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Art Criticism

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American Beuys: "I Like America & America Likes Me"

David Levi Strauss

> Complicity battling redemption—that's what the history of America is.
>
> —Susan Howe[1]

In fact, America has never known quite how to respond to Joseph Beuys. In Europe, Beuys is either loved or hated (rarely "liked"), but in America the terms of reception and critique have been less sharp. This ambivalence is reflected in the title of an article which appeared just after the Guggenheim retrospective in 1979: "Joseph Beuys: Shaman, sham, or one of the most brilliant artists of all time?"[2] The Guggenheim catalog itself is prefaced with a pinched and cautious apology from Director Thomas Messer which begins: "Joseph Beuys has been the subject of much controversy in the past and will, no doubt, challenge the responsive capacities of visitors to the current exhibition of his work at the Guggenheim Museum."[3]

Aside from German-born Benjamin Buchloh's hysterical trashing of Beuys in *Artforum*[4] and *October*[5] in 1980, and John F. Moffitt's useful but conceptually flawed book, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art: The Case of Joseph Beuys*[6] in 1988, which both end up as rigidly materialist diatribes equating Beuys's idealism and esoteric sources with crypto-fascism,[7] there have been remarkably few attempts, in English, to deal with Beuys's works and ideas.[8]

By most accounts, the American audiences for Beuys's public dialogues in January 1974 (arranged by Ronald Feldman) also didn't quite know how to take Beuys. His reputation for provocation and controversy had preceded him, but the substance of his teachings had not, so much of the time of these meetings was taken up by the most preliminary clarification of terms. When the dialogues did break through to more substantive exchange, the audiences often seemed caught on the horns of a particularly (though not exclusively) American dilemma: How

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can we embrace Beuys's idealism (which is akin to our own) without denying its profound opposition to the materialism which also defines us?

For his part, Beuys was equally ambivalent about America. As his influence spread in Europe, he continually declined invitations to come to the U.S. or show in the U.S., saying he would not come as long as the U.S. remained in Vietnam. When he finally did come in 1974, he tried to engage Americans in two very different kinds of dialogue. Four months after his largely unsuccessful public dialogues and lectures on his "Energy Plan for Western Man" in New York, Minneapolis and Chicago, Beuys performed his first and only *aktion* in America, and this second contact was fittingly *traumatic.*

> You could say that a reckoning has to be made with the coyote, and only then can this trauma be lifted.[9]

For three days in May in 1974, Joseph Beuys lived and communicated with a coyote in a small room in the newly-opened Rene Block Gallery at 409 West Broadway in New York. Though actually witnessed by only a handful of people, this action, entitled *I Like America and America Likes Me*, awakened the interest and curiosity of many who heard about it, far and wide. Along with Beuys's golden-flaked honeyed head in *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), and the glowing white horse and cymbals of *Iphigenie/Titus Andronicus* (1969), images of the Coyote action are among the most resilient and generative images to come out of Beuys's performance work.

Caroline Tisdall, author of the book documenting the Coyote action, has elsewhere written, "The represented environment must effect the modern consciousness originally, archetypically and beyond the times."[10] Perhaps more than any other, Beuys's American action was projected "beyond the times." Fifteen years after the act and three years after Beuys' death is perhaps a good time to make an inquiry into the further meanings of the Coyote action, and to reconsider its significance.

Coyote in America

> Coyote, ululating on the hill,
> is it my fire that distresses you so?
> Or the memories of long ago
> when you were a man roaming the hills.[11]

Native American Coyote tales speak of a time long ago "when animals were people" and everyone could communicate with each other. Though there are many different kinds of Coyote tales, varying from place to place and people to people, they flow from a common, ancient source and represent "one of man's earliest attempts to make articulate the movement of the Spirit."[12]

The Coyote of the Coyote tales is primarily a *transformer*, an agent of change bringing order to chaos and chaos to order. He is "the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries."[13] In much of Western North America he fills the role of Culture Hero and Trickster, found in virtually all traditional societies. He is an American Zeus, Prometheus, Orpheus, and Hermes all rolled into one; mating to create the human race, inventing death, stealing fire to give to humans—shape-shifter, androgyne, messenger and guide to the Underworld. In whatever guise, Coyote *makes things happen.*

In contrast to the virtuous gods and heroes of some other traditions, the Coyote of Coyote tales is by turns greedy, lecherous, deceitful, vain, jealous and gullible. The poet Gary Snyder has pointed out the "Rabelaisian-Dadaist overtones" of the Coyote tales.[14] It is typical of Native American thought that comic indirection paradoxically indicates the way of right action. There is more than a little Coyote in Buster Keaton.

During Sacred Time, the time of Creation, Coyote taught humans how to survive, and the incredible survival of the coyote, both mythologically and biologically, continues to be one of the great American mysteries.

The Coyote War

The coyote is the most adaptable and successful North American mammal besides *Homo sapiens*. Favoring prairie, basin and bajada, the coyote has recently extended its range from the forests of Maine to the city parks of Los Angeles, from Alaska to the mountains of Guatemala, and it has done this in the face of one of the most concerted attempts ever made to wipe out an entire species.

Weapons in the war against coyotes have included poisons such as strychnine and thallium sulfate, leghold traps, cyanide "coyote-getters" designed to explode into the coyote's mouth, snares, den-hunting to destroy pups, aerial hunting from planes and helicopters, "dying rabbit" calls to guns, sterilization baits, sight-running hounds, toxic collars on sheep, and "Compound 1080" (sodium monofloroacetate), hailed as "the best, most species specific, most fool-proof predator poison ever developed by man."[15]

All over the West, coyotes are hunted with four-wheel drive jeeps, CB radios and high-powered rifles with scopes. There has been a bounty on coyote scalps since 1825, even though no state or province has ever reduced any predator animal population through the bounty system.

Through the Predator & Rodent Control Branch of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (sister agency of the Bureau of Indian Affairs) and other agencies, the U.S. Government has poured millions of tax dollars into coyote eradication efforts since Congress first appropriated money for it in 1914. Charles L. Cadieux compared the government's war on coyotes to another recent debacle:

> Many people feel that the Vietnamese mistake was the first war that the United States didn't win. That isn't true. For forty-five years, Uncle Sam has fought a war against coyotes ... and lost! In the years between 1937 and 1981, minions of the Fish & Wildlife Service scalped 3, 612, 220 coyotes. The ears with a connecting strip of skin were sent to a central tallying point as proof of their 'body count.' [Cadieux estimates this figure should actually be doubled to include the number of unverified, unrecorded kills due to Compound 1080 poisoning.]
>
> If my calculations are reasonable, coyotes suffered *six million* casualties in this war with Uncle Sam. Yet, we would have to admit that the coyotes have won the war.[16]

Mythologically and biologically, Coyote is a survivor and exemplar of evolutionary change. This is what attracted Beuys to Coyote. Beuys embraced the coyote as the progeny of the paleo-Siberian, Eurasian steppe-wolf that came across the Bering Strait 12,000 (or more—some estimates go as high as 50,000) years ago and adapted to its New World home. Coyote carried the paleo-Asiatic shamanic knowledge with him, spreading it throughout the North American West and into Mesoamerica. Our word "shâman" comes directly from the Tunguso-Manchurian (Turko-Tartar?) *saman*, possibly derived from the verb meaning "to know," and remarkably similar to the Yucatec Maya word for a shaman, *h-men*, also meaning "one who knows" (the secrets of the Old Ones). Our word "coyote" is from the Spanish conquistadors' corruption of the Nahuatl word "coyotl." The Hopi call him "iisaw." He received his scientific name, *Canis latran*s, only in 1823, two years before Missouri made him an outlaw (a "Dillinger" or a "Geronimo"[17]) by putting a bounty on his scalp. After this, the coyote became a prime scapegoat in the West.[18] He symbolized the wild and untamed, an unacceptable threat to husbandry, domesticity, and law & order. In Christian symbology, he was the enemy of the Lamb and the Shepherd, a satanic figure. Like the American Indian,[19] he was the Other in our midst, and we did everything we could to eliminate them both.

> The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America.
>
> The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. ...
>
> —Oglala Sioux Chief Luther Standing Bear
> in his autobiography, 1933

The American intelligence is an indigenous plumage. Is it not evident that America itself was paralyzed by the same blow that paralyzed the Indian? And until the Indian is caused to walk, America itself will not begin to walk.

—Jose Marti, "Autores americanos aborigenes," 1884

The Trauma

Coyote Old Man is a fine doctor, a great medicine man.[20]

Medical symbolism is rampant in Beuys's work.[21] His own birth is referred to in his "vitae" as "Kleve exhibition of a wound held together with an adhesive bandage." Beuys recognized the whole Social Body as a wounded body, a traumatized body requiring treatment, and this realization led to a lifetime of research into the healing arts.

The Coyote action was performed in the shadow of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, on a postcard of which Beuys inscribed the names "Cosmos" and "Damian" in one of his multiples (made the same year as the Coyote action), as a comment on the commercialization of allopathy and as an homage to the greatest physician in the history of Europe, Paracelsus, who was born the year after Columbus "discovered America," and assassinated 48 years later by men in the employ of irate druggists and doctors. Legend has it that Paracelsus was captured by the Tartars while in Russia and was schooled in their shamanic healing arts.

Beuys's intentions in the Coyote action were primarily therapeutic. Using shamanic techniques appropriate to the coyote, his own characteristic tools, and a widely syncretic symbolic language, he engaged the coyote in a dialogue to get to "the psychological trauma point of the United States' energy constellation"—namely, the schism between native intelligence and European mechanistic, materialistic and positivistic values.

This is the dialogue he tried and failed to have with people in his "Energy Plan for the Western Man" tour earlier that year. In turning to the coyote, he moved from verbal language to the language of action. The conceptual simplicity of the Coyote action—"a man in a room with a coyote"—combines with its semiotic complexity to allow entrances and readings at many different levels.

Arriving for his first and only action in America in an ambulance, with "Emergency" emblazoned across its front and marked with the red crosses so prevalent in his earlier drawings and paintings, Beuys left no doubt about the purpose of his trip. Wrapped in a felt cocoon inside the ambulance, Beuys recalled his own myth of origin, in which he was shot down over the Crimea and rescued by nomadic Tartars, who wrapped him in insulating felt to warm him. Here again, the artist journeys to another world (the New World) through ritualizing threshold rites. Again he is wounded and in need of treatment. The trauma is always double. The Coyote action is an updated version of the masked dance dating from the Upper Paleolithic. In 1974, a New York art gallery replaced the cave as *temenos*.

Beuys's "medicine" in this action consisted of his usual costume (felt hat and fishing vest), staff, Braunkreuz flashlight, two large pieces of felt, a musical triangle, a pile of hay, and stacks of the daily *Wall Street Journal*.

Upon arrival in the room with the coyote, Beuys began an orchestrated sequence of actions to be repeated over and over in the next three days. A triangle is struck three times to begin the sequence. This triangle that Beuys wears pendant around his neck is the alchemical sign for fire (dry, fiery, choleric warmth), which ancient glacial Eurasian shamans sorely needed. It is also a sign for the feminine element (earthy & mercurial) and for the creative intellect, and it is the Pythagorean symbol for wisdom. Striking its three sides three times, Beuys calls himself, Coyote, and the Audience to order.

After the triangle is struck, a recording of loud turbine engine noise is played outside the enclosure, signifying "indetermined energy" and calling up a chaotic vitality. At this point, Beuys pulls on his gloves, reminiscent of the traditional bear-claw gloves worn by "master of animals" shamans such as those depicted on the walls of Trois Freres, and gets into his fur pelt/felt, wrapping it around himself so that he disappears into it with the flashlight. He then extends the crook of his staff out from the opening at the top of the felt wrap, as an energy conductor and receptor, antenna or lightning rod.

The conical shape of the felt resembles a tipi, the nomadic shelter which migrated from Siberia to North America with the hunters. Topped with the crooked staff, it also recalls both the stag and the shape of the lightning in *Lightning with Stag in Its Glare*, 1958-85, and is a reference to the classic shamanic antlered mask, also going back to the caves of the Upper Paleolithic, as does Beuys's *Eurasian staff*, the shamanic *phallos* (Coyote carried his around in a box on his back) and staff of the psychopomp—messenger and mediator. The felt enclosure doubles as a sweat lodge for Beuys, accumulating the heat necessary for transformation.

Beuys bends at the waist and follows the movements of the coyote around the room, keeping the receptor/staff pointed in the coyote's direction at all times.

When the beam of the flashlight is glimpsed from beneath the felt, we recognize the figure of The Hermit from the Tarot—an old man with a staff, holding a lighted lamp half-hidden by the great mantle which envelopes him. This card in the Tarot indicates wisdom, circumspection and protection. It refers to the developed mind of man, the prudence and foresight of learning, and is thought by some to picture Hermes, the Messenger, signifying active divine inspiration and "unexpected current."[22] Arthur Edward Waite gives the sense of the Hermit's lantern as "where I am, you also may be."[23]

After awhile, Beuys emerges from the felt and walks to the edge of the room, marking the end of the sequence of gestures. There is a pile of straw, another piece of felt, and stacks of each day's *Wall Street Journal* in the room. Beuys sleeps on the coyote's straw; the coyote sleeps on Beuys's felt. The copies of the *Wall Street Journal* arrive each day from outside (like the engine noise) and enter the dialogue as evidence of the limits of materialist thinking.

Beuys's ongoing argument with materialism is what most clearly identifies him as an Anthroposophical artist. Following Rudolf Steiner, Beuys was not against materialism, per se. He valued it as a positive result of Christianity and recognized its historical necessity, but believed that humankind's survival depends on its letting go of materialism in order to move on to the next evolutionary stage.

In a previous sculpture, *Batteries* (1963), Beuys employed bound stacks of newspapers as "batteries of ideas." In the Coyote action, the batteries are dissembled (by the coyote), their stored energy dissipated. The coyote sleeps on the felt and pisses on "the Daily Diary of the American Dream."

> Indeed, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that coyotes do have a sense of humor. How else to explain, for instance, the well-known propensity of experienced coyotes to dig up traps, turn them over, and urinate or defecate on them?[24]

Coyote also pisses on *The Wall Street Journal* to mark it, as if to say, "Everything that claims to be a part of America is part of my territory."

In previous actions and drawings, Beuys repeatedly identified himself with the Hare "which as an animal of the steppes elucidates the principle of movement and later becomes the image for the whole 'Eurasian' story."[25] In Beuys's iconography, the Hare symbolizes birth and especially incarnation. Though fertile, the Hare represents the vulnerability and finiteness of humankind. Like the Hare, Beuys is *careful.* He always uses felt and fat to insulate and protect. He moves slowly and deliberately, approaching Coyote carefully. In the Coyote action, Beuys/Hare is burrowing in, wanting to be born into Coyote's world. Coyote Old Man is the long survivor, found painted on paleolithic cave walls as *already* having been around a long time. "I know what happened after the before and before the after," he says.[26] Hare comes to Coyote to learn how to survive.

In fact, Beuys in his Hare nature was less a shaman than an ordinary Anthroposophical man; that is, his inquiries were seldom in *extremity* as the shaman's were, but rather in the direction of more common and communal work: producing warmth, planting trees, talking with animals, sweeping up, farming, teaching. Because of this, it took a good deal of courage for Beuys to put himself in vulnerable contact with the more dynamic and chaotic force of Coyote.

Among the Ohlone peoples who once lived in what is now the San Francisco Bay Area, vision-seekers going out (in dream) to contact animal-helpers had to be very careful. These animal-gods were "amoral, unpredictable, greedy, irritable, tricky and very magical. Cultivating such helpers was a complicated, exasperating and often dangerous undertaking."[27]

In social terms, the Coyote action calls attention to the crisis brought about by mechanistic, materialistic and positivitic thinking in the West and to the emergent need for Western Man ("Old Western Man is most clearly represented by what has become of the United States") to move into the next evolutionary stage, from progress (domination of nature, "triumph over the past," positivist reductions) to survival (holistic, ecological, evolutionary).

One of the most prevalent and persistent misunderstandings of Beuys has been that, by invoking the shaman and invoking other ancient esoteric lore and practice, he suggested an atavistic return to a pre-technological past. Beuys addressed this in a conversation with Heiner Bastian and Jeannot Simmen in 1979:

> *Beuys*: ... When I do something shamanistic, I make use of the shamanistic element—admittedly an element of the past—in order to express something about a future possibility.
>
> *Simmen*: All right, but how much of it is the presence of the shamanistic *now*, how much of it is the actuality of a model taken from the past, and much of it is really alive and viable at the present time?
>
> *Beuys*: It's this aliveness that I'm after, also in the sense of will power based on the necessity of bringing back something into our time-conscious culture that's been lost, namely a willingness to take these lost forces seriously, forces that are there in shamanism, and to put them back in the context of our thinking in a completely new way. That's why these things are realities not only in an aesthetic context, they're also real intentions.[28]

In that same interview, Beuys explains why he would not want us to "return to the age of shamanism," even if we could:

> In the age of shamans, men may have created closed images of the meaning of life, but they actually lived in subjugation, in a state of spiritual subjugation. It's different now—human beings are in a position to shape their own future, to determine how the future is going to look.
>
> Self-determination is something very concrete, something very spiritual. ... In philosophical terms, human liberty is the basic question of art.[29]

This is the key to Beuys' "expanded concept of art," elsewhere addressed by Max Reithmann: " ... for *poiesis*, which has a more comprehensive meaning than *techne* [art], means creation in the broadest sense of the word, the freeing of all natural beings."[30]

Beuys clearly comes out of the tradition of German Idealism that can be traced from Goethe to Novalis to Rudolf Steiner. Beuys apotheosizes art with a totalizing insistence that would have made the English Romantics blush. For Beuys, everything begins with art, and art is finally synonymous with life, with survival: "Art alone makes life possible." " ... without art man is inconceivable in physiological terms."

The evolutionary narrative which can be traced through Beuys's entire oeuvre is Anthroposophical at its base, but it is also molded by the artist's own investigations and experiences, including his empathic dialogues with animals and his intuitive understanding of traditional shamanic practices. From his earliest drawings on, Beuys depicted animals (elk, stag, goat, swan, queen of goats, fox, hare) as bearers of psychic and spiritual forces, and the shaman (*In the House of the Shaman* (1954), and *The Shaman's Bundle* (1962), among others) as a vital and initiatory technician of the sacred.

Beuys was not a philosopher. He was a sculptor, and his life's work was to uncover and demonstrate certain principles sculpturally. That this led him into pedagogy and social communication on a scale unheard of for avant-garde artists is a measure of the necessity and timeliness of those principles.

Every art action Beuys made looked to a future in which our continued survival will depend upon our ability to adapt, and to marshall senses and powers of intelligence now lying dormant. He recognized scientific materialism as a reductive and backward-looking *idée fixe* that must be transcended if human evolution is to continue.

It should perhaps not be so surprising to find that the holistic views espoused by Beuys have more and more come to the cutting edge of quantum physics and the life sciences. Modern science has recently discovered (in the "Gaia hypothesis") that the Earth is alive! Popular science writers like Fritjof Capra, Lewis Thomas, Stephen Jay Gould, James Gleick and others report that the dominant world view of the past 300 years, based on a scientific method that reduces everything to its parts for separate analysis, without considering each part's relation to the whole, has reached the end of its tether. Recent developments in scientific thought as well as recognitions of global crises are moving many scientists toward new holistic, systemic and ecological paradigms that see things *in relation.*

The modern Western world is extremely distrustful of the vatic role of artists, and is more likely to characterize their actions as *autistic* rather than vatic.

In his role as Trickster/Transformer, the shaman in traditional societies acted as a safety valve, letting the air out of society's repressed fears. Beuys often played a similar role. When German newspapers and magazines carried story after story about the escapades of "Prof. Beuys," they most often characterized him as both ridiculous and dangerous. In his attacks on Beuys in America, Benjamin Buchloh refers to Beuys at several points as a "trickster," always disparagingly: "Sometimes I'm not sure whether he's simply a fool or a very shrewd trickster, or perhaps a mixture of both."[31] Contrast this with the Navajo, who still attend the double function of the culture hero as ethical lawmaker and frivolous prankster, benefactor and buffoon.

> The spirit of the coyote is so mighty that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for mankind in the future.[32]

Beuys's dialogue with the Coyote stands out against the more prevalent modern relation to animals as inferior ("pre-technological") pests, pets, monsters or medical spare parts. As Beuys the ecologist led to the Green movement, did Beuys the animal communicator and founder of the "Political Party for Animals" (with its billions of members) lead to the Animal Rights movement?

The Coyote tales say that we learned a great deal from Coyote at one time. Recent developments indicate that we have a great deal to learn from him again. The Coyote action was Beuys's attempt to renew that synergistic dialogue, and to make contact with an America that is both ancient and nascent.

Notes

1 Susan Howe, *The Difficulties*, Susan Howe Issue, ed. Tom Beckett, vol. 3, no. 2 (Kent, Ohio: Viscerally Press, 1989), 100.

*2 Kay Larson, "Joseph Beuys: Shaman, sham, or one of the most brilliant artists of all time?,"*Art News*, April 1980, 126-127.

3 Caroline Tisdall, ed., *Joseph Beuys* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), 5.

4 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Beuys: Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for a Critique," *Artforum*, January 1980, 35-43.

5 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim," *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 3-21.

6 John F. Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art: The Case of Joseph Beuys* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988).

7 In his epilogue, Moffitt calls Beuys "a card carrying member of the esoteric tradition" and tries to draw a line from this tradition to Nazism. He slurs Rudolf Steiner as "the charismatic Fuhrer of ... esotericism," less than seventy pages after he has admitted that Hitler himself declared Steiner to be "the greatest enemy of the Nazi Party," and even tried to have him assassinated in 1922.

Moffitt's thesis, "that not only the form but also the content of Joseph Beuys's little understood *Aktionen* largely stemmed from Rudolf Steiner's writings," is true as far as it goes. Beuys often spoke of Steiner's considerable influence on his work. But this is only useful if Steiner is recognized as part of a much older and larger tradition connecting Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras, Plotinus, Ficino, Paracelsus and Goethe, among many other thinkers.

In addition, it should be pointed out that Beuys was influenced by *parts* of Steiner's work, especially those parts dealing with the "social body," education and healing. Steiner's specific theories and directives about art, such as the lectures collected in *The Arts & Their Mission* in 1923, seem to have had little or no influence on Beuys.

8 Donald Kuspit's "Beuys: Fat, Felt and Alchemy,"in *Art in America*, May 1980, is one brilliant exception.

9 Joseph Beuys, quoted in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys, Coyote* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1980), 24.

10 Gotz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works* (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1979), 275.

11 Jaime de Angulo, *Coyote's Bones* (San Francisco: Turtle Island Foundation, 1974), 59.

12 Bob Callahan, "On Jaime de Angulo," in *A Jaime de Angulo Reader*, ed. Bob Callahan (San Francisco: Turtle Island,1979), xii.

13 Karl Kerenyi, "The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology," in Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 185.

14 Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 27. See also "The Incredible Survival of Coyote," *Western American Literature*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Winter 1975).

15 Charles L. Cadieux, *Coyotes: Predators & Survivors* (Washington, D.C.: Stone Wall Press, 1983), 113.

16 Ibid., 51 (emphasis added).

17 The Apaches say that it was a coyote that taught Geronimo how to make himself invisible, and that Geronimo's strongest medicine was the Coyote ceremony.

18 It was this scapegoat aspect that most effected Jimmy Boyle, an inmate serving a life sentence in the Special Unit of a Scottish prison who wrote about the Coyote action and eventually arranged a meeting with Beuys. Tisdall's *Coyote* book is dedicated to Boyle.

19 In Mexico "*coyote*" is often used as a synonym for "native," and is applied to Indians and mestizos. At the same time, a "*coyote*" is a thief, shyster or go-between, as in the "*coyote enganchistas*" on the border.

20 Jaime de Angulo, *Indian Tales* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1953), 11.

21 See Axel Hinrich Murken, *Joseph Beuys und di Medizin* (Munster: F. Coppenrath Verlag, 1979).
22 Aleister Crowley, *A Description of the Cards of the Tarot* (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1976).
23 Arthur Edward Waite, *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (New York: University Books, 1959), 105.
24 Francois Leydet, *The Coyote: Defiant Songdog of the West* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1977), 65.
25 Adriani, Konnertz, and Thomas, op. cit., 38.
26 De Angulo, *Indian Tales*, op. cit.
27 Malcolm Margolin, *The Ohlone Way* (San Francisco: Heyday Books, 1978), 138-139.
28 Heiner Bastian and Jeannot Simmen, *Joseph Beuys: Ziechnungen/ Tekeningen/ Drawings* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1980), 92.
29 Ibid., 95, 96.
30 Max Reithmann, "Language, Mind and the Present in Beuys," in *Punt de Confluencia, Joseph Beuys, Dusseldorf 1962-1987* (Barcelona: Fundacio Caixa de Pensions, 1988), 176.
31 Buchloh, Krauss, and Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim," op. cit., 16.
32 Beuys, quoted in Tisdall, Joseph Beuys, *Coyote*, op. cit., 26.

The Anxieties of Indulgence:
Théophile Gautier as a Critic of Art

Max Kozloff

The critical career of Théophile Gautier, (1811-1872), was one in which the pivotal man of letters and the journalist of fulsome influence blended to produce an effect at once piquant, tedious, and provocative. If he enjoys today a rather muted fame as a poet, one finds hardly any trace of regard for him as a critic. Baudelair's unequivocal reference to Gautier, in the dedication to "Les Fleurs du Mal," as "parfait magicien és lettres françaises," generally causes some bafflement, or even raises eyebrows among modern writers. Venturi is decidedly harsher. Taking to task Gautier's literary versatility, something that apparently went hand in hand with a promiscuous enthusiasm for academicians like Gérome and Horace Vernet, he grandly claims that, by around the 1860's, "between the authentic spiritual life of France and the judgements of Gautier there is no longer any relation."[1] We may confess not to know what an "authentic spiritual life" is, disbelieve that good judgement is a necessary part of it, and still find an absence of critical focus in Gautier's work. Yet we may also be familiar with the great issues and accomplishments of French nineteenth century art, and discover Gautier's pertinent relation to them.

It was, however, a special relation. In vain do the usual criteria of critical acumen and durability grapple with the torrent of cultural journalism written by this polymath, whose career, beginning with *Jeunes-France*, (1833) ended with the twilight of the Second Empire, in the soirées of the Princess Mathilde. Did Gautier identify and champion the most significant innovators of his time? Not often knowingly, and not exclusively, and not decisively, except for Ingres, whose ideals most closely matched the critic's own. Did Gautier articulate a theory of art history, some overarching concept, or at least, sense, of the past and present into which he could meaningfully project the pictorial and sculptural phenomena of his own era? Not very legibly. Had he given structure to any philosophical principle or social concern that vivifies the

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context in which he pronounced judgement? Far from being the possessor of a theoretical frame of mind, Gautier's observations revolve around, rather than emerge from, certain restrictive formulae—such as *l'art pour l'art*—whose value was more emotional than conceptual. Mostly, his criticism wards off any impulse to action as much as it shuns the convolutions of intellect. Was there, then, a final effect he had upon his audiences, which would cause us to think him responsible for some distinct shift in contemporary taste? Aside from working on the well known *La Press*, and *L'Artiste*, his status was that of official government critic, on the staff of *Le Moniteur*, since 1854. Sloane says of him that he was perhaps the most widely read and respected critic of his day, although known and admired more as a lively verbal performer than as an oracle or pedagogue. Yet his position among the intelligentsia was more controversial: Flaubert, Sainte-Beuve, and the Goncourt brothers sounded his praises, while Delacroix and Charles Blanc derided his superficiality. All these failings ostensibly leave but one area in which a critical mark can still be made—the mode of feeling about, and response to, works of art, as embodied in imaginative prose.

The empathetic and descriptive dimension of Gautier's critical writing was for its time and achievement without peer, except for Ruskin. If we confined ourselves to a history of modern French art criticism, guided only by this one requirement of discursive energy and attentiveness, put to the service of evoking visual images, it would highlight a distinct trio of figures. Diderot is the earliest, Gautier occupies the center, and the Eugène Fromentin of *Les Maitres d'Autrefois*, 1876, the last.

It does their tradition an injustice to say that it was solely committed to informing readers of the look of works which were not often physically available for scrutiny. Few were the critics who overlooked, although many could neglect, this reportorial function, in a period long unblessed by satisfactory reproduction techniques. But the simple role of aide-memoire proves inadequate as a point of departure for discussing the work of critics all of whom had in common the fact that they were practicing novelists. Concerns with precision, style, narrative structure, character development, and expressive mood and goal were all compressed into the study of artistic objects. In their hands, the work of art came to have a "plot," and it turned into a species of painted fiction. No where in modern art are certain principles of art criticism and literary criticism, or even fictional craft, so interchangeable. (Though in the second half of the century, poetry, too, was to become a part-time muse of art criticism.)

With Diderot, the accent was on the moral contrast between "attitude" and "action," the latter judged to be more plausible in itself, and more elevating, through its *natural* depiction of human sentiments and passions. For Fromentin, the painting was hardly a *tableau vivant* of this sort, but rather a pictorial composition whose personal qualities of handling and form were limitless clues for situating an area in which an artist's creative forces struggle towards the realization of his imaginative ideals. And his constant probing of how the artist's resources are marshalled, what is at stake in them, provided the interpretative faculties of Fromentin a dramatic tension that is finally novelistic in character.

In Gautier, however, one initially discovers a limpid transparency of language in which the subject of a painting is rendered piecemeal, as if it were a subject in a novel—the difference in media being merely a petty obstacle to the homogeneous registration in words of things, surfaces, and behavior optically sighted. Not only is there a general unquestioning belief in the affective and sensory life of a painting, but an assumption that these are effortlessly negotiable by words. The reader is seduced into reacting as a viewer of a spectacle taking place before his eyes, if only because in reading Gautier, he comes across so few references, and these perfunctory, to effects and syntheses, anything that would establish the independent existence of an already created stimulus with its own conditions and conventions of being. The advantage of this particular kind of verbal lens consists in the impression it gives of the animation and consequence of the representation, making it appear as if our own powers of participation have been delightfully heightened without any conscious act of the will. That is, the author's pleasure in the undertaking is sufficiently relaxed as to communicate itself in the flattering guise of perception spontaneously approprated by the reader. The material detail is never so shapeless as to seem chaotic; and never so composed as to appear manipulated. The tone is hardly bland enough to appear neutral; yet it is never so idiosyncratic and self-reflexive as to be a personal imposition. No mood mongering or verbal flourished impede a flow or words which is almost liquid. In Diderot and Fromentin, the gap between an artistic ideal and its realization nourishes the act of criticism, which, for them, derives, by the artist, from more or less consciously applied rules and intuitions. By contrast, Gautier's writing is so extremely passive as not to appear as criticism at all. The content of his work seems freely created, naïve, and unproblematical.

It might be argued that Gautier's treatment of art implicitly recalls the doctrine of *ut picture poesis*, that is, the idea, stemming from Horace, and reaching its apogée in seventeenth century French criticism, that painting and poetry were sister arts, sharing many of the same unities of expression. And while the experience of poetry and painting would be different, originating, the one in time and internal emotion, the other in space and external appearances, both were accessible to the same judgement, based of their mutual imitation and crystallization of human action. But Gautier not only hesitated to draw such conclusions, his art and his criticism float gratuitously and contradictorily around the Horatian thesis. Gautier might at one time be so respectful of the philosophical power of art as to construe the turgid mural cartoons of Paul Chenavard to be the outpouring of an artist who writes his thought in crayon "as the poet does with his pen."[2] Yet the admiring exegesis this required of him was untypical of an overall method attached vibrantly to the sensory present, one that blends the "coloring" of words and evoked images with such intimacy that an undefined, but salient third stream of discourse is conjured up.

Gautier himself seems to have particular conflicts on this score. In the Salon of 1839, he wrote: "Despite the *ut picture poesis* of Horace, painting and poetry have nothing in common with each other; it's this unhappy preoccupation of poetry in music and in painting, which has for so long made us the most ridiculous dilletantes and *connaisseurs* of the world."[3] Three years earlier, he had made his meaning more painfully clear: "God knows, there is nothing more opposed on the earth and in heaven than the true principles or pictorial (pittoresque) composition and those of poetic composition. ... One makes a deplorable confusion and transposition of words. An idea in painting has not the slightest accord with an idea in literature. A hand joined in a certain fashion, the fingers opened or brought together in a certain style, a gush of folds, a curvature of the head ... form that which is called an idea in painting."[4]

It is not evident if Gautier was granting the status of an idea to the painted accessory as such, or the way it was conceived, or both: in any case, a notion having no such dignity today. Thirty-one years later, however, he returned to the problem in discussing some verse inspired by Ingres' *La Source*:

> Lorsque la jeune fille à la source voisine
> A sous les nénuphars lavé ses bras poudreux
> (When the young girl at the nearby spring
> Under the water lillies washed her powdered arms)

He then explains: "These verses by Alfred de Musset flutter on our lips while we look, mute and ravished, at that admirable painting. It is not a resemblance which we want to indicate, but an analogous impression: in the poetry and in the picture, there is something fresh like the water of the spring and one feels the cold kiss of the bath on this charming body of a virgin."[5] Pertinent here is that Albertus, the hero of an early poem by Gautier, chronologically hesitates between poetry and painting, as his true means of expression. One may conclude that in the course of his long evolution, the critic at first acknowledged the separate categories of the arts in principle, but that later, in practice, he blurred their distinctions, coming to see them as one bast undifferentiated community, from which the artifice of poetic response could model differing allusions to the same feeling. Through some adhesive in his words, event was surfaced, if not effaced, by sensation. The descriptive objectives of his prose gave way, or rather, were modified to sustain and substantiate the delicate analogues of which he spoke. To read through even a fraction of the seventeen Salons of Gautier is to see these peripatetic aims, literalistic projection of what is seen, and metaphoric extension of what can be felt, waver in and out of conciliated focus.

"We love," he said, "to put beside a picture a page in which the painter's theme is taken up by the writer."[6] Gautier, then, was the first to think of art criticism as something much grander in literary aspiration than it had ever been. The result was the assumed creative peerage of the criticism with the work it was discussing—an assumption far more arrogantly egotistical—despite the disarming tone of Gautier's writing—than that of any critic who had a mere point of view about a work of art. In the end, Gautier did not consider the various arts so much as substitutes, but as complements of each other. And this was made possible by his judgment that they were but differing linguistic mutations of artistic sensibility itself. Thus far, his position was not unsympathetic to *ut pictura poesis*. He ultimately diverged from, and unhinged its argument because he wanted to introduce in criticism nothing less than a new art.

That art, if it were to be an art, could only be fictive in the way it disposed itself, as well as in its relation to reality. Whatever its social obligations, it was not to be humbled internally by the transcriptual dependence of criticism on real objects and events. Yet it is a measure of his success that he wrote without faking sensations or pandering to his readers. With his fondness for the rich materiality of stuffs, and his fascination for tactile associations that would caress the body, or make it shiver, *in the mind*, he imposed upon himself an underlying world or conjecture that still nominally was paraded as serviceable commentary on art, indeed still read as faithful "imitation" of a work. The demands of the kind of writing which would express this conjectural world, far more than a belief in mutual criteria for the arts, finally account for his blurring of the issue of *ut pictura poesis*. More than that, however, they subverted the ostensible usefulness of criticism, a usefulness against which, in anything regarding the arts, he had dedicated all the powers of his rhetoric.

Not that his criticism was noted for its advocacy. Although he made himself known as a priest of the beautiful—"art for art means not form for form but rather form for beauty, abstraction made from all direct utility. ... "[7]—there is little enough of attempted persuasion in his critical work. For all its radiant delectation, the text is disinterested, non-guiding, and self-absorbed. No priest was ever less an evangelist. Quite easily one gives his criticism the status of an invented fiction, and reads it for itself. The hypothetical material it contains is judged as much by its imaginative consistency as by the way it limns possibilities of real experience.

Much the same condition applies to Gautier's theater criticism and his celebrated travel books—he was among the first to write eloquently about places—as to his novels and short stories. Their figures of speech are not monitored by any scruples to keep separate the classes of things actually seen and those created by words only. Pictures were the inspiration as well as the frequent subject of this prose because they most directly condensed the sensory data which the prose aspired to evoke in the memory. Often this practice elicits a certain coquettish indecision, a sense of *deja vu.* "I don't know if the habit of seeing pictures has confused my eyes and judgment, but often enough I have experienced a singular sensation in the face of reality: the real landscape appeared to me painted, and to be, after all, nothing but an awkward imitation of the landscapes of Cabat or Ruysdael."[8] It is a frequent procedure in his poetry, and not at all uncommon in his travel writing or fiction, that artists' visions, say Watteau's or Titian's, are summoned to illuminate, corroborate, or abbreviate an impression that wants to be conveyed. Whether invented or described, nature, in Gautier's work, constantly falls away in reminding the writer of art. Even when perceived intensely, a scene is compared with painting. In *Voyage en Espagne*, for instance, one reads: Between Pancorvo and Burgos, we came upon three or four little villages as dry as pumice stone and of the color of dust. I doubt whether Decamps ever found in Asia Minor any walls more burnt, more browned, more tanned, more grainy, more crisp, more scorched than these."[9] Art and travel operated, for him, on some level of instinctual equivalence, both representing the opportunity to take exotic leave, to displace as well vivify the senses.

In the preceding century, the picturesque view of landscape, as conceived by people writing about the rural surround in the configuration of a Claude Lorrain or Salvator Rosa, betokened nostalgic longings for a natural grace or savagery. But Gautier tended to make out of such double vision, flash verbal discoveries, touched off by the need to turn his own organism into the protagonist of aesthetic response.

Throughout his criticism, although less at the end of his life, when he strived to attain a certain impassivity, there are autobiographical references. He reminisces, compares experiences, editorializes, sometimes brings in his daily life—but rarely in the first person singular. His facetious use of the plural "we" undermines the circumstantiality (if not the bias), of the author's presence, by exaggerating it, giving it a royal or papal authority. One could point out as well, its hint of multiple personalities. The charade content of outright fiction allowed the writer to insinuate false selves, to impersonate various speakers who are alter-egos, simultaneously revealing and concealing their creator. He was prepared to extend his candor in these less than credible surroundings.

Something of the sort pertains to Gautier's art criticism, too, in which the apparatus of perception is as privileged as in a novel, and just as ambiguous as a record of a personal attitude. Nature, art, memory and fantasy, all excite his pen with an indiscriminate vividness, just as old pictures, by his beloved Veronese, for example, and new painting (e.g. Meissonier), subsist, for him, in the same continuum of maiden response. In the end, the writer, and following him, the reader, withdraw into a limitless expectancy of sensation, a seamless consciousness of shining, descriptive epithet.

Certain critics, Ms. Dillingham, and H. van der Tuin, for instance, have taken Gautier severely to task for the implicit conservation of energy in his outlook, and the repressed, nihilistic, isolated, and fragmentary features of his sensibility. The first writer cites the weakness of Gautier's creative impulses, and the threatened, protective tone of a purist aesthetic doctrine "which was based upon the intrinsic worthlessness of all real things, and the comparative value of the apparent."[10] The second writer, mindful perhaps of the pessimism of the Romantic egotists, goes even further in calling Gautier a "negative decadent," a reference to his self-indulgence and lack of responsibility, characteristics of a temperament that frequently confessed itself, like many of that time, to be choked by a sense of the void. Enjoyment seemed to d'Albert, the narrator of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, to be the aim of life, "and the only useful thing in the world." Compared to the critical ambition of Baudelaire—*volupté* transformed into *connaissance*—Gautier's simple hedonism does seem like a spineless basis for a critical enterprise. What is more, with him, playful toleration and generally pleasurable acceptance of the widest varieties of art does not seem founded in a positive value system, but rather on the avoidance of the disagreeable, a sense that the objects of pleasure themselves, so lightly and effervescently regarded, do not count on any meaningful, emotional level. Taking great pains to uphold an idea of the beautiful—his real priority—he rarely substantially developed and analyzed his allegiance to any one beautiful work of art.

Most symptomatic and revealing here, is the absence in his work of stern reproval and indignation (with the possible exception of his distaste for Courbet and Manet, the greatest artists of the two generations succeeding his.) On this, Gautier came to his own defense. "We have often been accused of leniency," he wrote, "and we do not deny the allegation. Criticism, we feel, should be a demonstration of the beauties, not a search for the faults of a work of art. We do not believe it to be the mission of the critic to mark and grade an artistic production in the manner of a school teacher."[11] One can well imagine a critic making a decision like this for journalistic reasons, in that his essentially constructive view of his activity precluded any threshold of negative comment. Additionally, to be over-exposed for thirty-five years as a regular critic, to a downpour of mediocrity, requires the taking of at least some firm steps to avoid the most predictable condemnations, even if it means to move away from the realities of artistic struggle.

But far more indigenous to Gautier's attitude was a repugnance for any moral stance or judgment, whether this would take the form of eulogizing a work in the name of the good and the true (or the advanced), or denigrating it for being superficial, meretricious, or in bad faith. There is a complete and refreshing absence or preaching and social will to power in Gautier's art criticism—unique for its period, and remarkable in one so highly placed—but its corresponding sensitivity to the great contemporary artistic problems is also curiously flattened out. Aware of certain technical, social and professional dilemnas, he hardly responded to all the deeper stylistic, psychological and political conflicts that underlaid his aesthetic experience. This meant that it would be difficult or even irrelevant for him to see them in any historical matrix, whereby certain actions—the making of works of art in the present—are shown as owing much to, and shaping one's consciousness of the past, in fact, contending with that past. Despite his great erudition and culture as novelist and amateur, despite his emotional obsession with the grandeur of past epochs, Gautier was never an orthodox traditionalist; and regardless of his nationalism, and his vague conviction that the French nineteenth century would match the "Greek world of marble and azure" with its own energizing "of iron and gas," he was no modernist.[12]

Most of these contrasts and possibilities are given an incisive character in his prose, but exist more by virtue of their local color, than as elements of rhetoric reacting normally to transient pressures of the moment. Just as the passage of time could be reversed and sidestepped by the perfection of old works that had sealed in *their* present, so history existed for him only in the imminence of re-incarnated sensations, and not in the play of vital and continuing forces. To evoke these works and sensations was a process of vivification that oddly tended to place him outside time even as its voice was of the unclassifiable present. That is why Gautier was simultaneously anti-positivist—there could be no progress when everything was constantly exhausting and renewing itself—and anti-deterministic, since even if art was an end-product conditioned by its racial, geographical and social origins, as Taine postulated, the greatest art was timeless, eternal, of an utterly fixed spiritual value, whose beauty could not be demonstrated by historical considerations. "We prefer," he writes, "absolute and pure beauty, which is of all time, of all cults, and which reunites in one admirable communion the past, the present, and the future."[13]

In contrast, it is only necessary to think of the intensely activist hopes for a return to the ideal orders of the past, as in Gustave Planche, or a universal art of the future, e.g. Théophile Thoré's *l'art pour l'homme*, (which convulsed critics of the 1940's and 50's), to see how singular was Gautier's rootless, unmanipulative position in his "now." Intermittent feelings of dissociation, a sense of living in an age to which one does not belong, were extremely common among mid-century intellectuals and artists. Their alienated styles established them as of their time. But in Gautier, emotional style was not accompanied as it was in them, by any ideology, or pull toward any one specific unreachable object of desire. And his psychological need to legitimate this "stance," which was nothing more than a functional inability to state choices, engendered his radical enthusiasm. His biographer Joanna Richardson reports that Gautier said that he had "oriental ideas about women; that he would have preferred to be faithful to several wives than deceive a wife with several mistresses."[14]

It must be stated that the atmosphere in which Gautier matured as a young ex-art student turned poet, (he worked briefly in the atelier of one Rioult), was rather flustered and threatened by the idea of decisive action. The July Monarchy of Louis Philippe has been likened to the administration of Calvin Coolidge, with some levity no doubt. It marks the first significantly modern surge of the bourgeoisie to a position of power and prominence, originally attained through an alliance with the proletariat, but now, during the 1830's the scene of Republican vacillation, the rise of the big banking houses to economic control, and the stumbling, chaotic democratization of the cultural market. Industry became through and through a base for stock manipulation, and making money was separated from its natural base in making goods. If during the decade the regime politically became more reactionary, and social conditions more materialistic, it is still extremely difficult to generalize about the period, for if anything, its official impulse was to mask and absorb conflict, and to smooth its manifold divergences. In changing the *homme revolté* into the *jeune ambitieux*, or at least in rewarding this more than any other change, it placated without really accommodating the liberals, while at the same time it drained away the symbolic privileges of the aristocracy, yet retained a covert sympathy with its world views. To the extent one accepted this post-revolutionary, centrist world, this *juste milieu*, all the more would one forfeit any unity between individual morality, action, and thought. For the precarious coalitions of sensibility and policy that dominated the epoch were based, not on grandiose principles of conduct, as in the Napoleonic empire, but on unspoken covenants, expediency, unrealistic syntheses. This gave the July Monarchy an amorphous spirit of enlightenment and tolerance, making it a moving target for radical protest, but hardly the more for that, a dynamically progressive society.

In the aesthetic sphere, no one better represented this eclecticism, nor exerted a wider appeal on Bohemian youth, than Victor Cousin, a Restoration pedagogue who lectured for about ten years at the *Institut*, starting in 1818. (Student notes on his lectures were published in 1836.) Cousin preached a vague rapprochement between the material and the ideal, active life and spiritual contemplation. It was this distinction to have downgraded desire and passion as attributes of the enslaved mind, while equating freedom with the disinterested pursuit of beauty: the self-dependent aim of art. If the latter was no longer to be the servant of morals or religion, neither could it represent the cause of justice or humanity. At the same time, therefore, as Cousin's doctrine, derived simplistically from German idealist philosophy back through to Plato, neutralized Romantic liberalism, it flattered the anti-philistine self-image of Romanticism, now threatened by the government's increasing appeal to the unartistic public as a new aesthetic arbiter.

Gautier, originally a janissary of Victor Hugo's *cénacle* in the Rue de Doyenné, came of age at a moment when his fellow Romantics, reacting against Bourbon repression, were disburdening themselves of clerical and monarchist tendencies, in the name of a new individualism. By 1830, their plight exactly coincided with the intolerable situation of the middle classes, from which many of them came. At the premiere of Hugo's *Hernani* of that year, Gautier, wearing his notorious red waistcoat (an event he celebrated to the end of his life), made his flamboyant stylistic gesture against a classical decorum and conservatism that had long been identified as an ideological prop of the royalist administration. Like his fellow bohemians, he was determined to announce that he was alive. The more difficult problem of the young artists, however, was to reconcile their creative leanings, which were elitist, with their political sympathies, which were now becoming relatively populist. Similarly, "the problem of bourgeoisie liberalism everywhere in Europe was how to fit the class rule of the bourgeoisie into the framework of liberal principles."[15]

To all this, Gautier retorted, in his digressive, derisive preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, 1834, with a funny attack against any intersection of art and necessity whatsoever, and a denunciation of double standards, and stiff-necked, inevitably vicarious, partipris criticism. Exalted in their place were form, artifice, superfluity, and total disengagement from mundane concerns, all sufficient unto themselves as the values which any serious art must uphold. The preface harked back to the Rococo in attitude, as did that androgynous fantasy which is the novel, in scene and mood. Both were united in a kind of saucy hermeticism. By no means the only manifesto of *l'art pour l'art* during the period, their sensible paradoxes, or rather inversions of merit, were the most flagrant and best calculated precedents of the theory of modern art as a game, a *blague*, whose very inconsequence in capitalist society was of inestimable worth. Without the intransigent flippancy of Gautier, it is hard to imagine the successful course of the aesthetic movement in England, nor the impact of Oscar Wilde, for whom *Mademoiselle de Maupin* was a key work.

But in their immediate circumstances, Gautier's teasing diatribes identified as the enemy the one nominal patron class most in a position to support the artists of the generation of 1830. And though they were ostensibly tonic as a gesture of solidarity among creative young men, *Mademoiselle de Maupin's* counsels of vice were no more to be taken seriously than the political enlightenment of their exaggerated hedonism. Indeed, Gautier was quite frank, and deliberately silly on that score: "I would willingly consent ... to the return of the anthropophagus Charles X, if he brought me back a hamper of Tokay or Johannisberger from his Bohemian castle."[16] On certain levels, and depending on how he was read, Gautier was cutting himself off from the activism of his friends, just as he was discouraging credulity and warding off "impure" experience. "My soles," he has his heroine say, "are too tender to walk upon the broken glass of reality."[17] Yet in 1836, seemingly to have no economic choice at age 25, he sentenced himself to a difficult kind of reality, relentless critical journalism for the rest of his life.

One of the interesting contradictions in that criticism was the strain between its carnal appetite and its hankering after an abstract ideal. The man who wrote "anything useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and man's needs are ignoble and disgusting like his own poor and infirm nature. The most useful place in a house is the water-closet,"[18] was constantly tripping himself up by his affirmation of art's appeal to the bodily and sensory need for pleasure. His antagonism to Christian, especially Gothic art, hardly stemmed from religious skepticism so much as it did from the curious idea that the Catholic church was a force for sensuous repression in art, only redeemed by the Paganism of the Renaissance. (And as far as he was concerned, the Reformation and Puritanism were unalloyed blights on the creative spirit, profanations of the temple of art.) Still, it can be seen that Gautier's earthiness was tremulous.

It recurrently gave rise to various tokenisms propounding something sounding very much like the Symbolism of the turn of the century: "It's precisely that which constitutes the glory and superiority of art; [he is speaking of certain old masters], behind these most pure, most noble, most divine types, one senses a type still more pure, more noble, more divine, which is guessed at, like a visage radiating through the half transparence of a veil. Form shows and conceals idea at the same time."[19] One gathers that for Gautier the merely contingent and necessary are associated with the ugly, the unformed, and the absence of "idea." Additionally, they continually suggest that one aspect of the flesh which he most dreads, its mortality. It is bodily fear rather than a philosophical conviction that prompts him to say "The beautiful does not belong ... to the sensible order, but to the spiritual order. It is invariable because it is absolute."[20] Through its nominal defiance of time rather than its embodiment of any Platonic essence, art held Gautier in sway.

He was totally predisposed towards variety, yet quite repelled by change, and there flows through his work a shiver induced by knowing how perishable is the housing of his sensations. A jealousy mixed with awe informed his view of art from the very beginning, distributing within his commentary ambivalent feelings of pride and inadequacy. Whenever there emerges in his writing a typical fantasy in which a work of art, usually a statue of a naked woman, would or might animate itself, and come to life, it signifies his will to liquefy and yet paradoxically possess the mute presence on his own creaturely terms, and be gone with that fearful absolute. On the other hand, his criticism is frequently an homage to the splendid inaccessibility of great visual art, a sense of which he hoped to protect and preserve in the medium of a language more able to survive the vicissitudes of time than vulnerable physical objects. If literature, that is, criticism could aid, it could also participate in that defeat of age, and thus gain for itself a victory over its own unspeakable dependence on the mortal creation of others. In Gautier's thought, "Art, like love, is but an effort of the soul that longs to escape death. ... In love though you are unaware of it, your secret motive is to escape from nothingness and to hand on the torch of life to another. ... Every man who is worthy of the name seeks to assure himself of the immortality of body and soul, and that is why there is nothing real in the world but art and love, for they alone create."[21] It is, then, a primitive theme, but also a grand one, which occupied this anxious aesthete. It lead him at least once, when speaking of the theater, (an art in which the problem was explicit), to admit the degree it involved him in deceit: "this harmony of lies, this solidarity of illusion which are some of the liveliest pleasures of the theater, and, let us be frank, the only end of art."[22]

Of a related, but secondary order of importance, is Gautier's conflict between an allegiance to the simple and austere, and his taste for complexity, detail, and ornament. In part, this clash can be explained as mere shifting inclination, a personal phenomenon that did not have any immediate emotional repercussions in his criticism. But in fact, Gautier here smudges his frivolity, thanks to an internal hesitation more deeply felt than it seems. "Economy of material, harmony of lines," he remarked in 1848, "such is the aim set by perfection. To make much from little, this is the dream of nature and it should be that of art."[23] Such thoughts permitted him to imagine a static and sculptural art, reduced in illusionism, and direct in appeal—direct, at least, in the sense of undistracted and clear, rather than of involving. Conversely, in a passage taking issue with Winckelmann, he wrote: "What does he mean by simplicity? The contrary of rich, of varied, of the ornate, the complex, and by extension, of the recherché, of the affected. However, the rich, the ornate, the complex are elements of the beautiful. From this point of view what would become of Rubens, Michelangelo, Shakespeare ... ? If by simplicity, he means the gift of being natural, many people have this quality in a mediocre organization."[24]

In these words, an altogether different idea of art is manifested, nor could it have been otherwise for this lover of fantasy, involution, chic, and drama. Both his attitudes, however, were allied in their distaste for nature as it is, if not as it could be. To chasten and temper form, or to bejewell and complicate it, these were impulses that theoretically polarized the imposition of creative will upon the inchoate materials of reality. Yet these two differing preferences were not all that much at odds with each other in Gautier's psychological realm of perception. They served, it seems, to erect an unconscious ambivalence in his view of subject matter, which be rated as of little importance, despite his emphasis on narrative content, and form, which he idolized, but constantly slighted in practice. With iconography, as long as Gautier was allowed to elaborate it on a social and fictional level, he was happy; with form, to the extent he could "spiritualize" it, he was gratified. His affirmations to the contrary, it is the greatest weakness of Gautier's art criticism that he never understood the reciprocity of form and content, the major tenet of the theory of modern art. As early as 1837, he had thought that painting was the glorification of form, which was eternal, while subject and action were nothing but accidents. But in actuality, his habits of thought confused the two notions, so that for him the archetypal object of admiration remained the subject fragment, the *morceau*, say a woman's necklace in a canvas of Ingres. Though he was wont to quote Plato's "The beautiful is the splendor of the real," and though he imagined that the modern artist's role was to superimpose some kind of handsome veneer or epidermis over the given product of the machinist, Gautier's working definition of terms was hopelessly inadequate. They encouraged him to like meretricious art for metetricious reasons.

Still, the most positive facet of his aesthetic, linked with this general duality of the simple and the complex, is his concept of the "microcosm." He adhered to the belief that every great artist is a visionary who gives us reality through the prism of his art. This critic was of the opinion that painting is never illusionistic in a literal sense, that the painter carries his picture within himself, and that between the creator and nature, the canvas serves as an intermediary.[25] The resulting metamorphosis of the outer world is a rendition, through certain signs, of the subjective, inner world, the "microcosm," of the artist. This gateway to the recognition of originality and temperament was the closest Gautier ever came to the theory of imagination in Baudelaire and Delacroix. It was his bid to give an account of the non-material power of visible forms in art, and it sought to explain that howsoever particular and individual an artist's way of seeing things, through sheer force of conviction, it might work to create an immutable, eternal order of beauty. There could be quite distinct and opposing "absolutes," as well as there might be perfections even of disorder. The "microcosm," therefore, became a means of formulating a perception of unity, of organizational coherence, even in a fragment. Despite the fact that little was new in his thesis (with the exception of the word "microcosm," much of it had come from Diderot), the absence of any reference to the viewer is rather significant. Delacroix, following the tradition of Dolce, Poussin, and the Abbé Dubos, had conceived of the function of art as a bridge between the soul of the artist and the soul of the spectator.[26] But Gautier freezes out the beholder by insisting upon the closed system of artistic metamorphosis. "One must not conclude that the artist is purely subjective; he is also objective: he gives and he receives. If the type of beauty exists in his spirit in the ideal state, he takes from nature signs which he needs to express it. These signs, he transforms."[27] It is hardly necessary to say that this is a notion about creation and syntax, rather than affect. Yet, it tells us nothing about the grist of the technical process, nor how any data are transformed. The point, however, is that the materials of artistic vision are thought to pre-exist in essence, are crystalized by the creator more by his structural than his emotional faculties, and are ultimately given a presence valued as symbolic utterance. Regardless of how little he put this idea into practice, Gautier here reaffirms what might be called the symbolistic rather than the expressionist current of aesthetic thinking in Europe. This talk of transformed signs, in 1856, was an oracular pronouncement. About forty years later, Albert Auriér, the apologist of Gauguin, would have had little to quarrel with it.

* * *

None of his arcane theorizing prevented Gautier from giving at least a standard appreciation of the passion and the importance of Delacroix. To be sure, most sensitive contemporaries had no trouble in recognizing the pre-eminence, although they fell short in meeting the challenges posed by the great master of Romantic painting. 1833, the date of Gautier's first inquiry into the subject, was even belated as a first contact with innovations that dated back to the early 1820's. For Gautier, Delacroix is the artistic representable par excellence, of the first half of the century, a painter resplendent with poetic fervor, savage execution, and alarming dreams. His modernity is guaranteed not only by his ability to paint in the spirit of Hugo, Byron, and Goethe, whose equal he is, but to cast forth images which jolt the eyes by their visual immediacy. In short, Gautier cannot be said to have expressed any new ideas on the art of Delacroix.

But on a general matter highlighted by that art, color in painting, he contributed scattered remarks, in a variety of contexts, which reveal an understanding still insufficiently credited. It should not come as a surprise that Gautier was one of the most color sensitive observers of his age. His prose is a witness to the primacy of color as a sensory element, and few were the writers who equalled him in the variety, subtlety, and evocativeness of his chromatic references. Already in 1836, he insisted that the artist sees fifty colors where the inexperienced layman sees one, and he follows through whole scales of tones which appear to the bourgeois only as a deadening uproar of colors.[28] By the 1840's, it was well understood, by Fromentin (in his Salon of 1845), as well as Baudelaire, that strength of color did not depend strictly on saturation of hue, but on mutually enhancing relationships of colors. In 1855, Gautier summarized his awareness of the phenomenon, as exemplified in Delacroix: "Color ... does not recommend itself by reds, greens, or blues of a great vivacity, but by the gamuts of nuances which set each other off; these so rich tones are not beautiful in themselves, and their shock results from their juxtaposition and their contrast."[29] And Gautier goes on to perceive how such contrasts embody the unparalleled air of excitement and movement in Delacroix's canvases, so that the figures seem barely contained by the margins of the picture.

But this awareness of how color is induced, and how it can be responsible for certain new combinations of pictorial energy and depth in space, might be viewed within the broader traditional controversy about the competitive roles of color and drawing, their limitations and potentialities. This was a quarrel waged since the Renaissance. Gautier's remarks on this point are quite incisive: "Assuredly color needs drawing, and one can't imagine it to exist without it. For nuances to be displayed there needs to be some delimitation, even in attaining bodies through environments (milieux), and avoiding all kinds of linearity, one arrives despite everything, at a hidden drawing which is no less real. But from this consequence, there does not result, to our eyes, any inferiority for color. Drawing is melody, color is harmony. ... Melody can well subsist independently of harmony, it is true, but of what prodigious riches of nuances, of what power of effect would one be deprived in suppressing the latter."[30] It is an arresting statement for a number of reasons. Not only does Gautier observe that a kind of drawing is inseparable from even the most chromatic vision, but that both color and draftsmanship are natural constituents, co-eval and without priority, of artistic composition. He is free of the cant that insisted color destroys form (an obvious element of form cannot take away from form). Moreover, the musical analogy gives to his ideas a vivid touch as well as a sense of all artistic means working towards abstract ends.

How much there is here of enlightened thinking about color, and how little of actual observation and study of the behavior of color as an element of light. Gautier was not so much interested in seeing as in imagining colors, or rather, nuances. That is to say, his insight into colors was a factor of his own sympathies as a verbal colorist, and was completely innocent of such optical notations as Constable's, Delacroix's, and Chevreul's, which fed eventually into porous, pictorial weave of Impressionism. His color consciousness, emboldened by the splendour at opposite poles of Veronese and Ingres, was essentially poetic in operation. And for Gautier, this meant that bodies and textures, too, were poetically reified in color, just as color melted back into the corporeal. His criticism, at times, is nothing more than a harmonious dilation of these perceptual changes.

On the occasion of the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855, the author of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* made such laudatory remarks on the English Pre-Raphaelites that their warmth has had to wait for over a century to be in any sense rehabilitated. In them, his success is not only a reflection of his openness to minute detail, but of his frank sensory curiosity. It was certainly not the highmindedness of these English painters that entranced him, but the unheard of highmindedness of these English painters that entranced him, but the unheard of hyperacuity of their eyes, through which nature, in all its tendrils, filaments, and dews, was transmitted with a kind of electrically naïve complexity. He sensed in Millais an artist of the most desperate freshness, with the soul of the fifteenth century, but possessing such a power of *abstraction* as to put himself outside time. In him, "one does not find any of the known manners of applying color: neither impasto, nor glazing, nor rubbing, no appearances of the brush, but a sort of pointillism as in miniatures."[31] Nevertheless, "despite the slender gracefulness of the touch, the general aspect (of Millais) is large, and the color bold. The artist has the courage of his reds, of his blues ...

and does not break up his virgin tones by those greyish half tints by means of which an over-facile harmony is obtained today."[32] Given his fondness for nuance, Gautier's delighted astonishment at the percussive, yet jewel-like color of the English might seem unexpected, had he not also been working on those lapidary poems, "Émaux et Camées." Gautier's pages on the Pre-Raphaelites reveal him attuned to certain refinements of clangor, and to the "charming puerility" of the naturalism of Millais' *Ophelia*, whose fantasy is made out of patients.

In faith, he was quite willing to follow through the sentimental entanglements of that patience. Speaking of a detail—two girls—in Millais' *The Return of the Dove to the Arch*, he wrote: "The hand of the younger one, resting on the green sleeve of the larger, is a masterpiece. It is not that soft and white pulp, made supple by almond pasted and veined with azure lines, which Lawrence caresses with his rapid brush; no, but a good hand a little reddened, washed with the hard water of the fountain, and that colors like a nuance of shame the fresh blood of virginity."[33] Gautier may have been singular in his appetite for seeing virgins in art, and a little naughty, perhaps, in enjoying the thought of cold water trickling upon their flesh, but there can be no doubt that certain moments in painting, and Pre-Raphaelitism was one of them, elicited from him an almost adrenalized keenness of scrutiny, favorable to criticism. Writing of Holman Hunt's *Strayed Sheep*. for instance, he said, "Look at it a long time, it's worth the effort. Soon, under the strange green of the grass, bathed in blue shadows and colored russet by the sun, you will follow the tiniest folds of the ground, you will discover plants crumpled by the passing of the herd ... a labor that would drive a Chinese crazy. But since the artist, determined to sacrifice nothing, cannot, for all his skill, reduce mathematically within a canvas one foot square some three miles of horizon, the result is that the details take on the exaggerated importance that a microscope bestows upon objects, and that a blade of grass attracts the eyes as much as a tree. Curious phenomenon! In the whole Salon there is perhaps no painting which disturbs one's vision as much as the *Strayed Sheep*. The painting which seems the most false is, in fact, most true.[34] Confronted with the finicky radiance of Hunt or Millais, Gautier could not rid himself of the suspicion that he was hallucinated. In part this may have been because, despite himself, he had been forced to see that naturalistic conventions, when once pushed to an extreme of polished intensity, betray their own transparence, and blink him out of his forgetfulness of vision, oblige him with the consciousness of his own examination as a sensory event. At the same time as he was thrilling to the most retrograde pleasures of illusionism, he was retroactively sensitized by the vulnerability of his own fingertips to an unprecedented awareness of a painting as a separate object—the truth of its falsity. The blessed thing that happens in the fine points of Gautier's criticism, such as on the Pre-Raphaelites, is that his focus on perceptual values elides into a sighting of the self-contained created entity, and its powers of evocation.

When it came to landscape itself, Gautier's testimony was somewhat inconsistent, but in the end lacking in sympathy. Traveling man as he was, he had a negative attitude toward the rural, not because of a contempt for provincial life, but because nature appeared to him bereft of intelligence, basically unoriginal, and demoralizing in it chaotic solitude. Such, at least, is the gist of remarks he made in 1837 in his Salon of that year.[35] All the same, however, the artists' achievements in humanizing nature, devalorizing it, and bringing it "up front," forced him, like all perceptive critics of the 1830's, to recognize that landscape was the most advanced and vital of the genres, a glory of French painting. Still, while it is true that he loved Decamps for reasons of exoticism ("the disdainful quietism of a Musselman"), and cared much for Diaz, on the account of his Rococo charm, Gautier left to others any significant critique of Théodore Rousseau, Daubigny, Corot, or Jongkind.

One artist alone managed to provoke more from him than a paying of respects—Jean François Millet—and he could not have been stylistically at greater odds with his contemporaries, the Pre-Raphealites. Millet came into his own in the 1850's and 60's, and in the beginning, as well as the end, Gautier had his difficulties with him. In 1848, the critic complained of a certain dullness and lack of vigor in Millet; in 1864, he was qualified, even grudging: "When M. Millet wants to, and does not abandon himself to his systematic ugliness, he can express the beauty of the fields. But according to whether he listens to nature or his system, he produces entirely dissimilar works. ... "[36] But in large part, it was Gautier's classicism that enabled him to appreciate the Virgilian mysticism of Millet, where elsewhere the painter was popularly, and erroneously, attacked as a social revolutionary. Not only the aspect of Millet's figure compositions as a stately rite, not only his broad consciousness of style and type, but the essentially dolorous sensibility of the man: all these were caught admiringly by Gautier. And as usual, when he looked closely, and therefore most restrictedly, Gautier achieved a marvel of critical observation: "We have already seen *The Gleeners*. Three poor women, bent toward the furrows that send back their burning reverberations, search for the forgotten ears of corn among the scratching stubble, with weatherbeaten, callous hands, deformed by toil. ... His (Millet's) heavy, impassible figures seem to slumber in the brutishness of misfortune, with the resignation of the animal; they seem *telluric* ... hardly detached from the original clay, and standing on the earth with feet that one might take for roots; their clothes, which have no folds, stick to their rough-hewn forms more like animal's hides than materials produced by human industry. They accomplish their tasks in a clumsy, primitive way ... as if the mysteries of agriculture had just been revealed to them. Their vague eyes have no thoughts; they express only a sad wonderment."[37]

Gautier's exposition here, so typical of him at his best, slides easily from confirmable detail to plausible metaphor, contained within a descriptive matrix whose field is apparently very circumstantial. But this very limitation, what his critics had always attacked as an absence of breadth, served as a wonderful induction of an artist's expressive values, all the more effective because modest in tone. He does not read out content on the basis of a prior reconstruction of an artist's personality and intentions, but rather, empirically he sweeps over the surface, letting its primary features tell of the peculiar mind at work beneath. So uncontrived and variegated is its build-up of information, that the prose, before one knows it, has transcended the need to give some conclusive image of its subject. One comes to know the work unexpectedly, because in his topographical overview, Gautier instinctively divines in every passage a separate microcosm, each as revealingly a germ of the imagination as the next.

This quality of perception might suggest that caricature, that art of broad and immediate impulse, whittled to essentials and compressed in ideas, would find in Gautier a hospitable critic. Such, in a left-handed way, was the case. His essay "Du Beau dans l'art," while overall a defense of his own homage to the beautiful (which he felt to be disparaged by the remarkable Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer), also professes some agreement with Töpffer's emphasis on the virtues of childlike drawing, and the value of spontaneity. Gautier was hardly to go any further in articulating a theory of naïvté or the innocent eye. And it never occured to him to treat caricature through any generalized notion of the comic, as did Baudelaire, or as allied to popular culture and folk art. Still less would he have noted its explicit political overtones. It remained for Champfleury to perform that pioneer task. All the same, there are moments in Gautier's criticism—rather gloomy ones, it may be imagined—when he seems to think that only in caricature could the nineteenth century be recorded, only laughter could be contemporary. At any rate, his adherence to the absolute clearly did not require that the subject of a work of art be agreeable, or that it should be free of deformity.

Something of his approach to this preliminary issue can be gleaned from his remarks on Leonardo's grotesque facial studies: "It is the cruel but irresistible joviality of a young and handsome god that mocks at human deformity ... Caricature, such as it is understood in modern times, has no relation whatsoever to these drawings, the fancifulness of which always springs from the deepest learning, and which are, so to speak, anatomically arabesque with muscles for scrolls."[38]

Departing from this idea of playfully cruel learning, Gautier saw caricature as a palimpset of the modern, or rather, modern manners, indifferent to aesthetic categories. In the purity with which he was thought to uphold this role, Gavarni had no equals for Gautier, just as he had none for the Goncourt brothers. Daumier they hardly deigned to notice, but Gavarni, in Gautier's eyes, was, incomprehensibly, the true original. He was praised not only because his captions and images were inseparable, but because he captured the passing styles, as well as the bodily tics of the Parisians, and, as Gautier put it, because he was the anatomist of "the carnival of Paris."[39] Although he knows how to punish vice, Gavarni is estimable because "he does not preach; he relates; with him, no indignation, no point of declamatory emphasis; he takes the world as it is."[40]

There is perhaps nothing more profound in these observations than a liking for a racy and witty documentation of fashions and foibles. Gavarni's work was an object of praise because it was sociable, legible, sarcastically debonair rather than savage, and for all its bite, accepting and passive in its cynicism. However, where Gautier penetrated more deeply was in an area occasionally bordering on caricature, but altogether more irrational and disturbing: the fantastic.

For the man who could write the *Romance of the Mummy*, the macabre had a far greater attraction than the demotic. In large part, of course, his feelings for this mode issued from the vestigial Gothicism in the graphic work of Delacroix and Boulanger—their witch's sabbaths and black masses. As for literary encouragement, one does not have to go further back than to Victor Hugo's *Preface to Cromwell*, of 1827, wherein modern thought is seen as owing much to the grotesque, a dualistic condition which mixes the repellent with the bufoonish. Visual fantasy was something of a picturesque lark, derived from English ghost stories and German medievalism in the 1820's and 30's. Striking a new note, Gautier, in 1842, published, as part of the material later to become *Voyage en Espagne* (*Tra Los Montes*), an explosive account of Goya. He thus became not only the first major French art critic to be acquainted with and write on a representation of Goya's work much larger than in the Standish and Spanish museums in Paris, but also the first of his time to lend a more abstract and frightful shudder to the fantastic—giving it, for once, something fundamental.

At first, it is true, Gautier searches for pictorial comparisons, and tries to find a sense of Spanish national character in his experience of Goya. (Much still has to be learned about the cosmopolitan tendency to associated and classify this genre of the fantastic within the idea of national schools.) But as soon as he thinks of Velázquez in reference to Goya, he is bothered by the relevance of Rembrandt and even Reynolds.

He ransacks his vast literary stock of analogies, and pays Goya the fine yet mistaken compliment of an equation with E. T. A. Hofman. Still, none of this suffices, in the face of a most ghastly genius, one whose originality is as cutting as his local world is Spanish. It is only when Gautier finds Goya incomparable, when Rabelais, Watteau, Callot, Cervantes and Cruickshank fall away as guides to the inexplicable, that the critic begins to "see" his subject.

Nonplussed by the "incredible fury" of the artist's execution, something he had never witnessed before, nor ever would again, he writes of paintings whose color has been swept on by sponges or by a spoon (*Dos de Mayos*), trowelled as if it were mortar, or smeared by a thumb. Much the same impetuosity informs the aquatints of Goya, heightened by etching, for in the angled shadows which eat away their backgrounds, there arises an effect so lugubrious and terrible that "one is transported into an unheard of world, impossible yet real."[41] The gloom is so phantasmal that it grimaces like a hyena, and accomplishes the most bestial transformations.

And this characterizes the social world of Goya, too, especially in the *Caprichos*: "The type of the *mère utile* is marvelously well rendered by Goya, who has, like all Spanish painters, a lively and profound sentiment of the ignoble; one cannot imagine anything more grotesquely horrible, more viciously deformed. ... Imagine creases and counterscarps of wrinkles; eyes like coals extinguished in blood; noses ... all bubbled with warts ... hippopotamus snouts bristling with stiff horsehair ... something of the spider and the woodlouse, and which gives you the same disgust as when the foot is placed on the soft belly of a toad."[42] So much, he says, for the merely realistic aspect of Goya's art!

The demonic purpose of Goya, on the other hand, is fully revealed to Gautier in one of the great plates of the *Caprichos*, "Y aun no se van!" (no. 59). In this etching, a corpse is slipping in his attempt to buttress a giant plinth of a tombstone, about to fall on his wretched cohorts of the grave. Gautier writes: "The expression of despair which paints itself on all these cadaverous physiognomies, in these sockets without eyes, which see that their labor has been useless, is really tragic; it's the most sad symbol of laborious impotence, the most somber poetry and the most bitter derision that has ever been accorded to the dead."[43] In sum, then, a remarkable essay, not least of all because Gautier visibly oscillates between two views of Goya without being able to decide which one he accepts. But the opposition between the Spanish realist and the universal demonist does not have to be resolved to be suggestive. And that momentary glimpse of dread is precious because the idea of fantasy itself is both absorbed in it and broadened. Above all, it is Gautier's response to the tactile life of this art, tingled and exhilarated one instant, quivering and scarified the next, that gives his remarks on Goya a specifically graphic place in his criticism.

It wasn't until twenty years later that he touched on some of the same problems, this time in a catalogue preface to an exhibition of Victor Hugo's drawings. These radically mysterious visions, with their "delirious" inkblots and snaky excrescences, sometimes doubled by folding, afforded Gautier further insight into the supernatural properties of a fantasy that had grown so wilful that it had wandered into a new kind of passive exploration of the random and subconscious energies that might swirl within a medium. [Hugo] "renders," wrote Gautier, "the visible aspect of things with ... precision ... but he shows the invisible aspect to the vulgar; behind reality he places the fantastic like the shadow behind the body, and never forgets that in this world every beautiful or deformed figure is followed by a black specter, like a shadowy page."[44] The thought that appearances have an inextricable and sinister alter-ego is at once recognizably romantic—echoing the idea of the alien second self in the artist's own reflexive view of his consciousness—and, in the context of Hugo, prophetic of a more twentieth century interest in the a-rational elements of the visual imagination. Just the same, Gautier had no trouble making of this observation something peculiarly his own. "But here," he writes of a Hugo drawing, "the remembrance of a fog, enveloping forms like the vapor of a dream, spreads on a film (*plaque*) vaguely stamped with acquatint, across which the half effaced silhouettes of poplars and oaks appear like arborisations under the milky transparence of an agate."[45] He detects a surface tension even in the langorous flotations of an ink wash, whereby his sensitivity to the tenebrous and crystalline come together in the sighting of a unique chimera. In art criticism, Gautier is the elegist of infra-structure. The magnifying waves of his scrutiny sweep without prejudice, sometimes even without self-knowledge, over some of the more devious exchanges between matter and convention in pre-Manet art.

But if his handling of visual fantasy, sometimes mingled with elements of caricature, revealed the crags of Gautier's inner landscape, he possessed an outer horizon which was, of course, no less an authentic feature of his personality. The artist who figured most grandly on that horizon, occupying a place in Gautier's affections comparable to that of Delacroix in Baudelaire's, was Ingres. What makes Gautier's understanding of Ingres singular is not merely that it was placid amidst great controversy, but that he treated the master of *The Bather of Valpinçon* with that same intimacy untended by introspection which was his normal method with all artistic phenomena. And though the magnetism of Ingres suffused Gautier's liking of scores of lesser, though mildly kindred artists, it also fostered the most equable and unblinkered, if unproblematic view of Ingres' art itself.

Certainly Gautier, in his retrospective essay on Ingres in 1855, made clumsy mistakes, such as his claim that the *Apotheosis of Homer* can give us an idea of the painting of Apelles, Zeuxis, or Parrhasius, an error that ceased having any critical context shortly after Ingres came our of David's studio in 1805. Gautier was as naïvely literal in his comparisons as he was anxious to expound Ingres' status as an artist for all time. His criticism is replete with words like *majestuese*, *pur*, *frais*, *noble*, and *ideale*, all very eighteenth century terms which give the drift of his conventionalized values, but not of his actual observation, which is very nineteenth century. For the picture of Ingres that emerges is that of an ambidextrous stylist, a scrupulous researcher, and a chameleon-like mind, who is "classic" only superficially. At the heart of his vision, says Gautier, is a fidelity to local color that can shade at any moment into a Venetian, medieval, or oriental pageant, at one with its sources. So that, at certain moments, Ingres, the historical painter, and even the bourgeois realist, blends harmoniously with that other Ingres, kneeling at the altar of timeless beauty. That this could be possible only through a synthesis of form, and a faultless grasp of the general in the particular, rather than a cosmetic palette and encrusted detail, seems to have eluded Gautier. No matter how unreformed an historicist in aim, Ingres much more tactfully tinted his styles with revivalism. The same confusion between form and subject that had hazed Gautier's aesthetics in the past now marred his set-piece evaluation of his idol.

Nevertheless, to Ingres' inimitable sensuality, at once chilly, exotic, and obsessive, Gautier proved the most articulate guide. The critic's affinity with this side of the artist—and it is one especially apparent now—surfaces even in such unlikely remarked that the sexual softness and movement of Joan of Arc are immediately apparent despite the armor with which Ingres has encased her.[46] It is difficult to know which is more illuminated by this statement: the corseted discipline of the painting, or the crypto-voyeurism of the viewer. At any rate, here are some of Gautier's most characteristic perception of Ingres:

"The *Venus Anadyomène* is perhaps the figure which the artist has caressed the most amorously; begun in his youth, he left it, took it up again, as one does with an adored mistress."[47]

Of the *Grand Odalisque*: "The eyes, whose glaucous pupils look from the side; the nose, with roseate nostrils like the interior of a seashell; the mouth, blooming with a nonchalant smile; the cheeks full, rather large; the chin, of a round and voluptuous curve, form a type in which in individuality of the Orient mingles with ideal of Greece."[48]

Or, of the *Odalisque with Slave*: "It is impossible to paint better the mystery, the silence and the suffocation of the seraglio: not a ray of sun, not a corner of blue sky, not a breath of air in that padded, stuffed chamber, impregnated with the dizzying perfumes of tomback, amber, and benjamin, where, far from all glances the most beautiful human flower wastes away."[49] With vivacious ease and accuracy, Gautier evokes an erotic setting of the mind, half greenhouse and half aquarium, in which the nudes of Ingres are displayed, like fabulous specimens of desire. But interspersed with these pasha-like sentiments, in fact like grateful acknowledgements of them, are paens to the perfection of Ingres, whose imperturbable spirit, "hearing the far off world only as a vague murmur," recedes into the eternal domain of art.

It is easy to prefer Gautier's sexed tributes to the starched eulogies of Étienne Délecluze and Gustave Planche, for whom Ingres was the preservor of tradition and guardian of correct line and finish. For it was Ingres' fortune and even desire to attract the support of the mossbacks most entrenched as foes of all rebellion in art. For them, Ingres, after 1824, championed the classic rectitude and authority of David, while satisfactorily lacking his revolutionary fervor. The most interesting work done on Ingres, aside from Gautier, was by his respectful enemies of the left. A provocative exception to the latter, however, was Théophile Silvestre, who in 1857, concluded, inimically: "David had put form at the service of thought, M. Ingres, believing only in form, makes of painting a voluptuous and sterile contemplation of brute matter, professes a complete indifference for the destinies of man, for the secrets of creation, and pursues, by means of straight and curved lines, the plastic absolute which is to his eyes the principle and the end of all things. After having created his prototypes of beauty, he could not even perceive that he had forgotten to give them a soul. ... It is not too much to require of the artist to question himself concerning some morality, at least some significance. ... Poetry reduced to the arrangement and sonority of words, is no longer poetry but a vain noise that beats the air."[50] Excepting the reference to straight and curved lines, this excerpt could almost have anticipated the endless strictures against Manet in the next decade. But Silvestre had correctly assessed, if not sympathetically judged, Ingres' hermeticism. Of course the matter of that hermeticism, for Gautier, was hardly brute; but it is precisely in this dispute over the internal life of a highly self-concerned formal attitude, that the first phase of *l'art pour l'art*, the phase that was challenged by Courbet, was brought to a head.

Ingres, of course, was an official painter, a venerable fixture and cultural hero of two Monarchist regimes. By no stretch of the imagination could he be considered a studio artist working for a select group of cognoscenti. It is a symptom of the complexities of aesthetic life in the 1850's, that such a "reactionary" artist should be censured by a middle-of-the-road critic for "offenses" that seem to us so modern. And it is no less bewildering that Gautier should appreciate in him the most humanly accessible virtues in the name of a fanatical elitism. Much more is inherent in this discrepancy than the fact that Ingres' art was at times contradictory enough to validate both opposing points of view. The problem of *l'art pour l'art* was not only of interpreting the relationship of artistic means to ends in any single instance, but also of determining the attitude of the artist toward his audience, as well as the nature of the audience itself. Because of the ambivalence of artists and critics, there was little agreement on the existence, if not the theory, of coherent art for art's sake. For example, any merely rigid adherence to a set of artistic principles, in denial of all other value systems, already has the introversion which distinguishes some *l'art pour l'art*. In this sense, Ingres' conservative supporters were wrong in their judgement of him, but for the right reasons. Varieties of *l'art pour l'art* could exist just as easily within, as well as outside, the academy. Yet, even if it is correctly argued that aestheticism has an age-old tradition, even if it is reasonably demonstrated that the matter is more one of contexts and definitions, than of content, Gautier remains the prime *critical* spokesman for that doctrine which, after the middle of the last century, was to burgeon into the basic rhetorical prop of modern art.

In the crazy-quilt of opinion contending for the independence of art, Gautier was less poetic than Lamartine or Musset, less philosophical than Cousin, and less moral than Flaubert. The environment to which they, and many others, contributed, did, however, arrive at an unstable consensus. For there was held in common an idea of art as an enclave of the spirit, engaged in a pursuit that society could neither manipulate for its own ends, nor had the capacity to judge. One writer sums up the situation rather concisely: "The embattled artists defended their sovereignty and liberty upon both these fronts (i.e. against the reactionaries and socialists); making such alliances as need compelled or occasion suggested; drawing now upon democratic aspiration, now upon scientific methods and knowledges, now upon industrial technique for aid and comfort in their struggle. To the Communion of Saints they opposed the Republic of Letters; to the Brotherhood of Man, the Uniqueness of the Artist; to the Proletarian International, the Bohemia of Art."[51] Nevertheless, somewhere between early Cousin and Flaubert, this view had shifted from a kind of upliftingly Utopian accent on freedom, in which art answers to its own established responsibility to beauty (as science did to truth), to the most profound inner alienation and despair.

The new religion of art derived partly from the isolated and embattled position of the artist, instigated by the growing cleavage between the academy and individualism on one hand, and the collapse and discredit of such protective institutions of belief as the state and the church, on the other. That so much intellectual and creative energy, now actively serving in the cause of socialism, say, or nationalism, rushed to till that breech, only made *l'art pour l'art* a more virulent phenomenon, especially after 1840. The cult of form, and the emphasis on virtuosity here became protective measures, in which the human was re-defined in always smaller orbits of intense sensation, the more to serve as a bulwark against the artist' growing sense of displacement, and their feeling of being engulfed by the inchoate and meaningless pressures of bourgeois life. Represented in such terms, life itself, its sentiments, conformities, entanglements and confusions, was demoted to a lower order of contingent and ephemeral existence, contrasting with the worship of art's gratuitous and everlasting discipline. The forms such re-alignments might take were multiple. Still and all, if they were largely anti-intellectual, misanthropic, and wounded, they were also restrictive, hollowing out zones of inner, specialized dedication.

In Flaubert, this state of affairs produced such a deep crisis of identity, such a tormented, unspontaneous quality in the relation of the artist to his work, that his enterprise became nothing less than an effort to distance all threat by a meticulous study of disillusion in middle class behavior itself. A situation like this led to the cultivation of that famous mask of disinterestedness and impassivity, so often noted by students of the reaction against Romanticism. Gautier, too, shared this defense. For him, the authorial presence is at its most commanding when it is subdued or effaced by the inevitability of that which materialized form. But, far from withholding his critical largesse, or husbanding his regard for any true path, he let out the art for art's sake attitude at its seams. In him, the irresistible quest for perfection met the immovable impatience to enjoy, and there ensued that sweetened, skeptical hedonism which found pleasure in a thousand disparate and contradictory artifices, but developed a commitment to none of them. While he thereby shattered everything that was imperious in the aesthetic doctrine, he nevertheless confirmed its aloofness. Grazed by his omni-directional purview, each object of attention cocooned into an unsorted nubbin of charm. He manifested that ironic laissez-faire that was so modern it sired even something of Dada; but he also pastured in that bourgeois paradise which, curdled by materialism, was the enemy of anything that might upset the status quo.

Gautier, the son of a *functionnaire*, was a bourgeois and social climber, faithful to his class in life style and goal, with the exception of one ecstatic moment of apostasy in his youth during the early 1830's. To its tastes and prejudices, however, he had a more sundered attitude, half complacent, and half vengeful, which gives his career its peculiar tension. His was the position of an educationist for his own people, far too clever and fine a mind to regard them as equals, quite overly timid and passive a person to break with them, their security and comfort. This indecision is registered in what might have been otherwise an important insight: "Few of us look at a picture, read a book, listen to a tune for the beauty of the colors, the language, or the sounds: in short, for its personal charm. This is at once our failing and our merit."[52] Of course, he could also twit his audience on a self-evident limitation: "If you pass a Raphael, and admire your reflection in the casseroles of Orolling, you're a bourgeois. If you prefer Paul de Kock to Lord Byron—bourgeois! You decorate your mantelpiece with spun glass dogs ... bourgeois. ... "[53] All this, in the end, is very benign. And it comes as no surprise that in 1855 he chose to defend the public against the overbearing and contemptuous dicta of critics, connoisseurs, and experts, men of his own profession.

For if Gautier could surrender abjectly to the interests of his audience, this could also backfire into a resentment and embarrassment about his professional niche as a cultural servitor of that audience. Exposed to coterie intellectuals, overseared by popularizing editors, he could not have felt that his was an altogether consistent and honorable place in the Paris art world. So that it was all too natural for him to abrogate his own authority, especially in the face of the ever more apparent heterogeneity of taste as time wore on. But these complaints were as nothing compared to the hatred with which he stigmatized *himself* as a critic. One would have to look far to find a more exemplary instance of a critic as detesting of his work as Gautier.

On his own testimony, his injured conscience had its origins in the disorientation of two inner drives—the sexual and the creative—coexisting in a personality whose despairing aim was to make them coalesce. Indeed, the always thwarted and regressive yearning for the Nirvana of the pleasure principle acts as a leit-motif of Gautier's criticism. It is responsible for the overtly sublimated and paraphiliac character of what he wrote, no less than for its agonies and accomplishments. "One thing which is certain and easy of demonstration," he declared, " ... is the natural antipathy of the critic to the poet, of him who makes nothing to him who makes something ... of the gelding to the stallion. You do not become a critic until it has been completely establishment to your own satisfaction that you cannot be a poet. Before descending to the melancholy office of taking care of the cloaks ... you long courted the Muse and sought to win her virginity ... I can understand this hatred. It is painful to see another sit down at a banquet to which you have not been invited, and sleep with a woman who would have nothing to say to you. With all my heart, I pity the poor eunuch who is obliged to be present at the diversions of the Grand Seignior."[54] Now, though the famous womanizer Gautier may not have conceived, when he uttered these remarks in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, that the epithet of jealous eunich might apply to the bulk of his future activity, at the end of his life it seemed to him still that he had done nothing more than devote himself to the vicarious. "*Anch'io son pittore* ... I've regretted all my life I abandoned my first career. Since then I've done nothing but make transpositions of art."[55] As if it were not enough to stand accused as a unwanted lover, Gautier heaped upon himself the burden of being a failed painter.

A look at the titles of his various collected essays tends to substantiate this point: *Caprices et Zigzags*, *Portraits Contemporains*, *Tableaux à la Plume*, *Fusains et Eaux-Fortes*, etc. For this man, to whom "the visible world exists," all ideas and sensations awaited the ultimate casting back, the final loving dissolution, into the visible. The sheer fantasy of this notion, not untypical of the period, but never so powerfully aware of itself, led Gautier to recriminations even against his pampered Eros. "Love" he has his character Albertus sigh, "is nothing but a spasm, and the glory of an empty word." Throughout his fiction, there are comparable statements of self-doubt and depersonalization, a sense that life is a dream in which one is imprisoned, where all affection, identity, and value evaporate in a vaporous shadow. Perhaps some of this explains the fatality of his sensualism, and why it had to be pegged on to a metaphysical conception. Van der Tuin says of him, very simply, "The *joie de vivre* of Gautier will be the fanatic desire to want to live, *despite everything*."[56]

Such, very briefly then, were some of the internal dilemmas of the critic whom Giraud classified as among the ultras of the French romantic Hellenists. Whatever the smile of its surface, Gautier's criticism was the product of a man guiltily convinced that he was living beneath his creative means, infirm, deficited, and dubious of the worth of his whole undertaking. To some extent, this hints of why he was so exercised by Rococo painting and decor, for in that fanciful *dix-huitieme* world, there was combined an innocent grace and a sad mood that soothed the needs of his unfulfilled imagination. Gautier assisted prominently in the Rococo revival which was to transfer a once aristocratic delicacy into the coarse configurations that flattered the luxury instincts of a far more plebian civilization. And though their emotional outlooks were miles apart, he shared with his readers many leveling proclivities of a taste which was largely parvenu. Actually, one expects criticism to reflect, as a matter of course, much that is the mean average and the merely fashionable, of the aesthetics of its day. And while we are no longer required to disparage Chassériau, Gérôme, and Couture, what are we to say of Regnault, Baudry, and Landseer? Gautier was fully capable of expressing these, as well as countless other melancholy preferences.

The confluence of his *embourgeoisement* and *l'art pour l'art* is seen at its most illiberal when, in 1849, he upheld the art of Veronese as one "which recalls to suffering people that Paradise can exist on this earth."[57] Gautier believed "that those who dressed splendidly, like those who paraded their wealth, did a service to those who dressed in sombre clothes."[58] It was characteristic of him to imagine also that Protestantism was envious of the lavish and pagan sensuality of the Catholic, was, in fact, Protestant, that is, envious, in spirit. But when he praised the triumphantly sterile neo-classic sculptor Pradier, as "the pagan of 1846 [protesting] against the reprobation with which Christianity struck the flesh nineteen centuries ago,"[59] he failed to understand that there was no hope whatsoever for a contemporary paganism, let alone that such sculpture was in itself related to the prudery which he attacked in any form of religious sectarianism.

Considerable evidence has been mustered to show that art for art's sake is antithetical to bourgeois morality. Albert Guérard states that the aesthetic sensibility in great measure can be defined by its antagonism to philistine materialism. As against this, no one can discount the serious affinities that exist between them. The merits of Arnold Hauser's Marxist analysis of the phenomenon can be seen in this context: "L'art pour l'art results, as we know, only partly from the romantic outlook and its estrangement from society and practical life; in some respects it is the direct expression of a genuinely bourgeois and workmanlike attitude, concentrated wholly on the efficient performance of the work in hand."[60] Hauser goes further to detect a parallel between artistic specialization and capitalist division of labor, both accelerated during the period. Thus, the important principle is not the content or direction of any one form of art, but the extent to which its aims find the most adequate realization, and its style the most appropriate rendering. And if this development can be viewed as an ultimate outcome of pride in craft, it can also be seen as sponsoring the most diverse eclecticism. Egan concludes that: "One cannot survey art for art's sake criticism in the second half of the century and not find revealed this astonishing situation: many types of mind and quite opposite interests come together not only without a jar, but even with sympathy."[61] Hence the philosophy that artistic ends carried much of the justification of a work—though it sounds so "modern"—also operated as a force to de-gravitize the rhetorical atmosphere. Won for small manual devotions, the weight of meaningful choice was lost for larger discriminations of quality. The resulting neutral reception of content mollified not only the bourgeois discomfort with art itself, but its fear of art's political defiance. Cassagne notes how congenial was the theory to a bourgeoisie which wanted nothing better than to contain art's de-stabilizing potential. And another writer, Brown, observes that even the Ingres-Delacroix controversy was encouraged by the government in order to absorb otherwise "dangerous" energies in an aesthetic dispute, and to deflect public attention away from political and social issues.[62]

Gautier may not have been an outright exponent, but he was representative of this state of affairs. He was pliant and credulous. Through him, as well as many lesser critics, was broadcast the cultural small talk of the period. But he also typified some of its most interesting and modern traits. One of these is that the glut of positive aesthetic response had a negative basis, stemming from the awareness that society was not only losing its way, but had ceased to believe in itself. The atomistic side of *l'art pour l'art*, its compensating diffuseness, its *mal de siècle*, the haunting sense it can give of a hole at the center of experience, is as much a part of our legacy as a more rigorous aestheticism. In this context, Gautier's frivolous manner was cautionary. It spoke for the anxieties of indulgence, just as Clive Bell's dogma of "significant form" was to announce, much later, the complacencies of denial. These anxieties, though often timidly stated or merely implied, were new. They indicate how much the distance between the innovating artist and bourgeois ideas has been exaggerated, and how much that artist shared with the bourgeois, upon whom he depended, an uncertainty about the historical process in which they were both immersed. It was an unwitting alliance of the perplexed, in which ideological positions were sometimes reversed. Silvestre had inadvertently anticipated to what extent classic art, its traditionalist thrust worn down, nevertheless provided a leaping off point for the abstraction of a later generation. But Gautier discerned much more acutely in Ingres, that the poetry of silence accompanied by an amorous thrill.

What encouraged such insights, and illuminated their special imaginative texture, was the clairvoyant libido of his criticism. It was be that the Pygmalion myth occupied an important place in the themes of nineteenth century French literature, particularly that concerning art. In Gautier, however, it becomes a central motif, underlying all the leanings of his judgement, ramified poignantly, ambivalently, and querulously throughout his career, and mounting almost to a complex. In 1856, he accused Pygmalion, who changed his statue into his mistress, of being a philistine. If so, Gautier himself was a would-be philistine (just as he considered himself to be a would-be artist), thirsting after the transmutation of stone into flesh. Though he wrote mostly of painting, his comments swell with literal projections of volume, which are more appropriate to sculpture. In *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, d'Albert's desire is to follow the curves of three dimensional contours into their most hidden folds—an impulse his critic-author was inclined to impress into his verbal analysis of all art. The primordial curiosity to touch, and to *know* (in the Biblical sense), through touching, was associated by Gautier with envy. Art was of the feminine gender, and virgin, to boot; it could only be "deflowered" by the possessive eye, trying to co-opt the physical encounter of which the body was capable. While one of his tendencies was to think of art as impossibly instinct with life, the limbs of created female figures circulating with blood, their bodies chemically responsive to the male, an other was to wish upon actual women that they be frozen into exquisite poses, there to be contemplated with an adoring, yet chaste leisure proper to the study of great art. By a twist of fantasy, the philistine in art becomes the aesthete in life. Many are the episodes in his writing where the hero-artist, in a climactic and privileged moment, first gazes upon the beautiful nudity of a woman, whom he then transforms from a love-object to a model. It would be short-sighted to think of these literary reversals as dreams of unrequited passion. Rather, they appear to function as scenarios whereby the twin enslavements of bodily want and creative humility are exchanged and thus exorcised in order to free the writer for the realization of his own form. Once relieved, or actually, detached, in this way, Gautier could work with a better conscience and a heightened descriptive impact. In a poem of veiled outcome from *Émaux et Camées*, he apostrophized his involvement with the story of Pygmalion.

Do Not Touch the Exhibits

A musueum statue fill you with delight
Some perfect handiwork of Phidias;
Love forges links between you both …
She seems to smile; your passion grows more rash,
Your burning hand moves to her marble hand;
You Cry, "A Goddess might take woman's flesh!"
The statue trembles … high the thunder rolls.
Venus is kindly; she can understand
Immortal longings in a mortal soul.[63]

Of course, these charades would have only a psychological value if they did not also reverberate invincibly within Gautier's aesthetic. He was, for instance, always time-stopping the performance arts, theater, ballet, and opera, and "mobilizing" the visual ones. Partly this explains why his prose has a photographic quality: of stills when speaking of ballerinas, of cinema when discussing painting. The continuum of action is either petrified, or brought out and made to flow, as if by some omniscient and wily shutter in the language. Gautier, we know, was fascinated with the camera, having taken a primitive example of one with him on his trip to Spain. He seems to have regarded the machine as a challenge to his verbal powers. Of dramatic criticism he wrote that it "must be a kind of theatrical daguerrotype recording every pose and aspect of the actor; a sentence even more responsive than the silver plate covered with iodine should reproduce the vocal inflections, the facial expressions, the poses, gestures. … "[64] If he pulled theater criticism toward that of visual art, he incorporated techniques of fictional and poetic writing, just as consciously, into that on painting.

Aside from the natural metaphors of language, and apart from the craving for the immortal, here was another setting of the stage for Gautier's celebrated transpositions of the arts. The links between the Pygmalion motif and synaesthesia, in his criticism, have been too long neglected. The wish to impart life into the inert was no paltry ambition. Nor was it modest to orchestrate the normally specialized senses in the symbolic medium of discourse. Gautier floated along in that current which suggested that the social independence of the arts was but the effect of their interdependence on each other. But he gave to it his own momentum. Sainte-Beuve was to imagine that we believe we are seeing the picture as Gautier describes it, and that his system produces a kind of exact reduction, rather than a translation. "In the same way one reduces a symphony to piano, he reduces a picture to an article." Although it is true that Gautier was more of a *précieux* in his method than in his choice of objects, and though he worked constantly to condense sensory allusions, it is hard to accept Sainte-Beuve's idea of his aim and results. On the contrary, his literary resources were amplified and crossbred in order to gain greater mental purchase on visual stimuli. He saw correctly that the visible insinuated myriad non-visual impressions—the olfactory, the thermal, the tactile, the motor—into one's consciousness, and that prose was his only means of recording their presence. His art criticism outstandingly *articulated*, even imitated this order of elusive experience. His uncannily tooled poems *materialized* and projected it.

The latter, of course, mark the full engagement of his creative energies, and it was fitting that in his poetry the vocabularies of the various sensations mix most radically. Poetic license allowed him to explore the realm of bodily affect—the means whereby physical feeling irradiates emotion—in an unreserved way he never permitted himself in the psychologically more tamped down art criticism. Nevertheless, everywhere he opened the approach to that phenomenal world in which the senses are prized loose from reason and reality, and where their impressions are compared and displaced in a buoyant synaesthesia that touched the visionary, and even sizzled off to an area beyond words. Gautier occupies a chronological place between de Quincy and Baudelaire in the literature of hallucination induced by drugs. Creating a hashish seance in *La Croix de Berry*, 1846, he wrote: "All my senses were displaced: I saw music and I heard colors, I had new perceptions, like beings must have who inhabit a planet superior to ours."[65] And he conceived, in a stroke prophetic of the 1890's, of a synoptic art of the future, where "the poet will write strophs translating into beautiful women, or green shadows. ... ; the painter and the sculptor will realize forms gifted with ideas and movement. ... The one will touch his verse, the other will hear his sculpture. ... All the arts will palpitate together in the same work and each work will swim in a medium of light and perfume, the atmosphere of intellectual paradise."[66] One glimpses signs of this paradise often in the *Enamels and Cameos*, where terse analogues and clipped rhythms are glassily annealed into each other:

> Sur les lagunes
> Sur une gamme chromatique
> Le Sein de perles ruisselant
> Le Venus de l'Adriatique
> Sort de l'eau son corps rose et blanc.
>
> Une frêle corde qui vibre
> Refrait sur un pizzicato
> Comme autrefois joyeuse et libre
> La ville de Canaletto.

Gautier discharged into, or rather, reserved for his poetry, his most kinesthetic impulses. By contrast, they were relatively staid in his art criticism, which acted as a holding operations of his imagination. Compared to his verse, (which had, of course, its own aims), that criticism was a model of prosaic, nerveless, sobriety; likened to much other criticism, it appears as a wonder of sensitive, vital, and luminous observations. As writing, it had faults, without doubt. Gautier never foreshortened a Salon, like Baudelaire; and there is no real architecture of critical thought to be found in his work. Everything runs together, so that local economies of touch dissipate in the pluralism of subjects: the granulations of the mind in pleasure. It is a criticism without reasons, where, to show is considered more important than to analyze or judge. It brooked no insight of the kind to be gained from a commentary that wrestles with its discoveries, or doubts its decisions. Gautier's was not the type of sensibility that could engage the reader by exposing its own problems. Yet it helped that he always knew *what* to describe, as much as how to describe it. His criticism never "goes" anywhere, but it had the capacity of minting ideas out of sensations. Body and spirit were married in this process and were companionably revealed by each other. Few critics of his time spoke with as much affection and appetite for works of art as he did. And no one was as polymorphously attuned to the way his body kindled to them. Whatever their personal motivations, his transpositions of the arts were not the second-hand workings of a verbal copyist, but an imaginative acknowledgement of the somatic co-efficients of painting and sculpture. Lacking system and even method, they still left an indelible promise to the language of art criticism. The justest estimate of him, perhaps, comes from Arthur Symons, exegete of Symbolism: "Gautier knew himself, and could tell the truth about himself as simply, as impartially, as if he had been describing a work of art. Or is he not, indeed, describing a work of art? Was not that very state of mind, that finished and limited temperament, a thing which he had collaborated with nature in making, with an effective heightening of what was most natural to him, in the spirit of art?

The five senses made Gautier for themselves, that they might become articulate. He speaks for them all with a dreadful unconcern. All his words are in love with matter, and they enjoy their lust and have no recollection. ... Everything that he cared for in the world was to be had, except, perhaps, rest from striving after it ... he went through the Louvre, room by room, saying the right thing about each painter in turn. He did not say the final thing; he said nothing which we have to pause and think over before we see the whole of its truth or apprehend the whole of its beauty. Truth, in him, comes to us almost literally through the eyesight, and with the same beautiful clearness as if it were one of those visible things which delighted him most: gold, marble, and purple; brilliance, solidity, colour."[67]

Notes

(With the exception of excerpts from Richardson, Sloane, and the other few places indicated, all translations from the French in the preceding text are my own.)

1 Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, trans. Charles Marriott (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1954), 255.

2 Théophile Gautier, *L'Art Moderne* (Paris: M. Lévy frères,1856), 93.

3 "Le Salon de 1839," *La Press*; quoted in Louise Bulkey Dillingham, *The Creative Imagination of Théophile Gautier, a study in literary psychology* (Princeton and Albany: Psychological Review Company, 1927), 298.

4 "De La Composition en Peinture," *La Press*, 22 Nov. 1836, quoted in Dillingham, Ibid., 300.

5 *L'Artiste*, February 1, 1857; quoted in Dillingham, Ibid., 305.

6 *L'Artiste*, vol. III, 1856-57, p. 4; quoted in Joseph Sloane, *French Painting Between the Past and the Present; artists, critics, and traditions, from 1848 to 1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 86.

7 Gautier, *L'Art Moderne*, op. cit., 153.

8 Théophile Gautier, *Caprices et Zigzags* (Paris: n.t.-p, 1856); quoted in H. van der Tuin, *L'Evolution Psychologique, Esthetique, et Littéraire de Théophile Gautier* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1933), 246.

9 Théophile Gautier, *Voyage en Espagne* (Boston: D. C. Health & Co., 1929), 26.

10 Dillingham, op. cit., 26.

11 *L'Artiste*, vol. III, 1856-57, 4; quoted in John Palache, *Gautier and the Romantics* (New York: The Viking Press, 1926), 116.

12 Théophile Gautier, "Plastique de la Civilization," *L'Évenement*, 8 August 1848; quoted in Henriette Lavergne, *Théophile Gautier critique d'art* (Algers: n.p., 1957-58), 95.

13 Théophile Gautier, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe 1855*, vol. 1 (Paris: M. Lévy Frères, 1856 - 1857), 143.

14 Joanna Richardson, *Théophile Gautier, his life and times* (London: M. Reinhardt, 1958), 37.

15 J.S. Schapiro; quoted in Roy Howard Brown, *The Social Function of the Ingres-Delacroix Controversy During the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy* (Master Thesis, Columbia University, 1956), 84.
16 Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, trans. Burton Rascoe (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1920), 29.
17 Ibid., 265.
18 Ibid., 27.
19 Théophile Gautier, intro to *Les Dieux et Les Demi-dieux de la Peinture* (Paris: n.p., 1864), n.p..
20 *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1 September 1847; quoted in Lavergne, op. cit., 81.
21 *La Presse*, 11 February 1850; quoted in Richardson, op. cit., 155.
22 *Le Moniteur Universel*, 10 August 1863, quoted in Richardson, op. cit., 59.
23 Théophile Gautier, *Souvenirs de Théâtre, d'art et de critique* (Paris: G. Charpentier et cie., 1904), 197.
24 *Revue des Deux Mondes*, op. cit.; quoted in Lavergne, op. cit. p. 103.
25 Gautier, *L'Art Moderne*, op. cit., 136.
26 See George P. Mras, *Eugene Delacroix's Theory of Art* (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 1966), 5.
27 Gautier, *L'Art Moderne*, 135.
28 *De la Composition en peinture*; quoted in Lavergne, op. cit., 70.
29 Gautier, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe 1855*, op. cit., 171.
30 Lavergne, op. cit. p.143
31 Gautier, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe 1855*, op. cit., 33.
32 Gautier, ibid., 36.
33 Ibid, 37-8.
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Modernism and Theatricality

Thomas Brockelman

0. 5 Introduction

Perhaps no other definition of aesthetic Modernism has proven as compelling as Michael Fried's notion of a "war against theater." Although its original appearance in "Art and Objecthood" and other essays from the late sixties[1] binds it to a particular moment and direction in the history of Modern art, the idea of the modernist as champion of an anti-theatrical creativity captures an important impulse behind the 20th-Century avant-garde as a whole. Modernism rejects Theatricality—rejects that impulse in art which, by "playing to the house," denies the separation between art-work and audience or viewer. In the place of a theatrical art whose slavery to the public's whims condemns it to an empty repetition of the known and familiar, the Avant-Garde proposes a strategy of "shock."[2] Perpetual revolution replaces tradition, the novelty of the *unheimlich* supplants the homey.

Today, at a time when the cultural landscape everywhere bears the scars of Modernism's battle, the visual arts often threaten an unthinking return to Theatricality. At its most banal and sinister this regression subordinates all artistic intent to the interests of the "Culture Industry" (Adorno) or, even more baldly, the "Entertainment Industry." Over "shock" Hollywood prefers a soporific.

Recent years have also seen, however, the multiplication of works that defy easy inclusion in the entertainment/shock opposition. Such art is certainly not *simply* anti-theatrical—it doesn't assert itself to be novel or revolutionary—but its participation in existing genres always contains an element subversive to established forms. The arts, following the lead of architecture, have begun experimentation with an anti-theatrical Theatricality unforseen in Michael Fried's battle.

Even though Fried's Modernism ignores the possibility of such an ironic return to theater, it nonetheless prepares the way for it. In fact, as I will argue, the possibility of new experimentation arises as an implicit acknowledgement of the Theatricality inherent in the "war against theater." The anti-theatrical argument thus collapses on itself: Modernism and Kitsch turn out to be bedfellows, albeit *strange* bedfellows.

But more important than the fact of such a breakdown is the way that it occurs: The key here lies in the lack in Fried's work of an adequate justification for his preference of Theatrical over non-Theatrical art. My argument, originating in this failure to ground a valorization of Modernism, highlights two major weaknesses in the battle against theater—weaknesses which between them create the opportunity for the new Theatricality evident today. These shortcomings, which we will see through a psychoanalytic interogation of Fried's work from "Art and Objecthood" (1966) through *Absorption and Theatricality* (1982), lie in the *narcissistic desire* produced by the experience of art and in the space central to such desire. Our inquiry moves from the enlightenment clarity of the Modernist's "war against theater" to the murkier regions of his desire for himself.

1.0 The Attack on Theatricality in "Art and Objecthood"

We begin with an examination designed to show the way that for Fried the tension between Modernism and Theatricality arises from their essential, even definitional, opposition to each other. In the next two sections I use the context of an explication of "Art and Objecthood" to draw out these grounds of conflict, exfoliating terms for later investigation.

Fried's attack on theatricality, which he has developed since his article "Art and Objecthood" appeared in the late sixties, derives from an attempt to maintain the legitimacy of art's autonomy from other cultural spheres on the basis of an experience unique to it; art, so runs the argument, produces an "aesthetic" dimension of experience not comparable to the experience of other kinds of objects. For Fried, Modernism in art only continues the aesthetic project of high art, and continues it, inevitably, by radicalizing it. Thus Modernism becomes, in Fried's hands, an increasingly acknowledged and explicit "war" against those forces within art which might compromise the uniqueness of the artistic domain—those forces which Fried terms "theatrical."[3]

"Art and Objecthood" attempts to guard high Modernism in the fine arts from the onslaught of "Minimalism" or (in a name coined by Fried himself) "Literalism" a movement which claimed to have followed the logic of the Modern to a position beyond art. The defense, then, follows a strategy predicated on the need to redefine the Modernist project within painting and sculpture so as to deny the seemingly conclusive arguments by which Minimalist sculptors like Tony Smith proclaimed the "end of art" and by which they inevitably lead Modernism away from the aesthetic sphere; for "the end of art" meant its re-absorption into the realm of general experience.[4]

Literalists argued that the history of art called for a new "art-work" whose presence would be experienced as an object; as they saw it, the painter's rejection of representation had its logical outcome in a completely "literal" art. What lies behind the project of revealing the literal, physical nature of the work, so it was asked, if not an interest in the objecthood of the work? Faithfulness to Modernism, to the movement of art-history, seemed to require the return of the artwork to the field of the object. "Objecthood" is the logical end of a Modernism defined solely through the critique of representation.[5]

The friction between "representation" and "objecthood" becomes, in fact, manifest in reflection on the "natural" object; what is outstanding about such "things" as surround us from the natural environment is their non-conformity to the meaning projects of a human world.[6] They are not, at least as single objects, "about" anything else.[7] The denial of representation calls for completion in a similarly mute art, an art which would give up all pretence to indicate anything but itself.

Art was to become for the Minimalist inarticulate, first in its inability to *say* anything other than itself, but also—as the cause of its dumbness—in its undivided and amorphous nature.[8] That is to say the Minimalist object is *in*articulate because it is *un*articulated. Thus Donald Judd's discussions of Minimalism called for the production of exactly this kind of "natural" (as opposed to humanly meaningful) object. Judd emphasized the importance of unarticulated "shape" in his work, of a "wholeness" not built from parts.[9]

In response to Minimalist descriptions of contact between viewer and object Fried developed the notion of "Theatricality," opposing it to Modernism; not only is the object undefined internally, it also remains indefinite as to its borders, so that it forbids a discreet experience of itself. There is, thus, a sense in which it "does not begin or end" but extends infinitely beyond itself.[10]

For the Minimalist the sculpture which tries to attain to objecthood really becomes the situation in which it appears. Seen most radically, then, the object *includes* the spectator, by enveloping the viewing situation, so that what seems most alien to the human mind—the "natural," the indefinite—seems to infect it; "the experience of literalist art is of an object in a *situation*"—one that, virtually by definition, *includes* the beholder.[11]

We could say that, because it depends on its relationship to the viewer, the minimalist "object" changes when the viewing situation changes—when the spectator moves or when one spectator substitutes for another. In this sense, then, the artwork loses its autonomy by depending on its audience for its very nature; but this relationship of dependence is exactly what prompts Fried's term "theatricality"; for when an actor "plays to the audience," when the play is *compromised* for those who watch it, then I might protest it as "theatrical."[12] The theatrical in art is, above all, the compromise of the artwork for those who view it.

Most significantly, this domination means the subjection of the artwork to a temporality not belonging to it. Because the work refuses final perceptual definition, because, that is, it threatens infinite extension, the "presentness" of the object is indefinitely deferred for the viewer. I do not (and could not, since it includes me) ever have it completely "in front of my eyes." As a result, the experience of the object maintains the normal temporality of the viewer, who really seeks the suspension of time in pursuit of "presentness"; "an indefinite—by implication infinite—*progression* takes place as if *in time*."[13] The presence of art reduces, for the Minimalist, to the infinite extension of the viewer's time-frame; and, in insisting on placing the artwork "in time" with the spectator, he has once again betrayed art to the realm of theater—where the player can pretend to exist in the same temporal dimension as his audience.

1.5 The Autonomy of Modern Art.

If the path away from art lies in a series of theatrical moves compromising the uniqueness of the work, then Modernism, perceived by Fried as the continuation of the traditions of high art, must produce an art which counters every tendency to blend artwork and object or aesthetic and natural experience. What I wish to underscore in the following discussion is the exact oppositional dependency of the concepts of Theatricality and Modernism; Modernism becomes the anti-theatrical, and Theatricality becomes the antimodern.

We can see such reciprocity, first of all, in Fried's emphasis on the acknowledged artificiality of Modernist art. Thus, where the "object" attempts a return to the natural in the formulation of unarticulated "shape," the art produced by the Modernists Fried supports, for instance Frank Stella or Anthony Caro, aims at the explicitly delineated and articulated; Fried lauds Caro's sculpture for its very artificiality, claiming that such "abstraction" allows the artist to represent human "meaning" rather than natural form:

> The individual elements bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition: it is in this sense, a sense inextricably involved with the concept of meaning, that everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at is in its syntax. Caro's concentration upon syntax amounts, in Greenberg's view, to "an emphasis on abstractness, on radical unlikeness to nature."[14]

The attempt by Modernist sculptors and painters to represent by means of a syntactical interrelationship of parts leads to an art which is anti-theatrical in its clear delineation, which maintains a discrete and bordered presence, and which, therefore refuses to expand beyond itself. Unlike Minimalist "objects," the works of the Modernists whom Fried admires do not change with the situations in which they are viewed; in fact, what is outstanding about them is their refusal to compromise themselves. Through such self-refusal, furthermore, the work and not the viewer determines its mode of experience, with the result that its actual presence remains essential to the experience of art; this means, most significantly, that Modernist art demands to be experienced with its own appropriate mode of temporality—what Fried calls "presentness"; because of its articulation and delimitation, the artwork seems, through a grasping of its clearly delineated parts alone, almost "instantaneously" apprehensible:

> It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*; as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.[15]

Whereas the viewer of Minimalist art endlessly *pursues* a looming presence which necessarily eludes his grasp, forever drawing on his "interest" (we might almost say, his curiosity), the spectator here faces an art which, in striving toward a perfect instantaneous clarity, grants "conviction" that the viewpoint reveals the artwork as it really is.

To summarize, we might represent the correspondence between Fried's "Theatricality" and his "Modernism" as follows:

	Theatrical Minimalism	**Modernism**
1. Status of work:	"Object"	"Artwork"
2. Work's realm of existence:	Nature	Culture
3. Appearance:	Unarticulated, Unbounded	Bounded, Clearly Articulated
4. Meaning:	Mute, Non-Semiotic	Represents Syntax of Meaning Itself
5. Experience determined by:	Audience	Artwork
6. Temporality:	Progress in Time	Instantaneous
7. Intellectual experience:	"Interest"	"Conviction"

1.6 Modernism as the "War" against Theatricality: the Grounds of Conflict.

If I have, through a detailed reading, been able to show the oppositional dependence of Fried's concepts of Modernism and Theatricality, if I have been able to show the way that they stand as inverted images of each other, I have yet to demonstrate the reason for either the *necessity* or the *instability* of this relationship. The reader might assume that Modern art and Minimalism might well peacefully co-exist, if only the Literalist agreed to forsake his claim to take the place of art. Minimalism cannot reproduce the "presentness" of high art, and so must occupy some lesser position in an experiential matrix—must, in other words, cease to call itself art—but, so one might think, there is no essential reason why the two parties might not "come to terms."

But in fact Fried disallows the possibility of such peaceful co-existence. For him, the Theatrical always necessarily threatens high art, or, alternatively, Modernist art can only continue insofar as it defeats Theatricality. Since, however, "Art & Objecthood" fails to justify such an agnostic position, we must turn to Fried's discussion of Modernism's eighteenth century pre-history, to his *Absorption and Theatricality*, for a valorization of the "war against Theater."

In his book on Theatricality in the painting of Diderot's time, *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried valorizes Modernism (through the proto-Modernism of the eighteenth Century) by describing the painting-beholder situation in terms of the broader structure of the subject/object relationship. In a discussion of Diderot, whose position he sees as a precursor to his own, Fried refers to:

> ... the problematic character not only of the painting-beholder relationship but of something still more fundamental—the *object*-beholder (one is tempted to say object-"subject") relationship which the painting-beholder relationship epitomizes. In Diderot's writing on painting and drama the object-beholder relationship as such, the very condition of spectatordom, stands indicted as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than of absorption, sympathy, self-transcendence; and the success of both arts (theater and painting), in fact their continued functioning as major expressions of the human spirit, are held to depend upon whether or not painter and dramatist are able to undo that state of affairs, to *de-theatricize beholding* and so make it once again a mode of access to truth and conviction ... [16]

Fried's interpretation of Diderot presents us with a battle against the Theatrical based on an ontological property of the epistemological situation itself; that property tends to deny to the Subject (in his role as perceiver) the ability to perceive objects *as they are* (*an sich*, as it were). Instead he tends to grasp them only as they are theatrically or *for consciousness*. The task of art, in the face of this natural theatricality, is to overcome the viewer's malaise by allowing him a moment of "self-transcendence"; the artwork, that is, is to remove the veil of artificiality separating beholder and object, to produce the object (in any case *an* object) exactly as it would be without a beholder.

At stake in Modernism's battle against theatrical Minimalism is the authenticity of seeing itself. Is beholding to allow real knowledge of the object, or must it condemn the viewer to a perpetual gaze at himself? For Fried, art provides the field upon which this question is to be decided. Modernism's battle against theater spearheads a struggle to see the world as it really is.

1.7 The Question of Modernism's Priority

Fried's use of the word "estrangement," however, raises a problem for his broadly "realist" approach to art. Any aesthetic conception which founds itself on the exclusion of subjectivity from the experience of art is vulnerable to questions about our *interest* in it. In other words, when Fried favors "conviction" over "interest," he seems to sacrifice the most obvious explanation of why we want to look at artworks at all—an explanation based on a theory of alienation.

Such a theory bases attraction to art on an impulse to find *ourselves* in the world and to remove from reality (whether natural or cultural) apparent otherness. By defining aesthetic experience against such a return of the subject to itself, Fried would seem to offer his readers a simple choice between an objective and a, theatrical, subjective "truth." But neither of these options, when defined against the other, would seem clearly superior: in fact both seem one-sided. The picture of Modernism drawn in opposition to an alienation theory would fail as an ultimate justification of the "war against theater," and we would be left wondering on which side we should enroll.

But Fried does not abandon a theory of alienation. The text quoted above contrasts the "estrangement" caused by theatrical art with the "conviction" resulting from authentic aesthetic experience, indicating that such conviction itself addresses alienation. From one point of view this rhetoric seems perfectly consistent with the theory: the elimination of an illusory bond between the beholder and the "natural" removes the subject's estrangement from itself. From the perspective of Fried's "objectivist" justification of Anti-Theatricality, however, such an emphasis on subjectivity seems perplexing. How is escape from the cage of perceptual subjectivism also a return of the subject to itself?

Precisely here Fried's theory falls silent, leaving us to piece together for ourselves, from the rhetorical structures of Fried's arguments in "Art and Objecthood" and *Absorption and Theatricality*, the full justification of his Modernism. We must disentangle a positive from a negative sense of "self-experience." This problem demands that we now examine Fried's implicit attack on the *narcissism* of Theatricality.

2.2 The Seductiveness of Self-Presence and the Fascination of the Object.

Theatrical Minimalism adds something to the beholding experience which, at the very least, intensifies it. According to Fried the experience of Literalist sculpture is clearly fascinating at the same time that it is frustrating. The intonation of this "interesting" character of the "object" provides an important overtone of urgency to the struggle against Theatricality in "Art and Objecthood." Such art is not so much boring as dangerously seductive, leading us "on and on" by means of an ever unfulfilled desire.[17] But what provides this impetus? What is this desire?

Since, after all, the point about Judd and Morris's looming "shapes" is their opaque, object-like alterity, it might seem strange that the very "naturalness" of the object suggests to Fried—and apparently to the Minimalists themselves—"the silent presence of another person" and that it, thus, it reveals an anthropomorphism in Literalist art.[18] We might be inclined to think that the object's presence is as far as possible from the presence of another human being.

Surely enough, the obvious problem with this anthropomorphic art for Fried lies not in its representation of the human (rather than the "thingly") but rather in its choice of the object-like, physical characteristics of man to stand for man. Minimalist theatricality reduces the presence of the human to the uncanny objecthood of another body. "Humanity" here is perceived purely through the "natural" physicality of the human body, a physicality which may initially fascinate the subject but which is ultimately unconvincing.

Whether or not it does so in an appropriate and sufficient manner, however, the *anthropomorphism* of Minimalism claims to present the subject with itself.[19] Fried's argument implies that this representation depends on a seductively false notion of the human. Minimalism, while pretending to the status of art, leads us away from a true experience of ourselves and toward a fascination with the impenetrable physicality of our existence.

Fried's discussion of the experience demanded by such art links "the silent presence of another person" and the work's presence as unarticulated natural object. The juxtaposition of these moments hints that they are by no means opposites, that the notion of humanity here expressed is somehow contiguous with the undefined and unbounded objecthood of the object. In fact, the unlimitedness of the object provides a perfect mirror image for an immediate consciousness, itself unbounded in its freedom from determinacy. Thus the "looming" shape of Donald Judd's sculpture, its impenetrable physicality, paradoxically serves as mirror for consciousness and, furthermore, for a consciousness which asserts itself as standing outside the boundaries provided by definite characteristics; consciousness is immediate—purely itself in its existence—rather than being mediated (and thereby limited) by anything that could be said about it. Following a tradition which runs (at least) from Hegel to Sartre we could refer to this unboundedness of consciousness as its negativity. In Minimalist art the viewer pursues himself as nothing.[20]

We might, then, say that the ultimate purpose of such an art was to create a self-understanding of the *radical freedom* of consciousness, of its independence from all determinate being. The mysterious objecthood of the object teaches us of our own mysteriously impenetrable existentiality. But an important paradox comes to light in this last formulation. If we depend on the Literalist artwork for the discovery of our independence, then this independence is by no means pure; for we at least depend upon this work for the realization of such a consciousness. Insofar as we become aware of our negativity through, say, a sculpture by Robert Morris, just so far is that "nothingness" compromised by its pedagogical dependence on the object.

This paradox springs from an essential characteristic of a narcissistic relation to the object, a relation that Fried's analysis of Minimalism underscores. The emblematic strength of Minimalist artworks, that they refuse internal definition, means that they also refuse external limitation. They go beyond themselves. In so doing, however, they escape full visual appropriation by the viewer—he or she can never see them as they really are—so that the mirror itself never "comes into focus," never becomes clear enough to offer a complete image. What results is the "indefinite progression" around the object, a progression which, aiming at the establishment of boundaries that would render the object necessarily *inadequate* to the reflection of pure consciousness, engages in a necessarily paradoxical and futile task; so long as the object remains undelimited it suffices to the potential reflection of the negative subject but denies the positioning necessary for there to be such a presentation. If the viewer, however, could succeed in "placing" the object within bounded confines, then it would no longer serve as sign for the unboundedness of consciousness.

Consciousness must hate the object whether it produces a clear reflecting surface, so that it can reflect the viewer, or whether it exceeds its own limits, so that it can reflect the viewer's *nature*. Minimalist art, thus, excites "interest" in itself through a promise which it does not—and cannot—keep. The spectator is fascinated with a hope for the extinction of alterity in the speculum of self-presence, but ultimately frustrated by the object's transcendence of his own position. The object never grants the ultimate conviction which its presence foreshadows. This Theatricality is, therefore, not only fundamentally dishonest in its failure to produce the subject for itself but also seductively dangerous in the lavishness of its promise for such selfpresentation, a promise which, as we have seen, it cannot keep.

2.2 The Self-Presence of the Instantaneous.

Clearly Fried's Modernism denies the kind of frustrating, progressive self-experience underlying theatrical art; by emphasizing the temporality of a "high art" of which Modern art is the contemporary expression, the critic underscores how such artistic efforts—negating our naive attempts to appropriate them to our "natural" time—call for experience within their own temporal mode; they grant their "grace" by drawing the spectator into their instantaneous mode.[21]

What transpires is a simultaneous "yes" and "no"; "presentness" stands forth against the denial of our everyday temporality. To understand how this is supposed to happen let us draw an illustration from the critic's *Absorption and Theatricality.*

In elucidating the viewer's reaction to a painting by Greuze, that depicts the grief of a young girl reading a letter of rejection from her lover, Fried claims a twofold device; the painter has drawn us into the painting in our sympathy with the girl, but he has also, through that very sympathy, caused us to realize our separation from the world of the artwork, for we find ourselves unable to disturb her in her revery.[22] The confirmation of the portrayed character's self-absorption makes us conscious of how little we share with her. We realize that her world is other than ours. In her world there is nothing we can do to help her, to change her situation, not because of the irreconcilable nature of her grief, but because we do not share with her the time-frame in which all *changes of state* must occur. As audience we live only in the *moment* of discovery, the instant that is cut-off from all others.[23] As we enter the world of the work, our factual impotence with regard to a state of affairs represented within it translates into an awareness of a unique mode of temporality, a mode wherein the continuity of events necessary to envision the alteration of circumstances becomes unthinkable.

Thus for Fried art communicates the temporality of the disconnected moment, where even narrative (such as one encounters in actual theater) means, or should mean, only a succession of imagistic "instants." In Modern art, of course, such an experience of instantantaity does not so much derive from our relation to something represented in the work—in Modernist painting there is often no one or nothing depicted with whom or with which we might "sympathize"—but the essential issue remains the realization of "presentness" through a denial of a continuous temporality. The goal of a Modernist painter like Noland or Olitski must be to create a work which "at every moment ... is wholly manifest," refusing the viewer's desire to experience it through a compilation of perspectival viewpoints.[24]

But, granted that the artwork draws us away from our experience of "natural" time and leads us toward the absolute present, we might still wonder what makes such an experience so important that it can provide a critical standard for all artistic production. And in this connection we might ask, what is the source of the "pleasure" experienced by the viewer in this self-limitation, this denial of ordinary temporality?[25]

To this last question, Fried's answer is unequivocal; the pleasure of the "self's" denial arises from the simultaneous conviction in an essentialized subjectivity: "What is called for (in an art of "self-absorption") is at one and the same time the creation of a new sort of object ... and the constitution of a new sort of beholder—a new 'subject'—whose innermost nature would consist precisely in the conviction of his absence from the scene of representation.[26]

Thus the artwork's "presentness" ties it to the subject's most essential mode of being; it is also, as we have already noted, the project of non-theatrical art (including Modernism) to overcome an alienation of art and audience, but to overcome that alienation not in the terms shared by the everyday "self" and its object—in its "natural" temporality and spatiality—but, as we have seen, in the time of the artwork itself. Thus the experience of Modern art provides a mirror for an essentialized subject, a subject stripped—precisely through the negation of its natural ties with the objective sphere—of its "selfhood." Furthermore, Fried's "new" subject is perhaps not quite so new: for the instantaneity of subjectivity is precisely that condition of negativity which allows it freedom. Subjectivity here is "negated or neutralized" in the act of beholding, so that it conceives of itself, once again, as *nothing*. Exactly insofar as it represents a rift in the positivity by which "things" relate, is consciousness able to reach decisions which are more than merely predetermined reactions.[27] The "presentness" of the subject, its removal from temporal progression into the realm of the discontinuous instant, is this displacement from the objective and is, as such, its pure negativity. In Modernist painting and sculpture, just as in Minimalism, what is vital is the mirroring of a "non-existent" subject, one that is "not really there standing before the canvas."[28]

Modern art, then, does not remove the mirror from the viewer, nor does the reflecting surface show a subject essentially different from that pictured by theatrical art. The consciousness which appears in the looking-glass of art is the same, is just as surely "nothing," as the consciousness for which the audience of theatrical art strives.

Our analysis of the temporality of Modernism has begun to uncover why Fried must repress any discussion of his theory in terms of alienation. The contrast between the Narcissism of theatrical art and the conviction of authentic art cannot, simply on the basis of their respective purposes, be maintained. Because both Modernism and Theatricality understand the subject as *nothing*, both share the intention of such a negative definition: the negative subject has no mirroring *other*, for it has no substance to be mirrored. Modernism, then, just as much as Theatricality, attempts to consume alterity—to return all traces of itself to itself, because only such an ingestion of otherness corresponds to the subject's essential negativity.

Since Modernism and Theatricality share the same end, their essential difference can only lie in their relative success in achieving that purpose; we have already seen the inevitability with which theatrical art must fail in its promise through a manifest self-contradiction. But how does Fried's argument imply that Modernism succeeds where Theatricality leads to failure?

2.3 The De-objectification of Aesthetic Experience.

In Modernism, not the artwork but that which lies between us and it represents to us our own negativity; it is our denial before a painting or sculpture which instigates our "dissolution."

This de-objectification of aesthetic experience provides the key to understanding Fried's reasoning for the success of Modernism; in Modern art the experience of the work is no longer of some quality of an object. In order to understand this we must, at least temporarily, leave aside the figure of the mirror; for what occurs in Modernism is really not a static reflection of one "thing" (the subject) in another "thing" (the object). Neither is the subject here *substantial* in this sense, nor is it able to "see" itself in some substantial object. We might better say that the experience of Modern art "constitutes" (Fried's own word) the subject in the "presentness" of an *act*. Furthermore the Modernist artwork, jettisoning exactly its thing-like characteristics in its instantanaity, removes itself from the realm of objectivity. Because it denies its foundation among "natural" objects (ie. objects which endure in time) a sculpture by the Modernist Anthony Caro offers itself to aesthetic experience as an *event*. It is, thus, already appropriated to the realm of the subject—the realm where the endurance necessary for the reflection of substance remains unthinkable.

As a result the Modernist can claim to have removed the paradox of a freedom guaranteed through a dependence on the reflecting surface. Here consciousness need no longer resent the object as an other which *is* itself—as testimony of an alterity of the self. Insofar as the Modernist work remains an object (and we can, of course, always see it as such) it does not reflect the viewer and refuses, therefore, to become object of desire; insofar as it becomes an event for appropriation by the subject, the work becomes itself subjective—and thus in its instantanaity is unable to trap the subject within progressive time. In the moment of experience the Modernist work, delivering entirely what is desired, is no longer an object.

The "new" subjectivity found within Modernism rests upon the rigorous exclusion of objective characteristics from the subject's experience of itself. By a division of the time of the subject from that of the object the Modernist hopes to create a "conviction" in the work, a conviction whose true nature is the self-presence of subjectivity, and this event occurs not in some subject "thing" or its substantial object but rather in the space "between" subject and object, the space occupied by the act of consciousness.

2.4 The Topology of Modernism.

If we have been driven to imply an implicit "location" between the beholder and the artwork—a place in which the act of perceiving coincides with the event of being perceived—then we must examine this *topos* to find out if the Modernist can really defend his claim to have overcome the narcissistic frustration of Minimalism.

The careful reader of this essay will have noted a consistent metaphorology in Fried's discourse; the "natural"[29] world, the world of the object showing itself in its brute physicality and progressive instability *for a subject*, is characterized by both temporal and spatial coordinates. There is a "natural" time—the continuous time of subsistence and alteration—and an equally "natural" space—characterized by the unconquerable otherness of the "looming" object. Furthermore Fried's discussion highlights, through the figure of presentness, a dialectically opposed alternative time of consciousness. When, however, it comes to completing the square of oppositions by suggesting a corresponding "space of consciousness" the critic remains peculiarly silent.

By speaking of "natural" space, I suggest that quality of the "objective" which resists location and which, in so doing, creates an ontological condition of Theatricality. The indefinite situatedness of a Robert Morris sculpture, always remaining opaque to the beholder by transcending itself into its situation, makes up something like a "natural" space for Fried. In the realm of "Nature," then, the spatial is marked by an irremovable alterity; because the object can not be fixed into a position, it remains inevitably "other" to the experiencing subject.

In this mode, moreover, space is always experienced *over time*; through progressive experience we achieve an ever developing, ever more exact understanding of a location which never fully discloses its nature as "place." "Natural" space and time intertwine in the praxis of approximation in "siting."

The context with regard to the subject in its act of consciousness is perhaps more difficult to grasp. The space accompanying instantaneous timeconsciousness is more elusive; clearly the self-limiting nature of the work, its precise locatability, follows as a result of the subject's experience of space.

We can better illuminate the experience itself, however, by means of the dominant trope from *Absorption and Theatricality*—by means of the notion of the "removal" of the subject from before the canvas.[30] In such an aesthetic experience the subject is not just missing from his beholding position in order to be present somewhere else. His "removal" means the negation of precisely the undefineable locatedness of the object. Rather, he is radically absent, displaced into a universal space freed from the constraints of objectivity, a space which denies all location.

We are reminded here of Fried's attempt to articulate the spatial effect of Courbet's anti-Theatrical efforts. In order to combat Theatricality Courbet sought "to annihilate or make untenable the 'world' of the beholder, understanding by the concept of a 'world' not so much a collection of objects as a multiplicity of possible standpoints ... "[31]

It is precisely in regard to this dislocation—this "world-theft"—that the beholder is "present"; for the subject who is "nowhere" is no longer bound by the perspectival limitations of the "place," and he experiences space, like the mathematician or the cartographer, as a synchronous system for instantaneous experience of all places.

Furthermore, this spatiality of active subjectivity, the experience of space from the epistemological "between," projects itself into the sphere of objectivity. The "syntacticality" of the Modernist artwork suits it for location within a synchronous system; both the work as a whole in relation to other objects and the individual parts of the work in relation to each other can be plotted in a system ultimately reducible to quantifiable variables, a system which removes the opaque alterity characteristic of "natural" space.

Such a system *coordinates* elements in a spatial framework; that is, it produces an ideal coordinate system (we obviously think here of Descartes) which locates all points without the need to refer to real objects within it. More exactly, all points are instantaneously present to consciousness and this presentness is what Descartes projects into a gridded system. Within this instantaneous space, then, there is no question of "finding one's way" with reference to landmarks; such an everyday means of localization demands a diachronous experience wherein the subject pinpoints something on the basis of a series of approximations based on observations of various objects, wherein the subject "takes its sights."

The instantaneousness of consciousness produces one further spatial accompaniment: as is demonstrated by Descartes' coordinate system, which claims to be able to relate *all* possible positions in terms of a single set of variables, the space of the instant admits of no merely qualitative spatial interaction. The position of every object can be described in purely quantitative terms. Every position—even and especially those which seem most incommensurate—exists "on the same map."

2.5 No-Place: the Space of Modernism.

Since the Modernist believes it impossible to locate consciousness, we begin to glimpse Fried's strategy in suppressing any discussion of the spatiality implied by "presentness"; for he hopes to avoid the self-contradiction produced by reifying a non-location. He senses, in other words, that he can only remain consistent by refusing to admit that the space of consciousness offers *something* to talk about. In talking about the location of subjectivity without limiting it to a single locality, and about the space between viewer and object, Fried can only assert that it is "no-place."

The space of the subject in its moment of apprehension—the space of its time—is ultimately "No-Place." I suggest this name not simply to circumvent Fried's negative assertion that no such location exists, but in order to claim that the critic himself has already discovered this negative location *as* location. He has discovered the No-Place as the semiotic node about which revolve a series of notions whose interrelationship produces Modernism. Itself unnamed and unexpressed, the No-Place is the unconscious thought which the various characteristics of subjective spatiality—themselves repressed in Fried's discourse—symptomize. We could say, the No-Place announces itself through the following overdetermination:

> 1. The No-Place is the space of the subject in its removal of the beholder from all location, so that he cannot himself be placed.
> 2. Such a space also denies the existence of *localities* within itself. Thus it is No-Place in that, within it, there are *no places*.
> 3. Finally, the No-Place is defined as the meeting, the hinge as

> it were, between the mutually exclusive realms of the subject and the object. It is the space in which opposites, things that cannot be placed "on the same map," relate—even though there is no "room" between them.

With this terminology, we can recast the nature of the Modernist project as Fried sees it as follows: Modernism is the attempt to achieve the selfpresence of subjectivity by occupying the No-Place. Its claim to success lies in its discovery and projection of this space of the subject and its critique of the project of Theatricality—of the attempt to achieve self-presence within the space of objectivity.

2.6 The Frustration of the No-Place.

A tension, however, appears in the very naming and defining of the No-Place, between its nature as *a-topic* and our relationship to it as a *topos*. As the space between incommensurable subjectivity and objectivity, as a "between" at all, we inevitably think of the No-Place as a location somewhere. The problem announces itself, furthermore, in the very idea of a "No-Place"—an idea which might be misconstrued as simply the place in which the "no" occurs, as the place of negativity. Despite these features which draw it toward an inclusion in a possible topography of the negative, the nature of the No-Place is such as to refuse any such placement; it is literally *no-place*, and cannot, therefore, be found anywhere.

This difficulty in theorizing about the space in which Modern art is to be experienced, furthermore, actually reflects a paradox in the Modernist aesthetic experience itself. Something paradoxical shows itself in the very attempt to occupy "No-Place," and this paradox is the central problem with the Modernism championed in "Art and Objecthood." In order, after all, to inhabit this space, or even to desire to inhabit it, the subject must conceive of it as some definite location within which he might be. But this is precisely what it is not. Because its nature is manifest only in the complete dislocation of subjectivity, the No-Place disallows positioning among other spaces. Such positioning would implicitly *locate* the subject, dragging it back to the limitations of partial perspective .

If, as we have seen, the claim for the superiority of Modern over Theatrical art rests on the ability of a Modernist work to prepare a *place* for the unmediated experience of our subjectivity, or if, more exactly, the very superiority of Modern over reactionary artworks arises from the superior ability of the former to stabilize and *locate* the subject's experience in the moment, and if, finally, Fried (and many others) founds the legitimacy of Modernism on a *dis-placement*, then the "war against theater" must, indeed, prove to be an irresolvable conflict: for, at its deepest level, it is a struggle of the Modern against itself.

Concretely, this means that the experience of the artwork inevitably arises from an experience of placement within what we have called "natural" space. Consciousness "sites" itself, locates itself in relation to "natural" subjecthood and objecthood. The experience of the natural subject's denial before the artwork—which allows occupation of the No-Place—is itself an event *within time* and within the space belonging to that time. Thus every experience of the Subject as "No-Place" arises only at the cost of its emplacement within an epistemological matrix. Since, however, the success of Modernist art depends on the transcendence of the subject's objective or "natural" spatiality, the Modernist must necessarily repress its dependence on this space.

The primary way in which such repression manifests itself is in the projection onto that objectivity, by means of which it removes itself from the sphere of the object, precisely its own spatial characteristics. Thus beside the "No-Place" appears "no-place"—objective being understood through a non-objective spatiality. The attempt to achieve instantaneous apprehensibility in Modernist artworks covers over, in this way, the necessity of a "natural" experience of space for the occupation of the space of the instant; for a discreet object can call the subject's attention away from the fact that it *is* still an object.

Alas, as Fried's discussions of the inevitable progression in the battle against theater make clear, all such instantanaity of objects is relative and the object soon loses its ability to "convince." Within the critic's work, theatricality is an ontological condition of the very act of beholding, and, as such it tends to return the object to its mode of "natural" posturing.[32] Thus this "war" must produce an ever advancing assault on "place," on the opacity of location which conditions the objectivity of the object, and it must do this, first of all, through the overturning of the models which in the past have sufficed as weapons against the Theatrical.

The result is the restless drive of progress within Modern art: an artwork which, at the time of its production, maintains the rift between itself and its audience, soon loses its ability to do so, soon becomes theatrical.[33] In its very success at stabilizing the experience of the subject, in its very success in securing the subject in the moment, the work ultimately excites the subject's aggression against it. The artist is driven forward by this need from his audience; he is forced to take ever more radical measures to repress the ubiquity of place.

Art, thus, becomes the concern of an *Avante-Garde* whose terrorization of the "establishment," of those conservative or merely academic forces which defend the efficacy of "tradition," in fact represents the displacement of the moment of frustration in theatrical Minimalism. The difference between Minimalism and Modernism, as we can now formulate it, is that, whereas in a theatrical art the endless temporal extension of aesthetic experience—its tendency, in the words of Donald Judd to "go on and on"—produced an infinite delay of gratification within the experience itself, in Modernism the experience grants the satisfaction of self-possession but only at the cost of a de-stabilization of the history of art itself. For the Modernist, one could say, the experience of frustration would lie in the search for works of "good art"; for every work promising, at a given historical moment, the removal of subjectivity soon decays and loses this promise.

The "war against Theater," further, produces more serious casualties than a wounded notion of "Connoisseurship"—a notion which, in any case, the perpetual revolution of the *Avante-Garde* denies. Most importantly, the repression of the subject's contextuality produces a need for the universal suppression of *place*, for the transformation of all locations which could possibly remind the subject of its own emplacement. The war "goes on and on" just as does the subject in the frustrating experience of Minimalism not just because of the decay of the "fortifications" against Theater, but also because of the necessity that Modernism erase all reminders of its own essential Theatricality.[34]

To put this argument in different words, we might say that any and every location places the No-Place and that the negation of *topos*, therefore, does not cease with the simple progression of art. The aggression here turns itself against the place as such and the hatred of it, like the Minimalist beholder's hatred of the *object* in its alterity, is without bounds.

In the light of these observations Fried's attack on theatrical Minimalism appears in a different light. In essays from "Art and objecthood" (1967) to *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980), the critic builds his defence of Modernism on the basis of an opposition between Modern and Theatrical art without ever sufficiently grounding the preferability of one mode over the other. The reason for this omission—which thus appears as symptomatic—appears when we trace the rhetorical hints that the texts do indeed provide to a consistent thesis. The question of the critical ground for the valorization of Modern art is, indeed, never addressed, but Fried's various discussions lead us inexorably towards a picture of a Modernism extraordinarily similar to the Theatricality against which it is defined.

The final touch to this picture of a perfect mirror relationship between apparent opposites is provided by the location—in the attack on *place*—of the same aggressivity within Modernism which has centered the critique of the Theatrical. It is clear, then, that the critic must deny Theatricality because he must repress it, and that he must repress it because it represents to him the paradoxicality of his own project. Theatrical art makes visible precisely the necessary failure of the dream of "presentness" and the ultimate frustration implied in its exclusive pursuit.

Notes:

1 "Art and Objecthood," originally printed in *Artforum*, June 1967, but used here in the reprint from *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1968). See also Fried's continuating discussions of Theatricality in Fried's article, "Shape as Form," *Artforum*, November 1966, and his more recent book, *Absorption and Theatricality* (University of California: Berkeley, 1982).

2 The word "shock" is most famously used to describe the Modern condition and the experience of Modern Art by Walter Benjamin: see, for instance "On some Motifs in Baudelaire," and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (Schocken: NY, 1969).

3 "Art and Objecthood," 139.

4 "Art and Objecthood," 131.

5 The key to the issue lies in a common way of discussing the history of Modern painting; this position (to which Fried took exception) explains the development of Modernism from Manet though Mondrian and beyond as the progressive eradication of the representational illusion on the painting's surface. Modern painting, as this view had it, first denied natural representation and then took on the very illusion of depth produced by the flat canvas. Through devices that called attention to the physical presence or "literal support" of the work, painters assaulted the illusion produced by the painting's surface. At this point, the stage attained more or less after Mondrian, painting reached an apparent crisis of its own limits. The artist faced a level at which the illusion of spatial representation remains, in Fried's words, "inevitable" given the very nature of perception (see "Shape as Form," p. 18), a level at which one is forced to admit the appearance of depth in even the most rigorously abstract canvas. Given the conflict due to the painting's illusionist nature, and given the imperative to defeat representation, some painters chose to renounce what seemed an obsolescent art and to turn to sculpture, where the artist need no longer be haunted by this bothersome tendency of the picture's surface; "The obvious response is to give up working on a single plane in favor of three dimensions. That, moreover, automatically 'gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art.'"("Art and Objecthood," p. 118, quoting Donald Judd)

6. See Heidegger's various discussions of "thinghood," especially those in *Being and Time* (especially, paragraph 16) and *The Origin of the Work of Art* (*Poetry, Language, Thought*), p. 31: "The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly. Or can it be that this self-refusal of the mere thing, this selfcontained independence, belongs precisely to the nature of the thing?")

*7 The attempt here, then, is to create a "mirror" art which is entirely non-semiotic—which, as Umberto Eco points out, does not so much *indicate* the subject as it forms a prosthetic double to it. This would be an art without content, an art without interpretation, where the representation would be indistinguishable from the represented because each was without the characteristics that allow comparison. " ... the mirror image never establishes a relationship between types but only between tokens ... " (Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (tktk: tktk, tktk), 216.)

8 Fried discusses this aspect of Literalism in "Shape as Form."

9 "Art and Objecthood," 119.

10 "Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro," *Artforum*, February 1967, 24.

11 "Art and Objecthood," 125 (author's italics).

12 I take Fried's failure to define Theatricality as symptomatic of what I argue (see p. 17 ff.) is his double relation to it. In formulating my own discussions I have been much

indebted to Samuel Fleischacker's unpublished essay, "Theatricality and the Death of Art."

13 "Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro," 24.

14 "Art and Objecthood," 138.

15 "Art and Objecthood," 140.

16 Absorption and Theatricality, 104

17 See, *Art and Objecthood*, 19.

18 "Art and Objecthood," 128.

19 In fact, if one follows Fried just a little further, *Absorption and Theatricality* does lead in the direction of our interpretation—which is to say in the direction of a central concern with the problem of *self* representation and a condemnation of Theatricality as insufficient to such representation; "Put simply and assertively: the criticism and theory we have been considering expressed an implicit apprehension of the beholder's alienation from the objects of his beholding (and therefore, in a manner of speaking, from himself, both in his capacity as beholder and as a potential object of beholding for others)." (Absorption and Theatricality, 104-5)

The point here, however, is that the explicit argument, in concentrating itself on the "artificiality" of the theatrical argument, passes over the way that theatrical art, too, claims to overcome this "alienation."

20 For clear formulations of such a view of subjectivity within Modern Philosophy, see Sartre's "The Transcendence of the Ego" (especially paragraphs 40-42 and 98-100) and, of course, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (especially the dialectic of Self-Consciousness). The *Phenomenology* is also quite useful for an exploration of the connection between "immediate" sensuous reality and an equally "immediate" unlocated consciousness (see the Chapter on "Sense Certainty").

21 See, "Art and Objecthood," 128.

22 *Absorption and Theatricality*, 59.

23 The work of Stanley Cavell, Fried's longtime friend and sometime teacher, often fills many of the gaps in Fried's discussions. In this case, see Cavell's discussion of *King Lea*r in *Must we Mean what we Say?* (New York, 1969), 330 ff.

24 "Art and Objecthood," 146.

25 *Absorption and Theatricality*, 68.

26 *Absorption and Theatricality*, 104; the quotations from this text refer to the context of eighteenth century French painting. But, since Fried sees Modernism as the continuation of the struggle against theater, since for him the difference between eighteenth and twentieth century situations is only a result of the increasingly radical decisions needed to guard art from its tendency to become theatrical, it is, I would argue, legitimate to translate the models of Theatricality and of the struggle against it to the context of a discussion of Modernism. (See Fried's discussion of the road to Modern art, p. 61 ff.)

27 For the connection of presentness, freedom and negativity see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (English Edition, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), for instance; "And insofar as I use negativities to isolate and determine existents—i.e., to think them—the succession of my 'states of consciousness' is a perpetual separation of effect from cause, since every nihilating process must derive its source only from itself. Inasmuch as my present state would be a prolongation of my prior state, every opening by which negation could slip through would be completely blocked. Every psychic process of nihilation implies then a cleavage between the immediate psychic past and the present. This cleavage is precisely nothingness." (p. 63, translation slightly altered.)

28 *Absorption and Theatricality*, 103, from the context of an explication of Diderot.

29 I maintain the term quotation marks around this term to indicate that its use is simply an extension of its application within "Art and Objecthood" and is by no means an attempt to suggest my own vies on "Nature" and "the Natural."

30 *Absorption and Theatricality*.

31 "The Beholder in Courbet," ill *Glyph 4* (Johns Hopkins Textual Studies, 1978), 119. My citation here distorts slightly the meaning of the passage, which continues; "or at the very least to revoke all distance between painting and beholder as a step towards absorbing the beholder into the painting in a new, almost corporeal way." What might seem misleading here is the use of this discussion to support the notion that the beholder

Cartoons, Comforters and the Culture Industry:
Mike Kelley's Art as Deception or Enlightenment?

Jeannine Bartel

I

> "Hey shithead," Rhea poked him none too lightly in the ribs. "Get your ass up."
>
> He came up fighting wit the crocheted comforter, with the half-formed shapes of unknown enemies. With his mother's murderers. He was in a room he didn't know, a room that might have been anywhere. Gold plastic gilt frames on a lot of mirrors. Fuzzy scarlet wallpaper. He'd seen Gothicks decorate rooms that way, when they could afford it, but he'd also seen their parents do whole condos in the same style. ...
>
> The pink and black squares of the comforter were bunched around his waist. He looked down and saw the segmented length of the centipede submerged in a finger-wide track of fresh pink scar tissue. ... "Get your ass on this," he said, giving her the finger. ...
>
> —William Gibson, *Count Zero*

Although Mike Kelley's environments/installations of tacky worn comforters, stuffed animals and provocative perverse cartoon drawings do not necessarily evoke the schlocky science fiction worlds of cyberpunk novelist William Gibson, each is necessarily related in the way they uncover the chaotic sensibility that is postmodern culture. Both invite this chaotic sensibility into their respective mediums and through clever manipulations and control are able to leave us with a clearer understanding of their/our world; but only if there is submission—perhaps uneasy—to the fact that these clearly ambiguous speculations are culturally induced. The confused sense of self thus revealed is one that has been fragmented by society. To encounter the world on their terms is both comforting—in the realization that we are not alone in our confusion—and disquieting. The abyss opened up threatens to lose us of Modern art attempts to inhabit a universalized space. Clearly in the case of Courbet, the negation of the beholder's space serves his absorption into the space of the painting. But it is precisely with regard to this absorptive possibility that Manet's reaction is decisive. Modernist art, following the lead of Manet, asserts the impossibility of flight into the world of representation. What, then, remains to an anti-Theatrical art is precisely this negated space, this space of difference, before the canvas. In other words, Modernism denies the location of the spectator before the canvas without offering him an alternative location. It is this predicament which I explore under the heading of the "no-place."

32 On the ontology of beholding see the discussion of Diderot on pp. 104-5 of *Absorption and Theatricality.*

33 See Fried's comments to this effect in *Absorption and Theatricality*; p. 61 ff.

34 We might say, using the vocabulary of our last section, that the name "No-Place," in drawing together the three above mentioned characteristics of the space of consciousness, suggests a fourth aspect which creates the demand that the entire cluster be repressed. This fourth characteristic reminds us that NoPlace is the name for a location that can't be reached from here.

forever. In contrast, the world of commodity culture offers up the controlled, self-limiting, pseudo-comprehensible, demands of its social and economic system.

Amidst these juxtapositions the best we can hope for is an encounter with the "modus operandi" of our times—ambiguity.

Kelley and Gibson break apart and re-collect the subjects of self-effacement and self-restoration—issues that are at the heart of our cultural ambiguity—in order to recontextualize a world of possibilities. Yet a difference, suggested by Gibson, exists. The contrast between Gothicks/parents suggests that it matters who or what sanctions the world presented. Gibson operates in the realm of the Gothicks, a sub-arena, or the zone of the low. How does Mike Kelley, distinguished representative from the realm of high art, disentangle himself from these parental-like bonds to roam?

II

> "His ugliness was the stuff of legend. In an age of affordable beauty there was something heraldic about his lack of it."
>
> —William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

Unlike the artists of the now infamous, product heavy, Neo-Geo school whose spectacles glisten in all their hermetic new-ness, Kelley relishes the use of cultural commodities that are worn and dirty. His by now familiar stagings of used—most likely abused—stuffed animals engaged in reenactments of all kinds of socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior, through their medium and message suggest the ideological dysfunctionality of the abrasive, antiseptically clean and socially distanced worlds of Neo-Geo.

Ironically, his use of commodity culture is less overtly supposed to convey a self-conscious "message." Kelley has not tied his art, as the former artists have, to calculated "political moves." Questioned on this issue Kelley stated,

> "No matter how ingenious those "criticisms" of the commodity system may be, they're automatically compromised by the artist's participation in the system. That kind of art becomes a commodity like any other, but the corruption isn't open."[1]

Kelley correctly points out that "art" often takes to hiding behind a facade that is ultimately false. Regardless of the failed attempts to engage itself throughout history, art is still perceived as an arena in which to enact socially conscious scenarios by putting itself outside the confines of a limited reality; while at the same time using that reality. Art products and commodity products become linked in a tautological struggle for dominance. Kelley's statement, in effect, declares mundane commodities the winner because of their honesty; because they are not self-complacent art.

It is in this sense that one can speak of Kelley's morally propelled consciousness that seeks to rid art of its troublesome relationship to this term (as it is conceived of traditionally) by revealing the sheer delights, failures and ambiguities of both commodities and art; it becomes a system of cartoonish commentary. In responding to questions posed to him about the inevitably paradoxical situation that an artist works in, Kelley commented,

> "The truth is that everybody's involved in the system. Everybody has some stake in it, so the evils that come with it are part of everybody's choices. I don't like being a victim. I like to think I have some responsibility for all this because in some way it does something for me. That's not to say I like it, but I think all systems have their pitfalls."[2]

He would willingly admit that his self-created system is just as destructive as any other. His program for art operates at a very strange and unresolved juncture. What exactly is his art meant to do? Is this art or anti-art? Is art to be useful or not? At its best does he—can he—offer an interesting critique not only of current trends in art, but also the ultimate projects of art in general?

III

The concern of many artists of the late-eighties to focus on the commodity aspect of art—art specifically as commodity product or art that critiques commodity culture—makes T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," strikingly relevant.[3] Bearing in mind the "historicity" of this essay, the problems laid out there can be historically related to this most recent phenomenon that has occurred most specifically in the USA.

In an essay which actually "promises" no solution to a stated problem we are constantly reminded of the absurdness with which one is asked to conform resolutely. Adorno and Horkheimer's methods of negation twist and stretch the ideological limits of art and the culture industry to reveal extreme instances where each represents a version of the other. At these unstable points, a thought or idea is often proposed that recognizes a momentary possibility, only to be immediately abandoned because of its falseness. Like Kelley's chaotic artistic worlds, their perpetually shifting discourse tends towards unenclosed reparative ambiguity.

Towards the end of their essay Adorno and Horkheimer discuss in their self-reflexive manner, what they view as the "social liquidation of art." In 1946 they stated,

> "With the cheapness of mass produced luxury goods and its complement, the universal swindle, a change in the character of the art commodity itself is coming about. What is new is not that it is commodity, but that today it deliberately admits it is one; that art renounces its own autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumption goods constitutes the charm of novelty."4

Artists who operate within the confines of this new role for art that has been historico-culturally presented to them "succumb to the ideology (i.e. the social liquidation of art)" by "cover[ing] up the contradictions instead of taking it into the consciousness of their own production. ... "[5] I suggest that ultimately what Kelley does is absorb and reveal contradictions, indeed revels in exposing himself—even at the expense of making himself look like a "monkey's ass."[6] He does not simply "deconstruct" postmodern commodity culture as critics have interpreted his work.[7] His art is wonderfully ambiguous, its ambiguity opening up and laying bare through material and metaphorical dirt and sleaze the very strangeness of the "Art" situation today, without ever fully resolving the conflict.

If we acknowledge Kelley's *true* "idolization of the cheap,"[8] by the way he lovingly aestheticizes, with a brutal caress, forms of garbage—used toys, blankets and most recently metaphorical entrails[9]—we understand his waltz through commodity culture. He does not look like a cultural pillager somehow above it all. The nature of his sincere relationship becomes an issue of the artist—who wishes to confront culture—reducing the aesthetic distance between culture and art by becoming honestly transparent. Unwanted products are utilized to signify freedom form use. Removal from the aims of the culture industry are achieved by "not assimilating the [artwork] to need" so that "liberation from the principle of utility" is achieved.[10] Kelley "uses" the culture industry just as it uses its own consumer; not to make art "useful" but to open up a space that will allow questions to be asked.

At the same time, if, as Donald Kuspit has argued in his critique of Adorno, in the end Adorno ultimately fails because he ends up "fetishizing its (the work of art's) inherent inadequacy to the world. ... ,"[11] then it might appear that Kelley himself is leaving very little options open for art either. Kelley himself acknowledged,

> "I like people to make up their own minds. So my work's not clear; it has a schizophrenic presence in that you can tell what the issues are but not my stand on them."[12]

But in their physical presence his "art products" reveal a vital critique of this particular "moment" in art historical time.

In his "Critical Notes on Adorno's Sociology of Music and Art," Kuspit's interpretation of Adorno's favorable analysis of Schoenberg rests on Kuspit's identification of the, "Dialectical artistic form," which, "is for Adorno the means of breaking through conformity, the first step in the revolution against the status quo."[13] This concept is best defined in opposition to "false consciousness" which does away with a dialectical motivation to artistic creation. "False consciousness" disregards conflict and "harmonizes opposites"[14]—cleans things up.

Or, in Adorno and Horkheimer's words the style of "the great work of art"—that which expresses suffering by "self-negation"—is discovered "in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity" attained by "exposing itself to this failure."[15] Juxtaposed next to the "inferior work of art" which has "always relied on its similarity with others—a surrogate identity"[16]—here I would insert Neo-Geo—Kelley's creations offer literal translations of "dialectical artistic form." An analysis specifically of his "cartoon" imagery and his use of found objects within the constraints of currently "socially useful art" can reveal the success or failure of these theoretical concerns.

In their essay Adorno and Horkheimer discuss two instances whereby "distraction" frees "irreconcilable elements of culture."[17] Only here—in the realm of art and/or laughter's confrontation with the culture industry—is there a possibility for salvation. However, to achieve removal from the labors of existence in their/our time only essential instances of these two states will do.

Formally and thematically—being true to Adorno we do not want to separate the two[18]—laughter is one of the main vehicles of conveyance for Kelley's imagery and message. Kelley's crude, crass and often perverse drawings/paintings are constructed to provoke some sort of hilarious response. The skeetish, exaggerated use of expressionistic lines and stark accentuations of black and white (or occasionally red) accompanied by witty verbal blurbs—typical of the comic book genre form which his style derives—incite the images to mockingly tease from their rompish space and rapidly inflict "adolescent," cruel takes on culture to their spectators.[19]

In *Carnival Time*, 1990, for example, Kelley juxtaposed four conflicting images on separate panels. We are not supposed to put the parts together and create a coherent "message"; if we do, we miss the point. That is not to say that it is messageless. Instead if we indulge in the works random chaos—confusion issuing form the mixture of style, iconography and distracted associations—we understand it as an ironic and "necessarily bad" explanation of the culture industry. The explanation being so "piss-poor" that it becomes hilariously funny. In their portrayal of the irony of the human situation the works make us laugh and we question our own fragile sense of self-awareness.

Yet his depictions do not promise happiness. Adorno and Horkheimer declare that, "false laughter" creates a feeling of "self-assertion prepared to parade its liberation form any scruple. ... "[20] Kelley's cartoons do not dismiss morality as they wallow in lascivious details of everyday existence. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, "works of art are ascetic and unashamed" and "the culture industry ... pornographic and prudish."[21] A work such as *Caught*, 1982-83, combines these two concepts. Two separate images define instances of being caught "red-handed." The left panel shows a young boy with his hand "stuck up a horse's butt." The right panel depicts a young boy being punished by an older woman for sticking his hands in a freshly baked pie. Uniting an explicitly sexual image with a more common moralistic image is the phrase, "It's not my fault ... it's my upbringing ... it's my environment ... mercy." In its purposefulness this image falls within the domain established by Adorno and Horkheimer as that which is healing, "conciliatory," or true. The "supreme law" of the culture industry "is that they (consumers) shall not satisfy their desires at any price; they must laugh and be content with laughter."[22] "Conciliatory" laughter does not allow this sense of ease to set in. *Caught* satisfies a voyeuristic desire to know that we are not alone in all that we perceive and experience. In Kelley's art something is gained for the viewer as they laugh; as the images both suggest and negate that one can ever attain a comfortable freedom outside this system.

Kelley's appropriated use of the particular style and spirit of underground comic books is also important vis-a-vis the culture industry's relationship to "significant" high art. Adorno and Horkheimer state, "Cartoons were once exponents of fantasy as opposed to rationalism."[23] The cartoon genre increasingly has become an abused form and has perhaps met its total violation in the form of contemporary television cartoons. Accordingly it has lost its ability to instill "conciliatory laughter" as opposed to "the wrong kind" which "overcomes fear by capitulating to the forces which are to be feared."[24]

Cartoons are now an institutionalized genre. The "cartoon industry" itself has created a cast of characters and types; to comply with these is to forgo freedom. Kelley's "cartoons" are uniquely contrived stills. His characters often do not conform to any legitimized form of the culture industry.[25] But even when they do they are not entirely familiar. In a subtle, and a most extremely penetrating manner, the images indicate "liberation ... from the grip of logic," which is the mechanism of "conciliatory laughter."[26] Kim Gordon has analyzed this imagery as the creation of a "superstructure that shows the mechanics of nature to be as complex as the superstructure of technology."[27] If we agree with this then in no small way the images subvert the dominating claims of the culture industry by laying bare the power of its opposite.

Being true to the unresolved dialectic of the essay Adorno and Horkheimer also acknowledge that,

> "The Mark Twain absurdity with which the American culture industry flirts at times might be a corrective of art. The more seriously the latter regards its incompatibility with life, the more it resembles the seriousness of life. ... "[28]

Kelley's imagery and dialogue work together in a caustic manner which literally plays with this "absurdness" and at the same time saves the art from a heavy handed "intellectualization of amusement."[29] The images are effective because they work in this space that is somewhere between pop culture and intellectualized art.

If "the promise which is all the spectacle actually consists of, is illusory" and "in front of the appetite stimulated there is finally no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape," then perhaps Kelley's cartoon imagery awakens "aesthetic sublimation" in order to offer art that is reparative in some sense.[30] The spectator always remains somewhat ambivalent about who or what is being repaired. Is this totally self-indulgent? Is it just a bad trip to land of "unfulfilled promises" for us? This unresolved tension allows questions to become a significant part of the art work. We stay away form falling back on normal conceptions about what art is and what it's function should be; perhaps operating in the best sense of "cruel naturalism."[31] His art is not easy nor should it be particularly difficult—this fluctuation between the two poles keeps the spectator alert to the dilemmas and problems of art.

Out of the fissures created by the stress of contradiction arises another of Mike Kelley's versions of culture—a culture which is all too familiar. In practice we have been consumers longer than we have been exposed to artistic sermons. Our phenomenological relationship with the culture industry is initiated right from birth. Through an experiential process we become physically and psychically bound to "products." His use of found objects works to solidify these concepts. Kelley violently invades an innocent culture—the time of childhood—and brings it to the hallowed halls of "Art." He lets the viewer—as active participant—wade through his mess. Here we are left desperately trying to figure out all the paradoxes of the environment which because it is disorientingly familiar in its display of "original" products of the culture industry—comforters and stuffed animals—leaves open a world of possibilities for art, objects and critics.

These objects are—or should be—warm, friendly, inviting objects that commodity culture provides: afghans, baby blankets, stuffed animals. This particular choice of "stuff" takes on increased significance vis-a-vis the culture industry. These products are a strange mingling of pre-industrial craft and post-industrial technology. His postmodern recontextualizations of them recover and underscore these absurdities. They unbalance through their blatant "falseness."

In their evolution these environments have crept from the wall—*More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, 1987—to crawl over the floor, and now even dangle from the ceiling. In his 1991 exhibition at the Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden this physical transposition made the overall effect of the pieces truly a strange blend of chaotic, laughable, absurdness. The cute animals—always subject to the "cruel naturalism" of their creator—either gather for sexual set-ups of their own accord or they are sadistically bound by their master. An example of the former was seen in *Arena #5 (E.T.S.)*, 1990, where two E.T. dolls molested a third doll, and a fourth doll watched helplessly form the far corner of the blanket. The latter method was aptly disturbing in *E.T.'s Long Neck, Two Brains Penis and Scrotum*, 1989, where an E.T. doll placed high up on the gallery's wall precariously balanced off his large brain of stuffed beach balls against an enormous combination of a yellow stuffed banana and purple snake which emerged from its groin area—E.T.'s penis mimicking his familiar elongated neck—and slithered onto the floor, where it ended in between the legs of another E.T. doll. Here, a strange, but enjoyable sexual encounter was suggested by the sweet red smile that had been sewn on this doll's face which viewers could only see if they were really trying to figure out what was going on; by physically bending down and getting close enough to be in on the joke. This offered a subtle punctuation of artistic licentiousness that Kelley used to move these scenes of bondage beyond simple artistic fun.

In some respects these works may be seen only as a directed move against the philosophy of Neo-Geo artists. In 1987, Kelley commented on this phenomenon of object art by stating,

> "I see the new work ... as being basically caricature. It's not formalism, it's a cartoon of formalism, a cartoon of Minimalism. I like caricature. I like destructive things. I don't think Neo-Geo says anything great. ... All it does is piss on Minimalism, but that's something that needs to be pissed on. That's why I would rather have a fake Minimalist work than a real one; at least the fakeness shows the lie of the whole enterprise."[32]

His desire—aptly demonstrated by his privileging of the sexual in his iconography—to play with the true and the false through the commodities of the culture industry betrays his use of friendly objects as being only calculated "art historical" moves. His motivation moves beyond simply attacking this art specifically, to the more general concept of the link between art, commodity culture and our vital psychic and physical existence. Kelley responds to the "politicization" of art in the Neo-Geo school by doing a response to commodity culture right. He is willing to admit he is part of the system. He is willing to admit that his art is worth money.[33] And in his truth and honesty—and a good dose of "conciliatory laughter"—he turns the culture industry and its accompanying pal the art world upside down.

Circling around and over his arrangements created a laughable, disorienting effect, similar to the experience of the carnival environment from which these toys might have originated at some point in their existence. Just as the rides, sites and sounds of the carnival are exhilarating and nauseating, so Kelley suggests a reconstructed version of this experience. Physical disorientation causes psychic distraction and, suddenly, we laughably do not know what art ever was, ever is or ever should be. These environments suggest, but never arrive at, Adorno and Horkheimer's ideal vision of dialectical synthesis—to release "amusement ... from every restraint" so that it would become both "the antithesis of art" and its "extreme role."[34]

The culture industry expands continuously. We are surrounded by an infinite variety and amount of essentially useless products and sources of entertainment. In 1946 Adorno and Horkheimer wrote,

> "The new ideology has as its objects the world as such. It makes use of the worship of facts by no more than elevating a disagreeable existence into the world of facts in representing it meticulously."[35]

The Neo-Geo group harmonize their aesthetic on this basis. Kelley, instead, takes the most common, ordinary, used objects—a blanket or a stuffed animal, abject products of commodity culture—and displaces a harmonized aesthetic by messing things up; creating a sense of distraction out of laughter and art. The distraction is often nuanced through his disturbing use of bondage on innocent products. That they are bound all over the gallery spaces and that we are thus, physically, unable to do anything achieves the same sort of frustrative pinnacle that "The Culture Industry" essay offers up to the psyche. Tormented and teased, and taken to wonderful new places, we emerge off balance.

If as Adorno and Horkheimer have noted, " ... the great artists have retained a mistrust of style, and at crucial times have subordinated it to the logic of the matter,"[36] then Kelley is one artist at this particular time who takes this phrase not only figuratively but literally as well. But Kelley's art enters into a paradoxical relationship with the concept of art in its "anti-style" aesthetics. Because if, " ... it (the work of art) unconditionally posits the real forms of life as it is by suggesting that fulfillment lies in their aesthetic derivatives," from which Adorno and Horkheimer are led to deduce that, "to this extent the claim of art is ideology too,"[37] his art may be signalling a way away from ideological concerns towards a place of free play and critical fun.

Notes

1 Interviewed by Holland Cotter in, "Eight Artists Interviewed," *Art in America*, May 1987, 197.
2 Ibid., 197.
3 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), n.p.
4 Ibid., 157.
5 Ibid., 157.
6 See for example, Kim Gordon, "American Prayers," *Artforum*, April 1985, 76. Kelley, in his interview with Holland Cotter has stated about his own aesthetic, " ... my preference is for work that's a little more blunt in its creepiness. Of course the problem is that if you deal with creepiness, people think you are a creep." See Cotter, 197.
7 One of Kelley's main supporters on the West Coast is Colin Gardner. See, for example, his review of Kelley's exhibition "Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile," *Art Week*, 28 September 1985, 1. Gardener digressed into a discussion of ideology that entirely neglects the presence of the exhibition, which as another reviewer noted was premised on the strange absurdity of exhibitions. See, for example, Dan Cameron, "Mike Kelley's Art of Violation," *Arts*, June 1986, 7. "The entrance to Kelley's cave-chapel is covered over with a painting, underneath which the hapless viewer must wriggle to gain access to the mystic truths within. Crawl Worm! declares the legend on the painting," Gardener covers up and ignores the physical materiality of the art.
8 Adorno and Horkheimer, 156.
9 See Mike Kelley's "Untitled Series 1990-1991" where black and white yarn lies tangled on rough sheets of muslin.
10 Adorno and Horkheimer, 158.
11 Donald Kuspit, "Critical Notes on Adorno's Sociology of Music and Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33, no. 3 (Winter 1975): 327.
12 Holland Cotter, 97.
13 Kuspit, 323.
14 Ibid, 323.
15 Adorno and Horkheimer, 130-131.
16 Ibid., n.p.
17 Ibid., 136.
18 Kuspit, 323. Following Kuspit's analysis, "For Adorno, to conceive the object in ontological independence from the subject and to suppose that it derives its value from a source other than the subject, is to forfeit the most elementary step of dialectic ... "
19 Other interpretations of Kelley's art have previously mentioned his fascination—indeed obsession—with an adolescent attitude: see, for example, Kim Levin, "Dogs and Babies," *Village Voice*, 3 May 1990, 96; David Rimanelli, "Mike Kelley at Metro-Pictures," (Review) *Artforum*, September 1990, 151. Both of these articles place very little emphasis on what implications Kelley's infantile/adolescent like treatment of art has for viewers. His art is very personal; but it also does something to the receiver. However, Gordon has noted the disarming quality the works inflict on viewers—"Having done this you feel a little foolish, reduced to a lower state—like a dog ... ," Gordon, 76.
20 Adorno and Horkheimer, 140.

21 Ibid., 140.
22 Ibid., 140-1.
23 Ibid., 138.
24 Ibid., 140.
25 Ibid., 135. This issue is peripherally related to Adorno and Horkheimer's dicussion in "The Culture Industry ... " about "light art" being the "social bad conscience of serious art." They continue, "The truth which the latter necessarily lacked because of its social premises gives the other the semblance of legitimacy," warning at the same time that, "Least of all can the antithesis be reconciled by absorbing light into serious art or vice versa. That is what the culture industry attempts." Kelley proceeds to venture into this area and is successful because of his awareness of the limitations of the program. He is hyper-critical of his art without allowing it to lapse into parody, hence, non-utility.
26 Ibid., 140.
27 Gordon, 76.
28 Adorno and Horkheimer, 142.
29 Ibid., 143 "The Fusion of culture and entertainment that is taking place today leads not only to a depravation of culture, but inevitably to an intellectualization of amusement. ... Amusement becomes an ideal, taking the place of the higher things of which its completely deprives the masses. ... " Kelley's art works through its pseudo-intellectualization and becomes something else, although obviously a critic like Colin Gardner wishes to preserve or inert something into his art that is not there—also revealing the "usefulness" of art for anyone's program.
30 Ibid., 139-140.
31 Kuspit, 323.
32 Cotter, 197. Also see Mike Kelley, "Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature," *Artforum*, January 1989, for a more thorough account of Kelley's ideas on caricature.
33 In his 1987 interview with Holland Cotter Kelley openly admitted that his art sells very well on the West Coast, see Cotter, 165. Therefore Lita Barrie's—"Rag Doll as Fetish," *Art Week*—lament over his Fall 1990 exhibition at Rosamund Felsen, because it was a sell-out, that pervades the rest of her review is entirely unfounded. She also states that Kelley's pieces "reduplicate[s] the banality of the junk culture they critique." That is, his works fail because they lack a "poetic dimension." Kelley's art does have its poeticism, Barrie may just be looking for the wrong metaphor.
34 Adorno and Horkheimer, 142.
35 Adorno and Horkheimer, 148.
36 Ibid., 130.
37 Ibid., 130.

The New Pusillanimity:
California Art and the Post-Regional Climate

Mark Van Proyen

> "Organization life being what it is, out of sheer necessity he must spend most of his working hours in one group or another, and out of self defense, if not instinct, the committee arts must become reflex with him. But more than necessity is involved. Where the immersion of the individual used to be cause for grumbling and a feeling of independence lost, the organization man of today is now welcoming it. He is not attempting to reverse the trend and cut down the deference paid to the group: he is working to increase it and with the help of some branches of the social sciences he is erecting what is almost a secular religion."
>
> —William H Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 1956

So much use has been made of the word *cynicism* in the art critical discourse of the past decade it seems reasonable and necessary that I clarify the particular spin with which I hope to embellish that term with in the context of this essay. Cynic: a person who accepts the world's circumstances as a given and designs his or her action in a manner calculated to accord with and prosper under those circumstances. Such a stance finds its opposite in idealism by which I mean to designate the attitudinal predisposition of those who feel that their action can and should transform the world's circumstances so that they may more accord with a concept of virtue. The standard apology for cynicism states that to know the world-as-it-is must constitute the necessary beginning of any meaningful wisdom a defense that fails to answer the question of how one might assign value (beyond mere convenience) to those preludes to world-shaping action called decisions. The standard critique of cynicism points to how it functions as a rationalization for opportunism and self-serving ambition by virtue of its dismissal of any desire-based aspiration to "the good" as being incompatible with "the real."

In the realm of art, cynicism also connotes defeat of the hope for a visionary world-definition (which can be presumed as following from the examples set by art's display of visionary self-definition) in its battle against the omnipresent banalities of institutional society's pervasive insistence on commodification and conformity. From the cynic's vantage the situation for art is clear: the institution occupies the position of primary organism in our social structure, and the individual either attains or fails to attain an identity only to the degree that he or she accommodates the demands of institutional reality. In other words, cynicism stems from the realization that there can be no viable alternatives to the notion of self as institutional component, and a grudging (or not so grudging) compliance with this situation. Joseph Nechvatal astutely calibrated the relationships between cynicism institutional reality and artistic practice when he wrote:

> "As for the cynical artist, he or she gives art a cynically narrow meaning in order to integrate it more easily into a cynical system, while anxiously gaining the esteem and affection of the largest number of people. In his or her psychic confusion, created by his or her cynicism, cynicism alone imposes the order of cynical recognition which can alleviate the confusion. The only trouble is that cynical recognition of a cynical artist by a cynical public simply confirms the alienating confusion."[1]

The necessity of this prologue lies in the fact that its consideration of cynicism would otherwise exist as a hidden backdrop to this essay's primary consideration: the new and noteworthy in the overlapping and symbiotically linked artworlds of northern and southern California, places which once could boast of an artistic history earmarked by an idealistically "regional" attitude, but in more recent times (the past fifteen years) has tended toward manifesting cynically provincial apeings of the art celebrated elsewhere. The homily that Californians would rather ride waves than make them seems more appropriate than ever when one accesses en suite the recent events and non-events comprising the contemporary art scene of the golden state. Yet, for a balanced picture it also seems important to remember that there was a time when said art scene took a degree of pride in local achievements and community autonomy: art in California could get its day in the sun without falling into the art-political orbit of East Coast power brokers, in effect starting its own aesthetic club proposing a synchronically topological narrative rather than joining the more populous (albeit foreign) parade devoted to the universal ascendancy of historiological diachronicity.

This attitude erupted into a momentary outrage when, under the supposed reign of an international pluralism, the East Coast art world's limelight began shining on expressionistic and figurative art, tacitly confessing to the inoperability of the avant-gardist sense of historical imperative it had used to browbeat regional expressions. What about our expressionistic figuration (Bay Area figurative art), and what about our image-text juxtapositions of semiological stereotypes (beatnik era collage and assemblage)? These naive questions fell on deaf ears as the limelight blithely went about its business of certifying what the market wanted to have certified; they also proved that the West Coast did indeed have a need, in fact, a dire need for mainstream certification.

This need was no mere artifact of envy, but a collective confession that the realm of art had come to exist squarely within the culture industry's well-administered domain. Thus, the characteristics ascribed to the "he" in the epigraph of this essay can now be said to apply in some degree to all artworld participants, even works of art.

At the outset, let us acknowledge that all the conversational buzz and vernissage palaver that informally reflects on the artistically new-and-noteworthy in California is focused on conjecturing about what various institutions might be doing in response to the programming decisions of other institutions. Speculations concerning who was hired by whom, or why who was fired by whom, or where these various whos and whoms are from since it almost never is from "here" are now very much in the foreground as de rigueur topics of conversation—along with the predictable digressions pertaining to the fund-raising acumen of these whoms, and, of course, the artists who will most likely end up in the limelight now that these whoms are in nominal charge of focusing it's careening illuminations. Let us also be mindful of the fact that in recent times the tone of these conversations is tinged with anything resembling outrage; on the contrary, they seem alarmingly matter-of-fact in the pragmatic spirit of reciprocal intelligence gathering—networking called by another name.

All of this might seem odd in light of the primary mythos underlying both the social heritage and recent artistic history of the golden state: status as a haven for those who have embarked on the fearful exodus from the etiquettes of social constraint, opting for the greener pastures of a live-and-let-live ethos acted out in the friendliest of natural environments. Looking back on California's artistic halcyon days (i.e., the late 1950's and early 1960's), it seems fair to say that the most memorable art emanating from this mythos was that which most energetically took a kind of Kierkegaardian stand against the Hegelian Goliath of avant-gardist historical inevitability. It thereby affirmed either a folkishly perverse eccentricity (as an emblem for the freethinking rugged individual) or a locally defined notion of transhistorical poetic depth as positive values defying the monological dictates of cosmopolitan historicity.

But now the times have changed in a way that was first and most succinctly summarized by Peter Plagens: "As the rigors of the artworld changed artists from passionate naifs or grizzled, resigned, old plodders into semi-showbiz sharpies, artists (by reputation or participation) fed back into and changed the system producing their own emulators, by staffing avant-garde academies."[2] No longer is the archetypical California artist a "shitkicker and malcontent"[3] (to use Robert Atkins' phrase) who can be counted on to manifest the courage to be a distinct artistic self rather than kowtow to the administrated coercions met out by a distant fashion consciousness. On the contrary, today's typical California artist wants *in*, and not just in the remunerative terms of career achievement, but also in terms of the seductions offered by the siren song of international importance. Todd Gitlin's coinage of the term "importance art"[4] aptly designates (and denigrates) artistic productions that zealously play up to this deity of mock-worldliness—the great majority of interested observers, however, seem quite satisfied with an art so attuned to the spiritual rhythms of corporate extravaganza. Thus, any critical taking of artistic stock in California must account for the way that "international importance" exerts a gravitational pull on the fabric of both institutional decision and artistic production. The degree of acquiescence to this pull that these entities manifest is the degree that they participate in what I will call the New Pusillanimity.

Invocation of the synonym "cowardice" might suffice as a dictionary definition of pusillanimity, or it might be usefully enlarged by the more descriptive "moral cowardice born of venal pragmatism." But getting a proper fix on what I am referring to when I use the term "new pusillanimity" (or NuPu, as hipster's parlance would have it) is best achieved with a few illustrations taken from what now passes for real life. A simple one can be found in the fact that several galleries have taken it upon themselves to launch little in-house publications intended to pick up the promotional slack of newspaper reporting of the most gossipy stripe. An exceptionally comic example of these is the *Saxon-Lee Art Report*,[5] which balances two pages of notices pointing to the "achievements" of gallery artists ("Saxon-Lee artists On The Corporate, Business and Museum Scene") with another two pages of some of the same artists cheerfully mingling with various members of the local hoi polloi, more than a few of which are designated by the epithet "consultant." An even better illustration might be found in an event called the First annual BACVA Awards Ceremony (the initials stand for Bay Area Coalition for the Visual Arts, and designates an umbrella organization comprised of over 70 commercial galleries, educational institutions and alternative spaces), which took place at San Francisco State University on May 18, 1989. This event is deemed particularly noteworthy because it was openly consecrated to conferring official recognition to achievements in the various categories of art administration, rather the more commonplace sanctification of artistic accomplishments that other award and grant-giving programs met out.

It is perhaps too tempting to view the BACVA ceremony as a work of unauthored performance art, partly because the event's organizers seemed to have performance art in mind when they opted to show a restored print of F. T. Murnau's 1928 vampire film *Nosferatu* with live musical accompaniment as an entertainment backdrop for the actual ceremony, thereby intimating the old populist analogy between administrator and parasite in visual form. Yet it is clear that this event makes perfect sense, for in an institutionally oriented art world the notion of recognizing the contributions of successful middle managers is the most natural of occurrences. Also, from the point of view that routinely seeks to demonstrate how the facture of art is contingent upon a wide spectrum of socio-linguistic forces at least partially beyond the conscious control of the work's producer, the BACVA awards can be understood as providing a valuable service by making explicit the heretofore implied privileges of administrative prerogative, thereby eliminating much of the necessity for the more arduous detective work of the deconstructionist, whose only remaining chore is to illuminate the event's invisible cartellino reading "encourage that which you can control, discourage that which you cannot."

For the most part, recent art criticism in California has been contentedly hand-in-glove with the above described circumstances, partly because it too stands to gain on the primacy meter when art is de-centered vis-a-vis the labyrinth of influencing factors, and partly because the subsidy that is available to critics in the form of modest awards, catalog essay commissions and the general aura of respectability (good for getting teaching jobs) comes from the precincts of administration rather than those of production. Hence, art critics in California tend to be of the make-no-waves ilk that finds the philosophical act of looking at a "what is" and comparing it to a "should be" a distasteful transgression of the pseudo-generosity of "mutually supportive sensitivity and maternalistic nurturing personhood" (my rather delirious term for the publicity ethic that travels under the sheep's clothing of exposition without judgement). Although several of these "art writers" have a well-developed theoretical understanding of art's institutional(ized) condition as well as the broad cultural values that animate criticism, but none pursue the task of what Donald Kuspit called "de-administering Art"[6] for the sake of recovering art's potential intentionality, and none involve themselves with the development of a distinctly regional stylization of critical reception, opting instead for a pro forma usage of those sensitizing ideological frameworks that have gained notoriety elsewhere.

Still, on the most superficial face of things, criticism seems to be doing well in the west, with three new quarterly publications having recently been inaugerated[7] (*Art Issues* and *Visions* based in Los Angeles, and *Shift* based in San Francisco), all well-designed and seemingly well-funded, and that venerable voice of west coast art *Art Week*[8] recently changing hands and receiving a complete makeover. Seemingly absent, however is a lively contentiousness and spirit of in-depth inquiry to the writing broadcast by these amplifiers, which so often opt for the kind of expository writing that adulates a general idea of art while suggesting in patronizing fashion that art isn't really worth arguing about. Thus, we have writing that features "interpretive strategies" rather than the formulation of relevant and useful criteria, and the notion of the critic as someone who fully articulates the cultural reception of an artwork (or group of artworks) is backseated in favor of a view of the critic as being just another functionary in the artworld's promotion-and-certification mechanism.

If it is still fair to assume that critics care about deflecting accusations saying that they merely act as crony promoters or investment certifiers—accusations that say in effect that they merely function on behalf of the new pusillanimity—then they will have to realize that it has once again become necessary for critics to begin by articulating the attitudinal parameters motivating their criteria, those being the Archemedian ground(s) of their subjective "structure(s) of reception." What follows is a sketch of my own, and it is offered in the hope that it will clarify the reasoning behind the remarks that I make about the artists and artworks in the final portion of this essay, and place some distance between those remarks and the more commonplace accounts provided by promotional writing.

When I am asked in conversational situations what my art critical criteria are, I have thus far been able to disarm would-be adversaries with a short answer to the effect that "the best work of art is the one that provokes, sustains and synthesizes the widest spectrum of fascinations." This functions as a rather curt explication of what I call the "esthetic of encompassing summation," which forms an impossible criteria for any artwork to live up to entirely but one that all live up to in differing degrees. Following from this, the task of criticism comes into focus as a finding and articulating of those degrees. As for what I might mean by using the word *fascinations*, the following explanation will have to suffice for now. By meditating on the history of art criticism and the historical oscillations that the notion of esthetic coherence has moved upon, I have surmised that three basic themes can be viewed giving form to a map schematizing the phenomena of esthetic fascination; all specific works of art as well as the larger ontological circumstances surrounding those works (i.e. the outlook that can be said to historically and ideologically function as the artwork's naratee) can be viewed as being distinctly modulated orchestrations of the characteristic utterances of these thematic voices, placing one or more in the realms of emphasis or suppression as the specific situation of cultural production warrants. I call these themes *presence*, *extent*, and *depth*. *Presence* is the easiest to explain, for it simply has to do with considering the empirical effect that the actual, physical work of art has on the senses, and forming judgments about whether this effect is agreeable or disagreeable. The estheticist tradition of art criticism (including the work of John Ruskin, Clive Bell, Clement Greenberg and the large coterie of Susan Sontag-inspired neo-estheticists) can be viewed as speaking to the issue of the artwork's presence, as does the adulation of mimetic verisimilitude, decorative coherence and technical virtuosity found in pre-modern accounts of the visual arts. As an ontological mindset, it can be viewed as corresponding to empiricism and pragmatism, and it regards formal unity as the highest esthetic virtue. Its characteristic mode of art critical rhetoric is the ostensive declaration.

Extent is slightly more difficult because it presents itself to the viewer as an "information picture" indicated by a pattern of relationships between fragments, suggesting that said pattern extends out from the work of art to social, historical and even cosmological truths beyond the work of art—the "widest horizons" that Baudelaire wrote about. Its visual counterparts are structure and signage employed in a radically experimental manner calculated to surprise and shock for the sake of subverting convention and reconfiguring taboos. The art historical and critical traditions reflected by the esthetics of extent are those of the avant-garde, and are best exemplified by the attitudinal predilections of Baudelaire, Duchamp, Harold Rosenberg and Lawrence Alloway, as well as innumerable pop and post-pop artists, and an equally innumerable phalanx of structuralist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist critics. The ontological habit of thought from which it emanates from is a rather broadly conceived positivism that subsumes both Marxism and structuralism, and it should be understood as rightfully having an oppositional and morally transformative component best exemplified in the later writings of Lucy Lippard. Discursive exegesis is the characteristic mode of rhetoric favored by critics committed to this aspect of esthetic reception.

Depth is the third leg of my tripod of esthetic reception, and my placing it in this position is not accidental; rather it reflects what I consider to be both the most satisfying and challenging of esthetic aspects and is also the one that I consider to be the most difficult to explain, simply because its exposition has heretofore been so susceptible to dogmatic urging and so resistant to logical argument. Part of the reason for this lies in the fact that the attitudinal predispositions inherent in a depth esthetic stands skeptical to the rationalistic equation of selfhood with the operations of mind, choosing instead to be "planted indomitably on the instincts," to paraphrase Emerson's famous lines.[9] Whereas *extent* can be said to be reflective of the context that surrounds the work of art, *depth* might best be said to reflect the work's pretext(s), which encompass the actualized totality of its crystallization of desire, fear and world experience. This coalesces in the symbolic and dramatic aspects of the work of art, which can viewed as reflecting the "life story" of the work's creator as well as (in ideal circumstances) the "life story" of the community surrounding that work. The psychoanalytic tradition of art analysis (which has been underrepresented in the recent history of art criticism, suggesting a suppression of sorts: Donald Kuspit and the psychoanalytically oriented art historian Adrian Stokes are its most prominent exemplars) can be viewed as offering a rumination on esthetic depth, and I would even suggest that traditional iconology has one of its withered feet in the depth camp. The relevant ontological predisposition to esthetic depth is existentialism, for it emphasizes the importance of the making of a satisfying ontological world rather than merely formulating the correct response to a given world. Like its two characteristically modernist counterparts, the aesthetics of depth has its own typical rhetoric which operates on a spectrum ranging from personal confession to platitudinous dictum. At all points it recognizes that the insights of psychoanalysis exist simultaneously as the crowning achievement and subtle assassination of the empirical and positivistic intellectual traditions of enlightenment rationalism, and the traditional logic that is at its foundation.

The largest implication of the esthetics of depth suggests that we give up the effort to achieve that longtime enlightenment goal of a disinterested and scientific esthetics (which is still clung to in a present-day guise by the neo-Marxist contention that there can be an autonomous critical round from which the socio-politcal contingency of everything *else* can be surmised): following from this, it becomes necessary to admit to ourselves that esthetics is inevitably *interested*, meaning that the claims of rationalism no longer can be said to offer a satisfactory circumvention of bias. I think that this realization is at the core of the postmodern habit of thought, and the aforementioned cynicism exists as but an outward symptom of the collapse of the Enlightenment's claim of offering a verifiable explanation of reality.

I want to emphasize that my tripod of esthetic reception should not be viewed as a trio of distinct generic categories with their own separate histories and parameters; rather they should be seen as esthetic essences that are situationally harmonized by specific works of art, rather in the way that particular colors can be viewed as being comprised of a given harmony of the primary hues. Still, all harmonies stem from a keynote, and many others are built on the absence of some notes. If the ideal work of art is that which gives effective voice to all three themes, then perhaps we can view others as ranging from mediocre to accomplished on the basis of either giving effective voice to two of the three themes, or doing such an exemplary job in giving voice to one of the themes that their intentionality can be perceived in the form of their stylistic genericism. Given that the new pusillanimity has become an all-encompassing backdrop for the critical consideration of any art object in California (as well as elsewhere), perhaps we can say that this transcendence of genericism (or illusion thereof) constitutes a precondition for considering something as a work of art worthy of critical attention, rather than an example culled from the more commonplace realms of relic, trinket and cultural symptom.

If presence is our first keynote, then it should be expected that the neominimalist works of sculptor Robert Therrian and painters George Lawson, John Miller and John Meyer should jostle to the foreground of any survey of recent California art, simply because the ethos of virtual presence is what these works traffic in. In the case of Therrian's enigmatically fusiformic objects (usually ceremoniously placed in a manner connoting some kind of unexplicit ritual meaning), there are vague allusions to the possibility that the subtle shifts in surface texture and overall stealthy sleekness of the forms represents some mysterious thing beyond their own attractiveness as objects, and these allusions to a symbolic purposefullness loosely affiliate Therrian's practice with the ephemeralist lineage of light and space installations as has been practiced by artists such as Robert Irwin, Maria Nordman and James Turrell since the early 1970's. This quality of allusiveness gives the best of Therrian's work a delicate resonance that seems to whisper of some hidden esthetic depth lurking behind the work's stoically seductive shapes, and it has an effect of suspending the skepticism pertaining to the work's "corporate" look that someone not at ease with institutional esthetics might harbor. A similar, albeit less developed allusiveness can be found in the recent paintings of George Lawson, which are typically comprised of rows of modular supports covered with monochromatic paint that is subtly varied both within each unit, as well as from unit to unit, creating a theme-and-variation effect. Some of Lawson's most effective works have been executed on adobe modules, which partially absorbs the saturations of oil paint applied to their surfaces,creating an intriguing tension between the present-tenseness of the paint and the past-tenseness of the adobe. Lawson's best work demands that the viewer-reader attends to the act of painting as a ritualized focus on the ambiguities of perception, ambiguities that frequently intimate subtle paradox between painting understood as object and as act. John Meyer's moody monochromatic paintings (almost always saturated in a washed-out tint of some agreeable hue that suggests the indistinctness of a landscape viewed in an extremely thick fog) make perceptual ambiguity their stock in trade, but they almost never evidence the demanding degree of focus that is the strong suit of Lawson's work, and because of this their aspiration to synthesize surface expressivity obdurate objecthood into paradoxical images frequently collapses into decorative sentiment. John Miller's paintings featuring an array of equidistantly placed diagonal black bars that function simultaneously as pattern and as a collection of tightly gestalted figure-ground relationships) also comes to us under the neominimalist banner, but they in fact hark back to older sources; Russian Suprematism and the Abstract Classicism that was practiced in southern California by Karl Benjamin and John McLaughlin during the late 1950's. Unfortunately, the preconceived and fabricated character of Miller's work doesn't inspire much confidence, and they recede quickly from consciousness because their one-liner articulation of figure-pattern ambiguities is tainted by an apparent gimmickiness, along with the feeling of production-line expediency that earmarks the work's fabrication.

Another sculptor whose work deserves attention is Mark Lere, who has concocted some spectacularly inventive installations of industrial looking objects that suggest an aggregate of futuristic technological apparatus. Conical fusiforms and burnished surfaces are recurring themes in this artist's work, frequently alluding to the high-tech ambience of advanced aerospace artifacts such as radar-evading aircraft. Lere's work keenly counterbalances the connotative qualities of a form with its palpable denotation, an attitude that has been frequently manifested since the emergence of a formalistically oriented art in southern California during the 1950's, and it was especially evident during the time when the ultra-didactic "presentness" of hard-core minimalism held sway in the east. Now that wry juxtapositions between the denotative and connotative aspects of form are commonplaces in international sculptural practice, the Southern Californian heritage of what I would call "object relational" assemblage sculpture and installation should receive an increase in serious attention.

The problem with most of the art that parades under the banner of neominimalism is that it dosn't go far enough in distinguishing itself in either form or intention from the work of its 1970's predecessors (especially those West Coast practitioners such as Lita Alburquerque, Jerry Byrd, John Mason, Eric Orr, David Simpson and Sam Tchkailian, who softened the didacticism of their work with tactile veneers suggestive of alchemical processes); it thereby begs for dismissal on the grounds that it fails to extend the esthetics of presence in any significant way, contenting itself instead to offer corporately acceptable hand-me-downs to a critical arena that is all too inclined toward a convenient art historical amnesia. But there is another group of painters who have embarked on a somewhat more challenging proiect that resides more completely in the gap between presence and extent, with occasional allusions to the realm of depth as well. I have given the label "Dissonant Abstractions"[10] to the work of these artists, all of whom are engaged in the project of exploring and expanding the limits of pictorial coherence within the tradition of modernist painting. This exploration is premised upon investigating the dialogue between unity and fragmentation that can occur in a pictorial space, a dialogue comprised of a palimpsest of multidimensional sequences and dichotomies that the viewer is invited to add up into a unity that constitutes a complex and multi-layered kind of dynamic equilibrium. The most precisionistic paintings created in this vein are those of Michael Wingo; every example of his work features a richly inventive presentation of graphic theme and painterly variation, all orchestrated in complexly nuanced color schemes. Mike Henderson's version of DisAb is the most improvisatory and tactilely aggressive I have seen: a single composition often features a dizzying variety of thick blobs and colorful slatherings of explosively hued oil paint. Senior practitioners such as Elmer Bischoff, Frank Lobdell and the late Jay DeFeo have all recently embarked on bodies of work that are categorizable under the same term, as has a talented younger painter named Rick Camire. Bischoff's work most vividly calls to mind a view of an elaborate electronic circuit viewed through a lush painterly fog, while both DeFeo's and Lobdell's versions accord most with the kind of painting that a mature Kandinsky might have created if he had made a concerted effort to give visual form to the musical ideas of Arnold Schoenberg.

The notion that an abstract painting might have a schematic as well as graphic identity leads us to view the work that comes to us under the label of "Dissonant Abstractions" as being partially rooted in the realm of extent as well a maintaining its source in the somewhat larger one of presence. This ratio is reversed in the recent collage drawings of Shari Lamanet and the recent encaustic paintings of Irene Pijoan. A characteristic example of Lamanet's work features a host of gestural inscriptions and dreamy drawings in a kind of hallucinatory vertigo within the space of a large, out-of-focus photograph. Pijoan's paintings, many of which are executed on both the concave and convex sides of a freestanding form, seem to be indistinctly abstract in the DisAb mode at first glance, only to become beguiling allusive (the waxiness of their surfaces makes the paintings seem like grand enlargements of microscopically examined skin tissue) on closer inspection.

Much like Pijoan's work, the paintings of Scott Bell, Christopher Brown and Deborah Oropallo counterbalance the allusive and explicative aspects of painterly gestures in a manner couched in a comfortable lyricism, but (especially in the case of Bell's work) they also keep the viewer's eye simultaneously vexed and entertained with their unorthodox juxtapositions and peculiar internal relationships. Of all of the work produced by California's younger generation of painters, Brown's work comes the closest to achieving a convincing virtuosity, and I think that this accounts for the fact that his paintings (graceful depictions of enigmatic figures floating in an aqueous fog of creamy oil paint) are so widely imitated. In Orapallo's recent paintings, an alphabetical list of people's names stand in for their figurative depiction, but the wry interplay between ingratiating surface and disquieting allusion (the names are in fact a roster of disaster victims) gives the work much of the same quality of enigma that one finds in Brown's work.

Another artist whose focus is on the esthetics of beguiling enigma is Ann Hamilton, a maker of quasi-theatrical installations that have recently gained exhibition at the most prestigious venues sponsoring that mode of work. Her 1989 tableaux vivant titled *Privation and Excesses* featured two rooms: the smaller of the two seemed like a jail cell containing a trio of live sheep and the larger one containing a disarming plethora of pennies spread over a floor covered with honey. In the larger room sat a mute actress who silently and repeatedly wrung her hands in an ritualized act of "out damn spot" compulsion, an act that served to sum up the work's allusions to "cultural" alchemy and "natural" excrement in a meditative albeit grandiloquent way. A similar fascination with the frictions that occur when cultural representation seeks to give imagistic form to "natural" function is found in the work of Mike Kelly, who works in a wide variety of non-traditional genre which all embrace the scopic regimes of low cultural representation for the purpose of giving a farcical voice to the more hypocritical motives of "high culture." The best known of Kelly's works are his unframed ink on paper works, which appropriate the pictorial voice of adolescent rumination for the sake of treating scatological subjects in a manner at once comic and grave.

Scatological allusions of a different sort can be found in Nayland Blake's tidy image-text assemblages that feature some of the more commonplace examples of sado-masochistic paraphernalia and sanitized organic material, all elegantly counterposed against cloying textual additions that reflect upon a certain rarified (and also prepackaged, à la Calvin Klein "obsession" commercials) notion of the sublime. These inscribed utterances tend to be intentionally confusing: are they cryptic allusions to the AIDS epidemic, or are their nostalgia-laden suggestions of a transcendent thanatos a more general—and maybe even self-mocking—homage to a romanticized notion of heroic death? Blake never fully plays any of these hands, and because of this the reception of his work has fallen into two camps: those critics who are taken in by the "mysterious" nature of the work's system of connotative references these are of the ilk that are impatiently quick to celebrate *any* work of art that gives them an excuse to wax pseudo-eloquent about the writings of Lacan, Foucault and Derrida), and those who see his mock taxonomies of the perverse with a kind of suspicion founded on the view that Blake's neo-conceptual stance (as well as that of installation artists Mitchell Stryop and Glen Rubsma as well as the image-text collaborators Jon Winet and Margaret Crane) is but a generically watered down version of what Marcel Broodthaers has done with a far greater degree of poetic involvement. From time to time California artists gain a degree of quick primacy by concocting early manifestations of international trends (for example, the generic neo-expressionism of Roger Herman) only to have that primacy fade when their work is pointed to as being a mere designer version of a distant original. My suspicion is that much academicized neo-conceptual work (such as Blake's) will fit this profile.

A more involved and imaginative use of text can be found in the performance art of Michael Peppe, which sets a new standard in the realm of the deceptively simple. Any typical example of Peppe's *Behaviormusik* performances begins with the artist sitting at a table, facing the audience, wearing generically quotidian clothing. But what happens at these events is far from ordinary. *Behaviormusik* is premised on the idea that any and all human actions can be scored and orchestrated. The action begins when Peppe tries to prove his premise, via a high speed rendition of various songs, pantomimes, recitations and other gesticulations that makes the performer seem as if he is mimicking about a dozen television and radio broadcasts simultaneously. Each of Peppe's performances is an entertainingly visceral exegesis on the subject of linguistic intertextuality, and it both embodies and mocks the structuralist notion of the self existing as but a residual figment of the flow of sociolinguistic forces motivating the mass media.

Another performance and installation artist who explores the friction between the conventions of popular and official representation is Tony Labat. A typical example of Labat's work is based on juxtaposing forms that connote a friendly sentimentality (such as fabric dolls) with others that project an austere authoritarianism, such as a video monitor that regards the viewer as a subject of surveillance, playfully suggesting that the former is but the falsely ingratiating mask of the latter.

Surveillance is a also a subject that Connie Hatch's phototext installations make reference to, but her feministically orientated works are more concertedly polemic in character than are Labat's. Her recent installation titled *Some Women ... Forced to Disappear* (1989) provides a disquieting meditation on how photography simultaneously functions to both take real identity from and give false identity to a group of portrait subjects made up of women whose celebrity status is known to the viewer and others who exist only as generic smiles that supplicate themselves to the (presumably male) gaze of the viewer. But this supplication has an undercurrent of ambivalence which is conveyed by the acts that the photos are transparent and are mounted at 45-degree angles to the wall, suggesting a partial escape from the aforementioned gaze, an escape that leaves an amorphous phantom in the culturally designated place that the "person" once occupied.

Investigations of the oscillating distinction between cultural place and non-place are couched in geopolitical terms by the collaborative installation group Border Arts Workshop. Their stock in trade is the collation and exhibition of various information pictures, both mythical and historical, that surround that point of cultural distinction that is the border between the United States and Mexico: their goal is to deconstruct official and cultural hypocrisies and disseminate alternative information in an unabashedly activist fashion.

The question provoked by both Hatch's and BAW's work is fundamental to any art that makes a visualization of social reality its raison d'être: when does the righteous indignation of agitprop become so full of itself that it looses contact with the potential for viewer empathy, something that the best political art achieves when whatever issue it addresses is made personally real to the viewer in vividly experiential terms so as to displace (rather than simply merge with) the abstractly distanced information pictures that are intellectually formulated through mass media input and overload. Hatch's work succeeds according to this criterion by subverting it, by making the structure of mediated information the "esthetic" subject of her work. On the other hand, BAW's work fails because it is overly content to let disparate references to the aporias inherent in social reality stand in for the density and coherence offered in a work of esthetic embodiment, in effect merely signing rather than crystallizing an idealized union of esthetic and moral consciousness. In other words, I am suggesting that a politically oriented art must of necessity have an element of esthetic depth (or make a very pointed use of its absence) to distinguish itself from the an-esthetic realm of informational half-truths of mass media.

An artist who brings a kind of dramatic depth to work that seems to be (among other things) politically oriented is Mark Pauline, who is more widely-known as the point man for the now defunct collaborative team Survival Research Laboratories (SRL). SRL's outdoor machine performances featuring homemade vehicles and demonic robots careening and crashing amidst grandiose pyrotechnics have achieved an almost legendary status among youthful hipsters, and such an appeal is perfectly understandable given that the events are comprised of an almost seamless blend of the etiquettes of science fiction and destruction derby, thereby functioning as a cathartic release for some rather obvious hostilities. Constant in both SRL's and Pauline's subsequent sculptural work is a toying with an exaggerated ambivalence about technology and power—that is, indulging in an atavistic fascination with the instruments of violence and, at the same time maintaining an ironic air of criticality that seems to want to moralize about the familiar theme of technology as dehumanizing agent. The former seems well enough achieved, but the later seems too lacking in sophistication to make much of an impact.

The paintings of Carlos Loarca also make the experience of the atavistic their subject matter, but it is of a more private and tradition-bound type than that which is found in Pauline's theaters of mechanical cruelty. Loarca's large, colorful paintings give apparition-like form to the dream dances of the half-human, half-animal beings of the tribal mystery religions of Loarca's native Guatemala. These paintings portray their mythic themes in a manner that is disarmingly unabashed, yet they also demonstrate a dazzling command of high-modernist painting techniques in their fusion of the stylistic attributes of expressionism and surrealism. In Ev Thomas' paintings, (of solitary trees and stoic rocks) the nod is given to an even more expressionistic treatment of the mythic subject, only here the mythos that is invoked amid the work's encrusted surfaces and tangled gestures is less cosmological in character, and more in line with the most tragic aspects of romantic sensibility.

In Margaret Thomas' hallucinatory paintings of writhing plants and undulating landscapes, the focus is on a directly portrayed vitalism that hints at undercurrents of expressionism and surrealism. The salient attribute of these works is their elaborately baroque portrayals of convulsing form that urgently suggest a given natural structure to be only an outward circuit of omnipresent energies. Vitalism of a less urgent and more mystical type is conveyed by Pegan Brooke's paintings, the most recent of which are intimately scaled works that simultaneously operate as stylized depictions of a paradisiacally distant place and also as schematically cryptic inscriptions suggesting a cosmological accounting of imaginary occurrences.

As mentioned before, my primary criterion is that an artwork's perceivable intentionality should somehow forge ahead of the generic parameters that comprise the idiom(s) of the work's making. The artists whose work I have cast approbations toward in this paper have all managed to fulfill that expectation with a noticeable albeit varying degree of success, and because of this, their work can be viewed in part as militations against the new pusillanimity by virtue of the commitment to aspiration and personal loyalty that earmarks it. The work of other artists is mentioned for the simple reason that it has gained a sufficient degree of topicality in the current context so as to warrant some watch-dog skepticism. Certainly there are other artists working in California who have done work that is characterizable in laudatory terms—the work of some photographers and muralists comes to mind—but they were left out of this survey because their work exists beyond what I can actually examine and the pattern of euphemisms that I rely on for the articulation of esthetic experience: in other words, I admit to a bias against work that lies outside the semantic and geographical boundaries of my expertise, boundaries which to some degree must circumscribe any critic's aspiration toward an authoritative understanding of criticism's subject.

Notes

1 Joseph Nechvatal, "Artistic Cynicism," *Art Criticism*, vol.5., no. 3 (Spring, 1989): 82
2 Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974),158-159.
3 Robert Atkins, "Trends, Traditions and Dirt: The Current State of Art in Northern California," *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art* 31 (Winter 1981): n.p.
4 Todd Gitlin, "Post-Modernism: The Stenography of Surfaces," *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Spring 1989): 56.
5 *The Saxon-Lee Art Report* is published quarterly by the Saxon-Lee Gallery, 7525 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90036.
6 Donald Kuspit "De-Administering Art," *Art Criticism*, vol. 2, no.1 (Fall, 1985): 5.
7 *Art Issues* is published seven times a year by Gary Kornblau (who is also the publication's editor), 721 Santa Monica Blvd, Los Angeles, CA. *Visions* is published quarterly by LA Artcore, 652 Mateo St. Los Angeles, 90021. *Shift* is published quarterly by Artspace, 1286 Folsom St. San Francisco 94103
8 In August of 1989, Kitty Spaulding became publisher of *Art Week*, replacing Cecile McCann, who founded the publication in 1972.
9 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*.; quoted in Donald Kuspit, "Internationalism: the Calm that Conceals the Storm," *Artscribe* (November - December 1986): n.p.
10 Mark Van Proyen, "Dissonant Abstracions," catalog essay from the exhibition of the same title San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, October 1986.

Proto-Modernist Aesthetic and Art Criticism Amended: From Behaviorist "Doctrinaire Realism" to Existentialist "Process Art" and Wilhelm Leibl's *Three Women in Church*

Rudolph Bisanz

"Art must start from the begenning, from nothing."
—W. Leibl, *Briefe*

"Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen."
—Geothe, *Faust*

Antecedents of Modernist aesthetics and art theory, i.e., Proto-Modernism, are a central concern of art history and art criticism alike. Literature on the subject traces Modernism's sources routinely (and correctly) to the French branch of their origins. Accordingly, Eduard Manet, the Impressionists, and the leading Post-Impressionists, for example, as well as their contemporary critical proponents, convincingly lead the roster of the "accustomed" early ancestors. However, the German contribution to early Modernist art practice or theory and criticism, particularly to what I call "Process Art," is seldom, if ever, pursued to the nineteenth century, and (to my knowledge) never to the greatest German Realist painter, Wilhelm Leibl (1844-1900).[1] I hope to remedy this discrepancy with this brief revisionist exercise in "discipline-based" art criticism. If my essay strikes some readers as overly provocative, I defer to Leibl himself as the true source of the incitement.

Conventional wisdom holds that, as the Teutonic counterpart of Gustave Courbet, Leibl produced a kind of German variant of French Doctrinaire Realism. Accordingly, his sole "inspiration" was Positivism and his devout aim the emancipation of the peasant class. In keeping with this anterior view, and in terms of the accompanying critical priorities or perceived aesthetics of Leibl's art, his position was hopelessly reactionary relative to virtually all *avant-garde* trends of his time. Alas, while reassuringly routine and customary, this judgment is also erroneous. But, having once been trapped in this critical dungeon, Leibl has not been let out, not even probationally, for a second look. The following is intended to reassess this view on the basis of one of the most famous paintings coming down to us from the nineteenth century. I mean that universal "household image" known to all, Leibl's *Three Women in Church*.[2]

For one, I intend to show that Leibl cannot, as is often done, simply be brought in line with Gallic art theories in a kind of internationalist aesthetic of mutual admiration. This cannot be done without either neglecting certain basic critical facts of biography and artistic development or by employing rank casuistry, or both. For another, my view is based on the fact that his presumed close relationship to the peasants and his alleged profound understanding of the workings of their mind, the two ideative lynchpins of conventional Leibl criticism, are based on faulty reasoning and are, therefore, misleading.

Surface appearances to the contrary, Leibl was not close to the peasants and, for all practical purposes, and as mutual affinities go, the "relationship" did not really exist at all. Moreover, he did not approach their psychology with sympathy or compassion, or even a penetrating anthropological curiosity. Instead, he treated them with abject clinical distance and, indeed, no small amount of callousness.[3]

Courbet, or his intellectual cousin, Jean François Millet, for example, stood close to the country folk they painted. But Leibl cultivated no similar personal relationship with the Bavarian peasants whom he depicted.[4] He was a cultural refugee from the city, first from Cologne, his home town, and then from Munich, his home base during the 1860's. He loved the countryside, hunting and the out-of-doors rough-necking. The presence of the peasants in that bucolic milieu in the Upper Bavarian countryside was, lastly, a historical accident. Like other accidents of nature, they were fit subjects not for interaction but for facturing into paint. Moreover, he was conclusively separated from the peasants by a functional language barrier, his different upbringing and education and, above all, his embrace of the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie as his preferred social milieu.[5] And finally, and most significantly, I contend that his putative, behavioristic "Doctrinaire Realism" is merely a point of departure for Leibl, not an aesthetic end point. If a political or culture-political frame of reference for his art in germinal form ever existed in his mind, and I doubt that it did, it is, critically speaking, thoroughly "degraded," indeed cashiered, by his larger aesthetic agenda and actual artistic development.

Leibl's mature aesthetic program—we shall have to call it nascent Existentialism applied to an early form of Process Art—consisted of "aesthetic activity for the sake of aesthetic activity," or "the activity of painting for the sake of the activity of painting." Although probably an offshoot of a *l'art pour l'art* mentality, this process, unlike its forebear, emphasizes "activity" over the finished product. As such, this process is original with Leibl, although aspects of his attitude may have been shared by certain of the Impressionists, e.g., Claude Monet. It resulted in "stylelessness," his desired effect, to a far larger degree than was the case with Courbet, Manet or even Monet. My methodology stems from a critical reading of art theory and is combined with an exposition of art criticism. Naturally, to have a *locus* in time and place—a "Sitz im Leben der Kunst"—as it were, criticism and theory must by necessity harmonize with data from art history. Above all, I wish to be as short and concise as possible.

A member of the Munich school, early on, Leibl distanced himself in due course from that city school as from all style affiliations. He specialized in naturalistic portraiture and peasant genre with passive figures. Contemporary German and English critics often dismissed his mature "peasant style" as vulgar, "uncouth," or even "repulsive," or they ridiculed his cumbersome enameling technique.[6] By contrast, ever since his earliest success with his naturalist *Portrait of Frau Gedon*, segments of the Parisian art world celebrated him as "the new Holbein" and an artistic equal of his fellow Realist and personal friend, Courbet.[7] During the 1860's, his formative years, Leibl wanted to differentiate himself from the two dominant strains of Munich art, history painting and anecdotal genre. He opted for an objective Realist approach. To find sources, he leapfrogged the dramatic, history set art of his teacher, Karl von Piloty, to study "origins": Rubens, Van Dyck, Velázquez, Hals.

Leibl opposed the two dominant trends of the Munich School, Arnold Böcklin's Neoromantic *Ideenmalerei* (idea painting), and Franz von Lenbach's psychologically heightened portraiture, equally strongly. He loathed the former's literary themes and detested the latter's spurious technical bravura. Leibl developed a form of "early German Impressionism" which differs from its French counterpart (where light effects dominate) by equating optical considerations with a "graduated color scale" and "the human figure and its volumes."[8]

Although he was influenced by Impressionism, Leibl wanted to disassociate himself from all those German Impressionists, i.e., followers of the French technique, who juxtaposed complementaries, used optical mixture of colors and infused white into the palette, practices that resulted in the dissolution of pictorial form. By stressing "local color and plasticity" as well as directional light, on the other hand, Leibl strengthened pictorial form.[9] Whether or not the should be called Impressionism or *Sonderimpressionismus* (German "special Impressionism"), or something else still, is lastly a technical question of little importance in our context. What is significant is that Leibl, the consummate technician of the craft of painting, strove to eliminate all traces of style and, thus, all traces of pretense, subterfuge or dissembling from his art. He thereby achieved an uncommon measure of "stylelessness"—contemporary critics called it "ugliness"—a strong contrast to the "stylishness" of so much of the art of his time that he hated.

Courbet encouraged him to pursue his chosen direction. It is not known whether or not Leibl also met some of the future Impressionists during his Paris stay in 1869-70. It would appear, however, that, on the basis of stylistic analysis, Manet influenced him more than Courbet. *The Cocotte's* debonair pose and svelte demeanor echo the prostitute types done by Manet (e.g., *Olympia*, 1865).[10] *Tischgesellschaft* was influenced by Frans Hals.[11] But its planar construction of form with color is demonstratively Manet-like. Overall, Leibl's paintings seem to echo the Frenchman's so-called Aesthetic Realism and attendant sober objectivity, the seeming psychological indifference to his objects, the emotional unrelatedness of his figures, the negation of spirituality, and the apparent lack of an articulated "social agenda."[12] Significantly (and with the possible exception of *The Cocotte*) Leibl abstained from practicing a form of behaviorist naturalism as an expression of political leanings (e.g., Marxist of Marxism-related), an approach preferred by quite a few of his naturalist contemporaries, e.g., I. Repin, C. Meunier, L. Frederic, *et al.*

All this indicates a complete break not only with the Romantic tradition but also with Courbet's politically charged Doctrinaire Realism. "Whereas with Courbet Realism becomes a political battle cry, with Leibl it remains exclusively formal and aesthetic."[13] But, significantly, we also sense an "urgency of being" in Leibl, an existentialist urge toward basal experience when he says: "Art must start from the beginning, from nothing."[14] (Do we sense echoes of Kierkegaard's "leap into the abyss" here?) By 1870, Leibl had disassociated himself from virtually all stylistic directions in Munich, and steered an independent course. His great technical facility, which ranged from his arduous *alla prima*, wet-in-wet enamels all the way to a dynamic Impressionism, added to the growing demand for his portraits. Munich feted him as the "King of Painters."[15]

Leibl's pragmatic approach to perception and creativity—"the true is the beautiful" (Leibl)—kept at bay those who scoffed at his portrayal of an unvarnished reality. his daily studio practice centered in *Gediegenheit* (solidity, purity, genuineness). This, the foremost demand he made of art, assuaged an inherent and venerable German aesthetic sensibility and, thus, tended to disarm some of his detractors. The group of younger artists who formed the Leibl Circle—Theodor Alt, Louis Eysen, Victor Müller, Fritz Schider, Carl Schuch, Otto Scholderer, Hans Thoma, Wilhelm

Trübner, *et al*—represented the "Bavarian echelon" of German Realism, Naturalism and Impressionism. Since Leibl did not formulate a coherent body of theories or a doctrine and, in fact, barely even articulated such notions as he may have had, they must needs have followed the example he set with his lifestyle and actual studio practice rather than his (meager) teachings *per se*.

From 1873 onward, Leibl lived a solitary life in the countryside. Peasant genre, usually with one or two figures, occupied a central position in his work. *Dorfpolitiker* is a rare exception of a multi-figural grouping.[16] With *Drei Frauen in der Kirche* he celebrated his last and greatest triumph. Because of problems with foreshortening and perspective he segmented his two most ambitious paintings, *Die Wildschützen* and *Mädchen mit der Nelke*.[17] To avoid the reoccurrence of such tragic mishaps, "he acquired a large photographic camera" as an aid to anatomy and composition.[18] However, while very, very many later nineteenth century Realist and Impressionist painters used the camera as an aid, few carried the technique to the extremes of verisimilitude and "stylelessness" that Leibl did. Therefore, it can be concluded that Leibl anticipated Super Realism or Photo Realism, a movement that came into its own in the later 1960's and 1970's, and that is characterized by an onanistic obsession with technique, a seemingly absurdly painstaking verisimilitude, and "aggressive" stylelessness. In the 1880's, the bright chromas of Hans Holbein the Younger dominated Leibl's palette. The late 1890's displayed a mysterious chiaroscuro, brought on by his discovery of Rembrandt as a stylistic ideal, e.g., *Girl at the Window*.[19]

The figures in Leibl's paintings and, alternatively, his portrait subjects, exist as passive personages marking a suspended time. They lack an obviously compelling psychological interest or palpable "Innerlichkeit" (inwardness or subjectivity). As arbiters of painting technique and little else, his works, as those of Manet, fulfill themselves in a "monistic," i.e., an objective-realistic expression based on empiricism.[20]

Leibl's procedural positivism, notwithstanding, once having effectively transformed "subjective" reality into "objective fact" and suspended the existence of his figures in a disengaged sphere, his art of "beautiful works of craft" seems to hint at a deeper psychological ground: singularity of personal identity, separation of the individual being, the numbness of alienation, the despair of angst. Leibl, who socialized with the upper bourgeoisie and aristocrats, was separated from his subject matter, the peasants, by his birth in a distant geographic region, cultural background, education and dialect.[21] Although he lived among them in his later years, it is doubtful that he really "knew" any peasants other than as passing supernumeraries of the pastoral set piece in which he lived or as models, i.e, as repositories of visual data.

By contrast, Courbet's intuitive familiarity with country folk and his "social program" for art endowed his figures with authentic social roles. Leibl's villagers, on the other hand, lack a similar, class-conscious, contextual integration. They are neither symbolically intensified nor do they play out a narrative. Thus, they stand in no apparent causal relationship to each other, to their environment, *or* to the viewer. Leibl's art is neither Symbolist nor narrative; neither political nor religious; neither Romantic nor Impressionist nor, indeed, behaviorist-naturalist; he stands for neither Socialist Realism nor for traditional genre or *Sittenbild* (picture of morals and manners).[22] He wished to be unaffiliated, and he succeeded handsomely in his goal.

Leibl "did not enrich the poetic and ideative ground" of German art.[23] Instead, he shared a common German penchant for an "art for technique's sake." Objective peasant genre, his confessed artistic mission, seems to be all surface materiality without ideative depth. In the process, people have become still lifes.[24] Disassociated and devoid of narrative or symbolical identification as social "types" or "cultural castes," he endowed his subjects with myriad specific characterizations. And yet, remarkably, Leibl's figures manage to emerge from his unrelenting positivist treatment with their own unalloyed dignity as individual existences intact.

As Leibl's style exhausts itself in an empirical process of defining the minutiae of color, light, space, and form, his figures literally "become art." His compulsive creative psychology calls for painting as an end in itself. In turn, by mercilessly revealing unvarnished existence, his "scientific" style lays bare essential humanity. Both, his psychology and style, manifest the same impulse to primal experience and existential irreducibles. Thus, with Leibl art shifts attention from a historical obsession with metaphysics to a passion for psychology. As he pursues his craft with undivided fanaticism, his skill connects with spirit, his arduous handiwork with metaphysics. By 1878, when Leibl settled down in the small Upper-Bavarian village of Berbling near Rosenheim to paint *Three Women in Church*, his most successful painting, he stood at the zenith of his creative development.

Three Women in Church falls midway between Leibl's celebrated early *Portrait of Frau Gedon* and his disastrous, misproportioned *Poachers*. Stylistically, he had already evolved through his student work in the manner of the realist Dutch Masters, honed his formal objectivism with his Manet-inspired manner, and perfected his slow and meticulous Holbein-influenced enameling technique. He used that last technique in *Three Women in Church*, a painting of the accomplished mature phase of his development. Concurrent and subsequent style directions of Leibl's include a French Impressionism-related naturalism and a Rembrandt inspired, tenebristic style. The wet-in-wet, *alla prima* technique used in *Three Women in Church* resulted in a facture that has the successive, minutely fan-shaped, and measured appearance of crystals. Leibl utilized this technique to achieve high-keyed color effects in a uniformly well lighted environment. However, lastly, for Leibl none of these techniques seemed to have mattered nearly as much as means to attain an end—e.g., to flesh out a subject, to essay a content—as exercises in technical self-referentiality and tachistic automatisms.

In his fanatical pursuit of visual minutiae, no detail of the subject matter was too small to catch Leibl's attention and require his meticulous translation into its artistic equivalent, the painted facture. The colors are exquisitely nuanced and scrupulously graduated. His single-minded persistence on a steady and purposeful technique lies at the point of inception of his goal, to "paint honestly with one's own naive eyes."[25] The query "how" to paint (i.e., technical questions) as opposed to "what" to paint (subject matter) dominated all art discussions of the Leibl circle.[26] In Leibl, the "how"—the process—assures the outcome. Thus, verisimilitude equals psychological authenticity which equals "truth," hence, "beauty." Paradoxically, in spite of his lifelong quest for "stylelessness" (or, better, because of it), with Leibl Post-Impressionist art achieves a resounding victory of style over representation. The resultant *non*-style (i.e., essential anti-historicism) underlies the foundation of Modernism. In turn, the same attitude spawned Modernism's explosive riot of style options, its rainbow of "stylettes."

The academic painters postulated "deductively" general goals for art, then relied on various *ad hoc* stylistic decisions to achieve those ideals in actual art practice. Acting exactly in reverse, Leibl's first condition is the "inductive" method of painting; no deviation from it can be permitted for fear that the results be compromised. Accordingly, a consistent adherence to the proper technique literally guarantees the right outcome, or, as Leibl was fond of saying, vouchsafe "the true, therefore, the beautiful." Leibl's toilsome technique meant that painting soon turned into arduous duty, then to hardship. Leibl's letters during the four years he spent painting *Three Women in Church* are a tissue of complaints about the pain and exertion of work and self-encouragements not to waver in his dogged pursuit of the steady course.[27] Sensing this, Lenbach promptly characterized the painting as *Zuchthausarbeit* (penitentiary labor).[28]

On the whole, German critical opinion misunderstood Leibl's intentions equally tragically. By contrast, in its Paris showing, the painting was hailed as a supreme masterpiece and its sale substantially improved Leibl's financial situation. The women who served Leibl as models for four years were villagers chosen to portray three different generations of church goers. Or were they chosen to represent three different "specimens" of female village life? Similar generational-cum-illustrational juxtapositions interested him in several other paintings.[29]

The location is the Pfarrkirche Hl. Kreuz (Holy Cross Parish Church) in Berbling, one of the loveliest Rococo country churches in Bavaria. The painting-as-still life immortalizes its elaborately carved pews and "renders" the women with equal emphasis. Leibl stressed the presence of hands by enlarging them proportionately. (Or is this and the discrepant sizes of the figures the result of faulty foreshortening and perspective, problems that vexed Leibl in some of his other large compositions?)

Leibl usually refrained from commenting on his artistic intentions. His short remark about *Three Women in Church* is a rare exception: the picture should raise a feeling "as I experienced in my youth ... " while listening to "the moving church music of the Old Music Masters ... which gave me a strange thrill and a feeling of devotion which cannot be described."[30]

The actual impression the painting conveys is far less poetic and, on first glance, infinitely more jejune. Leibl, who was neither pious nor a churchgoer, shows a rural commonplace, a colorable "motif." However, its hushed calm fails to spiritualize silence in the "soulful" manner to which the art world, especially that of Munich, had become accustomed since Romanticism and especially with its academic genre painting. Distraction, due to endless posing, shows in the faces, especially with the girl (about whose "ill health" Leibl commented laconically). Unlike his contemporaries, Benjamin Vautier or Adolf C. Tidemand, for example, who staged their subjects—often churchgoers—for symbolic or dramatic effect, the "value-neutral" Leibl shunned similar stratagems. Because of this, *Three Women in Church* ventilates no religious devotion and the different ages of the women seem "out of context."

For the same compositional reasons—reasons that accentuate the commonplace at the expense of displaying hidden meanings—Leibl does not editorialize on the social condition of the villagers, either. Thus, the nature of their communal affiliations is not divulged. Nor, in fact, is their personal relationship to each other or their consanguinity, if such was the case. As motifs go, they differ little from the carved pew in which they sit. Both are still life motifs. A fatal *caesura* disjoints the subject and the content of *Three Women in Church.* In it, a welter of cultural, social and familial relationships is conspicuous by its inhibition. The women are solitary islands in a contextually unarticulated milieu. They seem displaced, isolated and lonesome. A direct result of Leibl's objectivism, sharp powers of observation and compulsively mechanical painting technique is that he did not add anything that was not part of the motif, in the first place. Is it possible, therefore, that the women "seem" disjointed because they "*are*" disjointed?

Leibl's subjects appear as if seen by a viewing apparatus without conscience. It has mercilessly stripped the women of their inferred relational support system. Yet, remarkably, Leibl's refractory, though factitious, image posits unalloyed physical existence. His seemingly unscrupulous painting regimen, by focusing uncompromisingly on the individual *appearance* of his figures, propitiously lays bare their animalistic selves, their irreducible, existential being. Thus, his painting may perhaps achieve an ontological ground of meaning. As he used to say: "When I paint the human being as she is, the soul is there all the same."

As he drove the history of style, Leibl dutifully practiced art as craft and identified with craft the irreducibles of personal human values: confession through artistic dexterity; self-affirmation through the process of art; existentialist aesthetics as a quasi-autistic deliverer of unvarnished, simple truth.

The artistic milieu of Munich, in the 1860's, the years of Leibl's tenure there and his formative period, began to resemble that bazaar of styles which was to reach its apogee in the 1880's and 1890's, and from which artists could choose stylistic variables at their hearts' content as if from the well-stocked shelves of rich merchants. In short, art was rapidly succumbing to "commodification"—art as merchandise—a process much lamented by Leibl and his circle. Simultaneously, it was a time of mind-bending opportunities for such artists as could conceive of original thinking, i.e., for the proto-Moderns. (The striking resemblance of art life in the 1880's and 1890's to the present times, the uncanny similarity between the *fin-de-siècle* and Post-Modernism, is grist for another essay.)

The larger story of later nineteenth century art is the story of the battle of styles for predominance, the story of opportunities seized by some and their wild fling into the unknown, as well as the massive shift of consciousness in the perception of the nature of art. The pressures of a sophisticated market place of styles were so great as to make it appear to a thinking individual that art was at its wit's end, if not at its actual end, and that, lastly, all style options were pointless, cynical exercises in aesthetic sophistry.

Against such a hopelessly blocked up background, what would appear to be a logical choice for serious individuals would have been to give up art as a calling altogether, or to continue practicing it in radically altered form. Leibl (as some of his followers) considered the first option but settled on the latter. As we have learned, Leibl did not articulate his thoughts in the form of art theoretical writings. On the basis of compelling circumstantial evidence and expert witnesses, we contend that this radically altered form meant for him a shift away from art as an activity whose end-all is the art product to a process that is, at least qualifiedly, therapeutic and whose end-all *is* artistic activity, plain and simple.

With this psychological breakthrough Leibl advanced to the frontier of Modernism, i.e, to the basic root causes of Expressionism and, beyond that, of Tachism, at one extreme of the spectrum, and Super Realism, at the other.[31] Interestingly, Leibl's choice continues the broad aesthetic initiative of German Romanticism. In the early years of the nineteenth century, the Nazarenes, especially Franz Pforr and Friedrich Overbeck, shifted away from a product-oriented art to an art of confession, i.e., art as a daily confirmation of piety. That was the crux of the German Romantic "revolution," particularly that of the Lukas-Brethren.[32]

Leibl's "revolution" went one step further than that of the Early Romantics by inventing an art as daily confirmation of being alive. In this context, his choice of subject matter is purely incidental, his actual style an historical accident. None of these really matters, as the gap between Leibl's life and utterances and his peasant subjects, or the fissure between the subjects and the contents of his peasant paintings, amply demonstrate. What matters is *Haltung* (total attitude). And Leibl's *Haltung* is defined by *Gediegenheit*, on the one hand, and, on the other, by the essential traits of Existentialism: "the leap into the abyss of the unknown," the "start from the beginning, from nothing." This led him to practice an art that originated and became fulfilled in the very process of its own creation: skill as spiritual exercise. Skill becomes *Gediegenheit* becomes *Haltung* becomes *Gediegenheit* becomes skill. The whole process revolves around itself in an Existentialist vacuum free of social concerns, an Existentialist meander of time and being in which man functions as a (kind of Heideggerian) "creative workman" in a perennial and ubiquitous consciousness of dread.[33] Thus, Leibl realized an old German Romantic dream, to bring life and the practice of art as a routine of daily existence onto a common denominator while anticipating the twentieth century Existentialist position. The price he had to pay for this achievement was high. It was nothing less than the meaning of the work art as an autonomous intellectual entity apart from its creator, an inherent dilemma of all Modernist art criticism and aesthetics.

Notes

1 The current study is one in a series of complements, amplifications and *excursi* to my investigation of "Art History, Art Criticism and the Ideological Birth of Modern Art," *Art Criticism*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Winter 1989-1990): 1-18. In it I have traced the origins of Modernist aesthetics to methodology and speculative thinking in German art history and theory against the background of universitarian life in Wilhelmian Germany. Selected segments of the current article appear in the critical *International Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 2 vols. (London, Chicago: St. James Press, 1990), (n. a. at time of writing).

As used by me, the term "Process-Art" is not to be understood in its sometime usage as a procedure of manipulating non-art materials, e.g., "earth works," but as an aesthetic orientation whose goal is the practice of (traditional painting) technique for its own sake and as the ultimate gratification of the artistic endeavor.

2 *Drei Frauen in der Kirche* [*Three Women in Church*], 1878-1882, oil on mahogany panel, 113 X 77 cm (44.5" X 30.3"), Hamburg, Hamburg Kunsthalle.

3 Leibl relentlessly drove his models to sit for him motionlessly for hours on end over several years and vividly describes the ice-cold conditions in the church during the winters and the insufferably sweltering heat of its interior during the summers. He unfeelingly (and in behavioristically clinical fashion, perhaps his original position) wrote about the need to press on with his work, because the youngest of the three women who appear in the painting might not be able to suffer it through the winter, owing to her illness. (Was her deteriorating condition exacerbated by Leibl's exhaustive martinet?) E.g., compare W. Leibl, "Aus Leibls Briefen an seine Familie," in ed. M. Petzet, *Wilhelm Leibl und sein Kreis* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1974), 64.

4 Leibl's putative "family," a young peasant women and her child by him, or even his (alleged) offer to marry her, lastly do little to offset the "negative," i.e., the deep fissure between the artist's choice of subject matter in his paintings and his professed social and, indeed, actual private life which, in the last resolve, was elitist.

5 Leibl's native *Kölnisch* (or "*Kölsch*") and the archaic Old Bavarian that the Upper-Bavarian peasants spoke, are two dialects that are linguistically diametrically opposed to each other and empirically mutually incomprehensible. And he never really mastered the Bavarian peasant patois, despite his frequent protestations that he was very popular among the country folk and that he "understood" them. His frequent allusions to his "great fame" and celebrity status that he enjoyed among them (see "Aus Leibls Briefen ... ," op. cit, passim) indicates a one-way relationship, i.e., the prominent artist and country gentleman—lastly an alien intruder—among the naively adoring peasant crowd, flattered and bamboozled by the apparent attention he paid them in his art. Their naive praise of his paintings, frequently mentioned by him, was his partial compensation for the generally bad press he received in Munich and other German art capitals where he exhibited.

6 Compare *Benjamin's Contemporary Art in Europe*; after C. E. Clement and L. Hutton, *Artists of the Nineteenth Century and their Works* (Boston, 1884); facsimile ed., vol. 2 (St. Louis: North Point, Inc., 1969), 54.

7 *Portrait of Frau Gedon*, 1868-1869, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

8 Compare S. Wichmann, *Realismus und Impressionismus in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Schuler Verlagsgesellschaft, 1964), n.p.

9 Leibl did not himself write on the method of painting himself and seemed to have had an uncertain relationship to art theory in general. However, Leibl's thoughts on the subject can be reconstructed, after a fashion, according to the his disciple, the painter Carl Schuch, whose writings represent the only contemporaneous theoretical summations of the older master's approach to style. After E. Ruhmer, "Die Kunsttheorie des Leibl Kreises" in ed. M. Petzet, *Wilhelm Leibl und sein Kreis* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1974), 29.

10 *Die Kokotte* [*The Cocotte*], 1870, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

11 *Tischgesellschaft* [*Company at Table*], 1872-1873, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

12 T. J. Clark argues persuasively that, in Manet's case, appearances deceive. Accordingly, Manet, far from being a sociological innocent, trod softly but carried a big politico-ideological stick: class warfare *redux*. Compare his *The Painting of Modern Life, Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton, New Jersey: University Press, 1986). Alas, similar conclusions, however tentatively proposed, cannot be drawn in behalf of Leibl. In his case appearances *are* the real McCoy. What you see is what you get.

13 Horst Ludwig, *Münchner Malerei im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1978), 45.

14 E. Diem, "Wilhelm Leibl, Leben und Werk," in *Wilhelm Leibl und sein Kreis*, op. cit., 18.

15 Ibid, 10.

16 *Dorfpolitiker* [*Village Politicians*], 1876-1877, Winterthur, Stiftung Oskar Reinhart.

17 *Die Wildschützen* [*The Poachers*], 1882-1886, segmented, var.
collections, including Berlin, Staatliche Museum, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie; *Mädchen mit der Nelke* [Girl with Carnation], 1880s, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

18 Karl Leibl, "Malerei nach Photographie," in *Wilhelm Leibl und sein Kreis*, op. cit., 55. Karl Leibl is a nephew of the painter.

19 *Mädchen am Fenster, "Die Wabn,"* [*Girl at Window, "The Cousin"*], 1899, Cologne, Walraff-Richartz Museum.
20 R. Zeitler, "Das Unbekannte Jahrhundert; Leibl, Manet," in *Die Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, Propyläen Verlag, 1966), 121 ff.
21 Diem, op. cit., 17.
22 For a discussion of academic genre painting and Leibl consult R. Bisanz, *The Rene von Schleinitz Collection of the Milwaukee Art Center; Major Schools of German Nineteenth-Century Popular Painting* (Madison, Wisconsin: University Of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 162 f. and passim.
23 E. Hanfstaengl, "Leibl. Das bäuerliche Antlitz," in *Wilhelm Leibl und sein Kreis*, op. cit., 54.
24 Diem, op. cit, 14; see also Schuch, op. cit., 32.
25 C. Schuch, op. cit., 29 ff.
26 After C. Schuch, in Ruhmer, op. cit., ibid.
27 W. Leibl, "Aus Leibls Briefen an seine Familie," in *Wilhelm Leibl und sein Kreis*, op. cit., 61 ff.
28 Franz von Lenbach, cf. Diem, op. cit. 7.
29 E.q., *Das Ungleiche Paar* [The Unequal Couple], 1867-1877, Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut.
30 W. Leibl, op. cit., idem.
31 The connection with a "curative" form of Action Painting is fairly straight forward. The one with Super Realism is less so but compelling, nevertheless. The existentialist-therapeutic aspects of Super Realism (or Photo Realism, or Sharp Focus Realism or New Realism, etc.) have been discussed in some detail by Linda Chase in "Existential vs. Humanist Realism" in ed. G. Battcock, *Super Realism, A Critical Anthology* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1975), 81 ff. "The act of painting slowly and laboriously what the camera can record quickly and effortlessly becomes a metaphor for the essentially meaningless act of existence. But it is not meaningless after all." "The triumph of skill becomes a triumph of spirit as well" (p. 95). This interpretation of Super Realism is useful to keep in mind when explaining Leibl in a critical way.

Compare my critical polemic "Italia und Germania" (vol. 1) and "Friedrich Overbeck" (vol. 2) in *International Dictionary of Art* (London, Chicago: St. James Press, 1990; forthcoming).
33 The similarities between attitudes embedded in Modernism, particularly its Romanticist-Existentialist roots, and religious practice have been commented on often enough. But the similarities between the intellectual position implicit in Leibl's practices (and which gave rise to his ritualistic painting process) and those of a *halakhah*-observant lifestyle according to the *mizvot* (The Commandments)—especially as interpreted by Maimonides—for example, are too close to be overlooked. (For a provocative modern interpretation of the *mizvot* see Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Commandments," in ed. A. A. Cohen, P. Mendes-Flor, *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: The Free Press/Macmillan, 1987), 67 ff.) Of course, this comparison takes into full account the fact that the former occurs in the context of godless "anthropocentric secularism," while the latter is part of ultra-orthodox Talmudism. Yet, both have their assured and central "*Sitz im Leben*" as a quotidian and eternal prophylactic with which to forestall the filth and dread of existence. Significantly, both stress endeavor over attainment, search over finding, and movement over reaching the goal. For both, the dynamics of action, the "Process," is the thing! And Goethe put it best of all: "Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen." (Goethe, *Faust*).

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