

Robert Rauschenberg, *Map Room II*, performance view at New Cinema Festival I, Film-Makers' Cinematheque, New York, 17 December 1965. Photo: Peter Moore.

Critical Fictions Clive Phillpot on Changing of the Garde

Dictionaries record what words meant, rather than what they mean. Today's dictionary was put together yesterday. English is about as various as the people who speak it, and when someone once told me that as a writer I had the language in my hands, perhaps he should have added, "and in your mouth." It is our language. So how people say what they mean is of great interest, especially when what they mean differs from the dictionaries' explanation of what they say.

Take the term "avant-garde." Many people who use it have an inkling of its distant military origins, and of its application to art in the 19th century, but thereafter its uses and meanings spread right across the map. Except in casual conversation, I stopped using the term a number of years ago because of its imprecision. It seemed so loose-fitting that it could be draped over almost any form of Modern or contemporary art. For me, "avant-garde" was useful only when conversing with people who spent most of their time and thought in other territories. On such occasions I used "avant-garde" specifical-

ly to mean art that raised questions for the general public, just as do tabloid journalists who nominally represent that public, and who, lately, have used the word to red-flag certain forms of art.

The word "experimental" was not as effective in communicating with the general public, but I and others used it when talking with specialists because it seemed less confusing. The meaning of "avant-garde," after all, included more than a century of varying applications. And though the scientific sense of "experimental," suggesting a procedure that is a necessary preliminary either to limbo or to general application, was perhaps too evocative of cool objectivity in a sterile environment (rather like the old art history) to be fully relevant to art, it did seem applicable to some recent work. And it agreed with an apprehension of that work that was widely shared. For me, also, "experimental" had a slightly more focused meaning: it described art that had a clear relationship with earlier art, but exhibited some discontent with the status quo; art that was pushing forward into new territory, though not necessarily compromising its commodity status of exhibitability.

But I had not given up on "avant-garde." Perhaps the real problem with the phrase was that I rarely saw work that

fitted my own definition. By "avant-garde" I meant art that was disruptive, subversive, oppositional, critical, challenging, even unacceptable, because of its appearance and because of its meaning; that was not just a commodity—indeed that might be impossible to own, let alone buy or sell. Given my personal definition of avant-garde art, it was not to be expected that I would see such art in museums or dealers' galleries, for it would likely be too subversive for the one and unsalable by the other. Art of this kind would only be shown at a museum if it were already cold, defanged, co-opted historically. So a museum show of contemporary avant-garde art would be oxymoronic. The statement of a museum curator, two or three years ago, that "the contemporary avant-garde has witnessed the transition of the role of the artist from antagonist at society's periphery to committed participant in the continuance and interpretation of culture" was clearly contradictory.

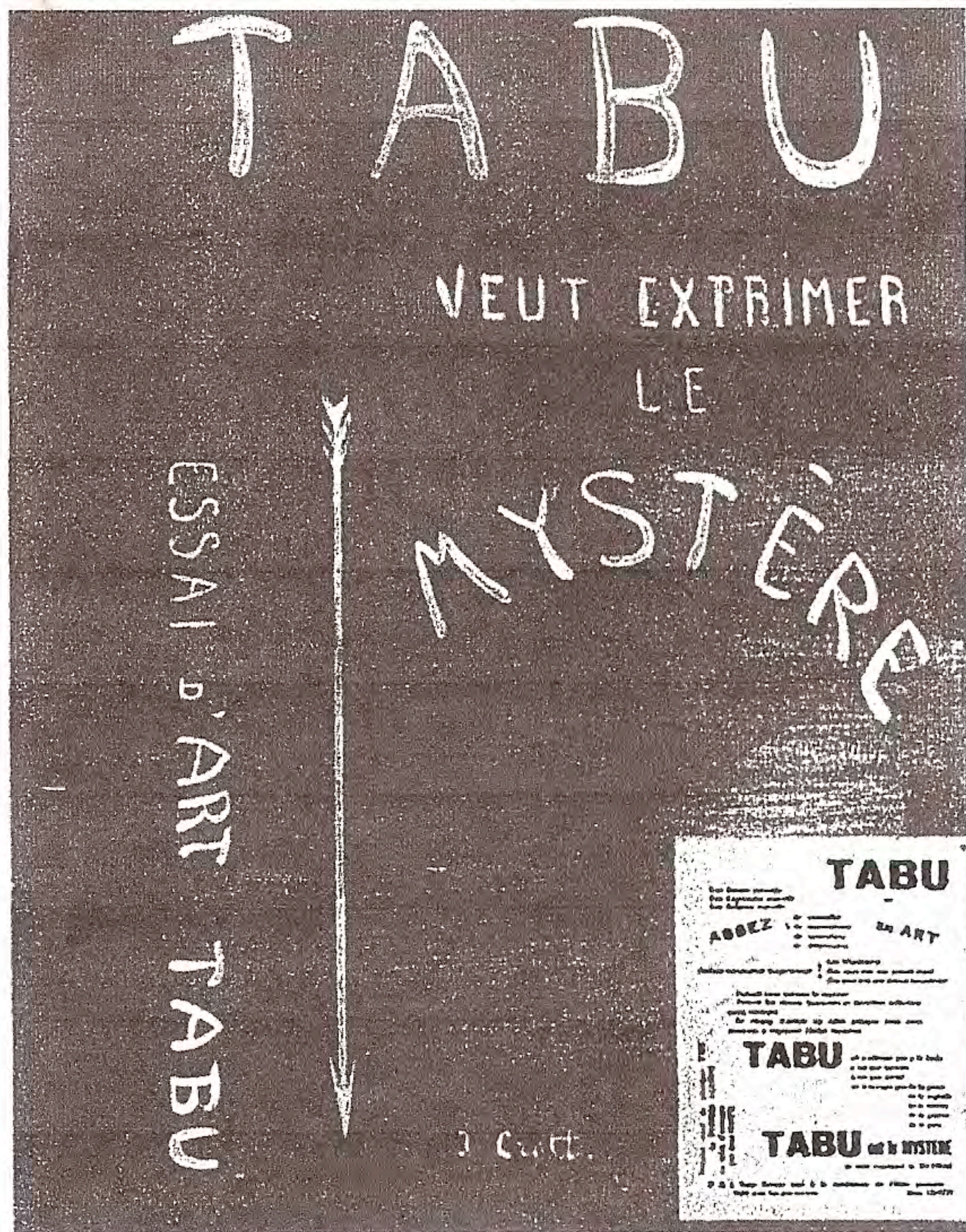
Yet given the seamless continuum extending through contemporary art museums, art dealers, and regular art magazines; and given the smooth intercourse between the art world and society's elites, at least in the United States, how could there not be an oppositional avant-garde? This avant-garde exists on the margins. Only from there can it sus-

tain its attack on art that serves, or is incorporated into, hegemonic structures. But if avant-garde art implies a critique of existing relations, then it is necessary to communicate this opposition. Museums

and galleries are unlikely to host such works wittingly, and of the next categories of regular exhibition sites, the publicly funded "alternative" space is frequently so dependent upon public funds that it sinks its teeth into the hand that feeds it only with great circumspection and risk. The cooperative artists' space, run without public support and accountable only to other artists, is the most likely place to get a squint at the avant-garde, but even here its presence is likely to be infrequent and unpredictable. Avant-garde art is often on the run; with no fixed abode; rootless.

The ambiguous, oblique, and complex resonance that tends to be characteristic of much art that is highly regarded is sometimes not the most precise way to make a point, so words, and consequently the printed and electronic media, play a particular role in this regard. At the very least, graffiti, stencils, handbills, posters, even a statement to the press will amplify the effects of an action or event that is spatially or temporally circumscribed. Beyond this, a desire to record, or to control the meaning, of an action or event can lead to its documentation in photography or text, and to the dissemination of this record in magazines, film, video, or electronic media.

Artists' magazines (as opposed to art magazines) may be the most accessible means for sensitive nostrils to catch a whiff of an avant-garde, indeed they have fulfilled this function for most of the avant-gardes of this century. They have served both to foster local and international dialogue and to draw attention to otherwise invisible activities—and they still do. Where was it possible last year to learn about the forthcoming 1990–93 Art Strike but through magazines such as *PhotoStatic*, *Schism*, *Smile*, and *Yawn*? Because such publications are usually produced by visual artists (often with crucial assistance from writers), there is a tendency to accord them retrospectively the status of art. This muddies the water: most belong as much to the genre "magazine" as to the genre "art." Some of the most vital and subversive magazines, in fact, have little visual pizzazz, because they are more concerned to get the word out to their sympathizers, known and unknown, and perhaps to sting the populace.



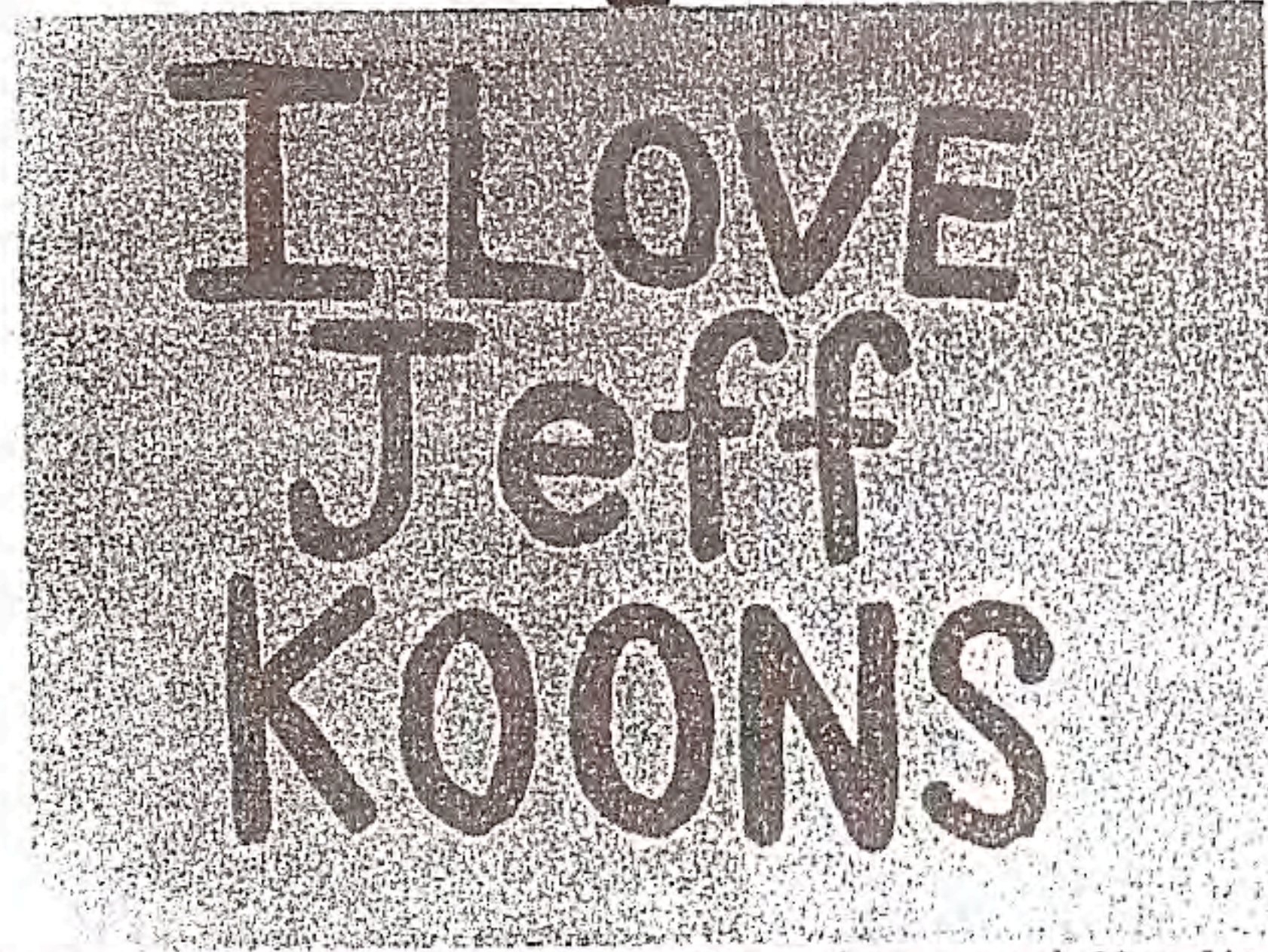
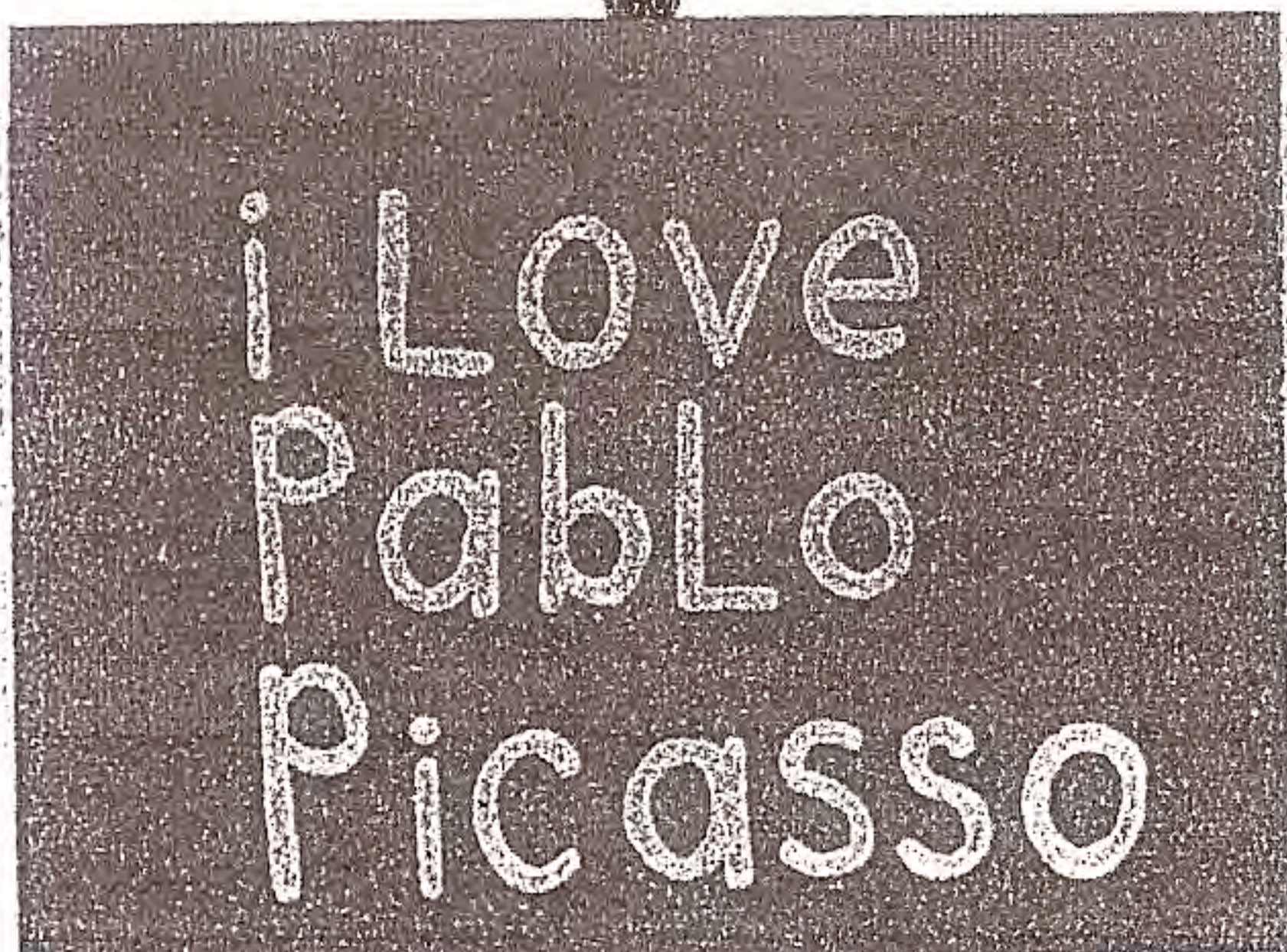
Jean Crotti, *Explicatif, Manifeste Tabu* (Explanatory, taboo manifesto), 1971, oil and paper on canvas, 36 1/2 x 28 1/2". Collection of Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Another channel of communication is mail art. This beautifully unfocused, uncentralized, unauthoritarian, uneverything unsystem is a fertile medium for unfettered ideas. The down side of this openness is that it is as full of garbage as the airwaves usually seem to be when one is searching for the music to match one's mood. But the point about certain untrammelled exhibiting possibilities, and certain printed and electronic communications, and the mailways, is that they are directed or controlled by artists. Not only do artists shape art itself here, they have the potential to shape the way art is seen.

One of the reasons why I have been trying to stick the legs and wings back on "avant-garde" is that while such art may be perceived to be dead, or to be alive but co-opted, or to have become, in fact, an integral part of the art world, it must in reality be alive and well and living elsewhere; it must exist either outside or, at the closest, on the periphery of this system. Some kind of oppositional art is inevitable, however elusive, in the society in which we are embedded, even when, es-

pecially when, the system appears to include a sanitized "avant-garde." A question of what word is used to describe it is made more than semantic by the different broadsides from the reactionary right. For the most part, those now using the word "avant-garde" in such a negative way ignore, through error or irony, the fact that most of the art the label is in many ways centered in a shared culture. Its audience, though certainly a minority, is not insubstantial until now the work has received enough support to make its way successfully through the bureaucracy of the government grant-awards process. As such it can hardly be called "avant-garde" in the strict sense.

Stewart Home's book *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettice to Class War*, a "copyright-free public copublished a couple of years ago by Aporia Press and Unpopular Books in London, England, throws some incident light on this issue. Home is an artist who "writes from a position of engagement and, "lacking the patience, time and



Above left: Cary Leibowitz, *I Love Picasso*, 1989–90, latex on wood 12 x 16". Above right: Cary Leibowitz, *I Love Koons*, 1989–90, latex on wood, 12 x 16".
 Below: "Confession in Support of the 1990–1993 Art Strike," from *Yawn: Sporadic Critique of Culture* no. 2, Oakdale, Iowa, 22 September 1989.

suitable temperament to do more than offer a summary of what an orthodox scholar could spend a lifetime researching," he does not "pretend to have produced a definitive history." He has, however, produced an informative and provocative book, and puts us in his debt by opening a fresh paradigm for avant-garde activity today. He has laid a trail that others will eventually expand and drive scholarly trucks along.

Home declares that he will not trouble himself "over whether [his] perspective is 'historically correct.'" Instead, he will "construct a 'meaningful' story" from fragments, since such a "fiction" can "assist our understanding of disparate phenomena." His aim is to document utopian currents in the late 20th century, and he asserts that though in earlier times such currents were expressed through religion, in modern times this "tradition" has been primarily artistic in nature. His avant-garde tradition therefore includes "Winstanley, Coppe, Sade, Fourier, Lautréamont, William Morris, Alfred Jarry, and on into Futurism and Dada—then via Surrealism into Lettrisme, the various Situationist movements, Fluxus, 'Mail Art,' Punk Rock, Neoism and contemporary anarchist cults" including *Class War*. Home also considers that "there is a samizdat (self-publishing) aspect to the tradition, that enables it to remain—at least partially—autonomous of the cultural and commercial institutions of the reigning society." On the other hand, though he sees the movements that he writes about as having "situated themselves in opposition to consumer capitalism," he also acknowledges that since they "emerged out of societies based on such a mode of organization," they cannot entirely "escape the logic of the marketplace."

Home's discussion of the '80s, in particular, draws our attention to many oppositional groups and individuals engaging in forms of "politico-cultural agitation and protest." Even so, he has chosen not to write about political groups that do not connect in some way with art and/or culture. Indeed, his focus is culture, since it is his contention that "cultural, as well as political, agitation is required if radical ideas are to have any impact" on society.

The point Home makes about cultural and political agitation on behalf of radical ideas emphasizes the distinction between the two categories. Avant-garde artists are frequently confrontational and expect to create a reaction, whereas experimental artists do not usually court disapproval. For all the initial shock of certain of his images, a Robert Mapplethorpe is both too socially established and too familiar in his approach to picture-making to be called "avant-garde." Recent developments might seem to suggest that there has been a coalescing of experimental art and avant-garde art, now that the work of experimental, and even mainstream, artists has begun to run foul of the law, but at least some of the art that is presently creating waves in the United States, generally art that deals with sexual images and patriotic icons, is only slightly more explicit than that acceptable in the recent past. What is really happening is that the emergence of religious fundamentalists with time on their hands and money to burn has suddenly made artists who are frequently mainstream in their means appear to be radicals. The inherent antagonism of the avant-garde has been matched by the aggression of religious reactionaries who seek out certain kinds of art in places where they would not normally go—but the casualties of this

assault are most often experimental artists

If avant-garde art, as I said earlier, is disruptive, subversive, impossible to own, and so on, and if, as Home suggests, it involves or embodies a form of "politico-cultural agitation," then some of the performance artists recently turned down for government grants in the U.S. may be eligible for the label. But it remains the case that as the right has been applying "avant-garde" lately, the word casts a far broader net and is bound to catch some mainstream fish. Perhaps the experimental artists now newly at risk will rise to the challenge, fan the flames of public controversy, match the aggression of the fundamentalists, and maybe provoke them even more, thereby helping to reveal the political agenda underlying the religious reactionaries' ostensible concern with sexual images. There are signs that experimental artists are becoming politicized, but it is important that they understand that they are only pawns in a bigger game. □

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