restany, the artist first exerts control by selecting objects not for their inherent object qualities, but for their perceived kinetic potential. Once the objects are selected, it is *they* who determine the actions that will be taken on them. But those actions do not constitute the crux of the creative process. Instead, the object is guided by its own reason, and performs according to it. But on what is that object-reason based? How can an object have reason not imposed or projected on it by a willful human mind? Restany fails to elucidate those questions, but he seems to suggest that the object's reason is specific to its particular form — that each object has an “essence,” as he stated above, and that that essence determines the object's behavior and, consequently, governs Arman's selection and treatment of it.

In attributing the qualities of essence and reason to objects — taking care not to make the obvious leap to anthropomorphism — Restany manages to give them a level of

⁸⁸ Ibid.

agency that stops short of autonomy. Without entirely obliterating Arman's role, he establishes the artist as one who allows the particular object, imbued with its own intrinsic agency-essence-reason, to partly dictate the form his art will take. The justification for such a stance is fairly clear in the works at hand: in an *Allure d'objet* such as *Rectangle noir* of 1958 (Figure 3.30), it is immediately evident that it is the object's behavior, in collaboration with gravity and the artist's gestural force, that has determined the composition — that is, the fact that glass broke into angular shards under the pressure of both forces.⁸⁹ But Restany fails to insist on the import of that crucial collaboration between object and artist. Certainly, the form and scale of the object and its kinetic tendencies determine much of the final composition. But to claim that the object takes on a life or a “reason” of its own the instant it is released from the artist's hand is to falsely attribute agency to an object that would have no kinetic action whatsoever if not for the artist's initial gesture — a gesture charged with intentionality, a conscious choice of how best to draw out that object's indexical trace.

Just as the predetermined forms of the inkstamps constituted only one aspect of the *Cachets* — the other crucial aspect being the artist's willful organization of those forms — the unique marks of the objects employed in this second series become *Allures d'objets* only when their potential is activated by the artist. The relative pressure, density, speed, and direction of Arman's rolling, tossing, dragging or dropping in the *Allures d'objets* parallel the variations of the stamping technique in the *Cachets*. In both cases,

⁸⁹ Likewise, in the later series *Accumulations*, Arman himself avowed that the scale and arrangement of his compositions were dictated by the particular objects they contain. I will address in Chapter Four the pursuant issue of whether this line of thinking constitutes a genre of “direct presentation” that removes the artist as an intervening factor.

the resultant marks — and, more importantly, the form they take as an ensemble — can only be the result of a collaboration between artist and object.

In Restany's text, the object's essence or reason — the two concepts seem to be interchangeable — can be imagined as being directly related to each object's function. For what is the essence or reason of a mundane object if not its very purpose? And yet Arman's communion with or deference to the object and its "natural" tendencies as object have little if anything to do with its actual function or real-life application. His interest in the trace of a pearl necklace lies not in the function of that necklace as necklace — that is, its specific purpose as ornament for a woman's neck — but rather in the strictly formal qualities of the familiar object: the smoothness and heaviness of the pearls, the sinuosity of the strand, the bulbousness of the whole.⁹⁰ And Arman's abandonment of likeness in this series — the shift from the recognizable stamped forms of the *Cachets* to the unidentifiable abstract lines and shapes of the *Allures d'objets* — testifies to his interest not so much in the objects qua objects, but rather in their potential as part of his protracted study of indexicality and its relationship to representation.

Indexicality and representation

With regard to the discussion of indexicality, a later statement by Restany, in a text of 1968, is revelatory: "*Les Allures traduisent chez l'artiste la prise de conscience claire de l'autonomie expressive de l'objet et en corollaire immédiate le détachement du point de vue représentatif. A quoi bon représenter une réalité qui se suffit à elle-même?*" (The *Allures* reflect in the artist the clear realization of the expressive autonomy of the

⁹⁰ Martin refers to the shift from the *Cachets* to the *Allures d'objets* as a turn from the specificity of using standard inkstamps to "the gesture of using objects in general and in ways that they were not apparently intended to be used." Martin, *Arman*, 18.

object and in immediate corollary the detachment of the representative point of view. What good is it to represent a reality that suffices for itself?)”⁹¹ Restany used this observation to claim that Arman’s is an art of presentation, rather than representation.⁹² An exemplary *Allure d’objet* such as *L’Amble de l’oeuf*⁹³ (Figure 3.31) illustrates the problem of Restany’s stance. In this case, the reality is an egg, which Restany would have us believe is being presented, rather than represented, in this work. The egg-reality need not be depicted, he would claim, as it is perfectly capable of standing for itself — here, through its indexical trace. Such assertions are problematic on two fronts: first, the notion of an “expressive autonomy of the object” is foiled by the form of the composition. While the serpentine nature of the marks does reflect the elliptical shape of the egg, incapable of traveling across the paper in a straight line, the vertical (up and down) repetition of those very marks equally insists on the involvement and even the intentionality of the artist. An egg left to its own “expressive autonomy,” freed from the artist’s hand so as to exercise the “reason of the Object,” could never achieve such a pattern of traces. The vertical zigzag is clearly the result of the artist’s rolling the egg by hand, or perhaps tilting the support back and forth, coaxing the egg in one direction and then the other, in order to achieve a certain effect — one that is in fact quite far from the “self-sufficient” form of the egg itself. What remains is an abstract composition that only denotes “egg” once we have been made aware that an egg was used in the process of its making — and even then, it denotes “egg, deferred,” or “egg guided by an outside force.”

⁹¹ Restany, “Arman: un regard,” 269.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 270.

⁹³ This work is one of very few in which the listed materials name the object used to create the traces. In many instances, the only material descriptor given is the vague phrase “traces of an object.” The title that describes the process (the amble of the egg) is also anomalous in the series.

As with the *Cachets*, the coefficient of reality guaranteed by the indexical nature of the artist's process in the *Allures d'objets* — inking and then stamping, rolling, or throwing an actual object so that it leaves behind its imprint — is challenged by the abstract nature of the resultant marks and their aesthetic arrangement on the support. The indexical signs left by the objects used in an *Allure d'objet* most often do not in fact point to — that is, index — the specific object whence they were born: it is impossible, for instance, to identify the referents of such works as *Untitled* of 1956 (Figure 3.32), *Pastrop loin* of 1957 (Figure 3.33), or *Untitled* of 1960 (Figure 3.34). And yet we know, not only from Arman's artistic practice but also from his writing, that the index, with its elevated relationship to reality, was of paramount interest to him. The index represented for Arman a certain access to or corroboration of reality in its ability to stand metonymically for its referent.

In an essay for an exhibition of African art, of which he was a fervent collector, Arman discussed the fragmentary nature of many of the objects on view, and proclaimed, “The pieces of the puzzle, whether or not they are present, are essential to the final result. In certain cases, their absences even magnifies [*sic*] the unknown totality.”⁹⁴ While he was writing here of literal missing parts of formerly whole objects, I think the core of the statement has some force when applied to the notion of the index. In the *Allures d'objets*, for example, we are given incomplete information: we get the trace of the object without the object itself, and the absence of that object in the same way magnifies our sense of it. That is to say, we are impelled to imaginatively construct what is conspicuously *not* there: the referent that created the trace and that inheres in the index because of its

⁹⁴ Arman, “Fragments of the Sublime,” in *Fragments of the Sublime* (New York: J. Camp Associates, 1980), n.p.

physical role in that mark's creation. In a particularly telling moment in a 1975 interview, Arman revealed that he "found that sometimes the print of a smashed violin looks more like a violin than the violin itself. It's like what is called in French the *chant du cygne*, the swan song before the swan dies. It is sometimes more dramatic and effective than a carefully made sketch of the violin."⁹⁵ Here, Arman argued that the index — the trace of the object, even when broken and conceivably abstracted — is more powerful than a reproduction or representation of that object, and he even suggested that the trace can sometimes hold more of a reality coefficient than the object itself. It is clear from this comment that Arman's goal was to attain the maximum authenticity or realness, and that he was exploring the most effective way to present the utmost reality. He had discerned at that point that mimetic representation — in the form of a drawing or painting — was insufficient, and that the indexical mark, as both physical extension and partial representation of "the real," bore a far greater power of realism.

Despite the illegibility of many of the *Allures d'objets*, we know that Arman aspired to legible indexical marks. In fact, Arman rejected certain objects that failed to leave a compelling trace of their form: among the first objects Arman employed in the *Allures d'objets* were felt hats and rags dipped in paint, but the imprints they left were found to be uninteresting because the objects themselves lacked a specific, identifiable shape.⁹⁶ Following those failed experiments, Arman turned to objects whose impressions would retain their particular form or at least hint at their *Gestalt*: springs, chains, jewelry,

⁹⁵ Arman, in "Romanticism of the Object," 75.

⁹⁶ This account of Arman's early experiments with felt hats and rags is reported by van der Marck in "Arman: An Archeologist," 11-13.

and the like.⁹⁷ The fact that the *Allures d'objets* turned out to be so abstract reflects the impossibility of a certain objective realism: despite the realness and presentness of the tangible referents, and Arman's effort to select objects with identifiable *Gestalts* that could be retained in their stamped form, the indexical marks fail. That is, they fail to do what an index, by definition, does: to point to or identify its referent, the real-world object that created it.

In fact, the indexical marks in Arman's *Allures d'objets* were so illegible, and their origins so mysterious, that the invitation to the 1960 exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Germain included a printed insert with a small reproduction of an *Allure d'objet* and the following accompanying text:

ANALYSE D'ALLURE

L'allure reproduite ci-jointe est la synthèse organique de trois gestes autonomes. Les tracés objectifs dont cette œuvre est le résultat s'analysent comme suit:

1° Le cheminement linéaire sinueux et gras figure le parcours d'un galet roulant irrégulièrement sur toutes les faces.

2° La tache éclatée rectangulaire centrale est la marque d'une forte flagellation opérée sur la surface du papier à l'aide d'une lanière de caoutchouc.

3° Le champ de stries parallèles à écartement régulier est produit par la projection rasante d'un collier.

ANALYSIS OF AN ALLURE

The *allure* reproduced here is the organic synthesis of three autonomous gestures. The objective marks from which this work results are analyzed as follows:

1st The linear, sinuous and thick path represents the course of a pebble rolling irregularly on all sides.

2nd The central, bursting rectangular spot is the mark of a strong lashing acted out on the surface of the paper with the help of a rubber strap.

3rd The field of regularly-spaced parallel streaks is produced by the close casting of a necklace.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Van der Marck adds that Arman quickly learned that "fragile materials . . . would break in the process, making more of a splatter than an imprint." See *ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁸ Text from a printed insert in the invitation to the exhibition "Arman: Allures d'objets" at the Galerie Saint-Germain, Paris, March 16 to April 9, 1960. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes. The invitation also included Restany's text "À toute allure," cited above.

The necessity of this kind of descriptive and explicative text speaks to the shortcomings of the index in the *Allures d'objets*: the real-world referent may inhere physically in the picture, but if that referent is unidentifiable then what value does that index have, particularly in the objective of achieving realism through direct access to “the real”?

On this subject, Reifenscheid proposes that “[t]he drawing offers a discursive space that is beyond that of the actual object.” There are moments within the *Allures d'objets*, as in the *Cachets*, where layers of overlapped passages create “areas of density with a pictorial dynamics of their own.”⁹⁹ The works on paper, she argues, attain a greater degree of poeticism or expressivity than the actual objects that created them, because the compositions highlight the gestural and aleatory elements of their creation. Having a sense of the artist’s hand tossing, rolling, stamping, or smashing, injects into these works a lyricism that static objects do not themselves inherently possess. But, one might be tempted to ask, at what cost? If lyricism were the primary objective, why all the emphasis on indexing “the real”?

The role of gesture

Reifenscheid’s envisioning of the artist’s gesture in the material traces raises again the question of Arman’s role in the creative process of the *Allures d'objets* — both what constituted his role and what he intended the viewer to be able to ascertain of it. Reifenscheid claims that “what interests Arman is not the imprint of the object but the motion that is a result of his throwing objects on the canvas.”¹⁰⁰ She thus seeks to shift the artist’s intentionality to a focus on gesture — his own and that of the object — rather

⁹⁹ Reifenscheid, "Arman - The Draughtsman," 162.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

than on the resulting physical mark. Emmanuelle Ollier takes that argument further in suggesting that Arman's entire œuvre is governed by a strain of violence, precipitated by the "*tempérament explosif de l'artiste* (the artist's explosive temperament),"¹⁰¹ and that the dynamic relationship between Arman and his work indicates that one should "*envisager l'œuvre d'art . . . à travers une étude comportementale de l'artiste et non plus au sens de l'objet produit* (consider the work of art . . . via a behavioral study of the artist and no longer of the object produced)."¹⁰²

Such assertions align with the types of declarations the Nouveau-Réaliste artists made about their *actions-spectacles*, beginning in 1960: that the action itself was the work, and the resulting material object merely its trace. Yves Klein staked that claim most famously with his pithy catchphrase, "*les tableaux ne sont que les 'cendres' de mon art* (the pictures are but the 'ashes' of my art)."¹⁰³ But as Meredith Malone has demonstrated in her dissertation on the topic, those very resultant objects — the supposed ashes of the *actual* artworks — were a phenomenon unique to the Nouveaux Réalistes that attest to a certain commitment to the material trace. The performance pieces and Happenings by their contemporaries in groups such as Fluxus and Zero in Europe and Allan Kaprow's circle in the United States never produced the types of physical works of art that the Nouveaux Réalistes' actions did. That those ensuing works would then take their place on the gallery wall and go on to live the typical existence of a traditional painting, sets the Nouveaux Réalistes' practice apart from that of their contemporaries in

¹⁰¹ Emmanuelle Ollier, "Arman et l'esprit du Bushido: La quête du geste parfait," *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 47.

¹⁰² Ibid., 51. Gilbert Perlain is another scholar to focus on the violence inherent in Arman's relationship to the objects he appropriates. See Perlain, "Arman, Passage à l'acte," in *Arman, Passage à l'acte*, 11-12.

¹⁰³ Klein repeated this phrase in many of his writings. Its first occurrence was in the text, "Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art." This essay, originally published by Éditions Montbliard in 1959, is reprinted in *Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art et autres écrits* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 2003), 80-101. The above quotation appears on pages 82-83.

a significant way.¹⁰⁴ The conventional nature of those secondary objects — especially in light of their egregiousness amongst otherwise similar contemporary artistic pursuits — suggests that the physical trace of the *action-spectacle* has more of an importance than the artists' claims alone would allow us to ascertain. The simple existence of the residual, material objects puts the Nouveaux Réalistes in a relationship to pictorial tradition and museum-display convention, whereas their performance-oriented contemporaries largely abandoned such an association.

Arman's first *actions-spectacles* were his *Colères*, for which he would publicly smash an object, usually a musical instrument, in a fit of apparent rage. He would then affix to a wood panel the broken pieces, sign the panel, and mount the whole work on the wall. The resultant works, such as *Colère de Mandoline* of 1961 (Figure 3.35), operate in the same way as paintings do, and very clearly invite comparison to a particular pictorial tradition: Cubism, and its depictive "fracturing" of objects, especially musical instruments. Just as Arman's performative action in the *Colères* was in the service of creating tangible records of that action — which have an aesthetic of their own as compositions — the *Allures d'objets* follow a similar logic. It is clear from the *Allures d'objets* (and confirmed by the later *Colères*) that Arman was interested in gesture and motion, as well as in the "behavior" of the object when confronted with the forces of gravity and human energy. But his chief concern was the material trace of that confrontation, as he made clear in the quotation cited earlier to the effect that "the print of a smashed violin looks more like a violin than the violin itself."¹⁰⁵ And the *Allures d'objets* themselves demonstrate this point: as Martin has argued, "If the gesture of

¹⁰⁴ See Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme."

¹⁰⁵ Arman, in "Romanticism of the Object," 75.

hurling inked objects across a sheet of paper was of importance, it was of importance only to Arman himself, since the gestural means is entirely absorbed in the pictorial end.”¹⁰⁶

Reifenscheid relies on a quotation by the artist to support her claim that the *Allures d'objets* were about motion and not imprint: Arman stated of the objects used for those compositions, “I threw them, I let them rotate, I did a lot of things with them, like the musicians, with the only difference that my material was ink.”¹⁰⁷ Whereas Reifenscheid picks up on the artist’s emphasis on the actions of throwing and rotating, the key to this statement for me is Arman’s claim that his material was ink. If the actions constituted the work of art, then the objects that spun and bounced and rolled would be the material; Arman’s assertion that ink is his medium confirms that he takes the physical composition to be the work itself. Here again one can see that duality in Arman’s art, between an object-based practice of presentation that seeks to go beyond the pictorial in order to achieve a more direct realism, and a painting-like outcome that still depends on the pictorial form to constitute the work itself, which the viewer will encounter in the traditional manner in which one takes in a painting.

The performative aspect of Arman’s artistic practice is thus more aligned with that of Jackson Pollock. For Pollock, too, the end product — the painting — was without question the work of art. But part of that work’s content, part of our understanding of it, was the semi-ritualistic process by which he composed its form. The Pollock association

¹⁰⁶ Martin, *Arman*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁷ Reifenscheid, “Arman - The draughtsman,” 156. The actual quotation is drawn from Arman’s 1998 interview with Abadie, in which he said of the objects used in the *Allures d'objets*, “*Je les lançais, je les faisais tourner, je faisais des tas de choses, comme les musiciens, mais moi je le faisais avec de l'encre.*” See Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 40.

that the *Allures d'objets* invite in their abstract webs of ink is thus apt also in the sense in which Kaprow read Pollock's paintings: as an opening, an expansion of art, out to the "real" world, to the space of performance, of the everyday object, of action.¹⁰⁸ Bouhours stresses that aspect of the *Allures d'objets* by claiming that Arman's practice in those works "*ouvre des perspectives hors du champ pictural . . . [et] l'amène à envisager de véritables performances de nature spectaculaire* (opens perspectives outside the pictorial field . . . [and] leads to envisioning veritable performances of a spectacular nature)."¹⁰⁹ He quotes a letter that Arman wrote to Éliane, circa 1959: "*Je ne rêve plus que d'enduire un camion d'encre de Chine et foncer sur une feuille blanche. Salvador Dalí avec ses escargots et ses oursins a frolé la vérité mais sa démarche est entachée car il faut passer l'idée littéraire avant le résultat concret et pictural* (I no longer dream of anything but coating a truck in India ink and charging across a blank sheet. Salvador Dalí with his snails and his sea urchins came close to the truth but his practice is tainted for it is necessary to get past the literary idea before the concrete, pictorial result)."¹¹⁰ The hypothetical action that Arman described in his letter had in fact already been realized by Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage in their collaborative work of 1953, *Automobile Tire Print* (Figure 3.36). For that piece, Rauschenberg and Cage did just as Arman imagined: they drove a Model A Ford, whose front tire had been coated in black house

¹⁰⁸ Kaprow wrote, "Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists." Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock [1958]," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7-9.

¹⁰⁹ Bouhours, "Arman avant le Plein," 32.

¹¹⁰ Arman, letter to Éliane Radigue, ca. 1959, quoted in *ibid.*, 31.

paint, down the middle of a long scroll of blank white paper. *Automobile Tire Print* is about the index, and more specifically, the index of a moving object, the capturing of its journey as well as its inherent form as object. It is also about the present tense; the work seems to be forever in the process of emerging, and to have endless potential for further extension. What is interesting about Arman's remark is that here again we see the truth of Malone's observation that the Nouveaux Réalistes refused to relinquish the creation of a physical art object despite their innovations in performative art.¹¹¹ For although Arman was imagining a sort of performative or spectacular situation in which this truck would be driven, perhaps publicly, the aspect of this fantasy that arouses his enthusiasm is not that of the action — of the actual driving across the paper — but rather the thought of the black ink marking the virgin paper — that is, the image produced by the action, the pictorial result.

The letter again confirms, as did the *Cachets* and Arman's early interest in the imprint-based work of Yves Klein,¹¹² that the index was a concept of great interest to Arman, and it follows that the *Allures d'objets* — especially given their development

¹¹¹ See Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme."

¹¹² The affinity between Arman's *Allures d'objets* and Klein's *Anthropométries* is worth noting. The *Anthropométries* involved the artist coating nude women's bodies with blue paint and directing them to press their torsos and thighs against a blank canvas or sheet of paper (Figures 3.37 and 3.38). Sometimes the models would be instructed to drag each other around on the canvas to leave traces of the body's movement (Figures 3.39 and 3.40). These two iterations of the *Anthropométries* serve as apt analogies for Arman's *Cachets* and *Allures d'objets*, respectively. In the first version, the body is stamped, like Arman's inkstamps, leaving a mark that is immediately recognizable — it straightforwardly indexes its referent, the female body. In the second version, the dragging of the body across the surface abstracts the indexical mark, which no longer necessarily expresses clearly its human referent. Here the comparison to the *Allures d'objets* is evident — not only on the level of the problematized kinetic index, but also on the level of technique and its implications for agency. For Klein's role as artist is to direct his "living paintbrushes" and to supervise their actions, intervening vocally as he sees fit, but in the end relinquishing total control of the final outcome. In fact, the kinship between Arman's and Klein's imprint-based works was so great that Arman himself created his own version of the *Anthropométries* (Figure 3.41). He told Bernard Heu that after the early rubber stamp works, "j'ai fait des empreintes d'objets et de corps de femmes. Je les enduisais d'encre et je les appliquais sur le papier (I made imprints of objects and of women's bodies. I coated them in ink and I applied them to the paper)." See Bernard Heu, "Les artistes d'avant-garde sont-ils des plaisantins?" *Télé Magazine*, May 7, 1961, 13.

from the *Cachets* and their subsequent evolution into the object-based works of the early 1960s — represent an expansion of his experimentation with the signifying potential of that mark and of its relation to its referent. Citing the index as Arman’s chief focus does not, however, preclude the centrality of gesture or kinetics in his artistic exploration.

Rather, as I have already shown to be true in the *Cachets*, the two are resolutely bound to one another. The role of the index is not only to point to its referent — to imprint the latter’s face onto the support — but also to point to that referent’s traveled path. The inked mark captures both the form and its movement; it is for this reason that the index holds a power perhaps greater even than the object or the gesture alone, for it contains or at least implies both. Such is the force of the index, and the reason for which it occupied a primary place in Arman’s practice as he sought to create an art grounded in “the real.”

Where the *Cachets* give us one face of an object and the sense of Arman’s repeated gesture of stamping it, the *Allures d’objets* go a step further by presenting the viewer with traces of the various sides of an object, as well as a record of its behavior in space as it responds to the both the artist’s direction and the effects of gravity, velocity, and ricochet.

The realism of the index

It is clear, then, that Arman was employing the index as part of his aspiration to capture and present “the real.” But the effectiveness of that strategy remains in question. Martin insists that the *Allures d’objets* reveal “the object itself,” and that “it is the explicit presence of the object that keeps Arman’s work, even at its most ‘beautiful,’ from ever becoming a discourse on pure form.”¹¹³ From the *Allures d’objets* on, Martin claims, the increasingly conspicuous presence of “real” objects in Arman’s work “constantly

¹¹³ Martin, *Arman*, 18-19.

maintains a tension between the world at large and the world of the traditional concerns of the ‘fine arts.’”¹¹⁴ Despite the aesthetics of the *Allures d’objets*, those works avoid the status of *l’art pour l’art* by their physical connection to real-world objects — a connection wrought through the index.

Yet Reifenscheid recognizes a lapse in that connection, in that the objects used to create the *Allures d’objets* lose their identity in the abstracted marks on the paper or canvas. She claims that the mirrors, bottles, egg shells, and pieces of jewelry that Arman used for these compositions are “no longer visually decipherable, because touch and motion are their only traces.” The marks on the page, she suggests, “epitomize the ephemeral and transitory, they are spiritual and immaterial concretions of the present.”¹¹⁵ While it is not entirely true that the objects are visually indecipherable — in many cases, they are quite clearly identifiable, as with the glass shards of *Rectangle rouge* (Figure 3.42) or the statuette of *Allure d’objets* (Figure 3.43) — Reifenscheid makes a valid point about the abstractness of many of the *Allures d’objets*, as I have already argued. I would expand her remark, however, to infer that the index, for all its power reaped from the fact of the referent’s inherence in it, maintains a problematic relationship to reality. If the indexical mark cannot actually point to its referent, because its form is so abstracted in the absence of that referent, how can it substantiate “the real”? By adding the element of motion and consequently abstraction to his work with direct imprints, Arman’s *Allures d’objets* call into question the power of the index to corroborate reality, and, one might add, the very notion of reality in an age increasingly given over to replacing substance with simulacra.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁵ Reifenscheid, “Arman – The Draughtsman,” 156.

As with the *Cachets*, the focus on the indexically revealed qualities of the object itself is tempered by a simultaneous exposition of the artist's gesture in creating the composition. In the *Cachets*, the problematic combination of the regular imprint determined by the standardized object and the irregular composition determined by the inconsistent gesture of the artist is what enriches the complexity of the works. In the *Allures d'objets*, one gets the sense that the marks are revealing the gesture of the *object* — its behavior as it rolls, glides, or shatters on the support. The focus is on the *object* and yet, just as the *Cachets*' irregularity of composition summoned our envisioning of the artist in action, stamping intuitively in a repetitive motion, the *Allures d'objets* compel us to imagine Arman bent over his laid canvas, tossing and rolling objects across the surface. In this way, the *Allures d'objets* have the effect of something like what Leo Steinberg called the "flatbed picture plane" in regard to Rauschenberg's and Dubuffet's paintings from the same period, beginning around 1950.¹¹⁶ Steinberg recognized a particular and unprecedented phenomenon at work in those artists' pictures: they "no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals."¹¹⁷ That is, the compositions resolutely declare the processes of their making — processes that were, importantly, performed on a horizontal surface like a table, desk, or floor. "The pictures," wrote Steinberg, "insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes."¹¹⁸ The works' vehement assertion of their "flatbed" origins changes their form of "psychic address," the way they confront the viewer. One may still hang such paintings on the wall

¹¹⁶ Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 82-84.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

but, like hanging a rug or tacking up a map, Steinberg suggests, there arises a discord in the viewer's confrontation with them. It becomes a challenge to reconcile these works with their vertical display in the gallery and consequently to evaluate them on the basis of criteria established for pictorial works — hence Steinberg's call for "other criteria" by which to evaluate the art of this period — that is, criteria other than the formalist doctrine espoused by Clement Greenberg. Arman's *Allures d'objets* are a textbook instance of the "flatbed" character identified by Steinberg. The dissonance created by the forcing upright of these horizontally-oriented compositions adds yet another layer to Arman's complex play with the dialectics of presentation and representation, for this operation only serves to distance the works from the reality of the operational procedures that created them.

Objets animés

The term *allure d'objet* and the technique of tracing an object's behavior as it moves across a surface were both influenced by the composer Pierre Schaeffer's researches in *musique concrète*, which he began developing in 1949. Schaeffer, the founder and leader of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales, or GRM, developed what he called *allures sonores*, *allures brutales*, or *allures d'objets en musique*; these were pieces of experimental music wherein the sounds of various instruments — chiefly non-classical ones — were altered and recorded.¹¹⁹ Arman's interest in experimental music is well documented. Not only was his wife Éliane an active member of GRM, putting him in contact with Schaeffer and his circle,¹²⁰ but he was also aware of the musical experiments

¹¹⁹ Reifenscheid, "Arman - The Draughtsman," 156.

¹²⁰ Restany referred to Schaeffer as an "*ami intime* (intimate friend)" of Arman's, though this seems to have been an exaggeration, and was certainly no longer true by 1960, when the two had a falling out due to creative differences. Restany discussed Schaeffer and Arman's friendship in a letter to Martineau dated December 28, 1959, Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes. Bouhours alludes to the

of several of his contemporaries, who would shortly become founding members of Nouveau Réalisme. Arman knew Klein's *Symphonie monotone*, a piece that involved the playing of a single note for twenty minutes, followed by twenty minutes of silence;¹²¹ as well as Dufrené's *Cri-rythmes*, phonetic poems and public vocal improvisations inspired by his participation in lettrisme.¹²²

Arman's attraction to experimental music was in line with his approach to art-making. As Bouhours avers, Arman took to heart the lessons of Schaeffer on an object's inherent autonomy: "*C'est l'objet*," wrote Schaeffer in 1959, "*qui a quelque chose à nous dire si nous savons le lui faire dire* (It is the object . . . that has something to tell us if we know how to make it tell it)."¹²³ In his music, Schaeffer sought "*la logique interne des phénomènes sonores* (the internal logic of sound phenomena),"¹²⁴ a notion that aligns with Arman's practice of allowing something like the internal logic of the object to determine the actions performed on it.

Arman's own association with GRM was based chiefly on his joint project with Jacques Brissot, a filmmaker and member of the group.¹²⁵ In 1959 and 1960 Arman worked with Brissot to produce the film *Objets animés*, which was based on Arman's *Allures d'objets* and set to a soundtrack grounded in Schaeffer's musical theories. In both

distant and complicated nature of their relationship in "Arman avant le Plein," 33, and references the end of that friendship in "De la petite mort à l'apocalypse," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 97.

¹²¹ Klein's *Symphonie monotone* served as the score for his live *actions-spectacles*, the *Anthropométries*; a small classical orchestra would play the single-note score while Klein, in his tuxedo and white gloves, directed the *pinceaux vivants*.

¹²² For a discussion of Arman's knowledge of and relationship to various musical experiments in the 1950s, see Giroud, "Arman et Fluxus," 85.

¹²³ Pierre Schaeffer, "Expériences musicales. Musiques concrète, électronique, exotique," *La Revue musicale* no. 244 (1959). Quoted in Bouhours, "Arman avant le Plein," 31.

¹²⁴ Pierre Schaeffer, quoted in "Objets animés," Institut national de l'audiovisuel, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.ina.fr/fresques/artsonores/fiche-media/InaGrm00807/jacques-brissot-objets-animes.html>.

¹²⁵ Brissot was also a founder, with Gérard Patris, of the Groupe de Recherches Image (GRI), which was tied to Schaeffer's GRM.

form and content, the film is an important demonstration of the principles of the *Allures d'objets* and sheds light on their significance for the whole of Arman's oeuvre.

Objets animés flickers between shots of the marks left by the objects Arman rolls or throws across his canvases, and shots of similar indexical mark-making in the natural world: waves leaving their trace on wet sand, seaweed washing ashore and combing the beach behind it (Figure 3.44). Footage of an *Allure d'objet* made by dropping an inked steel spring on paper is interrupted repeatedly by footage of colossal industrial coils dropping to the ground in a factory or junk yard, leaving their own marks on the earth. Brissot and Arman thus established a parallel between Arman's practice and natural or found phenomena, and in so doing they asserted the realness of the index, its truth as a mark: just as patterns on the sand attest to the passage of waves, so too do patterns on the paper attest to the passage of particular objects onto or across that surface.

The allusions to natural phenomena as a means of bolstering the "realism" of Arman's artistic practice aligned with what Harold Rosenberg identified as a "specifically twentieth-century form of illusionism," which involved the "transformation of fact by displacing it into fiction, and of fiction by giving it a setting of fact."¹²⁶ Rosenberg cited two instances in which a certain analogy to nature was used to support a claim to realism. First, Erik Satie commented on his ballet "Parade: Ballet Réaliste" that "the noises of waves, revolvers, typewriters, sirens, or airplanes are in music of the same character as the bits of newspapers, painted wood grain, and other everyday objects that

¹²⁶ He provided as examples the old and the new form of "statue": in the past, "the hero was 'represented' by a statue of marble or granite." Today, by contrast, Lenin's tomb contains the leader's actual body *as a statue*: "The tomb is the world's greatest collage; by means of it physical reality is converted into a powerful substance of fantasy." Rosenberg, "The Art Galleries," 161.

the Cubists frequently employ to localize objects and masses in Nature.”¹²⁷ And second, Jean Arp wanted his sculptures “to be come upon as one comes upon a stone polished by a river; that is to say, that his creations were on a par with those of geology.”¹²⁸

Rosenberg reflected on the contemporary repetition of such analogies as resulting from the new realities of the postwar world:

Given the enormous dissemination of simulated nature through window displays, motion-picture and television screens, public and private photography, magazine advertisements, art reproductions, car and bus posters, five-and-ten art, it is plain that in no other period or place has the visible world been to such an extent both duplicated and anticipated by fictions. Perhaps the ghostliness of our surroundings has augmented both the fascination of art with the game of substitutions and that distaste for mere picturing which first became a powerful force in painting and sculpture around the middle of the nineteenth century.¹²⁹

The idea of a “simulated nature” is present, implicitly, in Restany’s positive affirmation of “modern nature” as industrial, commercial, and technical. Though Restany fails to identify it as such, “the real” that he sees Arman and the Nouveaux Réalistes embracing is in fact a *simulated* “real” — a “real” that Rosenberg would describe as fiction.

Arman’s attempt to align his earliest realist practices with the *natural* “real” — all the while relying on a cinematic simulation to do so — attests to the complexity of his realist project as it contended with the plurality of realities in the contemporary world.

Another means through which Arman and Brissot attempted to strengthen the “natural” realness of the indexes in Arman’s *Allures d’objets* was through the film’s accompanying score, which was composed chiefly of the sounds of a ball bearing rolling and bouncing on a cymbal that resonated with the movement of objects onscreen.

Schaeffer himself remarked on the intensity of the accord between those elements in

¹²⁷ Erik Satie, quoted in *ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Arman and Brissot's film, elements that he believed were fundamentally interrelated. In an article on image and sound, Schaeffer praised the film for its effectiveness in illustrating this key principle of his musical theory. "*Les choses,*" he wrote, "*qu'elles soient Image ou Son, parlent le même langage* (Things, whether they be Image or Sound, speak the same language)."¹³⁰ Arman had found in Schaeffer's musical theories the sonorous equivalent of the physical index he pursued in his artwork: the sounds we hear in the film are the acoustic traces of an object's movement on a cymbal, just as the images we see are the visual traces of an object's movement on a piece of paper. The "language" that Arman's "things" are speaking is that of the index — and therefore, he implicitly averred, of *realism*.

Arman's text for the film included descriptive passages such as the following:

Le collier de la reine déroule sur la neige les sonographes de ses pierreries, les roulements à billes sont la procession des fourmis chercheuses d'or et les objets et tout l'univers, parfois même les pinceaux, tout est teinté et imprime sa volonté de déroulement, plaque son image et explose dans l'anamorphose de sa forme.

The queen's necklace unravels on the snow the sonographs of its gems, the marble rolls are the procession of ants seeking gold, and the objects and all the universe, sometimes even paintbrushes, everything is tinted and impresses its will to unwind, puts down its image and explodes in the anamorphosis of its form.¹³¹

Here Arman echoes Restany in pinning intentionality on the objects: they *will* the various forms and traces that they create. The imprints march like ants, as though autonomous. The necklace's trace is a sonograph. This is all the language of the index, of fixing an image or leaving a trace. Significantly, Arman also quotes the composer Luc Ferrari, who wrote "*Tout objet a un potentiel de conscience dont la volonté est la projection de son image* (Every object has a potential of consciousness whose will is the projection of its

¹³⁰ Pierre Schaeffer, "Le contrepoint du son et de l'image," *Les cahiers du cinéma* no. 108 (June 1960): 19.

¹³¹ Arman, "Objets animés [ca. 1959-1960]," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 250.

image).”¹³² Ferrari’s statement again attributes a human-like agency to the object, which he now endows with its own consciousness and will. Whereas Arman himself may not have made the leap to ascribe total agency to the object, he does rely on Ferrari to do so for him; this carefully selected quotation asserts an autonomous intentionality inherent within the object. Importantly, however, that intentionality is again described in terms of *potential*, leaving open the possibility that the realization of that potential might require the artist’s assistance or initiation.

Brissot’s description of the film project adds another voice to the conversation about the artist’s agency in the production. Describing the parallels between GRM’s ‘*objets sonores*’ and Arman’s ‘*objets animés*,’ Brissot observed, “*dans les deux cas, le créateur s’efforce de dominer une réalité en mouvement, sans lui imposer de déformations arbitraires, mais en assemblant les objets (sonores ou visuels) qui la composent dans une construction basée sur une connaissance aussi précise que possible de leur nature et des lois qui les régissent* (in both cases, the creator struggles to dominate a reality in movement, without imposing on it arbitrary distortions, but in assembling the objects (sonorous or visual) that compose it in a construction based on a knowledge as precise as possible of their nature and of the laws that govern them).”¹³³

Brissot thus confirms that, despite his relative objectivity, the artist is in control because he anticipates the laws that govern the objects in their predictable behavior. Van der Marck refers to Arman’s “willful invocation of chance and accident,”¹³⁴ which allows

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Jacques Brissot, “Formes, Objets, Mouvements [1960],” unpublished essay quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 18.

¹³⁴ Van der Marck, 1984, quoted in *ibid.*, 122. Van der Marck described Arman’s process in an earlier essay: “In hurling inked objects across paper or dropping breakables containing paint on a canvas, Arman did not allow chance to take over altogether. He maneuvered his image-creating devices through subtle controls, as Hokusai once coaxed ink-covered crabs to cross his paper. But the means are fully subsumed

him to maintain control over the result despite its apparently aleatory coming-into-being. "On the one hand he [Arman] wants his means to be subsumed in the ends; on the other, he wants the viewer to be intrigued with the process."¹³⁵

At the same time, Brissot was keen to emphasize the rawness of the filmic footage: "[C]e tournage a consisté principalement à enregistrer sur pellicule des peintures et signes naturels créés ou découverts par Arman, ceci à l'état brut, c'est-à-dire sans aucun trucage cinématographique (This shoot consisted mainly of recording on film paintings and natural signs created or discovered by Arman, in their raw state; that is, without any cinematographic doctoring)."¹³⁶ Brissot thus highlighted Arman's vested interest in an untempered realism — a filming process that aligned with the process of the *Allures d'objets* themselves — a principle of "collecting" traces. He also put on equal footing the signs *made* by Arman and those simply *found* by Arman — those that already exist in nature or in industry. Giving those different marks equal importance — both in his language in the above quotation and in the filming of *Objets animés* — established a relationship of parity between the artist's indexing and that of nature or the everyday world. That is, it put Arman's treatment of an object in relation to the natural phenomena of waves, for example, so that we understand implicitly the naturalness and artlessness of the *Allures d'objets*. Or it put his work in relation to brute industry, where objects move rotely through the production process, without the intervention of an artistic or aesthetic will. Just as Restany described in his essay for the exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Germain, Arman calls forth the natural "behavior" of the objects, which are thus allowed

by the ends and all we are aware of are hints, glimpses and illusions." Van der Marck, 1973, quoted in *ibid.*, 18.

¹³⁵ Van der Marck, 1984, quoted in *ibid.*, 122.

¹³⁶ Brissot, in an unpublished manuscript, quoted in Bouhours, "De la petite mort," 95.

to “express” themselves. They leave their mark on the paper in much the same way that a wave does upon the sand: according to chance and the natural laws of their own physical properties, and not according to the control asserted by the artist.

As Brissot was keen to declare, his role as filmmaker was limited to that of a witness — or, more accurately, of a camera: he merely recorded. As Bouhours has noted, it was Arman who put together the shots for the camera;¹³⁷ Brissot simply pointed the apparatus in their direction. But again, this will to distance the artist — here, the filmmaker — by intimating that he simply collected an external reality and presented it in its “raw” state, is misleading. Brissot may have maintained a critical objectivity in recording the material, but once that recording was made, he was then responsible for the montage. Significantly, Brissot did not simply leave his raw footage in its unprocessed state. Rather, he cut and mixed and strung together footage to create a montage composed, as described above, in short, alternating images. The speed with which the images flicker from one to the next creates what Bouhours calls “*une ‘fusion’ visuelle entre l’objet et son allure* (a ‘visual fusion’ between the object and its *allure*).”¹³⁸ That is, the object itself and its trace are overlain to the point of being almost indistinguishable from one another. That compositional choice suits Arman’s exploration of the index as metonymic surrogate for “the real”: the trace of the object is as “real” as the object that created it, for the indexical mark could not exist without its referent, and that referent inheres in it. That the film’s very form makes this argument attests to the artistic intervention of Brissot — in collaboration with Arman — in constructing an intentional structure capable of spelling out what the *Allures d’objets* more subtly denote. Equally

¹³⁷ Ibid., 96.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

compelling is the way in which Brissot's role in the creation of the film echoes Arman's role in the creation of the *Allures d'objets*: a commitment to distanced, objective observation that is undermined by the crucial intervention of each in the creation of the final product.

Projection and performativity

The quotation that Arman borrows from Ferrari in the film's text points to another central theme of the *Allures d'objets*: the notion of projection. As Bouhours has indicated, that term plays heavily in the discussion of those works,¹³⁹ since it captures the sense of the artist's action in throwing or tossing the object onto or across the support. But I would argue that "projection" serves a double function in that it also connotes the sense of the object's self-projection, which might be considered akin to indexicality. Again, Ferrari's language is informative. If every object's will is "the projection of its image"¹⁴⁰ then, in the context of *Objets animés*, the notion of projection seems to be analogous to the index: a ball bearing coated with ink projects its image — that is, stamps its likeness — on the support, just as a breaking wave leaves its mark in the sand.¹⁴¹ The term "projection" thus conjures the two intertwined principles of the *Allures d'objets*: the object's imprint and its action, the objective reality of the form and its conscious facilitation by the artist.

¹³⁹ Bouhours quotes Sacha Sosnowsky and Restany referring to the "projection" of objects, and points out that the term was of its time, and related also to Mathieu's *tachisme* and to music. See Bouhours, "Arman avant le Plein," 31.

¹⁴⁰ Arman, "Objets animés," 250.

¹⁴¹ Such a construal of projection recalls Arman's understanding of the object as having an inherent image that could be summoned by the artist. See Arman's claim of "stealing the direct image from the object," cited above and published in "Romanticism of the Object," 75.

It is by virtue of that action that the *Allures d'objets* are distinguished from the *Cachets*. In keeping with his project of moving ever closer to the direct confrontation with reality — that is, with the objects of the “real” world — Arman diminishes his own role in the determination of the composition. In the *Cachets*, as I have argued, the forms of the compositional elements are predetermined, but their arrangement is decided by the artist’s conscious or intuitive choices. With the *Allures d'objets*, Arman relinquishes some control of the final composition of the no-longer standardized forms. By tossing or dropping the object — projecting it into space — Arman allows chance and the natural laws governing that object — its mass, the balance of its weight, its material — to determine the placement and form of the irregular marks on the canvas or paper. In this way, he begins to work toward a solution to the discord of the *Cachets*, where the mechanicity of the form and the gesture work in opposition to the expressiveness of the arrangement of marks. Now, in the *Allures d'objets*, that expressiveness comes from the objects themselves, rather than the artist’s intuition, thus moving the *Allures d'objets* paradoxically further from abstract painting, even as on the surface they resemble it more.

Arman’s claim that it is the objects that determine the scale and format of a composition is here made even more salient: the object dictates not only the proper size of the canvas or paper support or the amount of ink needed to cover the object and still leave a visible imprint; it also demands a particular amount of force and type of gesture based on its own material qualities. Pieces of glass ask to be pressed or smashed on the surface, while a metal coil can be dropped and bounced or reeled across the support. The indexing of a pearl necklace will differ necessarily from that of a pebble or a ball bearing.

A ball bearing will roll on its own, and need only be propelled in a particular direction; it can then leave a trace that is haphazard, bounding in all directions, capturing the speed and unpredictability of its natural movement. The necklace, on the other hand, must be coaxed across the support: it will not roll about on its own with the same “autonomy” as a metallic ball. The necklace can be dragged along the surface so as to essentially comb the ink across the paper, or it can be simply pressed down so that it maintains its own recognizable form as a string of round beads. In either case, the artist’s intentionality is more felt in these latter types of *Allures d’objets* than in those that use more “naturally” kinetic objects. The stamped contour of the statuette in *Allure d’objets* (Figure 3.43) makes clear the artist’s role in formulating the composition, whereas the impressions of broken glass in *Rectangle rouge* (Figure 3.42) suggest an absence of the artist: his only role was to drop the inked glass onto the surface, and to allow its shattering to determine the composition.

On the question of the artist’s role or presence in the *Allures d’objets*, Ollier discusses the material pictures as the “*fruit d’une action révolue* (fruit of a bygone action).” The work of art, she claims, “*absentéise toute la démarche gestuelle de l’artiste, omettant ainsi son principe actif et la vitalité du processus de création* (makes absent the entire gestural practice of the artist, omitting its active principle and the vitality of the process of creation).”¹⁴² With this point I firmly disagree: it is rather the indexical quality of the *Allures d’objets* that ensures that the action is recorded, laid out for the beholder to ascertain from the marks on the paper — though perhaps rarely so straightforwardly that the specific gestures are entirely legible. As van der Marck affirms, in Arman’s practice

¹⁴² Ollier, “Arman et l’esprit,” 47.

of combining a measure of control with a degree of chance, a certain clarity is lost: “In hurling inked objects across paper or dropping breakables containing paint on a canvas, Arman did not allow chance to take over altogether. He maneuvered his image-creating device through subtle controls. . . . But the means are fully subsumed by the ends and all we are aware of are hints, glimpses and allusions.”¹⁴³ Van der Marck is referring to Arman’s intervention in the direction or coaxing of the inked objects across the surface of the support: he might tilt the canvas to cause a ball to travel in a particular direction, or he might apply more or less pressure to a comb to change the density of its traces. Just as the viewer cannot always make out the object-referent, one also struggles to ascertain exactly what actions were taken on these objects, and how much of what one is seeing is the result of chance versus intention. Van der Marck does not surmise whether that effect was intentional, but it seems to me that an artist seeking to present “the real” in its most sincere form would have a vested interest in blurring that distinction between the object’s behavior and his own. That is, Arman may not wish to highlight his own operations, but rather to focus attention on the quasi-autonomy of the object’s behavior. One is still aware of Arman’s hand, but the inability to pinpoint its specific role in the creation of the composition allows one to imagine a certain distance or objectivization at work.

The very notion of the object’s “projection” on the pictorial surface highlights another connection to the work of Duchamp: his famous *Tu m’* of 1918, composed of painted shadows of absent objects. These shadows, disjointed indexes of their referents, function, as Robert Benayoun observed, in such a way that “*La projection sur la toile d’éléments qui lui sont en principe extérieurs crée l’illusion d’une présence gênante et*

¹⁴³ Van der Marck, “Arman: An Archeologist,” 13.

invisible aux côtés même du spectateur, qui se voit presque tenté de regarder ailleurs ce qui est pourtant sous ses yeux (The projection on the canvas of elements that are in principle external to it creates the illusion of a looming and invisible presence alongside the spectator, who finds himself almost tempted to look *elsewhere* at what is nonetheless right under his or her eyes).¹⁴⁴ That is, the presence of the indexical mark — the (fictitious) shadow in Duchamp's work, or the trace in Arman's work — directs the viewer to contemplate not that mark but its referent. While the beholder of *Tu m'* may not literally look to the space outside the painting to discover the object "casting" the shadow, he or she is certainly compelled to imagine what that object was and where it had been positioned in order to have caused this particular index. Likewise, the beholder of an *Allure d'objet* is incited to construct in his or her mind's eye the object and the course it traveled to create the recorded traces.¹⁴⁵

The question of agency

In a curious turn within his original essay on the *Allures d'objets*, "À toute allure," Restany referred to those works as "*traces écrites* (written traces)" that, furthermore, "*ne sont que l'effet indirect de la main d'un homme* (are but the indirect effect of the hand of a man)."¹⁴⁶ Again, he acknowledges the presence of the artist, but he downplays his influence on the work of art, qualifying the relationship between artist and artwork as merely "indirect." Restany emphasized this distancing by insisting on what he

¹⁴⁴ Benayoun and Pierre, "Alchimie de l'objet," 51.

¹⁴⁵ Jouffroy hinted at this understanding of construction through negation when he wrote of imprints or traces as "*cette présence limitée dans le temps qui se rend manifeste de manière négative par le manque* (that limited presence in time that manifests itself negatively by lack)," thus suggesting that the trace of a thing that was once present makes one more conscious of the very thing that is now absent. See Jouffroy, "Les cinq prophètes du 'réel imaginaire': Adzak, Yves Klein, Recalcati, Pisotletto, Lourdes Castro," typescript, after 1973. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹⁴⁶ Restany, "À toute allure," 264.

called a sociological or objective shift via the found object, which “*sauvegarde la marge imprévue inhumaine entre la fin et les moyens* (safeguards the unexpected inhuman margin between the end and the means).”¹⁴⁷ That is, despite the artist’s role in initiating the process of creating an *Allure d’objet*, there is a fundamental separation between him and the final product, for the objects, imbued with their own intrinsic autonomy or agency, take over the creative process once released from the artist’s hand.¹⁴⁸

Nevertheless, Restany is not quite prepared to suggest a removal of the artist altogether: for an authorial hand is still present, if indirectly, in the process; and in the final composition one does discover “*rappels calligraphiques* (calligraphic reminders)”¹⁴⁹ of his identity. Restany concedes that Arman, not wholly absent from the *Allures d’objets*, plays the role of the “*moyen terme* (middle term)” between chance and control, which Restany defines as the two poles of the *informel*.¹⁵⁰ The claim that Arman’s autographic mark remains in his works would disappear from Restany’s rhetoric when the critic began to trumpet the artist’s next two series, the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, as part of his promotion of Nouveau Réalisme’s “objective realism,” a realism supposedly based on direct and untranscribed presentation. I find, however, that the same paradoxical slippages between the distanced and the present artist that are found within Arman’s early works on paper persist in the three-dimensional works of 1959 and

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Taking up a similar position, Bouhours compares Arman’s role as agent of the *Allures d’objets* to that of Pollock in the creation of the poured paintings of 1947-1950. In both cases the artist’s body is involved only in the “preparation” of the work; Arman’s object, like Pollock’s paint, achieves autonomy from the moment of its release, through its trajectory toward the canvas or paper, and during the entire period of contact with the surface. Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” 31. To bolster this comparison, Bouhours cites Michael Fried’s description of the “pulses of something like pure, disembodied energy” in Pollock’s line. See Fried, “Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 224.

¹⁴⁹ Restany, “À toute allure,” 264.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

beyond. I shall argue in Chapters Four and Five that the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* problematize issues of authorship, agency, intervention, and chance in much the same way that the *Cachets* and *Allures d'objets* do. In this sense I identify Arman's early interest in matters of indexicality and representation as feeding into his continued engagement with questions of representation's relationship to realism.

Restany's ambivalent claims about Arman's own presence in his works touch on what I identified in the *Cachets* as a sense that despite the mechanical nature of the forms that make up the pictures, there remains an impression of the compositions having been made by a willful individual. But Restany's reading of the works of contemporary abstract painters also demonstrates an irresolute stance vis-à-vis the role of the individual versus the intervention of chance. At one turn he accuses those artists of representing “[le] lyrisme pur, considéré sur le plan ontologique comme une situation d'universalité de l'individu créateur . . . où la primauté est accordée à la transmission directe ou allusive, véhémente ou secrète des intuitions sensibles (pure lyricism, considered ontologically as a situation of universality of the individual-creator . . . where primacy is given to the transmission, whether direct or allusive, vehement or secret, of sensitive intuitions).”¹⁵¹ At another, he describes the same figures as “circumscribed between the miracle of chance and the rigor of syntax.”¹⁵² Pollock, like Arman, struck an equilibrium between chance and control that made his poured paintings, like Arman's *Allures d'objets*, hang in the balance between autonomous abstraction — line freed from representation, as though painting itself — and the sense of the artist's willed control of

¹⁵¹ Restany, 1960 preface to *Lyrisme et abstraction*, 11.

¹⁵² Restany, “À toute allure,” 264.

that line, his containment and regulation of it. In both cases, it is the interplay between the two that gives the work its force.¹⁵³

Just as the *Cachets* blended the predetermined form with the artist's intuitive composition, thus making the works a collaboration between the artist and the object, the *Allures d'objets* combine the artist's gesture with the object's. The effect of this blending of intention and chance is a confusion of agency: when the artist relinquishes some control, can the object be said to be asserting it? The contemporary assessments of the *Allures d'objets* reveal that this ambiguity was central to the works' reception.

In a review of Arman's 1960 exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Germain, an unnamed critic for the journal *Combat* described the *Allures d'objets* as rhythmic compositions comprising a variety of forms and textures determined by the varying physical qualities of the objects used to create them. The author announced: "*Ce n'est plus ici la main qui conduit l'artiste mais l'objet projeté sur la toile ou bien égrené ou bien encore roulant à des vitesses données par le geste du peintre* (Here it is no longer the hand that drives the artist but the object projected on the canvas or else dropped or even rolling at speeds determined by the painter's gesture)."¹⁵⁴ The critic pointed out that Arman used any number of different materials, and argued that his choice of cloth, leather, metal, or glass was arbitrary — all that mattered was that "*sur la toile autant de différents traits s'exprimeront* (on the canvas so many different traits will be expressed)."¹⁵⁵ The term *s'exprimer* in French captures the ambiguity of the agency in

¹⁵³ The Pollock scholarship makes a fruitful comparison to the Arman scholarship, since both artists have long been the subjects of debates about intentionality versus chance. James Coddington's essay "No Chaos Damn It" addresses just this problem, seeking to redress the popularly held assumption that Pollock's webs of paint are simply "chaotic." See this essay in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 101-115.

¹⁵⁴ "Arman à la galerie Saint-Germain: Recherche de la matière," *Combat* no. 21 (March 1960): 9.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

this practice: *s'exprimer*, with its reflexive pronoun, can be taken to mean “to express oneself.” One might, then, interpret the above phrase as a claim that the objects’ traits *express themselves*; that is, the objects are the agents of their self-expression. But *s'exprimer* can also be used in French as a substitute for the passive voice, so that the phrase would read as translated above, that the different traits *are expressed*. In this translation, the agency is left ambiguous: is it the object or the artist that brings forth the different traits’ expression?

The reviewer described the *Allures d’objets* as first and foremost a means of introducing the everyday object into a graphic representation.¹⁵⁶ “*Ces graphismes peuvent . . . être amenés arbitrairement par la main du peintre mais ici on veut la présence de l’objet et on le glorifie en quelque sorte* (These graphisms can be brought about arbitrarily by the painter’s hand but here one wants the presence of the object and one glorifies it in some way).”¹⁵⁷ In this proclamation, the author touches on the abstracting that takes place in these works, where the object that creates the compositions cannot in most cases be detected. The critic asks directly what kinds of conclusions one can draw from the strange indexes the objects create — strange because a heavy object often leaves an unexpectedly light trace, whereas lightweight objects can frequently leave rather dense impressions. Despite the challenges of these misleading marks, the reviewer concluded that the object manages to be a felt presence in the work because its presence is willed there by the artist’s process.

¹⁵⁶ “*C’est d’abord une expérimentation qui introduit l’objet quotidien dans une représentation graphique.*”
Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

On the question of agency, this reviewer touched on the collaborative aspect of the artist-agent and object-agent: “*C’est l’objet qui s’interpose entre la toile et le peintre et celui-ci n’œuvre pas mais assiste à la représentation de son geste selon différentes données, selon différentes cinétiques, selon différentes densités* (It is the object that intervenes between the canvas and the painter and the latter does not work but rather witnesses the representation of his gesture according to different givens, according to different kinetics, according to different densities).”¹⁵⁸ The notion of Arman as witness ascribes him a mostly passive role — akin to that assigned to Jacques Brissot in the making of *Objets animés* — where he simply watches unfold the work of art. But the author leaves room for him in the final work by suggesting that the representation created is that of *his* gesture — and not simply of the object’s. The reviewer further explains, “*Arman assiste à la vie de l’objet choisi car celui-ci vit lorsqu’il se déplace, lorsqu’il est propulsé, lorsqu’il est soumis au geste, à la vitesse, en un mot au déplacement* (Arman witnesses the life of the chosen object, for it lives as soon as it moves, as soon as it is propelled, as soon as it is submitted to gesture, to speed, in a word to displacement).”¹⁵⁹ Once again we encounter the idea of the objects having agency. This author does not ascribe their movement to chance or to the interplay between mass and gravity, but rather anthropomorphizes the objects, ascribing literal “life” to them. Arman echoed the suggestion that these works were self-composing when he declared, “In the *allures d’objets*, the objects leave their traces like furtive animals.”¹⁶⁰ Likening the objects to

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Arman, quoted in Reut, *Arman: La traversée des objets*, 46.

animals grants them an agency and an independence, and further suggests a form of conscious will.

Such a reading of the *Allures d'objets* lends to the works a bit of the real-world authenticity that Restany sought to attribute to them: if the objects come to life in order to compose their own indexical representation, then the work of art can be seen as true-to-life, or true-to-reality. That is, if the artist has removed himself from the equation by refraining from imposing his subjective will on the composition, then the resulting work is simply what it is: the traces of the objects' own forms and motions, indexed from reality. But Arman contradicted his own account of the *Allures d'objets*, thereby undercutting this notion of an unambiguously objective approach. As to the role of the conscious versus the unconscious in his work, Arman explained:

Il y a d'abord — avant une série de travaux ou une idée neuve — l'intuition. . . . Après l'intuition, il y a le désir: celui de voir cette chose s'incarner, de la faire. Après le désir, il y a la volonté de réunir les forces matérielles nécessaires. Et, enfin, il y a l'exécution. Et dans l'exécution, on ne peut pas avoir oublié ni l'intuition ni le désir. C'est peut-être ça que j'appelle l'inconscient.

First — before a series of works or a new idea — there is the intuition. . . . After the intuition, there is the desire: that of seeing that thing be incarnated, of making it. After the desire, there is the will to gather the necessary material forces. And finally, there is the execution. And in the execution, one cannot have forgotten the intuition nor the desire. That is perhaps what I call the unconscious.¹⁶¹

Arman thus identified four steps to the creative process: intuition, desire, will, execution. The first three are incarnated in the fourth via an unconscious drive — they have been internalized in the artist so that he no longer consciously forces them on the execution; he acts freely, but those unconscious drives remain present to guide the direction of the work in its process of incarnation.

¹⁶¹ Arman, in Abadie and Arman, "L'archéologie," 62.

The intuition to which Arman refers as the first step of his practice seems to align with Restany's claim that Arman selected his objects based on his instincts as to the potential they had as forms, or, in the case of the *Allures d'objets*, as kinetic forms. And the key here is the *potential*: the objects need the artist to bring that promise to fruition, to realize — in the sense of first recognizing and then *making real* — the inherent expressive possibilities of that object. This concept of potential, so fundamental to Arman's selection of objects, carves out a role for the artist that is not distanced and objective but highly intentional. The onus is still on the object to determine the fundamental forms that constitute the picture, but the *intention* lies with the artist.

For Bouhours, the *Allures d'objets* differ from the *Cachets* in the fact that they are no longer pure and simple imprints of a designated object. Instead, they are the calligraphic marks created by the artist's conscious gesture, as he orchestrates “*un déplacement spatial et temporel de l'objet sur une surface* (a spatial and temporal displacement of the object on a surface).” Bouhours grants partial agency to the object, saying “*L'objet roule, effleure, griffe, frôle, pivote ou tournoie sur le papier ou la surface de la toile* (the object rolls, grazes, scratches, skims, revolves or whirls on the paper or the surface of the canvas),” but affirms that in the end, the resulting marks are “*soumis à l'organisation volontaire de l'artiste* (subjected to the voluntary organization of the artist).”¹⁶²

In a move that suggests Arman's will, in the face of the evidence of his hand, to relinquish agency and downplay his own subjectivity, Arman embraced and exhibited as his own several *Allures d'objets* that were in fact “made” by others. Éliane reported that

¹⁶² Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” 30.

Arman invited her, as well as Yves Klein and his wife Rotraut Uecker, to make *Allures d'objets*; if Arman liked them, he would re-appropriate them as his own.¹⁶³ This practice, in addition to being reminiscent of the anonymous vandals whose “work” was re-appropriated by the *affichistes*, stands as a testament to Arman’s view of his own role as minimal or unimportant compared to that of the object, the key “creator” of the work. As is true of the *décollages*, the *Allures d'objets* contain no signatory mark of the artist, only traces of some anonymous presence who made possible the unpredictable composition that resulted from some kind of manipulation of the given material: street poster or inked object.

On the occasion of the major retrospective of Nouveau Réalisme held at the Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris in 1986, Pierre Cabanne reflected on Arman’s early works on display there, the *Cachets* and the *Allures d'objets*. He found them to be “*de remarquables réussites esthétiques répétitives et quantitatives* (remarkable repetitive and quantitative aesthetic successes),”¹⁶⁴ and he saw in both series the same relationship to abstract painting I have been discussing throughout my consideration of the index. “*Le geste de base n’est pas très éloigné, dans sa transe physique et son contenu énergétique, de celui de Pollock* (The basic gesture, in its physical trance and its energetic content, is not very far from that of Pollock).”¹⁶⁵ What is interesting in Cabanne’s analysis is that he refers only to the gesture, and not the formal qualities of the works, and that he judges the gestures of *both* series to be similar to those of Pollock. In a sense, he is not distinguishing between the repetitive, certainly trance-like gesture of stamping in the

¹⁶³ Éliane Radigue, from a conversation with Bouhours in February 2010, cited in *ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶⁴ Cabanne, “Les nouveaux réalistes, de la décharge.”

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Cachets, and the more freely kinetic and detached tossing or rolling of the *Allures d'objets*. Once again, the subtlety of Arman's project is lost on the critics, to the detriment of the important steps he was taking in the quest for the integration of "the real" in the work of art.

The *Cachets* and *Allures d'objets* that Arman produced over the course of the first five years of his ambitious artistic practice represent a nuanced exploration of the complexities of agency, subjectivity, intentionality, and chance. Those concerns, all bound up in the contemporary debates about the possibilities of realism, would remain central to Arman's artistic pursuits over the next five years, as he developed his œuvre against the backdrop of Nouveau Réalisme.

Chapter Four: The Object

The Nouveau-Réaliste years

Arman described 1959 as the year in which “*tout arrive en même temps* (everything happen[ed] at once).”¹ The epiphany he had reached with the *Allures d’objets* — that he could use any object, and that each would have an expressive potential correlated to its object identity and conveyed through its indexical mark — was amplified when in 1959 it occurred to him to use the object itself, rather than its trace, as his material. As he began to develop what would become the two series for which he is perhaps best known, the *Accumulations* and the *Poubelles*, Arman elaborated what he referred to as his “quantitative” language, amassing quantities of objects, just as he had amassed quantities of indexes and traces in the *Cachets* and the *Allures d’objets*.

Arman’s transition from the index-based works on paper or canvas to the object-based works that followed was understood by critics and artist alike as a logical progression. In 1963, looking back on Arman’s œuvre up to that point, Alain Jouffroy articulated the significance, almost the obligation, of the index-to-object development. While he praised the “*très beaux, élégants et discrets* (very beautiful, elegant and understated)” *Allures d’objets*, he conceded, “*Mais la trace d’un objet n’est pas l’objet; son empreinte, toujours ‘poétique’, n’atteint pas le degré de virulence du vécu, du réel, du pantelant, du vrai* (But the trace of an object is not the object; its imprint, always ‘poetic,’ does not attain the degree of virulence of the lived, the real, the palpitant, the true).”² That is, while the indexical mark or trace contains some of the force of “the real,”

¹ Arman, in Arman and Hahn, *Mémoires accumulés*, 31.

² Jouffroy, “Arman [1963],” 266.

it cannot achieve the full vibrancy of the thing itself. This was precisely the conclusion that Arman drew as he worked through his first phase of realist practice; that it was evident also to the critics demonstrates the pertinence of the project of attaining the utmost reality: it was not only what Arman strove for, but what his contemporary audience sought.

As I have shown, the presence of “the real” was becoming a desideratum in French cultural production at large at this moment. In the throes of an economic boom and a concomitant explosion of consumerist culture, the country was experiencing the influx of image, simulacrum, and spectacle in their daily life, and consequently a premium was put on something that seemed to be slipping away: “the real,” in all its genuine, tangible, material authenticity. Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote in a 1957 manifesto:

Instead of this universe of ‘signification’ (psychological, social, functional) we must try to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their *presence* that objects and gestures impose themselves, and let this presence continue to make itself felt beyond all explanatory theory that might try to enclose it in some system of reference, whether sentimental, sociological, Freudian, or metaphysical.³

Robbe-Grillet’s call for the *felt presence* of objects and gestures in literature mirrors Arman’s efforts in his work to make present his own objects and gestures — as we have seen in the indexing in the *Cachets* and *Allures d’objets*, and as becomes ever clearer in the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* that he produced next. As I have argued, the parallel developments in experimental literature and art speak to a *Zeitgeist* of postwar France: a widespread concern for making present “the real,” the material stuff of everyday life. This advocacy for concrete, tangible, “real” things is befitting of a society experiencing

³ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “A Fresh Start for Fiction,” trans. Richard Howard, *Evergreen Review* 1, no. 3 (1957): 102.

the eruption of mass media, which was perceived as the occupation of daily life by images, and the consequent disappearance or degradation of the authentic “real.” These are the conditions that I see Arman engaging in the object-based works that he began making in 1959.

Arman’s shift from works on paper or canvas to works in volume appeared at the time to align with a similar shift on a broader scale: the move away from abstract painting and toward new forms of artistic production that embraced everyday objects as not only components but entire contents of works of art. As Arman developed the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, Restany began to formulate the unifying theories that would soon make possible the incorporation of the Nouveau-Réaliste group. For Restany, this was the moment — 1959, *l’année charnière* — when the idea of Nouveau Réalisme began not only to coalesce but to assert its urgency. As I discussed in Chapter One, by 1960, enough artistic imperatives had changed that Restany, in publishing his 1958 text *Lyrisme et abstraction*, was compelled to add a preface in which he addressed the new directions art had taken in just the past two years. Those developments, he noted, now made his essay on lyrical abstraction seem outmoded, as new paths had been opened “*au-delà de toute esthétique canonique, informelle ou non* (beyond any canonical aesthetic, *informel* or not).”⁴ Asserting the importance of the new object-based works that were beginning to proliferate, he proclaimed that it was sociology itself that was becoming the base material of art. Further — and equally important — he declared that this base material was one that “*l’instinct annexe dans sa mise hors de soi de l’individu créateur* (instinct annexes in its setting aside of the creator-individual).”⁵ Already in 1960, at the very moment of

⁴ Restany, *Lyrisme et abstraction*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Nouveau Réalisme's emergence, Restany thus established his crucial view of the artist as absent — restrained in order to allow the “sociological material,” the objects, to stand for themselves.⁶

Looking back on that pivotal moment in Arman's practice, when he turned from the index to the object, Restany referred to it as

la cristallisation d'une démarche appropriatrice du réel en un langage quantitatif qui devait s'élever immédiatement à la puissance d'un style. Je dis bien immédiatement car avant 1960, les 'cachets' et les 'allures' qui sont des empreintes d'objets se situent encore au niveau de la transcription calligraphique. Avec les premières poubelles de 1959-60 . . . et les accumulations d'articles de série . . . Arman ouvre ses yeux et les nôtres sur la nature moderne, industrielle et urbaine: un regard neuf sur le monde, traduit dans le langage simple et direct du consommateur.

the crystallization of an appropriative approach to the real and a quantitative language that would immediately elevate to the power of a style. I say immediately because before 1960, the *Cachets* and the *Allures* [*d'objet*], which are imprints of objects, are still situated at the level of calligraphic transcription. With the first *Poubelles* of 1959-60 . . . and the *Accumulations* of mass-produced articles, . . . Arman opens his eyes and ours to modern, industrial, and urban nature: a new look at the world, translated in the simple and direct language of the consumer.⁷

From this passage alone, the degree to which Restany's analysis of Arman's work was tied up in his broader philosophical goal of promoting a sociological embrace of the new capitalist “nature” is abundantly clear. And his allusion to the transcriptive nature of the *Cachets* and *Allures d'objets*, which he describes as *prior* to Arman's new realist language, implicitly bolsters his anti-representational stance.

⁶ In the same preface, Restany discussed the aptness of the new forms of art, and their necessity now that easel painting had lost its relevancy: “*La toujours possible synthèse de communication devra s'opérer à un autre stade de résolution antagonique: les conditions nécessaires à cette résolution s'élaboreront en dehors du cadre étroit de l'orthodoxie picturale. En dehors de la peinture, et — pourquoi pas? — contre elle* (The still possible synthesis of communication will have to be carried out in another stage of antagonistic resolution: the necessary conditions for that resolution will be elaborated outside the narrow confines of pictorial orthodoxy. Outside of painting, and — why not? — against it.)” Ibid.

⁷ Pierre Restany, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 12.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand Arman's object-based works of 1959 as developing out of the *Cachets* and the *Allures d'objets*, for this parentage, more than any Nouveau-Réaliste doctrine that was then emerging, had a profound effect on both the form and the concept of the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*. The fact of the latter series' development from the former indicates that Arman's conception of his volumetric works was based on pictorial principles.⁸ As a result, the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* retain a relationship to painting both in their insistent frontality and planarity and in their mediation of compositional harmony, often achieved through color relations and an all-over balance of surface forms, loosely based on the Cubist grid. The pictorial project at the foundation of the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* will prove important to my argument about Arman's negotiation of the object/image or "real"/simulacrum dyad, which I shall address in the present chapter.

That Arman's object-based works developed from the index-based works that preceded them is not a revelation. Even Restany, so focused on Arman's quantitative language of directly appropriated objects, acknowledged the logical progression of the artist's work from abstract painting to *Cachets* to *Allures d'objets* to the assemblage works that followed.⁹ But past considerations of Arman's œuvre's development have stopped short of theorizing it beyond the obvious chronological succession. In this chapter, I examine two key series from Arman's Nouveau-Réaliste years, the

⁸ Reut, *Arman: La traversée*, 6.

⁹ In a 1964 letter to Arman, Restany wrote of his intention to publish a brief biographical sketch of the artist in the journal *Quadrum*, and suggested that the two of them select "cinq photos destinées à illustrer le développement historique de ta démarche: une peinture abstraite; un cachet; une allure; une poubelle, une des toutes premières accumulations et une colère (five photos to illustrate the historical development of your practice: an abstract painting, a *Cachet*, an *Allure d'objet*, a *Poubelle*, one of your first *Accumulations*, and a *Colère*)." Pierre Restany, letter to Arman, September 18, 1964. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

Accumulations and the *Poubelles*. The crux of my interest in these series is the question of representation as it relates to Arman's realist project, already underway since 1954. And tied up in the question of representation is the problem of the artist's agency, a problem central to the theorization of Nouveau-Réaliste "presentation." I argue that Arman did seek, as Nouveau Réalisme professed, to present "the real;" but that the "real" that he presented consisted not in the concrete and unedited sociological objects that Restany called for, but rather in the "reality" of those objects in the modern world: their oscillation between material and spectral, "real" and simulacral.

Accumulations

[J]’étais assis avec tous mes outils pour faire un *Allure d’objet*. Pour cela, j’avais ramassé des tas de boîtes: des boîtes sans couvercle pour pouvoir y prendre les objets tout de suite; certaines avec des billes, d’autres avec des œufs en bois, des chaînes, des colliers, des ressorts . . . ou des rouages. Il y en avait une avec des ampoules électriques et des tubes radio. . . . Parmi ces boîtes pleines, il y avait une boîte de jeu de jacquet, que j’avais coupée en deux. La partie la plus profonde était pleine d’ampoules de postes de radio, dorées, argentées . . . , certaines noires. En regardant cela, j’ai eu une sorte d’impulsion: j’ai cherché un Rhodoïd que j’ai coupé à la taille de la boîte, puis cloué tout autour. Avec ce noir un peu gris que l’on utilise pour les tableaux noirs, j’ai peint les côtés et, sur à peu près 1 cm, le Rhodoïd. En redressant la boîte, j’ai obtenu ma première *Accumulation*.

I was sitting with all my tools for making an *Allure d’objet*. For that, I had gathered piles of boxes: boxes without covers so that I could take objects from them right away; some with marbles, others with wooden eggs, chains, necklaces, springs . . . or wheels. There was one with electric bulbs and radio tubes. . . . Among these full boxes, there was one backgammon box that I had cut in two. The deepest part was full of radio bulbs, gold, silver . . . , some black. Looking at that, I had a sort of impulse: I looked for a Rhodoid¹⁰ which I cut to the size of the box, then nailed all around it. With this grayish black that one uses for blackboards, I painted the sides and, on about one centimeter, the Rhodoid. In standing the box upright, I achieved my first *Accumulation*.¹¹

¹⁰ Rhodoid is a brand of transparent plastic with a cellulose acetate base, produced by Rhône-Poulenc since 1917. Here, Arman is referring to Rhodoid in its most common form: a clear, film-like sheet, which he used as a barrier to seal off the box.

¹¹ Arman, in Abadie and Arman, "L'archéologie du futur," 40-41.

The *Accumulations* would vary in scale, format, and contents over the next five years, but their basic form would remain the same: a shallow case, filled with multiple examples of the same or similar objects, fronted with a transparent pane (glass or plastic), stood upright and hung on the wall.¹² The *Accumulations* quickly became Arman's most visible works, and they were heralded by Pierre Restany as fulfilling the new imperatives of realist art: the direct presentation, without intervention, of the raw and present "real." These were the works that incited Restany to bring together Arman and several of his apparently like-minded co-generationists under the banner of Nouveau Réalisme.

As I have suggested, the Nouveau-Réaliste narrative that emerged at that time has dominated the scholarship on the *Accumulations*. I aim to reconsider these works in relation to Arman's own realist project, to argue that they are neither merely direct nor merely presentations, and as such, have more critical force than has been previously acknowledged.

Dialectic of presentation and representation

As has been reiterated throughout this dissertation, the traditional, Nouveau-Réaliste view of Arman's art was defined by Restany and hinged on declarations like the following: "*À l'opposé de l'attitude représentative traditionnelle, l'art d'Arman est un art de présentation. Présentation de notre nature moderne, industrielle, publicitaire et urbaine* (In contrast to the traditional representative attitude, Arman's art is an art of

¹² Variations would include cases that were transparent on all sides, and cases that sat upright on a pedestal instead of hanging on the wall. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the horizontal-to-vertical upending of the composition is less evident in certain works that appear to have been conceived and made on the vertical.

presentation. Presentation of our modern, industrial, commercial and urban nature).”¹³ The implication was of a purity and directness that offered as art simply “the real,” *tout court*. Curiously, within the same text, fundamental to his establishment of Arman’s alleged project, Restany went on to say that the *Accumulations* show us the world from a new perspective; “*voilà pourquoi ses œuvres sont pour nous l’occasion inespérée d’images nouvelles, poétiques et originales à partir d’une réalité banalisée par l’usage quotidien* (this is why his works are for us the undreamed-of occasion of new images, poetic and original, from a reality made banal by daily use).”¹⁴ Restany, the stalwart proponent of Arman’s art of presentation, here used the word “images” to describe what the *Accumulations* offer — and not just images, but new ones: a new picture of a reality so commonplace that we fail to see it. For Restany to refer to the creation of a new image as an instance of non-representation is already a contradiction. But even more interesting is the way in which he slips into conflating “real” and image — a slippage that I want to say is intentionally at play in Arman’s work and, further, is symptomatic of certain sociological changes at that historical moment.

I suggest that Arman was conscious of and engaged critically with that dualism, and that he addressed it with full awareness of the increasingly dialectical nature of “real” and image in the daily life of postwar Paris. Repeated statements Arman made about his work in relation to that of Duchamp reveal that he was a dialectical thinker, especially as concerned the possibilities of art making. He proclaimed that he never refused aestheticism in his own work because he had seen the way Duchamp’s anti-art stance had arrived dialectically at art: even as Duchamp made every effort to subvert aestheticism

¹³ Restany, “Arman et la logique formelle,” 265.

¹⁴ Ibid. Restany also included the *Colères* in this description.

and artistic convention in his readymades, Arman observed, they turned out to present themselves as aesthetic objects for artistic contemplation.¹⁵ “Non-aestheticism leads to aestheticism,” Arman declared. “It’s most impossible to refuse aestheticism. In this case, I prefer to assume it.”¹⁶ Arman, in recognizing that an anti-aesthetic gesture within the realm of art is always already an aesthetic one, found the solution to this problem in the embrace of the dialectic, that is, in accepting the inevitable slippage from one pole to the other. This would suggest that in thinking about realism — about making art that expresses “the real” — Arman might have had a similar revelation. An object in today’s world will inevitably become an image. Why not then embrace that duality, and give the beholder both, so that he or she can observe the phenomenon of the “real” thing presenting itself as simulacrum?

¹⁵ Arman was perhaps thinking of Robert Motherwell’s well-known 1951 anthology of Dada, in which he reflected, “it is evident, thirty-five years later, that the bottle rack he [Duchamp] chose has a more beautiful form than almost anything made, in 1914, as sculpture.” Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), xxiii.

¹⁶ Arman explains: “And even when Marcel Duchamp takes an object and shows it as something else than the object itself by the . . . baptism of the object, he makes an aesthetical [*sic*] move because he made this move in the field of aestheticism.” See “Oral History Interview.” Duchamp, too, recognized the inevitability of aestheticism but refused to embrace it. In a 1961 interview he stated that the goal of the readymade was to choose “*un objet qui ne vous intéresse absolument pas et pas seulement le jour où vous le choisissez, mais pour toujours, et qui n’ait jamais aucune chance de devenir beau, joli, agréable à regarder, ou laid. Mais le danger, c’est que n’importe quoi peut devenir très beau au bout de peu de temps si vous répétez l’opération trop souvent, et j’ai dû, pour cette raison limiter le nombre de mes ready-made. Si j’en produisais beaucoup, ce serait la fin du ready-made, et sa condamnation, parce que tout devient joli ou laid au sens de délectation esthétique d’une façon ou d’une autre malgré toutes les précautions* (an object that absolutely does not interest you — not only the day when you choose it, but forever — and that never has any chance of becoming beautiful, pretty, nice to look at, or ugly. But the danger is that anything can become very beautiful after a short time if you repeat the operation too often, and for that reason I had to limit the number of my readymades. If I produced a lot of them, it would be the end of the readymade, and its condemnation, because everything becomes pretty or ugly in the sense of aesthetic delectation in one way or another despite all the precautions).” Duchamp, in typescript of an interview conducted by Alain Jouffroy, New York, 1961. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes. It is worth noting that repetition is, for Duchamp, what causes neutral objects to become aesthetic objects — and that repetition is precisely what Arman embraces, in what Jouffroy called “*une revalorisation esthétique de l’objet lui-même* (an aesthetic revalorization of the object itself,” brought on by accumulation. As Jouffroy put it, “*lorsque l’on voit le porte-bouteilles dans un magasin, et que l’on en voit une vingtaine ensemble, on trouve cela formidablement beau* (when one sees the bottle rack in a store, and when one sees twenty of them together, one finds that tremendously beautiful).” Jouffroy in *ibid.*

In order to speak to the dialectic of “real” and image that he observed in the lived world, Arman exploited the dialectic of presentation and representation within the realm of art. The distinction between the two, which Restany was so keen to trumpet, was part of Arman’s own understanding of his work. But although he often echoed Restany’s claims about his art of presentation, I contend that he was acutely aware that his art was at the same time representation, and the language he used to discuss his work often conflates the two modes, suggesting a fundamental indistinguishability or inseparability of the seemingly opposing forces.

Restany described Arman’s practice thus: “*sur la table rase de la peinture-objet, on accumule de nouveaux objets et ceux-là ne sont pas transcrits, dessinés ou reproduits mais directement empruntés au monde du réel* (on the tabula rasa of the painting-object, he accumulates new objects, which are not transcribed, drawn or reproduced, but directly borrowed from the world of the real).”¹⁷ Restany’s emphasis on directness applied to both the appropriation of objects and their display: there was no transcription, drawing, or reproducing — that is, no representation — but only immediate, unmediated presentation. That directness made Arman a more innovative realist artist than his American co-generationists, whom both Restany and Arman criticized, claiming the latter worked within the framework of traditional artistic techniques, and simply “*refont l’objet* (remake the object).”¹⁸ Arman observed, “*les artistes pop proposaient un monde neuf, coloré, peint et très soigneusement refait* (the pop artists proposed a new, colored, painted, and very carefully remade world).”¹⁹ He opposed that “American” practice to his own, which

¹⁷ Restany, “Arman et la logique,” 265.

¹⁸ Arman, in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 52.

¹⁹ Arman cited specifically “*les boîtes de bière de Ballantine ou le pot de peinture avec les pinceaux en bronze de Jasper Johns, les boîtes de Brillo de Warhol, les Comic Strip agrandis de Lichtenstein, les objets*

he argued was a more pure realism, composed of the raw and true “real,” rather than of replicas or imitations.

Critics friendly to Nouveau Réalisme agreed with Arman and Restany’s assessment of the superiority — or at least the superior force — of a presentation over a representation. Abadie and d’Elme cited the Americans’ adherence to conventional practices of painting and sculpture as evidence of the European artists’ greater radicality. They praised the Europeans’ “violent sensitivity” to the massive industrial transformation at hand and extolled the way the Nouveaux Réalistes “*refusent les simulacres de la peinture à l’huile pour faire appel aux éléments mêmes de la réalité, seuls capables de témoigner, pensent-ils, de notre temps* (refuse the simulacra of oil painting to call on the very elements of reality, the only ones capable of bearing witness, they think, to our time).”²⁰ I want to call attention to the word “simulacra” here, for this term is at the heart of the presentation/representation dyad. The problem with painting, for the Nouveaux Réalistes, was its nature as simulacrum. The “real” of painting is pigment and canvas; whatever is depicted, whether figurative or abstract, can be only simulacrum. And if painting can be only simulacrum, then it cannot be sufficient: “Today it is possible no

en toile cirée d’Oldenburg. . . . Tous sont des objets refaits. Leur vertu, c’est d’être réalisés comme des sculptures ou des peintures, dans des couleurs violentes; d’exister comme des peintures bien plus que comme des objets (Johns’s Ballentine beer can or jar of paint with the bronze paint brushes; Warhol’s Brillo boxes; Lichtenstein’s enlarged Comic Strips; Oldenburg’s objects in waxed canvas. . . . All are remade objects. Their virtue is that they have been realized like sculptures or paintings, in violent colors; that they exist as paintings much more than as objects).” Ibid. It is interesting to recall, in reading Arman’s clarification, that the language he uses to denounce the Pop artists bears striking resemblance to that which Restany used to describe Arman’s project: the creation of “new images.”

²⁰ Abadie and d’Elme, “L’objet-roi,” 68. For Pierre Nahon, who, with his wife Marianne, would become the most prolific collector of Nouveau-Réaliste works in the 1980s, it is just that art of presentation that gives Arman’s work its force: “*Une accumulation d’Arman,*” avowed Nahon, “*c’est bien plus une rupture qu’un drapeau peint à l’huile sur une toile par Jasper Johns, qui n’est qu’un Bonnard américanisé, ou qu’une ‘Combine-Painting’ de Rauschenberg qui lui aussi n’est jamais qu’un Schwitters américanisé, et agrandi* (An Arman *Accumulation* is much more of a rupture than a flag painted in oil on canvas by Jasper Johns, who is nothing but an Americanized Bonnard, or than a Combine Painting by Rauschenberg who, he too, is nothing but an Americanized and aggrandized Schwitters).” See Macaire, “Un marché,” 12.

longer to speak in metaphor,” wrote the critic John Ashbery in 1962.²¹ Only “the real” itself, in its raw and pure form, could stand for itself, as the new art.

Even Gassiot-Talabot, noted detractor of Nouveau Réalisme, found the European artists’ solutions to the problem of bypassing painting and representation to be more radical than those of their American counterparts. He conceded that they were more thorough in their search for “*une perception du réel débarrassée de la relation conceptuelle et sensible* (a perception of the real freed from a conceptual and sensitive relationship),”²² which is to say that they were more successful in the pursuit of this single objective, developed solely in the logic of Nouveau Réalisme.²³

In 1964, Wim Beeren, curator of modern art at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, organized an exhibition of what he called the “new realism” — not Nouveau Réalisme *per se*, but the more general turn toward realism in art in this period. Beeren counted among the new realists artists like Arman who preserved objects, as well as those like Claes Oldenburg who created objects. Rejected were the so-called “junk artists” who, Beeren believed, “*construisait avec les matériaux tout de même une nouvelle image* (used the materials to construct a new image all the same).”²⁴ For Beeren, to use “real” things

²¹ John Ashbery, “The New Realism,” in *New Realists* (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1962), n.p. As I have begun to show and will continue to argue, this proclamation resonated not only in the art about which Ashbery was writing, but also in the literature and film of the era which equally eschewed metaphor in favor of bare realism.

²² Gassiot-Talabot, “À propos du Nouveau Réalisme,” 77.

²³ I make this point to reaffirm the importance of the respective projects of different artists — not just Neo-Dada versus Pop versus Nouveau Réalisme, but on an individual basis. This effort is why I dedicate this thesis to the singular artist Arman: to piece together his project and analyze it on *those* terms, and to understand it in relation to terms set up by both his colleagues and his unaffiliated contemporaries.

²⁴ Upon learning of the planned “New Realism” exhibition, Restany wrote Beeren to take issue with his selection of artists: he first praised the curator for the idea of bringing together Nouveau-Réaliste artists at the Gemeentemuseum, but then admonished him for leaving out certain members of the group. See undated letter from Restany to Beeren (ca. May 1964). Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes. Beeren responded that he was not organizing an exhibition on the movement *per se*, but rather an exhibition of the new realism in general: “*Mon principe était d’exposer les réalistes: des artistes qui conservaient les objets comme Spoerri ou qui faisaient l’objet comme Oldenburg. J’ai négligé le junk-art*”

as the material for creating something else — a mere *image* — was no longer realism: those “real” things had to stand for themselves only. In this understanding of realism we find echoes of earlier questions of Arman’s relationship to Schwitters, whom the former decried for using junk materials as compositional elements rather than as themselves. Arman claimed to be more of a realist because when he employed “real” things in his art, he maintained their purity as “real” things, and did not relegate them to the role of colors on a palette.

Nevertheless, despite his declaration of his intention to *present* rather than *represent*, and despite his perceived success in doing so, the form of Arman’s object-based works belie that effort. A look at those works in comparison to Duchamp’s readymades is instructive on this point. One of the most common responses to Arman’s *Accumulations* at the time of their advent was to compare the latter to Duchamp’s iconoclastic objects of the early twentieth century. Of course, Restany’s insistence on the Dada roots of Nouveau-Réaliste appropriation encouraged that exercise, even while the artists associated with the movement denied — and often strongly resented the imputation of — any connection to Duchamp or his readymades. Certainly, at the most basic level, Arman’s use of everyday objects, especially those that are manufactured and not artisanal, owes something to the historical avant-garde. But to put the *Accumulations* into the same category as the readymades based on their mutual use of found materials is perilously reductive: both the intentions and the effects of each body of work are entirely

pour autant qu’elle construisait avec les matériaux tout de même une nouvelle image (My principle was to show realists: artists who preserved objects like Spoerri or who made an object like Oldenburg. I neglected junk art since it used the materials to construct a new image).” See letter from Beeren to Restany, May 20, 1964. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

divergent, and the difference between the two is illustrative of Arman's problematizing of the presentation/representation dialectic.²⁵

Faced with the proliferation of mass-produced products, Duchamp adopted a practice of isolating a singular object, selected on the basis of his utter indifference to it. By removing it from the anonymity bestowed on it by its mass production, he particularized it: isolated, set aside, perhaps even mounted on a pedestal or signed with the artist's name or pseudonym, it became unique.²⁶ By contrast, Arman's *Accumulations* do not seek to combat the anonymity of the mass-produced; rather, they highlight it by replicating it for the viewer. In fact, this effort emerges as a key intention of the *Accumulations*: to make evident, for the viewer who may own one mass-produced razor or one mass-produced toothbrush or one mass-produced toaster, the total non-singularity of that single object; to demonstrate that part of its object-identity is revealed only in seeing it contextualized in its natural state: the homogenous mass of anonymous units, which together create a single *Gestalt*. It is at this point that Arman's *Accumulations*, despite the "directness" of their appropriation, veer into the territory of representation: the individual objects cease to stand for themselves, as they would were they isolated and

²⁵ Restany never claimed they were the same — in fact, Arman's were "forty degrees above" Duchamp's — but the implication of parentage was enough to cause the mass conflation of the two artists' work. Restany avowed that Arman's realism, like that of his colleagues, was Dada with a positive charge. See Pierre Restany, "A 40° au-dessus de DADA," 266-267.

²⁶ As Gérard Durozoi explains, Duchamp's appropriation "*extrait un objet de l'anonymat dû à sa fabrication en série, et le particularise, au minimum par une signature* (extracts an object from the anonymity caused by its mass production, and particularizes it, at minimum by a signature)." Durozoi argues that the Dadaist and Surrealist modes of appropriation, which were less immediate and invited artistic intervention, subjective intentions, and the creation of various contexts for their presentation, justified the individuality of their works, as opposed to the namelessness of those of the Nouveaux Réalistes. See Durozoi, *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, 15.

particularized like Duchamp's readymades, and began to stand together as metonym, to illustrate the abstract notions of quantity, of anonymity, of homogeneity.²⁷

Arman himself substantiated this distinction between Duchamp's intentions and his own: "*Lorsqu'il exposait un urinoir, le baptisait Fontaine et le signait . . . Duchamp cherchait à donner un nouveau nom à la réalité. . . . Au contraire, avec la notion de quantité, moi, je débaptise* (When he exhibited a urinal, baptized it *Fountain* and signed it . . . Duchamp sought to give a new name to reality. . . . I, on the contrary, with the notion of quantity, I de-baptize)."²⁸ That is, Arman denies particularity: he does not name the individual object, but instead subsumes it to the mass. Ironically, despite his implying otherwise, Arman, too, "gives a new name to reality," in that he titles his works based on their composite form, as a unified whole. In one instance, apparently aimed at definitively highlighting the divergence between his own work and that of Duchamp, Arman accumulated an object that was identifiably Duchampian. His 1959 installation *Fleurs* (Figure 4.1) involved filling a public room in Nice with dozens of coat racks, a clear allusion to Duchamp's well-known *Hat Rack* of 1917 (Figure 4.2). Titling the work *Fleurs* allowed Arman to draw attention to the transformative operation of multiplication: *en masse*, the coat racks come to resemble a fantastical bed of flowers; they cease to stand only for themselves and become a representation of another entity. The title directs the viewer to take in the whole collection as *one* entity: not a series of individual objects,

²⁷ Francblin, too, has argued that the *Accumulations* are less a mode of exhibiting objects than a mode of exhibiting the concept of quantity. See Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 91. I will discuss this concept further in a later section in this chapter.

²⁸ Arman, interview with Pierre Descargues, 1962, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 182.

but a mass of objects that collectively become something else — and come to signify, altogether, a "new reality."²⁹

The multiplication of coat racks and the renaming of the whole is precisely the kind of transformative operation that recurs in Arman's œuvre, despite Restany's insistence that such maneuvers are not there. The transformation in this instance occurs at the moment of the artist's *naming* of the work, which establishes the whole as a "new image" rather than the autonomous self-representation of the pure objects.³⁰ Notably, this *Accumulation* is aberrant in its form of display: the objects are merely amassed and exhibited in their everyday state, rather than stacked, upended, overturned, and enclosed in a case. As I will now argue, that latter form of display — the one most common in the series — introduces a host of additional considerations bearing on the artist's role in the objects' conceptual and ontological transformation.

The question of agency

If the nature of the *Accumulations* can be understood as both presentational and representational, then the question of agency stands unresolved. The implication of Restanian presentation is a tendency toward authorlessness: the directness of the

²⁹ Alison de Lima Greene finds the difference between Arman's *Fleurs* and Duchamp's *Hat Rack* to be located in the "contextual syntax" that Arman maintained, a syntax that was both "expressive and dramatically commanding," as opposed to the simple isolation and decontextualization of a single object by Duchamp. See Greene, "Arman: An Artist of Our Time," in *Arman 1955-1991: A Retrospective* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), 14.

³⁰ In an undated text, presumably from the early 1960s, Restany conceded, "*Les images qu'ils nous donnent à voir sont absolument nouvelles* (the images that they show us are absolutely new)." That is, despite his ceaseless insistence that the Nouveaux Réalistes do not transform the real or transcribe it into a representation, here he claims that what they offer in the end are *images* — and not only images, but images that are *new*. Which is to say: a new vision of an existing reality; a representation. See Restany, "Un Nouveau visage de l'Europe: le Nouveau Réalisme parisien," undated typescript. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes. I make the judgment that this essay is most likely from the early 1960s on the basis of the text's title, which implies that it was written when Nouveau Réalisme was a new phenomenon, i.e., around 1960.

appropriation and display of preexisting objects suggests that the objects themselves are the agents of the composition. They, combined with a degree of chance, are responsible for not only the content but the form and indeed the meaning of the work. But as we have seen, the artist does intervene in the presentation; he is not altogether removed from the creative process, but rather takes an active role in presenting the objects within a representational framework. The material form of the *Accumulations* suggests that composition is not left entirely to chance, nor is it entirely under the artist's control. The frequency with which vague rows and grids repeat, and objects line up along a vertical axis that mirrors the erect human posture, evidences the intentional hand of the artist. And yet the imperfect, apparently unpredictable positioning of individual objects — the way they turn, rotate, or lean to fill the space of the vitrine — reveals the impossibility of pure authorial determinism.

The ambivalent status of the object-as-agent and the artist-as-agent is clearly articulated in the criticism and scholarship on the *Accumulations*, where we witness a profusion of claims about the objects' inherent expressivity or subjectivity and the artist's detached function, as well as the inverse: the artist's expressivity as composer and the objects' detached status as surrogate colors on a palette.

As we have seen, Restany was unequivocal in his insistence on Arman's non-intervention in the composition of the works. He wrote of Arman's process,

Beyond appropriation, the object determines its own accumulation. . . . It contains within itself the determining factors of its piling up and of its proliferating, repetitive multiplication. . . . For each object there exist differing thresholds of accumulation. . . . From the start, a central intuition is in command, and it is clearly that of the determinism of chance directed by the object.³¹

³¹ Pierre Restany, "Arman: A Radical Portrait of Modernity," in *Arman 1955-1991*, 42.

Here Restany grants agency to the object, which is described as “directing” the operation based on its own “intuition”: the objects self-arrange as they see fit — in terms of quantity, scale, and form. Note that there is no mention of the artist in this description of process, only objects imbued with the capabilities of self determination, intuition, and command.

Due in large part to such fervent claims by Restany, Arman’s repeated use of the strategies of multiplication and repetition was largely understood as a will to limit the artist’s choice, to allow himself to be guided by the objects rather than by his own intentionality.³² Such a strategy fit with a broader trend toward anonymity that, as Cleve Gray observed in 1962, had become apparent in recent years, first through the loss of the signature at the lower corner of a composition, and then through the denial of the artist’s autographic mark, both of which were now “eliminated by a polished surface of complete impersonality.”³³ Abadie supported this reading of the *Accumulations*, and in an interview with Arman on the occasion of his first major retrospective in France, at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in 1998, he proposed to explain the balance of agency between the object and the artist by evoking the notion of potential: that the objects contain some sort of expressive possibility that the artist simply activates. As with the *Allures d’objets*, the potential-based model of agency would leave meaning tied

³² As artist Claude Viallat wrote, “*C’est une manière de ne pas décider de la dimension, de la matière. Une manière de ne pas composer* (It is a way of not deciding the dimensions, the material. A way not to compose).” Claude Viallat, “L’immersion dans la quantité à propos d’Arman,” *Art Press* 103 (May 1986): 15.

³³ Gray recognizes the phenomenon of omitting the signature in the works of everyone from geometric abstractionists to color field painters to abstract expressionists, and Arman’s slick vitrines could also be seen as the perfect illustration of that anonymous, impersonal, polished surface. Gray, “Aspects of Anonymity,” 92-93.

up in the raw, “real” objects, without denying the artist’s hand in bringing it out. Abadie prompted Arman by stating that in the latter’s work there seemed to be a simultaneous emergence of two essential notions: “*le langage de la quantité et, parallèlement, un mode de travail qui consiste à avoir à disposition des quantités de matériaux en attente de quelque chose* (the language of quantity and, in parallel, a working practice that consists in having at your disposal quantities of materials awaiting something).”³⁴ To this Arman responded simply and enigmatically, “*Ils attendent leur destin* (They await their destiny).”³⁵ Arman’s statement reaffirms earlier claims he made in the 1950s and 1960s that imply that the objects have a sort of self-fulfilling function in the work of art: that they possess some kind of value as objects that they imbue in the work of art, and their self-expression is inevitable or “destined.” In other words, the objects’ participation in the work of art is not governed by a controlling agent — the artist — but involves rather a self-directed role, a natural manifestation of their destiny as objects. The artist, then, is minimized as actor: he is not a creator but a facilitator, providing the circumstances for the objects to self-express in the context of the work of art.

In his seminal text of 1960, “Réalisme des accumulations,” Arman defined the *Accumulations* as “*la multiplication et le blocage dans un volume correspondant à la forme, au nombre et à la dimension des objets manufacturés* (the multiplication of manufactured objects and their blocking in a volume corresponding to their form, number

³⁴ Abadie, in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 41.

³⁵ Ibid.

and dimension).”³⁶ Arman thus confirmed that the scale and format of the vitrine were determined by the demands of the objects in question. Just as he allowed the form of the object to govern what actions he would take with respect to it in the *Allures d’objets*, here in the *Accumulations* it is left to the objects to “choose” the size, scale, and shape of their enclosing container. That process relegates the artist to a supporting role, such that it is not his intentionality that determines the form of his works, but rather the materiality of the objects he uses as his medium. Nevertheless, Arman does not entirely remove himself from the process with the absolutism that Restany advocates. In Chapter Three, I described Arman’s process as a *collaboration* between artist and object — a necessary deference to the demands of particular objects’ forms and characteristics, but never a total abandonment of control or agency. Again in the *Accumulations*, the works themselves, as well as Arman’s description of their creation, support an understanding of an engaged artist, sensitive to the objects’ particularities but still exerting his will of collection and containment in relation to them.

It is important to remember that, as discussed in the previous chapter, part of Arman’s objective in writing “Réalisme des accumulations” was to distinguish his work from that of Schwitters, to which it was often compared. Schwitters’s Merzbilder of the early twentieth century had been met with opposition by the Berlin Dadaists who saw them as merely aesthetic;³⁷ Arman reiterated that reading, asserting that Schwitters had been concerned chiefly with aesthetic harmony, and that he had thus treated his object elements like colors on a palette. Arman’s own professed resistance to such an approach — his claim, apparently borrowed from Restany, that the objects themselves possess an

³⁶ Arman, “Réalisme des accumulations,” 251.

³⁷ See Richter, “Hanover Dada,” 137-154.

intrinsic value that would be destroyed by their subsumption to an aesthetic program — was part of the case he indirectly made against representation. Objects, Arman implied, should not be used in order to represent some other totality or greater form; objects alone *are* the totality, autonomously, individually, each with its own value. In order for this inherent value to express itself, Arman suggested, echoing Restany’s recent proclamations, the artist must not impose order on the objects, but rather allow them to “auto-compose.”

However, the “auto-composition” that Arman called for, unlike that which Restany defended, was not absolute in that it did not require the absence or negation of the artist. In a later interview, Arman explained, “If you put in the container two thousand forks, they will assemble following plus or less [*sic*] the form of the fork and they will have space between them and they will have auto-composition that will be made by accident, but that will be still predictable when you use an object.”³⁸ Here Arman gives agency to the objects and distances himself from the role of composer, but he retains a modicum of power or control by asserting that this chance-based arrangement is in fact predictable. That is, despite removing his own hand from the task of arranging, he does so within the confines of a controlled practice; he never cedes fully to the objects because, first, he has pre-determined the basic structure of all *Accumulations*, which allows for only minimal variation among the elements, and second, those elements’ “behavior” can be forecast and harnessed according to some level of anticipatory calculation.

³⁸ “Oral History Interview.”

Restany was thus correct that “*l’objet détermine son accumulation. . . . Il soutient en soi les facteurs déterminants de son accumulation, il en commande au départ toutes les modalités quantitatives (nombre d’éléments, format et rapports dimensionnels de la cuve, de la boîte ou de la vitrine)* (the object determines its accumulation. . . . It contains in itself the determining factors of its accumulation, it commands at the beginning all the quantitative modalities (number of elements, format and dimensional relationships of the vessel, box or vitrine)).”³⁹ But Arman’s acknowledgement that the objects’ self-arrangement is not purely aleatory, that in choosing the objects to use as his materials he has a sense of how the final composition will come together, is an admission that the artist still has a role as agent; the balance of his agency has merely shifted to that initial gesture of the selection of materials. And that selection has more implications than the Duchampian gesture of nomination. Arman’s selection was based on criteria of potential. As we saw in Chapter Three, Arman’s *Allures d’objets* were also predicated on this type of choice: the artist selected objects based on how he expected them to respond to gravitational or gestural force: what kinds of traces they would put down once they left the hands of the artist, and how those traces might come to fill the page. By the same token, in the *Accumulations* objects are chosen based on the potential arrangements they might auto-compose within the imposed, limiting framework of the vitrine.

This type of semi-autonomy of the objects is clearly articulated by Arman’s description of his technique in the *Accumulations*. He explained that his process was determined by the identity of the appropriated objects: “*Je suis sensible à la qualité particulière des objets. Je ne peux pas travailler un objet de verre comme un violon ou*

³⁹ Restany, “Arman et la logique,” 265.

un soulier, chaque objet a son identité. J'ai une démarche d'approche différente [pour chacun] (I am sensitive to the particular quality of objects. I cannot work a glass object like I can a violin or a shoe; each object has its identity. I have a different approach [for each one])."⁴⁰ Thus certain objects beget certain techniques, in terms of the size, orientation, and format of the glass case; the means of arranging the objects within the case (in rows, in columns, on their sides, freeform); and the total number of objects collected and displayed. As I will show, that number is essential to the achievement of an *Accumulation*, rather than a simple collection of objects: the specific quantity must take the collected objects to the threshold that Arman identifies as the key to his creative act: the "critical mass." He explains: "*L'accumulation existe qu'à partir du moment où l'on ne peut plus identifier visuellement le nombre d'objets rassemblés* (The *Accumulation* exists only from the moment when one can no longer identify visually the number of assembled objects)."⁴¹ Arman goes on to explain the phenomenon of critical mass:

Le nombre seul permet de créer la vague qui découle de la forme des objets, l'ondulation. Et de temps à autre par le jeu du hasard, l'identité d'un objet pourra ressortir ou non. Vous pouvez aussi créer des rythmes, des structures, des mots. Je joue de toutes ces lois comme un violoniste de son instrument.

The number alone allows for the creation of the wave that flows from the form of the objects, the undulation. And from time to time by the game of chance, the identity of an object can re-emerge or not. You can also create rhythms, structures, words. I play all of these laws like a violinist plays his instrument.⁴²

Thus Arman confirms his active engagement in creating certain effects — of the dissolution of the object, for instance, or the development of lyrical abstract patterns — in his collaborative process with his materials.

⁴⁰ Arman, in André Parinaud, "L'aventure de l'art moderne: Arman, ou le rôle du créateur," *Galerie-jardin des arts* no. 186 (December 1978): 34.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Asked in 1998 about the composition of the *Accumulations* — whether the cases were filled at random, with the artist merely dumping the contents inside, or if it was rather an organized exercise, with the artist making intentional compositional choices and arranging the objects accordingly — Arman explained that he used both techniques in different instances:

Dans les premières Accumulations, il y a le vrac où les objets prennent place d'eux-mêmes: ils ont tendance à "s'autocomposer," par la loi de la gravité. Mais dans d'autres Accumulations, les objets sont attachés par du fil de fer; d'autres sont rangés ou collés. Il est évident que ceux-ci ont demandé une décision, même minime, de composition.

In the first *Accumulations*, there is the bulk where the objects take their places themselves: they tend to “self-compose,” by the law of gravity. But in other *Accumulations*, the objects are attached by wire; others are arranged or glued. It is clear that these have required a decision, even a minimal one, of composition.⁴³

Here Arman identifies the discrepancy between the artist as collector who allows his materials to “self-compose” and the artist who composes his materials — who glues, arranges, or attaches by wire the component parts of his work. The decision to perform one role or the other depended on the nature of the objects collected.

Even despite Arman’s admission of some level of control, Jaimey Hamilton observes that what can truly arrest the viewer of an *Accumulation* is the impression, though often false, that “*ces objets se mettent spontanément en place contre les parois de verre en fonction de leur poids et de leur forme* (these objects spontaneously place themselves against the sides of the glass in function of their weight and their form).”⁴⁴

⁴³ Arman, in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 45.

⁴⁴ Jaimey Hamilton, “Civilisation figée: Notes sur l’esthétique de la systématisation chez Arman,” in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 61. Hamilton relates the apparent self-organization of the objects to a Marxist proposition, proffered in *Capital*, that the capitalist system passes from one phase to the next not by the intervention of man but by the machinery itself. That is, the capitalist mechanism is self-propelling, and so too, argues Hamilton, are Arman’s microcosmic collections of objects.

That is, we respond more strongly when we do not perceive the artist's intervention.⁴⁵

This observation suggests that the impression of an authorless composition strikes a chord with the viewer in a way that a conspicuously arranged composition might not.

Hamilton goes on to connect this phenomenon with a piece of advice that Restany gave Arman after he showed the critic one of his first *Poubelles*, which comprised carefully organized waste materials. Restany told the artist that it was unsuccessful because it was too aesthetic, too worked; he advised Arman to simply pour the contents of a waste bin directly into his glass box and leave it as is.⁴⁶

The perception that viewers would be more moved by compositions that seem self-generated fits with a general tendency at this historical moment: a belief that there was something more “real,” more true to reality, about a work of art that eschewed or attempted to eschew artistic intervention.⁴⁷ And yet I think also that Arman's

Accumulations play on our inability to distinguish between one type of composition and the other, or perhaps our will to perceive these arrangements as composed by objects, and

⁴⁵ Claude Viallat expressed the preference for the seeming spontaneity and evident lack of “work” in the early *Accumulations*, which would disappear in the later instantiations of the mid-to-late 1960s: “*Les premières accumulations surtout étaient réalisées directement dans des boîtes; elles étaient immédiates. Par la suite, les inclusions dans le plastique ou le béton ont obligé à une technique beaucoup plus compliquée. Il a dû travailler couche après couche. La technique a enlevé un peu de la spontanéité* (The first *Accumulations* especially were realized directly in boxes; they were immediate. Later, the inclusions in plastic or concrete required a much more complicated technique. He had to work layer after layer. The technique took away a bit of the spontaneity).” Viallat, “L’immersion dans la quantité,” 17. The discussion of the distinction between the early *Accumulations*, made in Paris between 1959 and 1964, and the later ones made in New York, commonly repeats such impressions of the relative spontaneity of the former. I will discuss the two categories of *Accumulations* — the divide between which, incidentally, determined my choice to end my dissertation’s purview in 1964 — a bit later in this chapter.

⁴⁶ Arman recounts this episode in Abadie and Arman, “L’archéologie du futur,” 42. More on this in Chapter Five.

⁴⁷ It would seem that Arman and Spoerri had this in mind when they proposed to Sidney Janis an exhibition in which all of Arman’s artworks would be made by Spoerri, and all of Spoerri’s artworks would be made by Arman — the point being, of course, that the difference in artist would be indistinguishable for these non-subjective works. The exhibition never took place, due to Janis’s fear that collectors would be troubled by the concept, but the impulse toward self-effacement that fueled the idea is clear. Spoerri did independently create a “certificate of guarantee” that would allow anyone to make officially licensed *Tableaux-pièges*. See Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 174.

thus as somehow “natural.” Need we be reminded that a collection of some fifty nearly identical electric razors would scarcely be found “in nature,” that is, in our daily life in the world outside the gallery? Certainly, we might find rows of boxes of new razors at the store, or several old ones in a bin at the flea market. But never, it would seem, like this (Figure 4.3) — in such suffocating quantity. As van der Marck points out, this type of multiplicity in Arman’s work is effective *because* it is so “unnatural” — that is, because he uses manmade objects that, although they are produced in mass quantities, are never normally seen in such numbers in everyday life. Van der Marck contrasts these types of objects to “real-life parallels” like dried flowers in an herbarium or butterflies under glass; those “products of nature are multiple by definition, can be often seen in that state, meet their end naturally, and do not need the artist’s intervention.”⁴⁸ And so when we are confronted with Arman’s *Accumulations* of manufactured goods, we must be aware on some level of the artist’s involvement, his selection of these objects, his search for multiple exemplars, his collecting and amassing of them — even as we may willfully suspend this rational realization in order to see the works as “natural.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Jan Van der Marck, “Arman: The Parisian Avant-Garde,” 93. Arman himself addressed the difference between nature and culture in his selection of objects: “*Je m’intéresse aux sécrétions humaines et l’objet est, par excellence, un produit de l’homme. . . . Je pourrais accumuler des coquillages, des cornes d’antilope, des escargots, mais cela ne me concerne pas. Un coquillage est beau par lui-même. . . . Je ne suis attiré que par l’objet manufacturé, produit, consommé, détruit* (I am interested in human secretions and the object is, *par excellence*, a product of man. . . . I could amass shells, antelope horns, snails, but that does not concern me. A shell is beautiful on its own. . . . I am attracted only by the object that is manufactured, produced, consumed, destroyed).” Arman, 1972, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 154.

⁴⁹ Francblin describes the early *Accumulations* as “*faites d’objets qui paraissent avoir été jetés en vrac, même si ledit vrac, en réalité, a été un peu arrangé par l’artiste* (made of objects that appear to have been thrown in disorder, even if that disorder, in reality, was a bit arranged by the artist).” She names *La tension monte* of 1963, composed of manometers, as exemplary of the kinds of *Accumulations* that seem to have been inspired by the all-over, “*où les objets accumulés étant petits, la composition, à la fois souple et dense (comme dirait William Rubin), offre une image qui rappelle la peinture* (where the accumulated objects being small, the composition, at once flexible and dense (as William Rubin would say), offers an image that recalls painting).” Catherine Francblin, “Arman: au-delà de l’objet, une esthétique,” in *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Abadie, 13.

Indeed, when Rauschenberg saw Arman's first solo exhibition in New York at the Cordier-Warren Gallery in 1961, even though he himself worked with found materials which he intentionally composed in "random order,"⁵⁰ he understood Arman's works as auto-composed by the objects. He told Arman that he was very disappointed in the show, "especially these boxes with objects inside. Accumulation by chance is not art, it's luck."⁵¹ But Arman's embrace of chance and his delegation of agency to his materials was, as we have seen, more complex than mere happenstance. That complexity is captured in a statement he made in regard to the *Accumulations*: "Chance — there is nothing more controllable than chance in the long run. Since chance depends on laws, of quantity for instance, it is no longer chance. Chance is my raw material."⁵²

Arman's account presents a paradox, that chance is controllable. But it also presents a dialectic: chance follows laws and is therefore not chance; it is always already predictable and manipulable. For Arman to then claim that chance thus defined is his primary material is for him to insist on the paradox and dialectics at play in his work. Chance, which does not exist as such, is his material, he tells us. All of his prior statements about how he allows the objects to compose themselves thus take on new

⁵⁰ This term was used by Branden Joseph to describe the composition of Rauschenberg's Combines, which seemed to depend on both chance and control. See Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

⁵¹ Rauschenberg, quoted in Abadie and Arman, "L'archéologie du futur," 51. The quotation appears in French as "surtout ces boîtes avec des objets dedans. L'accumulation par hasard, ce n'est pas de l'art, c'est de la chance." Rauschenberg has also been quoted as saying, in response to the same show, "automatic repetition is not creation." Van der Marck suggests that Rauschenberg's dismissal of Arman's work, despite its similarity to his own, was part of "an undisguised effort . . . to discourage the French from coming to New York and competing for a share of the vanguard market by the Americans." See Van der Marck, "Arman: The Parisian Avant-Garde," 90. However, given Rauschenberg's collaboration with the Nouveaux Réalistes in both Paris and New York from 1961 on, I find this motivation unlikely, and believe rather that Rauschenberg fell into the same trap that so many do, of "willing" a sort of authorlessness to these works, through either the coercion of Restany's writing or a general resolve to see them as "pure" realism.

⁵² Arman, "Statement [1969]," in *Art Since Mid-Century: The New Internationalism* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1971), 327.

meaning: it is not that he is leaving the compositions entirely up to some unknowable force, but rather that he is allowing the objects to organize themselves according to laws that he anticipates and even effects. He knows, for instance, that when composing a work such as *Untitled* of 1960 (Figure 4.4), the amassing of x small bottles in a glass box of y dimensions will cause the bottles to fill the space allotted in a predictable way: once placed in the box on a horizontal surface, they have enough space to rotate and turn as they are flipped to the vertical of the wall. The selection of a smaller number of bottles and a larger case allows the objects to create a random pattern rather than tending toward order, as does a work like *Miadulation de friture* (Figure 4.5), where the constraints of space — the box is a mere eight centimeters deep — require that all the objects lie flat, side-by-side, and face-forward, in a vague suggestion of rows.

Of course, as we have seen, certain of the *Accumulations* outright reject the notion that they could have possibly been composed by any amount of chance. Works generally comprising smaller numbers of larger objects — women's shoes in *Madison Avenue* (Figure 4.6) or car horns in *Jericho* (Figure 4.7) — have clearly been very deliberately arranged by the artist. The objects fit into the enclosing box so precisely that it is unthinkable that they could have composed themselves. Often it is the verticality of the composition — notably, a departure from the flatbed quality of the apparently “auto-composed” works — that exposes the artist's intervention. The way the pitchers sit in a line along the bottom edge of the case in *Gaz à tous les étages* (Figure 4.8), for instance, discloses the artist's hand having placed them there. Left to chance, might not some of the pitchers have lain on their side or flipped upside-down? And of course, let us not forget works like *Le retour des croisades* (Figure 4.9), where the artist's hand is even

more conspicuous: not only are the locks arranged in rows, beginning from the top edge of the box, but they are also held in place by wires. This is a clear admission on Arman's part of his full control over the composition — even though the relative length of each lock may have helped to “decide” where it would be placed.

In light of the evident importance of the artist's controlling hand, Emmanuelle Ollier has recently lamented the fact that the sociological dimension of Arman's appropriative practice has dominated the scholarship, to the detriment of considerations of his own physical gestures.⁵³ While I disagree with the conclusions Ollier draws about those gestures — she is interested in their violent nature as a consequence of Arman's background in martial arts — she is correct to criticize the kinds of studies so focused on material analyses of the work that they entirely neglect the fact that an artist made them, and that his gestures and practices in doing so matter.

Arman has said that he is a "mental" artist, in that each of his works begins with an idea, on which he sometimes ruminates for months at a time.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, he insists, "*Je ne suis pas un conceptuel, je suis un homo faber. J'aime bien faire les choses. J'aime bien les contrôler avec mes mains. . . . J'ai appris à domestiquer le hasard* (I am not a conceptual [artist], I am a *homo faber*. I like to make things. I like to control them with my hands. . . . I have learned to domesticate chance)."⁵⁵ For the assertion of

⁵³ Ollier, “Arman et l'esprit,” 47.

⁵⁴ Arman admitted that he “*peut réfléchir plusieurs mois à une Accumulation avant de la réaliser* (can reflect on an *Accumulation* for several months before realizing it).” Quoted in Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 167.

⁵⁵ Arman, quoted in Raymonde Moulin, “De l'objet à l'œuvre,” in *Arman*, ed. Abadie, 34-35. Arman has also described his creative process as “*une sensorialité de la création par l'objet et une volonté de rationalité pour le contraindre. Je ne commence jamais une pièce sans savoir où je vais. . . . Avant de commencer je tâte le matériau, je réfléchis beaucoup, puis je le jette dans 'l'acte créateur,' peut-on dire, mon plan parfaitement établi. J'ai eu le concept en tête* (a sensoriality of creation by the object and a will of rationality to constrain it. I never start a piece without knowing where I am going. . . . Before beginning I

Arman's non-intervention in the presentation of his appropriated objects to have prevailed as long as it has is simply at odds with both the artist's philosophy and his practice. He understands his project as one of *making*, of *controlling*. A more careful consideration of the *Accumulations* (and, as we will see shortly, the *Poubelles*) makes clear that this is precisely what he has done: he has *constructed* these works of art, exerting physical, manual control over the objects with which he collaborates, and he has done so intentionally, after extended thought and consideration.⁵⁶

Selection of objects

Given the sociological interest of the *Accumulations*, touted as straightforward reflections of the reality of mass production, mass consumption, and mass waste in France's postwar boom years,⁵⁷ Arman's choice of objects for those works has been the subject of many iconological studies that seek to find meaning in the piles of shoes or watches or bicycle gears. Such studies, however, tend to treat the objects as though they alone made up the works of art, and as a result they overlook the crucial aspect that sets the *Accumulations* apart from any other collection of like objects: their means of display.

feel the material, I reflect a lot, then I throw it into the 'creative act,' if you will, my plan perfectly established. I had the concept in mind)." Arman, in Parinaud, "L'aventure," 33.

⁵⁶ As Martin argues, the artist is never indifferent to his compositions, for, "even with the *accumulations* that have simply been poured into a container that has then been sealed up. . . . [T]he accumulated objects have first and consciously been subjected to the process of choice and then to the process of accumulation itself. They have been arranged mentally if not physically — dwelt upon, thought about, and selected." Martin, *Arman*, 22.

⁵⁷ François Pluchart described Arman as having a "*volonté de révéler la société à elle-même et de la remettre en cause* (will to reveal society to itself and to question it)." By his account, the *Accumulations* reveal directly the "*inflexions de la société et notamment la manière dont elle consomme . . . soulignant la mesquinerie et le sordide de ses intérêts, la manière dont elle répartit ses richesses* (inflexions of society and notably the manner in which it consumes . . . highlighting the pettiness and sordidness of its interest, the way in which it allocates its riches)." Pluchart, "Enrichissantes contradictions," 8. Grégoire Müller added, "[H]e uses objects to comment on a variety of subjects: sociology, ethnology, psychology of perception, behaviorism . . . in order to give us a clearer picture of man and contemporary society." Müller, "Arman," 35.

I contend that meaning in the *Accumulations* lies less in what the objects are and more in how they are presented, for intentionality lay more profoundly in the multiplication, the arrangement, and the encasement of the objects than in the identity of the objects themselves.

Gene Swenson noted in 1964, “Arman does, of course, decide what type of object he will use; and he then chooses some variety of the available objects of that type. But just as he buys manufactured objects and does not make his own, so he seems less to make a choice than to become conscious of the possibilities of unifying some sensation with an object.”⁵⁸ The end goal is what van der Marck calls “a structural frame for the object,”⁵⁹ a way of presenting the selected items to achieve a certain effect. Henry Martin wonders,

Is it more important that these objects have been consumed or that they have been collected? But the point, surely, is that they have been both consumed and collected, and that the works themselves seem to indicate a sense in which “to consume,” “to collect,” and “to discard” all tend to mean the same thing. The interchangeability of these words is in fact what permits Arman to deal with objects that are *not* old and discarded. The tragedy in Arman’s work is dependent not upon the nature of the objects he works with but rather upon the nature of the operations to which the objects are subjected.⁶⁰

And Catherine Francblin adds:

C'est bien là le rôle des objets dans les Accumulations d'Arman: ils servent; ils ont un intérêt pour l'artiste dans la mesure où ils servent. Et à quoi servent-ils? Pas à scier du bois ni à desserrer des boulons, mais à former des figures, à évoquer des mouvements, à construire des formes. . . . Et une fois que les objets ont rempli leur tâche (en somme, aussitôt qu'Arman les a disposés de telle ou telle façon . . .), on peut parfaitement les oublier au bénéfice du tout qui est véritablement l'enjeu du travail d'Arman.

⁵⁸ G[ene] R. Swenson, “Arman and esthetic change,” *Quadrum* 17 (1964): 92-94.

⁵⁹ Van der Marck argues that Arman, unlike Duchamp, was never interested in the object as such or its shock value; rather, he was concerned with “a desire to devise a structural frame for the object.” Van der Marck, “Arman: An Archeologist,” 8.

⁶⁰ Martin, *Arman*, 29-31. Martin was referring specifically to works such as *L’Affaire du courrier* (three months’ worth of Restany’s mail), *Une saison en enfer* (old gas burners), and *Sic transit* (cigarettes), which, he posited, could easily belong to both categories, *Accumulation* and *Poubelle*.

That is the very role of the objects in Arman's *Accumulations*: they serve; they are interesting to the artist insofar as they serve. And to what end do they serve? Not to saw wood or to loosen bolts, but to form figures, to evoke movements, to construct forms. . . . And once the objects have completed their task (in sum, as soon as Arman has placed them in such or such way . . .), one can certainly forget them in favor of the whole that is truly the stakes of Arman's work.⁶¹

It is that very "whole" that merits further consideration. For that whole is the result of what Arman called critical mass, that point at which the quantity is so great that "*l'on ne peut plus identifier visuellement le nombre d'objets rassemblés* (one can no longer identify visually the number of assembled objects)."⁶² It was at that point only, Arman claimed, that the *Accumulation* exists. And it was at that point, too, that the very identity of the objects could oscillate between total evidence and utter elusiveness.

Given that oscillation, a certain "*gymnastique dialectique* (dialectical gymnastics)" is required in dealing with the question of the object in Arman's work,⁶³ and we can observe in the criticism many examples of just such gymnastics. Reviewing the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition, Vivien Raynor wrote that Arman, with his entry *Little Hands (Ainsi font, font . . .)* (Fig. 4.10), was an example of the kinds of European artists who "did not fit exactly into the anti-art category [but] were nevertheless more interested in the idea itself than its effect." For instance, when one encounters *Little Hands*, a drawer full of pink doll hands fronted with a transparent pane and hung on the wall, "the impact . . . is delayed until you have identified the pieces, more or less saying 'doll's hands' aloud to yourself. Thus, as you wait while the brain processes the information, the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Arman, in Parinaud, "L'aventure," 34.

⁶³ Francblin uses this term in response to Arman's art's participation in Restany's "adventure of the object" and simultaneous tendency to harm those objects. Francblin, "Arman," 9-12.

eyes are already wandering to [the next piece of art in the room].”⁶⁴ What Raynor unconsciously touched on in her observation was that very phenomenon that critics and scholars would seek to articulate for decades to come: the tension between the individual objects and their totality as sameness; the critical mass that transforms a collection of discrete items into a single image. The delay of impact that Raynor identified was the postponement of recognition that the homogenous, monochromatic field before her was in fact composed of dozens of specific objects. The disconnect between the brain and the eye — the fact that the eye has already moved on to the next artwork before the brain catches up — speaks to the mode of address of the *Accumulations*: they invite only such surface grazing because they present themselves as such slick and homogenous surfaces. There is no time for deep contemplation, and anyway it is not rewarded, for what is one to do with the information that these are doll hands once one has processed the visual data enough to name it? Raynor compares the experience of taking in the Arman — or, really, not quite taking it in — with the experience of confronting the Bruce Conner assemblage that sits opposite it (the work to which her eyes were “already wandering” as she processed *Little Hands*). Conner, in contrast to Arman, “makes sure that your sensibilities are very quickly roped.”⁶⁵

Such analyses of the effect of Arman’s *Accumulations* resonate with certain understandings of Rauschenberg’s work, particularly those espoused by Brian O’Doherty and Yve-Alain Bois, who have both argued that our responsibility as viewers of a Combine is not to dissect the material parts of the whole, but rather to take notice of the way we are addressed, of the kind of attention these works of art invite. Each of these

⁶⁴ Raynor, “The Art of Assemblage,” 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

scholars concludes that Rauschenberg's assemblages are to be taken in quickly and globally; the Combines do not ask us to stand and reflect, to pick apart the layers or scrutinize the individual objects, looking for meaning in a scrap of newspaper or a fragment of a necktie.⁶⁶

Arman's *Accumulations* bring about a similar confrontation, and demand a comparable mode of attention: not a protracted, analytical gaze, but a fleeting glance — the “myopic grazing” advocated by Bois or the “vernacular glance” supported by O’Doherty — enough of a look to grasp only “some razors” or “some bulbs.” They do not ask us to observe each individual radio tube, to pick apart the nuances of form and color, to compare and contrast their positions in the vague grid. For the objects do not appear as unique items worthy of particularized analysis. In the mass of the whole, behind the transparent frontal plane, they lose their individuality. And indeed, Arman himself considered the *Accumulations* to be surfaces, thus implying that the viewer’s attention should remain accordingly superficial. “*Je dis bien surfaces,*” the artist wrote, “*car même dans mes compositions volumétriques, ma volonté est toujours picturale plus que sculpturale, c’est-à-dire que je désire voir mes propositions prises dans l’optique d’une surface plus que d’une réalisation en trois dimensions* (I say surfaces because even in my volumetric compositions, my will is always pictorial more than sculptural, which means that I want to see my propositions taken in in the optics of a surface rather than of a realization in three dimensions).”⁶⁷ The effect of this artistic will for the beholder’s

⁶⁶ O’Doherty, “Rauschenberg,” 82-87. Yves-Alain Bois, “Eye to the Ground,” *Artforum International* 44 no. 7 (March 2006): 245-248.

⁶⁷ Arman, “Réalisme des accumulations,” 251.

attention to settle on the outer plane of the *Accumulations* is that the individual objects are diffused into an overall surface pattern or design.

To explain the oft-observed phenomenon of the objects' apparent dissolution in the *Accumulations*, Bernard Lamarche-Vadel has proffered a notion of “*addition soustractive* (subtractive addition)” at work in Arman’s œuvre.⁶⁸ He argues that Arman’s ever growing collection of objects is tempered by an accompanying attrition of their value or nature as objects, and that his act of accumulation thus turns out to enact a cancelation. He explains that the artist, “*loin de privilégier la contemplation esthétique-formelle de la singularité d’une forme manufacturée, s’attache au contraire à en dissoudre par connexion sérielle les propriétés singulières au profit d’une esthétique du continuum de l’addition qui soustrait la valeur de chaque terme additionné* (far from privileging the aesthetic-formal contemplation of the singularity of a manufactured form, strives on the contrary to dissolve by serial connection the singular properties in favor of an aesthetic of the continuum of addition that subtracts the value of each added term).”⁶⁹ It would not be a stretch to connect this phenomenon in Arman’s *Accumulations* to one at work in society at large, where the ever increasing proliferation of consumer products was seen to necessarily diminish the value and singularity of each new product.

Lamarche-Vadel concludes:

La relative indifférence aux objets accumulés ou l’accumulation des accumulations de la même façon relance le même principe et l’authentifie radicalement dans une logique supérieure où la conquête d’une opacité toujours plus grande, d’une neutralisation plus efficace, évacue chaque partie, et pour

⁶⁸ Lamarche-Vadel positions Arman’s “subtractive addition” as the inverse of the “additive subtraction” that Jasper Johns identified in Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953 (though Lamarche-Vadel incorrectly attributes this claim to John Cage rather than Jasper Johns). In that work, Rauschenberg’s erasure of the drawing — a literal subtraction of elements — was seen as creating a positive. See Otto Hahn, Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, and Pierre Restany, “Trois points de vue sur Arman,” *Opus International* 116 (November-December 1989): 22.

⁶⁹ Lamarche-Vadel, in *ibid.*

ainsi dire chaque pièce singulière, vers l'impénétrabilité, la saturation que représente chaque ensemble, lui-même sous-ensemble d'un ensemble supérieur.

The relative indifference to the accumulated objects or the accumulation of accumulations in the same way relaunches the same principle and radically authenticates it in a superior logic wherein the conquest of an always greater opacity, of a more effective neutralization, evacuates each part, and so to speak each singular piece, toward impenetrability, the saturation that each ensemble represents, itself a subset of a superior ensemble.⁷⁰

With every object added, the whole accumulation grows more opaque as it becomes more difficult to differentiate discrete elements. Four or five toothbrushes displayed together are still distinct, singular objects. But when fifty or one hundred are amassed, as in *Grands perce-neige* (Figure 4.11), the individual qualities of particular brushes are lost, and our impulse to distinguish between and among them diminishes as we accept the composition's insistence on being read as a dense and unified whole.

The level of homogenization of objects of course varies depending on the type and genre of objects amassed. Arman suggested in a 1968 interview that he was not only cognizant of the distinction between more connotative objects and more aesthetic ones, but actively engaged in exploiting each type of object in its own way:

I'm quite aware of what I'm doing. . . . When I was taking an object with a very strong meaning, as an object like a gas mask, which is a little built on the human face, and has a meaning of war or destruction, the meaning of the object was stronger than the aesthetical [*sic*] one, the poetic, or the message; the literary message was stronger than the aesthetic one. Whereas gears, a ball bearing the aesthetic is stronger than the meaning. But I was aware of that. And it depends on the composition. Sure, if I have five thousand square feet of gas masks from a certain space, we can forget the gas mask. It will be drawn on the mass of gas masks. But because it's a large object it will take on its importance when it will be put in a five by six composition. . . . But if I take ball bearings, even in a small composition, two by two feet, the ball bearing could be forgotten as a ball bearing and take a position in an all over grain composition surface. And I always play between those two tendencies; some a little bit more literary when the object has a meaning and some more aesthetically when the object has just plastic value.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Oral History Interview."

Critics were picking up on the disparity between works like *Home Sweet Home* (Figure 4.12) and works like *Untitled* (Figure 4.13) long before Arman articulated the difference. In 1965, Arman exhibited *Accumulations* at both the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York and the Galerie Lawrence in Paris, and on both occasions, reviewers took note especially of the proliferation of works in the second format, that is, composed of small objects that fill the surface in a dense overall pattern. François Pluchart, writing from Paris, observed what he took to be the increasing aestheticization of Arman's works in this new format: "*Les accumulations d'Arman ne provoquent plus: elles séduisent, elles ont une beauté tranquille, neuve toujours, mais comme déjà traditionnelle* (Arman's *accumulations* no longer provoke: they seduce, they have a tranquil beauty, always new, but as though already traditional)." ⁷² Pluchart referred to these works as "[p]eintures ou répétitions d'objets (paintings or repetitions of objects)," a conflation that captures the increasing dematerialization of the objects into surface ornamentation, akin to abstract or decorative painting.

Writing of the New York exhibition, Suzi Gablik remarked,

The repetition of objects which formerly caused them to appear strange and unassimilable (i.e., an enormous glass case filled with gas masks) has become totally digested into bland, honeyed textures and grids. Deprived of their capacity to subvert and bewilder, they serve as ghettos for the segregation of hardware. No longer heroically shoring up bloody noses and cracked crowns, he has focused on mere surface configurations. ⁷³

Gablik thus picked up on both the aestheticization and the abstraction of these compositions, and the loss of meaning of the objects encased therein. The bloody noses

⁷² François Pluchart, "Arman, Bertini et Rancillac: à la recherche d'un nouvel esthétisme," *Combat* (May 24, 1965): 7.

⁷³ Gablik was reviewing Arman's 1965 solo exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. See Suzi Gablik, "Reviews and Previews," *Art News* 63, no. 10 (February 1965): 11.

and cracked crowns that Gablik evokes are references to the humanistic or anthropomorphic quality of what Arman calls his “more literary” objects — those objects that we cannot help but associate with our bodies, like the dentures in *La vie à pleine dents* (Figure 4.14) or the shoes in *Madison Avenue* (Figure 4.15). The textures, grids, and surface configurations that Gablik observes in the newer *Accumulations* point to those less associable objects that Arman describes as having only plastic value: oxygen cylinder pressure dials in *Paradise for Asthmatics* (Figure 4.16), pastry molds in *Untitled* (Figure 4.17). In these types of works, Gablik laments, the objects are diffused into dull, superficial patterns, leaving behind the arresting effects achieved by the more literary works.

Gene Swenson agreed, noting that the difference between the more recent “American” phase of Arman’s work and the earlier period were minor, except that “[t]he objects presently accumulated or destroyed tend to be new; they are often metallic and shiny. . . . The objects are arranged in clearer, purer, and more beautiful patterns. These accumulations of objects, filling shallow boxes under glass or set in polyester, produce all-over effects which relate Arman, formally, to Tobey and Pollock.”⁷⁴ Accumulations of newer and “more impersonal” objects, such as cog wheels (Figure 4.18) or oxygen cylinder pressure dials (Figure 4.19), were arranged in such a way and reflected light in such a manner that they attained a certain undeniable aestheticism through their abstraction.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Swenson, “Arman and esthetic change,” 87.

⁷⁵ Hannah Feldman adds that later, especially after Arman’s naturalization as an American citizen in 1973, “such gestures were increasingly aestheticized in the glossier form that most Americans associate with his work. The critical possibilities that his early accumulations presented for thinking about ‘late’ capitalism’s obsessive concern with filling space and manipulating time were stifled in favor of an uncritical celebration of production that corresponds to the agenda of commodity culture.” Feldman asserts that Arman’s collaboration with the French carmaker Renault, which supplied him with wrecked cars so he could make

Donald Judd's review of the 1965 Janis exhibition reveals a consensus on this abstracting of the objects, although Judd saw the change in a positive light: "The pieces are essentially all-over paintings in strange materials. The all-over format is pretty familiar by now, but it's better than the bland composition of some of Arman's earlier pieces. At least it's fairly neutral and doesn't interfere with the color of the materials."⁷⁶ In all cases, the reviewers took note of the way the *Accumulations* were essentially becoming image, that is, becoming so abstract that the objectness of the objects was almost entirely lost.⁷⁷ They were fulfilling a maxim that Arman articulated in 1965 when he wrote, "*les petits objets accumulés perdent leur identité pour devenir surface* (the small accumulated objects lose their identity to become surface)."⁷⁸

The effect of the multiplication of objects — or rather, of multiple versions of the same object — is an axiomatic point of departure in the study of the *Accumulations*. Catherine Francblin lays out the qualitative change brought upon the object through quantity thus:

Quatre cuillères sur la table, l'œil les perçoit. Seize, il les voit, mais n'arrive pas à les compter. Deux cents cuillères, il reconnaît les formes, mais ne les discerne plus individuellement. Vingt mille cuillères, le regard n'englobe plus qu'un mur

massive sculptures from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s, "neutralized Arman's focus on its [industry's] waste, situating him as a primary beneficiary of a phenomenon he claimed to critique." Hannah Feldman, "Salons de Refuse," *Artforum International* 44 (2006): 230.

⁷⁶ Donald Judd, "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 39, no. 5 (February 1965): 56.

⁷⁷ Reut identifies this dematerialization as part of Arman's project of dealing with objects: from the moment he introduced the object into his work, it became a process of "annihilation" by different means. In the *Accumulations*, it is the quantity and homogeneity that effects the destruction of the object. See Reut, *Arman: La traversée*, 14. But in 1962-1964 especially, the *Accumulations* took a distinct turn toward the abstract. Van der Marck attributes this evolution to the artist's beginning to frequent New York and to be exposed to both the surplus of Canal Street and the glamour of Pop art. His works in 1963 and 1964 demonstrate Arman's embrace of the new materials available in New York and the new artistic strategies employed by Pop artists. Thus the objects in the *Accumulations* tend to be smaller, and mostly industrial (ball bearings, small gears, etc.). Packed closely together into their cases, these mostly monochromatic objects attain a new level of the "allover" that Arman had been pursuing since he first moved away from painting and toward object-based art in 1954. See van der Marck, "Arman: The Parisian Avant-Garde," 94.

⁷⁸ Arman, in Jouffroy, "Arman [1965]," 26.

monochrome abstrait qui scintille à la lumière. Autrement dit, la quantité modifie la qualité des objets. Et, au-delà d'un certain seuil, elle les désintègre.

Four spoons on the table, the eye perceives them. Sixteen, it sees them, but cannot count them. Two hundred spoons, it recognizes the forms, but no longer discerns them individually. Twenty thousand spoons, the gaze no longer captures anything but an abstract monochrome wall that shines in the light. In other words, quantity modifies the quality of objects. And, beyond a certain threshold, it disintegrates them.⁷⁹

That final stage, wherein the mass of objects becomes an abstraction, had always loomed in the earlier *Accumulations* of larger-scaled objects, its imminent achievability menacingly evident. But throughout the production of the early *Accumulations*, Arman had made the necessary adjustments to the quantity of objects and the scale of the container in order to attain that perfect measure where, as Francblin describes apropos of the two hundred spoons, the forms remained recognizable but the individuality of each was imperceptible, that is, where the objects would teeter on the verge of either becoming an abstract mass, or, in the other direction, being comfortably perceivable, in a way normal to everyday life.

By 1965, as the reviews by Pluchart, Gablik, Swenson, and Judd attest, the 20,000-spoon idiom was becoming undeniably applicable. As a result, critics were beginning to find that Restany's widely accepted claims about Arman's realism rang false. The notion that Arman refrained from the "American" or "Neo-Dadaist" practices of "*l'ordonnance des compositions, l'orchestration des plans, l'organisation interne de l'espace* (the ordering of compositions, the orchestration of plans, the internal organization of space)"⁸⁰ could not be sustained in the face of the dematerializing *Accumulations* of 1962 to 1964.

⁷⁹ Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 92.

⁸⁰ Pierre Restany "Le Baptême de l'objet," *Combat-Art* no. 86 (February 1962): 2.

Gérald Gassiot-Talabot was perhaps most vocal in calling attention to this disjunction. He observed in 1965 that nearly all of the Nouveau-Réaliste artists, even if they had for a moment obeyed Restany's rules, had in the end arrived "*à l'intervention ensembliste, à l'utilisation du matériau de base à des fins esthétiques, à la composition et à l'élaboration* (at ensemblist intervention, at the use of the base material toward aesthetic ends, at composition and at elaboration)."⁸¹ Gassiot-Talabot singled out Arman's scrupulously arranged displays as evidence of the impoverishment of the Nouveau-Réaliste agenda; the earliest *Accumulations*, he claimed, were Nouveau-Réaliste, that is, they did align with Restany's demand of direct appropriation and unmediated presentation. But in the later *Accumulations*, such as *Untitled* (Figure 4.20), this immediacy was lost and so, too, claimed Gassiot-Talabot, was their realism.⁸²

I maintain that Arman's artistic practice never quite aligned with Restany's Nouveau-Réaliste vision, for he was always arranging harmonious compositions, only in a relatively inconspicuous manner. The question then becomes not whether Arman's work has lost its realism, but what his realism was in the first place — and once we answer that, we can ask whether and how it has changed, and seek to understand why.

⁸¹ Gassiot-Talabot, "À propos," 77. Jouffroy, who began championing Arman as part of a new designation of artists, "Les Objecteurs," in 1965, likewise described the *Accumulations* as responding to "*un besoin de dominer la réalité par le classement, par le rangement, par l'entassement, par la fixation d'objets voués à la disparition* (a need to dominate reality by ordering, by arranging, by amassing, by fixing objects headed for extinction)." Jouffroy, "Les Objecteurs," typescript, 1965 or 1966. Fonds Alain Jouffroy, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

⁸² Gassiot-Talabot makes a pertinent observation about the Nouveau-Réaliste appeal to avoid artistic intervention, remarking that, ironically, "*Cette déshumanisation du rapport créateur, ce refus d'appréhender le réel à travers la traduction d'une émotion voulait pourtant se concilier avec une anthropocentrisme, un goût pour la trace humaine sous les espèces du déchet ou du matériau brut* (That dehumanization of the creative relationship, that refusal to apprehend the real through the translation of an emotion would nevertheless be reconciled with an anthropocentrism, a taste for the human trace in the form of garbage or raw material)." Thus while distancing himself as agent, the artist invites in a larger swath of humanity in the form of its castoffs. The dehumanizing occurs only at the level of the creative process. See Gassiot-Talabot, "À propos," 77.

Multiplication and the realization of critical mass

J'ai toujours prétendu que dans l'accumulation il y avait un changement: la quantité crée un changement, l'objet est annulé en tant qu'objet. Il devient une sorte de grain, de surface, de monochromie: sa destination est différente.

I have always claimed that in accumulation there was a change: quantity creates a change, the object is canceled as object. It becomes a sort of grain, of surface, of monochromy: its destination is different.⁸³

The effect of multiplication on the smaller, less associable objects like ball bearings and gears is by now obvious. But returning to the earlier *Accumulations* — those generally comprising the more “lyrical” or “connotative” objects — the question of how quantity affects and changes them remains unresolved. As Gene Swenson observed in 1964, “Arman’s works do not really look like ready-mades, and the impression they produce is certainly not the same as accumulated impressions of ready-mades.”⁸⁴ But how was that impression different? What effect did quantity produce? Herta Wescher compared the *Accumulations* to Joseph Cornell’s boxes of objects that “form strangely frozen still life,” and observed that the distinction between the two artists’ curious collections was the consequence of multiplication in Arman’s work, which “exerts a certain fascination on us due to the multitude of material which in a limited narrow space are drawn and pulled together to the point of losing their aspect as “real” objects and become, instead, unreal objects of clearly abstract composition.”⁸⁵ Indeed, Arman acknowledged in 1962 that the *Accumulations* he was producing were “*pas éloignées de*

⁸³ Arman, in Jouffroy, “Arman [1965],” 26.

⁸⁴ Swenson, “Arman and esthetic change,” 88.

⁸⁵ Wescher, “What is new,” 40.

l'art abstrait (not far from abstract art).⁸⁶ Reality is abstraction and abstraction is reality — this is precisely the dialectic on which Arman based his most ambitious works.

Many scholars' interpretations of Arman's quantitative language recognize in those works the phenomenon that Francblin spells out, but see it stopping short of the 20,000-spoon effect of utter abstraction, lingering instead in that liminal space between visibility and invisibility: one sees that these are spoons, but does one really *see* the spoons? There are two main schools of thought in response to this query. The first, which I will call the essence theory, finds that not only do we see the spoons, but their abundance encourages us to compare them and to notice the particularities of each individual spoon. Given all the different forms of spoons, we are left with an impression of the *essence* of the spoon as such: the presence of so many examples signifies the concept "spoon." The second school of thought, which I will call the sociology theory, argues that the general sense of quantity overwhelms our perception of the spoons so that we see first and foremost the abstract concept of abundance — and thereby a sociological reality, perhaps even a critique.

Although drawing a different conclusion about what exactly is represented by the *Accumulations*, both schools of thought join the growing discourse that points to the works' quality as representations, rather than as simple presentations. In all cases, as I will show, the multiplication of the objects, coupled with the transformative effect of the vitrine, makes the thesis of pure, direct, objective realism untenable.

⁸⁶ Differentiating Nouveau Réalisme from Dada, Arman explained, "*Ce qui nous différencie . . . des dadaïstes, c'est que nous cherchons la beauté. Il me semble que les affiches lacérées de Hains, les éponges de Klein, ne sont pas éloignées de l'art abstrait, ni mes compositions de certaines œuvres actuelles* (What distinguishes us . . . from the dadaists is that we seek beauty. It seems to me that Hains's lacerated posters and Klein's sponges are not far from abstract art, nor are the compositions of certain of my current works)." Arman, interview with Pierre Descargues, 1962, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 182.

Proponents of the essence theory concede that the means of display effects a transformation of the objects that in fact invites an aesthetic reading of the works. As one reviewer remarked, Nouveaux-Réaliste works like Arman's *do* involve an alteration of the poetic order, in the form of "*redonner sens et émotion à quelque chose du réel qui a désormais perdu tout pouvoir utilitaire, mais non tout pouvoir expressif. Dans bien des cas, cela consistera même à révéler, pour lui-même, ce pouvoir expressif censuré ou oblitéré par une réalité fonctionnaliste qui avait été imposée à l'objet* (giving back meaning and emotion to something real that has henceforth lost all utilitarian power, but not all expressive power. In many cases, that will consist even in revealing, for itself, this expressive power that has been censured or obliterated by a functionalist reality that had been imposed on the object)."⁸⁷ The fundamental tenet of this interpretive model is that, despite such transformations, the multiplication makes us *notice* the objects — not lose them to the abstracting mass, but become all the more aware of them, in a new light.

For the essence camp, Arman addresses the problem of the erosion of meaning in objects that are obsolete, broken, rejected, or left over: such items "*ont perdu leur utilité 'provisoire' mais pas leur sens 'naturel' et fondamental. Et cette usure libère un pouvoir poétique dont la force suggestive l'emporte sur le pouvoir utilitaire de l'objet. L'artiste est presque un 're-créateur' de 'sur-objets'* (have lost their 'provisional' utility but not their 'natural' and fundamental meaning. And that erosion liberates a poetic power whose suggestive force outweighs the utilitary power of the object. The artist is almost a 're-creator' of 'super-objects')."⁸⁸ That suggestive force hints at a literary or figurative quality that comes to replace the functional quality of familiar objects. And so, even as

⁸⁷ "Les Nouveaux Réalistes," 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the *Accumulations* are understood to *highlight* the objects, those objects still undergo a kind of obliteration in order to realize this rebirth as the same objects but with new poetic or artistic meaning. As Otto Hahn put it, "*Dans chaque œuvre l'objet s'annihile et devient expression par sa propre disparition* (In each work the object is annihilated and becomes expression by its own disappearance)."⁸⁹

For advocates of the first school of thought, the objects in the *Accumulations* are thus seen to come together to represent, as one, the essential form or identity of that object. Arman's own notion of "critical mass" is instructive for this interpretive model. As Umberto Eco puts it, the critical mass provides a transcendent vision: for him, the profusion of many different light bulbs, for example, allows the viewer to perceive "*l'ampoule en soi* (the light bulb as such)."⁹⁰ For Eco, the objects, in representing the idea of themselves, become the signified rather than the signifier or even the referent.⁹¹

Eco interprets the *Accumulations*' principle of addition as a positive value. He sees it adhering to "*la poétique du catalogue* (the poetics of the catalog)," which he defines as the accumulation of difference in light of a unifying motif. Thus, for example, a catalog of books would not be a list of the same book over and over, but rather all the different books in a single collection.⁹² Eco argues that the *Accumulations* thus affirm the

⁸⁹ Otto Hahn, "Le voyeur muet du temps qui passe," *Connaissance des arts* no. 367 (September 1982): 61.

⁹⁰ Eco suggests that the objects in Arman's *Accumulations* become representations of themselves — or rather, of the idea of themselves. He explains that it is "*comme si Arman nous disait: 'Avez-vous déjà vraiment regardé un saxophone? Le voici. Et voici que je vous en donne l'idée éternelle. Non pas dans le sens d'un Nouveau Réalisme mais, si j'ose dire, dans le sens d'un Nouvel Idéalisme — au sens platonicien du terme*" (as if Arman were saying to us: 'Have you ever really looked at a saxophone before? Here it is. And here I give you the eternal idea of it. Not in the sense of a New Realism but, if I dare say, in the sense of a New Idealism — in the platonic sense of the term).'" Umberto Eco, "Les objets d'Arman," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 17-39.

⁹¹ Eco argues that when the Nouveaux Réalistes ushered in the return of the object after the recent reign of abstract painting, their aim was "*non pour les représenter de nouveau: il s'agissait plutôt de les exploiter comme moyens pour représenter (ou viser à) quelque chose d'autre* (not to represent them anew: it was rather about exploiting them as means for representing (or aiming at) something else).'" Ibid.

⁹² Umberto Eco, "Sur Arman," in *Arman*, ed. Abadie, 12.

catalog, “*car ces objets multipliés ne sont pas le même objet: dans le jeu forcené (mais très calculé) de ces accumulations, chaque objet, par une inclinaison, un déséquilibre, une infime rotation, se différencie de ses semblables, prend un profil qui lui est propre* (for these multiplied objects *are not the same object*: in the fanatic (but very calculated) game of these accumulations, each object, by an inclination, a disequilibrium, a minuscule rotation, differentiates itself from its kind, assumes a profile that is its own).”⁹³ Eco uses this analysis to distinguish Arman’s practice from that of Andy Warhol: he claims that Arman’s amassing of similar objects, where “*aucun objet n’est identique à sa réplique* (no object is identical to its replica),” is “*l’exact opposé* (the exact opposite)” of Warhol’s rows of Campbell’s soup cans.⁹⁴

Beyond the obvious points that Eco overlooks — that Arman’s objects are “real” and Warhol’s are representations,⁹⁵ and that Warhol’s soup cans *are* in fact all different, most conspicuously in their flavor varieties — this reading does not fit the reality of either artist’s work. Eco concludes that Arman and Warhol’s productions verify that there are two types of catalogs: “*les uns nous disent que le monde est répétitif, les autres qu’il est toujours et étonnamment différent* (some tell us that the world is repetitive, the others that it is always and shockingly different).”⁹⁶ For one to take away from the *Accumulations* a sense of “shocking” difference among the gathered objects feels

⁹³ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Arman himself commented on the importance of this distinction between his work and Warhol’s in 1962, during the Sidney Janis exhibition “The New Realists” that had the two artists’ works sharing the same space for the first time. Several artists who were in New York to see the show, including Raysse, Larry Rivers, Saint-Phalle, and Klein, wrote to Arman to tell him that Warhol had stolen his idea of the accumulation of multiples. But Arman responded, “Don’t get upset. I understand what’s going on. But I would never do it with silkscreen.” Arman recounts this story in “Interview conducted by Susan Hapgood,” 112.

⁹⁶ Eco, “Sur Arman,” 13.

inconsistent with the works themselves. These are not artifacts for deep contemplation; their materiality tells us so. The Plexiglas vitrine that blocks our access to the fine details of the objects and that smoothes over the surface so as to minimize our perception of the particularities of texture and form, and that presents a physical and visual barrier — often quite literally, as reflective glare obstructs our view of the objects beneath — makes it evident that Arman’s intention was not for us to individually inspect and analyze each object contained within. The density of the accumulated objects occludes our perception of depth or perspective and impedes our eye from moving beyond the unifying surface. If comparative analysis of individual objects were the goal of the *Accumulation*, we would not see overlapping objects — in *Artériosclérose* (Figure 4.21), for example, or *Squelette d’Achille* (Figure 4.22), where forks and shoe horns obstruct each other — and we would not find artist statements declaring the goal of critical mass or surface opticality. Eco is correct that there is a sense of individuality in Arman’s objects when compared to the cold regularity of Warhol’s precise, gridded soup cans, but more important is that the individual part in Arman’s work is subsumed by the whole — the overall composition, which silences each element in order to signify only the general notion of the object: not “a two-inch nail, a four-inch nail, a silver nail, a bronze nail . . .” but rather, simply, “some nails.”

Francblin, although she rebuts Eco’s notion that the *Accumulations* invite the differentiation and comparison of individual objects, agrees with his interpretation of the end effect. She distinguishes the practice of accumulation from that of collection by making the following precision: “*si la collection procède d’une addition d’objets particuliers, chacun d’eux venant ajouter à la richesse de l’ensemble, l’accumulation, au*

contraire, procède d'une négation de l'objet dans son identité propre (if collection proceeds from an addition of particular objects, each of them coming to add to the richness of the whole, accumulation, on the contrary, proceeds from a negation of the object in its own identity).” Here we find an echo of Lamarche-Vadel’s notion of subtractive addition. Francblin continues,

Alors que la collection vise à conserver ou à promouvoir les objets en fonction de leur personnalité reconnue, dans l'accumulation l'objet disparaît comme individu au profit de son émergence comme espèce, de sa réapparition sous la forme universelle d'objet générique. Transformant le particulier en général, l'accumulation est donc une opération d'abstraction.

Whereas collection seeks to conserve or promote the objects in function of their recognized personality, in accumulation the object disappears as an individual in favor of its emergence as species, of its reappearance under the universal form of generic object. Transforming the particular into the general, accumulation is thus an operation of abstraction.⁹⁷

In Francblin’s reading, there is no room for an effort at counting, naming, or distinguishing individual parts, nor would such an exercise have any bearing on the meaning of the work. Instead, the individual objects disappear into the fabric of the work, which as a whole expresses the general idea of that object, its essential object character.

The effect is such that, as Hector Obalk has argued, when one encounters an *Accumulation* of pliers, for instance, rather than speaking of a few pliers or a dozen pliers or twenty-five pliers, one is tempted to speak of “some pliers,” the way one would talk about “some water” or “some sugar.”⁹⁸ The semantic distinction is more pronounced in the French language, where *des pinces* becomes *de la pince*, taking on the indefinite

⁹⁷ Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 48.

⁹⁸ Hector Obalk, “L’art évident, deuxième partie (sculpture),” *Art Press* no. 126 (June 1988): 32. Obalk was referring to a later work, Arman’s *Souple et brillante* of 1976, a free-standing (that is, not encased) *Accumulation* of universal pliers, souldered together. Despite this work’s different format from the earlier *Accumulations* that are the subject of this dissertation, his observations on the uncountability of the objects and the semantic distinctions that fact brings about are enlightening for my discussion as well.

article reserved for unquantifiable things like sugar or water, but also like abstract ideas — *de la quantité, du gaspillage* (quantity, waste). The countable not only becomes uncountable — it also becomes abstract; it enters the category of ideas. And the paradox here is the effect of that critical mass on the measure of reality contained in these compositions: the quantity at once provides a greater concentration of the “real” thing, and strips that “real” thing of its “realness,” emptying it into image.

Arman concluded his 1960 text “Réalisme des accumulations” with his own observation on the topic of multiplication:

A tout objet fabriqué correspond une série d'opérations précises qui se trouvent être contenues toutes dans sa forme et sa destination, multipliées par le nombre de sujets choisis, ces opérations se trouvent libérées dans les surfaces accumulatives. Ce procédé de travail est en corrélation avec les méthodes actuelles: automation, travail à la chaîne et aussi mise au rebut en série, créant des strates et des couches géologiques pleines de toute la force du réel.

To every fabricated object corresponds a series of precise operations that all turn out to be contained in its form and its destination; multiplied by the number of chosen subjects, these operations find themselves liberated in the accumulative surfaces. This working process is in correlation with today’s methods: automation, assembly line work, and also mass disposal, creating geological strata and layers full of all the force of the real.⁹⁹

Arman is speaking here of the object’s use-value: its particular function or role, its reason for being produced, which is inherent in its form. That is, in looking at a fork, we can ascertain its value as an implement for piercing and carrying small amounts of food; in looking at a pair of pliers, we can see their value for pinching and prying small objects. These are the realities of these objects. What the *Accumulations* give us, however, is something else: they are surfaces which defuse these functional values. The vitrine that

⁹⁹ Arman, “Réalisme des accumulations,” 251. It is worth noting here how much Arman’s language echoes that of Restany, who frequently spoke of a synecdochic type of realism, where a fragment is imbued with “all the force of the real.”

encases the utilitarian objects, as well as their suffocating saturation by quantity, neutralizes them by canceling out their use value. That Arman considers that operation to be in line with “today’s methods,” that is, the way objects are mass-produced, mass-marketed, and mass-consumed, is telling. It implies that he recognizes the same neutralizing of the objects at work in those automated processes: he sees objects being reduced to image in society at large, owing to the quantitative extremism of their manufacture and consumption. That image, for Arman, maintains “all the force of the real,” but that force is now metaphorical, which is to say implied rather than actual.

Arman further declared, “*mille compte-gouttes sont plus compte-gouttes qu’un seul compte-gouttes* (a thousand eye-droppers are more eye-dropper than a single eye-dropper).”¹⁰⁰ He was making reference to a well-known proclamation by Yves Klein, famously borrowed from Henri Matisse: “*mille mètres carrés de bleu sont plus bleus qu’un mètre carré de bleu* (a thousand square meters of blue are more blue than one square meter of blue).” Arman quoted his friend Klein in his own text before suggesting that the same rule applies to objects. He thus asserted that amassing a greater quantity of an object is akin to having a higher concentration of a color — it expresses the idea “eye-dropper” more effectively than a single eye-dropper could.¹⁰¹ Or, stated another way, Arman articulated the notion of quantity bearing the weight of realism: with a greater

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Francblin, in referring to accumulation as “*une opération d’abstraction qui transforme le particulier en général* (an operation of abstraction that transforms the particular into the general),” points to Arman’s famous dictum about the eye-droppers as evidence of his own attitude toward that gesture: “*Mille compte-gouttes sont plus compte-gouttes qu’un seul compte-gouttes, parce qu’un compte-gouttes est un objet, tandis que ce que l’on appréhende devant mille compte-gouttes, c’est un concept - un concept qui non seulement englobe tous les objets, mais surtout leur survit* (‘A thousand eye-droppers are more eye-dropper than a single eye-dropper,’ because an eye-dropper is an object, whereas what one apprehends before a thousand eye-droppers is a concept — a concept that not only subsumes all the objects, but most importantly outlives them).” Francblin, “Arman,” 11.

number of the same thing, the measure of reality is greater. The collection of like objects combines to form a single, concentrated signified. This declaration attests that Arman's goal in multiplying objects is to attain a more "real" realism. But his means of accomplishing that objective paradoxically, yet predictably, has the effect of abstracting the "real" things he collects and presents. With the premium placed on quantity, the collection of objects inevitably reaches that critical mass wherein the identity of the object is lost to the overall identity of the mass. And the glass-fronted case in which the "real" objects are displayed only exacerbates the sense of a uniform surface image supplanting the "realness" and materiality of the objects.

Arman describes this phenomenon: "*Le côté obsessionnel et profératoire de la multiplicité d'un objet le rend pareil à une granulation unie, expression de la conscience collective de ce même objet* (The obsessive and pronunciatory side of the multiplicity of an object renders it similar to a unified granulation, expression of the collective consciousness of this same object)."¹⁰² Arman thus suggests that although the neutralizing surface of the vitrine strips the objects of their object-quality by subsuming them to a homogenous surface, that homogenous surface turns out to capture the essence of the objects collected behind it. That is, the compulsive repetition of the same object, even though reduced to mere surface, creates a monotone face that *represents* the object *per se*. Without naming it as such, Arman thus articulates the dialectic of presentation and representation that I claim is at the center of his realist project: objects are presented, but their "realness" is compromised by their mode of display; that mode of display in turn renders the objects representations of themselves — of their essential characters.

¹⁰² Ibid.

By this understanding, objects, in the hands of Arman, become simulacrum: the “real,” physical thing dissolves into the idea of the thing. While Eco sees this transformation as a positive — the *Accumulations* get at the “platonic ideal” — in the language of spectacle, Arman’s works bear witness to the degradation of life from *being* to *appearing* — from the “real” to the merely visible.¹⁰³ Thus even the first school of thought can be seen as supporting the notion of *Accumulations* as representation: these are the “new images” that Restany identified in Arman’s work. In the transparent cases we are confronted with a new picture of a familiar reality — a “poetic” side of objects — that is divorced from their functional identity.

In the second school of thought, it is not the lyrical quality of the *Accumulations* that dominates, but rather their sociological resonance. Jaimey Hamilton has studied in depth the social phenomena, theorized at the time by Henri Lefebvre, that matched, in real life, this sense of the individual objects’ disappearance into the homogenous mass. Lefebvre observed that the rhythms of capitalism were beginning to colonize every aspect of modern life, with the result that the objects and environments that make up the everyday were losing their variety and individuality. By the same token, Hamilton observes that in Arman’s work, “Sameness overrules the mystique or aura that any individual thing may have within the strata of an Accumulation.”¹⁰⁴ The particular is subsumed to the mass, and the mass becomes an image, complete in its own right.

¹⁰³ Recall that Debord wrote that the sign of spectacular society was “*une évidente dégradation de l’être en avoir . . . [ce qui] conduit à un glissement généralisé de l’avoir au paraître* (an obvious degradation of *being* into *having* . . . [which] leads to a generalized slippage from *having* to *appearing*).” He further asserted, “*Considéré selon ses propres termes, le spectacle est l’affirmation de l’apparence et l’affirmation de toute vie humaine, c’est-à-dire sociale, comme simple apparence* (Considered according to its own terms, the spectacle is the *affirmation* of appearance and the affirmation of all human life, that is social life, as mere appearance).” Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 19-22.

¹⁰⁴ Hamilton, “Arman’s System,” 61.

Hamilton thus claims that Arman's works from the same period of Lefebvre's writings serve as a perfect visual expression of the latter's preoccupations.¹⁰⁵

Hamilton echoes the observation that the glass front of the *Accumulations* performs a transformation of the objects behind it — or rather, that it incites the objects to transform themselves: the latter are “*accumulés au point de devenir plus que la somme d’eux-mêmes* (accumulated to the point of becoming more than the sum of themselves);” losing their object-specificity as forks or clocks or shoes, they come to resemble “*des apparitions miraculeuses* (miraculous apparitions).”¹⁰⁶ Hamilton argues that it is at the moment of “critical mass” that the systematization of Arman's *Accumulations* becomes reification: each *Accumulation* ceases to simply present objects, but begins to “signify the ideal of commodity abundance.”¹⁰⁷ She illustrates this point with the example of *Malheur aux barbus* of 1960 (Figure 4.23), where the collection of electric razors, despite being different in size, color, and shape, nonetheless creates a “density of sameness.” In that undifferentiated mass, “focus shifts from the singularity of each item to the way they all add up to the ideal of ‘plenty of razors.’”¹⁰⁸ For Hamilton, the razors themselves no longer matter: their use, their monetary value, their belonging to any given individual — all of those considerations are trumped by the more important matter: how they, together inside a vitrine, “amassed as an image and evoked a generalized idea of plenitude, surplus, and affluence.”¹⁰⁹ Hamilton's diction is important here: she describes the objects *becoming* image through the means of their amassing. Thus the artist *has* performed a

¹⁰⁵ Hamilton, “Civilisation figée,” 57.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Hamilton, “Arman's System,” 61.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

transformative operation on the found objects: not by altering their individual form, but by combining them in such a way that they enact the transformation themselves: from object to image. And that image, as Hamilton avows, is a representation of a second reality: the abstract concepts of plenitude, surplus, and affluence.

Hamilton's insistence on the inconsequence of what the objects are, since they become mere images of a concept, aligns with the purposeful indistinctness of Arman's choice of objects and his equally unclear relationship to them. Peter Schjeldahl has argued that the power of the *Accumulations* lies in this very ambiguity, in "an ambivalence toward the objects he employs made poignant by the way he employs them." Schjeldahl sees Arman's work as continuing and then halting the degradation of objects that can be observed in modern society. He explains, "Having lost its utility and, as it were, been crucified, the artist's chosen detritus is resurrected on a new plane and granted a new dignity."¹¹⁰ That is, Arman's works both participate in and work against the sociological reality of objects' debasement. Schjeldahl is thus discerning what I have observed to be the effect of the vitrine, which strips the objects of their use value and accords them instead a symbolic value — that is, they cease functioning as objects and begin functioning as images.

The mass of objects, neutralized both by their quantity and by their enclosure behind a sheet of unifying glass or Plexiglas, take the form of the "anonymous object," product of twentieth-century capitalism. Anne Richard has theorized that phenomenon in the changing status of the object around this time: "*le système de production en série impose un certain nombre de principes qui rendent impossible toute relation affective à*

¹¹⁰ Peter Schjeldahl, "Arman in 1973," in *Arman: Selected Activities* (New York: John Gibson Gallery, 1973), 3.

l'objet. Parmi les principaux: la réduction de la durée de vie de l'objet, l'aspect formel lisse et uniforme, l'aisance du maniement, l'exclusion de l'effort, le rejet de la forme anthropomorphique (the system of mass production imposes a certain number of principles that render impossible any affective relationship to the object. Among the principal ones: the reduction of the object's lifespan, the smooth and uniform formal aspect, the ease of manipulation, the exclusion of effort, the rejection of the anthropomorphic form).¹¹¹ Thus Arman's model of objects made literally "smooth and uniform" by their means of collection and display, speaks to the status of the object at this late capitalist moment.

Richard notes, importantly, that detritus has the inverse characteristics of the object *tout court*, that is, the new object. Detritus is marked by an irrational form, an accidental aspect: "*marqué par l'utilisateur; le déchet témoigne des symptômes de l'Unique et de l'Humain . . . le déchet est le reste, le rebut, l'inassimilable, l'inassumé, le définitivement épuisé: parfaitement émancipé, il est totalement indépendant. Son langage est quantitatif. Il fonctionne comme le NEGATIF ou le revers de l'existence* (marked by the user; detritus bears witness to the signs of the Unique and the Human . . . detritus is the leftover, the dregs, the unassimilable, the unaccepted, the definitively worn out: perfectly emancipated, it is totally independent. Its language is quantitative. It functions as the NEGATIVE or the reverse of existence).¹¹² Accepting these definitions, one must see the *Accumulations* as detritus transformed into objects, which then become images. Used-up remains, heterogenous and accidental in form, made regular and homogenous by their

¹¹¹ Anne Richard, untitled and project for a thesis on the aesthetics of detritus mailed to Pierre Restany for review. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹¹² Ibid.

display: Arman thus gives us at once the new and the exhausted, the usable and the used. These are consumed remains offered for consumption of another kind — consumption by the eye, a purely retinal confrontation, which is all these castoffs have left to offer.

Claude Rivière, in a review of a 1960 exhibition of Arman's work in Düsseldorf, reflected on the latter's new deployment of objects, following his prior index-based series. She argued that there are two ways we think about objects: the psychological conception of the object is based on its function or utility, and is easy enough to understand. The metaphysical conception of the object, on the other hand, is more complex because it is permanent.¹¹³ She thus concluded that “[a]ucun objet ne peut échapper à l'image en tant que telle (no object can escape the image as such).”¹¹⁴ That is, every object is associated with a permanent, metaphysical idea, which is embodied in a symbolic image.¹¹⁵ In today's society, “l'image prend toute son importance, fait figure de héros et en le multipliant nous lui donnons une nouvelle puissance, c'est-à-dire que nous démultiplions son intensité virtuelle (the image takes on its full importance, plays the role of hero, and in multiplying it, we give it a new power, that is, we increase its virtual intensity).”¹¹⁶ With this elaboration, Rivière bridged the two schools of thought on the effect of Arman's gesture of accumulation. The image-status that Arman's objects take

¹¹³ She explains, “La conception psychologique de l'objet est très compréhensible car elle se situe dans son utilité. Mais la compréhension métaphysique de cet objet est chose plus complexe car elle adhère à la permanence (The psychological conception of the object is very comprehensible for it is situated in its utility. But the metaphysical comprehension of that object is a much more complicated thing for it adheres to permanence).” See Claude Rivière, “Ivresse de la liberté créatrice,” *Combat* 15 (August 1960): 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ We might again relate this to the image, inherent in the object, that Arman sought to coax or to “steal” in his earliest realist works.

¹¹⁶ Rivière describes Arman in Platonic terms, claiming that the artist, like the philosopher, is in search of the idea that is at the root of all reality. She writes, “Arman sait ce que peut représenter la hantise d'un dépassement du réel. En cela, il rejoint Platon puisqu'il désire rechercher l'idée qui est au fond de toute réalité (Arman knows what the shame of a bypassing of the real can represent. In that, he joins Plato since he desires to seek the idea that is at the base of all reality).” Ibid.

on relates at once to the metaphysical idea of the object — its essence — and to the larger sociological reality of that image coming to replace the object itself.

Arman's *Accumulations*, despite the homogeneity of their format (multiples of the same or similar objects contained in a box with at least one transparent pane), represent a vast heterogeneity of subjects: old and new items, rare and mundane, personal and anonymous. As Hamilton observes, the hundreds of *Accumulations* made between 1960 and 1964 — the veritable peak of this series in terms of quality, though Arman would go on producing lesser exemplars for decades to come — reflect the changes to the Parisian economy in the postwar years. As the flea markets morphed from an old system of reuse to a new system of obsolescence, Hamilton argues, the *Accumulations* exploited this material abundance and the attendant cycle of desire, possession, and disposal that propels and sustains consumerism.¹¹⁷ But it is not merely in Arman's repetition of the *Accumulation* format that we can observe that cycle; in each work, the multiplication of objects paradoxically enacts its own disintegrative action on the objects themselves — what Pierre Cabanne called an "*annulation* (cancelation)"¹¹⁸ — and the resulting abstraction of the individual items, I argue, is key to Arman's realist project.¹¹⁹ Thus,

¹¹⁷ This observation makes a natural link to Perec's novel *Les Choses* (1965), whose prose, modeled on advertising and eschewing all dialogue, mimics this same proliferation of stuff and the ways in which its very existence drives the decision-making of the protagonists. Those characters' entire existence is determined by what they own; and what they own is decided by the desires that are essentially implanted in them by the convincing advertising of objects that are designed to grow obsolete and need constant replacement. Hamilton sees Arman's repetition as a means of "highlight[ing] the effect such performative repetition had on the development of consumer subjectivity." See Hamilton, "Arman's System," 58.

¹¹⁸ Pierre Cabanne, "Arman: Un corps-à-corps avec l'objet," *Artstudio* no. 19 (1990): 30.

¹¹⁹ In fact, the disintegrative effort in the *Accumulations* has a history in Arman's oeuvre. The artist first began incorporating in his compositions real objects, and not just their traces, in 1958, with a sub-series of *Allures d'objets* known as the *Allures-Colères*. In those works, Arman began by breaking an inked object on the canvas — a glass or ceramic dish, for instance — and then proceeded to affix the broken pieces to the canvas, on top of and among the inked impressions of its breaking. *Rectangle noir* (Figure 4.24) and *Allure d'objet no. 2* (Figure 4.25) both include the two types of evidence of the object's shattering: the splattered ink that recounts the force of the impact, and the shards of glass that attest to the form of the breakage. As Bouhours points out, at this moment, the object is present only in terms of its disintegration,

while each of the two main interpretive models has its place in the Arman scholarship, what is essential is that both turn out to be theories of representation.

I want to emphasize the interrelatedness — indeed the inextricability — of these two schools of thought, insofar as an object is irrevocably tied to its image. The fact that two such differing approaches to or understandings of the *Accumulations* can coexist — and recur throughout the scholarship, with just about equal frequency — is a testament to the dialectic at play in these works. The collections of objects do lay bare their inconsistencies: grid-like patterns give way to the casual disorder of the imperfect human hand that has arranged the objects or of the cumbersome objects that have arranged themselves; rows of apparently identical articles reveal themselves to be slightly off from one to the next. And yet as soon as we try to focus on these imperfections and discrepancies, it is as if the image of the whole flickers back in, interrupting our concentrated gaze to replace it with the more general glare required to take in the whole encased scene at once. Our eyes fail to fix on the details long enough to lose focus on the mass, just as our attempts to take in the mass as a conglomeration of identical parts is interrupted by the glimmerring *puncta* of things that are slightly out of place, slightly off color, slightly different.

Two exemplary works illustrate this duality. First, *Untitled* of 1960 (Figure 4.26), composed of cog wheels in a wood-mounted Plexiglas box, demonstrates the unification of not-quite-identical elements behind the transparent façade. Although the cog wheels differ slightly in size, shape, and color, the quantity amassed causes us to register them as

which is the direct result of an intentional action executed by the artist. See Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” 33. For Arman to advance from this disintegrative endeavor to the multiplicative-disintegrative effort of the *Accumulations* was thus a logical step.

essentially the same. The silver wheel in the bottom left corner may attract our attention in passing, or we may momentarily pause on a glint of pale gold peeking from behind the duller, brassy wheel in front of it. Although we may become briefly aware of the dissimilarities between these similar items, however, our attention always resettles on the surface, where the collection registers as a whole.

In *Busy* of 1960 (Figure 4.27), on the other hand, the entire composition is a picture of heterogeneity: the disparate telephones barely resemble each other, and the tangled web of cords, receivers, and handsets hardly encourages us to distinguish one discrete item from the next. In this instance, the differences among the individual objects are so prevalent that they overwhelm the possibility of enumerating them. The objects have so little in common, other than their shared identity as telephones, that the task of mentally listing the differences feels futile. The point, then, must be just that: the collective expression of the idea “telephone.” Since disparate parts are unified only in their communal task of signifying “telephone,” the individual material objects function together as a single sign.

The role of the vitrine

What allows works as different as *Untitled* and *Busy* to coexist in a single series is the fact that their meaning is contingent upon their means of display. As I have by now made clear, in addressing the multiplication and consequent cancelation or transformation of the object in the *Accumulations*, it is essential to consider the entire means of display of those objects: encased in a delimiting box, they are contained behind a transparent barrier, set apart from the viewer’s space. That glass-fronted case does as much to transform the objects as does their multiplication, and the two tactics combined account

for the force of the *Accumulations* as works of art. The effect of the vitrine is one of containment — of the most authoritative framing, separating the work of art from the world, even as the *Accumulation* is purportedly working to bridge the gap between art and life. The transparent frontal plane of the box allows only visual access, neatly organizing everything behind it into an assimilable surface.

Otto Hahn described Arman's practice as "*la présentation brute de l'accumulation, c'est-à-dire la non-intervention sur la réalité, — ou, tout du moins, l'intervention limitée à la mise sous vitrine* (the raw presentation of the accumulation, that is, the non-intervention on reality — or, all the same, intervention limited to the placing behind glass)."¹²⁰ But that small qualification — that it is not so much non-intervention as a particular kind of apparently minimal intervention — has tremendous ramifications for the work of art. Indeed, the vitrine is the aspect *par excellence* of the *Accumulations*, the element that elevates them from the status of a pile of objects to that of a work of art, that allows them to hang on the wall like pictures, and that assures their spectacular effect on the viewer, as it transforms the objects behind it.

Arman's use of the vitrine is fundamental to the meaning of the *Accumulations*, and his choice of that medium carries with it a host of implications for the works in question. The vitrine has its own history as a cultural, sociological, and psychological artifact, which has been the subject of scholarly inquiry in its own right. In a study of the vitrine's Parisian origins and evolution, Martin Roberts argues that this artifact produces a series of paradoxical effects. It functions as sign-bearing surface despite its three-dimensional nature; it occupies an ambiguous liminal zone between exterior and interior;

¹²⁰ Hahn, "Matériaux et techniques," 15.

it is a site of both wonder and desire; and it involves an inextricable association with the mirror, both physically and psychically.¹²¹ Based on these characteristics, Roberts builds the case for the vitrine as exemplary of Debord's concept of spectacle, since the vitrine is a perfect instance of the separation that Debord saw between lived experience and its reified representation in consumer culture.¹²² For Roberts, the vitrine "construct[s] what it displays as spectacle and those looking at it as spectators, inviting yet denying possession of its contents."¹²³ This is the power of the transparent façade: it at once makes available and denies access; it offers objects for *visual* consumption but denies tangible use — which is to say, it disallows lived experience of the objects and cancels their functional value, replacing it with only sign value.

Keying into this very phenomenon, Jouffroy declared in a 1963 review of Arman's exhibition at the Galleria Schwarz in Milan that "*chaque œuvre d'Arman se présente en effet comme une vitrine . . . la vitrine de la vie journalière* (each work by Arman presents itself in effect as a vitrine . . . the vitrine of daily life)."¹²⁴ For Jouffroy, that vitrine renders the objects behind it "*décanté[s], nettoyé[s] de toutes les cendres, de toutes les taches, de toutes les salissures de l'instant et du hasard ménager* (settled, cleaned of all the ashes, of all the spots, of all the soilings of the moment and of household chance)."¹²⁵ Jouffroy thus implied the loss of some essential part of the

¹²¹ These descriptors, Roberts notes, were outlined already by Emile Zola in his 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*. See Martin Roberts, "Mutations of the Spectacle: *Vitrines*, Arcades, Mannequins," *French Cultural Studies* (1991): 216. On the association with the mirror, Shelley Rice adds, "Blocking the physical intimacy they seem to promise, closed windows throw the gaze of the observer back upon him/herself; granting only limited voyeuristic access to the objective world, these [windows] become the ultimate arenas for subjective expression." Rice, "The Question of Shop Windows . . .," in *The Art of the Everyday*, ed. Gumpert, 34.

¹²² Roberts, "Mutations of the Spectacle," 216.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹²⁴ Jouffroy, "Arman [1963]," 266.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

objects' reality: the marks of their use or their worldly existence are canceled by the means of their display. But it is not that these marks disappear behind the glass, or that the objects are somehow transformed back to their original state when they were new and unused. Rather, the marks of age and use, those same marks that grant individuality to various versions of the same object, are neutralized by the compositional framework of the *Accumulations*. Thus not only are similar objects collected in a great enough number that the objects are read *en bloc*, as a mass rather than as individuals, but the enclosing box, with its transparent face, demands that we keep our attention on the surface rather than probe into the details of particular objects.

In a similar vein, Hahn concluded that although Arman's works are made of "real" objects, stripped from the industrial world, it is not the object that interests the artist, but rather his relationship to it. He argued that in amassing these objects, "*il [Arman] veut neutraliser la profusion de leurs qualités, de leurs fonctions — il les délimite, les fige, les rend lointains et inoffensifs* (he [Arman] wants to neutralize the profusion of their qualities, of their functions — he demarcates them, sets them, renders them distant and unoffensive)."¹²⁶ This is the work accomplished by the vitrine: the setting apart and dissociation of the objects, so that they are available only for vision and not for use; they lose their object-quality in favor of image-quality. Hahn's implication is thus that Arman observes this distancing between the object and himself — this degradation of experience to a merely visual register — in the world at large. This, he implies, is "the real" as Arman knows it: already mediated, dissociated, unreal.

¹²⁶ Otto Hahn, "Arman," undated typescript (ca. 1972). Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

Arman's use of the vitrine invites reflection on a statement he made about certain formative experiences of his childhood. As the son, grandson, and great-grandson of prolific collectors of everything from buttons to industrial machines, Arman admitted that he had "*toujours été attiré par ce qui est multiplié* (always been attracted to that which is multiplied)."¹²⁷ But in the same statement, he went on to qualify that fascination: "*J'adore les vitrines des magasins d'appareils photo ou les vitrines des magasins d'outillage ou de jouets* (I love the vitrines of camera shops or the vitrines of tool or toy stores)."¹²⁸ Such an admission speaks to an important and overlooked aspect of his attraction to "junk": it is not just the objects that fascinate him, but the window display, the transparent pane that allows visual access to all kinds of splendors that might otherwise remain altogether inaccessible. Shelley Rice, in a study of the nineteenth-century emergence of the shop window, asserts that both photography and display cases "brought the contents of the world to Parisians" by making *visibly* available wares and exotica from all corners of the earth. "But the faraway places, everywhere implied, were really available to city dwellers only by their *traces*: a picture here, an object there, both of them transported by the trains that telescoped geographic space, conflating the local and the distant."¹²⁹ As a result, "the city itself, like a Universal Exposition, became a repository of signs, constantly referring elsewhere, simultaneously denoting both presence and absence."¹³⁰ By the time Arman began making his vitrine-based artworks, as Buchloh observes, "Arman had understood that sculpture from now on would have to be situated within the display devices of the commodity, and that conventions of museum

¹²⁷ Arman, quoted in Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 48.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Emphasis original. Rice, "The Question," 33.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

presentation would merge increasingly with those of the department store (the showcase and the shop window).”¹³¹

The image-quality of the *Accumulations* aligns with Arman’s attraction to display, and justifies his understanding of those works *as* surfaces. But when Arman “flattens” an object by giving us only one dimension of it, distancing it from us behind a transparent but material barrier, is it truly “flattened into image,” in the Debordian sense?¹³² The lack of a definitive answer to this question reflects Arman’s dialectical engagement with Debord’s diagnosed spectacularization of “the real”: he shows us what that phenomenon looks like, in perhaps its most literal and clearest sense, but he also shows us how spectacularization so understood unravels in reality. Debord wrote that “*le monde réel se change en simples images . . . [ce qui] correspond à l’abstraction généralisée de la société actuelle* (the real world is changing into simple images, [which] corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society).”¹³³ Arman presents “the real world” — actual everyday objects — in such a way that we can observe their slippage into the realm of images; however, the fact of the objects’ continued physical presence, and the way our attention flickers between the glass surface and the objects behind it, demonstrate the instability of the notion of spectacle itself — or at least, any practical application of it.

What is certain is that the glass façade, working in conjunction with the strategy of quantitative accumulation, diminishes the individuality of the specific objects. Based on this observation, Hamilton has made a compelling argument for reading Arman’s

¹³¹ Buchloh, “1960a,” 438.

¹³² Debord refers to the “*univers aplati* (flattened universe)” that we experience as our life is deported behind “*l’écran du spectacle* (the screen of the spectacle).” Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 207.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 23.

Accumulations in relation to a Baudrillardian systematization of objects.¹³⁴ She cites Baudrillard's dictum in his key 1968 text, *Le Système des objets*: “*Le verre, très exactement comme l’ambiance, ne laisse transparaître que le signe de son contenu et s’interpose dans sa transparence* (Glass, exactly like the atmosphere, lets show through only the sign of its contents and is interposed in its transparency.)”¹³⁵ That is, the sheet of glass or Plexiglas that stands between the beholder and the objects displayed performs an ontological transformation of those objects. As I have argued, the “realness” and presentness of those objects are challenged by the vitrine that denies access to them in their full material reality. What we are given, instead of tangible objects, is a representative *image* of those objects — a sign. We see one aspect of them, one two-dimensional side, repeated *ad infinitum* — just as in the repetitive indexing of the *Cachets*. That repetition may give us ever more occasions to look at the object, or rather, object-type, but it will never give us any more information; it will never let us arrive at some essential, inherent, intentional meaning. And this situation, of a perceptible lack of intentionality in the objects themselves — since they remain simply objects — is also the way images work in Debord's spectacle. We do not perceive the emptiness of spectacular images because our knowledge of the “real” things — our familiarity with their referents — allows us to complete the *Gestalt* in our minds and to be satisfied with the image as surrogate.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Hamilton asserts that Arman's use of the glass façade — always uniform, no matter what the form of the case it fronts — is his way of “*repren[ant] la fonction des vitrines, de la publicité et des autres manières d’organiser les objets en spectacle* (tak[ing] up the function of vitrines, of publicity, and of other manners of organizing the objects as spectacle).” See Hamilton, “Civilisation figée,” 60.

¹³⁵ Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, 58. Quoted in *ibid.*

¹³⁶ In attempting to uphold the pure realism of the *Accumulations*, Eco argued in the catalog of Arman's recent retrospective that even if given only image, we can still perceive the real object. He leans on Husserl, who asserted that we always perceive objects via different profiles (*Abschattungen*) because our experience is fluid. At different moments and across different periods, we see different aspects of an object: “*bien que*

Robbe-Grillet declared in 1957 that the world was no longer a surface that concealed a heart; it was simply surface *tout court*. He thus called for a new literary language to speak to those conditions.¹³⁷ I suggest that Arman, too, having observed the same perceived superficiality of things, was pursuing a new artistic language for a changing society seeking its expression. The vitrine provided the literal framework for that new language, built on a grammar of “real” objects.

The pictorial nature of the *Accumulations*

Je pense être plus un peintre qui fait de la sculpture qu'un sculpteur.

I think I am more of a painter that does sculpture than I am a sculptor.¹³⁸

The image quality of the *Accumulations*, attained as a result of both the multiplication of objects and their blocking in a neutralizing vitrine, puts them in relation to pictorial convention, from which Arman was never truly divorced. Despite Restany's proclamation that these works, and all of Nouveau Réalisme, represented a complete break from all past forms of art, especially easel painting,¹³⁹ the works' form maintains continuity with that tradition. The *Accumulations* are shallow rectangular boxes that hang

nous percevions seulement des silhouettes dans le continuum temporel se succédant, celles-ci fusionnent, pour nous donner toujours l'objet (even though we perceive only silhouettes in the temporal continuum, they fuse in order always to give us the object)." Thus, even though the *Accumulations* present us with only a single dimension of the objects, because these objects are familiar to us and because we are accustomed to doing so, unconsciously and automatically in our daily lives, we comprehend the whole from the part. Eco, "Les objets d'Arman," 38.

¹³⁷ Robbe-Grillet wrote that in the history of literature, the myth of “depth” had dominated; the writer had played the role of “burrowing deeper and deeper to reach some ever more intimate strata, in finally bringing to light some fragment of a disconcerting secret.” Profundity had been the goal: getting at some deeper truth. But now, in today's world, Robbe-Grillet declared, “Not only do we no longer consider the world as our very own, our private property, designed according to our needs and readily domesticated, but we no longer believe in its ‘depth.’” Robbe-Grillet, “A Fresh Start,” 103-104.

¹³⁸ Arman, quoted in Reut, *Arman: La traversée*, 180.

¹³⁹ Recall that Restany wrote in the first manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, “*La peinture de chevalet (comme n'importe quel autre moyen d'expression classique dans le domaine de la peinture ou de la sculpture) a fait son temps* (Easel painting (like every other classical means of expression in the domain of painting or of sculpture) has served its term).” See Restany, “Les Nouveaux Réalistes,” 264-5.

on the wall like a picture, and in many cases their sides are opaque so that the only way to perceive the contents is to look at them frontally, where the transparent face lies (Figure 4.28).¹⁴⁰ As I have shown, the works present themselves as surface: like a painting, all of their interest and meaning resides in this essentially two-dimensional confrontation.

In fact, when Arman's work first appeared, it was immediately understood in terms of painting — and not just painting, but abstract painting — the very means of expression that the Nouveaux Réalistes, according to Restany, so fervently believed had “served its term” and needed to be supplanted. In 1961, abstract painter Raymond Cogniat referred to Arman's *Accumulations* as among “*les expériences les plus brutales où l'on a d'abord cru voir l'abstraction portée jusqu'aux pires limites* (the most violent experiences where one at first believed to be seeing abstraction carried to its worst limits).”¹⁴¹ Cogniat conceded that after a few months of being exposed to Arman's work — and no doubt to Restany's writing — one knows better than to see the *Accumulations* as an extension *ad absurdum* of abstraction, but instead as coming “*d'un nouvel engagement, d'un reniement, d'un combat qui s'engage en faveur d'un retour au réel, par la redécouverte de l'objet* (from a new engagement, from a renunciation, from a battle launched in favor of a return to the real, by the rediscovery of the object).”¹⁴²

It seems obvious that the realization that Cogniat reached about the work of Arman and his Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues was influenced by Restany's promotional rhetoric; how else might one explain the about-face he experienced, from seeing

¹⁴⁰ In some works, the format is a glass case mounted on a wooden back panel and hung on the wall; in others, a glass case sits on a wooden base. These formats are much less common than the shallow wood boxes with the single transparent frontal plane.

¹⁴¹ Raymond Cogniat, “Pas d'ennemi à gauche,” *Le Figaro*, August 31, 1961, 8.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

abstraction in the extreme to recognizing the works as a negation of abstraction and a return to “the real”? The author certainly gives no reason to believe that he came to this understanding on his own, over time, through the contemplation of the works alone. Instead he praises Restany’s clarity in communicating the artists’ intentions, and declares, “*On ne peut prétendre être devant un prolongement de l’art abstrait car Pierre Restany précise bien: ‘ . . . les nouveaux réalistes ont été écœurés par les excès du tachisme en épaisseur, ils se méfient de l’humour naturaliste dérivé de l’art brut, ils rejettent enfin l’ambiguïté de l’informel’* (We cannot claim to be before an extension of abstract art, for Pierre Restany makes clear: ‘ . . . the Nouveaux Réalistes have been disheartened by the excesses of *tachisme*, they are wary of the naturalist humor derived from *art brut*, and they reject the ambiguity of the *informel*’).”¹⁴³ Cogniat thus reveals that his entire volte-face concerning the character of Nouveau-Réaliste work is based on Restany’s insistent claim that it is anti-abstraction, anti-lyrical, and anti-painting, despite the fact that all the while the works of art themselves possess in many cases a strong affinity with the pictorial languages of the abstract.¹⁴⁴

As I argued in Chapter One, Restany’s dismissal of a pictorial reading of Arman’s *Accumulations* was motivated by his drive to declare the death of painting in order to assert the reign of the appropriated object, which he saw as a more socially relevant art

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ In response to the attack on abstraction that Cogniat suddenly saw in Nouveaux Réalisme, through Restany’s words, Cogniat put out a call to arms for abstract painters and their champions: “*Le temps approche où il faudra défendre l’art abstrait, rappeler sa volonté de pureté, son apport pour la liberté du peintre et affirmer son importance historique* (The time is coming where it will be necessary to defend abstract art, to remember its will toward purity, its provision for the freedom of the painter, and to affirm its historical importance).” Now, abstraction risked not only academicism, but worse: becoming outmoded. Ibid.

form for the modern, capitalist, industrial age.¹⁴⁵ That dismissal was equally essential to Restany's project of differentiating the Nouveaux Réalistes from their American counterparts, a distinction that was founded on the presentation/representation dyad. In response to the 1962 Sidney Janis show that brought the American and European "new realist" artists together, Restany wrote an article in which he addressed the relative strengths and weaknesses of the contributors to the exhibition. Unsurprisingly, he extolled what he saw as the superior realism of the Europeans, who resisted the "representative attitude" that he saw the newly arrived American Pop Artists so fervently affirming. He cited Arman's *Accumulations* in particular as exemplary of the non-pictorial and non-representative ideal: "*Ces œuvres,*" he wrote, "*incarnent bien l'un des pôles-limites de l'esprit nouveau-réaliste européen, l'exaltation des possibilités expressives de l'objet dans le respect de son originalité essentielle, sans transposition ni correctif esthétisant, maniériste ou littéraire* (These works epitomize one of the limit-poles of the European Nouveau-Réaliste spirit, the exaltation of the expressive possibilities of the object in accordance with its essential originality, without transposition nor corrective, either aestheticizing, mannerist, or literary)."¹⁴⁶ His key claims were once

¹⁴⁵ Restany's agenda on this point was recognized by his contemporaries. In a 1965 letter to Restany, Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, Restany's colleague at the review *Planète*, lamented the former's insistence on maintaining this stance. He wrote that the importance of painting was "*un point que tu as peut-être un peu trop systématiquement refusé d'examiner, pris par des options actuelles, mais qui fera dans quelques décennies apparaître comme des précurseurs certains peintres de la génération de 1950 et certains abstraits lyriques* (a point that you have perhaps a bit too systematically refused to consider, taken by current biases, but that will seem in a few decades like precursors of certain painters of the generation of 1950 and certain lyrical abstractionists)." Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, letter to Pierre Restany, January 22, 1965. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹⁴⁶ Restany, Pierre. "Le Nouveau Réalisme à la conquête de New York," *Art International* 7 (January 1963): 29-36. As we have seen, Arman never denied his interest in aesthetics; furthermore, he openly acknowledged that the American Neo-Dadaist Stankiewicz was one of the earliest influences on his realist work (and that of his colleagues): "*Ses pièces avec des chaînes, des morceaux de ferraille, exposées à Paris, en 1955 ou 1956 nous ont montré comment employer le matériau de rebut* (His pieces with chains and pieces of scrap metal, exhibited in Paris in 1955 or 1956, showed us how to use waste material)." Notably, Stankiewicz's use of junk material was in a highly representational manner — the aestheticized,

again that the object as such had an inherent value grounded in its potential to be autonomously “expressive,” and that Arman accessed that object-value by resisting any kind of intervention, either by representation (“transposition”) or by transformation (“corrective”).¹⁴⁷ With this second claim, Restany implied a refusal of intentionality altogether: the artist expresses no will toward aesthetic, artistic, or poetic meaning; he merely allows the object to stand for itself.

And yet when Arman first exhibited the *Accumulations*, critics agreed on their strangely pictorial nature. Many simply wrote of the works using the language one would expect to find in reviews of painting — discussions of the harmonious balance of color, the play of forms on the surface, the compositional structure — and almost all referred to Arman not as the artist, but as the *painter*.¹⁴⁸ Some reviewers noted the peculiarity of their own tendency to want to discuss these three-dimensional works as though they were pictures. Rivière, writing for *Combat*, problematized the dissonance between the volumetric works and their pictorial address when she wrote in a 1960 review, “Arman . .

Schwittersian version of junk art — precisely the kind of assemblage that Restany denied his own artists practiced. Arman, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 1, 36.

¹⁴⁷ Martin has argued that Restany’s entire notion of an “expressive autonomy of the object” is destructive; it clouds the distinction between meaning and being — “between what things ‘stand for’ and what things ‘are.’ . . . The very idea of expression has to do with externalizing something that is internal. ‘Express’ is a verb that requires a human subject. Things do not express, people do.” See Martin, *Arman*, 22. This assessment recalls Robbe-Grillet’s insistence on mere presence as the entire “meaning” of an object. I will discuss this matter further in Chapter Five, as Martin’s argument is more directly related to the *Poubelles*.

¹⁴⁸ For example, an anonymous review of a 1962 exhibition of *Accumulations* in Brussels announced, “*La Galerie Aujourd’hui présente un peintre dont Pierre Restany dit qu’il inaugure un nouveau cartésianisme* (The Galerie Aujourd’hui presents a painter whom Pierre Restany says is inaugurating a new cartesianism).” In 1964, Arman was included in an exhibition at the Galerie André Schoeller Jr. in Paris entitled “*28 Peintres d’aujourd’hui à Paris* (28 Painters of Today in Paris).” *Télé Magazine*, reviewing the episode of the television program *En français dans le texte* dedicated to Nouveau Réalisme, described Arman’s project by saying he “*peint avec ce qu’il trouve dans les poubelles* (paints with what he finds in the trash).” This phrase was echoed in “*La fortune des éboueurs*,” *Paris-presse-l’intransigeant*, April 27, 1961, where the author exclaimed, “*il y a des gens qui peignent avec ce qu’ils trouvent dans les poubelles: déchets, détritius, ordures et boîtes de conserves!* (there are people who paint with what they find in the trash: rubbish, detritus, garbage and cans!),” and named Arman as the leader of this group. See press clippings of all of the above in the Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

. veut seulement dégager un nouveau réel, celui qui des forces condensées de l'objet manufacturé fera un autre donné et délivrera à l'objet une valeur plus picturale que sculpturale (Arman wants only to establish a new real, that which will make from the condensed forces of the manufactured object another given and will endow the object with a value more pictorial than sculptural)."¹⁴⁹ She recognized in the *Accumulations* a transformative operation that, rather than depicting the objects pictorially, turned them into a single, pictorial object.

Addressing the same effect, Claude Viallat, member of the painting movement Supports/Surfaces (which opposed Nouveau Réalisme and Neo-Dada precisely because of the latter's anti-pictorial stance), admitted in an interview that he could not help but engage Arman's appopriative art. Viallat explained that he was attracted to Arman's work precisely because of the *pictorial* problems it posed: "*On peut voir une accumulation d'Arman comme relevant d'un geste mécanique. . . . Mais cette accumulation entraîne également des rapports de matières, de couleurs, de formes, d'espaces, qui appartiennent à la problématique du peintre. En tant que tels, je ne pouvais pas les ignorer* (One can see an Arman accumulation as coming from a mechanical gesture. . . . But that accumulation also carries relationships of materials, colors, forms, spaces, which belong to the problematics of the painter. As such, I could not ignore them)."¹⁵⁰

Rivière again confronted the odd pictorialism of Arman's *Accumulations* in 1961, when she reviewed two "realist" exhibitions in Paris, *40° au-dessus de Dada* at the

¹⁴⁹ Rivière, "Ivresse," 7.

¹⁵⁰ Viallat recognized Arman's indebtedness to Pollock and Mathieu and affirmed that "*Il a une très grande culture picturale qui se manifeste consciemment ou non* (He has a very large pictorial culture that manifests itself, consciously or not)." Viallat, "L'immersion," 15.

Galerie J, and *Les 41 présentent . . .* at the Galerie Iris Clert. In her essay she sought to put her finger on just what was meant by "realism" in the context of the current art. "*Le réalisme est une théorie* (Realism is a theory)," she wrote; a theory defined in this case, it seemed, via opposition: "*opposition au verbalisme, à l'abus des abstractions ou bien encore à la chimère* (opposition to verbalism, to the abuse of abstractions, or even better, to chimera)."¹⁵¹ Questioning how one was to understand the objects pasted to Spoerri's compositions, she posited: "*L'objet est ce qui est représenté devant nous et nous pouvons le voir dans son enesmble ou à la faveur d'un seul élément* (The object is what is represented before us and we can see it as a whole or by taking advantage of a single element)."¹⁵² By "represented," Rivière seems to have meant, literally, re-presented: Spoerri's objects are taken from the context of the meal, where they were first presented to dinner guests as the contents of a feast; now, they are re-presented to us, the audience, as the remains of a meal-event, the "ashes of his art," a realist composition. Arman's *Accumulations*, on the other hand, are less straightforward: not mere re-presentations of objects, but something new altogether. "*Mais, comment traduire en nouvelle réalité l'œuvre d'accumulation d'Arman,*" Rivière asks, "*puisque'il se présente devant nos yeux comme un concret, c'est-à-dire comme une vision résultante d'un mécanisme cinématique* (But how does one translate Arman's work of accumulation into a new reality, since it presents itself before our eyes as something concrete, that is, as a vision resulting from a cinematic mechanism)?"¹⁵³ Rivière's invocation of the term "vision" to describe the compositional whole of Arman's *Accumulation* is revealing. In contrast to

¹⁵¹ Claude Rivière, "Réalisme, concret et vie," *Combat* (May 22, 1961): 7.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

the straightforward objectness of Spoerri's compositions, where individual dishes and bottles and scraps are laid before us *as themselves*, Arman's works enact a transformation *away* from objectness and toward *vision*, toward the optical, toward screen (note her invocation of cinema). Rivière echoed the common observation that the object, in Arman's hands, undergoes a certain disintegration, "*puisque la répétition amenée par l'accumulation tend vers la destruction de la qualité utile de l'objet* (since the repetition brought about by accumulation tends toward the destruction of the utilitarian quality of the object)."¹⁵⁴ Once again, it is becoming image.

Reviewing the same two exhibitions, Michel Ragon wrote in *Arts* that between the Galerie J and the Galerie Iris Clert, the avant-garde was advancing so quickly that it risked being swallowed by academicism.¹⁵⁵ Worse, the new realism offered at the Galerie J show failed to live up to its insolent title, "40 degrees above Dada." For Ragon, Duchamp's innovative readymades far surpassed those offered by the Nouveaux Réalistes, which were bogged down by "*fignolages esthètes* (aesthetic tinkering)"¹⁵⁶ and thus came up short as regards both negation and humor. The artistic trifling that Ragon identified in the new works is manifested in the optical quality of Arman's *Accumulations*: the emphasis on surface organization of form and color, on the purely retinal impact of the whole object, neatly delimited by its sturdy frame. Gone is the legacy of the autonomous, anti-aesthetic bottle rack; in its place is the bottle itself, a hundred times over, tidily transformed into a glimmering plane of transparency (Figure 4.29). The *Accumulations* could thus be said to fulfill John Canaday's diagnosis of the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Michel Ragon, "40° au-dessus de Dada?," *Arts* no. 823, May 17, 1961.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

new assemblage works in general, "so receptive to theatrical lighting that one is almost fooled into accepting them at face value and into forgetting that face is the only value they have."¹⁵⁷

The following year, John Ashbery referred to the *Accumulations* as "handsome in a way that reminds one of abstract painting."¹⁵⁸ And in 1963, Ragon described *Untitled* of 1963 (Figure 4.30) as "*cent tubes de cachets d'aspirine formant un relief pointilliste* (a hundred tubes of aspirin packets forming a pointillist relief)." Despite his invocation of the term "pointillist," a pictorial technique, Ragon claimed however that such an accumulation "*n'a sans doute plus rien à voir avec la peinture* (has without a doubt nothing more to do with painting)." Instead, Arman's art, and the art of the future that it appeared to portend, "*paraîtront des pièces d'ethnologie* (will appear as pieces of ethnology)."¹⁵⁹ For Ragon to be able to identify a certain pictorial quality to the *Accumulations* — the way the multiplied objects coalesce into a scintillating, "pointillist" image — and yet still conclude that the work is ethnographical rather than pictorial, speaks to the tension between the techniques and materials that Arman employed. Ragon, like many of his contemporaries, focused his attention on the objects themselves that Arman accumulated: the "hundred tubes of aspirin" are the very "ethnographic" material that he conflates with the entirety of the work. That is, in referring to the *Accumulation* as an ethnographic piece, Ragon is willfully ignoring the aspect of the work that makes it an *Accumulation* and not just a pile of objects: the vitrine, the means of display, the very structure of the work of art. That vitrine, and the way that it organizes the objects within

¹⁵⁷ John Canaday, "A Mixed-Up Show: 'Art of Assemblage' Leaves a Little Something to be Desired," *New York Times*, October 8, 1961, X19.

¹⁵⁸ John Ashbery, 1962, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 118.

¹⁵⁹ Michel Ragon, "Le 'Nouveau Réalisme,'" *Jardin des arts* no. 100 (March 1963): 68.

it, is what creates the “pointillist” impression that Ragon identified. And the term “pointillist” is, importantly, an apt metaphor for the kind of disappearing act that the objects undergo as their quantity and homogeneity cause them to flicker between appearing as discrete objects and as a unified, all-over composition of colored forms. The tension between the pictorial image created by the display of the objects, and the sociological information conveyed by the objects themselves, is the very force of the *Accumulations*. And yet very few critics at the time managed to see past one pole or the other.

The dichotomy in the criticism reflects a felt need to make a choice between pictorialism and “realism.” As Jouffroy explained, “*tout tableau perd aujourd’hui sa vie, s’il ne nie pas de quelque manière son caractère de tableau* (today every picture is losing its life, if it does not deny in some way its pictorial character).” Thus the collages, combines, *décollages*, and objects of the Nouveaux Réalistes seemed to Jouffroy “*plus chargées de vie — de risques — que les bons tableaux paisibles ou dramatiques des peintres soucieux de ‘belle peinture’* (more full of life — of risks — than the pleasant or dramatic pictures of the painters concerned with ‘*belle peinture*’).”¹⁶⁰ A year after staking this claim, however, Jouffroy had changed his tune; he argued in a 1965 article that Arman’s technique of multiplication and accumulation had come to “serve as a mask for the man who paints, the man who co-ordinates his visions and articulates them in accordance with a self-invented syntax.”¹⁶¹ Arman was making *tableaux* of a new order.

¹⁶⁰ Jouffroy, “Pour une révolution,” 190.

¹⁶¹ Alain Jouffroy, “The Paris International Avant-Garde,” in *New Art Around the World: Painting and Sculpture* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966), 88.

The organization and cohesion described by Jouffroy grant the *Accumulations* a certain wholeness or completeness, which Arman himself understood as important to his particular project:

Il est évident que quand j'ai vu ces objets [les Accumulations] exposés pour la première fois, j'ai compris que leur impact était complètement différent de celui des ready-mades. Ils possédaient effectivement une sorte de Gestalt, un mode à eux, qui les différenciait beaucoup de l'objet qui, isolé, sur un socle, dans le contexte d'une exposition, a été élu. Mes objets ne sont pas élus; c'est le tout qui est élu. C'est une chose différente.

It is clear that when I saw these objects [the *Accumulations*] exhibited for the first time, I understood that their impact was completely different from that of the readymades. They possessed effectively a sort of *Gestalt*, a way of their own, that very much differentiated them from the object that, isolated, on a pedestal, in the context of an exhibition, was selected. My objects are not selected; it is the whole that is selected. It is a different thing.¹⁶²

For Arman to invoke the notion of *Gestalt* in a discussion of his *Accumulations* reveals that he understood the works' impact as tied up in the whole of their composition, defined and delimited, importantly, by the vitrine. The vitrine is what pushes the *Accumulations* into the realm of the *tableau*: the finished work, whole, complete; a world unto itself.

The fact that that framing device maintained one of two compositional formats — vertical or horizontal, that is, portrait or landscape — affirms its adherence to pictorial convention. The vitrines could have easily been conceived in the neutral square, but Arman never took that route.¹⁶³ The precedent for the square composition had been well established by this time in abstract painting, and was certainly a viable option for Arman. The fact that he maintained an allegiance to those formats that, like his early abstract paintings, retain a connotation of conventional pictorial subject matter reinforces the sense of his continued engagement in the problematics of painting. The vitrine becomes a

¹⁶² Arman, in Abadie and Arman, "L'archéologie du futur," 44.

¹⁶³ I am grateful to Molly Warnock for pointing out the tendentiousness of this choice on Arman's part.

sort of surrogate for the canvas; as such, the objects it receives function, as Otto Hahn observed, as the colors and forms that constitute the *tableau*.¹⁶⁴ In a review of the *Accumulations*, Hahn even used the word "canvas" in reference to the vitrine: “*Chez Arman, les ‘accumulations’ ne livrent que leur rythme: les ressorts cessent d’être des ressorts, et les capsules de bouteille . . . cessent d’être des capsules; les objets d’Arman se noient sous leur propre profusion et il ne reste, sur la toile, que le dynamisme somptueusement tourmenté des expressionnistes abstraits* (With Arman, the *Accumulations* deliver only their rhythm: the springs cease to be springs, and the bottle caps . . . cease to be caps; Arman’s objects drown under their own profusion and all that remains on the canvas is the sumptuously tormented dynamism of the abstract expressionists).”¹⁶⁵

All of these factors combined must have contributed to the relentless centering of the critical discourse around pictorial concerns. Jouffroy referred unequivocally to Arman and his co-generationists as painters — painters with firmly established intentions and a will to control their art so as to bring the former to fruition. In a 1965 essay accompanying a thematic exhibition of object-based art, Jouffroy wrote,

[L]es jeunes peintres . . . ne s’opposent d’aucune manière à la peinture . . . mais tentent de remettre au premier plan cette pensée sans laquelle la peinture tout entière se dissout dans la futilité esthétique. Ils rendent service à la peinture – à la peinture future – et c’est dans cette perspective ouverte sur l’avenir qu’il faut saisir le sens de leurs objets présents.

[T]he young painters . . . in no way oppose painting . . . but try to restore the eminence of that thought without which all painting would dissolve into aesthetic

¹⁶⁴ Hahn wrote, “*L’objet, hors de sa fonction est en quête de transcendance. . . . L’objet disparaît, ne laissant en place que ses qualités. . . . Quelque procédé que l’on emploie, le tableau naît par l’organisation des couleurs et des formes* (The object, outside of its function, is on a quest for transcendence. . . . The object disappears, leaving in place only its qualities. . . . Whatever process one employs, the picture is born of the organization of colors and of forms).” Hahn, “Lettre de Paris et de Bruxelles,” 67.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

futility. They are doing a service to painting — to future painting — and it is in that open perspective on the future that we must grasp the meaning of their present objects.¹⁶⁶

Jouffroy introduced the possibility that despite not putting paint to canvas, Arman and his contemporaries working in objects were advancing painting; they were working within its domain even without working within its materials. Arman's allegiance to the *tableau*, achieved by new means, exemplifies such adherence to pictorial concerns and dedication to finding a new language for their expression.¹⁶⁷ Abadie observed that even though he took Arman's essential aim in the *Accumulations* to be first and foremost "*la notion d'expression par la quantité, caractéristique de notre époque 'd'explosion démographique, de production, de gaspillage'* (the notion of expression by quantity, characteristic of our period 'of demographic explosion, of production, of waste')," he also noted a dialectical return in Arman's project, which allowed him to use the object in the *Accumulations*, like that in the *Allures d'objets*, "*comme élément de composition de l'œuvre et non plus en tant que finalité* (as a compositional element of the work and no longer as a finality),"¹⁶⁸ a pictorial means rather than an end in an of itself.

As we have seen, Arman himself invited this pictorial understanding of the *Accumulations*, not only by verbally asserting that he approached them as surfaces or

¹⁶⁶ Alain Jouffroy, "Les objecteurs / Object Lessons," *Art Press* no. 257 (May 2000): 47. This 2000 article is a reproduction of Jouffroy's 1965 text that accompanied a traveling exhibition of the works of Arman, Kudo, Pommereulle, Raynaud, and Spoerri.

¹⁶⁷ In William Rubin's essay for the catalog of Arman's retrospective exhibition at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in 1998, he distinguished between two types of works within Arman's *œuvre*: modernist and postmodernist. Rubin expressed a clear preference for the modernist works, which retained a relationship to pictorial concerns, and declared, "*Arman reste à mes yeux meilleur peintre que sculpteur* (Arman remains in my eyes a better painter than a sculptor)." One wonders whether he was aware of Arman's own preference for thinking of himself as a painter and not a sculptor. Rubin drew that conclusion from the insistent unity — what one might call the *tableau* quality — of the earlier *Accumulations*. William Rubin, "Comment situer Arman?" in *Arman*, ed. Abadie, 26.

¹⁶⁸ Abadie, 1969, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 82. The term "*d'explosion démographique*" is a quotation of Arman, who spoke of those issues in Jouffroy, "Arman [1965]."

tableaux, but by composing, constructing, and displaying them as such. Lamarche-Vadel argues that the basic underlying structure of Arman's works is the Cubist grid;¹⁶⁹ that is, even when he works in three dimensions, the undergirding of his arrangement of objects takes as its model the pictorial structure developed by Picasso and Braque that had come to dominate much advanced Western pictorial production since the early twentieth century. Van der Marck, too, takes note of the evident structure of the *Accumulations*, and avows that the works' complexity is drawn not from sculptural concerns but from graphic ones — a thesis that is supported by the progression of Arman's project from the indexical works of the early 1950s to the object-based works that followed.¹⁷⁰ Both scholars thus identify a pictorial sensibility at work not only in the display — the rectangular form hung on the wall — but in the very composition of the *Accumulations*. On both a material and a structural level, these works fight against their own three-dimensionality in insisting on their pictorial origins and address.

Furthermore, the encounter with the viewer that they invite is much closer to the traditional pictorial confrontation than to the more interactive scenarios provoked by certain contemporary realisms. What sets Arman's work apart from that of many of his Nouveau-Réaliste colleagues is the forced passivity of the spectator who faces it. Malone's study of the "action-spectacle" made important discoveries about the innovative ways in which the Nouveaux Réalistes invited their audience to become active participants in the artwork presented. In Klein's *Le Vide* of 1958, Tinguely's *Super-Manifestation-Spectacle* of 1959, and Spoerri's *L'Epicerie* and *Restaurant de la Galerie J* of 1961, the beholder is asked to "perform" rather than to "view"; for Malone, that

¹⁶⁹ Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, *Arman* (Paris: La Différence, 1987).

¹⁷⁰ Van der Marck, "Arman: The Parisian Avant-Garde," 91.

invitation suggests new definitions of both artistic practice and spectator habit which respond to the restructuring of lived experience in postwar France.¹⁷¹ The participatory aim of the actions-spectacles is nowhere to be found in Arman's early work, all of which, from the *Cachets* and the *Allures d'objets* to the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, is presented in a pictorial mode of address, offered solely for visual contemplation by the passive viewer who has no access to any experience beyond the optical register.

The *Accumulations*' evident roots in painting are the logical result of Arman having begun his artistic practice as a painter in the popular abstract styles of the early 1950s, which built their design on Cubist foundations.¹⁷² That the *Accumulations* developed from his subsequent forays into stamped compositions — still fundamentally dependent on Cubism in their arrangement of regular forms across the activated surface, centrally concentrated — provides further justification for the felt presence of a pictorial order. In fact, based on this observation, the *Accumulations* have much in common with the *Cachets* — arguably even more than they share with the *Allures d'objets* that immediately preceded them. Bouhours suggests that the *Accumulations* in effect represent the inverse of the *Allures d'objets*: rather than the spatial expansion of the *Allures*, the *Accumulations* enact a constriction of the object into a given volume.¹⁷³

The *Allures d'objets*, given their two-dimensional format, would seem to be a more pictorially oriented series than the *Accumulations*. But in fact, the insistent

¹⁷¹ Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme," 130.

¹⁷² Pierre Schneider observed that while post-cubist painting that relied on the cubist grid was by 1960 becoming "worn" and "extenuated to a distinguished pallor," the new realists were giving Cubist geometry a new life. He wrote, "the new Dada does not rebel against the tyranny of order: it melts into it. . . . It is precisely because it is mechanical that the neo-Dadaists introduce geometry into their work. Squares and rectangles are used, not as revealing an essential structure of reality, but because they mean nothing: as a worried pupil copies the answer from his neighbor's blue-book without even trying to understand the problem." Pierre Schneider, "Art News from Paris," *Art News* 59, no. 8 (1960): 44.

¹⁷³ Bouhours, "Arman avant le Plein," 33.

framedness of the *Accumulations* — with the wood or Plexiglas boxes providing an impenetrable boundary separating the contents (the work of art) from the world that exists outside it — forces them into a pictorial address at once more limited and more limiting than that of the *Allures d'objets*. In the *Allures*, the perceptible spatial expansion that Bouhours cites gives a concomitant sense of these works' potential extension beyond the edges of the canvas or paper and into real space. The marks are records of an object whose movement — rolling, bouncing, dragging, skipping — feels infinitely possible in limitless space. The *Accumulations* invert such an effect by virtue of their resolute containment in the impenetrable bins: were the *Accumulations* conceived as loose piles of shoes or razors, their potential for proliferation might be convincing. Instead, they are framed, contained, sealed; they are closed compositions; finished *tableaux*. Martin, who sees Arman's work as "a dialogue between the container and the contained," considers the *Accumulations* representative of "a process that has been stopped and sealed off." Thus, unlike the piles of trash in junkyards or on the side of the road, Arman's *Accumulations* "never give the sense of a process that could go on forever."¹⁷⁴

The limiting spatial conditions of the *Accumulations*, Bouhours argues, make them in the end less connected to the *Allures d'objets* and more to the saturated, all-over compositions of the later, larger *Cachets* like *Sombre dimanche* (Figure 4.31).¹⁷⁵

Bouhours makes this claim by referring to what I have called the abstracting of the objects in the *Accumulations* as they are subsumed by the dominant impression of a

¹⁷⁴ Martin adds that in some of the freestanding *Accumulations* (i.e., those without vitrines, which are rare in the early 1960s but become more common in later years), "it is the reappearance of some of the formal configurations of the *cachets* and *allures* that supplies the notion of a limit. . . . Arman uses concepts of formal stability to bring home his point. . . . The *accumulation* goes on until it gives the visual impression that the addition of one more element would make it topple over." Martin, *Arman*, 38-41.

¹⁷⁵ Bouhours, "Arman avant le Plein," 33.

unified mass. I would add, however, that even the earlier *Cachets*, such as *Untitled* of 1955 (Figure 4.32), portend the kind of spatial arrangement that Arman would employ in the *Accumulations*: forms in *Untitled* are positioned in vague rows where, although they overlap and obscure each other in a sort of lyrical abstract chaos, their regularity and repetition create the sense of an underlying framework. This is the effect we find again in a work like *Home Sweet Home* (Figure 4.33) or *Le Sénat* (Figure 4.34), in which the intimation of a grid-like structure is still discernible despite the cluttered disorder of irregular objects that works against it.

Arman reflected in 1994 on the importance of painting to his conception of the work of art, discussing the influence of Van Gogh's pictures, in which the painter's tools are always perceptible in the impasted spirals of his brushwork. Arman referred to his own work — the *Accumulations* — as “*ma manière de peindre, toujours dépendante de l'utilisation de l'objet, qui pour moi doit être présent et reconnaissable avant tout* (my manner of painting, always dependent on the use of the object, which for me must be present and recognizable above all).”¹⁷⁶ There are two key observations to make here. The first is that what Arman admires in Van Gogh's work is the way the impasted paint *indexes* the tools and gestures of its making. He refers to the painter's marks as “*la trace . . . le résultat d'un geste, geste effectué avec des outils – brosses, tubes, truelles, grattoirs, ces outils restent visibles et leur présence atteste le mouvement créé par eux* (the trace . . . the result of a gesture, gesture effectuated with tools — brushes, tubes, trowels, scrapers, these tools remain visible and their presence attests to the movement created by them).”¹⁷⁷ This statement calls to mind the work Arman did in the *Allures d'objets*,

¹⁷⁶ Arman, “La nuit étoilée [1994],” in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 260.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

pictures composed entirely of traces that record both the gesture and the tool that created them. Thus we once again have confirmation of Arman's keen investment in the index as captor of a once-present "real." Second, Arman's observations about his own work, that the object must always be *present* and *recognizable*, reflect the complexity of his project which *aspires* to this kind of material clarity but arrives dialectically at an abstraction of it. This is perhaps what led Tita Reut to refer to the "*obscure clarté [qui] envahit la surface* (obscure clarity [that] invades the surface)" of his works.¹⁷⁸ The objects presented are at once present and clear — quite literally, as they are physically there, displayed behind a perfectly transparent window — and distant and obscure; they are at once themselves and something else.

This idea of the objects as "something else" again conjures the metaphor of language, that structure of meaning composed of signs. Reut invokes a certain rhetoric of the object in the *Accumulations*, wherein "*L'objet est l'écriture d'Arman* (The object is Arman's writing)."¹⁷⁹ This view recalls the language used to discuss the *Allures d'objets*, where the inked traces were seen as the object's calligraphic script. Now that the objects themselves make up the work, they become their own form of writing, with a logic and syntax determined at once by the objects themselves and by the artist, just as the *Allures d'objets* had been. The idea of the objects as writing or script relates the *Accumulations* again to the graphic or pictorial, where Arman can be seen to be arranging objects as signs in a grammatical structure. Arman confirms this intention in referring to his practice as the "*utilisation d'une grammaire objectuelle* (use of an objectual grammar)."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Reut, *Arman: La traversée*, 9.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸⁰ Arman, "[Je crois que dans le désir d'accumuler . . .] [1964]," in *Arman*, ed. Bouhours, 252.

The appeal to an object-based language appears frequently in Restany's writing on Arman. The critic claimed that the objects of industrial society, both the mass-produced articles and the waste that results from their manufacture and consumption, "have a meaning, a power of signification in and of themselves." As a result, "Their morphology is self-explanatory; it can therefore act as a basis for a language, for an art of human communication and participation."¹⁸¹ This claim was part of Restany's argument for a sociological reading of Arman's work, in that he saw the encounter with an *Accumulation* as representative of "the pure emanation of industrial society at its peak."¹⁸² But likening Arman's *Accumulations* to a language also touches on the idea of the objects as signs within a syntactical system. The objects cease to represent themselves autonomously, and become signs functioning like letters or words. In one of his many comparisons of the *Accumulations* to Duchamp's readymades, Restany concluded that Arman's originality lay in his quantitative expression: whereas Duchamp's readymades are "specific gestures, elements of a vocabulary," Arman takes these elements and creates "a lexicon, a syntax, a poetic articulation."¹⁸³ In short, Duchamp made words, Arman made sentences.¹⁸⁴

Asked in a 1978 interview to explain the painting/appropriation rupture that Restany so insistently claimed was there, Arman avowed, "*Je n'éprouve aucune révolte contre la peinture classique* (I do not feel any revolt against classical painting)." He

¹⁸¹ Pierre Restany, "Arman: A Radical Portrait," 35.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 39.

¹⁸⁴ Puzzlingly, Restany states in the same discussion that with Arman, "the language of the objects' presentation is organized from the very first in a rational, logical way." The invocation of rational logic here seems to go against Restany's erstwhile claims that Arman does not impose order on things, but rather allows them to organize and express themselves. But as we have seen, any encounter with specific works confirms their organizational intentionality. Ibid., 38.

confessed to admiring the personal, expressive paintings of Poliakoff and Mathieu, and claimed that he was never able to achieve the same qualities of originality and personality in his own paintings, which is why, he explained, “*je suis revenu à la peinture, d’ailleurs, par d’autres chemins: le dessin, l’empreinte à l’huile* (I came back to painting by other routes: drawing, oil printing).”¹⁸⁵ And even accumulation could be added to that list; Arman described his practice of accumulation as making him “*un peintre de mon temps* (a painter of my time).”¹⁸⁶

Privileging of vision

As a “painter of his time,” Arman not only presented tangible objects in such a way that we experience them as images, but did so with the intention of declaring that experience as the new reality of our relationship to objects. Arman’s use of the vitrine can be seen as part of a project of accounting for or problematizing what was felt to be the new way of being-in-the-world — as a kind of perpetual spectator. Even beyond the inherent qualities of the vitrine itself, Arman’s *Accumulations* make emphatic their address to the *eye only*, by underscoring their limitations as purely visual consumables. As I have begun to suggest, in both his selection and his arrangement of objects, Arman foregrounds the experience of looking. The *Accumulations* make inescapably conspicuous for the viewer the conditions of her own act of perceiving, and they do so in several ways.

First, the vitrine itself as surface reflects back to the viewer the image of herself in the act of looking — a reflection that not only shows but also thwarts that very act, as the

¹⁸⁵ Arman, in Parinaud, “L’aventure,” 33.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

reflections on the pane of glass at times occlude visual access to the objects behind it, showing the viewer instead herself as spectator (Figure 4.35). Even more striking, Arman underscores the “to-be-seeness”¹⁸⁷ of his surfaces by purposefully arranging the objects so that they radically *face* the viewer. The “facingness” of the objects in Arman’s *Accumulations*, once remarked, is undeniable, and comes to overwhelm and even supercede the other kinds of thematic connections one might find in his choice of objects. For instance, again and again in the series, we find repetitions of various bulbs (Figure 4.36), reflectors (Figure 4.37), and lenses (Figure 4.38) — all radically frontal, meeting the viewer with a direct face-to-face confrontation. It is no accident, I might add, that light bulbs, reflectors and camera lenses all function in the “real” world as analogies to or surrogates for the human eye. Arman’s *Accumulations* insist on that surrogacy, as multiple exemplars line up behind the surface to stare outward and meet the viewer’s gaze as its equivalent.¹⁸⁸

Pressure gauges (Figure 4.39) and clocks (Figure 4.40) take the analogy further: literal faces look out of the vitrine — all in formation to face forward despite the innumerable other configurations they could reasonably be expected to assume if the thesis of artistic non-intervention were true. Recall Hahn’s claim that Arman’s “only intervention” was the “placing behind glass” of the objects culled directly from the “real” world.¹⁸⁹ Yet looking at these works — and especially the consistency with which the

¹⁸⁷ I borrow this term, as well as the related “facingness,” from Michael Fried, who has used them most notably in his studies of contemporary photography and of the paintings of Edouard Manet. See Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); and *Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁸⁸ As early as 1962, Pierre Descargues took note of this compositional oddity, describing *Clic Clac Kodak, Hourrah!* (Figure 4.38) as “*des dizaines de vieux appareils photographiques, regards ouverts vers le spectateur, bien aligné* (tens of old cameras, eyes open toward the spectator, all in a row).” Descargues, “Arman: Accumulations et colères [1962],” in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 126.

¹⁸⁹ Hahn, “Matériaux et techniques,” 15.

grid-like, frontal arrangements of round, eye- or face-like objects repeat — it is implausible that such compositions were anything but an intentional choice by the artist.

If such examples were not conspicuous enough, Arman provides us with instances where there are actual faces — in the form of dolls' heads or whole bodies — facing out of the vitrine, staring back at the viewer (Figure 4.41 and 4.42). And if the dolls still were not enough to convince the viewer that he was intended to take note of his act of viewing and position as spectator, the accumulations of dolls' eyeballs surely make the point (Figure 4.43).

Taken together — as one may easily do by consulting whole pages of Arman's catalogue raisonné (Figures 4.44-4.46) — the *Accumulations* of eye- and face-surrogates paint a new picture of Arman's chief preoccupations in conceiving a new realist art. Given the frequency of such compositional strategies, we might rethink certain dominant assumptions about Arman's choice of objects. While the inherent poignancy of an item like a gas mask, a pair of eyeglasses or a child's doll cannot be denied, such items come to take on new meaning in the context of the œuvre.

Rather than simply signifying war and violence, the gas masks (Figures 4.47 and 4.48), multiplied, encased, and facing outward, become also more sets of eyes meeting our gaze from behind the vitrine. The eyeglasses (Figures 4.49 and 4.50), conjuring images of the piles of personal affairs confiscated in the Nazi concentration camps, are also metaphors of looking and seeing, their transparency doubling that of the vitrine, alluding to the tradition of the "painting as window" but turning it on its head. That window asks us to look only *at it* and not through it and onto another world — there is nothing to see beyond the surface despite the fact that, thanks to its literal transparency,

we now have that ability. And the dolls (Figure 4.51), an evident elegy to innocence lost in the same wars that produced the necessity for household gas masks, are also human surrogates, a repetition of our own reflection in the glass that separates us from them.

With these works, Arman made clear that he was engaged in the question of perception as it related to the new reality and, by extension, realism. Not just what is our new reality, but what is our relationship to it? How do we come to know it? The answer, it seemed, was that, increasingly, we were coming to know our world through vision above all else — through looking, and looking at the surface: the kind of “myopic grazing” characteristic of the “vernacular glance” later theorized in response to Rauschenberg’s work of the period; or the so-called “matte reading” that Barthes advocated in the literary criticism of the day.

The direction Arman’s *Accumulations* would take over the course of just a few short years affirms his central interest in questions of perception. By 1964, as we have seen, the *Accumulations* were becoming abstract, reflective surfaces — aesthetic arrangements that eschewed the connotative objects that might distract the viewers’ focus from the self-reflective act of perceiving. Instead of eyeglasses and personal cameras, we get ball bearings (Figure 4.52) and cog wheels (Figure 4.53), the “mere surface configurations” discussed above.¹⁹⁰ Arman’s gradual progression to the aestheticized abstractions of the mid-1960s only confirms that whatever interest he had in the objects he accumulated, it was superseded by his interest in the effects produced by his display of them. His *Accumulations* stand as a testament to the preeminence of vision that Arman observed in the new mediatized society. Where others have seen the *Accumulations* as

¹⁹⁰ Recall this critique of Arman’s 1965 solo show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, in Gablik, “Reviews and Previews,” 11.

“direct reflections” of compulsive consumption — the amassing of ever more “stuff” as the market shifted from the artisanal to the disposable — I see them as ruminations on *visual* consumption. In echoing back to the viewer our own act of looking, they assert themselves as studies of perception itself, and invite us to contemplate not only the visual data before us but our limited and limiting relationship to them as *mere spectators*.

Dialectic of “real” and simulacrum

I have aimed to show throughout this chapter that the *idées reçues* concerning the *Accumulations* — that they constitute something like a pure presentation of the unadulterated “real” — collapse upon more focused consideration of the works in their entirety. The tendency in the scholarship has been to address the accumulated objects as though they themselves, and not their mode of arrangement and display, are the entire content of the work. It is just such an approach that allowed Reifenscheid to declare that the *Accumulations* (and the *Poubelles*) “focus on the things themselves, which are concrete and, with almost no glossing over, nothing but themselves.”¹⁹¹ In view of all we have observed of the effects of multiplication and the vitrine, such a reading feels incompatible with the works. Even the most basic premise, that the objects are simply concrete, elicits doubt when we confront the reality that these objects have been contained and restrained behind a glass front that in fact *does* gloss them over, in the most literal sense. As I have argued, the transparent barrier that holds the concrete things in place transforms the whole composition into a sort of screen — a quickly digested, flat surface that reads as a unified whole, and can thus be considered the ontological opposite of the discrete, concrete, self-sufficient objects that Reifenscheid purports to find there.

¹⁹¹ Reifenscheid, “Arman – The Draughtsman,” 159-160.

When Reifenscheid goes on to describe the works' "denial of all personal interference,"¹⁹² it becomes clear that she is seeing not the works *per se* but the discourse on the works, mediated by Restany's perpetually echoed claims about the direct appropriation and presentation of the objects at hand. It is important to understand that Restany's interpretation of Arman's practice was motivated by a broader project on the critic's part. Restany's notion of "direct appropriation" was developed not strictly within an art historical framework, but within a socio-historical one, too. Périer suggests that Restany intended that practice to restore order to the subject-object relationship, which had become inverted as a result of the eruption of consumerism in postwar France. He explains:

En cette fin des années cinquante, les hommes entrent dans une société matérialiste et sont soumis à de frénétiques besoins, à l'hystérie de l'acquisition. Une alienation qui incline sournoisement l'objet à dominer l'homme. Ainsi, le rôle déterminant de l'objet comme matérialité, comme objet de désir et de possession aboutit à une appropriation du sujet par cet objet. Et il ne s'agit pas alors seulement de l'objet concrètement défini, mais aussi du système de conditionnement qu'il génère. La vision de Restany tendrait à ouvrir une brèche dans ce système et à restaurer le pouvoir d'appropriation du sujet sur l'objet.

At the end of the 1950s, mankind enters a materialist society and is subjected to frenetic needs, the hysteria of acquisition. An alienation that in an underhand way leads the object to dominate man. Thus, the determining role of the object as materiality, as object of desire and possession, results in an appropriation of the subject by that object. And it is thus not only about the object concretely defined, but also the system of conditioning that it generates. Restany's vision would tend to open a gap in that system and to restore the power of appropriation of the subject over the object.¹⁹³

Thus, Restany's understanding of appropriation was tied up in a will to defeat the effects of the turn to mass production, including alienation and the loss of self in the "hysteria" of consumerist desire. Arman's artworks, on the other hand, evince an entirely different

¹⁹² Ibid., 160.

¹⁹³ Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 154.

conception of appropriation: one that envelops not only the objects but the whole “system of conditioning,” one that accounts for both the surplus of mass production and the effect of that surplus, including both desire and alienation. Once again, to observe the works outside the parameters defined by Restany is to recognize that the concrete realness of the objects is compromised by the method of their display, and that the non-intervention of the artist is merely a convenient myth.

In 1963, compelled to “de-Restanize” the discourse on his œuvre, Arman invited Jouffroy to write the catalog text for an exhibition of his work at the Galleria Schwarz in Milan. The shift in tenor is significant: in one single essay, Jouffroy reroutes the discourse away from dogmatic, Nouveau-Réaliste claims of direct presentation and toward a more nuanced consideration of the form, effects, and implications of Arman’s work. “*Regarder un tableau d’Arman,*” Jouffroy wrote, “*c’est faire face à l’aveuglante réalité, buter contre quelque chose de saisissable et d’évident, qui dissimule l’insaisissable et le surprenant. Encore faut-il savoir regarder le monde et cela n’est pas donné à tous les regardeurs* (To look at an Arman tableau is to face blinding reality, to trip over something seizable and evident, that dissimulates the unseizable and the surprising. One must still know how to look at the world and that is not a given for all viewers).”¹⁹⁴ In the same sentence, Jouffroy refers to the *Accumulations* as *tableaux* and as reality — that is, as representation and presentation, as simulacrum and “real.” Jouffroy’s ambivalence in the face of the *Accumulations* can be seen as a consequence of the intentional ambivalence that Arman has built into the works. They *are* both surface and substance, image and object. Jouffroy’s inability to separate the two is symptomatic

¹⁹⁴ Jouffroy, “Arman [1963],” 266.

of what is felt to be at work in society at large. Even as he seeks to extol the reality of the *Accumulations*, Jouffroy cannot but refer to them as *tableaux*; it is as if his amazement is directed not at their “realness” *tout court* but at their “realness” *in spite of* their status as surface.

Jouffroy seems to come to grips with this duality later in the same essay when he declares that whatever the object in an *Accumulation*, “*il n’est jamais, chez Arman, ce qu’il est quand nous le rencontrons sur une table, dans un tiroir ou dans un placard. . . . [L]a situation que l’artiste lui a imposée nous empêche de le saisir comme nous le faisons tous les jours: il s’éloigne, il passe de l’autre côté d’un fleuve, et, pour un peu, deviendrait un inaccessible exemple* (it is never, in Arman’s work, what it is when we encounter it on a table, in a drawer or in a cupboard. . . . [T]he situation that the artist has imposed on it prohibits us from seizing it like we do every day: it distances itself, it passes to the other side of a river, and, for a bit, becomes an inaccessible example.”¹⁹⁵ Although Jouffroy does not identify the vitrine or the principle of multiplication as the operator of this distancing, he does recognize the phenomenon in effect. It is what Debord would later describe as the spectacle at work: “*La réalité considérée partiellement se déploie dans sa propre unité générale en tant que pseudo-monde à part, objet de la seule contemplation* (Reality considered *partially* unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world *apart*, an object of mere contemplation).”¹⁹⁶ Along the same lines, Jouffroy concludes with a nod to the paradox of Arman’s works: these shallow cases, hung at eye level, that would seem to bring things directly into relation with us, in fact dissociate them: “*Étrange réalisme . . . qui consiste à éloigner le spectateur de la*

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Emphasis original. Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 15.

réalité, alors qu'en apparence tout est ordonné et composé de manière à l'en rapprocher (Strange realism . . . that consists in distancing the viewer from reality, while in appearance everything is ordered and composed in such a way as to bring her closer to it).”¹⁹⁷

Jouffroy’s observation that the very things that seem so proximate in fact remain most evasive, echoes in an important way the contemporary debates about the very nature of “the real,” discussed in Chapter Two, as theorists clamored to account for consumerism’s effect on human experience. In 1957, Barthes observed the ways in which advertising and media imagery were transforming lived experience into a purely visual activity. Taking as example the advertisements for ornamental cookery in the popular magazine *Elle*, Barthes described the way the photographs “never show the dishes except from a high angle, as objects at once near and inaccessible, whose consumption can perfectly well be accomplished simply by looking.”¹⁹⁸ Such observations aligned with Debord’s assertion that the “real” world was itself changing into simple images and simple images were becoming “real” beings. Under these conditions, “the real” could no longer be directly grasped, he argued — it could only be contemplated as image, and thus the spectacle “*trouve normalement dans la vue le sens humain privilégié* (naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense).”¹⁹⁹ The world was offered only to the eye.

I do not mean to suggest that Arman was sympathetic to Debord’s anti-capitalist stance, nor that he was engaging directly with the Situationist notion of spectacle. Rather, I wish simply to call attention to the centrality of the questions of “real” and simulacrum

¹⁹⁷ Jouffroy, “Arman [1963],” 266.

¹⁹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 79.

¹⁹⁹ Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 23.

in France at this moment, and to propose that Arman's realist project highlights the problem of whether such a thing as an unmediated experience of "the real" was even possible. For I believe that the perceived threat of the world not literally *becoming* image but being *experienced* as image was a driving force behind the call for a "new realism" in art — a realism that would abandon image, depiction, representation, or simulacrum altogether.²⁰⁰ In his *Accumulations*, then, Arman was not simply reflecting the sociological fact of the profusion of manufactured goods and their attendant media images, as many have claimed, but was instead exploring the means by which to present that reality in or as a work of art. The fact that his *Accumulations* present "real" objects for the eye only — since they are encased in transparent vitrines that allow only visual access — is both an indication of the shortcomings of the notion of "direct" presentation, and a manifestation of the object-image dialectic that Debord, Barthes, Baudrillard and others recognized in society.

Arman demonstrated a consciousness, if not a critique, of spectacle when he explained,

Le Nouveau Réalisme a rassemblé des artistes qui ont perçu avant les autres les problèmes posés par les rapports avec l'objet, l'objet produit, mécanique, rejeté, la production de masse, les affiches. Ils ont essayé de comprendre la civilisation dans ce qu'elle a de matériel, le programme de l'envahissement des slogans, de la publicité, de la machine, des supermarchés, le monde urbain et l'objet manufacturé.

Nouveau Réalisme brought together artists who perceived *before others* the problems posed by our relationship with the object, the produced, mechanical, rejected object, mass production, posters. They tried to understand civilization in

²⁰⁰ Malone points to a pertinent claim by Theodor Adorno: noting that society had become the domain of appearance, Adorno argued that in such conditions art and society could no longer be complementary; the work of art had to resist such a debased reality. Malone, "Nouveau Réalisme," 6. See also Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

its material, the program of the invasion of slogans, of publicity, of the machine, of supermarkets, the urban world and the manufactured object.²⁰¹

The reification signaled by the Situationists reached its apogee in this period during which, as Edward Ball describes it, "the image [is] severed from all reference. . . . The material fact of a product is superseded by its ability to signify."²⁰² Debord's dictum that "*Le spectacle est le capital à un tel degré d'accumulation qu'il devient image* (Spectacle is *capital* accumulated to such a degree that it becomes image),"²⁰³ reinforces the notion that the tangible, physical "real" is subordinate to its own image — the image that it "projects" — because in a mediatized world, it is in the image that signification happens. In light of Debord's observation about where meaning and indeed "the real" lie, Arman's *Accumulations* appear illustrative of a certain sociological phenomenon — not simply that of the proliferation of consumer goods, but that of their *Versachlichung*: their abstraction from substance to sign/idea.²⁰⁴ When Arman claims to select objects not simply on the basis of their object qualities, but rather on their "expressive possibilities," that is, their ability to express or signify certain ideas, feelings, or connotations, he essentially submits to this Debordian worldview, accepting that the signifying potential of an object trumps its inherent physical properties.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Emphasis original. Arman, quoted in Moulin, "De l'objet à l'œuvre," 30.

²⁰² Ball, "The Great Sideshow," 28.

²⁰³ Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 32.

²⁰⁴ Ball explains that while the notion of reification is related to Hegel's *Verdinglichung* (turning into a concrete thing or object), Marx's version of it, from which the Situationists drew their understanding, was inverted as *Versachlichung*, or thingification: turning into an abstract thing or matter. See Ball, "The Great Sideshow," 26.

²⁰⁵ On this topic, Henry Martin argues, "Arman is not so much in love with objects as he is obsessed by the way in which they both retain their 'objectness' and yet become things that are intimate and human — by the way in which the object becomes the expression of a need, the solidification of a hope, a desire, or a dream." Martin, *Arman*, 35.

Even Restany conflated the material nature and image nature of the

Accumulations. He wrote that through a quantitative approach,

Arman transcends the banality of the object — garbage; refuse; the product that is worn, burnt, smashed, or sliced up; sometimes even a brand new article — and through this object, rises above the commonplace itself — the wasteland, the flea market, the violin-maker's workshop, the hardware store, the automobile factory, the fire, the accident. . . . He is only seeking to attain an aspect of the real in its expressive fullness by seizing it in the instant and by thrusting it out of its own time frame.²⁰⁶

Once again, Restany emphasizes the reality contained within these works, and attributes

that “realness” and fullness to the gesture of “primary, direct appropriation,” which he

describes as immediate, so as to emphasize the rawness of the objects and consequently

imply a lack of intellectual or artistic intervention. But in the next sentence, Restany

praises the simplicity of Arman's artistic gesture as the reason his works are “a constant

source of poetic and original images that spring from the most banal reality of

obsolescence.”²⁰⁷ Here, even Restany, the champion of Arman's unadulterated

presentation of “the real,” acknowledged the imagistic qualities of the *Accumulations*.

The simplicity of Arman's accumulative gesture allows the objects to transcend their own

reality and identity to become part of an image, “poetic and original,” as they are

subsumed within their participation in a surface arrangement of color and form. Restany

wrote that through Arman's technique of unifying objects in multiplicity, he achieved “a

virtually infinite series of possible images created by a direct process of repetition.”²⁰⁸

Again, Restany acknowledges that despite the immediate appropriation and direct

²⁰⁶ Restany, “Arman: A Radical Portrait,” 37.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

presentation of “real” things, Arman’s works end up resulting in images, by virtue of the repetition of those “real” things and, I would add, their encasement in a unifying vitrine.

William Rubin described the more successful *Accumulations* as those that manage to oscillate between those two modes, the poetic and the plastic: where the objects achieve an abstract pictorial aesthetic in their accretion and yet still retain their identity as specific objects with concordant literary or associative value. In Rubin’s model, the vitrine itself becomes crucial: with it, the pictorial address of three-dimensional objects is possible even when the whole case is detached from the wall and offered in the round, as in *Le Village des damnés* of 1962 (Figure 4.54). Where the *Accumulations* fail for Rubin is when they tip too completely into the domain of sculpture. The inclusion of the pedestal is permissible in a work like *Le Village des damnés* because the vitrine still does the work of compressing the objects into a neat image or series of images; but when the vitrine itself is omitted, as in *Untitled* of 1962 (Figure 4.55), the works become “*écrasées sous le poids de leur réalité tactile* (crushed under the weight of their tactile reality).”²⁰⁹ For Rubin, those types of *Accumulations* are unsuccessful because they are too *tactilely* “real”; to work as artworks, the *Accumulations* need the flatness of the vitrine, alone capable of transforming everyday objects into object-images. For only the object-image — that paradoxical simultaneity of the “real” things and their representation, the perfect balance between “*les composantes poétiques et plastiques* (the poetic and plastic components)” — can achieve “*justesse absolue* (absolute correctness).”²¹⁰ That *justesse*

²⁰⁹ Rubin, “Comment situer Arman?,” 26.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 25. Martin adds that the essence of the *Accumulations* is their simultaneous destruction and preservation of objects. They destroy objects in denying their use value and prohibiting their future use, and at the same time they preserve objects by putting them in sealed boxes, transforming them into artworks that are then handled with the utmost care. Martin, *Arman*, 35.

is found in the object-image precisely because of the latter's aptness as realism at this moment.

The fact that the *Accumulations* could be — and long have been — understood as simple, straightforward presentations of concrete, autonomous objects, is a testament to the force of the dialectic they enact. Perhaps one sees these objects as “real” because in a mediatized world, a glossed-over, flattened image of a thing is experienced as “real.” This is a phenomenon of which Arman was keenly aware, and his turn to the object as an art material can be seen as a reflection of his interest in the status of the object in an image-saturated society. He was equally concerned with the transformation of the object from one hundred years prior, when everything had been made by hand, to the postwar era, when everything was mass-produced.²¹¹ He observed that in the past, “because they were created by hand, [objects] got part of the individuality of the people who created them.” But now, with the turn to mass production, “the object lost its individuality. When you made thousands of coca-cola [*sic*] bottles, the prototype is a bottle, the other ones are just part of the production.”²¹² Here Arman is articulating (without naming) the concept

²¹¹ Jill Carrick points out that there were legislative measures at the time to reduce the number of objects in display windows. This kind of political attention to the issue of product proliferation speaks to the anxiety felt by those who saw their daily life being overtaken by objects. The law was intended to promote quality as a sort of antidote to the overwhelming quantity. What Arman gives us, then, is the illness rather than the cure: he gives us the overly abundant display, the surplus of objects that testifies to the imminent obsolescence and easy replaceability of each. See Carrick, “Le Nouveau Réalisme,” 179.

²¹² “Oral History Interview.” Michel Thomas made a similar observation; citing Arman’s famous proclamation that a thousand eye-droppers are more eye-dropper than a single eye-dropper, Thomas implored, “*Il faut donc forcer le réel manufacturé à dire plus, parce que l’accumulation donne à voir une certaine absurdité quotidienne: celle de la fabrication à la chaîne et la perte d’identité* (It is thus necessary to force the manufactured real to say more, because accumulation shows a certain quotidian absurdity: that of assembly-line fabrication and the loss of identity).” There are two important claims here: first, the implication by the use of the term “force” that the artist must have not only a role in the creation of the work, but an aggressive or a controlling one — quite far from the passive and acquiescing role envisioned by Restany. Second, the loss of identity that Thomas observes refers to both the loss of individual specificity among objects, which are no longer uniquely hand-crafted, and the loss of personal identity among consumers, who become essentially identical to each other as they acquire the same products as everyone around them. Thomas, “Nostalgie,” 11.

of simulacrum: only the prototype of that mass-produced bottle is “real”; all the others are simulacra — representations that imitate “the real.” If this is how Arman perceives manufactured objects, which make up the entire contents of his *Accumulations*, then it follows that what he is collecting and presenting in the *Accumulations* is not the “real” but the simulacrum. And *this*, Arman implicitly claims, is realism. It is as though he is declaring through these works that simulacrum is the best representation of today’s world — an image-world, where simulacra have come to replace “real” things.²¹³

Sarah Wilson has argued that the rise of Pop art brought with it the fulfillment of Michel Foucault’s prediction that “A day will come when, by means of similitude relayed indefinitely, the image itself along with the name that it bears will lose its identity.”²¹⁴ Foucault’s invocation of “Campbell, Campbell, Campbell” at the end of the text speaks to the exemplarity of Warhol’s “industrialized simulacra”²¹⁵ — but I would argue that Arman’s achievement of that same loss of identity, but with actual objects rather than their representation, makes his revelation of the debit all the more compelling. Objects themselves become images that in turn lose their meaning.

²¹³ Lamarche-Vadel understands the importance of Arman’s *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* as a negotiation of the very nature of the œuvre. Although he sees both series as “*consacré mais exclusivement à en révéler le caractère épidémique et mortel [de la société de consommation]* (dedicated exclusively to laying bare the contagious and deathly nature [of consumer society]),” he also understands those works as part of Arman’s project of coming to grips with “*le statut global de l’œuvre d’art dans sa visibilité, dans son essence rétinienne* (the general status of the work of art in its visibility, in its retinal quality).” Lamarche-Vadel, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 12.

²¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* [1968], trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 54. Quoted in Sarah Wilson, “From Barthes to Baudrillard: art history, criticism and the ‘philosophes’ in France,” in *Art Criticism Since 1900*, ed. Gee, 225.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter Five: The Event

Action-spectacle

A key practice among the Nouveaux Réalistes was what they called *actions-spectacles*, a range of performative, often interactive events staged by the artists before a public, sometimes within the space of a gallery but often outside.¹ The two Festivals of Nouveau Réalisme that Restany organized in 1961 and 1963 included a variety of such events, which contributed to the “mock-revolutionary”² and “festival” atmosphere of what would otherwise have been fairly standard group exhibitions.³ *Actions-spectacles* such as Jean Tinguely’s *Hommage à New York*,⁴ Niki de Saint-Phalle’s *Tirs*,⁵ and Daniel Spoerri’s *Restaurant de la galerie J*,⁶ adhered to a certain linear narrative, where actions or gestures were carried out in a given space and time, and resulted in concrete works of art. But there were other forms of *actions-spectacles*, too — other types of events that came to define the tactics of the Nouveaux Réalistes. Yves Klein set the standard for the exhibition as event, the gallery show as spectacle, with his 1958 *succès de scandale* at the

¹ For a full analysis of the *actions-spectacles*, see Malone, “Nouveau Réalisme.”

² Rosemary O’Neill saw the 1961 “performance event,” held on the eve of Bastille Day, as evoking “a mock-revolutionary turn away from the École de Paris and painting as a vehicle of expression.” Rosemary O’Neill, “À propos de Nice: Mapping a Regional/International Phenomenon for a National Stage,” *Artlas Bulletin* II, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 38.

³ The *Premier Festival du Nouveau Réalisme* was held in Nice from July 23 to September 13, 1961, at the Galerie Muratore and Jean Larcade’s property, l’Abbaye de Roseland. The *Deuxième Festival du Nouveau Réalisme* took place at the Neue Galerie im Kunstler Haus in Munich in February of 1963 and marked the official end of the group’s collective activity.

⁴ *Hommage à New York* was a monumental, kinetic and cacophonous machine, made of found objects, which Tinguely designed to self-destruct. He “exhibited” it in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art on March 18, 1960, before a large audience.

⁵ Saint-Phalle’s *Tirs*, or “shooting paintings,” were assemblages of objects, interspersed with pockets or cans of paint, and coated in white plaster, which the artist as well as guests or audience members were invited to shoot with a rifle, causing the paint to trickle down over the white plaster, making the pictures “bleed.”

⁶ Held during Spoerri’s solo exhibition at the Galerie J in 1963, Spoerri’s *Restaurant* was an invitation-only meal served in the gallery each night for the first eleven days of the show. On the twelfth night, the remnants of each meal were displayed as *tableaux-pièges*.

Galerie Iris Clert, *Le Vide*.⁷ For that show, Klein emptied and whitewashed the entire gallery, and then purportedly imbued the space with his “*sensibilité picturale*.”⁸ The vernissage involved two Republican guards in full regalia, a large blue drapery across the gallery’s entrance, and a specially mixed blue cocktail.⁹ But it was not just the opening that was a spectacle; the entire exhibition, devoid of actual art objects to contemplate, could be described only as an event to be experienced.

Capitalizing on the notion of exhibition as event, Arman proposed to Clert in 1958 another spectacular exhibition that would serve as the theoretical antithesis to Klein’s empty gallery. Rather than stripping the space down to its bare white walls, Arman would fill it, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, with a suffocating quantity of stuff: *Le Plein* in answer to *Le Vide*, fullness in place of the void. Clert, wary of packing her gallery with garbage, refused the exhibition; it would take until 1960 for her to change her mind and agree to host it. In the intervening years, Arman would develop not

⁷ The full title of the exhibition was *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l’état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée*. Klein had in fact put on several similarly spectacular shows prior to 1958, but *Le Vide* was the most impactful — both for the public and for fellow artists — in reshaping the notion of the exhibition as event. Klein’s January 1957 exhibition *Proposte monocrome, epoca blu* at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan, comprised a single room filled entirely with nearly-identical monochrome blue paintings that were displayed on rods standing 20 centimeters from the wall to create a sense of limitlessness and immersiveness. In May of the same year, Klein held two more exhibitions of *Propositions monochromes* at both Iris Clert and Collette Allendy in Paris. At Clert’s gallery, the vernissage of the exhibition was marked by the release of 1001 blue balloons into the skies of Paris, thus establishing his practice of enhancing the exhibition with promotional events related to its opening. At Allendy’s gallery, in addition to showing more of his pictures, Klein also left one room entirely empty, a portent of *Le Vide* to come the following year.

⁸ Klein, “Le dépassement,” 84. Thomas McEvelley describes the preparatory phases of the exhibition: “[after painting the walls white] to return the gallery space . . . to the state of Prime Matter, [he then] projected mental images onto the transparent space, creating immaterial paintings that were ‘stabilized’ in mid-air by prolonged concentration. Meanwhile his own presence filled the space with “an abstract but real palpable density existing and living in the space by and for itself.” McEvelley, “Yves Klein: Messenger of the Age of Space,” *Artforum* 20, no. 5 (1982): 45.

⁹ The planned lighting of the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde with lights in Klein’s patented color, International Klein Blue (IKB), although previously approved and even rehearsed, was canceled by the Prefect of the Seine at the last minute.

only the *Accumulations* but also the *Poubelles*, the works which follow in concept and anticipate in form *Le Plein*, which would finally be mounted in October of 1960.

The *Poubelles* — literally, trash cans — were modest vitrines filled with what appeared to be the unfiltered contents of household or neighborhood waste bins. And *Le Plein* would be in essence a *Poubelle* on an architectural scale. Considering the chronology, one must question what implications that exhibition might have had for the development of Arman's œuvre had Clert accepted the proposition in 1958. Instead, we are given the reverse chronology: the idea for the architecturally-scaled *Poubelle* came first, but the pictorially-scaled iterations were the earliest to be executed. *Le Plein*, when it was finally realized in late 1960, was thus understood as an expansion of the *Poubelles*, and not the other way around. It is germane to consider how we might have understood this exhibition if the small-scale *Poubelles* had not already existed, or, by the same token, how we might have understood the small-scale *Poubelles* if they had come after *Le Plein*.

I surmise that without the *Poubelles* appearing first, *Le Plein* would have stood more firmly as pure event — pure spectacle — without the artistic credibility that the *Poubelles* afforded it. Likewise, if the *Poubelles* had come after *Le Plein*, they might have been seen as micro-versions of that spectacle — something akin to small-scale souvenirs of the event rather than autonomous artworks in their own right. Instead, despite the antecedence of the *idea* of *Le Plein*, the exhibition was brought to fruition only after Arman had conceived and developed the *Poubelles*. The problems he addressed in that series — problems of contents, technique, and format — necessarily informed his eventual execution of *Le Plein*. It is therefore essential to study the

Poubelles as predecessors to *Le Plein*, in order to understand the expanded and evolved stakes of that exhibition-event.

In this chapter, therefore, I will first introduce the *Poubelles* and explore their implications for Arman's realist project. I will then address *Le Plein*, which, I argue, affirms the claims I have made throughout this dissertation about Arman's understanding of the relationships between "the real," realism, and representation. I contend that the shift in scale from the small, pictorial *Poubelles* to the architectural *Plein* had consequences beyond the simple inclusion of more and larger objects. That shift represents the transformation of the artwork from object to event; and the nature of that event — as *realist* event — speaks to Arman's understanding of the experience of reality itself.

Poubelles

There are two competing origin myths to the *Poubelles*, one maintained by Arman and the other by Restany. According to Restany's account, Arman made the first *Poubelle* on December 17, 1959. The artist was in Paris, living at the time with his wife's parents in the quartier des Halles, and he and Restany had set out that day to explore the neighborhood garbage. Restany, in typical fashion, takes credit in large part for this effort, claiming that it was he who suggested that waste bins would be the perfect place to develop the practice of accumulation by making that appropriative gesture "*à la fois plus absolu et plus spectaculaire* (at once more absolute and more spectacular)" by introducing the element of chance.¹⁰ Of course, such an anecdote contradicts the

¹⁰ Restany wrote, "*Pour rendre ce geste [de l'appropriation directe de l'objet] à la fois plus absolu et plus spectaculaire, je lui suggérai la poubelle comme le lieu le plus propice à la réalisation de l'appropriation aléatoire* (To make this gesture [of direct appropriation of the object] more absolute and more spectacular, I

chronology of Arman having conceived *Le Plein* a year prior — an exhibition that already proposed the collection and display of heterogeneous neighborhood garbage.

By Arman's account, he had made the first *Poubelle* not with Restany but on his own, some time in 1959, presumably before December 17. For that first exemplar, Arman recounts, he had carefully selected and arranged refuse inside a vitrine; he then showed it to Restany, who, as he had with the *Cachets*, found merit in the idea but suggested a different execution. Conveying his disapproval of the end result, the critic declared, "*Il y a peut-être quelque chose, mais ce n'est pas ça. Autant les Accumulations, c'est bien. Mais là, c'est arrangé. . . . Tu as fait des compositions. . . . Tu n'en es pas encore là* (There is perhaps something there, but this is not it. As *Accumulations*, it's fine. But here, it's arranged. . . . You have made compositions. . . . You are not there yet)."¹¹ Restany's rejection of "compositions" — of the too-apparent intervention of the artist's hand and will — is consistent with his criticisms of Arman's prior work, and of his attitude toward realist artwork in general. In a move in step with his conception of the new realism as necessarily unmediated, Restany suggested that Arman should dump the garbage — that is, the whole contents of the waste bin — directly into the boxes, and cease assembling the objects in any intentional way.¹²

When Arman returned with a new *Poubelle*, this one lacking any organization of its contents, Restany praised the principles of global acceptance — of not having

suggested the trash can as the most suitable place for the realization of random appropriation)." In Renaud Bouchet, "Dialogue épistolaire avec Pierre Restany autour des 'poubelles' d'Arman," *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne* 96 (June 2006): 89.

¹¹ Périer further recounts, based on interviews with Arman, that Restany had found the work too stylized, too elegant, and had shouted at the artist, "*Mais non Arman, tu as fait du Schwitters en trois dimensions. C'est trop décoratif. La poubelle ce n'est pas ça!* (But no, Arman, you have made a three-dimensional Schwitters. It's too decorative. That is not a *Poubelle!*)" Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 140.

¹² *Ibid.*

removed any items from the garbage as it was found — and of direct transfer. The critic was pleased, according to Périet, “*parce que avec ce geste radical, l’artiste renforce la théorie qu’il élabore, lui, depuis des mois* (because with this radical gesture, the artist reinforced the theory that he [Restany] had been elaborating for months).”¹³ Arman went on to create a few *Poubelles* in that manner over the next several years, but the inclusion of organic matter inevitably destroyed them, as mold and fungus turned the whole vitrine black. For that reason, the majority of the *Poubelles* that he made, and nearly all that survive, were constructed from pre-selected and organized items. Of course, in maintaining control over the compositions in this way, Arman was able to arrange the contents so as to create the illusion of an unfiltered fragment of “the real,” to imply that the work had been made by a gesture of immediate and unfiltered *déversement*. But the fact that they were indeed assembled intentionally to create the illusion of global acceptance and direct transfer, places the *Poubelles* in the category of representations: these vitrines *depict* household garbage — and by extension, all the sociological data therein.

Petits déchets bourgeois (Figure 5.1) is considered the first official *Poubelle*;¹⁴ assembled in 1959, it established immediately the typical characteristics of the series, which Arman would continue to pursue with little variation over the next five years in

¹³ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴ According to Restany, this was the *Poubelle* that was created on his and Arman’s initial foray into garbage collecting in the Halles on December 17, 1959. The catalogue raisonné describes it as “*Première poubelle de Arman* (Arman’s first *Poubelle*).” Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 180. There is no mention in the catalogue raisonné of any prior *Poubelles*, though it is possible, given Arman’s description of their putrefaction, that they simply did not survive long enough to be exhibited in Arman’s first show of the *Poubelles* in 1960, let alone to be accounted for by Durand-Ruel, who published the catalogue raisonné in 1991.

Paris.¹⁵ A transparent box, roughly the height of a small household waste bin but significantly shallower (on average, about 60 by 40 by 10 centimeters), holds an array of worn and used items, evidently unrelated save for their status as discards; the whole case is mounted on the wall, in the same format as the *Accumulations* and, significantly, as a conventional painting.

In *Petits déchets bourgeois*, castoff containers of food products and home goods (a tea canister, a cheese wheel, craft glue, light bulbs) press up against the frontal pane, their striking, graphic packaging on full display. Wedged between and among them and piled on top are scraps of crumpled paper and twine, bits of eggshell, some foil, a cork, a toothbrush, a shirt, an empty box, and countless fragments of unnameable things. There is no hierarchy or order; there is simply content, dispersed evenly behind a transparent surface, splayed out for our contemplation. Here, an analogy with the *Cachets* emerges: the even saturation of the whole surface from edge to edge; the formal balance of color and density; the all-over composition that, despite lacking a *Gestalt*, subsumes the individual parts into a larger impression of both excess and containment.

The *Accumulations*, too, bear an important relationship to this second series of object-based works, developed nearly in tandem. Crucially, the repetition Arman practiced in the *Accumulations*, that strategic amassing of like things in uncountable quantities, has here given way to heterogeneity; where the *Accumulations* exacted the dissolution of identifiable objects in an impenetrable mass of sameness, the *Poubelles* deploy *difference* as the means of destabilizing familiar things. If the *Accumulations*

¹⁵ Once Arman moved to New York, the *Poubelles* underwent more significant changes both formally and materially. In that new environment, Arman found himself surrounded by the overwhelming spectacle of Canal Street, which he described as “*des trottoirs entiers d’accumulations de ready-mades* (entire sidewalks of accumulations of readymades).” Arman, in *Paris-New York*, ed. Hulten, 757.

invited us to grasp the abstracted essence of the thing accrued, then the *Poubelles* have an altogether more global project. They invite us to contemplate not a single species of objects, but rather objectness as a whole, as a category — objectness as such. For, as Henry Martin put it, “trash by definition contains anything and everything. If there is something that approaches the state of being *the* object and not *an* object, it is trash — simply by virtue of its being nothing, by virtue of its being so thoroughly undiscriminated.”¹⁶

Given the nature of trash and the status of the object within, Francblin has questioned whether the *Poubelles* really fit the Restanian narrative of "*l'aventure de l'objet*," since the very objects contained in them are in the process of decomposing: "*Peut-on, par conséquent, regarder une Poubelle comme une œuvre exaltant l'objet? Des paquets de cigarettes, des chiffons, des emballages cabossés qui s'écrasent les uns contre les autres; des objets qui ont achevé leur vie, qui ont perdu leur forme, qui sont à peine identifiables sont-ils encore des objets* (Can one, consequently, look at a *Poubelle* as a work that exalts the object? Cigarette packs, rags, dented packages that crush against each other; are objects that have finished their life, that have lost their form, that are barely identifiable, still objects)?"¹⁷ To answer that question, Francblin goes through the exercise of defining the word "object." She suggests that the broadest definition given by

¹⁶ Martin, *Arman*, 25.

¹⁷ Francblin, "Arman," 10. Hahn, too, saw Arman not as glorifying objects but as attacking them: "*Dans ce groupe [de Nouveaux Réalistes], Arman est celui qui s'attaqua à l'objet avec le plus de franchise et de puissance* (In this group [of Nouveaux Réalistes], Arman is the one who attacked the object with the most frankness and power)." Hahn, *Arman*, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 16. Likewise, Jouffroy described Arman's entire œuvre as *un traité de destruction systématique du réel* (a treatise of systematic destruction of the real) — the dismantling of the object rather than its apotheosis. Jouffroy, "Pour une révolution," 206.

the dictionary — that an object is any concrete thing perceptible by vision or touch¹⁸ — must be eliminated, because by that definition a canvas is an object, a block of marble is an object, and thus all painters and sculptors are "object artists." But the second definition offered by Larousse — that an object is any solid thing, considered as a whole, made by man and destined for a particular use¹⁹ — does not quite fit the *Poubelles*, either, for the shattered dishes, broken egg shells, and ripped and crumpled newspapers that make up those works are neither solid nor whole. Nevermind their obvious inutility, brought on by both their fragmented status and their containment in an unrelenting mass and behind a Plexiglas barrier.

The problem of the status of the object in the *Poubelles* is thus related to (though distinct from) that of the *Accumulations*: These works made of objects, which Restany claims are meant to exalt those objects, in fact challenge the very concept of the object. As I have shown, the object-quality of the objects in the *Accumulations* is compromised by their quantity and display; in the *Poubelles*, the object-quality is already diminished by the degraded status of the objects as *waste*; the display only compounds their de-objectification.

De-composition and the myth of *déversement*

It is no surprise, given the *Poubelles*' affinity to the *Accumulations*, that many of the same questions that have governed the critical response to the latter works recur in the scholarship on the *Poubelles*. Restany's narrative of direct, objective, anti-authorial

¹⁸ "Objet: *du latin objectum; chose placée devant . . . toute chose concrète perceptible par la vue ou le toucher.*" Larousse, quoted in Francblin, "Arman," 10.

¹⁹ "Objet: *chose solide considérée comme un tout, fabriquée par l'homme et destinée à un certain usage.*" Ibid.

realism loomed ever larger over the new series as the arrangement of objects in Arman's transparent vitrines tended toward the uncomposed, the random, the "natural." The vaguely grid-like structure of the *Accumulations*, suggestive of a certain intended order and the intervention of the artist's will on an otherwise impersonal form, becomes in the *Poubelles* what I want to call a willed disorder.

Although the first impression of the *Poubelles* is one of the uncontrolled and aleatory, this impression is based on the assumption, encouraged by the format of the works, that these compositions were made by simply overturning the contents of a waste bin into the Plexiglas case. Restany's mythologization of Arman's practice serves to reinforce this fiction, as do statements by the artist in which he attempted to distance himself from any implication that he had intervened in the composition of the *Poubelles*. Positioning himself as a mere witness to the artwork's self-creation, he averred, "*J'ai toujours prétendu que les objets s'auto-composaient eux-mêmes. Ma composition consistait à les laisser se composer eux-même* (I have always maintained that the objects auto-composed themselves. My composition consisted in letting them compose themselves)."²⁰ As with the *Accumulations*, Arman attributed agency to the objects as a means of buttressing the objectivity of his realism.

In his writing, Arman emphasized his efforts at anti-composition as part of his rejection of abstract painting:

In the search for a new creation, a pursuit made necessary by the insolvency and the weariness of hedonist and gestural painters, I have, in a conscious manner, explored my own local district (in Paris) for rubbish, waste and scrapped manufactured goods; in a word, everything that is non-utilized. I affirm that the very expression of this rubbish and these objects has a distinctive worth of its

²⁰ Arman, in Abadie and d'Elme, "L'objet-roi," 74.

own, without any attempt, on my part, at aesthetic arrangements that might make them lose their intrinsic value.²¹

Again, he reinforces the notion, shared by Restany, that objects have an inherent object-value that must be left unaltered and allowed to express itself. Arman's refusal of "aesthetic arrangements" is a denial of authorship; that he positions his practice against the eminently authorial mode of gestural painters makes this point all the clearer. The claim that it was the objects doing the work of self-composition, rather than the artist imposing a composition on them, has reverberated in the criticism and scholarship on the *Poubelles* for decades. It should be noted, however, that Arman repeatedly affirmed that he welcomed aestheticism and even courted it in his work; the above statement appears thus to express a need to align with Restany's claims for Nouveau Réalisme, at a moment when Arman was relying on the latter to bolster his career and reputation.

Given the evident objectivity of the "un-composed" *Poubelles*, Restany wrote of those works that they "*concrétisent enfin l'affirmation de la volonté directement appropriative du réel. . . . [C]es cuves pleines de détritrus . . . témoignaient sans ambages de la conversion réaliste d'Arman, de sa recherche déterminée d'un langage immédiatement objectif* (concretize finally the affirmation of the directly appropriative will of the real. . . . [T]hese vessels full of garbage . . . bore witness in no uncertain terms to Arman's realist conversion, of his determined search for an immediately objective language)."²² The "conversion to realism" that Restany cites was of course a supposed conversion to Restany's vision of realism, for as we have seen, Arman had already considered his prior series of *Cachets*, *Allures d'objets* and *Accumulations* as realist on

²¹ Arman, in Alexander Watt, "Paris Letter: Nouveaux Réalistes," *Art in America* 49, no. 2 (1961): 108.

²² Restany, "Arman: un regard," 269-270.

his own terms. What set the *Poubelles* apart for Restany, and made them more realist, was that "immediately objective language" achieved through the deliberate disorganization of the works' contents. And indeed, Arman conceded that the *Poubelles* represented the moment when he best fulfilled the Restanian vision of Nouveau Réalisme. He explained, "for Pierre Restany, I was a very good New Realist when I used the garbage, as an expression. And when I use it like that I just pour the garbage in the container. As I did once."²³ That is, the *Poubelles* met — or at least appeared to meet — Restany's criteria for realism as the direct appropriation and unmediated presentation of "the real," in that objects were extracted from household trash bins and deposited into a transparent vitrine without any effort at aesthetic or schematic arrangement. However, it should not escape notice that Arman acknowledges having directly upended a trash can into a transparent box *only once*, or perhaps only in the past, thereby implying that in all other instances, the transfer of the contents from waste vessel into art vessel was done piecemeal, methodically, intentionally.

Restany steadfastly denied the calculated composition of the *Poubelles*, insisting instead that they were made by a pure and simple gesture of pouring: "*Arman déverse le contenu des poubelles dans des cuves de verre dont il fait des hauts-reliefs* (Arman pours the contents of trash cans into glass containers and makes *hauts-reliefs* of them)."²⁴ For Restany, it is the unequivocal gesture of *déversement* that asserts the realism of those works. It was by that action, for Restany, that Arman "*rétabli[t] ainsi un contact direct*

²³ Arman, in "Oral History Interview."

²⁴ Pierre Restany, "Notre actuelle avant-garde," *Planète* no. 1 (1961): 91. Restany repeated this claim verbatim (though in English) in a 1963 essay for an American audience, in which he wrote, "Arman has abandoned his 'seals' [*Cachets*] [and] his 'charms' [*Allures d'objets*] . . . and now pours the contents of garbage cans or a collection of some specific object (razors, faucets, electric-light bulbs) into glass containers and makes high-reliefs of them." He thus extended the myth of *déversement* to the *Accumulations* as well as the *Poubelles*. Restany, "The New Realism," 104.

avec le réel (reestablishes a direct contact with the real).”²⁵ In these two accounts, in an effort to again trumpet the objectivity and immediacy of Arman’s realism, Restany mischaracterizes both Arman’s process, which was entirely controlled and intentional, and his resulting works, which were the ontological opposite of *haut-reliefs*.²⁶

Restany’s claim as to Arman’s non-intervention went hand-in-hand with his insistence on the artist’s anti-aestheticism as part and parcel of his commitment to the new realism. By purportedly not intervening in the arrangement of the objects, Arman allowed "objective reality" to stand for itself. Asked about the role of “plastic considerations” — that is, aesthetic concerns in the arrangement of the objects and refuse in the *Poubelles* — Restany claimed that such matters, “*outré le phénomène d’appropriation globale . . . constituent pour lui une surprise a posteriori* (other than the phenomenon of global appropriation . . . constitute for him [Arman] an *a posteriori* surprise.”²⁷ He maintained that Arman’s interest lay in the gesture of appropriation of waste more than in the latter’s appearance, and that the plays of color and form that resulted were merely “*une considération rétrospective* (a retrospective consideration).”²⁸ Francblin, echoing Restany in her comparison of the *Poubelles* to the *Accumulations*, asserted that there is in the *Poubelles* “*plus question d’harmonie ou d’esthétique; plus*

²⁵ Restany lists various activities of the Nouveaux Réalistes that make them realists; for instance, “*ils versent le contenu des poubelles dans des cuves de verre hermétiques pour en faire des hauts-reliefs. . . . Ils rétablissent ainsi un contact direct avec le réel* (They dump the contents of trash cans into hermetic glass bins in order to make high-reliefs. . . . They thus reestablish a direct contact with the real).” Restany, “Un Nouveau visage de l’Europe: le Nouveau Réalisme parisien,” undated typescript. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes.

²⁶ Of course, the presence of the delimiting vitrine renders inappropriate the term “relief” in any discussion of Arman’s *Accumulations* or *Poubelles*. Donald Judd pointed out this disjunction himself, describing an Arman composition as “an ostensibly over-all box — it is not a relief, being pictured behind glass.” Judd, “Arman,” 106.

²⁷ Restany, in Bouchet, “Dialogue épistolaire,” 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

question de choisir et d'agencer les déchets[.] . . . détritius de toutes sortes sont entassés tels quels dans un cube transparent (no longer a question of harmony or aesthetics; no longer a question of choosing and managing the garbage[.] . . . detritus of all kinds are encased as they are in a transparent cube).”²⁹

Yet Arman confessed that the limitations of the *Poubelle* format — where the contents are not fixed or sealed by anything but the vitrine — required that he select only non-organic waste material in order to avoid decay and putrefaction and all the unpleasant visual and olfactory effects they engender. His process must thus be understood as a selective collection, rather than a global acceptance, of discarded items.

Indeed, in a 1961 photograph of Arman at work in his studio (Figure 5.2), we see the artist bent over the vitrine that is to become *Poubelle des Halles* (Figure 5.3). The Plexiglas case lies flat on the ground, its front pane removed, surrounded by a variety of small objects destined to fill it — a scrap of polka-dotted fabric, a cigarette carton, straw, scrap paper. Arman hovers above, his hands poised for the delicate work of placing those items just so — with the precise amount of disorder to create the illusion of direct *déversement*, but just enough balance of color and form to provide visual interest across the densely packed surface. That balance is evident in the final work, where textures and colors are dispersed rhythmically from edge to edge, so that bits of red punctuate the composition and are complemented by spots of blue, and various elements work to counterbalance the stalks of straw that would otherwise dominate the composition: their verticality is matched by the horizontality of the cardboard; their stiffness and opacity is

²⁹ Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 89.

balanced by the pliability and transparency of the clear plastic; their roughness is offset by the softness of that printed blue fabric.

Despite such evidence of intentional composition, Restany's interpretation of the *Poubelles* as virtually authorless dominates the criticism and scholarship on those works. Echoing Restany's discourse of *déversement*, Bruce Altshuler referred to the *Poubelles* as "heaps of trash dumped into glass vitrines,"³⁰ and Herta Wescher, describing the process of the *Poubelles*, inferred, "Arman poured into his boxes the entire contents of a garbage can," thus denying the artist's role of selection or arrangement.³¹ She added that although Arman had always been committed to non-intervention, it was in the "haphazard method" of the *Poubelles* that he achieved his greatest work: "Arman discovered his true material in the garbage cans which he emptied into transparent boxes without affecting either the choice or the selection."³²

Critic Jacques Michel supported the notion of authorial distance, describing the *Poubelles* as transparent boxes, impeccably manufactured, containing garbage and refuse that "*s'arrangeaient entre eux pour nous donner l'image mythique et saturante de ce qu'une société riche jette après consommation* (arranged themselves to give us the mythical and saturating image of what a rich society throws away after consumption)."³³ Michel's observation is significant for two reasons: first, he describes the trash as arranging itself, and he emphasizes that process with the added "*entre eux*" — as though the individual pieces of garbage were working together or among themselves to create a

³⁰ Bruce Altshuler, "Pop Triumphant: A New Realism," in *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 197.

³¹ Wescher, "What is new," 30.

³² *Ibid.*, 40.

³³ Jacques Michel, "Arman dans le béton: quand les objets quotidiens changent de nature," *Le Monde*, February 13, 1975, 19.

certain assembled form. Once again, Arman is removed from the equation, his compositions left to the will or whim of objects imbued with agency. No attention is paid to the formal qualities of the works that suggest that, indeed, the artist has asserted his will with respect to the selection and placement of objects. Nor are individual *Poubelles* discussed — only the whole series, *en bloc*, which is a fitting approach for the second of Michel's observations to which I wish to call attention. He draws a key conclusion about what the objects create in arranging themselves: the mythical and saturating *image*. Once more we have a critic who takes note of the “real” objects that serve as the artist's materials and who recognizes a certain absence or distancing of the artist's will or subjectivity, but who then concludes that what the viewer is given is not reality or “the real” *tout court*, but rather an *image* of it. For Michel, in the *Poubelles*, the objects cease to stand for themselves and rather meld together into a singular representation of a sociological phenomenon — that of consumer waste.

***Poubelles* and sociology**

The “sociological” interpretation of the *Poubelles* that Michel touches on — the idea that the works simply reflect back to a consumerist society the realities of its own excessive consumption and consequent waste — remains the most common construal of this series. Umberto Eco, in his most recent essay on Arman, rehearses an argument that he has long made about all of the Nouveaux Réalistes' object-based works, and that he now directs specifically to the *Poubelles*: that “*les objets, dépourvus de toute 'personnalité,' parfois exécrés, détruits, cassés, déformés, devenaient la représentation du déchet bourgeois, de l'accumulation des ordures dans une société industrielle* (the objects, deprived of all ‘personality,’ sometimes abominated, destroyed, broken,

deformed, became the representation of bourgeois waste, of the accumulation of garbage in an industrial society).”³⁴ For Eco, it is a simple one-to-one, synecdochic relationship. The broken, used object in the waste bin stands for the many broken, used objects in the dump — the *Poubelle* as microcosm, a small cross-section of a global phenomenon.

In Eco’s formula, the objects are reduced to signifiers of waste; they become a cohesive representation of a social reality. In the *Poubelles*, “*l’objet n’était pas (comme dans l’ancien réalisme) le signifié mais plutôt le signifiant d’un discours différent* (the object was not (as in the old realism) the *signified* but rather the *signifying* of a different discourse).”³⁵ That is, the items contained in the transparent bins were not themselves the subject of the work; rather, they performed as signs for something else: they became, according to Eco, the representation of bourgeois waste or, as Barbara Rose argues, “*l’emblème des excès de la consommation bourgeoise et du principe de l’obsolescence programmée, qui veut que les objets soient conçus pour tomber en panne afin d’entretenir le cycle de la consommation* (the emblem of the excesses of bourgeois consumption and of the principle of programmed obsolescence, according to which objects are conceived to break down in order to maintain the cycle of consumption).”³⁶

A more nuanced reading of the “microcosmic” structure of the *Poubelles* can be found in Jaimey Hamilton’s studies on the subject. She sees the *Poubelles* as purposeful endeavors to make the viewer aware of “*la monotonie des chaînes de production, les transferts constants de devises, le caractère impulsif de nos achats et, tout spécialement, nos habitudes de gaspillage* (the monotony of assembly lines, the constant transfers of

³⁴ Eco, “Les objets,” 37.

³⁵ Emphasis original. Ibid.

³⁶ Rose, “Arman à New York,” 41.

currency, the impulsive character of our purchases, and especially our habits of waste)."³⁷ For Hamilton, these works are especially concerned with highlighting the repetitive nature of all of these consumer processes and gestures. But in order to make the argument that "*chaque Poubelle est un témoignage anthropologique étonnant d'une époque et d'un lieu* (each *Poubelle* is an astonishing anthropological testimony of a period and a place)," Hamilton seems obligated to subscribe to the oft repeated, read Restanian, discourse of Arman's non-intervention in his works. Hamilton affirms: "*Le geste d'Arman est audacieux en ce sens qu'il nous présente ces ordures sans les transformer, comme l'aurait fait Kurt Schwitters ou même Robert Rauschenberg* (Arman's gesture is audacious in that he presents to us this garbage without transforming it, as Kurt Schwitters or even Robert Rauschenberg would have)."³⁸

Hamilton's view, like that of so many others, alleges that the entire content and intentionality of the *Poubelles* are strictly anthropological or sociological: that these are not aesthetic or artistic works (like those of Schwitters or Rauschenberg); that the artist merely presents a social reality to the viewer and thus "*nous fait sentir avec acuité les nouveaux rythmes de la vie quotidienne d'après-guerre* (makes us feel acutely the new rhythms of postwar everyday life)."³⁹ For Hamilton, Arman's synecdochic realism is not so much contained in each individual work, in the one-to-one relationship that Eco implies, but is instead a function of the overall repetitive structure of the series. In pursuing series such as the *Poubelles* over an extended period of time, she argues, Arman's œuvre echoes the "*structures répétitives de la culture moderne* (repetitive

³⁷ Hamilton, "Civilisation figée," 58.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

structures of modern culture),”⁴⁰ and that repetition is what distinguishes Arman’s works from the historical avant-gardes of the Dada readymade and the Surrealist found object. She sees the *Poubelles* as metonymic expressions “*du grand flux du capital, de l’énergie, de l’idéologie et de la politique dans une économie mondialisée. Elles captent une partie de ce système et elles en expriment la logique* (of the grand flux of capital, of energy, of ideology and politics in a globalized economy. They capture a part of this system and express its logic).”⁴¹

Restany of course agreed. He maintained that even in the *Poubelles*, where the objects were presented in a maelstrom of debris that made it nearly impossible to identify them individually, it was still the objects that mattered and not the means or form of their display. He wrote,

Ne nous laissons pas abuser par la modestie de certains formats, de ces cuves de verre que quelques poignées suffisent à remplir. Ce n’est pas tant sur le pittoresque ou le caractère imprévu des éléments constitutifs d’une poubelle qu’Arman veut attirer notre attention. C’est l’ordure qu’il traite en soi, dans la plénitude de sa présence sociologique: par cette prise de possession, par le geste-même du choix, il l’a arrachée à la banalité du quotidien, il lui a retiré son auréole péjorative ou honteuse, il l’a située hors de la durée. Cette parcelle du réel extratemporalisée est douée d’une capacité expressive générale. Peu importe dès lors le format, qui va de la miniature au monument; peu importe aussi la diversité des apparences, depuis le cendrier du fumeur intoxiqué ou le sac de toilette de la femme du monde jusqu’au tombereau des Halles.

Let us not be fooled by the modesty of certain formats, of these glass vessels that can be filled with a few handfuls. It is not so much to the picturesque or the improvisational character of the constitutive elements of a *Poubelle* that Arman wants to draw our attention. It is the refuse that he treats as itself, in the plenitude of its sociological presence: by that taking possession, by the gesture itself of choice, he has removed it from the banality of the everyday, he has removed its pejorative or shameful halo, he has situated it outside time. That

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Hamilton also sees each of Arman’s series from this period as phases in the lifespan of an object: repetition of objects imitates mass production; encasement and titling refer to presentation and marketing; collection stands for consumer greed; disintegration alludes to waste and planned obsolescence in contemporary culture. Ibid., 59-60.

extratemporalized parcel of the real is endowed with a general expressive capacity. Consequently, the format, which goes from the miniature to the monument, matters little; the diversity of appearance also matters little, from the intoxicated smoker's ash or the socialite's toiletry bag to the cartload from the Halles.⁴²

Restany's insistence that to look at the means of display is to miss the work's meaning has had a lasting influence on our approach to the *Poubelles*. If the transparent case does not matter, and the scale does not matter, and the form and composition do not matter, then all that remains is the abstract sociological data conveyed by the objects that Arman uses as artistic material — as *one* material among many, I might add.

The evident sociological interest of the *Poubelles*, like that of the *Accumulations*, has led many scholars to attempt to identify in those works a particular commentary on the cultural phenomena that they put on display. Eco, for instance, claims that Arman's action in making the *Poubelles* constitutes a “*dénonciation des maux de la société* (denunciation of society's evils).”⁴³ Raymonde Moulin, too, finds in Arman's work an implicit criticism of contemporary society: “*Même s'il ne suffit pas d'être témoin pour être sociologue et si tel n'est assurément pas l'objectif d'un artiste, il est clair que les recherches d'Arman, au tout début des années 60, sont une thématization artistique anticipée du programme critique d'une sociologie de la consommation qui se développera dans les années suivantes* (Even if being a witness is not enough to be a sociologist and if such is not necessarily the objective of an artist, it is clear that Arman's research, in the very beginning of the 1960s, is an advance artistic thematization of the critical program of a sociology of consumption that will develop in the following

⁴² Restany, “Arman, Martial Raysse et le bon sens,” 192.

⁴³ Eco, “Les objets,” 37.

years)."⁴⁴ For Moulin, whatever aesthetic stance the artist takes, it is subordinate to the implicit criticism of the obsessive production and consumption of contemporary society.⁴⁵

Arman's collecting and displaying of the consumer dross is, for Eco and Moulin, a critical act in and of itself; the *Poubelles*, then, are an indictment of a society prone to excess. This, to me, is an interpretation that takes for granted certain assumptions that are not given by the works of art *per se*. A *Poubelle* contains within its form no clear and unequivocal condemnation of the societal reality it exposes. Eco and Moulin's assertions of the artist's intention and the work's meaning are based purely on projection. Is the collection and display of garbage in a fine art setting an inherently reproachful act? Certainly not — but nor is it an inherently celebratory one, as Arman's many critics deemed it to be. As we have seen, throughout the 1960s, Debord's Situationist circle repeatedly denounced what they saw as Arman and the Nouveaux Réalistes' unflagging enthusiasm for and complicity with the new spectacular society — defined by its overproduction and overconsumption of increasingly disposable goods. To their eye, these pristine cases not only glorified the consumer waste they offered for our visual consumption, but also contributed to the commodification of the visual display itself.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Moulin, "De l'objet à l'œuvre," 30.

⁴⁵ She continues, "*La critique implicite des sociétés contemporaines, en route vers l'abondance, obsédées de production et qui paraissent sans but ni raisons, sous-tend des prises de position esthétiques* (The implicit criticism of contemporary societies, en route toward abundance, obsessed with production and that appear without goal nor reason, subtends aesthetic stances)." Ibid.

⁴⁶ Here again, Restany, in his effort to explain away Arman's failure abroad, reduces the artist's work to an uncritical tribute to consumerism. This kind of image of Arman's work is, as I have suggested, a chief reason for the antagonism it met, both in the United States and in France. Restany was outspoken in his diagnosis of the *Poubelles* as enthusiastic monuments to consumerism. In fact, he surmised that the reason for the *Poubelles*' delayed appearance on the New York art scene — and their subsequent tepid reception — was due to Americans' apparent shame of their waste, a feeling incompatible with Arman's unabashed embrace of it. The *Poubelles* were never shown in the United States at the moment of their creation and peak relevancy. Only the interactive work *Automatic Garbage Can (Cast Your Ballot Here for a Cleaner Dwan Gallery)* (Figure 5.4) was shown in Los Angeles in 1962; it would take until the late 1960s for the

The question of the *Poubelles*' charge — positive or negative — is a significant component of the ongoing debate about the critical import of the whole of Arman's œuvre. Eco's and Debord's contradictory readings of the same works' tone attest to the indeterminacy of the social meaning of the *Poubelles*. For what evidence can there be, in a transparent bin filled with banal objects in familiar packaging, of either a negative or a positive charge? Given Arman's penchant for collecting, amassing, and repeating, as evinced by the *Cachets*, *Allures d'objets* and *Accumulations*, the *Poubelles* must be seen in relation to his prior work and the overarching project into which all those series fall. It follows that meaning must be sought in the form of the *Poubelles* as works of art, and not simply as sociological or anthropological objects.

Whether the art of this period intended to condemn or to venerate consumer society was a widespread concern in the contemporary art criticism. And yet despite the debates surrounding Arman's work that I have already cited, some critics and scholars have seen the encased objects as neutral on the question of the social reality they reveal. So while Hamilton finds that the *Poubelles* "*sont des mises en scène hyperboliques de la logique du spectacle* (are hyperbolic mises-en-scène of the logic of the spectacle),"⁴⁷ she is quick to clarify that Arman's presentation of spectacle does not bear any clear political or critical intentions. Instead, it merely evidences the artist's interest in "*pouss[ant] les limites du système* (push[ing] the limits of the system)" to show the "*boucles de*

prototypical *Poubelles* to appear on the New York scene, and even then, to minimal success. See Bouchet, "Dialogue épistolaire," 97.

⁴⁷ She explains that Arman's works achieve this status "[p]ar la manière dont elles activent la réaffirmation perpétuelle de la consommation dans un monde capitaliste qui incite à produire toujours plus ([b]y the way in which they activate the perpetual *reaffirmation* of consumption in a capitalist world that incites to produce always more)." Hamilton, "Civilisation figée," 63.

rétroaction du capitalisme (feedback loops of capitalism).⁴⁸ And Abadie claimed that despite the swell of critical attention to the question of the social commentary in the art of the time, “*Avec les Poubelles, la question ne se posait pas: elles étaient une sorte de constat objectif* (With the *Poubelles*, the question was not asked: they were a sort of objective constant).”⁴⁹ Arman’s own claims about his work supported this notion of objectivity — again implying a certain authorial distance by suggesting that he was working more as an “archaeologist” than as an artist. He described his work thus: “*par delà l’œuvre de l’artiste, il y avait presque un travail d’archéologie du futur; une façon de chercher à représenter ce que nous sommes* (beyond the artist’s work, there was almost a work of archaeology of the future; a way of seeking to represent what we are).”⁵⁰ Aligning his practice with that of an archaeologist allowed Arman to suggest that he conducted his art-making in the same manner as the scholar who works with the utmost care and precision to extract and exhibit “real” things exactly as he or she finds them, without intervening in their presentation, seeking only to shed light on the society that produced them, but not to pass critical judgment thereon.

Arman’s chronic exploitation of the archaeological metaphor belies the concurrent claims he was making about the origins of his work. For the image of a meticulous mining, cataloging, and displaying of objects is at odds with the image of an authorless composition of self-arranging objects. Just as the force of the *Accumulations* — and of the works on paper before them — hinged on the question of agency, the

⁴⁸ Hamilton explains that were Arman’s works to take on a critical stance, “*elles risqueraient de devenir des parodies spectaculaires d’elles-mêmes* (they would risk becoming spectacular parodies of themselves).” Ibid.

⁴⁹ Abadie, “L’archéologie du futur,” 53.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 55.

meaning of the *Poubelles*, too, depends on to what and where operative power is ascribed. If the artist is performing the task of selecting and exhuming, in a “controlled collection,”⁵¹ a particular set of objects that he then displays as specimens that reveal to an audience the social and anthropological reality of contemporary civilization, then it would be easy to imagine him asserting a certain bias or making a particular statement through the objects he chooses and the way in which he presents them. But if the artist is simply pouring the contents of waste bins into these Plexiglas cases and allowing the unfiltered objects to compose themselves, then the practice would seem much more “objective” and the result insistently “real,” that is, unfiltered, impartial, and direct. But Arman’s practice matches neither the former nor the latter hypothetical approach. Instead, his methods in the *Poubelles* are as follows: he selectively chooses the objects he will include, and he arranges them in the Plexiglas case in a way that, on the surface, suggests a lack of intervention, but on closer inspection reveals its artificiality. The process is thus akin to that of the *Allures d’objets*: first, the artist selects the constituent objects and initiates the composition — in the *Allures d’objets*, choosing which object to ink and how to direct its trajectory; in the *Poubelles*, choosing which objects to place at the bottom or back of the case and how to stack and layer subsequent objects. Next, the artist cedes some control to the objects’ natural behavior under the force of gravity — in the *Allures d’objets*, allowing a ball to roll or a pebble to bounce; in the *Poubelles*, allowing the unfixed contents to settle downward as he sets the vitrine upright (Figure

⁵¹ Ironically, this was Restany’s term for Arman’s practice in the *Poubelles*, which he referred to as a “*ramassage d’ordures contrôlé* (controlled garbage collection).” By invoking the term “controlled” and qualifying Arman’s action as such, Restany introduced into the mythology of these works’ conception and realization the deliberate intentionality of the artist. For a *controlled* amassing of refuse is a very different operation than the simple, all-embracing gesture of *déversement*, of simply picking up a waste bin and dumping its contents into a glass case. This latter practice, entirely apocryphal, has long been the accepted understanding of the *Poubelles*’ making. Restany, in Bouchet, “Dialogue épistolaire,” 89.

5.5).⁵² In both cases, the artist is clearly the chief agent, but in allowing elements of chance to enter the process, he arrives at compositions that cannot be entirely predetermined, nor fully attributed to his will.

Pierre Cabanne, for one, was not fooled by the "de-composed" look of the *Poubelles*; on the contrary, he found the intentionality of the *Poubelles* laid bare in the artist's obvious attention to aesthetic, read pictorial, considerations:

Ces Poubelles . . . comportent dans leur contenu une notion de choix: Arman choisit en effet les objets qu'il enferme dans des boites vitrées en fonction de leur forme, de leur volume, de leur contenu, de leur couleur, les rapports, les tensions. . . . Ces Poubelles sont des tableaux, leur qualité picturale qui résulte du choix des objets est incontestable; se souvenir qu'Arman est et demeure peintre, il refait sa palette avec les couleurs, leurs valeurs, leurs reliefs, la variété des matières, des formes, du tout venant accumulé. . . . [C]es entassements n'excluent pas l'idée de composition bien au contraire . . . [Arman] commence par disposer les détritiques les uns par rapport aux autres, forme, volume, couleur.

These *Poubelles* . . . comprise in their contents a notion of choice: Arman in effect chooses the objects that he encloses in glass boxes in function of their form, their volume, their contents, their color, relationships, tensions. . . . These *Poubelles* are *tableaux*, their pictorial quality that results from the choice of objects is incontestable; remember that Arman is and remains a painter, he redoes his palette with colors, their values, their reliefs, the variety of materials, of forms, of everything amassed. . . . [T]hese accumulations do not exclude the idea of composition; on the contrary . . . Arman begins by arranging the pieces of trash in relation to each other, form, volume, color.⁵³

⁵² There is a sense in which the *Poubelles* are not only de-composed — in that there is apparently no purposeful arrangement of the contents — but also de-composing. De-composing in two ways: first, in the sense that the objects age and decay over time, and second, because their arrangement within the Plexiglas box continually undoes itself. This, because Arman elected not to fix the contents of the *Poubelles* in any way, so that over time, gravity incites them to settle downward, creating new, unforeseeable *Gestalts*. As Greene points out, this quality of the ever-metamorphosing, ever-decomposing configuration of contents is what sets apart Arman's work from earlier assemblages by Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, or Salvador Dali, all of whom arranged and fixed the contents of their boxes with care and an eye toward permanence. See Greene, "Arman: An Artist," 13. While this is a valid point, it is important to note that Arman *does* arrange and fix the objects that comprise the *Accumulations*, so the Surrealist comparison is perhaps more apt with that series than with the *Poubelles*.

⁵³ Cabanne, quoted in Bouchet, "'Poubelles' et 'Accumulations,'" 82.

Cabanne's insights are striking. Here is a critic who, among the legions of voices trumpeting the raw, direct objectivity of the *Poubelles* as transplanted trash cans, identifies them instead as pictures. He insists, as I have aimed to do throughout this dissertation, on acknowledging the fundamental character of these objects as artworks — and not just artworks but *tableaux* — conceived and executed according to surprisingly conservative pictorial convention.

The role of the vitrine

There is something disconcertingly neat about the waste in the *Poubelles*; as though garbage has received the advertising treatment — cleaned up and recast as a cleaner, easier, more ordered version of itself. This impression comes from two places: first, that the Plexiglas screen that holds in the contents serves, as I have argued, to gloss over and smooth out the otherwise diverse and disorderly contents. Second, Arman's appropriation of garbage is selective: he refuses organic waste, so that the trash we see is never putrid or repulsive in the way an actual household trash bin might be. There is no liquid or solid food waste dampening or staining the other objects, only bits of clean paper, plastic, and metal. Suspended in the pristine cases, as Barbara Rose has noted, these objects hover between evoking trash and evoking objects on display.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Rose refers to the *Poubelles* as “playing on the idea of an opposition between the contents of a trash can or that of a vitrine showing precious jewels.” See Rose, “Arman à New York,” 42-43. With Arman's concurrent series, the *Portraits-Robots*, the balance most certainly swung toward display. For those works, Arman collected the personal belongings of a particular individual, usually an artist, gallerist, or other close friend, including Yves Klein (Figure 5.6), Iris Clert (Figure 5.7), and Pierre Restany (Figure 5.8). Those items, displayed in a vitrine, stood as a portrait of the individual in question. The format of the portrait was strikingly similar to that of the *Poubelles*: a shallow vitrine, transparent on all sides, filled with apparently random items, often in a damaged or fragmented state, as though pulled from the waste bin. But the conspicuousness of Arman's hand in arranging the items in the *Portraits-Robots* could not be denied. Sarah Wilson likens the aesthetic arrangement of carefully selected items to “a Catholic-type reliquary.” The Clert portrait, for instance, “conjures up through objects, magically impregnated with her presence, the ‘petit récit’ of Iris Clert's life and the debris from which it could be reconstituted.” She is referring in particular to Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* (Paris: Éditions du Minuit, 1979). See Wilson, “From

As it was for the *Accumulations*, therefore, the vitrine is essential to the form of the *Poubelles*, especially as concerns their status as something like pictures. First, the vitrine defines the parameters of the composition, in much the same way as would a stretched canvas. One of the problems modern painters had confronted was how to negotiate the borders of the picture: whether and how to cut off the representation from the represented world, or rather to subvert that primordial convention of painting and attempt to mediate those borders. Arman, in using a box with a fixed external form as his support, thus faced a traditionally pictorial problem. Using a transparent case was perhaps one way of subverting the delimiting edges, of having them disappear. The *Poubelles* represent a shift from the opaque wooden boxes of the *Accumulations*, which tended to have only one transparent face (Figure 5.9), to cases that are transparent on all sides (Figure 5.10). Without the obdurate framing device of solid wood edges, the all-around clear surfaces would seem to de-emphasize the borders between artwork and reality, bringing the collected objects into contact with the viewer's lived space. However, the contents of Arman's vitrines end up so forcefully contained — with papers and waste often pressed up against the sides, giving unyieldingly visible and solid form to the

Barthes to Baudrillard,” 224. Lamarche-Vadel describes the *Portraits-Robots* as “*les seules pièces dans toute la production d’Arman qui manifestent l’évidence d’une composition issue du Cubisme. Comme si pour tracer un portrait crédible de ses amis, Arman avait besoin de cet ordre de composition par facettes juxtaposées, tout autant qu’une hiérarchie angulaire interne de distribution des objets collectés. Mais sans doute cet ordre compositionnel dénote-t-il aussi, au-delà d’un rapport ustensilaire immédiat à la matrice cubiste, et au moyen qu’elle représente d’ordonner synthétiquement des éléments, épars, l’intérêt que porte Arman, homme de méthode, à la méthode inaugurale du XXe siècle.* (the only pieces in all of Arman’s production that show evidence of a composition derived from Cubism. As if in order to trace a credible portrait of his friends, Arman needed that order of composition by juxtaposed facets, as well as an angular internal hierarchy of distribution of collected objects. But without a doubt that composition order also denotes, beyond an immediate utilitarian relationship to the *cubist matrix*, and in the way that it stands to synthetically order elements, scattered, the interest that Arman, man of method, brings to the inaugural method of the 20th century).” Lamarche-Vadel, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 110.

transparent perimeters — that those boundaries turn out to be all the more powerfully present than even the edges of a canvas or a picture frame might be. The containedness of the “real” things is underscored, and consequently, their presence is deferred, their immediacy mediated.

In his study of the vitrine as a part of French cultural life, Martin Roberts compares the glass-front displays to television screens. He defines the key difference thus: “in the case of television, the spectacle takes the form of an image, a representation or simulacrum of reality; the vitrine, on the other hand, displays “real” objects occupying the same ontological space as the spectator, and is not, strictly speaking, an image at all.”⁵⁵ And yet, he concedes that despite this distinction, “the vitrine does nevertheless have many of the formal properties of the image (framing, composition, separation from the spectator).”⁵⁶ The vitrine, like the television, is a site for display; both media present or project something like images through the mediation of a glass screen.

Hamilton sees the vitrine as Arman’s means of expressing “*la structuration invisible mais néanmoins très puissante du capitalisme en tant que système* (the invisible but nonetheless very powerful structuring of capitalism as a system).”⁵⁷ Despite the heterogeneity of the boxes’ shape and size, the glass-paned front remains a constant throughout the entire series of *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*; and that clear façade is, for Hamilton, “*une métaphore matérielle cohérente pour exprimer une organisation systémique autorégulée* (a coherent material metaphor for expressing a self-regulated systemic organization).”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Roberts, “Mutations of the Spectacle,” 219.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, “Civilisation figée,” 60.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

The shallowness of the vitrines, the unnatural shape and size of these containers, also foreground their artificiality, and their belonging to a pictorial register more than any other. That minimal depth of the cases of course facilitates Arman's arrangement of their contents across the whole surface, suspended from top to bottom in an allover that is reminiscent of both the *Accumulations* and the early works on paper. But it also separates the entire art-object from the register of daily experience, for a trash can of this shape and size would be wholly impractical; because of its shallow flatness, it is much better suited to mural display than to functional use.⁵⁹

The vitrine turns the *Poubelles* — and, more important, their contents, garbage — into a purely retinal object. Arman made a vital discovery as he labored through these works: “When people have been protected from the terrible aspects of garbage, the smell, the sticky texture, they can look at it with interest.”⁶⁰ The Plexiglas case allows for the removal of all other sensory experiences except the optical. In that sense, these works behave as image: we cannot interact with them on any level but the visual. Paradoxically, this distancing that the vitrine enacts between the garbage and the beholder in fact brings us closer — because it protects us from the repulsion our other senses would otherwise encounter at close proximity.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Arman described the scale of the *Poubelles* in practical terms: “I would say the quantity of garbage of a French household for two days was enough to make a piece that was two feet by one-and-a-half feet by four inches, with dust, little pieces of glass, little bits of thread, a box from Camembert cheese, things like that. The quantity of garbage was very small. It took two days to fill up a case like that, from a normal three-person household.” Arman, “Interview conducted by Susan Hapgood,” 109.

⁶⁰ Arman, in Wegner, “Arman in London,” 8.

⁶¹ The invitation to visual communion that the vitrines provide speaks to a larger artistic trend, inaugurated by Duchamp, that privileges seeing over making. As Martin put it, “[G]iven that we see things when they are located in a space that allows them to be seen — when they have come out of hiding — and that the art of art has always been the art of creating such a space — of *bringing* them out of hiding — one solution is simply to take the problem literally. This is the solution that Duchamp chose in removing his *Fountain* from a plumbing-goods store, where it was essentially invisible, and placing it in a museum where it was anything but. This is also the route that Arman opted for in transferring his trash from an opaque barrel on

The mediation of the vitrine and the consequent phenomenon of irreality that it evokes is particularly significant in that the aim of the *Poubelles* was to present “the real.” It was not to represent, but to make present “real” objects from the world. The Plexiglas precludes full three-dimensionality, and in so doing subverts the very “realness” of the “real” objects it protects, presenting them instead in the manner of a painting — as a kind of holistic painting-object. As the Italian nuclear artist Enrico Baj put it, in attempting to understand the implications of the *Poubelles* for the new definition of realism,

il s'agit d'un nouveau possible 'réalisme,' au quel [sic] on peut arriver, je crois, par une sorte d'objectivisation du tableau, par le fait que le tableau devient objet ou 'ensembles d'objet' et se propose, de ce même fait, tel que plus 'réaliste' que n'importe quelle peinture précédente.

it is a new possible ‘realism,’ at which one can arrive, I think, by a sort of objectivization of the painting, by the fact that the painting becomes object or ‘ensemble of object’ and proposes itself, from this same fact, as more ‘realist’ than any other preceding painting.⁶²

The vitrine thus grants the *Poubelle* the possibility of a new functionality as image. Its diffusion of the waste behind its surface performs the transformation to what I have characterized as the ontological opposite of the relief that figures like Restany and Rose have identified in the *Poubelles*.⁶³ In a sculptural relief, the three-dimensional elements,

his back porch or hidden under his sink to a glass case that he then placed in his own or somebody else's living room.” Martin, *Arman*, 26.

⁶² Enrico Baj, letter to Pierre Restany, June 27, 1960. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

⁶³ Rose has referred to Arman's *Poubelles* as “assemblages in relief”; she describes the earliest *Poubelles* as “composed of detritus compacted in such a way as to form reliefs.” Rose, “Arman à New York,” 42. As is now clear, the portrayal of the *Poubelles* as reliefs, while it captures some of the works' object/sculpture liminality, in fact misleads. A relief is defined as a two-dimensional surface from which sculpted portions project into three-dimensional space. Arman's *Poubelles* are simply two-dimensional surfaces: their façade is slick and pristine, as all of the three-dimensional elements of the work are contained behind it, rather than projecting in front of it. In this sense, the Plexiglas screen — the vitrine — acts to flatten the objects behind it, not literally, in the sense of physically altering them, but visually.

in projecting beyond the flat surface, serve to inject a palpable reality into the work. In the *Poubelles*, the three-dimensional elements, in being encased behind the flat surface, deny palpability and confine reality. The Plexiglas case shields “the real” from real space; it distances the audience from the very “real” that Arman is purportedly offering up directly.

The effect of the vitrine on the contents of the *Poubelles* and on the viewer’s experience of those contents is central to these works. As I will now argue, the vitrine holds an equally if not more important position in *Le Plein*, and one that Arman no doubt worked out through his experimentation with the *Poubelles*.

Le Plein

In 1960, following the success of Arman’s solo show at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf, at which all the *Poubelles* on display were sold, Iris Clert finally agreed to host Arman’s monumental exhibition-event that he had proposed two years prior: *Le Plein*.⁶⁴ Even more than the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, *Le Plein* was seen as the quintessence of Nouveau Réalisme. As Hannah Feldman points out, *Le Plein* “often serves as a textbook illustration of Restany’s Nouveau Réaliste dictum.”⁶⁵ Restany

⁶⁴ There are other suspected reasons for Clert’s eventual agreement to hold the show at her gallery, including the accusation that she was seeking to injure Klein, who had betrayed her, or that she simply loved a good scandal. Arman proclaimed, “*Elle ne s’intéressait pas vraiment aux artistes. Iris Clert, avant tout, était une Grecque qui adorait le déclamatoire. Elle prenait les artistes les plus spectaculaires et en faisait une tragédie, une bouffonnerie . . . Par-dessus tout, elle aimait se mettre en scène et interpréter son propre rôle . . . Elle servait les artistes tout en se servant d’eux* (She was not really interested in artists. Iris Clert, above all, was a Greek who loved the declamatory. She took the most spectacular artists and made of them a tragedy, a farce. . . . Above all, she liked to put on a performance and play her own role. . . . She served artists all the while using them).” Arman, in Arman and Hahn, *Mémoires accumulés*, 60. Elienne Lawson confirms, “[*Le Vide* and *Le Plein*] were seen by some as publicity stunts (and indeed were, for Clert’s gallery was very small and relied on American tourists in search of portable ‘culture’).” Lawson, “Pierre Restany, Jeannine de Goldschmidt, and the Galerie J,” 11.

⁶⁵ Hannah Feldman, “Salons de Refuse,” 36.

himself saw *Le Plein* as the “*apothéose monumentale* (monumental apotheosis)”⁶⁶ of Arman’s Nouveau Réalisme and called the exhibition “*Un événement capital qui donne au Nouveau Réalisme sa totale dimension architectonique* (A capital event that gives Nouveau Réalisme its total architectonic dimension).”⁶⁷ Restany further referred to *Le Plein* as “*un credo . . . un monument érigé par Arman à son style à peine naissant et déjà définitif* (a credo . . . a monument erected by Arman to his style that was just nascent and already definitive).”⁶⁸ Arman, too, saw *Le Plein* as a summing-up of his preoccupations from the past several years, but defined it less in relation to Nouveau Réalisme and more as a kind of culminating expression of his personal realist project:

Comme un jeune fauve, je prends conscience de mes dents, de mes griffes et de mes muscles. . . . Les années passées m’ont permis d’accumuler des armes. 1960 sera l’année des déclarations et des prises de position. . . . Les ‘poubelles’ avec toutes leurs variations, les ‘accumulations’ directes et le ‘plein’ comme point final.

Like a young wild animal, I am becoming aware of my teeth, of my claws and of my muscles. . . . The past years have allowed me to amass my weapons. 1960 will be the year of declarations and of stances. . . . The *Poubelles* with all their variations, the direct *Accumulations* and *Le Plein* as final point.⁶⁹

Lamarque-Vadel, too, understands *Le Plein* as “*le vrai gardien de l’esprit de l’œuvre. Connaître et estimer beaucoup ‘Le Plein’ est la mesure nécessaire de la compréhension des métamorphoses ultérieures [du projet Armanien]* (the true guardian of the spirit of the œuvre. To know and to highly esteem *Le Plein* is the necessary measure of the comprehension of the ulterior metaphors [of Arman’s project]).”⁷⁰ *Le Plein*

⁶⁶ Restany, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 48.

⁶⁷ Restany, quoted in Pigué, “Arman,” 64.

⁶⁸ Restany, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 48.

⁶⁹ Arman, quoted in *ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁰ Lamarque-Vadel, quoted in *ibid.*, 48.

contains references to some of his best-known works,⁷¹ reinforces the connectedness among his various series and genres, and serves as a kind of final statement on his artistic project — as it has materialized thus far and as it will continue to develop in the years to come.

Le Plein, mounted in October 1960, involved the packing of the gallery, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, with hundreds of pounds of detritus.⁷² The invitation to the exhibition came in the form of a sardine can stuffed with bits of trash (metro tickets, ashes, matches, cigarette butts, etc.) and a copy of a hand-written invitation to the vernissage.⁷³ Along with it came a typed message from Pierre Restany, announcing the exhibition as the authentic Nouveau-Réaliste presentation of “the real” (Figures 5.11-5.12).⁷⁴ In a move typical of the playful tone of Arman’s œuvre, the key required for opening the sardine can was inside the can,⁷⁵ thus establishing a feeling of frustration and inaccessibility that would follow the invitee to the exhibition itself. There, he or she

⁷¹ *Le Plein* contains exemplars that remind us of various *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* of the past two years, and also others that foretell the works to come: lightbulbs from *Cyclofiat*, the coffee mills from *O! Combien de marins . . .*, shoes from *Madison Avenue*, wallets from *Parcimonie*, cheese cartons from *Petits déchets bourgeois*, business envelopes from *L’Affaire du courrier*, and so forth.

⁷² According to Hamilton, “Arman’s System,” 63. The full inventory of the exhibition, compiled by Arman, though suspected to be inaccurate, is published in Durand-Ruel, *Arman: catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 46.

⁷³ The invitation read, “*Iris Clert vous prie de venir contempler dans ‘le plein’ toute la force du réel condensé en une masse critique* (Iris Clert invites you to come contemplate in ‘the full’ the total force of the real condensed into a critical mass).” Reprinted in Altshuler, “Pop Triumphant,” 204.

⁷⁴ The text read, “*Un événement capital chez Iris Clert en 1960 donne au nouveau réalisme sa totale dimension architectonique. Dans un tel cadre le fait est d’importance. Jusqu’à présent, aucun geste d’appropriation à l’antipode du ‘vide’ n’avait cerné d’aussi près l’authentique organicité du réel contingent* (A crucial event at the Galerie Iris Clert in 1960 gives to Nouveau Réalisme its total architectonic dimension. In such a context the event is important. Until now, no gesture of appropriation radically inverting ‘the void’ had circumscribed so narrowly the authentically organic nature of the contingent real).” Restany, invitation to *Le Plein*, in Durand-Ruel, *Arman: catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 46.

⁷⁵ One critic described: “*Mode d’emploi: pour ouvrir la boîte, la clef est à l’intérieur. Mauvaise astuce, car il fallait l’ouvrir avec une autre pour la trouver, ainsi que des détritrus, copeaux, rognures, et invitation à l’‘exposition’* (Instructions for use: to open the can, the key is inside. Bad trick, for it was necessary to open it with another [key] in order to find that one, as well as detritus, wood shavings, trimmings, and an invitation to the ‘exhibition’).” *Le Piéton de Paris*, 1960, quoted in *ibid*.

would be met with an impenetrable mass of unassimilable garbage,⁷⁶ a "*cimetière d'articles de Prisunic* (cemetery of articles from Prisunic [an inexpensive grocery store]),"⁷⁷ packed and sealed by the gallery walls as though by a sardine can.

From the street, passersby could see in the window of Clert's gallery nothing but garbage: bicycle wheels, bird cages, records, light bulbs and the like were piled in so tightly that it appeared that the entire space was completely filled, and thus unavailable to a visitor wishing to enter (Figure 5.13). But in fact there was a small corridor, accessible through a side door, that allowed two or three guests at a time to enter and to circulate partially around the massive mound of waste. And in the gallery's back office, several *Accumulations* were available for purchase, including *Direct pour la Lune* (suppositories), *Retour des croisades* (padlocks), *La Vie à pleines dents* (dentures), and *Hommage à la cuisine française* (sauce pans) (Figures 5.14-5.17).⁷⁸

Arman's first plan for *Le Plein* had been to have municipal garbage trucks back up to the gallery and dump their contents directly inside the space. Notably, such a plan would not have involved the artist touching the garbage at all, but instead directing the workers from a distance, thus giving what Van der Marck called "specialists of garbage with no knowledge of art"⁷⁹ the power to control his work.⁸⁰ When that plan failed to materialize, due to both Clert's concern over the nature of the refuse that might end up in

⁷⁶ Rosalind Constable described the frustrating way that "those who accepted [the invitation] were forced to admire the exhibition from a small platform to one side," while the Piéton de Paris added, "*C'est très triste: j'ai vu deux braves personnes mélancoliques assises devant un tas d'ordures très propres qui remplissaient la galerie. Quel boulot!* (It's very sad: I saw two brave melancholic people sitting before a pile of very tidy trash that filled the gallery. What hard work!" Rosalind Constable, 1961, and Le Piéton de Paris, 1960, both quoted in *ibid.*

⁷⁷ M.C., 1960, quoted in *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 89.

⁷⁹ Van der Marck, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 48.

⁸⁰ The image of Arman directing the garbage trucks from a distance recalls the tuxedoed and clean-handed Yves Klein guiding his *pinceaux vivants* through the creation of the *Anthropométries* (Figure 5.18).

her gallery and the sanitation department's unwillingness to empty their trucks there, Arman took to the streets himself and, with the help of Martial Raysse, collected enough garbage to fill the exhibition space, purportedly taking note along the way of everything they were including in the exhibition.⁸¹

Although the initial plans for the exhibition did not come to fruition, the myth of *déversement* carried over from the *Poubelles* to *Le Plein*, where the notion that the whole gallery had been filled by the simple pouring-out of the contents of a large truck became the parable of the show. Michel Ragon announced that "*Arman a commencé par déverser le contenu d'un camion dans la galerie où il exposait sous un titre dépourvu d'ambiguïté: Le Plein* (Arman began by dumping the contents of a truck in the gallery where he exhibited under a title devoid of ambiguity: *Le Plein*)."⁸² Henry Martin repeated that claim, reporting that *Le Plein* was "a kind of happening in which Arman got together a couple of truckloads of rubbish and heaped them into the gallery until it could hold no more."⁸³ And Restany asserted that bins upon bins of refuse had been emptied into the space, with Arman then finishing the work with "*le placement sélectif d'objets d'appoint* (the selective placement of supplementary objects)."⁸⁴

Certainly, all evidence of *Le Plein* confirms the dubiousness of those claims: not only can Arman be seen in photographs carefully selecting and positioning the constitutive objects one by one (Figure 5.19), but his painstaking inventory of every item

⁸¹ Altshuler, "Pop Triumphant," 204. It is likely that the inventory Arman and Raysse took, which is published in the catalogue raisonné, is more literary than literal — an approximation produced for effect — to give the appearance of a meticulous, archaeological "mining" of the Parisian trash.

⁸² Michel Ragon, "Le Nouveau Réalisme et le culte de l'objet de série," in *Naissance d'un art nouveau: Tendances et techniques de l'art actuel* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1963), 139.

⁸³ Martin, *Arman*, 26.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

included in the exhibition attests to the purposefulness of his choices of objects.⁸⁵ Even if the accuracy of that list of objects remains in doubt, the fact of its creation suggests that Arman intended for audiences to understand *Le Plein* as an intentional labor of collection and display of specific objects, and not simply a meaningless pile of random refuse.

Further, Restany's concession that Arman intervened only in the final composition — by placing, for example, a bicycle front and center in the window exposed to the street (Figure 5.20) — unravels his adamant insistence on the objectivity and randomness of the work's composition. For Arman to interfere at the end is no insignificant detail; in fact, it suggests that even if he had begun *Le Plein* with an initial comprehensive acceptance of waste materials, this strategy was merely a ruse. If the final step in the realization of *Le Plein* (or of any *Poubelle*) involves the specific and careful placement of select objects so as to achieve a particular visual effect, then all the force of the chance arrangement of arbitrary objects is undone. Indeed, one reviewer took note of Arman's apparent hand in the careful arrangement of the objects that made up *Le Plein*: “Après tout, son tas est assez artistiquement disposé (After all, his heap is rather artistically arranged).”⁸⁶

⁸⁵ The inventory list was intended to constitute a poem: “6 oyster shells, 3 cubic yards of used bulbs, . . . 200 pounds of old records, 48 walking canes, 7 coffee mills, . . . 5 bidets, 6 slices of bread, 3 flower pots, 180 bird cages, . . . 10 old hats, 12 pairs of shoes, 1 ice bucket, . . . 70 pounds of curtains, 5 hula hoops, 1 ashtray with ashes, . . . 1 cubic yard of metal shavings . . . 1 cubic yard of magnetic tape from the musical works of Pierre Henry . . . 1,000 copies of a pamphlet by Mathias Goeritz, *L'Art votif contre l'art merde*.” Arman discusses making this list in Arman and Abadie, “L'archéologie,” and the list appears in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 46. According to Bruce Altshuler, the pile allegedly included works of art by Picasso and Hartung, as well as fifty small paintings from Iris Clert's *Micro Salon* of 1959. See Altshuler, “Pop Triumphant,” 204.

⁸⁶ Choay compares Arman's exhibition to the similarly themed manifestations by American artists who were revolting against consumerism's control of society: “*Et pourtant si l'étiologie est comparable, phénoménologiquement le résultat me paraît différent. Alors que la vision américaine est sérieuse, dépourvue d'humour, révolte devant la dérégulation et l'écrasement, Arman se meut en pleine ironie. . . . Il s'agit d'une dissertation à base humaniste, sur un certain état de décomposition (le nôtre). Et l'écoeurement, tout lucide qu'il soit, tout révolutionnaire même en tant que geste, se tente d'une certaine complaisance: L'Europe demeure confortablement étayée par un monde de valeurs qu'elle peut mettre en*

Le Plein comprised, among other items, 200 pounds of old records, 180 bird cages, and three cubic yards of used light bulbs.⁸⁷ Given these figures, the sheer abundance of certain objects should give us pause. Certainly this was not the random contents of waste bins throughout the city, but consciously and purposefully collected specialty items. How does one come across 180 bird cages in the streets of Paris? Happenstance is an unlikely answer; more likely, that figure is evidence of a concerted effort on the artist's part to accumulate mass quantities of this particular object that had certain qualities he was seeking for his exhibition of "garbage." A bird cage is an object that keeps its form, even when discarded; it is a poetic object, with connotations of Dada and Surrealism; it bears the association of the animals that may have once inhabited it, of the bourgeois home that might have housed it, of the metaphors of captivity. Just as the bicycle, front and center in the gallery's window, was selected for its maximum recognizability and impact, so too, do the birdcages represent a conscious choice on the part of the artist to give the "garbage of Paris" a certain image.⁸⁸ Even Restany acknowledged that, after the Prefecture de Police de Paris denied Arman's original plan

question, mais qui n'en continue pas moins de lui fournir son appui, tant demeure encore puissante ce qu'on appelle sans qualificatif, la culture. (And yet if the etiology is comparable, phenomenologically the result seems different to me. Whereas the American vision is serious, deprived of humor, revolt before dereliction and oppression, Arman moves in plain irony. . . . It is a dissertation with a humanist base, on a certain state of decomposition (ours). And the disgust, as lucid as it is, as revolutionary even as a gesture, encourages a certain complacency: Europe remains comfortably held up by a world of values that it can put into question, but that will nevertheless continue to provide its support, as long as what we call culture, without qualification, remains powerful)." Choay, 1960, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 46.

⁸⁷ According to Hamilton, in "Arman's System," 63.

⁸⁸ As with the *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, the question of the individuality or identity of particular objects within the composition resurfaced with *Le Plein*. Alison de Lima Greene has pointed to the "evocative character" of certain objects therein, and she notes that it was Rolf Wedwer's 1970 article "Environments and Rooms" that first proposed the idea of the importance of specific images within the installation. Wedwer singles out the bicycle as a singularly articulated object, so distinct from the otherwise frontal mass that it breaks the continuity of the heap, managing to be at once part of the whole and autonomous. This account is reminiscent of certain of Rauschenberg's Combines, where a single object — a stuffed eagle, an automobile tire — is so prominent that it stands out from an otherwise homogenized agglomeration of images and things. See Greene, "Arman: An Artist," 8-9.

to empty dumpsters of city trash directly into the gallery, “*la manifestation changea légèrement de sens: la poubelle architectonique devient une accumulation géante* (the exhibition changed meaning slightly: the architectonic *Poubelle* became a giant *Accumulation*).”⁸⁹ That is, the objects came to be selected and collected rather than acquired at random and “*utilis[és] à l’aveuglette* (use[d] blindly).”⁹⁰

Of the many negative reviews of Arman’s exhibition, several include details that make clear that the reviewers had not actually witnessed the show themselves, but had instead absorbed the rumors about its contents and format, and consequently, its meaning. Rosalind Constable wrote, “The entire floor of the gallery was ankle-deep in debris — the kind of debris that gathers in the back yards of any city slum.”⁹¹ The characterization of the objects as the detritus of a “city slum” misrepresents the specialized and even bourgeois nature of the items on hand — a misrepresentation echoed by another critic who posited that the gallery had been filled with “the contents of the cart of a neighborhood ‘ragpicker.’”⁹² But more important, the image of a floor covered “ankle-deep in debris” does not even come close to approximating the floor-to-ceiling reality of *Le Plein*, and it especially does a disservice to the viewing practices required by *Le Plein* — a monumental address, and not an invitation to step over and around small piles of garbage.

⁸⁹ Restany, 1967-68, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 48.

⁹⁰ Francblin argues that Arman’s original idea for the exhibition, which would have seen the direct dumping of garbage trucks’ contents into the gallery, demonstrates that Arman “*n’avait aucune intention de choisir les objets; il voulait vraiment les utiliser à l’aveuglette* (had no intention of choosing the objects; he really wanted to use them blindly).” Francblin, “Arman,” 11. Despite that intention, however, as Restany points out, the reality of the final work was quite different, and the selection of objects was entirely intentional and in no way blind.

⁹¹ Rosalind Constable, 1961, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 46.

⁹² Review from *Libération*, 1960, quoted in *ibid.*

It is important again to stress that, even though it was in fact possible to enter the gallery, the majority of viewing took place from the street. The interior viewing space was only three feet wide, and so admission was limited and visitors had to wait in line to enter. Thus, the vernissage of October 25, 1960, was described as “resembl[ing] a kind of block party, since most viewing was done from the street through the gallery window.”⁹³ Such a situation is significant because it puts *Le Plein* in direct relationship to the *Poubelles* in that it recreates not only the garbage-based contents of those works, but also their viewing structure and mode of address: the garbage is displayed behind glass, and so the viewer perceives it at a remove. Of course, the fact that it was possible to enter the gallery from the rear gave viewers a privileged experience not possible with the *Poubelles*: to see, unimpeded, the objects that constituted the heaping mass. And yet their compressedness, their absolute surplus, made it impossible for a viewer to take in the objects completely, since the space did not allow for circumambulation and the suffocating density of the objects precluded the examination of individual elements.

Malone characterizes *Le Plein* as an “environmental installation,” which she defines as the kind of work which, unlike a Happening, takes place within the controlled space of a museum or gallery, where the objective is to “*réduire les barrières entre spectateur et œuvre d’art* (reduce the barriers between spectator and artwork).”⁹⁴ She sees this type of installation as heralding the utopian collaborative works of the next few years, such as *Dylaby*,⁹⁵ which called for active participation on the part of the viewer,

⁹³ Altshuler, “Pop Triumphant,” 204.

⁹⁴ Other examples of environmental installations cited by Malone include Klein’s *Vide* and Spoerri’s *Restaurant de la Galerie J*. See Malone, “Une utopie collective: les installations environnementales,” in *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Debray, 236.

⁹⁵ *Dylaby*, the “dynamic labyrinth,” was a collaborative, interactive exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1962. For a full account, see Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History, 1962-2002* (London: Phaidon, 2013).

rather than the passive consumption encouraged by Arman's *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*.⁹⁶ But I see *Le Plein* as instead perpetuating the same kind of address as the latter two series: one that allows for only an inactive confrontation on the part of the viewer, who can receive visual data but cannot interact with the objects as objects. One cannot walk among the items, touch them, move them, or even take them in from various vantage points. The whole mass of detritus, in its overwhelming scale, is offered only for passive, visual consumption — whether from within the gallery space or, especially, outside it.

A more apt comparison for *Le Plein* can be found in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project of the following year, *Wall of Barrels, Iron Curtain* (Figure 5.21).⁹⁷ Benjamin Buchloh describes that work as the beginning of the latter artists' "lifelong project of expanding sculpture to the scale and the temporariness of spectacle culture and reducing its simultaneous material presence to a mere media image."⁹⁸ Such a project fits also Arman's *Plein*, which reproduces the characteristics of spectacle culture both in its exaggerated scale and in its utmost ephemerality, rendered even more urgent by the fact that the exhibition had to close early because the organic matter included in the waste heap was beginning to rot and to produce a putrid smell.⁹⁹ Further, and perhaps most

⁹⁶ Malone, "Une utopie," 236.

⁹⁷ It is worth noting that Arman took issue with this work, because he saw it as a co-opting of his personal artistic language. He explained to Otto Hahn, "*J'estime que c'est une grande 'accumulation'. Quand Christo a fait, en 1961, le barrage de la rue Visconti, avec des fûts en métal, Restany, dans sa présentation, a évoqué mon travail: 'Et Christo donne à l'accumulation' d'Arman une dimension architecturale. 'J'ai toujours ressenti cette Mastaba comme une partie de mon langage (I consider it to be a large 'accumulation.' When Christo made, in 1961, the barricade of the rue Visconti with metal barrels, Restany, in his presentation, evoked my work: 'And Christo gives to Arman's 'accumulation' an architectural dimension.' I always felt that Mastaba like a part of my language).*" Arman, in Arman and Hahn, *Mémoires accumulés*, 208.

⁹⁸ Buchloh, "1960a," 435.

⁹⁹ Francblin reports that the Association de l'abbé Pierre was charged with picking up the objects that constituted the installation "*avant que les bactéries ne s'y attaquent* (before the bacteria attacked)." Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 89.

compellingly, the whole exhibition lent itself to the kind of media imagery Buchloh recognized in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's oil barrel blockade: the photographs of *Le Plein* are all taken from the street, where the garbage is contained within and behind the large display window, perfectly framed like an enormous picture (Fig. 5.22).

Le Plein's vitrine

Even Restany described *Le Plein* in terms of display, analogizing Clert's gallery with a certain shop-window character. He wrote, "*la vitrine de la galerie Iris Clert à Paris offre un spectacle peu banal: la galerie est remplie du plancher au plafond d'un tas d'objets de rebut les plus hétéroclites* (the vitrine of the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris offers a rather unusual spectacle: the gallery is filled from floor to ceiling with a pile of the most heterogeneous discarded objects)."¹⁰⁰ Although Restany had earlier identified Arman as "*un réaliste, déserteur des habitudes scléreuses de la perception et des préjugés visuels* (a realist, deserter of sclerotic habits of perception and of visual prejudices),"¹⁰¹ in his account of *Le Plein* he unequivocally establishes that the chief confrontation with the work is mediated by the gallery window, and appears to the viewer as a kind of image through that screen. It is the *vitrine* that offers a *spectacle*.

In a similar vein, Francblin describes *Le Plein* as the filling of the vitrine, and not of the gallery itself, with refuse. She makes this word choice twice, first stating, "*Arman*

¹⁰⁰ Restany, "Un destin," 21.

¹⁰¹ Restany made this claim as part of his argument that *Le Plein* and the *Poubelles* fit in with Arman's established Nouveau-Réaliste project: "*Qu'Arman fasse ma corbeille de papier ou le plein d'une galerie parisienne il ne cherche à atteindre qu'un même aspect total du réel. Il n'est ni un mystique, ni un pervers, ni un spéculateur de l'insolite. Mais un réaliste, déserteur des habitudes scléreuses de la perception et des préjugés visuels* (Whether Arman 'makes' my wastepaper basket or the full-up of a Parisian gallery he is seeking only to attain the same total aspect of the real. He is neither a mystic nor a deviant nor a spectator of the bizarre. But a realist, deserter of sclerotic habits of perception and of visual prejudices)." Restany, 1961, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol 2, 106.

transforme la vitrine de la galerie Iris Clert en une énorme poubelle (Arman transforms the vitrine of the Galerie Iris Clert into an enormous trash can),” and then describing the process: “*Assisté de Martial Raysse, Arman remplit la vitrine de la galerie, haute de trois mètres cinquante, d’un amoncellement spectaculaire d’objets de rebut* (Assisted by Martial Raysse, Arman fills the gallery’s vitrine, three and a half meters high, with a spectacular heap of rejected objects).”¹⁰² The fact that the exhibition was encountered and indeed defined by way of the gallery’s street-front window speaks to the continuity of Arman’s problematizing of the mechanics and metaphors of display. Buchloh observes that in the new consumer society of showcases and shop windows, “Arman recognized that the changes in how the subject is constituted and how objects are experienced . . . would become most apparent in the object’s situation in public space,”¹⁰³ and he thus devised an art form that positioned itself like a commodity.¹⁰⁴ For Buchloh, *Le Plein* thus “demarcate[s] one of the single most important changes in the paradigm of sculpture in the postwar period.”¹⁰⁵ Brian O’Doherty described its impact:

More mundane and aggressive [than Klein’s *Vide*], it uses the gallery as a metaphorical engine. Stuff the transforming space with refuse and then ask it, grotesquely overloaded, to digest *that*. For the first time in the brief history of gallery gestures, the visitor is *outside* the gallery. Inside, the gallery and its contents are now as inseparable as pedestal and artwork. . . . By rendering the gallery inaccessible, and reducing the excluded visitor to peering through the window at the junk within, Arman initiated . . . a major schism.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Francblin, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, 89.

¹⁰³ Buchloh, “1960a,” 438.

¹⁰⁴ Recall the passage cited earlier: “Arman had understood that sculpture from now on would have to be situated within the display devices of the commodity, and that conventions of museum presentation would merge increasingly with those of the department store (the showcase and the shop window).” Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Brian O’Doherty, “The Gallery as Gesture,” *Artforum International* 20, no. 4 (1981): 27.

O'Doherty credits *Le Plein* with establishing a motif in the art of the later 1960s, in which "[t]he excluded visitor [is] forced to contemplate not art but the gallery."¹⁰⁷

Restany, too, recognized that the gallery itself had metamorphosed at the hands of the art it contained: he wrote of *Le Plein*, "*La salle d'exposition sert de cadre à cet entassement monumental* (The exhibition room serves as frame to that monumental heap)."¹⁰⁸

The implication of the room as frame, or of the gallery itself as object of contemplation and not of embodied experience, correlates with a perpetuated myth about the exhibition: that it was accessible *only* from the street, that "no one could enter because of the accumulated garbage."¹⁰⁹ While we know this statement to be untrue, the notion of an inaccessible exhibition, of a gallery so full that its space was no longer hospitable to guests, was so appealing, especially as a contrast to Klein's *Vide*, that it has been propagated in many discussions of the exhibition. O'Doherty explains why that is the case:

[A]vant-garde gestures have two audiences: one which was there and one — most of us — which wasn't. The original audience is often restless and bored by its forced tenancy of a moment it cannot fully perceive — and that often uses boredom as a kind of temporal moat around the work. Memory . . . completes the work years later. The original audience is, then, in advance of itself. We from a distance know better. The photographs of the event restore to us the original moment, but with much ambiguity. They are certificates that purchase the past easily and on our terms. Like any currency, they are subject to inflation. Aided by Rumor, we are eager to establish the coordinates within which the event will maximize its historical importance. We are thus offered an irresistible opportunity to partake in creation, of a sort.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ O'Doherty cites Daniel Buren's sealing off of the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan in 1968, and Robert Barry's declaration in 1969, "during the exhibition the gallery will be closed" — a claim that was carried out at the Eugenia Butler Gallery in Los Angeles in March of 1970. *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁸ Pierre Restany, "Un destin," 21.

¹⁰⁹ Cone, "Métro, Boulot, Dodo," 50.

¹¹⁰ O'Doherty, "The Gallery as Gesture," 27.

Although the tale of the un-enterable gallery is apocryphal, its development and spread come as no surprise, given the importance of the shop-window experience of the exhibition. Today, a replica of the vitrine of Iris Clert's gallery is itself part of the collection of the Musée de l'Objet in Blois, with a reconstruction of *Le Plein* held therein (Fig 5.23). That the museum accessioned a reproduction of the window itself, rather than simply the objects that made up the exhibition or a three-dimensional re-creation of the whole gallery space, confirms that the means of display was itself a part of the artwork and was experienced as essential to it, whereas the rest of the objects and space were not. *Le Plein* without the window is simply a pile of garbage, just as would be the *Poubelles* without their Plexiglas cases. Such a recognition aligns with my argument, in opposition to Restany's, that the means of display are crucial to the work of art and cannot be separated from it in order to satisfy a claim about the supremacy of the objects and their sociological meaning. At Blois, *Le Plein* is displayed as a large but shallow box abutting a wall, functionally two-dimensional in the same way as the *Poubelles* and *Accumulations*. As Henry Martin asserted of *Le Plein*, "One misses the event if one thinks it was the junk that was on display. What was really on view was the gallery itself. The show was probably best seen from the outside — through the windows."¹¹¹

Not surprisingly, many have interpreted the vitrine-focused display of *Le Plein* as a form of institutional critique. Alison de Lima Greene argues that "by packing the gallery up to the window, Arman converted the ground floor of the edifice into a giant vitrine, making the gallery function as a showcase of commodities apparent to even the most casual passersby."¹¹² But do not galleries always function as a showcase of

¹¹¹ Martin, *Arman*, 26.

¹¹² Greene, "Arman: An Artist," 8.

commodities? In fact, Arman's arrangement would seem to defy this claim, since the commodities he shows are neither desirable nor available; they are not arranged neatly as in a commercial display, nor do they conform to the expected presentation of goods for sale: a crumpled piece of paper, for example, has none of the commercial familiarity of the ream of paper one would find in a store. A bicycle with wheels bent, buckling under the weight of other objects, does not make a compelling appeal to the consumer. It would appear rather that this exhibition was somewhat of an anti-commercial act: containing only a mass of garbage, there was nothing for an interested patron to purchase.¹¹³ As Françoise Choay put it, "*Il n'y a plus rien à acheter ici, dans ce tas géant qui est véritablement un geste, un événement et qui s'en retournera au néant sans profiter à aucun collectionneur* (There is no longer anything to buy here, in this giant heap that is veritably a gesture, an event, and that will return to nothing without doing any collector any good)."¹¹⁴ What is more, the piles of worn and damaged objects make evident the wastefulness of mass consumption and also the pointlessness of compulsive consumerism, which only lead to piles of garbage. *Le Plein* can be seen therefore as not only an unappealing, anti-advertising-like display, but also an indictment of that very commercialism.

¹¹³ Notably, the commodities that *were* available for purchase — the *Accumulations* — were held in the back room, removed from display and available only to those who actively pursued them. It is worth noting that whereas the exhibition of Arman's works at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf in May and June 1960 had sold every single item within a few days, at *Le Plein*, held just four months later, only a single work was sold. (Enrico Baj purchased *Accumulation directe pour la lune*.) See Renaud Bouchet, letter to Pierre Restany, October 22, 2001. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes. Restany attributes this discrepancy in success to the German market's openness to contemporary art, and especially to Nouveau Réalisme, long before Paris became friendly to either. See Pierre Restany, letter to Renaud Bouchet, November 20, 2001. Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

¹¹⁴ Choay, 1960, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 46.

Of course, the evident anti-commercialist statement made by the main presentation of *Le Plein* was diluted by the fact that in a back room of the gallery, there were *Accumulations* hung on the wall, available for purchase. That gesture seems almost like a hyper-commercialist act: the smaller works would have had the look of miniaturized versions of the grand exhibition, and, sold in a separate space behind the main attraction, it is as though that back room were a gift shop, the *Accumulations* mere souvenirs of the main event. It takes on the air of an artist (or gallerist) taking advantage of an opportunity to commercialize the uncommercial, the way that models of churches or postcards of buildings might be sold at souvenir kiosks.

Rather than understanding the commercial-style display of *Le Plein* in terms of a pro- or anti-capitalist statement, I suggest that it was meant instead to reinforce the mere opticality of the objects contained therein, and to draw the viewer's attention to his or her own habits of looking. Lamarche-Vadel aptly assessed the power of the vitrine in *Le Plein* when he wrote,

[C]e n'est pas tout à fait un hasard, si précisément au moment de bâtir la récapitulation monumentale de sa problématique et de son œuvre à venir, Arman se laisse guider d'une certaine manière par la rigidité plane d'une paroi transparente, la vitrine, et ce, à l'instant où il conçoit la plus absolue démonstration d'un volume. Celui qui fut peintre, d'une certaine façon, l'est demeuré. Par le privilège remarquable conféré à la perception frontale, Arman s'est approprié le volume pour le dénier, comme il utilise l'objet pour en dénier la valeur d'usage.

[I]t was certainly not by chance that, at the precise moment when he built this monumental summing-up of the problematics of his future work, Arman allowed himself to be guided in a certain way by the flat rigidity of a transparent partition, the vitrine, and this at the moment when he conceived the most absolute demonstration of a volume. Arman had been a painter, and in a way he has remained one. By the remarkable privilege conferred to frontal perception, he appropriated volume in order to deny it, just as he uses objects in order to deny their use value.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Lamarche-Vadel, 1987, quoted in *ibid.*, 48.

Lamarque-Vadel touches on the thesis I have been proffering throughout this dissertation: that Arman conceived his object-based works as pictorial compositions, and that the vitrine — at whatever scale — provided the means for him to treat objects as pictorial components, to work against volume and, I would add, tactility and use-value; to present “real” objects as something more like images or signs.¹¹⁶ As Lamarque-Vadel intimates, the fact that Arman treats even the architecturally-scaled *Poubelle* as a picture — as something to be confronted in two dimensions — speaks to his utter indifference to volume, his will to see his works “taken in in the optics of a surface rather than of a realization in three dimensions.”¹¹⁷

The centrality of the question of perception throughout Arman’s œuvre is granted new force and vitality in *Le Plein*. Describing the exhibition, Périer wrote, “*Les passants de la rue des Beaux-Arts stupéfaits peuvent voir le spectacle hallucinant de cette galerie remplie d’un amoncellement de vieux objets et d’ordures* (The passersby of the rue des Beaux-Arts, stupefied, can see the staggering spectacle of that gallery filled with a piling up of old objects and garbage).”¹¹⁸ He thus touched on an important aspect of *Le Plein* that sets it apart from the *Poubelles* and all other works by Arman: the fact that one could merely happen upon it, as a passerby. The “stupefication” of those who found themselves

¹¹⁶ Lamarque-Vadel goes so far as to declare, “*cette vitrine qui fut celle de la Galerie Iris Clert, par la puissance de démonstration de ce chef-d’œuvre sombre comme la tombe de la société industrielle est devenue la vitrine de l’œuvre de Arman tout entière* (that vitrine that belonged to the Galerie Iris Clert, by the power of demonstration of this somber masterpiece like the tomb of industrial society, has become the vitrine of Arman’s entire œuvre).” Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Recall this line from Arman’s “Réalisme des accumulations,” which I quoted in Chapter Four: “*Je dis bien surfaces car même dans mes compositions volumétriques ma volonté est toujours plus picturale que sculpturale, c’est-à-dire que je desire voir mes compositions volumétriques prises dans l’optique d’une surface plus que d’une réalisation en trois dimensions* (I say surfaces for even in my volumetric compositions my will is always more pictorial than sculptural; that is, I want to see my volumetric compositions taken in in the optics of a surface rather than of a realization in three dimensions).” Arman, “Réalisme des accumulations,” 251.

¹¹⁸ Périer, *Pierre Restany*, 165.

the unexpected audience of this shop-window spectacle speaks to the authenticity of the confrontation they had with the work. Unlike in a typical museum or gallery setting, where one is prepared to come into contact with works of art, and where one tends to adopt what Brian O'Doherty termed a certain "museum perception,"¹¹⁹ *Le Plein* catches its accidental audience in a "vernacular" state, to borrow another of O'Doherty's terms. That is, Arman's *Plein*, due to its location in the street, the site *par excellence* of the vernacular glance, presents itself to the hurried eye of the casual passerby, the quick look that takes in, immediately, a general sense of the whole: a gallery filled to the brim with trash. And the form of the work — the unassimilable chaos of unrelated objects — reinforces the aptness of that fleeting glimpse. *Le Plein* could thus be seen to fulfill Jouffroy's call for a "*révolution du regard*." For Jouffroy, in the face of the felt acceleration of time amid the constant and immediate consumption of ideas and images in postwar France, the best artists understood that "*la révolution à opérer, c'est celle du regard qu'on jette sur les choses, et en particulier sur l'art* (the revolution to be carried out is that of the glance that one casts on things, and in particular on art)."¹²⁰

Vide-Plein

The ways in which *Le Plein* clearly emerges from Arman's practice of making the *Poubelles* are plain — from conceiving the works pictorially, via the vitrine, to conceding to the careful placement of objects so as to create the illusion of non-intervention. But we must not forget that the initial idea of *Le Plein* predated the *Poubelles*, and came in

¹¹⁹ O'Doherty defines "museum perception" as "academic modes of looking" that are typical of that setting due to years upon years of art education — a kind of protracted, analytical gaze rather than the immediate glance common to everyday life, movies, television, advertising, etc. See O'Doherty, "Rauschenberg," 84-85.

¹²⁰ Jouffroy, "Pour une révolution," 189.

response to an entirely other catalyst: Klein's *Vide*. As I have suggested, the ultimate form of *Le Plein* reflects the trials and experiments of the *Poubelles* more than the initial idea of a *Vide-Plein* opposition. However, it is important to acknowledge the origins of the first conception of the exhibition, and to question the ramifications that the initial vision of a waste-filled gallery may have had on the final realization.

Restany described *Le Plein* as not only an homage to quantity but also an homage to Yves Klein, "*l'antithèse dimensionnelle (et symbolique) du Vide* (the dimensional (and symbolic) antithesis of *Le Vide*)."¹²¹ This was the angle that Arman, Restany, and Clert all endorsed: that *Le Plein* was the answer to Klein's wildly successful *Vide*, and that the two were conceptually related.¹²² In reality, the connection between the two was more promotional than anything else: it was a way to attract visitors to the exhibition and a means of suggesting a deeper, perhaps even spiritual, significance for the massive accumulation of waste.

But to consider *Le Plein* as emerging conceptually from *Le Vide*, rather than from the *Poubelles*, is to recognize a certain theoretical distance from the latter works. For *Le Plein*, as conceived in 1958, was about transforming space and the viewer's experience of it, just as *Le Vide* had done, but with antithetical techniques.¹²³ As Bouhours points out, "*cette démarche [d'Arman] est de nature conceptuelle, sur-matérielle, puisqu'elle*

¹²¹ Pierre Restany, "Un destin," 21.

¹²² Klein declared at the time of Arman's exhibition, "*Après Le Vide, Le Plein. Le plein du quantitativisme et de toutes ses conséquences, momifiés à jamais par Arman dès aujourd'hui* (After *Le Vide, Le Plein*. The full-up of quantitativism and of all its consequences, mummified forever by Arman from today on.)" Yves Klein, from a statement in 1960, quoted in *ibid*. But Restany affirms that in 1958, when Klein and Arman were allegedly discussing a collaborative project of *Vide/Plein*, Klein was in fact far more invested in his collaborations with Tinguely, and was rather unenthusiastic about Arman's proposal. See Bouchet, "Dialogue épistolaire."

¹²³ Hahn described *Le Plein* as the "*contrepoin*t à l'exposition du *Vide* (counterpoint to the exhibition of *Le Vide*)." Hahn, *Arman*, quoted in Durand-Ruel, *Arman, catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, 48.

propose de transformer radicalement le rapport phénoménologique et comportemental du visiteur avec un lieu, par l'action d'une saturation matérielle, qui répond à la vacuité immatérielle de son ami (that practice [Arman's] is of a conceptual nature, super-material, since it proposes to radically transform the phenomenological and behavioral relationship of the visitor with a place, by the action of a material saturation, which responds to his friend's immaterial vacancy)."¹²⁴ As Restany averred, Arman's gesture of accumulating objects so that they "saturate" the entire gallery space was akin to what Klein did in saturating the same space with his "pictorial sensibility."¹²⁵ What this reading of the exhibition leaves out is the ironic vacancy of *Le Plein* itself: the way the material saturation enacts its own dissociation or dematerialization of the individual items. As Bouhours suggests, "*Dans un tel projet, les objets ne sont pas les éléments constitutifs d'une œuvre d'art, mais seulement la cause et les moyens à partir desquels il va réaliser les conditions d'une appréhension inédite de l'espace* (In such a project, the objects are not the constitutive elements of a work of art, but only the cause and the means from which he is going to realize the conditions of an unprecedented apprehension of space)."¹²⁶

One might see the "de-composition" of the form of *Le Plein*, like that of the *Poubelles*, as relating not only to the "decomposition" of the objects themselves, but also to the idea of material abundance relating ironically to dematerialization. For figures like Debord and Baudrillard, as we have seen, the proliferation of mass-produced objects at this time led to a sort of perceived emptiness — a degradation of those very objects to the

¹²⁴ Bouhours, "Arman avant le Plein," 34-35.

¹²⁵ Restany, "Un destin," 21.

¹²⁶ Bouhours, "Arman avant le Plein," 35.

point where they existed more as image or sign than as material. The exhibition *Le Plein*, then, could be seen not so much as *Le Vide*'s ontological opposite, but rather its dialectical pair. Saturation by quantity leaves the gallery in a state of essential emptiness — what Restany called “the dematerialization of the art object by quantitative excess.”¹²⁷ Arman had already noted the correspondence between his materiality and Klein's immateriality in his 1960 text “Réalisme des accumulations,” in which he wrote that the amassing of multiples behind a smooth and uniform surface tends to become “*une proclamation monotypique bien que plurale par son nombre et donc très proche des démarches monochromes d'Yves Klein* (a monotypical proclamation even though plural by its number and thus very close to Yves Klein's monochrome processes).”¹²⁸ Both methods — the amassing of objects behind a unifying vitrine and the painting of canvases in a uniform color — create, that is, a dematerialized, monotone surface.

The construal of the gallery space itself as the object and subject of the singular exhibition-artwork-event resonates with Klein's *Vide*. But it is also true that if we think of space as volume — of the gallery or of a vitrine — there is a crucial correlation between *Le Plein* and the *Poubelles*. In both cases, Arman enacts a kind of dematerialization of material objects in the process of exploiting certain circumstances of display which condition our experience of “the real.” In that sense, *Le Plein* corresponds with Arman's broader realist project of accounting for the new modes of perception — purely visual and frustratingly incomplete — that define the new mode of being in the world.

¹²⁷ Restany, in Bouchet, “Dialogue épistolaire,” 94.

¹²⁸ Arman, in a letter to Éliane Radigue, October 16, 1957, quoted in Bouhours, “Arman avant le Plein,” 33-34.

Conclusion

At the ‘objective level’ everything is always the same. It is our perception of objectivity that is different. . . . [C]ertain formulations of the past demonstrate themselves to be no longer useful. . . . Aristotle has been superseded not because he was ‘wrong’ but simply because the problems that we have to solve are no longer the problems that he had to solve over two thousand years ago.¹

As I have shown, there was an observable and widespread interest in the notion of realism in the 1950s and 1960s in France: artists, critics, and theorists alike devoted much consideration to the determination of what realism could look like and achieve at that historical moment. As a result, objectivity, the long-held province of realism, came under intense scrutiny. Robbe-Grillet, in a 1957 text on innovations in novel-writing, argued that objectivity was an illusion — that “total impersonality of observation” was impossible. He described the way the world simply *is*, regardless of our interpretations of it: “Around us, defying the mob of our animistic or protective adjectives, the things *are there*. Their surfaces are clear and smooth, *intact*, neither dubiously glittering, nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in penetrating their smallest corner, in softening their slightest curve.”² This statement strikes me as highly relevant to the situation that Arman was confronting and to the artistic solution that he conceived for it. Robbe-Grillet describes “real” things as resolutely themselves, unable to be mediated by artistic or imaginative intervention. And yet Arman devises a means of doing just that: his clear vitrines *do* “soften the curves” of the “real” objects; they add a mediating layer on top of the “smooth, intact” surfaces that, paradoxically, breaks them down by

¹ Martin, *Arman*, 19-20.

² Emphasis original. Robbe-Grillet, “A Fresh Start,” 100.

essentially replacing them with a new surface, one that *is* transparent, and that neutralizes everything behind it. A further quotation from Robbe-Grillet, in which he contrasts literature with cinema, makes this point all the more compelling:

In the original novel, the objects and gestures forming the very tissue of the plot disappeared completely, leaving behind only their *significations*: the empty chair became only absence or expectation, the hand placed on a shoulder became a sign of friendliness, the bars on the window became only the impossibility of leaving. . . . But in the cinema, one *sees* the chair *too*, the movement of the hand, the shape of the bars. What they signify remains obvious, but, instead of monopolizing our attention, it becomes something added, even something in excess, because what touches us, what persists in our memory, what appears as essential and irreducible to vague intellectual concepts, are the gestures themselves, the objects, the movements, and the contours, to which the image has suddenly (and unintentionally) restored their *reality*.³

Robbe-Grillet thus suggests that the presence of the thing itself enhances our sense of its symbolic meaning. In a written text, the object itself is nowhere — there are only linguistic signs for it. And it is that absence of the referent, which is a condition of linguistic representation, which turns the referent's symbolic meaning into its only meaning. Robbe-Grillet argues that film transcends this problem of representation because we see the object itself in addition to grasping its metaphorical significance within a narrative. He stops short, however, of unpacking the reason that film, rather than painting, is the apt visual medium to express this distinction. Film can do this in a way that painting cannot because film, like photography, is a form of index: the referent adheres to it, for there can be no filmic image of a chair without the presence of the actual, physical chair. This is Barthes's definition of the indexicality of the photographic image, whose *noeme*, "That-has-been,"⁴ extends to the cinematographic image as well, and that fact explains the particularity of the restoration of reality that Robbe-Grillet

³ Emphasis original. Ibid., 101.

⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.

describes film as enacting. Painting, on the other hand, does not contain the possibility of corroborating reality: as Barthes made clear, “no painted portrait, supposing that it seemed ‘true’ to me, could compel me to believe its referent had really existed.”⁵

A fundamental objective of Arman’s realist project seems to have been to overcome the problem inherent to all representation that the referent itself is absent and thus capable only of symbolic meaning. In the *Cachets* and the *Allures d’objets*, his solution was to index “real” things, as do photography and film, in order to render them present and visible, so that their meaning is both literal and symbolic. As we have seen, however, the form of indexing that Arman practiced presented the challenge of illegibility, tilting the works toward the camp of symbolic representation. The *Accumulations* and *Poubelles*, then, were Arman’s means of addressing that problem, by making undeniably present the “real” objects, alongside and within the structure of their symbolic meaning.

Reflecting on the Nouveau-Réaliste movement and its essential tie to the precise moment from which it emerged, critic Michel Thomas asked, “*Entre ‘Le système des objets’ de Baudrillard ou ‘Le système de la mode’ de Barthes, brillantes analyses sociologiques de notre temps et ‘Le Fétiche à clous’ (sculpture-accumulation de révolvers) d’Arman, qui a su épinglez le plus clairement pour le public la frénésie de l’objet et du discours (Between Baudrillard’s ‘System of Objects’ and Barthes’s ‘The Fashion System,’ brilliant sociological analyses of our time, and Arman’s ‘Nail Fetish’ (Accumulation of revolvers), who knew how to capture most clearly for the public the frenzy of the object and of discourse)?*”⁶ In invoking Arman’s *Accumulation* alongside

⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶ Thomas, “Nostalgie,” 11-12.

Baudrillard's and Barthes's works of social theory, Thomas suggests that the artist's work represents another voice in an important historical conversation. Arman's realist works are not *reflections* of a certain reality, but active participants in a dialogue about the nature of that reality and how we come to know it.

Arman's refrain that an artist is a "witness" of his or her time is well known, and is frequently cited by those seeking to position Arman as passive and non-intervening, an artist who keeps his distance and maintains his objectivity by bringing reality directly to the viewer without altering or judging it. But as this dissertation has shown, the attribution of passivity — however positively it was and is applied — fundamentally misrepresents Arman's practice.

A more apt depiction of Arman's artistic project can be found in another of his statements on the position of the artist, in which he declared, "*Nous sommes le produit d'une époque, du moment et de l'endroit où nous vivons. Aussi bien, par le côté explosion démographique, production, gaspillage, tous ces phénomènes industriels ou autres, la quantité est une expression actuelle* (We are the product of a period, of the moment and the place where we live. Equally, on the side of demographic explosion, production, waste, all these industrial or other phenomena, quantity is a current expression)."⁷ I want to insist on that last phrase, that quantity is a current expression — that is, it is one of the languages of the day, one of the means of communication in the contemporary world. In staking this claim, Arman demonstrates his artistic will in making the kinds of work that he makes, and in using the strategy of accumulation that repeats from series to series. He is seeking to have his artworks speak the language of the day. That is, Arman

⁷ Arman, in Jouffroy, "Arman [1965]," 27.

acknowledges his belonging to this time and place. But rather than construing his artworks as simple, passive reflections of that moment, he positions them as active agents, taking up the language of that time to *say* something about reality — to enter the same conversations that Debord, Baudrillard, Barthes, and Robbe-Grillet were conducting with their works of philosophy, sociology, literary criticism, and fiction, respectively.

In this dissertation I have treated Arman's artwork as just that: as an active voice willfully put forth by an intentional artist seeking to account for the reality of his time. Such an approach, which required the close study of the works of art themselves alongside historical texts relevant to the questions of "the real" and realism, has allowed me in part to wrest Arman's œuvre from the dominant discourse of direct, objective, passive presentation, and to recast it as purposefully mediated, subjective, active representation. Construed as the latter, Arman's work stands as a singular artistic project, one attuned both to the plurality of the concept of "the real" in postwar France, and to the complexity of our relationship to it.

My study thus demonstrates the importance and indeed the richness of contextualizing artworks within multiple, overlapping histories: those of the artist's own project, of his or her artistic community, of the art market and major trends in art criticism, and of the geo-political and socio-cultural milieu in which he or she works. With the artwork situated more completely in its varied frameworks, newer and fuller narratives emerge, which challenge the accepted discourses of art history. Given the contentiousness of the particular piece of art history to which Arman belonged — that of Nouveau Réalisme and of the postwar period more generally — the urgency of such

interpretive work is clear. This study thus serves not only as a new account of the importance of Arman's œuvre, but as an incitement to further question the narratives of artists' groups as unified blocs of uniform intentions, and of the varying ways in which certain historical and art historical questions mattered to individuals. As Arman's project demonstrates, the work of an individual artist – in this case, his interrogation of notions of realism and representation – participates in the larger artistic, literary, and cultural conversations of his time, reinforcing the imperative of a rigorously historical approach to the study of art.

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Curriculum Vitæ

Jennifer Watson was born in Rochester, New Hampshire, in 1984. She graduated *summa cum laude* from Middlebury College in May 2006, with highest honors in the History of Art and Architecture, a double major in French, and a minor in Italian. Her undergraduate honors thesis, “Parallel Realities: Robert Rauschenberg and the Nouveaux Réalistes,” earned the Christian A. Johnson Prize for Excellence in the History of Art. Following two years of teaching French at Kents Hill School in Maine, she entered the graduate program in the Department of the History of Art at Johns Hopkins University in the fall of 2008, earning her master’s degree in April 2010. As a Ph.D. candidate, she received a Cazel Fellowship, a Singleton Center Fellowship, and a Fellowship in the Center for Advanced Media Studies, all at Johns Hopkins University. She also designed and taught a number of courses in modern art at Johns Hopkins as an Intersession and summer instructor, and as a Hall Teaching Fellow, Dean’s Teaching Fellow, and Dean’s Prize Fellow.