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Art Criticism

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Art Department
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The Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art

A Prefatory Note

The first section of this issue of *Art Criticism* is devoted to a panel on "The Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art" that was presented in February 1989 at the 77th Annual Meeting of the College Art Association of America in San Francisco. The subject in all its facets has, if anything, become more timely. While there has not been a shortage of discussion on the topic, the views presented at this lively panel combined to form a dense and economical package that we thought worthwhile publishing. The panelists were Amy Baker Sandback, John Baldessari, Luis Camnitzer, Suzi Gablik, Jeff Koons, Robert Storr, and its chair Mel Pekarsky. An attempt has been made to retain the language, flow, and presence of the panel presentation; the text has been kept as close to the original as possible. The Jeff Koons presentation was accompanied by a number of slides, but most of the work noted is so familiar to the art world that we did not feel the unillustrated format of *Art Criticism* would take away from his presentation.

By Mel Pekarsky

The words "art" and "morality" have been aimed at each other for a very long time but never so much as now, and never with such broad, multiple definitions of each. Both words are seen often in good and bad company in this postmodern, pluralist, unsacred end of the twentieth century (or "McSacred," as Peter Plagens has called it).[1] And I wonder if either of these words had even the same meaning in, say, Rembrandt's time; art's meaning is now perhaps as multiple as its varieties, and the definitions of "moral" layed at art's doorstep are equally myriad and provocative. For example:

Paul Goldberger discusses the "morality" of Michael Graves' designs for the Whitney Museum addition in consideration of Marcel Breuer's original (assumedly moral) structure.[2] Names themselves—like Richard Serra, and in different ways, Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano (and Jesse Helms, too)—are touchstones for any number of serious and complicated considerations.

And the relationships between artist, critic, dealer, collector, patron—everyone in postmodern capitalism's changed art world—have provoked shelves of articles and books on "art and money" and "art and business," which are subtitles to any current discussion of art and morality. In a Paul Taylor *New York Times* article for example, James Rosenquist says of art money, "It's become like drug money," and Taylor boils it down to a neat equation: "If art equals money, it is at the root of all evil."[3]

Then too, it seems fashionable to call the personal as well as the aesthetic morality of the artist into question, from Serra and Salle, to recent books calling to account the activities of Tolstoy and Dickens, to Michael Brenson—again in *The Times*—reviewing our own Jeff Koons![4] Cellini never had it so tough from Vasari!

And the current relationships between the art community and the rest of humankind have frequently and rightfully been questioned, never more trenchantly than by some members of this panel. Andrew Kagan writes of the "moral emptiness of [contemporary] art" and says, "But what is becoming increasingly disturbing is the fact that we have for so long lacked even the climate, the attitudes of high seriousness and commitment in art," citing his own essay as a response to the "absence of moral purpose in recent art."[5] Donald Kuspit considers the artist as activist, weighing the

possibilities of "the human and political potential of activist art" to which many have indeed turned.[6] Alberto Moravia, on the other hand, states categorically, "Art cannot politicize itself without committing suicide; in politics, terrorism is always anti-cultural."[7] And in art, the avant-garde is always terrorist.

William H. Gass, whom Suzi Gablik has delectably cited concerning "taking the pig out of pigment," goes all the way in his essay "Vicissitudes of the Avant-Garde," subtitled "In Search of a Worthy 'No'."[8] I quote:

> Many and various are the vicissitudes of the avant-garde, and it is true that now there is nothing that a group of this kind can do that such a group once honestly did; nevertheless, there is one sort of something--one theme, one theory--that throughout all the common connivances cannot hang its head, although all the old romantic myths of the artist have been remaindered and each of his motives questioned. 'To live is to defend a form,' Hölderlin once said. It might be defended still, if painters refused to show, composers and poets refused to publish, and every dance was danced in the dark. That would be a worthy 'no,' but it will never be uttered.[9]

Probably not.

One gets dizzy from it all, and wonders if, moral issues abounding in such immoral times, therefore are not the times exceedingly moral? After all, we even arrest immoral paintings right off the wall![10] And with all this—enough for maybe a few panels—we still haven't gotten to the core of this one, so I quote from the studio sessions announcement that led to the panel:

> This panel will begin with the premise that the first decision an artist makes when starting to work in this postmodern, pluralist end of the twentieth century is a moral one; that is, if you can paint whatever you want (since nobody cares what you paint or if you paint at all until you're a commodity), the first decision is what to paint. This is diametrically opposed to pre-modern art, which was preceded by 'need' and 'commission,' with the style usually universal and the content preordained. The use of 'moral' is intentionally provocative here, and meant to apply to formal as well as contextual issues, e.g., Abstract Expressionism can be described as a movement of moral strength and conviction (and it has been). The question of a moral imperative may imply political imperatives in a similarly wide sense, questioning values (individual) and standards (societal), and indicating a possible individual vs. public moral imperative.

This was, I believe, what Barnett Newman was talking about, recalling the forties in the sixties:

> We felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce World War, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of painting that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes and people playing the cello. At the same time, we could not move into the situation of a pure world of unorganized shapes and forms, or color relations, a world of sensation. And I would say that, for some of us, this was our moral crisis in relation to what to paint.[11]

John Baldessari, in an interview with Jeanne Siegel,[12] talks of his trying to get back to bedrock in his work, trying to strip away all the non-essential, and thereby arriving at "choice" through this reductivist approach, "choice," which seems such a fundamental issue of contemporary art.

With my own work, I have "risked," I suppose, a large number of embarrassing paintings in making this choice, in trying to arrive at an iconography I could believe in—and believe worth painting. In the process, format as well as form became a concern for a while, in addition to subject or content, and led me into a period of involvement with public art: trying to make art that belonged to everyone but was nobody's property; to start something right in the cities; to not make tradeable objects; to play with the idea of large landscapes on walls in the real, urban landscape—all of which made me even more aware of the dangers inherent in such aesthetic adventures. These concerns immersed me in the consideration of the questions we're here to discuss today, and led me to focus my thoughts upon this idea of "choice" that we've been talking about. This moral imperative.

Meyer Vaisman has been quoted as saying, "I don't feel it is the responsibility of the artist to judge whether a culture is good or evil,"[13] which is certainly a kissing cousin of another statement by British sculptor William Turnbull talking about public sculpture commissions, and quoted in Lawrence Alloway's *Topics in American Art*: "The problem with public sculpture," he says, "is with the public, not with sculpture. The idea of designing a sculpture for a particular site, even if chosen oneself, seems to me a gross limitation on the sculptor's freedom of action."[14]

So! We get to speak many tongues, in any tongue, and the gift becomes the essence of the problem. Gablik notes the absence of "the unifying presence of a transcendental order."[15] Again, boiled down, if you can paint whatever you want, what do you paint? Does it matter? And should the question be what *would* I paint or what *should* I paint? Is any of this

valid anyway? And one can't help toying with the idea that if you can paint whatever you want, isn't there implicit in your decision great power? (Or if it's lack thereof, how can that be?) And to whom does this power pertain, since society has for all practical purposes given up the responsibility of telling artists what to do until after the fact (of the work). And—no small byway—what should the critic be doing these days? What's the critic's responsibility, moral or otherwise? I have yet to see a critical program equal to facing the millenium with honor.[16]

So this is our subject. As I noted when introducing it to the panel members, I wouldn't have been terribly surprised if some of them chose to ignore all or part of it in order to address it better; they might meander with impunity.

Notes

[1]Peter Plagens, "The McSacred and the Profane," *Art Criticism*, v. 5, n. 1, 1988.

[2]Paul Goldberger, "The Whitney Paradox: To Add is to Subtract," *The New York Times,* Sunday, January 8, 1988, Section 2, p. 31.

[3]Paul Taylor, "Lights! Camera! Easel!," *The New York Times*, Sunday, February 21, 1988, Section 2, p. 20.

[4]Michael Brenson, "Greed Plus Glitz, with a Dollop of Innocence," *The New York Times,* Sunday, December 18, 1989, Section 2, p. 41 *et seq.*

[5]Andrew Kagan, "Heroic Individualism, Moral Purpose, and the Absolute Affirmation in Contemporary Art," *Arts Magazine,* May 1987.

[6]Donald Kuspit, "Crowding the Picture: Notes on American Activist Art Today," *Artforum,* May 1988.

[7]Alberto Moravia, "The Terrorist Aesthetic; of Artists, Stockbrokers, and Other Jacobins," *Harper's Magazine,* June 1986.

[8]William H. Gass, cited in Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York, Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 23.

[9]William H. Gass, "Vicissitudes of the Avant-Garde; In Search of a Worthy 'No'," *Harper's Magazine,* October 1988, p. 70.

[10]I am alluding to the student caricature of Mayor Washington that was "arrested" in the infamous episode at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

[11]Barnett Newman, 1967, cited in Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York, 1977), pp. 27-29.

[12]Jeanne Siegel, "John Baldessari: Recalling Ideas," *Arts Magazine*, April 1988, p. 86 *et. seq.*

[13]Suzi Gablik, "Dancing with Baudrillard," *Art in America*, June 1988, p. 29.

[14]Lawrence Alloway, "The Public Sculpture Problem," *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (New York, Norton, 1975), p. 246.

[15]Suzi Gablik, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

[16]Curiously enough, and more or less in this context, a lead article appeared by John Russell, the senior (visual) art critic for *The New York Times*, on Sunday, February 18, 1990, titled "Tyrants Fall; Art Endures." In the midst of our elation with the post-Glasnostian democratization of Eastern Europe, Russell explored the moral strengths of art and artists, and their ability to provoke and change society. However, not one visual artist, or one work of visual art was mentioned.

By Amy Baker Sandback

There are plenty of well-presented arguments about the role of art in society, the place of the artist, the enlightenment of the general community offered by the Keepers of the Light, yet personally I have no particular fondness for this line of reasoning. In fact I find this ever-growing mythology a touch self-conscious, a somewhat self-rightness, self-promotion of "art" that is beside the point and practice of it. Disappointingly little time is spent looking and more is spent reading, speaking, and listening to instructions on what to "see." This use of language is rarely employed to suggest the mysteries of creative passion. Rather, the conversation concerns art professionalism, which specifies a patina of morality and literary profundity, among other attributes, as tools needed to achieve success. It is not that I find this discussion of critical issues uninteresting or unimportant, just that I find it secondary to my understanding of art and certainly not primary to any "imperative" of art. As a member of the audience who has willingly sat up front, or been backstage, I find that these verbal justifications do not explain my continuing interest.

I said all this quietly to Mel Pekarsky when he asked me to be on the CAA panel. He said I should say it out loud and in public. So be it. My disclaimer is that the views expressed here cannot be blamed on any person living or dead, nor any reproduction of an object. Therefore I have no visual reinforcements to offer with this text. Only contact with the real thing, an artwork, can illustrate my points.

It seems to me that we have been thoughtfully mesmerized by various literatures to the point of overwhelming the purely visual impact of art. The Druids, we are told, not only worshiped oak groves but were worshipful before such power of words. Modern conservationists still uphold the importance of the forest and the general public appears to agree with the Druid on the consecration of language. Contemporary folk have extended rites of word-play and literary referencing into a science of semiotics and expanded the current priesthood to include scholars, critics, politicians, and selected artists. We listen to these chosen in hope that there will be guidance. As any good heathen will point out, however, words are only symbols for ideas, not fixtures of thought, and their powerful meanings are shaped by public and private perceptions that are fine tuned by considerations far removed and more down to earth than the spiritual. The study of any language, even art language, often becomes a study of the speaker's

sociology, mixed with a fair amount of individual and group psychology. It turns out that the powers of words are in large part what you make out of them, as Lenny Bruce's night club routines filled with "dirty" examples brilliantly mocked in the 1950s. He was jailed, proving that even in modern times word power has been recognized as potentially "awesome," an old word downgraded into commonplace in the 1980s by American teenagers, but here used in its traditional sense.

Take the words "moral" and "art" for example. Both are valid symbols for important contemporary concerns. For me they are two separate considerations. The first has to do in this discussion with the maker, and the second with what is made. To loosely paraphrase the National Rifle Association, Art isn't moral, but artists can be.[1] While I recognize the need for both art and morality in my life, and in the life of my community, I grow uneasy at the idea of the pairing. Isn't trying to equate the experience of art (the science of beauty) with morality (the science of ethics) a merger of two very different and equally abstract languages? And isn't the idea of hyphenating art in the same class as hyphenating Americans? Moral-Art, Yellow-American? How does Red-, White-, and Blue-Moral-American Art sound to the ear? In order to be responsible, we need to define our terms, so bear with me.

The ten volume Century Dictionary devoted six columns of tiny print to the various definitions of MORAL-MORALITY which in turn is followed by MORASS (a tract of low, soft, wet ground, the drainage of which is insufficient either from the depressed situation or from its uniform flatness: a swamp, a bog, a fen) which is where this topic generally leads. Interestingly AESTHETIC takes up only one column, as does ART.

MORAL, "a noun related to ethics, a condition relating to manners, first used by Cicero; manner or custom, pertaining to the rules of right and wrong." Who gets to say?

In the words of *Biblioteca Sacra* XLV. 645 it all began with Adam and Eve. "When in his self-consciousness he (man) realized that through transgression he had become guilty, doubtless all things about him seemed different, because in his own soul there had been a moral revolution." Here enters the idea of accountability.

MORAL "pertains to the mind as opposed to the physical, it pertains to the will or connotative element of the soul as distinguished from the intellect." I personally would prefer to believe that morality is an aspect of a truly developed, well-rounded, healthy intellect.

The very first meaning given for ART is " the second person singular, indicative mood, present tense, of the verb 'to be'." This is more in line

with my views of the familiar relationship hoped for when art is present.

The second section in the dictionary had to do with skill and dexterity; and the third and last with artfulness: "cunning."

To complete this study of key words, we also need: IMPERATIVE, "expressing command; absolute....not to be avoided or evaded; must be attended to or performed; obligatory; binding." In philosophy, IMPERATIVE is listed as "a deliverance of conscience." In grammar the IMPERATIVE MODE, is "the form or set of forms of a verb which express command, entreaty, advice, or exhortation: as 'come here'; 'restrain yourself'."

So there is my very short study of the terminology, from my point of view, and here are my opinions.

I am all for moral persons who happen to be artists, I am for moral viewers for that matter. I would like to suggest that the best part of one's being is activated intimately by the art experience and that this experience allows for true old-fashioned awe. This, for me, is the true content and value of art that questions of subject matter or material or morality stop short of addressing.

On faith I accept the notion that individual response is the key to the meaning of art, that is, its imperative. I agree that this is a subjective judgment on my part. But it is the shock of recognition, the energy that one intuitively acknowledges, that for me is the reason art is so important. Like music, art creates an opening that the fine words we learn in school only go part way in describing. It goes beyond the power of language and cannot be translated. It is rather like the bounce of underwater sonar on an unseen but present object, or like the discussion artist Ian Wilson's questioning of what is not known by discussion of what is, that has haunted my thinking for years and that gives no pat answers, just shapes and patterns of possibilities.

Which brings me to another related area of concern, and that is the role of the contemporary artist as new wave "Guru," and the perception by some that in unspecified ways art-making provides an inside track to a special truth that the rest of humankind are excluded from sharing. As a long-time observer, from the vantage point of an art professional, as a friend, as a neighbor, as the wife of an artist, my field-work indicates that this role is dangerous for all concerned. As a group, it is my empirical conclusion that artists are as flawed and sometimes as brilliant as academics for instance, or doctors, or bricklayers. In personality, political conviction, business ethics, insight into the mysteries of the universe, I have observed no clearly demonstrated advantage or maturity. Fortunately

there are a few wise souls in the world; some are artists. Sometimes this means involvement with political or social or philosophic issues, but not always, not necessarily.

So I restate my earlier paraphrase: There is no such thing as moral art, only moral artists. No style is necessarily moral and no subject matter is necessarily correct or incorrect for carrying forward a moral purpose. No political message or religious symbol necessarily renders great art. Speaking well about art is good for business and builds reputation, but that does not mean that the art discussed is necessarily good. Piggy-backing an aesthetic to an idea or a cause may indicate an important aspect of the personality of the maker, or it may be marketing, simply stylish ideology that in the end produces propaganda and merchandise, not art.

Do I think there is a moral imperative in contemporary art? Not necessarily. I think that there are intelligent artists with good intentions who may make bad art that can sometimes function as useful social advertising; and that bad persons just as conventionally intelligent with less fine intentions, or having an unconventional perversity, have been known to produce masterpieces that in the end have added to the common good. More to the point: who am I or anyone else to pass a moral judgment on a work of art? Hitler tried, Jesse Helms and his friends would like us to, so do certain other academies, both liberal and conservative, that look forward and backward for their vision. If morality is an imperative of art, how do you approach the beauties of an erotic shunga image of sexual contortion, or the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe or Joel Peter Witkin? Or any other sometimes disagreeable talent or subject, or set of events? May I be allowed to bask without guilt in the joy of a lyric Matisse when I know it was done during the French Occupation? I question the man and the history, separate from questioning the value of the artwork.

For me the "art" in each artwork should not be judged, or understood, or confused or fused, with its moral implications. Male members, wide-eyed babies, pretty flowers, and flags of the right and left have nothing to do with art, and everything to do with the texture of society. All these could be the raw material that, as Lévi-Strauss suggests, culture cooks. I would suggest that extraordinary persons are extraordinarily sensitive to this cultural stew whether or not they are artists or plumbers, but I would be surprised by a panel on the moral imperative of plumbing. Why is that? I personally believe in certain political causes. I **generally** believe in art and its ability to make magic, even when it is ugly, or anguished, or performed solely as an intellectual exercise, and even when it is apparently dumb or simply lovely. Subject matter and personal agenda are not fundamental to

the meaning of an artwork. They are ingredients before and after the fact. And for me morality is a judgment, not an aesthetic function.

To quote Sol Lewitt's sentence No. 35, "These sentences comment on art, but are not art."[2]

Notes

1"Guns don't kill, people do."

2"Sentences on Conceptual Art," by Sol LeWitt, *0-9*, no. 5, January 1969. Quoted by Lucy Lippard, *Six Years; The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (London, Studio Vista, 1973), p. 76.

By John Baldessari

First of all I want to comment on Amy's comment about plumbing and art. Richard Serra told me some years ago—we were discussing teaching methods—that he was about to embark on teaching a course—I think it was at Yale—by using plumbing as a metaphor for sculpture. So there you are! Whatever works, I suppose.

I'd like to begin by just telling an anecdote that involves Jeff Koons. (I hope you will forgive me, Jeff!). A couple of weeks ago I was in New York and I met him out in the street in front of our common gallery, Sonnabend, and we said hello and so on. There had just been a profile on him in the *L.A. Times* by a person who is a rock and roll critic in Los Angeles, but occasionally writes about art and was embarked on a series of profiles, and Jeff was one of them, and I thought he had gotten under her skin.

I know her slightly, but she is a good friend of a very good friend of mine. I had asked my friend, "Why do you think she got so bothered, because she deals with rock and roll people all of the time, and certainly Jeff is—in terms of being moral/immoral—nothing compared to what goes on there. I think, you know, that she thought art was the last bastion of morality." She said, "You know, yes. I think she really does believe it," which I thought was rather naive. I passed it on to Jeff and we discussed it for a moment, and his comment, I will treasure it always, because I think it sums up something I want to say here, and I don't even know if he remembers. Jeff said, "Gee, you'd think she thought I was Mark Kostabi or somebody." I use that to illustrate the point that, you know, morality in art is pretty relative.

First of all, I've gotta say, when the question of morality and the moral imperative comes up, I can't help but think about money. I don't know how much—I know there are other things involved. I mean there are a couple of other things I think of, too, and I'll mention them afterward, but money is certainly one of them.

I sort of emerged as an artist with the generation—if you want to call it that—of conceptual-minimal artists. I've seen a lot of art come and go since then, and you get this global view of things, after a while. I remember that in college I was into Abstract Expressionism and Jackson Pollock and the artist as hero, and then came this phase that was all about just art. If you had your photograph taken as an artist then, or an article written about you, that was not so great; you should just have the photograph of the art. And poster sizes got smaller and smaller and smaller until you just had these

little cards being mailed out, with very discrete type on them, and you'd go into the galleries and museums and you'd look around, and it would be kind of hard to see the work, and you could see the end of this coming after a while. A critic friend of mine, Lucy Lippard, said, "You know, it's kind of hard to read the stuff on the wall when you've got a screaming baby under your arm." I think that was the problem for a lot of that art. At any rate it began to wane and you saw posters getting larger and larger and larger and larger until it got to where they are now. And the art began to sort of retreat a little bit and you got to see more of the artist, or at least a compromise where the art was behind the artist in the poster.

Now, why is this? Well, I think people like to have *stuff*—stuff sells—and it's something you can handle and it's physically there. Somebody the other night was commenting—and it comes up time and time again, I was trying to place when and where it happened, all of a sudden—sculpture went from ephemeral materials where it was back there in the sixties and seventies and you never saw any bronze, and now it's hard to escape bronze when you go into a gallery. It's the sort of material you always think of when you see sculpture now, because it's durable and it's something that you can hand over from father to son, and your investment is protected. It won't disintegrate in ten or twenty years. To underscore that point, some months ago I was on a panel at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles about documentation and conservation. I thought, my God, what a boring thing that is, but O.K., I'll go, because I really do have this thing from having taught for some time, about artists photographing their works; that's from the period when things fell apart soon after they were made, and you knew you should have some sort of visual record of it. Some friends of mine were in town from *Parkett* magazine and they wanted to get into the panel and they said they couldn't get in. I said, what do you mean, you can't get in, there aren't going to be any more than six people there. So I called the museum and in fact it was true—all of the seats were sold out! And it was so when I got there. The only reason I can attribute to that kind of crowd was that people are concerned now about art, because all of a sudden, art is beginning to be—well not all of a sudden, but it became quite clear there—it was beginning to be equated with money. So much so that it gets worrisome. I had a conversation a few months back with Richard Prince, and he advanced a rather interesting idea that he thought it was getting to the point that it almost might be that art might be interchangeable with money. You know, art as a medium of exchange, and I've been thinking about that, and whether that's good or bad.

I've seen a lot of exhibits around the world and in private collections, and it seems to me that I walk in and there's some sort of pantheon of wish lists—or not even wishes, it's wishes come true, collections of art that they

want. We don't seem to worry about art unless it makes a lot of money, and all of a sudden it becomes worrisome. I mean, if art that made a lot of money didn't sell, I don't think we would worry about it. It's only then we ask "Is it moral?" "Is it not moral?" You know, Julian Schnabel comes to mind a lot—what if those paintings didn't sell? Actually they might be kind of interesting! I mean you have to think about that! It kind of *looks* very moral, doesn't it? But then we think, God, that sells for a lot of money and then there are those things he says, so it can't be serious. Then, I think about Kiefer. He seems to be very moral, and there are similarities between Kiefer and Schnabel in terms of how they edit the process of their work. It's pretty encrusted. And lately, the more I hear about Kiefer's prices going up, I think, God, I wonder if he's serious about his paintings! I didn't think about that so much before, because he got through to me, but then all of a sudden when money comes in it began to cast a doubt in my mind. This is just a private reaction.

So what have we got here—we've got three K's—Kostabi, Koons, Kiefer—money. I don't know.

I've got to say I had an argument one night at a bar in New York with a very close friend of mine about Jeff's work (and Jeff, I was defending it). She was getting very irate, and felt that somehow it was immoral. I said, why is it immoral? She said, well, it caters to the lowest common denominator—you know, bourgeois taste. And I said, what's wrong with that? If people respond to it, it's okay. If they don't respond to it, it's okay. Why are you getting so upset? But here's this person I thought was very understanding of people and knew how people operate in the world and who they are, as Amy said, and this seemed sort of unlikely. I like that about Jeff's work—that he can bring that issue to the fore. If I match him up against Kiefer and think about seriousness, and then if all of a sudden there's money involved, I will suspect Kiefer's motives. But what I like about Jeff is that he is a direct equation. I don't know if I'm saying this properly, but I don't *suspect* him. He seems to reflect our culture perfectly. (We'll discuss this later Jeff!).

Now, having been an artist and teacher an equal length of time, I am very suspicious of anybody who tells anyone what kind of art they should do. God knows I've done it, but I try not to. I remember an old dealer friend of mine in Germany saying that art should have no message. And that stuck in my mind for a long time, and I still do think about it. I do know that once I start thinking about doing the art I want to do, or should I do what the culture needs, all of a sudden I begin to stifle a big yawn. When I hear that, I think it can induce a certain kind of paralysis. Van Gogh used to talk about being paralyzed in front of a white canvas. How about being paralyzed

in front of the question of what is the right art to do? That could really paralyze. So I think it really probably gets down to a question of—and this is going on my own experience of teaching and doing art—doing what one does best. I know it sounds banal but it goes deeper than that. I think a lot about athletes here—when they find out what their strengths are and what their weaknesses are, they work on their strengths. This is something I have tried to do with students that I have come in contact with. As I get to know them more and more, and I get to see certain strengths, those are the things that I push. And their weaknesses I try to get them to forget about. Now I may be greatly wrong about assessing them, but that's the chance you take. I have no idea of what's going to come out, and sometimes I have an idea, and I feel a little bit like Dr. Frankenstein, but those are the breaks. One cannot dictate what should come out, but you can train people, the prospective artist, to do that which they do best and fine tune that. To me that is moral purpose—to use all of the strengths that you have. And maybe art won't come out as a result, but I think it has a pretty good chance.

By Luis Camnitzer*

I would like to start by quoting from something I wrote some years ago. It applies to the subject under discussion, but my interest in it here goes beyond the content of the statement. The quote is "We live the alienating myth of primarily being artists. We are not. We are primarily ethical beings sifting right from wrong and just from unjust, not only in the realm of the individual, but in communal and regional contexts. In order to survive ethically we need a political awareness that helps us understand our environment and develop strategies for our actions. Art becomes the instrument of our choice to implement these strategies."

Though I believe it is a neat statement, I am not using it just to satisfy my own presumptuousness. I am interested in what happened to the statement. It appeared, at the time, on the cover of *The New Art Examiner,* with big white letters on a violently red background, looking like a piece by Barbara Kruger. I was thrilled and flattered by the exposure, but it made me ponder the ethical implications of appearing within the aesthetics of the cover. A statement which I had written in the context of a larger article, and meant to be read as such, had been transformed into an appealing object. So very appealing, at least for me, that I framed it. But, the content of the statement had lost its original immediacy and surrounding atmosphere as designed by me. It became encapsuled and fetishized in the alien space of a magazine cover.

I am, of course, cynical and vain enough not to regret the event at all. However, it is clear that the manipulatory steps used to engage the consumer of a magazine cover are radically different from those manipulatory steps used by the writer of an article or by an artist in a piece to convey a message to the reader or to the viewer. While all these steps vaguely belong to the category of packaging, it is clear that each medium and product has its own code for how the manipulation shall proceed according to its destination. A thoughtless substitution can create the same havoc as when detergent is packaged as perfume.

The question is not *if* we manipulate the viewer, but what do we want to achieve by manipulating the viewer, and what means do we employ to do so. I am using the word "manipulation" on purpose. In common usage it has negative connotations and we always avoid its use when we describe art processes. We prefer to use euphemisms like "composition" and "design," and to deal with decisions about media, colors and size as if they were imbued with divine purity. In both negative and positive

interpretations we are acknowledging the presence of an ethical component which transcends the choice and values of the content. This is important, since usually morals are mostly attached to the storytelling part of art and avoided in the rest. The word "manipulation" has an ethical (or unethical) aura. The word "composition" has only an aesthetic aura, which in artistic terms is positive.

The use of positive euphemisms for words with negative connotations is more often than not a sign of hypocrisy. In this case, the hypocrisy helps hide the fact that we are organizing and prioritizing information so that the consumer shares with us not what there is to share, but that which we want to be shared. The shift of the action from ethics into aesthetics propitiates and confirms the delusion that it is only those decisions pertaining to content which have an ethical quality. Ethics thus becomes something literary, a quality frowned upon by visual aesthetics, and can be dismissed.

By speaking of manipulation we are forced to acknowledge the presence of a public. By speaking of composition, on the other hand, we can indulge in the belief that art primarily consists of an intimate dialogue with the materials. The public is supposed to relate to this dialogue only in an incidental way, through voyeurism. By speaking of composition we don't have to decide whom we want to address with our art, aside from wanting to make it in a big gallery. We thus neglect one of our first possible ethical decisions, the one that places us in the context of society. It is interesting to note that the vast majority of artists working on art projects for the light board on Times Square resort to written political messages, no matter what their "normal" art work is. Suddenly the public's voyeurism can't be ignored and the dangers of visual pollution, happily marketed by galleries, becomes unacceptable in a truly public arena.

By disguising and erasing processes in and with aesthetic patinas, we ignore the fact that what we call aesthetics is no more than the formal packaging of our product. It is our personal form of packaging, a factor that defines our artistic individuality, something that therefore is sacred and worth money. We further compound the problem with an obscurantist mysticism still prevalent in art matters. This mysticism tries to make us rely on inspiration and taste to resolve artistic problems instead of using them as tools for adjustment to perfect whatever we really want to say. We are thus led to neglect both the clear formulation of communication problems and the emphasis on the visual feasibility of the package in relation to those problems.

Commercial marketing procedures of consumer products are much more straightforward and honest. Their mercenary quality is upfront. A

market is defined and a product developed (or vice-versa) and the packaging is developed accordingly. What, why, and for whom, are the leading questions, and only then comes the appearance. We may not agree with the motivation, but there is an ethical consistency. Any mistake in the answers to those questions ensures economic failure, so they had better be correct. The adoption of the same questions in art would help to place ourselves in our society and clarify when we are attempting to make a profit, affect society, or when we are limiting our work to act as self-therapy. It is a clarity we gingerly employ to dismiss (mostly the motivations of) schlock art and other marginalia, but we are more careful when we address other cohabitants in the space of our elite or—God forbid—ourselves.

Most of our art is socially muddled, even when it functions effectively in the market. The secret or explicit wish of most artists is to be able to live off their art production. At the same time, a profit motive in art is seen as unethical. We want it both ways, to be non-mercenary and pure and to be paid for our magic in a mercenary and non-magical society. In essence, we are dreaming of living in a monarchical court or in a utopic socialist society, depending on what end of the political spectrum we belong to. But few of us feel the urge to help society develop in a corresponding direction. It is in this dissociation of the art produced and our implicit or explicit dreams, that we tend to become amoral.

By placing the ethical commitment solely on content, we may feel better, but we fail to address the issue. We merely confirm the dissociation and hope to solve two different problems with one and the same solution. By relying on taste and inspiration to define the aesthetics of packaging that content, we place the responsibility for whatever happens on an unconscious and unchallenged ideological platform. Because of our inattention, this ideological platform, more often than not, escapes our control. We thus let decisions be made for us instead of by us.

Lately a link has been established between ethics and postmodernism. I do not see this moralist surge in postmodernism, at least not as compared to a presumed lack of morals in modernism. Modernism had its own moral imperative, a utopic belief that art could better society. While the building of a language was attempted to express that construct, conservative tendencies were lurking in the background during all of its reign. Much of postmodernism uses these conservative tendencies as an illustrious and validating genealogy. With this genealogy, and because of it, postmodernism is not really an aesthetic developed as an answer to modernism. It is rather a parallel aesthetic picked up by the market to

occupy modernism's place upon exhaustion. Simultaneously, the postmodern label also served to co-opt and unify some artistic expressions dealing with the consciousness and assertion of local identities. The potential challenge to the notion of an international style was thus defused. To a certain extent, postmodernism can be seen as the de-moralization of older, anti-formalist tendencies, and their placement into a conservative context, while re-internationalizing and unifying what threatened to become a nationalist fragmentation in art.

This is not to say that ethics have no role in art today. But when issues connected with ethics appear, unlike what happened in the past, they do so marked by the absence of an awareness of posterity. Speculation about art issues leaves out a previously existing aim at atemporality. Doomsday has abandoned the signs carried by the cartoon crackpots of *The New Yorker* and marked a potential and credible end of history. As a consequence, much of the art being made has short term goals. Some art is produced to transform artists into commercial and self-profiting icons, rather than to create icons to serve cultural enrichment. Other art is produced to denounce the end of history, rather than to create an environment where that termination becomes an impossibility.

But, whatever the art historical interpretation of our present may be, our art tradition has always been far from being drenched in ethics, even in the cases where the concern is a present prone to catastrophe. As artists we are easily enchanted by effects which may appear during work and we do not have any scruples about pursuing them no matter how much the subsequent results may contradict our original intentions. We rarely challenge in depth the parameters which define art or the technical constraints offered by art history. Though there are occasional ruptures, for the majority of artists, art has been an evolutionary process with much taken for granted. But in the specific case of ethics, even Walt Disney had surpassed the notion of them being constrained to content. He forced symbolic values onto form. In his work, things drawn with curves are cute and good. Things angular are dangerous and evil.

It is the taking for granted of this superficial and frivolous approach to ethics which, understandably, helped disseminate the widespread National Rifle Association philosophy of art: Art is not ethical, only artists are. It is also what generated the commerce of art which attacks commerce, or the making of murals which present anti-fascist issues in a fascist manner.

It is undeniable that much art escapes and even contradicts the personal ethics of the artist. Emile Nolde was a good Nazi but never understood why

his regime didn't allow him to be an official artist with the art he was making. Fortunately, and who knows for how long, it is accepted that his art was better than his politics. While it is conceivable that with a greater historical perspective his art and politics may fit into a coherent continuum, any possible consistency still eludes us today. It would seem that he either didn't draw political conclusions from his art or that he was unable to express himself fully. No matter how interesting his "better" half may be for us, he had a problem. Had he been able to solve it (in the direction of our own values, of course), he might have been an even better artist and a less despicable person. By accepting the separation of art and ethics as an unmovable fact, we would in fact condone split personality, intellectual laziness, and inarticulateness as acceptable positive values. The resolution of the inconsistency should at least be taken up as a challenge, even if any neat solutions may appear to be unattainable.

If we really want to deal with ethics in art we will have to anchor all the questions pertaining to the art-making process—*what*, *why*, and *for whom*, with a later, *how*?—on a solid ethical foundation. In certain environments—for instance, those urged by a political crisis—it is conceivable that the act of taking a brush into one's hand, to restrict production to accepted artistic techniques, may condemn all the decisions following to be spurious and invalid. Only with a total ethical inquiry covering every step of the art-making process, an inquiry not yet seriously addressed by artists or art educators, may we have a chance of developing a truly valid aesthetic for our time and environment.

We do have clear opinions about the code of ethics of the members of all the other professions while we are not clear about our own. It is interesting to see how we can complain about artists not yet being accepted as full partners in society, without even attempting to sift through the complex mesh of painful ignorance, defensiveness, and justified resentment, which together with selective elitarian success, produce our alienation. It is interesting too that as university art educators, in fact forming more future university art educators than future artists, we were never trained in teaching nor do we prepare our students for it. Not only do we seem to believe in shamanism, but it is one based on self-appointment, osmosis and self-service.

Maybe we should start by recognizing that a successful work of art is the meeting ground of two radically opposed dynamics. With the created object or situation, the artist is trying to work his or her way out of a known ground and push the audience into the unknown. The manipulation by the artist is orchestrated to achieve the crossing of the border. The audience,

on the other hand, tries desperately to push the disconcerting feeling of the unknown back into the context of everyday cultural commonplaces. The tension produced is not always a friendly one and leads to a despising condescension on the side of the artist, and to total rejection on the side of the audience. The split is tainted by ethical judgment. It resolves itself by name calling. The crazies and the elitists versus the philistines and the ignorants. The creation of a strong common ethical ground seems to be more urgent than the development of new fashionable packaging codes. Once this ground is established, the more speculative, research-oriented and—in terms of communication—more rarified art, will then also be freed of its own demagogy. Our work with the unknown makes us researchers, not magicians. The mystification may sell well, but it is unbecoming.

*It seems relevant to note that Luis Camnitzer refused on principle an NEA grant for a retrospective exhibition at Lehman College Gallery the past year owing to the "obscenity" clause that had to be signed on accepting.
M.P.

By Suzi Gablik*

Speaking for myself, as a critic in the late 1980s, I am not really interested in writing catalogue essays or art reviews. What I am concerned with is understanding the nature of our cultural myths and how they evolve—the institutional framework we take for granted but which nevertheless determines our lives. One question which preoccupies me, for instance, is what it actually means to be a "successful" artist working in the world today; and whether the image that comes to mind is one that we can support and believe in.

For a long time now, Western civilization has been obsessed with ideas of dominance and mastery: the dominance of humans over nature, of masculine over feminine, of the wealthy and powerful over the poor, and of Western over non-Western cultures. The same goals of dominance and mastery which have now become the formula for global destruction are crucial to our society's notion of success—it is a logic that pervades every experience in contemporary culture. Nor is art some ancillary phenomenon, struggling to overcome the forces of instrumental reason; it is heavily implicated in this ideology, and we can no longer ignore our own participation in this process. The institutions and practices of the art world are modeled on the same configurations of power and profit that support and maintain the dominant world view of this society and keep the ball of patriarchal high capitalism rolling. Art has been totally sucked into the giant web of all our cultural addictions—to work, money, possessions, prestige, materialism—the whole "business as usual" and psychology of affluence that is now threatening the ecosystem in which we live with its dysfunctional values and way of life. It is all a single system manipulating the individual into the spiritually empty relationship of the producer to the product.

The mechanism doesn't require that art do much, just reproduce the economic will-to-power of the dominator system. Nevertheless, the "transaction" mentality is highly skeptical of anyone who tries to break out of its credo of success. Start being out of touch with the cultural ideals of economic success and competitive striving, start challenging these ingrained perceptions of how we understand our place in the world, and you threaten to break the barriers that keep us locked in denial: at stake is our personal identity in relation to a particular view of life that our culture has made available to us.

Most people are aware that the system isn't working—that it is time to move on and to revise the destructive myths that are guiding us. We have been programmed into a belief-structure that is losing its feasibility as a social form because it is destroying the integrity of the earth, but we can't recover without being open to transformation: recovery is the willingness to make a systems shift. You might even say this change of consciousness has become the moral imperative of our time: de-hypnotizing ourselves from the way our culture directs us to perceive the world, easing ourselves out of the exaggerated modes of striving, dominance, and mastery that have begun to destroy us. What are the implications of such a change in consciousness, then, for art? One thing is clear: to be able to see our own practice as actively contributing to the most serious problems of our time requires a change of heart. Art which is totally the product of the way of thinking of this society is unlikely to reorient it in any way. Unless serious efforts are made to reassess our relationship to the present framework and its practices, new patterns won't take hold. Vested interests will ensure that they are maintained as before. Until we produce an alternative model, nothing significant will alter. If we want things to change, we will need to evolve new "ground rules" for the future that no longer bear the mark of the imperatives of this culture, where art has become something to fill galleries with, a pretext for putting oneself on display that virtually implies the deletion of all other concerns. So right now, the moral task before us (as I see it) is to identify which approaches to art make sense in today's world, and which ones are self-defeating or destructive.

The whole framework of aesthetics, as it was constructed by modernism, came out of the objectifying consciousness of the scientific world view; and like scientists in our culture, artists have been encouraged not to worry about the applications or consequences of their activity. It is enough to generate results. Just as the shortcomings of "objective" science are now becoming apparent, we are also beginning to perceive how the reductive aspects of aesthetics, and "art for art's sake," have removed art from any living or social context except that of academic art history and the gallery system, crippling its effectiveness and influence.

Allan McCollum's *Plaster Surrogates,* for instance, are a shrewd commentary on what occurs when a guiding truth becomes bankrupt. They exemplify, perhaps better than any other deconstructive work, the paradigmatic inertia of aesthetic codes that have become just another petrified formula for an image-driven society of spectacle. Mass-produced in assembly-line quantities, they have the "look" of pictures (a surrogate is the reduction of something to its essential characteristics), but there is

nothing to see. By representing the art object in its modal existence as commodity and spectacle, McCollum is simply laying bare the function it fulfills in relation to the culture at large. A crisis of purpose is at stake here and, to quote Jean Baudrillard, "the boil is growing out of control." Through overproduction and excess the system over-extends itself, accumulates, sprawls, slides into hypertrophy, obliterates its own purposes, leaves behind its own goals and accelerates in a vacuum. "I'm just doing the minimum that is expected of an artist and no more," McCollum has stated. "I'm trying to orchestrate a charade." But even simulations cannot escape the system's ability to integrate everything—because collectors will buy them, dealers will show them, and critics will write about them. When art, as Peter Halley puts it, is "reconstituted according to the processes of bourgeois consciousness," the thing that everybody really talks about is how to get a show. Without any socially relevant role to play, the artist has embraced the part of an achievement-oriented professional, in avid pursuit of sales and reviews—although these desires, as we know, do not always contain their own fulfillment. McCollum captures it all brilliantly, in a single Gestalt: the intensification of the aesthetic process in a void. In his book, *The Disenfranchisement of Art,* Arthur Danto speaks about the need to emancipate art from its own disenfranchising theories of art. Since what distinguishes aesthetics most precisely is the desire for art free of the pretensions of doing the world any good, we will never arrive at any true assessment of what art can and cannot do, I now believe, until we have deconstructed the assumptions of the aesthetic mode itself.

Exposing the radical autonomy of aesthetics as part of the economic ideology of capitalism—as just another tool of patriarchy that helps to perpetuate the dominator system—has been the chief value of the aggressive ground-clearing work of deconstruction. Institutional models based on notions of product development and career achievement merely echo the stereotypic patriarchal ideals and values that have been internalized by our whole culture. The move away from modernism may well be underway, but to truly leave it behind will be possible only when we have evolved another kind of vision than the kind of theoretical vision, premised on mastery, inherited from the Renaissance. But if the frame is dissolved, then we are released from the reifying tendencies and spectatorial orientation associated with the fixed gaze, and we are in the presence of another vision entirely. Vision premised on empathy rather than on mastery is cognitively geared to the achievement of very different goals.

In September 1987, my friend Dominique Mazeaud, who now lives in

Santa Fe, began an art project which she calls "The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River." Once a month, armed with garbage bags donated by the city, she and a few friends who sometimes accompany her meet to clean pollution out of the river. Part of her work involves keeping a diary, of which the following are some extracts:

"Nov. 19, 1987. My friend Margaret drops me off at Delgado promptly at 9:00 a.m. Because of the snow I was not sure of the conditions I would find but did not doubt a second that I would put in my day. I find a stone warmed by the morning sun which makes a perfect site for my beginning prayer....Yes, I see what I am doing as a way of praying:

> Picking up a can
> From the river
> And then another
> On and on
> It's like a devotee
> Doing countless rosaries.

"November 24. Visitors stop by my door and look at a group of objects laid down on a strip of fabric. 'What is this?' they ask. 'These are some of the treasures I have collected from the river.' 'You found this little girl's shoes?' 'Yes,' I reply, 'even the two $5 bills....' I really enjoy talking about the river, as if she were my friend.

"I am glad I am walking slowly...because it allows me to catch great 'pictures.' It's not that I can carve them out and put them in a frame when I get home, but it is that they are such strong images that they quickly fill the screen of my mind. They are called 'soul-imprints' in my river vocabulary.

"December 2. Why in all religions is water such a sacred symbol? How much longer is it going to take us to see the trouble of our waters? How many more dead fish floating on the Rhine River...? How many kinds of toxic waste dumpings? When are we going to turn our malady of separateness around? Most of the glass we find is broken, but even so, the two of us picked up 103 lbs. in the forteen hours of work we put in that day.

"How many times did I wonder about the persons who hurl the beer bottles down the rocks: in the upper part of the river or, later on, from or under the bridges, trying to imagine what went into this action. Is it that man is inherently violent, is it that there is nothing else to do other than smashing bottles into the river? Is it pure and simple fun?

"March 19.

I can't get away from you river
In the middle of the night
I feel you on my back
In my throat, in my heart....

"We decide to clean the dumping area and set out to work. This is a more delicate operation than picking up 'a can and then another.' It's soiled rabbit litters, crates filled with rotting fruit scattered all over, and more. Some of it is encrusted in the ice, some of it has been burned. As soon as we start stirring, the offensive smell of the decaying fruit hits us and the ashes soil the water...what a mess, but we get to it 'faces down,' so to speak.

"July 14. Today I realize that, in fact, it is the first time I am truly alone in the river.... I went to the block where, back in November, I not only saw the suffering of the river but also the death of the river. Just as I could no longer walk on trashed riverbanks without doing something about it, I could no longer be there without transposing my witnessing into some form that people could share. That day I started my 'riveries.'

"July 20. Two more huge bags I could hardly carry to the cans. I don't count anymore...I don't announce my 'art for the earth' in the papers either. I don't report my finds nor my time for the newsletter of *Santa Fe Beautiful*. All alone in the river, I pray and pick up, pick up and pray.

"Who can I really talk to about what I see? I feel the pain quietly, knowing that I, too, must have been unconscious at one time. I have also noticed I stopped collecting the so-called treasures of the river. It was OK at the beginning, but today I feel it was buying into the present system of art that's so much object-oriented. Is it because I am saying that what I am doing is art that I need to produce something?

"November 10. I call my river-journal my 'riveries;'...Is it too sweet a word for the feelings that my 'river-musings' often bring up in me? Would 'rageries' describe them better? But do I really rage? I have been talking a lot about feeling pain, sadness. Is rage my next step? Would rage affect the way of my work? Would it make me more of an activist than I am? Would it make me more opened to the community about what it is that I am doing in the river?"

In 1917 Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal and called it art, although at the time there wasn't any concept yet in place to explain such an act of transgression. Today Mazeaud's project is equally startling because it isn't based on a transgression of the aesthetic codes at all. The creative

relationship is with the internalized feminine rather than the patriarchal aesthetic tradition. It reflects a completely different approach to the world, since it comes from a different integrating myth: compassion. Carlos Castaneda calls it the "path with a heart." We have so little experience with making art on this basis that we are unlikely to feel at ease with it. This is definitely not art in the fast lane, based on chronic hyperactivity and jockeying for positional importance. It is not just a variation on the old system, but represents a genuine restructuring of the artist's role. The bottom line here is that McCollum's simulations pass more easily as "real" art than Mazeaud's project of picking up the garbage because McCollum still manages to retain a negative relationship with the tradition of theoretical aesthetics.

The first step in any reframing process is to become conscious of how much the values and dictates of the dominant culture have been internalized. For once fully conscious of how we have been conditioned to follow a certain program, we can begin to surrender some of these cultural images and role models as personal ideals. The possibility then opens for actually modifying the framework and not just being immersed in it.

As we begin to search for the blueprint that is hidden away in our own work, we shall need to decide whether or not it answers the call. And what is the call? It is, to quote my friend Caroline Casey, "that nothing which is not socially and ecologically responsible make it out of this decade alive." For me, moving away from the competitive modes of institutionalized aesthetics is one way of not perpetuating the "dominator" system—foregoing its rites of production and consumption, its mythology of professionalism and its power archetype of "success." Only then can we begin to evolve a different set of ground rules for the future. But transformation is not just change; the willingness to make this systems shift, as I have already stated, is the beginning of recovery.

*Excerpted from Suzi Gablik's forthcoming book by Thames Hudson, *The Re-enchantment of Art*.

By Jeff Koons

What I'm going to do this afternoon is show a history of my work from 1978 to the present time, and you can just more or less see how, as a contemporary artist, I have been functioning within some of the dialogue that we've been speaking about here. I personally do believe that there is a great shuffling and shifting for power right now: the art world, its place within power. I'm also an optimist. I really believe that things beneficial to humankind will be absorbed into evolution, and things that are negative will be destroyed.

I'm going to start showing photos. This is a work from 1978. It's one of my inflatable pieces. I was buying objects that were brand new, but they were sold just in inflatable stores. The flowers were sold for modern home decor, and this is when I did the first rabbit that I ever did. I wanted to show this, only to explain later on why I did my stainless steel casting.

I had studied painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art and also at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and for myself, the act was a little too subjective. I felt that I was dealing just with issues that were too personal, and I was going through a process of trying to cleanse myself. In this work, I think my own sexuality is very evident. I tried to remove my sexuality more by starting to work with my appliance pieces. This work is not new. It's pre-new. I was working at the Museum of Modern Art, and I was seeing tremendous exhibitions in the Projects gallery. Barbara London was doing a Bill Viola exhibition. They had a Jackie Winsor show, and also the Architecture and Design Department in the late seventies was really doing interesting exhibitions. This had an affect on me. What I was doing was mounting objects on modernists' backgrounds—like a Mondrian background. Most of the backgrounds were Mondrian, but I was manipulating the objects. I was putting bolts right through the back of them. I wasn't preserving the integrity of the object. I decided that I did not like this work for just those reasons—active manipulation and removing the integrity. The only way this would become of interest and hopefully start to develop into art was to maintain the integrity of the object and just let it display itself—its newness. So even though these objects aren't encased here—this is 1980—I was displaying them for their newness. That's a Duratran light box that says "the new."

These objects are just hanging on normal holes that are on the back of the handles, to put them in a broom closet or have plastic clips. This is a close-up of rug shampooers. The reason I was using the vacuum cleaners

was also because of the anthropomorphic quality, like breathing machines. The rug shampooers, for me, tend to be more masculine than maybe some of the other vacuum cleaners. But also they can be androgynous at times, some of them, because they have both phallic shapes to them and also feminine qualities. This is the first—well, no it's not the first—but it's the drawing for the first one, which ended up being the second encased piece. At this point I'm displaying an object for its newness. I had removed the modernist backgrounds when these pieces were on the wall. That was coming from my painting tradition, and I just used white fluorescent light to support a commercial aspect of display—these objects are just displaying their newness—they are removed.

It's about the Gestalt that an individual would have of being confronted with an object that can be in an immortal situation. It's about negotiation between the animate and the inanimate. On the side, it says "wet-dry." I used these vacuum cleaners a lot. They have a relation to my tanks as we go on. I also did double-deckers. This is 1980-81. And this is for the interest of the interrelationships, and the type of information that is communicated back and forth between the objects. This is a triple-decker. So I stopped doing this work in 1981, and I re-thought the type of work that I wanted to do. I did not want to continue to do the encased pieces.

By the way, the works that we looked at—my double-deckers and triple-deckers—cost me about $3,000 to make. So I had to position myself so that I was able to be of service to my art—that my art wasn't being controlled by my income, but that I would control my activity for my works. So I did work on Wall Street just so I would be in a position to finance my own work. I have always been at the service of my art.

This is a one-ball total equilibrium tank. The new was really about birth—right after the moment of birth—to display the integrity and to be immortal. This is more a pre-birth situation. And this is, as was the new, an ultimate state of being; here I'm also showing equilibrium as an ultimate state of being. I think that the basketball enabled me to show that ultimate states of being do not have to be just personal, but can be social states of being, and can be cellular and womb-like.

My vacuum cleaner pieces were always looked at in more of a feminine vein; people would always think of photos of the housewife vacuuming the home of the fifties, or just Pop Art in the sixties. I wanted to show more of a darker side of consumerism, and I worked more in masculine colors in the equilibrium work. Everything is brown, or the bronze is brown and heavy: black stands, orange basketballs, most of the athletes here are male basketball players. There are some females, one is a *Woman of The*

Williams. But also, this is a liberation for me. I had to display the newness of objects and maintain their integrity and keep these plexiglass cubes so perfect in precision down to a thousandth in construction. Keep them clean. This is liberating work. I don't have to keep everything so clean with these tanks, though, and I don't have to maintain the integrity of the basketball. The tanks, I think, are ultimate states of being.

Then there were my Nike posters—this was a trinity of work: tanks, Nikes, and bronzes. But my Nikes were sirens. They were the great deceivers. They were saying, "Look, I have achieved equilibrium, you know, you can do it too. Go for it." But of course they are just a front man because if they did achieve equilibrium they would be dead. Because the tools of equilibrium, such as the aqua lung, would take you under. If you'd put that on your back and go for equilibrium, it would kill you. I was trying to show that just as a basketball is used by some ethnic groups for the possibility of mobility—for social mobility—that some white middle-class kids were using art for social mobility; and just as the basketball players become front men, so do artists.

Here's a three-ball tank. Now this is a fifty-fifty tank related to my wet-dry vacuum cleaner: on the vacuum cleaner, it said "wet-dry." Here we have the same situation; half of the tank is wet, the other is open, but it's either/or, being or nothingness. So this is also an ultimate state of being. The interrelationships that happen within some of my encased pieces state my interest. Here, in a three-ball tank, due to vibration, the balls will move, and on the date when this photograph was shot, the balls happened to be in this configuration. The next day, maybe there were two on this end and one over here. To me this is the beginning of artificial intelligence, this is like the beginning of a thought pattern. It's a very womb-like situation. So even if you saw the tanks and you had the desire for this ultimate state of being, and the Sirens were pulling you under and you were going for their deceptions, and you went for it, you put the aqua lung on, and somehow you got it off your back, or you used a snorkel and it chipped your teeth, and you resurfaced and you saw the boat there, and you swam and you crawled in it, it would take you under because it weighs six hundred pounds. There is no salvation.

This is just to show the interrelationships of the objects, the trinity. This was my exhibition at International With Monument in 1985. This was more or less my return and trying to deal with the commercial art world. I had brief experiences with the commercial art world in 1980 and 1981 with galleries such as the Mary Boone Gallery and the Annina Nosei Gallery. I didn't enjoy the experience too much, and I dealt more with

alternative spaces, universities, and private curators from the years 1981 until I came back in 1985 with more confidence to try and participate in the commerical art world.

This is another installation. After doing that body of work—the equilibrium work, in 1986—I did a series called *Luxury and Degradation,* and I wanted to give a mild, panoramic view of society, and show how luxury and abstraction are the guard dogs of the upper class, and how the aristocracy will use luxury and abstraction to take away, of course, your power: to take away your chips—your economic base. They do want people to have a lot of gumption, and if you can go through mobility and change your class structure, that's wonderful, but eventually they'll get you. I was trying to show how advertising is used to manipulate along with luxury objects, and so on. The average public is really not prepared for the intensity and the abstraction of advertising. A lot of us in this room are involved with art and we have more of an understanding of abstraction than the average person. Advertising can be extremely intense and debasing.

This is like a poor man's decanter. Everything was based on alcohol. This is just a bucket with liquid measurement. It's in stainless steel. This is fake luxury; I'm trying to meet the needs of the people. It's a poor man's decanter. Maybe someone would milk a cow in it.

On the opposite end of this panoramic view, as far as I went to the edge of the upper class, to the guard dog, was a Baccarat crystal set, which is also stainless steel, polished to a mirror finish. Going along with these different objects that I had—I did eight different objects—I had paintings, and they were targeted at different income levels. Everything was based around alcohol. This is the lowest targeting price, at $15,000, that an advertising company will deal with in alcohol. This is *Aqui...Bacardi.* I took all these paintings—they were originally ads, and I had them reprinted on canvas—from the subway system in New York, so I went to the South Bronx and to low income areas in Harlem, and I would ride that train into the highest income area of targeting, which is Grand Central Station, and what *Aqui...Bacardi* is really saying is, take your weekly paycheck and throw things up in the air and take things as they fall. For somebody, if this is as far as they can go in levels of abstraction and luxury, then this is it, they'll take your chips here. But if you can continue to go farther up to where they target you to the height of a $45,000 income, then you're lost in total abstraction and lost within yourself—such as my Frangelica ad which is just "stay in tonight."

In the center of all of this is a symbol. The center of all of this, the middle class, was symbolized by the *Jim Beam J.B. Turner Train,* and this was a

full length train, but each car was a fifth of liquor. Now, this is a total coordination—I am able to give the public this fake luxury and to try to meet the needs of the people (and I think polished stainless steel gives a sense of entropy), but the only thing that will preserve my alcohol forever is stainless steel, so if a collector who may have the train, or individual car like this, the engine, if they ever break the seal and they drink the alcohol, they can learn the basic things about abstraction, and even art—how dislocated thought patterns start to create interesting things, and can be creative and abstract, but they've killed the piece as a work of art!

This is another piece—this is my *Fisherman/Golfer*. There is a lot of distortion that takes place also in these objects; the room will be upside-down in the reflection of it, and it's to seduce and to try to meet the needs of people. This was a symbol of mobility for myself and my parents in the sixties. As we were moving up in the middle class we got larger and larger homes, and we'd buy more and more horses. They would always be carrying travelling bars with them wherever they would go. Trips to Puerto Rico. This is also somebody becoming more and more dependent on alcohol; the underlying theme is the alcoholic, and with the alcohol, how degradation sets in. And luxury and abstraction can be degradation.

So after doing that work, I did this work [*Louis XIV*] for Sonnabend three months later in 1986. I wanted to show again a little panoramic view of how art functions, really, since the revolution. I am very interested in the objective and subjective in art, and I see things as prior to the French Revolution as being very objective and after the Revolution becoming more subjective, but I wanted to show that no matter who you place art in the hands of, that eventually art will become reflective of their ego, and eventually decorative.

Now, I wanted to do art that almost looked out of the control of myself, and of course, if you put art in my hands—any artist's—it's going to become reflective of ego and eventually become decorative, but also, if you put art in the hands of a monarch, such as *Louis XIV*, it's going to become reflective of *his* ego and eventually decorative, and if you put art in the hands of the masses, which Bob Hope to me is a symbol of, eventually it will become reflective of their collective ego and become decorative. (I really believe that Bob Hope does not go out and tell a joke because he subjectively thinks it's funny, you know. He goes out and he'll tell a joke because the night before he got a tremendous response to it.) And of course, art in the hands of the masses does become victimized, and the person participating as the artist also becomes victimized. But you have to be able to control that victimization, and to be able to take the

responsibility to then victimize others, to still try to communicate. And it seems as though artists and the art world tend to have a great fear of that responsibility to communicate, while to me, that's what I thought we were supposed to be: the Great Communicators.

Meanwhile other industries now, of course, are continuing to grow, and to be truly the great communicators: the advertising industry, the entertainment industry. So I'm trying to show how art has also functioned in Western European Art since the Revolution; here's art as sexuality, which is *Doctors Delight*, a recast Capodamonte piece. This is my rabbit, which was art as fantasy. I like the rabbit because it tends to have the look of an orator, somebody giving oration, but also as a masturbator with a carrot up to his mouth, and I wanted it also to be a symbol, like the ball that's out in a bird bath in suburbia.

This is a piece of two kids, which is a symbol of morality to me. It has a little allegory taking place there, where maybe it's raining or something's happening, but the one child is spilling the other one's porridge. This is actually a marble that was originally in two pieces and here in stainless steel is two pieces and the spoon comes out of the hand of the one baby so if worse comes to worse, you have a spoon to eat off of.

This is the *Kiepenkerl* piece that I did in West Germany. This was a disaster in casting which enabled me to free myself more, and work more closely with allegory and with my hands—not my own hands but artisans' hands. These are some of my new porcelain works from 1989. This is called *Serpents*. I wanted to do a body of work that dealt with the horror on the face of the Masaccio painting of the *Expulsion*. What this new body of work was trying to do was to remove the guilt and the shame, and it is extremely bourgeois work. This is the bourgeois response to dislocated imagery—and to banal imagery. The only way the bourgeois can move forward and be able to create a new aristocracy, to be another upper class, to be another power source, is to embrace themselves in a move forward and not to backtrack and to feel guilt and shame. This is trying to show Adam and Eve: instead of knowledge being an original sin, this is sex.

This is *Ushering in Banality*.

This is God is on my side, whether or not anyone else is. This is *St. John* and this is to be baptized in banality, and the only way to really participate and to be effective is to be baptized in banality: to be able to embrace oneself and who one is and what they respond to. The rallying cry of the bourgeois is banality. And you can be that after you are baptized in banality. This is an interface between the victim and victimizer.

That's a woman in the tub.

This is the *Winter Bears*. The heart could be romantic; it could be the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

This is *Amore*. This is about self-power, even though it says, "I love you."

That's Buster Keaton as Christ. Optimistic, but not prepared for the journey.

This is *Fait d'Hiver,* it also tries to deal with globalization. I know advertising firms have given up on the idea of globalization, but artists are really the best prepared for that. I believe globalization can occur, but somehow you have to be able to unite Cicelina and Michael Jackson.

By Robert Storr

Talk of morality usually brings out the worst in people. Right wing demagoguery is only the most obvious example. Average earnestness also casts a pall on art. Intellectually, in fact, it is far more problematic than its know-nothing twin. When the idea of a moral imperative is raised in aesthetic discourse—and nowadays it's mentioned a good deal by students and crops up in diluted or concentrated forms in much art writing—a whole series of words flow back into the vocabulary: authenticity, sincerity, holism, and the like. Close behind follow their opposites, or presumed opposites: cynicism, glibness, trendiness, careerism, materialism, etc. Ultimately lurking behind all of these terms are the concepts of "good" and "bad," or in extreme cases, "good" and "evil." The reversion to so grand and yet so simplistic a set of dichotomies reflects deep frustration with the present state of the art world. I share that frustration to a degree. I do not, however, share the sentiments of those who now call for "moral rearmament" in art, inasmuch as the complaints and accusations which are the impetus and focus of such crusades beg all the important questions. Appeals to "truth" and "affirmation" do not tell us what these terms mean—nor do they define the meaning much less the artistic function of "falsehood" and "negation." Such appeals also beg the question of what the particular context is for using these words. Worst of all it assumes that all said and done, we in fact agree that such values actually exist and can be directly expressed or embodied in art.

Frequently the word "human" is uttered in the same breath as these ethical or psychological abstractions as if somehow it were a sufficient adjective or qualifier. With or without modifiers, however, these words retain their Manichean ring. In the categorical mind, ambivalence toward these imagined antitheses is suspect, and co-existence between them inconceivable. In line with that primordial separation of moral light and dark comes a messianic view of art and an ardent faith that art can save us. Some apparently believe that *only* art can save us, which of course allows the believer to abandon doing anything practical while they engage in redemptive magic. Among "postmodernists," meanwhile, apocalyptic thinking often translates into a dystopian determinism every bit as rigid and every bit as implausible as the modernist utopianism it ostensibly corrects. Inevitably, they tell us, we will come to a bad end or an interminable impasse. Once destined for revolutionary heaven we are now

doomed to totalitarian hell or, scarcely better, a high tech purgatory. History is over and the day of judgment is at hand. But history, one must never forget, is the perfect imaginary playmate. Academic ventriloquists are forever amazed and reassured by its compliance to their fantasy, and artists have lately rejoiced in the same easy delights.

Whether throwing one's voice, or speaking for oneself, what carries the weight of argument in addition to these auratic words is a tone of concern, even desperation, a tone that in effect says, "How could you possibly doubt the self-evidence of our assumptions?" That, of course, is exactly what much of the best art of the 1980s did. It insisted that we do not know the true or full implications of the language we habitually use. It reminded us that we do not live the same or even similar realities within the "Family of Man." Moreover, it warns us that the identity of both the artist and the viewer are always up for grabs. Even the integrity of finite, first hand experience is subject to close scrutiny. Contingency and difference are the "human" condition. Making the unsettling "permanence" of these factors obvious—and thereby making artists and their audience extremely if sometimes pleasurably unsure of themselves—is just what art should do.

In this context, it is more than ever necessary that we avoid confusing the teller with the tale. Nor should we uncritically indulge artists who practice Method Acting. Artists, that is, who strike attitudes the aggressively stylized "naturalism" of which is intended to obscure the artifice of their role-playing. In this regard the "gotta dance" hamming of Julian Schnabel, for example, is infinitely preferable to the "I reeeealllly meant it," mutterings of some of the Neo-Self-Expressionist character actors. With Schnabel we know where we stand—and how little we can expect—and thus remain open to true satisfaction when his schtick finally goes over (which every once in a while it does and does spectacularly). By contrast, professionally earnest artists divert our attention from their aesthetic failures by stressing the "existential" imponderables of their predicament, and in so doing make it all but impossible to trust them when, on occasions no more frequent than with Schnabel, they actually deliver. All of which is to say that the theatre of "good intentions" is not just a bore, it is a kind of special pleading and henceforth deeply dishonest. The willing as distinct from coerced suspension of disbelief is the prerequisite of all art. Instead of expressing "natural" law, therefore, art is a matter of contracts and torts, the guiding principle being that artists are always ultimately responsible for owning up to the illusions in which they traffic just as the public is responsible for admitting to their desire to submit to those illusions.

Both partners to the deal must accept and enjoy a measure of perversity. We have this on the best authority. Here then, since this is a sermon, are two of its texts. Picasso:

> We all know that art is a lie and not the truth. It is a lie which makes us realize the truth, at least the truth as it is given to us to understand.

And Oscar Wilde:

> Man is the least himself when he speaks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth.

In the final analysis, taking away the mask or consciousness of the mask represents an effort to absolve the public of its duty to be critical, and thus to participate actively in the events of art as well as the events of the world. Rather than heralding a return to seriousness, the new moralism signals a regression to passive trust, in which the artist is reinstated as a hero-guru-genius. Here again '80s art is there to disenthrall us. A couple of cases in point.

Joseph Beuys was a high priest of spiritual renewal. Or so he appeared to the wide and diverse audience that revered his artfully *povera* persona and viewed "social sculpture" as a laboratory for moral experiments. More than a mere maker of objects—only incidentally as a maker of objects, perhaps—he enacted the part of a teacher, activist, shaman, and healer. Pre-eminently, in fact—and in plain American English—he was a bull-shit artist of unrivalled ambition and stamina and dazzling aesthetic refinement. Only true believers, determined at any price to find a cult, bought his line at face value. The credulity of disciples, however, does not denigrate the brilliance or insightfulness of their chosen prophets. Beuys was and remains an important figure precisely because we suspect that his myth—in particular his myth of origins with its tartars, felt, and fat—was pure hokum and yet we readily succumb to its lyricism. Nor can any consenting adult fail to wonder about his marketing strategies, his aca-demic politicking—just imagine sitting in on a committee meeting with the guy!—or his Christological anarchism. Still we are moved by the preposterous simplicity of his vision of social change. It is the combined effect of consciousness of Beuys's inspired fraudulence and our awareness that, more than any of his contemporaries, he was able to inject energy into outmoded roles and replenish a poetically bankrupt

mysticism. That is what makes him compelling.

Andy Warhol offers a complementary case, having gleefully confounded the distinction between "good" and "bad" with the acute instinct of an acolyte who had watched the conjury of virtue from backstage. Contrast Warhol's Catholic skepticism and Catholic inquisitiveness to the Protestant certainty of Ad Reinhardt, who wrote: "Artists are responsible for ugliness. The ugliest spectacle is that of artists selling themselves. Artist commodity is an ugly idea. Art as entertainment is an ugly activity. Artists once led less ugly lives than other men. Today artists lead the same kinds of lives as other men. The artist as businessman is uglier than the businessman as artist." Warhol matter-of-factly responded by treating business as art. Jeff Koons has polished his routine still further, and represents the only true contender for the vacancy Andy left behind.

Parenthetically, Jeff and I shared the same teacher—Ed Paschke. And a moment and milieu—Chicago in the mid-to-late '70s. This coincidence establishes an irresistible affinity for work I am told I should not like. But I do like it. A lot. It is startling to see how adeptly he has applied Imagism's "finish fetish" to Neo-Pop images and materials and how well he has adapted Paschke's cordial wierdness to his own promotional-conceptual purposes. Those who add "New York" to their list of epithets have another thing coming in Jeff's case. Rather than heralding another triumph of mainstream taste, his success marks the Conceptualist retooling and wholly unanticipated apotheosis of regional Funk. And, if he is the devil incarnate, he has all the devil's charms.

Back to Reinhardt though. The point is that his puritanism was scripted rather than scriptural. It was a role that he played to the hilt, fully aware of its archness and absurdity. Despite their obvious differences Warhol and Reinhardt were nicely matched in their understanding of the "all-or-nothing" extremes on which one must base such conceits. Neither of them ever broke character. Warhol's refusal to do so was the sign of his rigorous dandyism. The tragedy of Warhol is the attempt on the part of some of his many widows to normalize him, to make him accessible, likeable, and reassuringly sincere after all. In the '80s the Warhol of the discos appeared on New York television with a smirk and asked, "It's 10:30, do you know where your children are?" Duping only the most gullible of parents, his sly invitation to fevered kids desperately wanting "out" was his genuinely public "public-service." The Warhol of the soup kitchens that we're getting now is a betrayal of his assidiously cultivated indifference. Warhol wasn't a nice guy, or if he was, it didn't really matter. His work was relentlessly nasty, disquieting and revealing. Amen.

This, alas, is not the case with some of the junior varsity Warhols currently scrambling for his mantle. Lacking the courage of their lack of convictions, they crave a legitimacy that is really not there to be had in the first place and that only scoundrels would want in any case. When accused of the usual misdemeanors of disingenuousness and opportunism, they protest that what they are doing is for our own good, when in fact if they were serious they would not be particularly concerned with our own good. Take Peter Halley, for example, who has said that his paintings are made to teach the people who control power how to use it better. He speaks from inside that class he says, and he wants to instruct them and correct the errors of their ways. It is hard to figure, though, how a day-glo diagram of a computer chip or the cartoon version of the Panopticon as suburban hoosegow might correct the misapprehensions of one such as Oliver North, organizational genius of the Iran-contra "Enterprise" and author of a far more interesting flow-chart of "where the money went."

The pretensions behind such a claim owe less to moral flaws than intellectual ones, however. Ideas, not values, are what end up being debased. In the process, the specious search for an ethical or political stance thus gives rise to a new but pedestrian kind of humbug, in which complex ideas expounded and explored in other—to most artists—exotic disciplines are turned into captions or alibis for paintings, sculptures, texts, and photos. Let us call the by-products of this transformation scholastic kitsch, or to choose a felicitously rhyming German word that means "egregious nonsense," we might better label it scholastic *quatch*. For all their verbal gamesmanship, neither Beuys, Warhol, nor Reinhardt could ever have been charged with committing this offense. Nevertheless, its commission is routine among the forces of moral uplift as well as with those made uncomfortable by the evidence of their own smarminess. Such people suffer from a low tolerance for the anxiety provoked by the very contradictions and fakery that make art possible. The great dialectician of impossible purities, Reinhardt had the penultimate word on the matter. To be itself, he maintained, art must be stripped of its excuses and emptied of its pretense, an operation which reciprocally released art's erstwhile meta-contents and put them back in worldly circulation where they belonged. "The morality of art is not morality," he said. "The religion of art is not religion. The spirituality of an art is not spirituality. The humanism of art is not humanism." The specifics of artifice—and the frank recognition that one chooses them—is, I think, the one thing for which all artists are morally responsible. In art, the only cardinal sin is to be seduced by one's own performance or to be a sucker for one's own tricks. Beyond this, there

are just two practical commandments to be observed.

To the art-lover: never trust anybody who says they're telling you the gospel truth, whatever the gospel.

To the artist dealing with another artist/art professional: never kid a kidder.

Three Reviews

High and Low!
Modern Art and Popular Culture

at the

Museum of Modern Art

6 October 1990—15 January 1991

By Jeannine Bartel

How does an exhibition like *High and Low!* originate? The curators Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnick carefully skirt this issue to their own benefit. Before one ever enters the galleries housing the show we know that it could not have taken place without support from AT&T. This issue is decidedly interesting within the context of the *High and Low!* theme. But a critical glance at the exhibition reveals that it is merely protocol to acknowledge their "low" appropriation of high art, indicating the uncourageous, all too traditional character of the show. What Varnedoe and Gopnick never concede is that their concern for popular culture and its impact on high art derives from an old, recently reworked—artistically and art historically—relationship between the two.

Their approach is conventional, breaking no new ground. It derives from the Pop art provocation to a critical discussion of the subject. Since that time, in the U.S.A., the relationship between high art and popular culture has become a major theme of the practice and ideology of art. Keith Haring (unashamedly) opened a show in New York to sell products carrying his trademark symbols. Jenny Holzer now appears—with the full media force of that word—both in art journals and on MTV. Philosophically and pragmatically, the flux between high art and popular culture has become very complex. One could not ascertain that from a jaunt through this exhibition. Varnedoe and Gopnick are on target in their general theme, but it is the way they have authoritatively announced their construction of the idea that is most detrimental to the exhibit.

The re-constructed kiosk that welcomes viewers to the first part of *High and Low!* is symptomatic of the curators own highly artificial version of art history. The obvious artificiality of the kiosk should not be present in a show that is trying to integrate the stuff of life with that of art and is symptomatic of the artificiality of the exhibition as a whole. Guide words accompany the kiosk; but here the text that is a staple of large museum shows becomes almost embarrassing in its lack of content. This lack of respect for the museum goer, or lack of respect for (s)he who is not an artist genius, (s)he who is producer/consumer of mass culture, is a consequence of the curators' determination to control the ideology of the show. In their "high" catalogue—and in their replicated "low" newspaper flyer readily available for the masses at the beginning of the show—the curators tell us

that their task is to address a certain balance that has and continues to occur between the high and low arts. But just as the kiosk is a forced reconstruction that uncomfortably exists as the show's grand opening statement, so too one senses that Varnedoe and Gopnick are never entirely comfortable with their task. They do not in fact address the balance. What unavoidably emerges is a standard old reading of art history that takes no advantage of alternate methods (anthropological, Marxist, social psychological, etc.) that might be used to make a new reading.

Much of the revisionist art history developed over the past ten years has called on material culture studies in order to achieve a more balanced look at past art production. Varnedoe attempts to address these studies in his opening remarks in the catalogue. But his highly negative critical evaluation—executed in a very cursory way—of much of this writing is symptomatic of his regressive commitment to the old art historical understanding of the art he deals with. The exhibition proper is the predictable statement of this predictable reading. This is made evident as one moves past the kiosk into the first rooms of *High and Low!*, where Picasso and Braque dominate, receiving more attention than their Russian or German counterparts.

Much could be said about the attention the curators gave to their grand entrance. A consciously manufactured pace is set up in this first space. Here viewers are supposed to slow down and pay homage to the *truly* great modern masters—Picasso and Braque. One is compelled to linger, to gaze longingly. Then before you know it you have passed the small (very important) grouping of collages by Rodchenko, Schwitters, and Ernst. It is so diverse that it amounts to a conglomeration, ultimately confusing the spectator. One could also question the rationale for the works hung across from these collages, a series of cubist paintings, with seemingly little to do, thematically, with what surrounds them. It is a basic art history survey text without accompanying words—contextless pictures with no meaning in the exhibition's context.

Occupying an even smaller portion of attention in this categorical group vaguely defined as "Words" is the "stuff" of real life—the "low." A wall opposite the cubist collages is covered with newspapers, explicitly revealing to the viewers that this is where artists Picasso and Braque had their sources. In their typically paternal manner the curators have highlighted those areas of the newspaper which correlate exactly to the works on display. While interesting, this does not examine the mystique of the newspaper. Art maintains its hallowed status as what is most interesting.

In the rest of the first floor galleries the curators continue to attempt to

expound on the relationship between "words" (the low) and art via an investigation into the impact of advertising on art. A room is given over to billboards. And, as becomes typical for the rest of the exhibition, a singular example—a stained glass reproduction of Michelin's *Bibendum*—is left to uphold the low in the face of the high. The room given over to post-1945 art and advertising is deleterious in its exclusion of low art examples. Objects seem to be included because of their "master" status. Joseph Cornell's boxes and Rauschenberg's *Gloria* cannot be explained any other way. Once again the question arises: where are the ideological pretensions of this show centered?

One of the strangest rooms on the first floor is that containing the infamous found objects of the Dada and Surrealist periods. There is something eerie in the way Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* and *Bottle Rack* sit behind their glass enclosure, looking not so much like objects, but like freaks in a circus. For once in the exhibition all the textual material accompanying the art—catalogue, flyer, guide words—reveal something interesting and paradoxical about the relationship between art and material culture.

The curators let us know about merchandise display techniques that became popular in the early twentieth century. The objects sit behind their glass enclosure dimly lit in a space that is easily passed over as one too many shop windows. In a sense, these "master" works of modern art lose their high art status. One has only to compare the display technique used here with the method of presenting Cornell's boxes to uncover an alarming discrepancy in effectiveness. If the motivation behind the placement of these pieces is to submerge the "art" into the place from where its ideology is derived (here merchandising techniques), then an interesting inversion has occurred. As inferred from this arrangement, this transposition of the high into the low is effective because it points to the problematic character of the *High and Low!* exhibition. It is ironically self-reflective on the legitimacy of the exhibition, and as such is one of the more memorable aspects of the show.

A similar but less disturbing reversal occurs with the placement of various Oldenberg sculptures into a window space that opens onto the street. Those outside the sacred realm of art are able to get a glimpse of art masquerading as commodity. These two cases are exceptions to the rule. Much of Part I of the exhibition moves quickly along, with the high getting most of your attention and space, as evidenced by Rosenquist's monumental full room mural *F-111*.

Those expecting Part II to be an improvement will be disappointed. All

of the ideological foundations collapse here. From the opening remarks on graffiti art to the closing remarks on contemporary art, one is left wondering where the curators have been for the last ten to twenty years.

It is embarrassing to read their assessment of the graffiti phenomenon, especially the connections they draw between cave paintings and graffiti art. At least in the U.S.A. the rise of the graffiti-inspired paintings of the 1980s was indelibly linked to Black and Hispanic subculture. Yet, our by now familiar guiding words of wisdom loudly announce that, "in the case of graffiti, modern painters have discovered new expressive possibilities in a very different part of urban life—a form of writing and drawing that seemed ageless." Viewers are exposed to an interesting but very incomplete survey of artists working under the influence of graffiti.

The pieces by Dubuffet, Twombly, and Rauschenberg exhibit the stylistic qualities of graffiti art. But where are the artists who integrated themselves into—in some cases actually emerged from—the street aesthetic socially as well as formally? Where is Keith Haring or Jean Michael Basquiat, to name only two of the many artists who came to the forefront in the Eighties under the auspices of the graffiti aesthetic? Where is the "low" in this section?

The only thing we are given to hang on to are references to Roman wall inscriptions. Sitting uselessly in a glass case are textbooks—distanced secondary interpretations—offering us glimpses of anthropological readings of marks left on excavation sites at ancient Roman ruins. In the catalogue the curators proudly announce that the references to classical antiquity in Twombly's art and the references to Roman wall inscriptions are indicative of the connection between high and low that is not only a product of the twentieth century, but can be linked to the classical past. This desire to preserve tradition is the backbone of the exhibition. Tradition is sustained at the expense of the motivating concept behind the whole endeavor. The curators are unwilling to let go of academic tradition, and allow a movement or dialogue to occur between two seemingly disparate—but inextricably linked—elements of culture. This creates the sense of radical incompleteness one experiences exiting the show.

Part II of *High and Low!* is just as ideologically confounding. A large part is given over to a "look at" comics. The "out of control" quality of the entire exhibition is—like comic book expletives—boldly highlighted. Throughout the exhibition the curators protect the vested status of high art by facilely not allowing the low to enter the picture. Simply put, the comic books may just be more interesting than the art. Once again, by not really using that which is thrust upon them to raise questions about the ironic

relationship of what is nominally high and low—which is which?—the works displayed finally destroy the entire enterprise. Indeed, they, and it, peculiarly self destruct. Varnedoe's and Gopnick's entire way of dealing with the comic book sensation is very retro; it has had its moment in history. The actual art shown indicates that it's high time to let go of old hierarchies which cannot do the art justice.

Walking past Jenny Holzer's installation piece on the way out, one welcomes her caustic commentary. It restores something lost in all the preceding galleries. Although her initial forays into the use of LED boards are less "aesthetic" than the reconstructed version of the 1990 Venice Biennale work displayed here, Holzer's art is effective because of its criticality. Her truisms, laid out in stone, are both philosophical and mundane. They do carry the somber quality of tombstone epitaphs, but read like the lyrics of a "pop music" song. The room becomes a spectacle where the necessity of the viewer's place in the whole show is finally acknowledged. The connection between high and low is clearly indicated to be that of the relationship between the masses who create "popular culture" and the few who create "art." This integration, the operative method here, is only rarely achieved in the exhibition. Holzer's installation is an obtrusive reminder of what it lacks.

Finally the "complexity" of the publications connected with *High and Low!* is worth noting. The catalogue—viewers can read it at tables outside the entrance to the show—contained many more images than are included in the show. In a sense, the catalogue restores its missing visual links. Here one can find references to Haring and Basquiat, as well as Barbara Kruger, whose absence is a serious loss for the exhibition. *High and Low!* must of course have some exclusions, but relegation to the text is like a slap in the face. At the same time, exhibitions are often remembered through their catalogues, so it is just as well that she is in the catalogue. But the authoritarian attitude that relegated important artists to the catalogue is present in the text itself. Another publication, containing selected readings on the topic of popular culture and art, is also available. Not surprisingly, the essays included, while seminal in their day, are part of a tradition that is supposedly being challenged. Yet the curators hold onto it in the exhibition, and to the texts that will carry it into posterity.

The *High and Low!* exhibition occurred at a time when the dialogue between high art and popular culture has been intensified because of attacks on both via the issue of censorship. Suddenly the art world has been reminded that perhaps it does have a certain power outside its hermetic self. The affective influence of the low on the high has been central to the

development of artists who question the system. Robert Mapplethorpe and Karen Finley, two artists who have been "chart-toppers" on the censorship hit list, are part of an active subculture which could be termed "low." Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnick never want to acknowledge that the subject they have undertaken to explore is not only intellectually messy, but could entail stepping off their safe platform onto some really dirty ground. Never taking this step their interpretation of a dynamic topic not only becomes bad curating, but, even worse, made for a boring show.

By Cheree Quizon

It requires an impossibly great leap of faith to accept the claims of *High and Low! Modern Art and Popular Culture* at the Museum of Modern Art. It is an exhibition that depends on texts and explanations to make itself understood, and then it doesn't succeed.

"Words," suggesting its conceptual failure, begins the catalogue's hefty text, which is divided into schematic, catch-all sloganeering phrases: "graffiti," "caricature," "comics," "advertising," and almost like a non sequitur, "contemporary art." This pseudo-jazzy assortment of grab-bag buzz words typifies the look, feel and erratic pace of the show. It is a museum showpiece talked about in showpiece style. The curators Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik lead us to expect a brilliant redefinition of the relationship between modern art and popular culture. What we get however, is a less than brilliant—decidedly socio-political—discourse of institutions, in which the museum, its patrons, and art history are more important than both modern art and popular culture.

Thus, the exhibition looks like an inbred institutional infant, not unlike a degenerate prince shored up by the weight of social pomp and circumstance, but tottering under it. Abundant funding by AT&T, the museum trustees' all-out support for debutante Varnedoe's "coming out" as curator of painting and sculpture, and the plethora of mass media attention added to the brassy, showy glamor, seem to confirm the conceptual shallowness and slickness of the show. It is peculiarly unstable, inert, and uncreative, for all its pretended dynamic and hoopla.

The campy opening salvo is a case in point. A small green newspaper kiosk, decked out with dutifully yellowed reproductions of French newspapers of the 1910s and 1920s stands at the entrance to the entire floor. "Advertising," the title on the floorplan, is a banner headline that hardly prepares us for the weight of newsprint dropped on our heads. Newspaper blow-ups, presumably those once perused by Picasso and Braque cover an entire wall; fragments are raised, emphatically making the dandyish opening declaration: this is the piece of *Le Journal* which Picasso used for this 1912 collage. It is a mindless specificity, a dumb empiricism.

Then with an "art hammer," indeed a gigantic, spectacular one, the same nail-head is hit again and again: this is the panel from the All American Men of War comic book Roy Lichtenstein used in 1963, this is George Herriman's Krazy Kat which, according to the catalog, shares with Joan Miró's *Dog Barking at the Moon* an "enchanted universe where heaven

and earth still join." This archaeological excavation of sources is a wondrous demonstration of the manic zeal of the curators, but depressingly, they never adequately discuss their transformation and use. The curators continue to maintain the traditionalist, status quo assumption that high art and artists belong to a hermetically sealed discourse, a "modern mainstream" of "great art," for all their low borrowings and manipulations. The comparisons of high and low—and such a comparison is not an analysis—is for them novel, even titillatingly radical; but paradoxically, peculiarly beside the privileged point of the art.

The use of newspaper handouts is another studied contradiction. Tabloids are available, carefully worked over by a graphic designer self-conscious about period lay-out and the nostalgia of serif typeface. It is presumably a welcome, delightfully familiar thing to hang on to, light feature story reading to offset the pretentious but erratic exhibition. But the populist expectations are betrayed for the texts drone on in staid, didactic academic language. The promise of innovative energy implicit in the fast-paced headlines is betrayed by the stuffy anti-reportage beneath. Unlike the quirky "popular" street papers it tries to imitate, the handout comes off as scholarly slumming.

The sixteen or so galleries in the lower and ground floors are crammed full of comic books, newspapers, archival reproductions and much more art. The "art" part, assembled from works belonging to MoMA as well as private collectors, is to a large extent made up of familiar modern art war horses, carrying so much the burden of history. There's Picasso's highly touted *Gertrude Stein* glaring at us in the subsection on Caricature and a slice of Claes Oldenberg's *Giant Piece of Cake* plopped down in the middle of a crowded room on Gigantism. Andy Warhol's equally overworked *Soup Cans* are neatly arrayed in the Pop room next door. An interesting point is made concerning the element of nostalgia and tragedy in pop art but this captioned remark, however, is forcefully overturned by the grand march of the carefully edited pop pieces themselves: colorful, happy, aggressive, street smart.

Hence, the exhibition is a show of the familiar and pseudo-exemplary from many odd sources. Varnedoe and Gopnick bring together artifacts of "art" and "non-art"—or, as Varnedoe insists on putting it, the schematically "high" and "low"—in combinations and proportions meant to clarify the confrontational nature of high/low distinction. In fact, they obscure it.

While the exhibition's first half jauntily asserts itself underneath an overarching banner of "Advertising," the second half fragments under a bucolic mix of titles. With unabashed glee, it mischievously mixes two and

three-dimensional mass media, urbanesque artifacts. It is all too self-congratulatory about this quasi-democratic mix and match, but is clearly not comitted to the principle. For it stops short at the idea of calling comic book, billboard, graffiti on the grimy city walls, art. Art is always capitalized here, a self-conscious hieratic distinction. Ironically enough, it does not always succeed, especially in instances where the pampered "high" fares poorly in juxtaposition with the eccentric, more densely textured "low" culture artifacts. In the Comics subsection, Lichtenstein was noisily celebrated but looked dull in comparison to the comic books in the glass case.

Like an aristocratic society matron with pluralist democratic pretensions, the exhibit nevertheless invites chosen dregs of popular culture to a high art cocktail party, hobnobbing but minimally interacting. They are made to be "seen together" at this social event but are essentially kept apart. Here and there, remarks are dropped about the preciousness of interconnections and affinities between the two, but with high art always having the last word.

This prejudice is clear in the curatorial politics of wallspace. Mail order catalogues, comic strip camera readies, even collage pieces by Kurt Schwitters, among other items, dissolve into a crowded clutter of glass and obtrusive captions. Certain sacrosanct high works remain grandly isolated of course, for all their "cross referencing." This is especially true of the lovingly hung oils and collages by Picasso and Braque, which probably represents Varnedoe's curatorial hat-tipping to mentor/predecessor and sponsor William Rubin, whose last exhibition as MoMA's long-time curator for painting and sculpture was the huge, blockbuster Cubism show last year.

As a general rule, however, *High and Low!* staggers under an over-abundance of epigraphs, textual and visual. On the one hand, this may be seen to reflect the complexity of the show's claims. But on the other hand, it fails to articulate the subtler interaction between the high and the low, and the place they meet.

The advertising cliché is Varnedoe's and Gopnick's favored place of high/low convergence, but it is used so loosely that it has been rendered meaningless. The experience of advertising is vicarious, for apart from the token display of merchandising catalogues and allusions to billboards as "spectacle," the rhetoric of advertising is filtered through the high art, becoming a specious text. *F-111*, by former billboard-turned-high artist James Rosenquist, fills an entire room with gigantic painted pictures of

airplanes, spaghetti, Firestone tires, and a little blond girl with tidy tresses toasting under a hairdryer. It loudly punctuates the Pop and Gigantism rooms with walls of oil, canvas and billboard aluminum. We are told that it rivals the gigantism of advertisement. Here is another old art historical point beaten almost to death.

It is useful to ask if advertising is indeed just empty visual rhetoric, as the curators would lead us to believe. Is it not all about selling and being sold to? It is all about responding to a proposal to buy. Advertising has a clear-cut target market, where exclusion and elimination is a necessary part of its dynamics. It creates slick quasi-realities with a price tag attached. In both these senses, it is like art in its marketability and its necessary manipulation of meaning. This is of course too close for comfort, too sensitive an issue. The curators skirt it, perhaps for fear of opening up the question of how much these high art pieces' bench prices ridiculously soared, especially after being "institutionalized" in a museum, blue-chip gallery or Namebrand private collection. It is safer to keep advertising a visual idiom, a slick sensibility, a "gigantism." When Cy Twombly scribbles or when Giacomo Balla deadpans on dirty wooden doorways, they are said "to evoke marred urban walls," not much more. They are understood to describe the "yes" of words—of progress. Are Twombly and Balla, or even Rauschenberg for that matter, so easily collapsed together? If this is so, are they rejecting progress per se or a paradigmatically "words" way of thinking? Their ambivalence on this matter is part of the exhibition's implicit privileging of advertising over caricature and graffiti art, a tenuous unexamined dichotomy in the exhibition.

This is in fact what *High and Low!* does—it refuses to do *anything* with its banner theme. It is a safe, unthreatening, and calculated stance which platitudinizes art, giving it an aura untouched by the "baseness" of the real (art) world, much less the world where popular culture exists. This kind of neutralized handling is used even with high art works that have a clearly combative and critical stance. To make Dubuffet appear as just a naughty doodler is meant to be cute, funny, maybe even witty; but by excluding his political innuendo, it is misguided. Frighteningly enough, the curators propagate this barefaced superficiality with a knowing wink.

In keeping art in a vacuum, Varnedoe and Gopnick hope to keep themselves and the museum disembodied as well. They force us to believe that MoMA is not a museum institution with its own agenda and objectives, but a neutral, objective, perhaps even pure repository of Modern Art and recorder of its True History. In this way, they close off other possibilities by asserting and invoking its authority: art history dead-ends here.

As a result, we are asked to only see their paradigmatic schemas, which predictably collapse any complexity that the art or the artifact may confront us with. The correct paradigm, they claim in the catalogue's coda, is a pluralist one which privileges no single analysis. But they contradict themselves by the manner in which the claim is made: sweeping, totalizing, categorically relegating all that came before and all that it currently excludes to the trash heap of history. Indeed, a great deal of writing and thinking on art and popular culture, as well as entire communities of art and art practice relevant to the theme, is categorically excluded. Where then is this pluralism that they speak of? Tyrannical acts are once again orchestrated in the name of that overused enigma, the (artistic) "common good."

It is a struggle to remain open to an overload of wasted words. A seeming mistrust of visuality leads to a kind of verbosity. Juxtaposing images with so many words almost inevitably pulls toward the latter; Varnedoe and Gopnick are all too aware of this. The verbosity is indicative of the need to control art and filter out the tensions it always brings with it: here is Art and *this* is the way you must think about it. Conversely, there is a realm of non-Art and one need not bother with that. In *High and Low!,* words and captions rule as curatorial puppet-kings.

There are moments of apparent conjunction that could have been intellectual opportunities. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, Meret Oppenheim's *Fur Teacup*, René Magritte's *Key of Dreams*, Man Ray's *Gift* and other archetypal Dada and Surrealist objects are enclosed in one glass case. How do they change meaning in being brought together? Encased, they look like garish relics of a dead crusade. Nothing further is said or done, however, leaving another point limply hanging. Facile exhibitionism—spectacularism—undermines critical opportunities: Richard Hamilton's kitschy collages, Jasper Johns's painted bronzes, or Rauschenberg's cluttered combines reduced to inertly fascinating art pieces rather than played against each other to create a new sense of significance. They end up saying simply: "these were the changes after World War II."

The debilitating curatorial clutter ends abruptly in the three relatively barren rooms, where we seem to come out into a clearing promising much. But what are works by Elizabeth Murray, Jeff Koons, and Jenny Holzer doing together? Does high and low inhere in them? It is absurd to think so. Koons's vacuum cleaners exhaust what's left of our patience. Murray's giant wall shoes give us an exclamatory flying kick squarely in the face,

the poetry of her titles notwithstanding. Varnedoe and Gopnick speak of pop culture's many histories, supposedly pushing this culture's "changing givens" onto the contemporary artists. These neat, painfully restrained last rooms hardly demonstrate this. They are a morgue, an odd dead end, where Murray's self-indulgent mega-emblems make faces at Koons's shiny, little shallow toys. Holzer builds a stunning mausoleum of words, falling like red, red rain on the cold pink marble; it is perhaps the only thing that alleviates the superficiality. The exhibition is densest here, but it turns into an empty bubble and floats away. Holzer's work mocks the exhibition's ambition of telling "small stories about people and objects," its failed articulation of the "eloquence of peculiar facts."

By Ellen Williams

The exclamation point which liberally punctuates the *High and Low!* show at the Museum of Modern Art is meant to convey surprise, excitement, even astonishment. What this exhibition elicits instead, is a self-conscious double-take—perhaps the stagey double-take of Charlie Chaplin, or the hyperbolic one of the Three Stooges. Or, borrowed from the comic strips in the show, a question mark and exclamation point might float over our heads as we view it, shorthand for that mix of mystification and surprise that signals the bafflement of cartoon characters.

The conceptualization of *High and Low!* is not in any sense *éblouissant*, to use a term suitable for an exhibition with such a heavy French flavor. We are not exactly blown away by the idea that there is a "revolving cycle of interchange—a process that transfers things from a low to a high position and then back again," as the curators say in their souvenir newspaper. That handout, which is evidently meant to be a low form of high catalogue touching on, rather than examining in depth, all the points they wish to emphasize, in no small way serves as advertising for AT&T, which underwrote the exhibit. It is typical of the showmanship characteristic of *High and Low!* Something quite simple is inflated into a very stylish, dressy, almost chic, and certainly very big show. I mean the window-dressing: the installation itself, the catalogue, the grandiose advertising.

But there are show pieces that are truly delicious: significant and beautiful things which do not need the theatrics, being dazzling in themselves. Left to our own devices, could we determine how the low has informed the high? Probably. More importantly, could we see whether the high infuses the low? This concept of high to low flow is integral to the theory the curators insist on, and it isn't convincingly proved in the exhibition or the catalogue.

The replica of a French kiosk at the exhibition's entrance is a case in point. This glossy construction, serves as an enticement to enter the show. It displays a number of yellowing, well-pressed French newspapers of the World War I era. They hang from new wooden clothespins—those heavy ones hard to find anymore. The side panels are hung with pristine metal signboards, seemingly brand-new. One, about chocolate, advises us, with heavy-handed irony, to avoid imitations. *Éviter les contrefaçons:*, and we would be well-advised to. This kiosk exemplifies one side of the exhibition. It, and other theatrical props like it, sometimes seem to

overpower—have a grander presence than—even the most sumptuous of Braque's charcoal drawings, or Gris' *Glasses, Teacup, Bottle* or Schwitters' collages, like *Eva Stee* or *The Kots Picture*. These galleries are almost overshadowed by the enormous expanse of French newsprint, pasted to a wall. Certain blocks of print cleverly jump out to demonstrate the sources of Picasso's, Gris', and Braque's collages. Did the connection have to be made so blatantly? Wouldn't a simpler device have served the same purpose, letting the work explain itself? It could have been the star attraction.

There is another bit of showmanship in the gallery called "The Spectacle of Billboards." The large stained-glass window showing *Bibendum*, the tire man and symbol of the Michelin rubber company, has been recommissioned for display. It is stunning, but hardly furthers the contention that the wheel turns from low to high. Its decorative, high-kicking *Bibendum* draws our attention away from the other works in the room.

For "The Object on Display" a vitrine—a shop-window—was constructed displaying Duchamp's *Fountain*, and *Bottle Dryer*, and Oppenheim's fur-covered *Object*. Looking at yourself reflected among these things, you might overlook a Picabia pen and ink of a reflex camera, entitled *Ici, C'est ici Stieglitz. Foi et Amour*, inspired by a mundane advertisement. Faith and love; the exhibition illustrates how artists make art out of faith and love and things like advertising schemes, comics and so on. But where is the recognition that commercial interests can debase that art? Either it loses its character as art, or else everything is art. The answer to this question is not readily apparent, although it is part of the concept of a circuit running between high and low forms of culture supposedly being fully explored.

In general, the showmanship is confined to the part of the exhibition devoted to the interplay between art and advertising of various kinds before World War II. Presumably, everything shifted into high gear then. One last showy gesture is made in the gallery where "Changes after World War II" are examined. After using an actual museum window overlooking the street to display objects which Claes Oldenburg showed in his *Storefront* in 1961, the exhibition takes on a straightforward air. The Rauschenbergs, *Coca Cola Plan* and *Mona Lisa*, and the Jasper Johns objects, are powerful presences. Rauschenberg's *Rebus*, is included in the section of graffiti, where it seems lost; it could be shown here with more effect. In contrast, the Ruschas and Warhols in the next room, speak without fanfare of high art being made from the fabric of the low. What is missing is something which would indicate how these works found their

way back into the popular culture. How does James Rosenquist's *F-111* influence the billboard designer? The show is not at all enlightening on this point. We know how aspects of Warhol's work crept back into the world of advertising. But were ads really transformed by that influence or were they already that way?

The curators make a stronger case in the areas devoted to graffiti, caricature, and the comics. There they tried to demonstrate the turnings of the wheel of high and low in a rather dry working-out of what they regard as its cyclic nature. The theory, apparently exhaustively treated in the catalogue, is rather academic. It reminds one of reading Gombrich or Schapiro on the incorporation of the daily into art, or George Kubler on stylistic cycles. Borrowing from Kubler's book, one might even have titled this exhibition *The Shape of Time*; less catchy perhaps, but also less simplistic than the recurring High/Low theme.

Winding up the show with a "Coda" of contemporary works, we come away with a strong sense of the low informing the high more and more powerfully. Here there is even less sense of it working the other way. The circuit the curators are so fond of may still be open, but it seems always to be interrupted where low informs high. Suspense is built into the theory: will high culture continue to inject popular culture with transcendent fixes as it is supposed to do? Is this perhaps the future role of MoMA, achieved by designing crowd-pleasing exhibitions?

To be fair, in their book—which they do not call a catalogue, and which is not one—the curators declare that they are going "to forestall the construction of any grand theoretical frameworks and indulge instead [their] curiosity about particulars." They do this particularly in the School of Paris section of the show. That is, they explore "the histories of mundane things that lay on the fringes" of the artists' visual consciousness, and which have "become so central to our vision of the world." Apart from this section and that of the comics they do not clearly make their case. On the whole, I doubt that high art has such a profound and powerful influence on popular culture.

In the newsprint handout, they state that art and culture are caught up in a revolving cycle of interchange, like an electric circuit. Further, they write that things "are taken out of the flow of the general currency into a special, more prominent place in art and then through the influence of that art, the same elements return, somewhat transformed and with a new meaning." But then elitism is suggested in their reminder of "the threat that things of great complexity and provocation may become trivialized [even as] art forms of great intensity...may be made from what seems only the dross." In the end, *High and Low!* is not conceptually new, and certainly the

exclamation point of the show is not compelling. Rather, it is superficially appealing, visually seductive and not unlike advertising itself.

Paul Gauguin's *Notebook for Aline*

Edited by Linnea S. Dietrich

Translation by Linnea S. Dietrich and Katherine Wyly

INTRODUCTION

By Linnea S. Dietrich

Gauguin's contributions to the history of modern thought occur in his writings and provide a significant commentary on the explication of his visual work. From this vantage point in time, Gauguin's ideas and his development of them link him to the French Symbolist tradition, of course, and also to the aphoristic and life-affirming philosophy of Nietzsche, the essentialism and transcendental psychology of Jung, and the binary systems of Structuralism, especially that of Lèvi-Strauss. The overriding theme of his work is the attempt to reconcile opposites, one of the persistent projects of twentieth century thought, and manifested most clearly in contemporary feminism and deconstruction, psychoanalytic theory, and Marxism.

Indeed, Symbolism itself can be understood as the attempt to combine or integrate opposites in which identities, entities, polarities, dissolve into each other in a seemingly endless interchange. Gauguin's very style, basted with frequent analogies, loose, apparently formless, eclectic, questioning, reflects the conciliatory and emergent nature of his thoughts.

Specificially, Gauguin may not have been a feminist, nor behaved in a manner designed to liberate the women and men in his life, yet he faced the issue of difference in his written and visual work and tried to come to terms with it. He at least was able to change his mind as he developed, and the *Notebook for Aline* initiates this process, completed, for Gauguin at least, in *Different Things*.

In the spring of 1893, having run out of canvas and awaiting his return

to France, Gauguin began the collection of notes, loosely related thoughts, drawings and clippings known to us as the *Notebook for Aline*. The *Notebook* begins with a dedication to Gauguin's daughter, Aline. That Gauguin identified very strongly with her is indicated by the words barely visible on the front cover, first noted by Suzanne Damiron, "Diary of a Young Girl."[1]

The recent facsimile of the *Notebook* reveals two additional works formerly pasted into the front and back covers of the manuscript.[2] The text remains unchanged. Victor Merhlès provides a fine explanatory text accompanying the *Notebook*. He supplements Gauguin's less than complete documentation of his sources and places the manuscript in the context of Gauguin's family life and artistic career.

The text seems to have been written all in one sitting, or at least in a short time in the spring of 1893, in fairly simple prose, but without much regard for continuity between paragraphs or ideas. The notebook contains photographs and newspaper clippings—sometimes pasted over the text—and, as it was among Gauguin's effects at his death in 1903, it is clear that Gauguin added to it over the years.[3] (His daughter died in 1897, so he could not have given it to her by then should that have been his intention).

In the *Notebook*, Gauguin wrote one of his most important passages on "the genesis of the painting" *Manao tupapau* (*She Thinks of the Spirit of the Dead or the Spirit of the Dead Thinks of Her*, 1892, discussed below). Here also, arranged in no particular sequence, are various other important statements of Gauguin's—artistic, political, humorous, serious. As is typical with Gauguin, he quoted frequently from others—Verlaine, Wagner, Peladan. The work stands as one of the clearest expressions of his artistic and personal goals. Ideas which one had surmised to be true about Gauguin and his work such as his commitment to the power of imagination and the need to reconcile opposites receive specific though brief confirmation in this beautiful little volume.

Again and again, Gauguin makes statements which define him as a Symbolist and not a naturalist, impressionist, or abstractionist. He uses representational subject matter but abhors mere illusionism. Symbolist art is a dynamic process that interrelates elements usually thought of as binary opposites: nature/culture; matter/spirit; female/male; reality/imagination; East/West; musical/literary; form/content; physical/spiritual; or, as he said here, "Night and day." The *Notebook* is unified by Gauguin's consistent reference to complementary pairs. In the Western philosophical tradition, Pythagoras was the first to list a Table of Opposites. Heraclitus and Parmenides argued over the principles of the Many and the One. In the East, the Chinese developed the concepts of yin and yang as

complementary related pairs. William Blake called reason and energy not true opposites but contraries without which there is no progression.

Gauguin, in the *Notebook for Aline*, discussed the material and spiritual components of art, the musical and literary (formal and thematic) aspects of painting, the relation of feminine to masculine, the republican and aristocratic aspects of his politics, and the "primitive" and "civilized" contributions to the arts. He acknowledged explicitly that he was attempting to reconcile dualities by an analogy: "Just as it takes place in chemistry, it will happen rather often in this chemistry of the intelligence that the combination of the elements yields a substance which does not have the characteristics of its components at all. Thus the domain of the imagination is unlimited. It includes the entire universe."

The *Notebook* begins with a succinct definition of art. In a passage titled "Notes of Edgar Poe," Gauguin called art "the reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul." Art consists not in the imitation of nature, but in the unusual, the unknown, the mysterious—all that can be subsumed under the term "imagination" combined with the sensuous. Art is the process that unites the physical and the spiritual. Gauguin is strengthening Emile Zola's definition that art is a "corner of nature seen through a temperament" by the addition of the phrase "veil of the soul," at once more mysterious than "temperament" and more potent, since "soul" includes the spiritual. "The domain of the imagination is unlimited," as Gauguin said, and the artist is important and special, even blessed, for it is the artist alone who writes the divine book containing the laws of harmony and beauty.

The phrase "night and day" occurs in what is probably the most important—certainly the most quoted—passage in the *Notebook for Aline*, Gauguin's analysis of *Spirit of the Dead*. In this passage, Gauguin showed how the painting evolved from a simple study of a nude to a profound synthesis of opposites. Gauguin's "genesis" is a paradigm of the Symbolist method itself. "Gauguin's description of his elaboration of the *Spirit* from initial sensory impression to symbolic art..aligns his creative process with the primitive's construction from initial utterance to developed language."[4]

The painting began, as Gauguin stated, as a study of a nude woman. He related his thought process as follows. The girl is frightened. But her pose suggests something "indecent." The young girl is perhaps preparing herself for love. No. Though in character, Gauguin doesn't want that reading of the work. She is preparing to sleep? No. That too would be "indecent" for we would conclude that the act of love had already occurred and was over. So, he settles again on fear, and then defines the cause—it

is the fear of one's own mortality, the fear of the Spirit of the Dead. Not sex or love, but death, although Gauguin had himself interjected both sex and love into his discussion (the forces which conquer death?). The Spirit of the Dead, the *tupapau*, exists in the imagination of the frightened girl (as Jacob wrestling with the angel exists in the minds of the praying people in Gauguin's painting of that name). But it is also concretized, visually embodied, in the painting, and reinforced in power by phosphorescent flowers, horizontal undulating lines, harmonies of complementary colors.

The title has two meanings: either she thinks about the Spirit or the Spirit thinks about her. Also, Gauguin said, "Thought Spirit." The thought literally evokes the thing, the Spirit, just as the formal elements, the "musical part," evokes the content, the "literary part," or, the "spirit of a living woman connected to the spirit of the dead." "Night and day" summarizes all the layers of elements that are linked in the painting and in the "genesis." "Night and day" serves as the synthesis, the basic structure, the symbol, for all the other related pairs.

To this, Gauguin added a final interrelated pair. "This genesis is written for those who always want to know the whys, the becauses." In this case why and because serve as related pairs.

Of great interest in the *Notebook for Aline* are Gauguin's attitudes toward women. Gauguin painted women frequently, using them in his work as conveyors of his own ideas. Throughout his writings he made constant reference to the feminine, or the feminine principle, and in this early effort, he attempted to discover what the "essential" nature of woman is. He stated, in a section titled "On Richard Wagner," that:

> The nature of woman is love; but this love is the kind that conceives, and which, in conception, gives itself without return.[5] Woman attains her full individuality only when she gives herself. Without soul until she receives one through the love of a man. And the true woman loves without condition, because she must love.

Feminists might balk at this proscriptive and chauvinist view (and ask what is man's nature—is it not love also?), but it may be that Gauguin is ascribing this view to Wagner.

This passage is either ambiguous or a mixture of conventional and profound wisdom. The ambiguity comes from the words "conceives-conception." It's not clear whether Gauguin meant the literal conception of a child or a more abstract conceiving of ideas and feelings. The phrase "without return" can mean without hope of reciprocation or "forever." Earlier in the *Notebook* Gauguin had stated, "The only one who is well

loved is the one whose love has not been guaranteed reciprocation." Take a chance, he seems to say, women as well as men.

Gauguin may be conventional in stating that woman's nature is love, in the spirit of Byron's "Don Juan":

> Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
> Tis woman's whole existence.

Or, he would have agreed with Jung's views:

> The woman is increasingly aware that love alone can give her full stature, just as the man begins to discern that spirit alone can endow his life with its highest meaning. Fundamentally, therefore, both seek a psychic relation one to the other; because love needs the spirit, and the spirit love, for their fulfillment.[6]

Later, in *NoaNoa*, Gauguin articulated a dualist cosmology based on spirit and matter, male and female, as the two aspects of the creative force in the universe.

On the other hand, Gauguin may be saying that in giving at the moment of conception a woman receives full individuality (biological determinism?). More abstractly, he could mean that in giving oneself to an experience, an idea, or a feeling, one receives it.

Gauguin does not address the issue here of the nature of the male. He does, however, state a few paragraphs later that:

> Woman wants to be free. It is her right. And surely it is not man who prevents her. The day that her honor is no longer placed below her navel she will be free. And perhaps healthier also.

Gauguin was angry at the constraints European society placed upon relations between the sexes, but no doubt sincerely wished for a time when the individual's merit would not be based on the sort of reproductive system one has.

He alludes also to homosexuality and lesbianism and alternate sexual behaviors. "Freedom of the flesh must exist." The sin in sexuality comes from *selling* one's body. Whosoever *gives* her or his body commits a little sin, but one which is redeemed by "the most beautiful act in the world, Creation...in the sense that it is a continuation of the work of the Creator." It is not clear, again, whether he means that sex between two free partners is a microcosmic expression of the Divine, or that sex which is procreative is Divine. Judging from his bitter harangues against "slavery" to one's

children, he must mean the former!

Further, contrasting European and Tahitian values, he asserts, "In Europe human copulation is a consequence of love. In Oceania love is a consequence of coitus. Who is right?" Characteristically, he is repelled by "European" insecurity and need for *quid pro quo* arrangements, in business and in love.

Elsewhere in the *Notebook* and in other writings and letters, Gauguin spoke against prostitution, against marriage as legitimized prostitution, against European conventionality and prudery, and in favor of a free and open sexuality, and even androgyny. His maternal grandmother was Flora Tristan, the early nineteenth century labor activist and supporter of women's rights, and it is credible that Gauguin concurred in her views. It should not be forgotten either, that he often spoke merely from his own convenience, self-interest, and bitter experience, himself guilty of what he most condemns.

There is evident in the *Notebook* a double side to his attitudes on politics as well. He said he is republican but that the French Republic is an illusion. And yet he is "Aristo" when it comes to art because art is for the minority and has been supported historically by men of wealth and rank. Society now does not support the artist and is therefore "criminal and badly organized."

Finally, it is the "primitive arts" that nourish one and not the arts of "advanced civilization." This theme recurs in his written work and is of course a subtext in his visual work. He links "primitive arts" with nature, the feminine, freedom—those things which nourish. He is still, at this point in his career, an essentialist and a dualist, though he valorizes the "female" role and though he goes on in later works to rethink and deconstruct his system.

The ideas expressed in the *Notebook for Aline* reveal Gauguin's disillusionment with contemporary life, but assert over and over his power of will and his ability to make in art a world he could not inhabit in his life.

The addition to the notebook of various clippings by critics praising Gauguin's work suggests that he was preoccupied with criticism and the value of his work in general. It is as if some sympathetic person, like a daughter, had written and collected all this material about him in a scrapbook. Perhaps this book was his way of fulfilling that wish.

Notes

[1]See page three of Damiron's introduction to the facsimile of Paul Gauguin's *Cahier pour Aline*, edited by Suzanne Damiron with the patronage of the Société des amis de la Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie de l'Université de Paris, Paris, 1963. The manuscript is conserved in the Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie, the Jacques Doucet Foundation.

[2]Another facsimile of *Cahier pour Aline*, edited by Victor Merlhè. Société des amis de la Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie, William Blake and Co., Bordeaux, 1989.

[3]Damiron, p. 4.

[4]Kirk Varnedoe, "Gauguin," in *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art,* ed. William Rubin, vol. 1 (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 200, and the note on pp. 208- 209.

[5]The French phrase *sans retour* has both meanings, that of "without return" or "forever."

[6]Carl Jung, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (London, Routledge and Kegan, 1948), p. 185.

Notebook for Aline

To my daughter Aline, this notebook is dedicated.
Scattered notes, in no sequence
like Dreams, like Life all
made of pieces.

These meditations are a reflection of myself
She too is a savage
she will understand me...My thoughts...will they
be useful to her?
I know that she loves her father whom she respects
I give her a souvenir
In my share the
death accepted today is an outrage
Who is right? the word or I? Mystery
In any case Aline has, thank God
her head and her heart placed high enough
to not be frightened and corrupted
by contact with the demoniacal brain
which nature has given me
Faith and Love are of
Oxygen They alone
make us live.[1]

Notes on Edgar Poe

To the dreamers, to those who have put their faith in dreams as if they were the only realities.

If I had been called upon to define very briefly the word art, I would call it the reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul. The imitation of nature, no matter how exact it may be, does not entitle anyone to take the sacred title of artist. The grapes of Zeuxis[2] had nothing artistic except to birds on the wing, and even the curtain of Parrhasios[3] did not succeed in hiding the fact that this painter was lacking in genius. I spoke of the veil of the soul; something like this seems to us indispensible in art. We can always double the beauty of a landscape by

looking at it with half-closed eyes. The senses sometimes perceive too much and sometimes too little.

Matter is the slave of the artist; it belongs to him, genius, without doubt, is revealed in choosing it.

With those of great intelligence, ambition is only negative. It struggles, toils, creates, not because it is pleasurable to surpass others, but because it is unbearable to see oneself surpassed when one feels oneself capable of not being. I cannot refrain from thinking that the greatest minds, those who best understand the vanity of human glory, are satisfied to remain silent and unknown. Just as it takes place in chemistry, it will happen rather often in this chemistry of the intelligence that the combination of two elements yields a substance which does not have the characteristics of its components at all. Thus the domain of the imagination is unlimited. It includes the entire universe. Even with the ugly, it creates beauty, which is both its only object and its impeccable touchstone.

The perfect harmony of a work of the imagination often harms the work in the eyes of stupid people by giving them the illusion of facility.

The only one who is an artist is one who can apply successfully the most abstruse of its precepts. Invectives against originality come from persons who are both vulgar and hypocritical. The idiot who claims to disdain originality gives proof rather of the kind of shamed hate that a man feels, weeping when faced with a superiority he cannot reach.

There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in its proportions.[4]

Take out this strange unexpected, new or original element and all the ideal charm of beauty will disappear immediately. We lose the unknown, the vague, the mysterious and we feel its lack. We lose in a word, everything that can make earthly beauty similar to celestial beauty. I would bet, says Chamfort, that any public idea, any convention, is a stupidity, because it has pleased the masses.[5] This is good, says Epicurus, precisely because it is displeasing to the crowd.

Do not be stingy except with the title of friend. How many people believe themselves great intellectuals by proclaiming that perhaps two and two do not make four.[6]

Everything is forgiven. Nothing is erased: what has been will always be.

The only one who is well loved is the one whose love has not been guaranteed reciprocation. Love me first, and I will love you after. Who will begin and who will finish the first.

On Richard Wagner

The idea of the fertile union of all the Arts goes back to very early periods in our history; it corresponds to the need felt by our race to recall the noble mystery of its origins and the *exalted hopes* of its destinies, to get away from selfish thought, from the sterile bitterness of material existence, to find oneself again, in a word, as in a mirror, idealized, spiritualized, brought back to its purest essence, and *becoming animated in this* contemplation of one's divine element, to feel one's faith fortified and one's courage revitalized.

I see predominate in this, above all, the necessity of throwing off an artistic burden which has become more burdensome every day, an extremely acute need of intellectual independence. We cannot lie to ourselves, to resign ourselves to impotence, to consent cowardlike to lose in *living our reasons to live.* I want to be happy, and only someone who is free is happy; but the only person who is free is someone who is what he can be and consequently must be. It follows that he who satisfies within himself the necessity of his very being is free, because he feels that he belongs to himself, because all his acts correspond to his nature, to his real demands, while one who obeys an external necessity, instead of obeying his interior needs, undergoes a constraint...he is not free, he is a slave, he is unhappy.

We acquire the strength to accomplish our work with time, if we learn to recognize each other, and to group as the disciples of a new religion, and if we reinforce each other in our faith by a mutual affection.[7]

The nature of woman is love; but this love is the kind that conceives, and which, in conception, gives itself without return. Woman attains her full individuality only when she gives herself. Without soul until she receives one through the love of a man. And the true woman loves without condition, because she must love.

I believe in the sanctity of the mind and in the truth of art, one and indivisible...I believe that this art is of divine source and that it lives in the heart of all men, illuminated by divine light: I believe that after having tasted the sublime delights of this great art, one is fatally devoted to it forever and can never deny it; I believe that everyone, by his own efforts, can attain the state of blessedness.

I believe in a last judgment, where those who in this world have dared to traffic in this sublime and chaste art, will be condemned to terrible torment, all those who have dirtied it and degraded it by the lowness of their

sentiments, and by their vile pursuit of material pleasures. I believe that on the other hand the faithful disciples of great art will be glorified, and that, enveloped in a celestial cloth of waves of perfume, of melodious chords, they will return to submerge themselves forever in the bosom of the divine source of all harmony.[8]

———

Do not do to others what you don't want them to do to you. That is very little to ask of a good man, and it is not a reason—that because he does not do evil to you, that he is a good man. It would be better to say—Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

Isn't it a mistake to sacrifice everything to children and doesn't it deprive the nation of the genius of its most active men? You sacrifice yourself for your child who, when he becomes a man in his turn will sacrifice himself. And so it goes. There will be only sacrifices. And stupidity will last a long time.

———

It is good for young people to have a model but let them draw the curtain on it while they are painting it.

Words of Zunbul-Zadi:

He says also—don't finish too much, an impression is not durable enough for the search for infinite detail after the fact—cannot help but harm the first attempt; thus you let the blade cool and you make a stone out of boiling blood. Even if it were a ruby throw it away.[9]

R. Schumann: Always listen to the songs of the people. They will give you the national character.

Woman wants to be free. It is her right and certainly it isn't man who prevents her. The day that her honor is no longer placed below her navel she will be free. And perhaps healthier also.[10]

You must not be confused. Knowing how to draw well and having a beautiful drawing. Being well educated and being intelligent. Being intelligent and being not a fool, there is another difference? To be proud and to be vain—still another difference.

I have known extreme poverty. That is to say to be hungry, to be cold and everything else which follows. This is nothing, one becomes accustomed to it and with will power one ends up by laughing about it. But what is terrible about poverty is that it is a hindrance to one's work, and to the development of one's intellectual faculties. In Paris especially, the race for money takes up 3/4 of your time, half of your energy. It is true on the other hand that suffering sharpens your genius. However, you mustn't have too much or it will kill you.

With much pride I have ended up by having a lot of energy and I have wanted to Will!

Is pride a fault and must one develop it? I think so. It is still the best thing to struggle against the human beast that is in us.

I have met a lot of shits in my life. But not one like little Bernard: everywhere you go you are sure to put your foot into one of his pieces of crap. He shits in all the corners.[11]

At my mama's house, the only person in evening clothes when we dined was the servant and he didn't understand what they said there; at the home of the governor of Tahiti, the only person not in evening clothes is the servant and no one listens to the witticisms of the old fraud except the servant who smiles. How everything changes!

Monsieur Louis Blanc, a competent critic, thought and wrote that the Egyptians had only a vague idea of the beauty of form.[12] Aie!! Another, after considerable work crowned with success and medals, etc., has just taught us that the famous painting of Rembrandt's entitled *Nightwatch* was a daytime watch. My God!...What possible good does that do us? I would have preferred that this gentleman had made a pendant to the picture of the same value. He is perhaps right after all. His work could not have had the same success. What do you prefer? A beautiful painting of an ugly person or an ugly painting of a beautiful person? Nobility was hereditary and we had our own '93 to abolish this custom. Wealth is today hereditary. Isn't it the same privilege?

Two persons are arguing and one says: "shut up." The other responds, "I'd like to smash your face." Which of the two speaks French the better? I would not dare to say. Ah: if he said, "You're a slob" I would understand.

A kilo of green is greener than a half-kilo.[13]

You must, young painter, contemplate a little this alleged La Palissade.[14] You will understand perhaps why in a painting a tree-trunk must be more beautiful than in real life.

The day that some imbecile found this phrase of comparison. It is a plate of spinach. The painting has discolored for about forty years.

The great monuments were made under the reign of the Potentates. I believe that great things also will only be done with the Potentates.

The Genesis of a Painting

A young Kanaka girl is lying down on her stomach showing part of her frightened face. She is lying down on a bed which is decorated with a blue *pareo* and a sheet of a light yellow tint. A violet-purple background strewn

with flowers like electric sparks; a rather strange figure stands by the side of the bed.

Fascinated by a form, a movement, I paint them without any other concern than making a nude piece. So that it is a rather indecent study. And nonetheless I want to make of it a chaste painting which will give the Kanaka spirit, its character, its tradition.

The *pareo* being intimately allied with the existence of a Kanaka woman, I use it as the bottom of the bed. The sheet of a material like bark from a tree must be yellow. Because of this color, it arouses something unexpected for the spectator. Because it suggests the light of a lamp which spares me from making a lamp effect. I need a rather terrible background; violet is exactly what is needed. There is the musical part of the painting all constructed.

In this rather daring position what can a young Kanaka girl do completely nude on a bed. Prepare herself for love! That is very much in her character but it is indecent and I don't want that. To sleep! The act of love would be finished: this would still be indecent. I see only fear. Some kind of fear. Certainly not the fear of a Susanna surprised by the elders. That doesn't exist in Oceania.

The *Tupapau* (Spirit of the Dead) is the very thing. For the Kanaka it is the constant fear. In the night a lamp is always lit. No one goes about on the road when there is no moon unless he has a lantern and even then they go in groups. Once I had found my *Tupapau* I hung onto it firmly and I made it the motif of my painting. The nude passes to secondary importance.

What can a spirit mean to a Kanaka woman. She doesn't know the theater or read novels. And when she thinks of a dead person she necessarily thinks of someone she has already seen. My spirit can only be any good little woman. Her hand stretches out as if to seize a prey. The decorative sense leads me to strew the background with flowers. These flowers are the flowers of the *Tupapau*, some phosphoresences, a sign that the spirit is thinking about you. Tahitian beliefs. The title *Manao tupapau* has two meanings:

Thought   Spirit
belief

Either she is thinking about the spirit
or the spirit is thinking about her.

Let us recapitulate. Musical part. Horizontal undulating lines—harmonies of orange and blue connected by yellows and violets; their derivatives. Lit by greenish sparks. Literary part. The spirit of a living woman connected to the spirit of the dead. Night and day.

This genesis is written for those who always want to know the whys, the becauses.

Otherwise it is simply a study of a nude Oceanic woman.

They say that God took a little clay in his hand and made everything that you know.

The artist in his turn (if he really wants to make a divine creative work) must not copy nature but take the elements of nature and create a new element.

In the *Grow and Multiply* there is a little of that. Grow that is to say become strong. Multiply that is to say augment the creation with new creation.

Napoleon I who as a young man had seen the popular wave overflow its banks wanted to put it back in its place. He worked all his life to create kings. The kings joined together to destroy Napoleon. The imbeciles worked against themselves. And the great despot was right when he said bitterly at St. Helena: "the Kings will miss me...."

If I look in front of me into space I have a kind of vague awareness of infinity and all the same I am the point of beginning. I would understand therefore that there would be a beginning and that there would not be an end. In this I do not have the explanation of a mystery but simply the mysterious sensation of this mystery. It is true that a sensation is not a truth. And this sensation is very closely connected to the belief of an eternal life promised by Jesus. Or then, if we are not the beginning in coming into the world, we must believe like the Buddhists that we have always existed—change of skin.

All that is very strange
Let us go and have dinner—for a change.

We must not get bogged down in reflections.
To be modest must one call oneself an imbecile?

A true painter always feels a certain shyness about borrowing beauty from another. It is not the subject which must be beautiful but one's work.

Trouilleberg furious that they sold a painting of his for a Corot reminds me of these words of a convict that the chain-gang guard was urging to work: Ha! you take me for a sailor.[15]

Verlaine— it rains in my heart
as it rains in the town.....[16]

The public want to understand and learn in one day, one minute, what the artist has spent years learning.

My political opinion! I don't have any but with universal suffrage I must have one.

I am a Republican—because I feel that society must live in peace. The majority is absolutely Republican in France. I am therefore Republican and moreover so few people love what is great and noble that a democratic government is necessary.

Long live democracy! There is only that. Philosophically I believe that the Republic is a *Trompe l'Oeil* (a pictorial expression) and I have a horror of illusion. I become *anti-Republican* again (philosophically speaking).

Intuitively, by instinct without reflection, I love the nobility, the beauty, the delicate tastes and this motto of yore, *Noblesse oblige*. I love the good manners and even the politeness of Louis XIV. I am therefore by instinct and without knowing why ARISTO.

As an artist. Art is only for the minority.[17] He himself must be noble. Only men of great wealth and rank have fostered art, out of instinct, out of duty (by pride perhaps). It doesn't matter. They caused great and beautiful things to be done. Kings and Popes treat an artist as an equal.

The democrats, bankers, ministers, art critics put on patron airs but do not act as patrons, they haggle as if they were buying fish in a market. And you expect an artist to be Republican!

There are all my political opinions. I feel that in a society all men have the right to live and to live well according to their work. The artist cannot live; therefore society is criminal and badly organized.

Some people say. The artist does something useless!

The worker, the manufacturer, in other words, all men bring the nation something which can be bought and sold, enrich the nation. And I will say more. *He alone* enriches the nation. When he is dead there remains yet another value. Which doesn't happen for the money changer. Example: a hundred francs circulate in different currencies. The money changer in several transactions causes them to pass from several hands into his own pocket. The nation still has 100 francs—not a cent more.

The artist like a workman makes a painting of 10 francs for example. The nation is enriched by 10 francs. And this is a useless being!

My god, how many calculations.

A few verses to change the subject:

Verlaine—

What have you done, you there
Weeping without cease
Say, what have you done, you there
With your youth?

Verlaine—

A great black sleep
Falls on my life:
Sleep, all hope,
Sleep, all desire?

I no longer see anything,
I lose all memory.
Of good and evil...
Oh, the sad story.

Verlaine—

I came, a clam orphan,
Rich only in my tranquil eyes,
To the men of the big towns:
They did not find me clever.

At the age of twenty a new disturbance
Under the name of amorous passion
Caused me to find women beautiful:
And they did not find me handsome.

Even though I was without country or king
And scarcely being very brave
I wanted to die in the war:
Death wanted nothing to do with me.

Was I born too early or too late?
What am I doing in this world?
Oh all of you, my grief is deep:
Pray for the poor Gaspard![18]

There is nothing which resembles a daub more than a masterpiece and vice versa.

Simplicity is for the great lords.

A young man who is incapable of doing something foolish is already an old man.

It is still at Mazas[19] that one finds the genius of a language; there a new word is created and understood forever more. At the Academy one can proceed only by etymology and a century must pass to adopt a new expression.

At my grandmother's house people smoked and laughed: at the governor's house no one smokes, no one laughs and everyone yawns. He is the most ultra-conservative negro.[20]

About Félicien Champsaur—His belly where blooms, lower down, a four-fold petal, in the radiance of secret flesh and the exhaling of heavy perfumes recalling our spasms, the rose of secret love.[21] Well! That's pretty daring—but you must admit it's pretty disguised.

Our ancestors were Gauls and they were *none the less healthy for that.*

There is in the heavens a book where the laws of harmony and of the beautiful are written. The men who know how to read in this book are favored by God says Swedenborg.[22] He adds that the artist being the truly blessed since he alone has the power to write the book, one must consider him as a Divine messenger.

And Swedenborg was a learned man!

Can one say that the man who wrote *Seraphitus Seraphita, Louis Lambert*, is a naturalist? No. Balzac is *not* a naturalist.

What a torture it is for a miser to be generous! But also what a torture for a generous man to be stingy.

A hen who has hatched (some eggs) defends her little ones with bravery, even when they are little ducks: which proves that maternity is in the blood. The voice of blood-ties!! I remember a good black in Martinique who showed me three little mulatto children near their mother, also a negress. Ah, sir—are my children not pretty?

The judge who condemns a man to the death penalty uses the right of the stronger.

The executioner is no more or less an assassin, considering that he kills to earn his living. The assassin who kills to earn his living is worth more than the executioner because he has risks and the executioner doesn't.

At the scaffold the victim must place his neck exactly on the collar, which is rare either because the condemned man is either too big or too little. Why isn't the balancing board not adjusted to the desired height, which would be easy to ascertain in advance.

One must never scold a friend who comes to ask a favor *especially* if you don't do him the favor.

To give is an easy thing.
To know how to give is very difficult.

The man who has confidence suffers only when he is deceived and he discovers it. The one who has distrust suffers the whole time of his distrust.
The same with pessimism

They believe that medicine is not making any progress. Because the maladies of man make more progress than the doctors. I will go even further. It is the progress of medicine which creates so many sick people by allowing infants to live who are fit only to die.

A'propos of Panama. What a tragedy! All those people ruined, etc....
I am not of that opinion and I think that if the whole business hadn't happened it would have been necessary to invent it. The stockholders are to be pitied, they say, yes (but people without any money who are looking for work without finding any, are they not also to be pitied). The stockholders are for the most part either little parsimonious men, misers even, or else gamblers and that is the majority, caring very little about the lives of men who leave their homes to work in a pernicious soil.
The ministers or deputies and the business agents have put ill-gotten gains in their pockets, but they have spent it—on all things that make work. Do you know if stockholders have invested money acquired honestly?
In other words there was a great movement of business, of supplies, of brokerage and down there a little canal digging. But all that is something! On the other hand Morality....
It would be necessary to do away with the stockmarket speculating for the Morality.
And nonetheless the stockmarket and this speculation are the pivots of our financial existence. Without them modern society could not function. What harm do you see in an imbecile investing the money he has stolen—in order to be decorated?

In the art of literature two factions are in conflict. The one who wants to tell more or less imaginary stories. And the one who wants a beautiful style, beautiful forms. This trial could last for a long time and end up in favor of either side. Only the poet can justify the demand that verse be beautiful and nothing else.

The musician is a privileged being. Sounds and harmonies. Nothing else. He is in a special world.

Painting too should be in a separate category: Sister of music it exists through forms and colors. Those who have thought otherwise have all been caught by their defeat. They accumulated anecdote upon anecdote—all in vain. They only amuse the public one day, only one minute, only one second.

Our laws!

Is it really God who punished Sodom? As for me, I think that it was a woman—otherwise Lesbos would not survive. What are our lawmakers getting mixed up in, I ask you. Where does vice begin? Where does it end?

If there are some revolting vices one must admit too that *freedom of the flesh* must exist, otherwise it is a revolting slavery. In Europe human copulation is a consequence of love. In Oceania love is a consequence of coitus. Who is right?

He or she who gives his or her ass commits a little sin, and even this is detestable....In any case the sin is in large part redeemed by the most beautiful act in the world, Creation, a divine act, in this sense that it is the continuation of the work of the Creator. He or she who sells his or her body commits a true sin. This act of venality degrades mankind and places him lower than the animals.

You will always find a mother's milk in primitive Arts. In the Arts of advanced civilization, I doubt!

Where is the man who can say that he has never wanted to commit a crime. One minute, one second.

One acts as one feels one lives by the morals one loves.
Pelladan.[23]

The resemblance with ordinary life inflicts the work with popularity and makes

inferior everything which expresses it.
Pelladan.

Paul Gauguin

Notes

[1]Suzanne Damiron has shown that this statement beginning, "These meditations..." was written on the first page under an article supportive of Gauguin by the critic Jean Dolent. Gauguin pasted Dolent's article over his own text. See Damiron's notes to *Cahier pour Aline* (Paris, 1963), p. 5. Gauguin's remark about "Faith and Love are of Oxygen" reveals his frequent habit of comparing states of mind to chemical formulas.

[2]Zeuxis, a late fifth century B.C. Greek master of realism, painted grapes so lifelike that birds came to peck at them.

[3]Parrhasios, a contemporary of Zeuxis, invited Zeuxis to view his painting. When Zeuxis went to lift the curtain over the work, he found that it was in fact painted. Zeuxis' realism, then, fooled birds, but Parrhasios' realism fooled a fellow artist!

[4]This is a well-known theoretical statement of Edgar Allen Poe, who quoted Francis Bacon in this context. See Poe's "Marginalia," *Edgar Allen Poe* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1966), p. 408.

[5]Probably Nicholas Chamfort (1741-94), a French writer of great wit in Revolutionary times.

[6]Gauguin repeated this remark in *Before and After*.

[7]Gauguin develops this theme in later writings.

[8]These two paragraphs are from Wagner's credo on art, something Gauguin was familiar with from his Le Pouldu days.

[9]Gauguin took this remark from his earlier "Notes on Painting."

[10]Gauguin repeated this statement in *Different Things* and in *The Wasps*.

[11]The painter Emile Bernard (1868-1941), had been a friend and painting colleague of Gauguin's, but their rivalry became unpleasant. The question of their mutual influence on each other is hotly debated in Gauguin scholarship.

[12]Louis Blanc (1811-82), a French historian, politician, and journalist. Merlhès points out that Gauguin means Louis Blanc's brother Charles (1813-82), a writer and professor of the Collège de France who wrote the *Grammar of the Arts of Design,* a work which has a pro-Greek bias, at the expense of Egyptian art. See Victor Merlhès' notes to *Cahier pour Aline* (Bordeaux, 1989), pp. 63-64.

[13]Gauguin repeated this statement in *Tales of an Amateur* and in *Different Things.*

[14]La Palissade, an obscure French painter.

[15]Paul Désiré Trouilleberg (1829-1900), a French painter whose landscapes did resemble those of the much more significant Corot.

[16]Verlaine's line should read, "Tears fall in my heart as it rains in the town."

[17]Gauguin omitted a syllable in "*minorité*," spelling it "*minoré*." The Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie confirms our translation as "minority."

[18]Gauguin cited here the last stanza (of four) of "Sagesse VI," then the first two stanzas (of three) of "Sagesse V," then "Sagesse IV—Gaspard Hauser chante." See Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes* (Paris, Editeur Galeimard, 1948), pp. 183-184.

[19]We assume (and Gauguin mentioned Mazas in *Tales of an Amateur* as well) that he is referring to a high security prison built in Paris from 1845-50 on the Boulevard Mazas (named for a Colonel Mazas). The building was demolished in 1898.

[20]Lacascade was the governor of Tahiti and the butt of many of Gauguin's caricatures and satires.

[21]Félicien Champsaur (1858-1934), a friend of Verlaine's and a minor novelist in his own right.

[22]Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a philosopher and "divinely inspired" writer very important to the Romantic and Symbolist artists.

[23]Gauguin misspelled Joseph Peladan's name. It is sometimes spelled with an accent as well. The French writer (1859-1918) became a mystic and also founded the Rosicrucians in 1892.

Agoraphobia: The Contradiction of Culture

By Maureen P. Sherlock

In "Deserts of Love," Rimbaud writes:

> This time it is the woman whom I saw in the City, and to whom I have spoken and who speaks to me.
>
> I understood that She belonged to her everday life; and that it would take longer for the turn of kindness to come again than for the reproduction of a star.[1]

The woman with whom he has spoken, face to face, is the city herself in the moment of the Paris Commune of 1871. This woman appears and then slips away only to reappear as the whore who stares back at us from the heart of modernism: for the bourgeois, to enter a dialogue with her in a public place identifies the woman as a prostitute. For Rimbaud, she is an urban worker and his only hope for a genuinely democratic citizenship which overcomes the hieratic organization of the Second Empire.

I begin my discussion here in order to reflect on the impossiblity of either a pure artistic intention on the part of subjective life, or its communicative reception within a structured and objective social life. These categories assume as ontologically real and necessary an ideological division between the will and the world, the ego and the body politic, the private and the public. The issue of cultural production must then be negotiated in those little pineal glands of art (the gallery, the museum, or the public art space) to build the bridge, as Kant called it, of an aesthetics which would

retrieve on the level of feeling what we are denied in other spheres of knowledge and political life. The place of exhibition is presumed to efface itself in order to bring together the heroic but subjective intention of the author with the objective aspirations of the public body. As Louis Dupre so poignantly puts it: "From that perspective, culture, exiled from its native habitat, had to wander aimlessly between the emptiness of a pure subject and the opaqueness of an estranged object."[2]

It was Marx's genius to grasp that the isolation of the individual as a producer of meaning was an ideological product of capital; in opposition he claimed the origin of meaning to be social agents operating in a complex system of relationships. As capital first reduces the importance of life to *homo oeconimicus*, cultural production, along with politics, education, and social life, is isolated from the economy which defines people's lives. It is currently hypothesized that late capital has now invaded these marginal areas to leave us without even imaginary social ties. We live seduced and abandoned in a Baudrillardian world of blockbuster culture, the selling of the presidency, efficient, cost effective education and, last but not least, night lights at Wrigley Field.

My project here is to examine one small part of that cultural contradiction in which the subject's intentions are transformed into the economy of desire we call consumption, and our social lives are consumed in an act of auto-cannibalism to be spit out as the post-political triumph of ideology over memory of or desire for a real and productive social life. There is no place of grace in capital, there are only contradictions which keep us from reproducing a star. I will first briefly examine the Paris Commune of 1871 as a site which managed to experiment, if only for a few months, with a non-hieratic social space in Rimbaud's City[3] and how it relates to Henri Lefebvre's concept of *everyday life*. Second, I will selectively discuss the society of the spectacle and its erosion of genuine public life in international expositions of culture and technology, and last, the attempts of contemporary artists to subvert the spectacle City, if only momentarily, to destabilize its meaning and offer a horizontal dialogic space of free public speech.

The category of everyday life in the work of Lefebvre, though first discussed in his 1946 work, *Introduction à la critique de la vie quotidienne*, was more fully amplified in later work. It has recently re-emerged with an intensifed interest in Situationist International and a number of art historical and literary reassessments of nineteenth century France. Marx himself uses the term "everyday life" in his and Engels' *Writing on the Paris*

Commune. Marx realized the Commune's most striking feature was its direct democratic forms of social organization at every level of life. It was so radical he called it "the greatest revolution of the century."

Lefebvre's concept of everyday life indicates a specific form of social *praxis:* a collective imaging of social space and time. It emerges with industrial capital's fetishistic presence of the commodity, and the subsequent trivializing and alienating of those social relations not directly connected to production. He clarifies it with some related terms:

> I have elsewhere distinguished *la vie quotidienne* (daily life) from *le quotidiene* (the every day) from *La quotidiennete* (everydayness): 'let us simply say about daily life that it has always existed, but permeated with values, with myths. The word *everyday* designates the entry of this daily life into modernity: the everyday as an object of a programming (*d'une programation*), whose unfolding is imposed by the market, the system of equivalences,..."everydayness," [it] stresses the homogeneous, the repetitive, the fragmentary in everyday life'...I have also stated that 'the everyday in the modern world, has ceased to be a "subject" (abundant in possible subjectivity) to become an "object" (object of social organization).'[4]

It marks, then, a certain shift in the organization of daily life, its social geography and the axis of power.

The Commune dealt with the daily routes and vectors of its people, a life based on an at least imagined directness of social experience in the earlier faubourgs, before Haussmann, *bon marche*, and the division of labor. The Commune was truly a revolution in the streets and for the streets; it sought to determine, as Lefebvre says, who had the right to the city. It is Kristin Ross' thesis that these two fundamentally new and contradictory *spatial* movements developed in the 1870s. First, there is the abstract geometry of an expansionist and colonialist space of the grid, of the new science of geopolitics and an international division of labor. Second, there is the new inscription of urban space as revolutionary space; it is a geography of class consciousness, because for the first time the classes are spatially segregated from one another as they had not been in earlier communities in the city. Smoldering under authoritarian rule of the Second Empire, the reorganization of the city along Haussmann's rule of the straight line, and the siege of Paris during the war, was an insurrection of workers which erupted on March 18, 1871. "For seventy-three days a largely leaderless revolutionary government declared Paris an autonomous Commune and set about the free organization of social life—free, that is, except for the

constant threat of military reprisal" (*ESS,* p.5). In the last week of May, the Versaillais attacked and 25,000 Communards were killed, more than had died in either the Franco-Prussian war or the Terror.

The Communards were mostly former peasants drawn to Paris by Haussmann's endless destruction and reconstruction plans, artisans who were used to being independent workers, and an enormous population of women, as France's male population had been decimated by the Franco-Prussian war. It was a revolution not so much about the seizing of the means of production as seizing a *place* where people could live and talk and congregate as citizens rather than producers. It was clearly an open marketplace they wanted and not *Bon Marche*.

In May 1871 Rimbaud wrote a "communist constitution" which is now lost, but is here recalled by his friend Ernest Delahay:

> In the little states which made up ancient Greece, it was the agora which directed everything: the agora, that is to say, the public place, the assembled citizens deliberating, voting, with equal rights, on what had to be done. He then began by abolishing the representative government and by replacing it by a system of permanent referendum.[5]

While not wishing to romanticize the event, I do want to accentuate this concept of the *agora* as a horizontal or dialogic space, the intentional egalitarian social practice of the workers, as opposed to the hierarchic old order of authority.[6]

Ross makes clear the significance of this horizontal axis in the Commune's announcements against distinctions between high and low art, writing and reporting, artist and artisan, painting and cartoons, etc. It attacks all those distinctions as the result of a vertical axis of space and posts this decree in the streets:

The Commune of Paris:

> Considering the imperial column at the Place Vendôme is a monument to barbarism, a symbol of brute force and glory, an affirmation of militarism, a negation of international law, a permanent insult to the vanquished by the victors, a perpetual assault on one of the three great principles of the French Republic, Fraternity, it is thereby decreed: Article One: the Place Vendôme will be abolished (cited in *ESS*, p. 5).

I am particularly interested in this event because of the questions it raises about the social geography of public space: the state's need to commemorate its military triumphs versus the Commune's need for fraternity. That the Commune thought it important to attack a sculpture before the central

banking institutions of the Empire, indicates the seriousness of the column's symbolic intervention in their social life. The incident clearly undermines the neutrality of public works: first, social space is a political practice; second, it problematizes the choice of whose "national" history is to be memorialized; and third, who determines the place one occupies in history?

While it is clear the Commune failed, it is also clear killing 25,000 workers to restore the Second Empire, while effective, is not the most desirable long range program. It is here that the sophistication of capital as an ideological form emerges in the transformation of daily life into everyday life and its transformation of space into colonial space effectively join hands. Everywhere in Western Europe and the United States we find a variety of domestic revolt and expansionist politics; the problem was how to eliminate class consciousness to form a new social subject open to colonialism. Significantly, we also find a very new cultural phenomenon emerging in Europe and North America, the international exposition. From London's Crystal Palace to Chicago's White City we find imaginary tourist cities built by the first cultural alliances of corporate capital and government. Staffed and planned by the "new educators," the exhibitions promised a utopia for good workers through a technology calculated to impress; and a racial destiny guaranteed by the display of tribal peoples.

It is not without irony that Marx reflects on how the commodity is exhibited like art at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, while four years later Courbet is dismayed to find hundreds of paintings indifferently displayed like commodities at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.[7] The spectacle of the commodity was everywhere in evidence, and it is my thesis that the fair is the perfect metaphor for what the city will become: a futuristic spectacle for tourists with a midway of anachronistic modes of production and rejected forms of social life. The tourist of everyday life is neither a worker nor a citizen, he is a spectator who consumes the spectacle city of Haussmann.

I want to draw some parallels to the United States at the turn of the century with France and England, which was also beset by urban labor insurrections at home while sighting its manifest destiny far beyond even its Pacific shores. Within this context, expositions functioned to offer utopian classless cities of consumption and scientific proof of a necessary colonialist destiny. Subjective consumption of the spectacle city collapsed the revolutionary potential of Rimbaud's urban prose poems; while new systems of science guaranteed one's objective place in the great chain of being. Two expositions are of particular importance to us because they signalled a radical change in the status of popular culture in political

ideology. Earlier fair planners in the United States hoped for "elevating" programs, with much moralizing about good versus degenerate workers. They were particularly hostile to having midways with sideshows, circuses, peep shows, dance hall girls, etc. These marginalized working-class entertainments were scorned by the pillars of society and government who organized and profited from the fairs. All that was to change from the Chicago World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893 to the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition of 1904 in St. Louis.

Seven miles south of Haymarket Square, in that still desolate marshlands now called the University of Chicago, Marshall Field and Potter Palmer answered the anarchists. They raised a completely artificial and temporary city to entertain "the people" under the guise of scientific education. This great white neo-classical elephant highlighted the advanced technology of what would turn out to be the advanced white races. You even got to participate in a scientific project which brought science down to the level of the people in the Anthropology Building. In his outstanding work, *All the World's a Fair,* Robert Rydell notes:

> Visitors to this building could be examined and measured by anthropologists under Putman's assistants, Franz Boas and Joseph Jastrow. For fairgoers who harbored doubts about the ideal types they were to conform to, statues of a male and female student from Harvard and Radcliff stand nearby.[8]

These statues are there to guarantee the truth of white supremacy in the land of social Darwinism. It is Rydell's thesis that this exposition was the beginning of capital's direct intervention into popular culture to guarantee its hegemonic control of the hearts and minds of the unruly working class.

The Midway Plaisance was built along side of the White City and wedded evolution, ethnology, and entertainment to program peace at home and success abroad. In between the honky-tonks the anthropologists, those apologists of colonialism everywhere, established the sites of other cultures as spectacles. The "lower races in their costumes" and their quaint crafts could not match "our" technology, their dirty midways could not touch our emerald cities. Racism was cloaked in educational and scientific moralizing such as this quote from a souvenir pamphlet:

> Perhaps one of the most striking lessons which the Columbian Exposition taught was the fact that African slavery in America had not, after all, been an unmixed evil, for of a truth, the advanced social conditions of American Africans over that of their barbarous countrymen is most encouraging and wonderful (cited in *AWF*, p. 53).

People were so upset by the Dahomey Village they thought the Native Americans were not so bad, in fact they were becoming almost aesthetic: "a thing of beauty and a joy forever" (cited in *AWF,* p. 66).

The white man's burden was the lesson of the Midway, substantiated by the newly authoritative social science installed amongst the peep shows. Later, at St. Louis, anthropologist W.J. McGee would organize living villages of "primitives," including the Native Peoples displaced by the purchase the fair celebrated. He advertised the exhibits as one of the last chances to see "real savages." As he succinctly put it: "human culture is becoming unified, not only through diffusion but through the extinction of the lower grades" (cited in *AWF* , p.161). The diffusion and extinction, we are to assume, is the product of nature and not colonialism or genocide. To this he added his evolution of social types from savagery, barbarism, civilization and enlightenment in anthropological displays. This left one with pseudo-neutral scientific concepts with which to disguise domestic racism and the exploitation of colonized peoples. In addition, this vertical ascendancy, which culminates in white races, also fosters racial rather than class identities and technological salvation. The theory allowed them to kill two birds with one swan song: a faceless, bureaucratic white city and a colonial geography of dying savages with valuable land.

If this extended analysis seems to have wandered over the hills and dales of geo-politics, it is only the beginning of a retrieve of that other history which alone will allow us to address the problem of the possibility of a genuine social space for art. It will not be determined by an artist's intentions, but in finding ways to constitute the kind City which Rimbaud saw for a brief moment in a social practice which named names, remembered its own history, and constructed its monuments in the *agora* of public speech.

If the 1888 anarchist revolt at Haymarket Square in Chicago marks the site of a bloody conflict between these Communards and the police, it is a site still activated not by the presence of a public commemorative sculpture, but its absence. The city tried to erect a memorial there to honor the police who died; each of the many times is was raised the anarchists tore it down. The police finally gave up and to this day the monument can be found in Chicago's central police station. Each May the anarchists return for a picnic and vow never to forget their history. At this moment, the square and the city's vegetable markets and artist's lofts which still surround it are facing eviction by the sons of Baron von Haussmann. I know this sounds a bit melodramatic, but in Chicago, like Alan Ginsburg, I still get sentimental over the Wobblies. New Wobblies returned

November 2, 1989 to San Diego to protest a Treasures of Russia exhibition which consisted of the Czar's Faberge eggs. A collaborative of artists (including David Avalos, William Weeks, Elizabeth Sisco, and Louis Hock) had their $8,000 newspaper ad documenting the publisher's union-busting tactics first accepted and then refused by the city's main paper, *The Union*. With the *Plus Fire Performance Group,* they decided to document, on the Day of the Dead, an earlier act of censorship in the city and to restore a memory of the Wobblies free speech movement in the city. *Emma* dealt with the 1912 visit of Emma Goldman and her friend Ben Reitman to speak on Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* at San Diego's "Soap Box Row." Goldman was denied a forum under the city's ordinance against free speech in the downtown area, and local vigilantes kidnapped and tortured Reitman while forcing Goldman to leave by train. The effectiveness of the group's performance, which retrieved the suppressed alternative history of the city, was clearly marked by the audience's take over of the speaking space for their own face to face discussion. One participant shouted: "Speak from the heart—get rid of the script," and they did.[9] It broke down the barriers of the tale from the teller and the spectator.

Art is a social practice which can also work to facilitate others in their struggle for a "right to the city." Using Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery as a local base of culture practice, both Group Material and the Los Angeles Poverty Department are currently involved in separate projects of urban empowerment. Collaborating with local artists and inner city community organizations, Group Material, through a series of face to face Round-Table discussions, is installing billboards throughout the participating neighborhoods with non-commercial but necessary information. At the end of March the participants will access their efforts and publish a how-to model book for continued joint efforts in Chicago and elsewhere.

Later this spring, members of Los Angeles Poverty Department will participate with local artists and Chicago's Union of the Homeless in a training workshop for the production of street and institutional waiting room/lobby performances. They too will organize a workbook as a potential model for others. There will be performances in welfare offices and the dissemination of alternate messages in communites by groups who have ideas, research, and information, but no way to visualize or present them. They will be aided by citizen artists who thought they had no one to speak to beyond four white walls lit with track lighting. All of these small, strategic movements are but the continuation of an almost forgotten history where, for a few moments in Paris, there were no differences between the public and the private, a billboard or a painting, a street

performance and the theatre. Isolated and alone, the spectacle of the city seems overwhelming, fatal, and pacific. But as T.J. Clark reminds us:

> The spectacle is never an image mounted securely and finally in place; it is always an account of the world competing with others, and meeting the resistance of different, sometimes tenacious forms of social practice.[10]

Notes

This article was originally presented at the 1989 Mountain Lake conference on art criticism in Virginia.

[1]Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations,* trans. Louise Varesse (New York, New Directions, 1957), pp. 155-57.

[2]Louis Dupre, *Marx's Social Critique of Culture* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983), p. 277.

[3]In reflecting on the visual elements of social geography, I am deeply indebted to Kristin Ross' excellent work, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Hereafter cited as *ESS.*

[4]Henri Lefebvre, "Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx's Death," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 87, n. 1.

[5]Ernest Delahay, *Rimbaud: L'artiste et l'être moral* (Paris, Albert Meissein, 1923), p. 96. Cited in *ESS,* p. 21.

[6]Although it is not my intention to discuss it here, I also believe this was operative in other worker insurrections in the United States, such as the Homestead and Pullman strikes and, most especally, in the anarchist revolt at Haymarket Square.

[7]Yves-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," *Endgame* (Boston, MIT Press & ICA, 1987), p. 35.

[8]Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 57. Hereafter cited as *AWF*.

[9]For an extended analysis of the event and a reprint of the censored newspaper ad, see "Red Emma Returns," William E. Weeks in *Art Papers,* vol. 14, no. 1, (Jan/Feb 1990), pp. 16-19. See also in the same issue, my own "No Loitering: Art as Social Practice," pp. 2-5.

[10]T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Everyday Life* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 36.

Van Gogh, Vinnen, and Vasily Kandinsky: The Threshold to Abstraction

By Marion Wolf

The unabating German critical contest between figurative and reductive visual representation recalls—especially with a view to current ethnic revivals—an earlier art dispute, triggered by a painting of Vincent van Gogh, which became a stimulus to a significant document of modernism, the *Blaue Reiter* almanac. Briefly on view in this country,[1] the disputed *Field with Poppies* (Mohnfeld) was a loan from the Bremen Kunsthalle, which had dated the picture in 1890.[2] The canvas provides a panoramic view of cultivated, poppy-dotted, fields, their grid slanted up toward the hilly backdrop of the Provençal Alpilles. With its ordered rural setting and matching palette, it reveals little of the painter's turbulence. This "most harmless van Gogh," as it was dubbed at the time of its 1911 purchase by the Hamburg director Lichtwark, appears an unlikely cause for controversy. Yet its acquisition for his institution by the Bremen Kunsthalle director Gustav Pauli (1866-1938) aroused the German art establishment to widespread objections of such acrimony that they provoked rebuttals of enduring programmatic consequence.

In that connection this dispute, known as the *Vinnen Protest*—a spiritual and political debate between figuration and abstraction—still rewards scrutiny. In assessing it one should recognize, apart from the intensifying exterior tensions precipitating the disastrous First World War, the wide regional pluralism governing the 1911 German art scene (only a few decades after consolidation of the many independent principalities into the unified Reich). Beyond the pompous eclecticism fostered by the Berlin imperial court, and the conservative painting practiced at the reputed academies of such provincial capitals as Düsseldorf or Munich,

newer visual trends, especially *Naturlyrismus* (lyrical naturalism), had spawned rural art colonies at Worpswede in the north and Dachau to the south. Concurrently, certain urban circles favored Impressionism, and while the Munich *Jugendstil* vogue was then abating, smaller radical groups had arisen in Saxony and Bavaria, their expressionist iconographies gaining gradual recognition. Yet variants of German Realism also persisted into the 1930s. This fateful decade, when any other mode of visual representation, denounced as degenerate and alien, was being driven into outer or "inner" exile, also cut German van Gogh holdings from one-hundred and twenty to less than twenty.[3]

However, that ostensibly spontaneous cultural policy was rooted in an anterior antagonism which already around 1893 had caused the Munich scandal—generating the Berlin Secession, the 1905 chauvinist *Werdandi* affair, and by 1911 engendered the even more critical Vinnen incident. But while the two earlier instances still originated from above—the circle around the Kaiser who, resisting the dynamism of his era, furthered reactionary tendencies—the *Vinnen Protest* arose among the artists themselves. Thus the *Response* editor Alfred Walther Heymel (1878-1914), a former Bremer, could sarcastically credit it with "at least clarifying the 1910 situation pertaining to artists' goals better than ever before." Although later observers like Peter Selz considered the Vinnen affair mainly a "blend of chauvinism and self pity," the grievances of the Protesters also reflected a less materialistic, if more ominous, cultural paradox, the *Fortschrittlich Reaktion* (progressive reaction), whose adherents unwittingly slipped into conservatism:

> Rather than realize that they were backward...they transfigured the very ideas and attitudes which concealed definite *reactionary* elements. Thus their formerly idealistic impetus turned against those ideas previously considered progressive, as it attempted, in stupendous delusion, to reunite the diverging contemporary tendencies within definite religious, mythic or racist positions.[4]

Thus having functioned as stylistic reformists only two decades earlier, these aging artists now resentfully recognized that they were being bypassed—that they were outmoded. That their patriotic fervor attacked only van Gogh is ironic, since as a Dutchman—even if linked by early critics to French Impressionism—Vincent was ethnically Germanic rather than Gallic. Moreover, throughout the preceding eleven years of his Bremen directorship Gustav Pauli had acquired, without encountering much resistance, eighty-four works by Germans as well as thirteen works

by foreign artists, including paintings by Manet, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and Gauguin.[5] A Bremen native, he was part of a remarkable phenomenon, a new generation of German museum professionals, determined despite government resistance to expand their collections through the acquisition of valid modern works, regardless of national origin.[6] But beyond causing disfavor politically, that resolve angered many conservative artists economically, for they were used to the benevolent collecting of regional art by former museum directors, who were often painters themselves.

The *Field with Poppies*, having been exhibited during the fall of 1910 at the Berlin gallery of the resolute van Gogh proponent Paul Cassirer, entered the Bremen Kunsthalle collection early in 1911. Its purchase had been sanctioned by the *Galerie-Verein*, an acquisitions committee of museum friends. It included the *Protest* author Carl Vinnen, whose later pamphlet would claim that he had voted favorably on Pauli's earlier foreign choice of Monet's portrait of *Camille*, its price of 50,000 marks notwithstanding. But he objected vigorously thereafter to the 30,000 marks purchase of the *Field with Poppies*, arguing his patriotic and economic objection in two vituperative local newspaper articles. Consolidated into his essay *Quousque Tandem* early in the spring of 1911, they were disseminated throughout Germany, mostly to Secession and *Künstlerbund* members.[7] Expanded by many supportive replies—ranging from mere approbation to extensive comments—together with some surreptitiously added spurious economic data and his brief apology, Vinnen's text was then issued by the ethnically inclined Jena publisher Eugen Diederichs as the brochure *Ein Protest Deutscher Künstler* (A Protest by German Artists).

Its detailed announcement, which included excerpts in the morning papers of April 11th, produced immediate individual refutations in the urban press of Bremen, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Vienna, and in certain periodicals like *Pan*. But it was July before the Munich publisher Reinhard Piper (1875-1953) retaliated with the comprehensive rebuttal, *Im Kampf um die Kunst* (In the Battle for Art). It appeared in the Bavarian capital, which under the Wittelsbach regime had turned into an artistic and intellectual center comparable to Paris. Although its noted *Akademie* had to yield some relevance after 1892 to the local Secession, the city's significance had grown with the rise of the *Jugendstil*—a German version of Art Nouveau— and subsequent vanguard movements. By 1909 several German and foreign artists, some rejected by the local Secession, had founded their own exhibition society there, the *Neue Künstler-Vereinigung*

München (NKVM). Their group shows were scathingly criticized in the *Protest* brochure, although by that year (1911) their goals were diverging again. Such group members as Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944) or Franz Marc (1880-1916) began adopting ever bolder ideologies and iconographies.

Their chief assailant, the painter Carl Vinnen (1863-1922), was a Cuxhaven resident who considered himself a member of Worpswede, a village art colony located in the isolated moors of the Bremen area. It was founded around 1889, in an anti-industrial spirit akin to that of Barbizon and Pont-Aven. Rather than resort to conventional Realist or Symbolist metaphors, these painters drew upon experiences of *Naturlyrismus* as artistic equivalents. After such early recognition as a gold medal obtained at the 1895 Munich Glaspalast show, the settlement experienced reverses, including the untimely death of its member Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907). While she mostly rendered the local scene, her later pictures began to reflect her frequent stays in Paris. Even Vinnen acknowledged a limited French influence on his own works (mainly atmospheric land- and seascapes). Yet his pamphlet denounced French painting as an inferior art foisted upon Germany—often as studio remainders—by unscrupulous art dealers. Such outright contradictions typify his entire brochure, which summarily attacked van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne. Though granting those Post-Impressionists some significance, Vinnen claimed to lack a proper frame of reference, a shortcoming he blamed on "snobistic" critics, especially Julius Meier-Graefe (1869-1935), the committed if impetuous formalist advocate of modernism, who rated painterliness, "*das Malerische*," above traditional representation.[8] Instead, despite discerning certain French affinities in their pictures, Vinnen valued the art of the German Realists Thoma, Rethel, Menzel, and Leibl, and maintained that future French trends, by affecting German art more forcefully, would destroy its valuable Teutonic essence. He saw this development precipitated by the purchase of French moderns by German museums: he saw millions of marks lost to the domestic art market as foreign works were "forced upon Germany by a large, well-financed, international organization."[9] This undoubtedly alluded to ventures by such vanguard galleries as Bernheim Jeune of Paris, Cassirer of Berlin, and Thannhauser of Munich. In the preceding year they had jointly circulated a French Impressionist exhibition, featuring paintings by Manet from the Pellerin collection.

Analogous to much European art writing of the period, which generally focused on trends rather than individual works, the *Protest* provided no assessment whatsoever of the contested *Field with Poppies*, nor of its

creator. When mentioned, van Gogh was summarily rejected along with other Post-Impressionists, or brusquely accused of "unbridled subjectivity" or mental imbalance. Only in the *Protest* introduction does Vinnen attempt a critical evaluation. He accuses Vincent's oeuvre of lacking three essential *Dimensionen* (dimensions), specified as *Zeichnung, Farbe und Stimmung* (draftsmanship, palette, and atmosphere).[10] Although these dicta are dismissed by the *Response* as "nebulous and hazy," they might well constitute an effort by Vinnen to counter the formalist visual criteria established by Meier-Graefe in his 1904 *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Modernen Kunst*—despite its impressive title a rather informal collection of his early essays on modernism—where the the three *Potenzen* (potentialities), are defined as *Linie, Farbe und Kompositon* (line, color, and layout).[11]

Upon its dissemination among the German art establishment, Vinnen's polemical *Quousque Tandem* drew close to a hundred endorsements from conservative academicians and now obscure critics—except for a few names like Stuck and Trübner, or those more current during the Nazi era, Erler and Schultze-Naumburg. Although most were deliberately distanced from Wilhelminian policies, their invidious comments ranged from rabid chauvinism to an emphatic neo-idealism, couched often in personal attacks on progressive museum directors, critics, or fellow painters. Of those branded "degenerate" by a later regime, only one—in fact, the sole woman on either side of the controversy—backed Vinnen. But although she did not recant, as Trübner would in the *Response*, Käthe Kollwitz's (1867-1937) swift remorse emerged in a family letter. It showed that beyond her patriotic and her well-known humanitarian concerns, she was motivated by stylistic misgivings:

> Then I proceeded to the French, and in the very first hall, which also holds that splendid Rodin bust, I regretted right away my signing the *Vinnen Protest*, since here again I saw the French represented by rather good works, and realized that in any case German art needs French fecundation...Rather I should have told myself that the entire Matisse phase must come to an end, which one has to await calmly.[12]

Thus beyond the Post-Impressionist generation of van Gogh it was the economically less menacing, but stylistically more threatening, French Fauves and German Expressionists—shown at the Paris *Salon d'Automne* and the Munich *Neue Künstler-Vereinigung*—who enraged the Protesters. They derided them as sentimental (*empfindsame*) Bavarians or alluded to them by name, mentioning Kandinsky specifically.[13]

It was the German avant-garde that reacted spontaneously to the attacks. The day after the *Protest* excerpts appeared in the Munich press, Franz Marc wrote his Rhenish painter friend August Macke (1887-1914):

> From your papers you too must have learned of Vinnen's diatribe...about to appear at Eugen Diderichs...a unanimous furious protest against the current high regard for the French moderns (van Gogh and Signac to Matisse and Picasso), and above all their acquisition by museum people and other snobs. Among his applauders figure the entire Munich Secession, beside the Worpsweders...but seemingly no one from the Berlin Secession. I had the immediate idea of a refutation, broadly based of course, backed up by reputations and with the support of names (Tschudi, Berlin Secession, Sonderbund). But someone will have to start it. Why not us? The *Vereinigung* with Kandinsky in the lead, and Tschudi....Kandinsky is versed in such matters. I shall see him soon and discuss it with him....I think, for example, of juxtaposing Matisse next to Erler, Renoir beside Münzer, Cézanne next to Trübner and Dill...Do explore your Rhenish circle with that in mind, if your military service leaves you any time.[14]

That same day Marc also wrote to Kandinsky, who, however at first, hedged, claiming work and his status as an alien.[15]

For their intended rebuttal the young artists joined Reinhard Piper, principal publisher of Meier-Graefe. Piper's entire publishing enterprise was attacked by Vinnen:

> After the recent boom in Cézanne and van Gogh there now seems also a [financial] corner in Daumier in preparation. But first we may witness the mercantile introduction of El Greco, whose art, rediscovered some time ago by Meier-Graefe with the slogan Greatest Spanish Painter, has been arrogated promptly by the latest trendsetters....[16]

Vinnen infers a deliberate value manipulation contrived through the Cézanne and van Gogh monographs of Meier-Graefe, and Klossowski's Daumier biography, all issued by Piper.

Although most of Marc's spontaneous proposals, like the pictorial juxtapositions now widely used in art-historical presentation, materialized only in the subsequent *Blaue Reiter* almanac, much of his artistic credo is already evident in the *Response*. In fact, the pamphlet seems less focused on the slandered art of van Gogh—who was honored the next year by an entire section of his own at the Cologne Sonderbund show—than on more current trends. First titled *Im Kampf um die Kunst,* the brochure had

fostered—by the oubreak of the war—two further editions as *Deutsche und Französische Kunst* (German and French Art).

Contributors to that *Response* volume spanned the German progressive panorama, from the Berlin Impressionists to the racist convictions of Möller van den Bruck. (They also included most early German van Gogh collectors: Osthaus, Heymel, Max Liebermann, van de Velde, Count Kessler, Carl Moll, Curt Herrmann, Flechtheim, and Cassirer, lacking only Jawlensky, Tschudi, and Meier-Graefe—the latter two van Gogh owners as early as the nineties. They abstained from responding for tactical reasons.) Made up of original as well as reprinted rebuttals, the booklet was organized into four subdivisions: directors, authors, artists, and those collector-dealers the French call *Marchands-amateurs*. From the directors, however, some major names are missing. The absence of the pivotal Hugo von Tschudi (1851-1911) has been ascribed to his terminal illness that year, but a Piper postscript to Heymel proves that these two prudent editors deemed an inclusion of such a controversial personality "not advisable."[17] Upon consulting Franz Marc, Tschudi charged the head of Munich's university art department, Karl Voll—whose essay cautions against spiritual inbreeding by regional art groups—with "speaking in his place." Equally lacking is a refutation from a Tschudi protégé, the Mannheim Kunsthalle director Fritz Wichert (1878-1951). He was blamed in the *Protest* for having acquired a Manet painting—a version of *The Execution of Maximilian* (1868)—for his museum.[18]

Beginning the *Response* was a statement from the chief *Protest* target Gustav Pauli. He called for greater directorial freedom and strongly denounced Vinnen's irrational ambivalence. But that seemed partly derived from local conditions. Notwithstanding its initial acclaim, and the perpetual adulation of regionalism in the literature of the *Fortschrittlich Reaktion,* which includes the *Worpswede* monograph by Rainer Maria Rilke, the settlement had become subject to foreign attrition.[19]

After the turn of the century—despite the deliberate rural orientation of their colony—the poet, his wife (the sculptress Clara Westhoff) as well as Paula Modersohn-Becker, had begun alternating between their village and Paris. They were drawn to France by masters like Westhoff's mentor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and Paul Cézanne, whose 1907 Paris memorial exhibition inspired Rilke to a sequence of extraordinary letters, issued later in book form.[20] Concurrently, the Bremen Kunsthalle, which since 1895 had been buying Worpswede works, had begun to broaden its acquisition focus, dismaying the champions of local *Heimatkunst.* Such factors might condone Vinnen's wrath but not his blatant misstatements. As other museum heads were refuting similar allegations by the *Protest,*

the Posen director Ludwig Kaemmerer had to rebut charges of his squandering German funds on a Monet painting, which he identified as a loan from museum supporters.[21]

The writers' *Response* segment comprised, among others, a broad exoneration of progressive art criticism by Hans Tietze (1880-1954), as well as a lengthy statement by the Sonderbund planner Wilhelm Miemeyer (1871-1960). Citing *ars ex arte,* he defined the new art—to the ensuing dismay of Franz Marc—as an adaptation rather than radical reformulation of Impressionism. Among Weimar contributors were the pioneering Count Harry Kessler (1868-1937), a former museum director who was discharged over a similar outcry against foreign art during his 1906 Rodin drawing exhibition; and Henry van de Velde (1863-1957), the eminent designer—who proposed relocating the scorned French pictures to private homes—cited the growing *Raumkunst* movement, then decreeing *refugia* for art works.

Alone in exposing the socio-political roots of the *Protest* was Wilhelm Hausenstein (1882-1965). Another young Piper author, Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), whose 1906 Bern dissertation *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Abstraction and Empathy) first articulated expressionist esthetics, declared their neo-primitivist goals:

> Primitive art does not arise from immature **con**tent but from other-aimed **in**tent....Therefore we compel ourselves to that primitive way of viewing, unimpaired by any prior knowledge or experience, which is the simple secret of the mystical impact of primitive art.[22]

Reflecting a wide proliferation of styles, the largest *Response* segment was made up of the artists, led by the noted Berlin Secession triumvirate Liebermann, Slevogt, and Corinth, the sculptors Kolbe and Gaul, and lesser artworld figures like the pointillists Paul Baum and Curt Hermann. Of the Dresden *Brücke,* only the by then Berlin-based Max Pechstein (1878-1937) responded, while a message from Max Beckmann (1884-1950), affirming French art, still sniped at Matisse. Austrian participants included Gustav Klimt as well as Carl Moll—a confirmed van Gogh collector through his link to the Vienna Miethke gallery. Parisian rebuttals came from the expatriate painters Hofer, Spiro, Bondy, and Pascin, as well as Wilhelm Uhde, whose Henri Rousseau biography introduced the naive artist to Munich. Rhenish responders, beside Macke's vehement denunciation of the Düsseldorf academy, included the Sonderbund members Deusser (1870-1952), Nauen (1880-1940), and Clarenbach (1880-1952), and their dealers Walter Cohen of Bonn and Flechtheim of Düsseldorf. From Fischerhude the Worpswede founder Otto Modersohn generously

upheld both French art and German regional painting. Equally contradictory were reactions from Bavaria, ranging from outright solidarity with Vinnen by most Secession members, often from resentment against Tschudi's reorganization of the Munich museums, to figures like Walther Püttner (1871-1953), the *Scholle* member, who, after signing the *Protest,* also participated in the *Response*. Actually, *Scholle* members were indeed facing a dilemma. Though committed to recording similar *Naturlyrismus* experiences as the pleinairist Worpsweders, they tended toward a more decorative linear landscape version under the influence of the regional *Jugendstil.*

Surprisingly, due perhaps to their developing stylistic rift, no one from the *Neue Künstler-Vereinigung*—not even the van Gogh owner Jawlensky, who revered the artist as his "master and example"[23]—came forward beside Kandinsky and Franz Marc. The latter's essay pleaded urgently for commitment to that deeper creative immediacy he attributed to Primitive art:

> Hence our affection for the Primitives is no mere whim, but the profound yearning for restoration of the long-lapsed relationship from man to art.[24]

This aim, deeper than Marc's individual goal of an "animalization" of his imagery, is further discussed in the subsequent *Blaue Reiter* almanac.

From published correspondence it becomes clearly evident it was in fact that yearbook—which superceded the intermediate *Response* pamphlet—that had initially been meant as the principal refutation of the *Vinnen Protest*. As early as May 9th Piper had approached the Munich collector and publisher A.W. von Heymel—who was then readying some rebuttals for publication in the June issue of his *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*—with a proposal for two entirely separate refuting publications:

> As the principal publishers of Meier-Graefe it was only normal that also we would repeatedly receive suggestions from artists as well as authors for a response to the Vinnen brochure. But due to the necessary haste a publication in book form is not feasible right now. Such a volume, which must exceed considerably the scope of the Vinnen Protest, and also feature juxtaposed illustrations, should therefore be postponed till autumn. But it might be good to precede such a crucial publication by some pamphlet, corresponding in format to that of Vinnen, i.e., also emanating from a broad survey.[25]

Within two months the first of the two envisioned publications had

become ready for a summary. Piper cautioned its editor Heymel:

> Could you mention perhaps that we did not systematically rake all of Germany for names, but from a large amount of pertinent personalities could contact only a small number; that our brochure might easily have been longer, had we intended a tome rather than a pamphlet.[26]

Those admonitions appear verbatim in the epilogue to Heymel's *Response*. But despite that claim of restraint, Piper had undertaken a comprehensive survey in preparation of the *Response*, mailing close to one-hundred and fifty personal letters of solicitation or explanation.[27] It is thus startling that at first he rejected the statement by Kandinsky, the most consequential by far of all the rebuttals. What may have deterred the cautious Piper, even more than Kandinsky's radical ideas, was its dictatorial and quasi-messianic tone. It was the only *Response* contribution not addressing the controversy. In his letter of June 8th to Piper the painter justified his strategy:

> In this case I believe that it is rather the universal attitude which is the most proper form: one states one's basic position, and then defeats through the magnitude of the concept life-art the petty concerns and fears of the Vinnen party. That my contribution is aimed *directly* at that faction becomes obvious from its final passage, toward which a logical chain of reflections leads from its very first sentence.[28]

But Piper's assent was not due, as has been claimed, to an intervention by Franz Marc, who berated the publisher in his letter of June 13th from London for "not printing Kandinsky's splendid and mighty article....Kandinsky's art is just as prophetic as his words." For already by June 9th Piper had agreed to its original wording.

In that remarkable statement, arguing a steady advance from Symbolism toward abstraction, the artist advocated a deliberately construed art, its exterior shape expressing an inner necessity:

> hence already now the absolute indispensability of the preplanning and functionality, i.e., of the construction also in the visual arts becomes entirely clear. Inevitably any up-to-date artist will conform his output to that necessity.
>
> After music it will be painting that is going to be the next art form inconceivable without construction. Is in fact now already.
>
> Thus painting will attain that higher level of *pure* art, which music had reached for centuries. All 'young' and 'wild' ones of any spiritually

superior country will be supporting that aim, and no power whatsoever can impede that progress....[29]

This assertion, in its constructivist terminology, echoes his Russian colleagues. It proclaims expressive modalities detailed by Kandinsky more explicitly in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, a booklet Piper managed to issue before the end of 1911.

Once that *Response* booklet had come out, the literary collaboration intensified between Kandinsky and Marc. They considered the pamphlet useful but too diffuse to proclaim their aims. They continued compiling a publication which Piper initially assumed "crucial" to a Vinnen defeat, but which the two editors by then had envisaged more sweepingly as a "forum for all genuine new ideas of our own era: painting, music, stagecraft, design, etc. It should appear concurrently in Paris, Munich, and Moscow, with many illustrations."[30] It was a publication Marc anticipated being as culturally comprehensive as the compendium *Sachsenspiegel.* Having entitled that yearbook *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider), the two artists used its name for two exhibitions, organized after their withdrawal from the *Neue Künstler-Vereinigung*. With some alterations, it toured various European cities after their Munich openings. A few of the works displayed, particularly two major paintings from that year (1911)—were Franz Marc's transitional *White Bull* and Kandinsky's apocalyptic *Komposition #5,* the very picture which had precipitated their December resignation from NKVM—received full-page reproductions in their yearbook. In addition to work by other just-emerging or revalidated European painters such as Matisse, Picasso, and El Greco, their book contained manifold examples of popular and indigenous art of diverse ethnological and chronological origins. While other European vanguards were also attracted to such native objects, it was rather for their outer shape than for the intrinsic spiritual properties attributed to those artifacts by the *Blaue Reiter* editors, who were still attuned to theosophical and other esoteric symbolist ideologies. Determined to demonstrate the universal validity of such images, they presented van Gogh, not by his controversial *Field with Poppies,* but by his portrait of *Dr. Gachet.* Juxtapositioning it with a Japanese woodcut, visual affinities were emphasized. The widest coverage (seven illustrations) was given to the naive French painter Henri Rousseau (1840-1910), whose pictures Kandinsky declared the Realist complement to his own evolving abstractions.

Over one-hundred didactic illustrations were interspersed strategically with nineteen text items, ranging from mere quotations to reports on structural strategies in German, French, and Russian contemporary artistic

ventures. The *Almanac* opened with three essays by Franz Marc, whose introductory *Geistige Güter* (Spiritual Goods) was meant as a defiant vindication of Tschudi and Meier-Graefe. The volume also gave much prominence to novel principles of music composition, while featuring essays by Kandinsky proclaiming the autonomy of line and color in pictorial space. It concluded with three brief atonal compositions by Schönberg and his students, as well as the script for *Der Gelbe Klang* (The Yellow Chord), a drama by Kandinsky, fusing elements of shape, color, sound, movement, and myth into a revolutionary synesthetic spectacle.

But contrary to the professional diversity of the *Response* participants, only artists collaborated on the yearbook, according to the belief of its editors—undoubtedly heightened by the aloofness of Meier-Graefe, who by then had equated abstraction with decoration—that "they are the only ones aware of their aims; art writers become here merely second-hand."[31]

Although initially conceived by Piper, who augmented their stock of unusual illustrations with reproductions of modern artists disparaged in the *Protest,* the *Almanac* was ultimately compiled so autonomously by the two painters that the apprehensive publisher requested their financial guarantees before issuing the *Blaue Reiter* in May 1912. But this proved a superfluous precaution, since the first *Blaue Reiter* edition of close to 1200 copies—some providing original graphics—required a second, hardly altered, edition by the spring of 1914. But the outbreak of the war that summer, brought on by widely escalating nationalist pressures, precluded further sequals of the *Almanac*. How far that volume, opposing a universal inner-directed esthetic to locally limited objectives, might otherwise have offset the Vinnen mentality cannot now be assessed, because of the radical sociopolitical changes actuated by the hostilities. With the precipitate flight of Kandinsky, and the early deaths of Macke (1914) and Marc (1916) in action, the *Blaue Reiter* circle disintegrated.

Post-war developments temporarily broadened the *Blaue Reiter's* popular acceptance in Germany, as it had also done for van Gogh, who had appealed mostly to a limited cultural elite. But despite the transformation of the Imperial Reich into the Republic of Weimar—where a just-returned Kandinsky could advance the new art during his years of Bauhaus teaching—attacks on non-objective esthetic persisted (motivated primarily by politics), culminating during the thirties in the infamous *Bildersturm.*

As recent exhibitions have shown—even in the present, fundamentally altered cultural climate—fluctuations between figuration and reduction, between global and domestic canons, continue.[32] But exactly a century after the founding of Worpswede and the death of van Gogh, whose oeuvre now commands a value far beyond most German museum budgets,

visionary advocacy of a universal, rather than an ethnic, pictorial language has arisen from that “inner necessity” proclaimed by Kandinsky and the *Blaue Reiter*. It has remained so eloquent that, despite its patina, many in Germany still regard the *Almanac* to be “the most important programmatic work on the art of the twentieth century.”[33]

Notes

[1]*Van Gogh in St. Rémy and Auvers* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition catalogue, 1986-87).

[2]The New York catalogue dates this picture June 1889.

[3]Walter Feilchenfeldt, *Van Gogh and Paul Cassirer* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Van Gogh, 1988), p. 42.

[4]Richard Hamann and Jost Hermand, *Stilkunst um 1900* (Munich, Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1973), p. 9.

[5]Gustav Pauli, *Erinnerungen aus sieben Jahrzehnten* (Tübingen, Rainer Wunderlich Verlag, 1936), p. 238.

[6]The group included, among others, Lichtwark of Hamburg, Sauerlandt of Halle, Wichert of Mannheim, Osthaus of Hagen, Swarzensky of Frankfurt, Hagelstange of Cologne, and particularly Tschudi. After his Berlin dismissal by the Kaiser he became museum head in Munich.

[7]"How much longer?" is the opening query from Cato’s first oration against Catilina, a quotation then popular with German debators.

[8]"Snobism arises not only when appreciation is feigned, or urged, about inferior art, but also when it applies to works of true value, to which the beholder is not provided a clue.” Carl Vinnen, *Ein Protest Deutscher Künstler* (Jena, Eugen Diederichs, 1911), p. 6.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 17.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 7.

[11]Kenworth Moffett, *Meier-Graefe as Art Critic* (Munich, Prestel Verlag, 1973), p. 41.

[12]Kollwitz's letter to her son Hans, June 20, 1911. *Aus meinem Leben* (Munich, List Verlag, 1961), p. 143.

[13]Hans Rosenhagen, *Ein Protest Deutscher Künstler*, p. 68.

[14]August Macke and Franz Marc, *Briefwechsel* (Cologne, M. Dumont-Schauberg, 1964), p. 52.

[15]Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, *Briefwechsel* (Munich, Piper Verlag, 1983), p. 29.

[16]Vinnen, *Ein Protest Deutscher Künstler*, p. 16.

[17]Reinhard Piper, *Briefwechsel mit Autoren und Künstlern, 1903-53* (Munich, Piper Verlag, 1979), p. 132.

[18]"Regret my inability to provide a contribution due to overwork." Telegram from Wichert quoted in a Piper letter to Heymel, June 20, 1911. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

[19]Hamann and Hermand, *Stilkunst um 1900*, p. 280.

[20]Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe über Cézanne* (Frankfurt, Insel Verlag, 1952). English translation, New York, Fromm International, 1985.

[21]Similar strategies were used by other embattled German museum heads, especially Tschudi. He used them after the Kaiser had vetoed his multi-national acquisitions for the *Nationalgalerie*, until even donations from the private sector were banned without prior official sanction.

[22]Wilhelm Worringer, *Im Kampf um die Kunst: Die Antwort auf den "Protest Deutscher Künstler"* (Munich, Piper Verlag, 1911), p. 94.

[23]Jawlensky's letter to Joanna van Gogh-Bonger, March 28, 1908. Feilchenfeldt, *Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cassirer*, p. 29.

[24]Franz Marc, *Die Antwort*, p. 89.

[25]Piper, *Briefwechsel mit Autoren und Künstlern*, p. 130.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 134.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 132.

[28]*Ibid.*, p. 135.

[29]Kandinsky, *Die Antwort*, p. 75.

[30]Kandinsky and Marc, *Briefwechsel*, p. 45.

[31]Piper, *Briefwechsel mit Autoren und Künstlern*, p. 123.

[32]*Refigured Painting* (New York, Guggenheim Museum, exhibition catalogue, 1989) and *Bilderstreit* (Cologne, Museum Ludwig, exhibition catalogue, 1989).

[33]*Der Blaue Reiter*, eds. Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (Munich, Piper, 1987; Dokumentarische Neuausgabe von Klaus Lankheit), p. 7.

A Sceptical Note on the Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art

By Donald Kuspit

The idea that art involves anything imperative makes me uncomfortable, and the qualification of that imperative as "moral" makes me very uncomfortable. Especially at a moment when the government is attempting to impose its version of the morally imperative on art—determined to force art to submit to supposedly universal morality. What morality should art exhort us to, when the morality it is being asked to conform to is suspect?

While the idea of universal responsibility implicit in Kant's categorical imperative—"act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law"—is marvelous to contemplate in theory, the morality to which we are asked to conform in practice is hard to justify as universal. "Universal" morality usually masks a limited conception of life, a preconception of its proper concerns—the appropriate way to feel, think, and act. Such propriety invariably serves the interests of some particular social power, which legitimatizes, imposes, and enforces itself by claiming its morality to be universal and normative—unproblematic. This precludes analysis and questioning of it. The proclamation of a *universal* morality—implicit in the idea of the moral *imperative*—is censorious of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that are contradictory of—have no place in—normal, universal life. By labelling them improper or inappropriate they are in effect dismissed, without further examination—without understanding.

Art is frequently the victim of such censorship—witness the notorious cases of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, whose images, labelled obscene and immoral, were in effect completely devalued. Of

course, art itself can help universalize, normalize, conventionalize, and moralize feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that are deemed socially appropriate. Christian art does this. That is, art can give authority to a particular version of the important life, in the process gaining authority for itself. Much art does serve, or is appropriated by—even against its own best intentions—the interests of some "moral majority," becoming part of its imperativeness.

Let me sharpen my point. In the contemporary world art is at its best when it is deliberately obscene: its specific contemporary task is to realize the uncanniness that implies the obscene. As Erling Eng says, not only does obscene mean "against the scene" or "a withering of the scene," but it is "a modified reproduction" of a forgotten (and thus mythic) past scene.[1] The idea of the moral imperative of contemporary art goes against the idea of its obscene "imperative," if it can be called that. But the moral is not simply antithetical to the obscene: it suppresses it. Thus, to insist that art must have a moral imperative is to deny that it can and should be a revelatory articulation of the obscene. Only by way of persistence in the direction of the obscene can art be of contemporary service to life. Perhaps only the unpremeditated obscene—the spontaneous eruption of the profoundly forgotten—can heal the damaged self of the modern world. Firsthand experience of the obscene allows the self to feel inwardly alive; I venture to say that it lost its sense of being alive in the first place because it lost contact with the obscene life within itself.

These days art is all the more necessary as the one psychosocial space in which the obscene can become unequivocally manifest, for everywhere else the obscene exists equivocally as a snickering stereotype. The sense of the obscene has been blunted by its social management. The obscene has in effect become moralized—administered in the interest of public morality, the way prostitutes are administered. Society predetermines what can and cannot be regarded as obscene: the obscene must register with the mind police. The fake obscene has usurped the place of the genuine obscene, which emerges uncannily when and where least expected, if it appears at all. It is increasingly difficult, in a society that proclaims its enlightened and tolerant attitude, to know what is or is not authentically obscene. Our society has shaped an official, permissible obscene to serve its own interests—to control from within. The obscene that is publicly visible and available is produced to capture one's private fantasy. One's deepest impulses are owned by society before one knows it. The openly acknowledged obscene is bait that keeps one on the social hook. What is socially confirmed as obscene is an apple of paradise

designed to get you to bite into it with your whole being, giving the society that produced it complete power over you. Pornography is perhaps the exemplary case of the manufactured, programmed, predictable, mind-manipulative obscene. It exists ultimately to dull and distract one's senses: its mock obscenity (mock sexuality) is meant to put one in a state of mind in which it is impossible to spontaneously experience something as unexpectedly—uncannily—obscene. One thinks of the pinups that were painted on the sides of bombers, mentally obscuring the importance of their mission. One knew what one was fighting for; the sanctioned obscene of the coy pinup justified war, whose obscenity was unsanctioned, and so unrecognized.

The obscene is generally regarded as a personal matter, so that the structure of society itself will never be recognized as obscene. The socially produced—morally acceptable—obscene absorbs the excess energy and leftover interests of one's inner life so completely that one has no energy left to see and no interest in seeing behind the social scene. The authentic obscene is implicitly critical; to recognize that there is something behind the scene, that the scene is uncanny, is to be critical of it. The moralized, even idealized obscene—that part of the scene which is socially labelled obscene, which is an official behind-the-scene—is designed to keep you from looking further, from looking for what is behind the rest of the scene. The sanctioned, ritualized obscene is typically spectacular, its illicitness so sensationalized and glamorized—like Las Vegas glitter—that one cannot imagine that the obscene would appear in any other way, so that one is blind to it in ordinary life. This spectacularization—a kind of secular sacramentalization—makes the obscene facts of life an acceptable part of the scene, so that their inward—behind-the-scene—significance is not realized. Behind the fun of gambling in Las Vegas is the fact of greed, itself a complicated cluster of desperate needs behind its spectacular appearance. The fun facade or spectacular scene serves a socio-moral purpose: to obliterate all awareness—the very idea—of a behind-the-scene, an uncanny obscene.

If the obscene articulates what is inwardly inescapable in life—what will wreak havoc if it is not faced—and if morality is an effort to avoid the obscene—to deny the obscene facts of life—then insistence on art's moral imperative is a way of keeping it uncontaminated by the obscene, a strategy for preventing it from going behind the scene of life. Art, of course, can become a means for the social manufacture of the obscene; ironically, this confirms its moralization. Indeed, the moralized obscene is evident in much high art, which often uses the excuse of a mythological theme to

render a naked body or naked landscape, meaning them to be obscene, but fearful of just how far behind the scene it is socially permissible to go, and so moralizing them by means of mythological allusion, as well as by stylistic means, which keeps them part of the scene. From the *Venus of Milo* to the *Venus of Urbino*, from the landscapes of Patinir to those of Turner, from Dürer's portraits to Cubist portraits, art offers an anxious mix of idealization—a method of spectacularization, as well as of stabilizing a representation as a scene—and of uncanniness, which is inseparable from the behind-the-scene effect, the sense of the obscene. Traditional art was caught on the horns of a dilemma; contemporary art must decisively choose the obscene—struggle to be genuinely obscene—because the manufactured, moralized obscene has become socially dominant, invading even the low life world where it was once unwelcome and known for the lie about life which it is. In a society which attempts to wipe out the sense of the obscene—in part by replacing the genuine obscene with the fake obscene—art seems the one means that can restore a sense of the inherent obscenity of life.

Another way of making my point is in terms of D.W. Winnicott's distinction between the true self and the false self.[2] The moral imperative serves the latter rather than the former. More precisely, art which invests in the idea of the moral imperative tends to reinforce the compliance that is the *raison d'être* of the false self. The false self exists to protect the true self, but it can acquire a pseudo-integrity of its own, which moral imperativeness—a sense of the false self's power to command in the name of the socially normal—can support. It is bad enough that much art unwittingly reflects compliance; to deliberately advocate it malevolently undermines the true self's spontaneity and vitality—indeed, its spontaneous power to go behind the scene, to recognize the obscene. The sense of the obscene serves the true self—the self which "can be creative and...can feel real," and "from which comes the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea"—if only by counteracting the notion of imperativeness, particularly of moral imperativeness. Inherent to the sense of the obscene—and the true self behind the scene of the false self is the genuinely obscene in a world of compliance and depersonalization masked as morality and universality—is the feeling that there are no commandments to follow, no imperatives, only life to be spontaneously and creatively lived.

The conflict between the true and false self—implicitly between the vitally obscene and the rigidly (imperatively) moral self—has been an issue of art since antiquity, which hoped for their reconciliation. When Horace, in *The Art of Poetry*, argues that the best poetry "joins instructions

with delight" (l. 381), he announces that reconciliation. An art that instructs—that is morally imperative because it instructs—implicitly advocates compliance and falseness to the self that pursues delight, especially the self that delights in itself, that enjoys its own life. An art that delights strengthens the self's sense of aliveness. It is easier to reconcile the moral and the delightful in theory than in practice, although it is not impossible to do so. Certainly much high art seems to do so, if idealization is instructive. But as time passes, such superlative art comes to seem more one than the other—either more instructive than delightful, or more delightful than instructive. Indeed, now its moral aspect, now its sensual aspect, will seem prominent and important, suggesting that its union of opposites was unstable to begin with—inherently flawed.

The issue of the moral imperative of art can be framed in still another way: can art communicate concern? This means something more than dealing with socially topical themes, as much get-the-message art does. Winnicott remarks that " the word 'concern' is used to cover in a positive way a phenomenon that is covered in a negative way by the word 'guilt'."[3] I think the negative way is more useful for understanding would-be moral art than the positive way. That is, I think art wants to be morally imperative and instructive—dogmatically demonstrate its concern, the feeling and acceptance of responsibility, as Winnicott says—out of a sense of guilt at giving pleasure, delighting the senses. I think much self-proclaimed morally concerned art eschews sensuality as obscene in a world of suffering—in a world of carelessness or indifference. But it is only through genuinely obscene sensuality that art can make suffering convincing, make it seem emotionally real enough to be concerned about, feel responsible for. It must be recreated for the spectator so that he or she is inwardly moved by it, rather than acknowledge its existence superficially, which is all that the iconography of suffering as such achieves. Unless art realizes freshly obscene methods—every material once regarded as obscene seems to have exhausted its uncanniness—it risks becoming moralizing propaganda, that is, self-defeating as art. Without obscenity, art is inwardly bankrupt, the secretly compliant facade on a social scene. To have conspicuous moral influence is simply another way of being part of the scene—a rather canny way. It may make certain self-styled artist-prophets in the wilderness happy with themselves—give them a feeling of narcissistic superiority—but their moral swaggering and smugness does not necessarily indicate depth of concern, nor does it guaranteee the significance of their art. Indeed, an obviously moral art tends to lose uncanniness. It certainly does not help the spectator to realize his or her responsibility, for art as well as life.

Notes

[1]Erling Eng, "Psyche in Longing, Mourning, and Anger," *Facets of Eros*, eds. F.J. Smith and Erling Eng (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 78-79.

[2]D.W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" (1960), *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York, International Universities Press, 1965), esp. p. 148.

[3]D.W. Winnicott, "The Development of the Capacity for Concern" (1963), *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Appendix

Criticism's task—its own morality—in this situation is complex, and in a sense ironic. On the one hand, it must try to root out and denounce what might be called the commissar factor in self-proclaimed morally concerned art—just that factor which indicates that the art means to establish a new status quo of concern, to replace the existing one. That is, the art means to reeducate—re-moralize—us. The moral superiority of would-be commissar art (and artist) brings in its wake tyranny and inhumanity. It will only give a new prescriptive basis to human misery. Criticism thus shows the peculiar moral opacity—limitations—of self-styled moral art. On the other hand, criticism must deliberately make a given art seem vitally obscene, even when it does not seem to be at first glance. That is, criticism must make an effort to expose the obscene roots of seemingly "sublime" art, in the process suggesting how the art made its primary obscenity into a "secondary" scene, that is, fused it with an existing stylistic and iconographic scene to make it obliquely public. In doing this, criticism makes explicit the uncanniness inherent in every art. Of course, criticism also runs the risk of seeming to advocate a certain kind of obscenity, making it a new "moral" imperative or would-be status quo. If this occurs, then the critic becomes a perverse kind of commissar—which is what he or she should never be.

It should be noted that my account of the critical task transcends the traditional critical goals of description and evaluation. Empirical description changes into interpretive uncovering, and evaluation into elaborated recognition of the obscene depths an art discloses, as well as its surface

success in disguising its obscene roots. Criticism must uncannily bend traditional criticism to its own obscene purpose, all the more so since empirical description goes nowhere in the current situation of stylistic pluralism and endless novelty; and submissive acceptance of a particular hierarchy of values as the authentic one ignores the fact that there are a number of competing hierarchies of value which seem equally valid. In a situation in which it is not clear what art is canonical—and it may never again be clear, unless dictatorship of art is established (and there are many artists and critics eager to play dictator of art, Red Queens eager to chop off disobedient nonconformist's heads)—the only honorable critical path is to acknowledge the obscenity of every canon, and work within all of them.

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