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# Art Criticism



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# Editorial Note

*Art criticism is not a single kind of writing and the second number of Art Criticism opens with a neglected problem, the conditions of journalistic art writing. John Perreault, drawing on his own work for the Village Voice, 1966-1974, discusses the opportunities of newspaper criticism. His resourceful use of the first person singular is an implicit reproach to the routines of much standard practice.*

*Art Criticism is not a channel for artist's statements as such. However, artists' writings are often critical or theoretical in a wider sense and three pieces deal with this dimension of them. Joseph Margolis examines ideas of Robert Morris's as expressed in his writings; Leon Golub surveys the artworld as a panorama of options; and Robert Hobbs discusses Possibilities 1. This was intended in 1947 as the first issue of a journal close to artists and its single number is a monument to the opinions and ideas of early Abstract Expressionism.*

*The relation of art history and criticism is bound up with the literature of feminism in art in ways that are discussed in the group of four articles on "Women's Art and Problems of Art Criticism." Alessandra Comini brings art historical research to bear on symptomatic sexual misreadings of Klimt by art critics. Sandra Langer deals with the transition of information from original research to popularization. In a "Re-Review" she discusses four books of the 1970s that give legible shape to the history of women's art for the first time. Connie Robbins' "Review of Reviews" considers the contribution of two short-lived but significant journals devoted to women's art. One article questions the adequacy of both the critics who have neglected and the critics who have supported women's art. As it is by one of the editors, it should be pointed out that this condemnation is not made in a Draconian spirit, but expresses the author's sense that the writers failed to adapt to a specific historical situation, which is basically a failure of consciousness.*

L.A., D.B.K.



# First Person Criticism

BY JOHN PERREAULT

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From the issue of October 15, 1966 (a review of Meredith Monk's *16 Millimeter Earrings*, a multimedia event) to the issue of December 9, 1974 (an interview/profile of H.C. Westerman called "A Cliff in the Woods"), I was the regular art critic for the *Village Voice*, a New York weekly newspaper. It began as a neighborhood newspaper and gained citywide attention for its Reform Democrat politics and its coverage of the arts. Even before the newspaper strike of 1962 that blanked out the dailies finally pushed the *Voice* into the black, it had a considerable and influential readership. My immediate predecessor, Peter Schjedahl, who, like myself, had begun as a poet-reviewer at *Art News*, used his *Voice* position as a springboard to a brief career as art reviewer on the *Times*, and his predecessor, David Bourdon, was already at *Life*. Jill Johnston, dance critic and reporter of Happenings, and Andrew Sarris the film critic, had

already made names for themselves, thanks to the platform afforded by the paper.

The *Voice* had a reputation as a writers' newspaper. I am not so sure (as was often thought) that this was because of any idealism on the part of the owners, who eventually became millionaires when the paper was sold to Clay Felker in 1974. I suspect that the *Voice* became a writer's newspaper by default. Except for spelling and grammar corrections, and even these were chancy, my copy (and everyone else's, I assume) appeared unedited, in the raw so to speak. Edwin Denby called me up once to point out that one of my rare complex sentences lacked a verb. My editor Diane Fisher, she hired me and was the only one I saw when I delivered my copy, the only "management" I ever met, was in charge of the entire "back of the book": dance, movies, books, music, and art. She also burned the midnight oil when each week she single-handedly laid out the entire book for the printer. There was not much time for her to fuss with any writer's copy even if she wanted to.

But there was another reason for granting writers so much freedom from the yoke of editorial supervision; I was paid only \$15.00 per column. (By 1974 my remuneration had risen to the grand sum of \$90.00.) Jill Johnston, whose first person dance criticism had influenced me originally, wrote for nothing, glory apparently payment enough. At those prices it was not advisable for a titular editor to tamper too much with a writer's creativity. Also the *Voice* began as the newspaper of Greenwich Village, an area with a long history of Bohemianism. A few mad writers thrown into the banal mix of display ads, listings, and local liberal politics gave the paper an identity just when the cultural explosion was beginning to be news, as a result making the *Voice* an above-ground underground newspaper, a media monitor of counter-culture fads and political and social trends.

Thus, during my eight year stint at the *Voice*, I was able to write about the art I wanted to write about in any manner I chose. Columns of course had to be tied to current exhibitions, as in all newspapers. This was an ideal situation for a critic and I covered, often for the first time anywhere, aspects of Conceptual Art, Process Art, Earthworks, Video, Performances, Photo-Realism. My writings for the specialized art magazines suffered, but what I lost by not being listed in the *Art Index* I gained in immediate impact, feedback from the art world, and the excitement of being New York's only "avant-garde" newspaper art critic. I was also able to make political references that would not have been tolerated at the *Times*, for example, or in any of the art magazines at the time.

Reviewing my carbon copies and tear sheets from those eight years, reviewing my reviews, I both like and am dismayed by what I read. The language is consistently direct and opinion

ated; at times I was too sarcastic. It is up to others to judge the value of the value judgments I made about art, but new art was consistently my subject. My week-to-week decisions about what to write centered on this fact. What I am most interested in here is not what I wrote about, but how I wrote it. In my present writing for the *Soho Weekly News*, I continue most of the ways developed during my *Voice* years: first-person, semi-autobiographical, peripatetic reports, as well as the essay, the interview/profile, the diatribe and the paean, and straight reviewing. Direct address is ubiquitous. Although I write for art magazines, my commitment to writing for a general readership still holds, as does my belief in the importance of journalistic criticism. If one function of art criticism is to act as a bridge between art and the public, as I believe, then newspaper criticism is a worthwhile task. How is this to be done? In what follows I shall attempt to examine some of my own strategies and their theoretical and practical ramifications, not out of vanity but because such an examination might be helpful to art criticism. A range of issues can be touched upon in a way that may initiate further discussion and experiment.

One searches for ancestors. Until recently art criticism has not been an academic subject. Art historians, locked in battle with studio instructors, have not allowed much contemporary art or art criticism into their curricula<sup>1</sup>. Sensing that art criticism is a valuable and possibly honorable calling, the novice seeks models from the past, but mostly in vain. Art history is not a very fruitful methodological guide to confronting the work of one's contemporaries which after all is the main task of an art critic.

As a poet, my obvious model was Baudelaire<sup>2</sup>, whose *Salons* and essays are still held in esteem, although his judgments were often in error. It was Baudelaire who provided any justification I needed for my own exploration. After all, if he used the first person, so could I. His salon pieces were part of a tradition originated by Diderot. Written in response to the large state-supported exhibitions that filled the vacuum left by the withering away of royal patronage and Church support, the Salon reports—authored at times by now illustrious figures, such as Goethe, Heine, Gautier, and Baudelaire himself—were the first phase of art criticism as we now know it (and not Xenocrates or Philostratus the Elder, as some seeking a more ancient lineage claim)<sup>3</sup>.

What after all is the panoply of art spread out over hundreds of New York galleries but one enormous Salon? I took as my self-image, or rather persona, that of an opinionated guide to an enormous and continuing Salon, my reports issued in weekly doses or installments. In a manner of speaking I was

reinventing the earliest form of art criticism. My fictional Salon was not confined to one exhibition hall, but encompassed all of New York, with forays into the wilderness where Earthworks were silently proliferating and students were being shot (1970: Kent State University). I went to Texas for an Andy Warhol show of chairs, shoes, and other art works he had “discovered” in the basement of the Rhode Island School of Design, and to see the Rothko Chapel. The peripatetic reviewer occasionally sprouted wings:

...Yes, another art junket and another airplane ride, this time a private jet with veal sandwiches and homemade mayonnaise...After a stop-over in Memphis for re-fueling we finally arrived in Houston. Houston is humid and sprawls out all over the place, a little like Los Angeles, but on a smaller scale. There are palm trees here and there and lots of lush, heavy vegetation. It is really strange to see a skyscraper rising right out of a parking lot next to a row of 1930 bungalows.

I am too embarrassed to include the gossip that went along with this, although even it provided information and local color, before I got around to talking about Warhol’s collection of found objects, “Raid the Icebox.” I continued the same piece (*Village Voice*, October 30, 1969) with my return to New York, rushing to see Stephen Kaltenbach’s installation at the Whitney Museum and Henry Geldzahler’s “New York Painting and Sculpture” at the Metropolitan Museum, ending with a comment about Street Works. All this sounds a little breathless, but I think it did communicate some of the richness of the art situation in a personal, informal manner. My column was in the spirit of the Salon piece, but brought up to date to deal with the expanded art situation in a regular weekly context.

Lawrence Alloway in *The Nation*<sup>4</sup> was the first to describe my method. He contrasted it to Robert Pincus-Witten’s art historical approach in the promotion of “Post-Minimalism”:

Perreault, on the contrary, is improvisatory. He writes in the first person and can include details of his legwork from gallery to gallery, as well as encounters and distractions along the way. Perreault’s criticism is within the genre of art criticism as established by Diderot in his *Salons* in the mid-18th century. Diderot, faced with a thousand or so new works in each Salon, walked-looked-thought-wrote in one impacted process. Hence, the variety of subjects, the jumps in mood, and the discursive exuberance of the Salons. In Perreault, subjects such as the function of the masterpiece, the taste of dealers, and

the sudden difficulties of Clement Greenberg-influenced Abstract painting reveal a comparable fertile and responsive grasp of the art scene.

Alloway points out that my observations rest on a context of daily life. Citing Paul Valery's "Degas Dance Drawing" as a parallel to my own use of personal data and asides, he says that "information can consist of arbitrary facts, personal to the author, freely clustered, as well as consecutive steps in a causal argument."

Perhaps I should give some further examples of the peripatetic mode, beginning with the following extreme (*Village Voice*, October 3, 1969), written after a summer hiatus:

It has been quite a week. I had forgotten over the summer what it feels like to go around looking at art and then sitting down and trying to write about it for others. It is really pleasant to walk up and down Madison Avenue or 57th Street, stopping in here and there to look at various art merchandise. It's a little like window-shopping and is something I would do whether or not I had to. On the other hand, it can be depressing. The amount of garbage in the galleries is appalling, a fact that three months away made me forget. But then art is either everywhere and not necessarily what you see but how you see what is already around you or it is something rare and special. I incline, as it should be obvious by now, more and more to the former.

This week's column could be called "Looking for Art." Art like love is where you find it, and although I did manage to see a few interesting things in the galleries, the things that really stick in my mind are Godard's *La Gai Savoir* at the Film Festival—it was more visually stimulating and "plastic" than most of the gunk I stared at in my rounds; Janis Joplin on television; the beautiful green bridge leading to Ward's Island, which was the site of Charlotte Moorman's Seventh Annual Avant-Garde Festival (the Bridge was inscribed with such goodies as: "If you're in the Avant-Garde/You're in the Wrong War" and "The War in Vietnam is not Symbolic"; the subway station at Sixth Avenue and 57th Street; and several great movie moments on TV: Shelley Winters underwater in *Night of the Hunter*, Shelley Winters meeting John Garfield at a swimming pool called The Plunge in *He Ran All the Way*, Eve Arden singing "I'm Unlucky at Gambling" in French (!) and Monty Wooley singing "Miss Otis Regrets" in a bad movie

about Cole Porter called *Night and Day*...

I had a great deal of license at the *Voice* and this personal, almost free-association approach seemed to work. It undoubtedly made some readers angry, but I developed a following, and even the above example had an underlying purpose: to place art in the context of a total environment that, whether or not one likes to admit it, puts art in competition with movies and television and a cityscape covered with graffiti, and even manages to insinuate that art might be put in perspective if thought of in conjunction with the war in Indochina. The real world, in my art writing, was constantly intruding upon what I now think of as a fictional, expanded Salon: the art world of museum shows, gallery shows, and new products, struggling to earn a place in art history, the very art history that we eyewitness art critics, art journalists, or journalistic critics, are helping to create. But should not art criticism reflect the politics of the larger world? Here is a more directly political fragment (*Village Voice*, April 7, 1971):

This week I was at Kent State to contribute an introduction to a memorial exhibition to you-know what. My informants who were around at the actual event talked, among other things, about the false spring that occurred on May 4, 1970. One good rainstorm would have saved the lives of four, the wounds of nine. No one wants to throw rocks or shoot guns on a cold and rainy day. The elements contribute to history....I love the spring, even here in Dead End City. But recently when the first warm day arrived and I thought of buying bulbs and planting herbs, I found I could not breathe. It wasn't the pollution. It was my thesis that warm air causes politics and confrontation to bloom.

So I was in Kent, Ohio, "Tree City," where they have begun to massacre the trees to widen a road that by East Coast standards no one really uses. Actually, Kent is called "Tree City" because of the Davey Tree Company, not because of the trees. Aside from the University, which was once a normal school, the Tree Company is Kent's only industry. Kent is not now normal. Here we have what must be the ugliest campus in the world, but full of bright Middle America faces, chugging along from class to class across the formerly bloodied grounds. It is always hard to see one's place in history, but any community that would commemorate its own insane place in history by inviting Rod McKuen to read his silly poems has to be crazy. Student identification is



required to gain admittance to official events and there is rampant [sic] paranoia about “outsiders” coming in to provoke a repeat of last year’s catastrophe...The officials seem to think that the Kent killings are of only local interest, refusing to acknowledge that a whole nation was plunged into despair.

My peripatetic mix also included a good deal of information about art-world sociology. As eyewitness, I documented the rise of Soho as an art center (*Village Voice*, March 20, 1970):

...it is a far cry from Tenth Street days. Saturdays are as good or as bad as the gallery scene on Madison Avenue or 57th Street. People, however, don’t doll up as much to go to the five or so good galleries now located in Soho, and everyone looks vaguely serious. The area is densely populated by artists, in spite of the unfortunate fact that loft-living, because of outdated, ridiculous zoning laws (not yet amended) do not afford much security for the artists. (Where the artists will live once Soho goes - and the way it looks now it probably will - is another question. Staten Island? Hoboken?)

More artists go to these galleries than to uptown ones, because in most cases they are in their own backyards. Paula Cooper on Prince Street was first, then Richard Feigen’s downtown branch on Greene was next. This year, O.K. Harris and Max Hutchinson (out of Australia) opened, and just this week Reese Paley (out of California) opened its huge showcase with a jammed-up champagne cocktail party...

...More bigtime uptown galleries (Emmerich? Castelli?) are rumored about to open downtown stores. If this keeps up can cocktail bars and chic boutiques and apartment houses with doormen be far behind?

Less than a year later I could report (*Village Voice*, October 1, 1971):

The art scene, if not art, has livened up a bit, judging by the crush of people attending the recent simultaneous openings of Sonnabend, Emmerich, Castelli, and Weber at 420 West Broadway. All incidentally, excepting Weber, retain uptown flagships. The opening was insane with far too many people and at some points, for me, near panic conditions, crowd-

wise. With free booze and the results of four mailing lists and the fact that so many art people live in and around Soho, you can imagine the chaos.

The peripatetic format also allowed me to handle the new pluralism in a relatively graceful way. For instance, I was able to give more attention to women artists as more and more of them gained gallery exposure, and I was able to incorporate theory as well as description. I began a round-up (*Village Voice*, February 11, 1972) with the following introduction:

Oddly enough, I've seen a fair amount of interesting art this week. When it rains it pours. Rather than force a theme, I'll do a rundown. There is such great diversity that to do otherwise would be unjust. The art world is more pluralistic than ever, which I take to be a sign of health. There are many lines of historical development, not just one, as some maintain. Even the two-line models in which realism and abstraction, painterly and non-painterly, romanticism and classicism, or what have you, are posed together in a see-saw relationship, although an improvement, is far too simple to be true.

The peripatetic mode of art writing and first person criticism are workable solutions to some current art critical problems, particularly in the context of journalistic criticism (i.e., writing about art for a general readership). From 1966 to 1974 I was certainly the only art critic with "avant-garde" sympathies writing regularly in a New York newspaper. John Canaday on the *New York Times* and Emily Genauer in the *New York Post* were barely interested in contemporary art at all. The peripatetic mode was ideally suited to my sensibility, my sense of the history of criticism, and the new art that was thrust upon me. I am not claiming that this kind of informal, outwardly personal criticism is the only valid mode; my claim is that it is a serious and useful one. It helps break down hierarchical ways of dealing with art and is ideally suited to the current pluralistic situation. It is important that the mode is flexible enough to include all kinds of information surrounding art works. These contexts are not easily included when using the language of formal art criticism, but are essential for the understanding of art and, in fact, are part of the art.

The use of the first person can be defended on several grounds, not the least of which is the precedent of the *Salons* as mentioned, which were often cast in the first person. I remember, early in my career at the *Voice*, receiving an irate letter from a reader in Texas, berating me for using the first person. The reader had even wasted time counting the number of

times I said “I.” (I hope the reader of the present essay will not be tempted to continue this practice.)

On the contrary, first person writing has its advantages. Opinions are not disguised by “we,” “one,” the passive voice, or other semblances of objectivity. The first person singular establishes a continuity for the regular reader and a feeling that there is a person behind all the information and evaluation. In newspaper writing, which must be brief, direct, and in the active voice, the first person eliminates the need for endless qualifying clauses. But there is another defense of first person criticism, one that is even more important: the use of the “I” underlines the participatory nature of art. The viewer truly completes the art work. The critic writing in the first person demonstrates this by serving as a model for how to look at art, in an active rather than a passive way and locating art experiences in the world of daily life. Art is integrated with contexts that are political, sociological, perhaps even biological. Those who fear that the first person singular is egotistic are not sophisticated in their understanding of the uses of language, for the first person can be as fictional as any other person. Certainly it allows greater freedom of expression, but it is also a rhetorical device.

What I have come to call journalistic art criticism has its pleasures and I believe that it is an important area for serious work. There is a dearth of such writing. Accessible art criticism for a general readership is essential for the health of art and art criticism, for art is not merely for the art world and the people who subscribe to art magazines. Art criticism can become trapped within academic language and specialized vocabularies, losing contact with the public and even with artists. Journalistic criticism is bounded by short lead times, limits on length, the necessity of pegging one’s observations on current exhibitions, as well as the disposability of the newspaper itself. Not all journalistic critics have the freedom that I had at the *Voice*, but through writing for a newspaper one gains a feeling of direct influence, a broad experience of art, and I believe some notion of social responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup>Some universities, colleges, and art schools, responding to the need, are beginning to offer art criticism workshops or using art criticism as an approach to contemporary art. The University of California at San Diego, the School of Visual Arts in New York, the University of Arizona at Tucson, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook are some examples.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art*, Translated by Jonathan Mayne. (Garden City, 1956); Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writing on Art and Artists* (Baltimore, 1972).

<sup>3</sup>Lionello Venturi's *History of Art Criticism* (New York, 1964) is the only historical survey I know of. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt's *The Triumph of Art for the Public* (Garden City, 1979) reprints mainly *Salons*, from 1785-1848 (Heinrich Heine's 1831 *Salon* is particularly fresh).

<sup>4</sup>Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, (September 3, 1973), pp. 188-90.

<sup>5</sup>In his art magazine writings, Pincus-Witten has recently taken on the diary form, with mixed results.

# Robert Morris: His Art and His Theory

BY JOSEPH MARGOLIS

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It is often remarked that neurotics in our time tend not to exhibit the salient disorders that Freud first observed among his Viennese clientele. For example, hysterical paralysis is distinctly on the decline; one hardly hears of a single case nowadays. And dream material is noticeably less inclined to exhibit the classical forms of Freud's paradigm cases. A possible explanation suggests that neurotics are very well informed about Freud's theories and findings. Perhaps their unconscious is literate enough to invent puzzles decipherable on the assumption that clinical subjects express their disorders in ways informed by their particular grasp of Freudian speculations. Even if this is somewhat uncertain in therapeutic circles, a very strong analogue obtains in the context of producing art. Certainly, the advent of so-called conceptual art is quite unintelligible unless one concedes that practicing artists are essentially re-

sponding to conventional theories of the nature of an artwork—which, in a way, they are thereby undermining.

To concede even this modest and somewhat well-worn adjustment with regard both to neurosis and art is to concede the theory-laden nature of all human endeavors. Consequently, we see at a stroke that it is quite impossible to understand paintings and sculptures for instance in purely perceptual terms. What is perhaps not so obvious is that the admission, seemingly natural enough, entails a complete reversal of aesthetic theories of the fifties and sixties—notably focused in the work of Monroe Beardsley<sup>1</sup> and Frank Sibley<sup>2</sup>. For, by and large, in Beardsley's and Sibley's views, the aesthetic is essentially identified with a certain sensitivity to sensory perception relatively uncontaminated by nonperceptual background information and theory.<sup>3</sup>

Symptomatically, neither Beardsley nor Sibley—the most discussed Anglo-American aestheticians of the fifties and early sixties—offered a theory of the nature of artworks. And, at least since the late sixties, the principal speculations about art—for instance, the views of Nelson Goodman, Wollheim, George Dickie, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and myself—have all, in rather different ways, attempted to come to terms with the ineliminably nonperceptual features of art.<sup>4</sup> For example, these theorists have emphasized symbolic functions, problems with forgeries, causal conditions of production, intentional and historical factors, background information, conceptual presuppositions, informing theories, ontic properties, conditions of individuation and reidentification, interpretive contributions, and notational constraints. On any promising view, it proves to be quite impossible to characterize artworks in purely perceptual terms if even a portion of such considerations are admitted to be strongly characteristic of them. The ontology of art has, therefore, become once again the relationship between human culture and physical nature and puzzles about the relationship between the conventional, or at least culturally informed, orientation of sensory perception and what may minimally be assigned to the physiological or “natural” psychological operation of the senses.

It is against this backdrop that a review of Robert Morris's art and theories becomes both intelligible and instructive. For Morris, somewhat more articulately than many of his cohorts, has been attempting for a number of years to specify precisely what he believes he is doing with what—for want of a better term—we may call his sculpture, as well as what he believes his work contributes toward the liberation of other artists and of an appreciative public.

Having said this much, however, I must concede that Morris has obviously changed his views and his manner of working a number of times, has himself referred to such changes, has

expressed himself rather cryptically in interviews and formal statement, and himself becomes an object for potentially alternative interpretations. He has, for example, experimented with Dada, Pop art, Jasper Johns' objects, Minimalism, and similar movements of the sixties and early seventies.<sup>5</sup> But, assuming the coherence and continuity of his career, as well as his explicit disclaimers, it is not implausible to suppose that his endeavor is not correctly captured by the artistic intent rightly assigned to any of these movements. In fact, I should like to suggest that Morris's intention is not to make artworks at all—hence, not to make I-beam sculptures, earthworks, mazes, lobster pots, boxes, compositions with pieces of felt or stacked timber, uneven rulers, or the like. He *is* interested in making art, but his interest is not that of producing particular works. For instance, both with the various stacked timber and stacked steel compositions, the museums involved usually buy or supply materials to specification. Morris sets them up differently in each exhibition. He himself remarks quite aptly: "It's going to be different every time, and it's also going to maintain a certain structure."<sup>6</sup> The importance of this comment is easily misconstrued. It does signify at least that Morris wishes to emphasize the way in which the inherent structure of materials and determinate spaces (the setting of an exhibited piece) sets constraints on how compositions using those materials and those spaces can be organized; also, the contingency and temporal indeterminacy of any particular ordering, given any previous ordering of materials; also, the performing aspect of the artist's arranging materials under certain constraints in accord with his own capacities, limitations, orientation, intention, susceptibility to unknown influences, and the like; also, the "borrowed" nature of the materials so used, that must be returned in a sense (true, Morris believes, of all art) to the material sources from which what serve as the media of art are contingently selected; also, the difference between such compositions (rather like the usual sculptures) that are not intended for any particular space or particular building or particular occasion and a fresco like Leonardo's *Last Supper*, "painted... for a specific space in a specific building."

These details are entirely relevant and have been emphasized by most of Morris's commentators, as well by himself, from time to time. They serve, therefore, to confirm the convergence of Morris's actual work, as well as his personal view of his work, with the more recent currents of the philosophy of art; for they signify at least the impossibility of appreciating what Morris is doing, without attention to the nonperceptual features of art itself. But they hardly justify our extracting a theory of artworks that could rightly be called Morris's, or of claiming that he holds a theory conformable with the views of this or that

aesthete. The best way to give a sense of what is missing, in pursuing the usual academic exercise of "locating" Morris's style of working, or his theory of art is to emphasize certain obvious paradoxes. For example, what he has produced tends not to be perceptually as interesting as the conceptual enigmas somehow associated with his artistic efforts; and yet, through all of his statements, it is patently clear that Morris is primarily focused on the problem of sensory perception.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Morris has stressed the need to supercede illusionistic, representational, "anthropomorphic," allusive, pictorial, imagistic, "flat" and abstractive art by "reconstituting" the [three-dimensional, material] object as art."<sup>8</sup> This has led to a substantial and understandable criticism of the vacuity of Morris's materialism, that is usually linked with his apparent rejection of humane themes of social significance.<sup>9</sup> But it misses to some extent the self-perceived irony of Morris's endeavor. For he himself stresses the inevitability with which the objects he posits (intended to replace traditional images) come to be seen as images assimilable to this or that convention.<sup>10</sup> Also, the replacement intended is particularly relevant only to the art of the sixties. On Morris's view, it, too, is to be superseded—this time (in the seventies) by "the reclamation of process" rather than of object, refocusing art "as an energy driving to change perception."<sup>11</sup>

No doubt, this is not entirely clear. Here is what Morris offers by way of an extended programmatic summary:

What was relevant to the '60s was the necessity of reconstituting the object as art. Objects were an obvious first step away from illusionism, allusion and metaphor. They are the clearest type of artificial independent entity, obviously removed and separate from the anthropomorphic. It is not especially surprising that art driving toward greater concreteness and away from the illusory would fasten on the essentially idealistic imagery of the geometric... Certain art is now [moving into the seventies] using as its beginning and as its means, stuff, substances, in many states—from chunks, to particles, to slime, to whatever—and pre-thought images are neither necessary nor possible. Alongside this approach is chance, contingency, indeterminacy—in short, the entire area of process. Ends and means are brought together in a way that never existed before in art... Any activity, with perhaps the exception of unfocused play, projects some more or less specific end and in this sense separates the process from the achievement. But images need not be identified with ends in art. Although priorities do exist in the work



under discussion, they are not preconceived imagistic ones. The priorities have to do with acknowledging and even predicting perceptual conditions for the work's existence. Such conditions are neither forms nor ends nor part of the process. Yet they are priorities and can be intentions...What art now has in its hands is mutable stuff which need not arrive at the point of being finalized with respect to either time or space. The notion that work is an irreversible process ending in a static icon-object no longer has much relevance. The detachment of art's energy from the craft of tedious object production has further implications. This reclamation of process refocuses art as an energy driving to change perception.<sup>12</sup>

This statement, together with the clear message of Morris's "Aligned with Nazca," pretty well gives us his view both of the general history of art—in particular, of the movements of the sixties and turn into the seventies, with which he has been associated—and of what is to be undertaken in contemporary American art. But it is a rather complicated statement and must at least be read in the spirit in which the earlier, admittedly relevant clues to his work are seen to be fundamentally incomplete and potentially misleading.

Now, there is no reason to suppose that artists are always the best and clearest commentators on their work. There is no good reason to suppose that artists, apparently theorizing about art, are actually doing so. Morris's statements are, as it happens, comparatively clear and straightforward. They are enigmatic, however, largely because they are opposed to whatever has already been achieved, because the new direction hinted at cannot be entirely grasped by those who are not actually engaged in pursuing that new undertaking, because the theoretical character of these statements (whether inspiration, incentive, insult, speculation, or pose) is not entirely obvious, and because the idiom may be either deliberately paradoxical or deliberately intended to flirt with the incoherent and impossible.

I believe the statement cited goes a long way toward clarifying what Morris intended or had in mind in producing a good many of his familiar pieces. For example, it is clear that, in his masses of mixed materials (some manufactured stuffs), in the timber and steel assemblages, in the felt bundles dropped from a small height, Morris intends to supercede both conventional representational painting and sculpture and Minimalist particulars, that is, particular physical objects placed in a fixed way in a given site. He wishes to experiment with indeterminacies or contingencies of various kinds—which he understands primarily in temporal and spatial terms—within structured constraints that are quite unlike those associated with the objects of

the practices being replaced. Interestingly, in the idiom of current analytic philosophy, Morris has turned to the art of concrete masses rather than of concrete sortals—mud and wire and timber and steel rather than beams and boxes and images. In doing so, however, he cannot escape (and is aware that he cannot) the inevitable equivocation on masses and sortals: hence, earthworks (for instance) turn out to be particular earthworks perceptually fixed here and now. To see the glimmer of a clue in this, to the discrepancy between (what we should conventionally call) his works and his theory, is to begin to understand Morris's fascination as well as the general tendency of commentators either to fix on the most banal features (for instance, the placement of physical forms, observable physical qualities of the materials used, literal scale, and the like) or to hint at, or condemn, the boring and vacuous nature of what he has actually produced. Seen as actual work, Morris's production is quite akin to Conceptual art, except—the obviously crucial difference—that he insists on working in the most elemental physical materials. What I mean is that what is interesting about Morris is precisely how his theoretical speculations inform his work. Without his reflections, they are extraordinarily dull—or if not dull (because they may be witty, like the three uneven rulers), uninteresting *visually* beyond a first look. This means either that sculpture is not primarily or essentially a visual art or else that Morris's work is not actually sculpture but perhaps some as yet unnamed form of production. Here, again, the bearing of contemporary views of the nature of art tempt us to consider Morris as an ally, because the failure of his would-be sculpture to hold our attention visually seems to point to the important nonperceptual features of all the arts.

But this would be a conceptual mistake. For Morris emphatically is *opposed* to any theory of the artwork. It is an essential part of his program, his actual efforts, his interviews and prepared statements, that the very demarcation between the *process* of using one's artistic energies and the putative *product* that results from the exercise of an informed craft betrays his own intention—actually plays into the hands of academic or “Cartesian” art, which progressively assimilates whatever had once opposed it. Ironically, by that very resistance, Morris appears to give himself airs, adopts the role of artistic prophet, and proclaims the stages and new directions that creative liberation must take. So he says, for instance: “What art now has in its hands...,” as if, by redirecting our intellectual focus, he had ushered in an entirely new artistic possibility never before encountered. His advocates, baffled by the message, catalogue the most obvious features of his obvious products; his opponents, sensing an alien orientation and not at all interested in his

theories, condemn what, on a more or less conventional view, cannot but be condemned—or else ignored.

But his theories continue to provoke—primarily, I believe, because they strain toward the impossible by way of extending potentialities already exploited through a kindred unwillingness informing the work of earlier rebels to live with the received conventions and traditions of their day. In this sense, Morris promises as unconditional a form of artistic freedom as one can *imagine*, which at the same time can never be actually *achieved* in the finite work of any human artist. It is here, I believe, that his special charm is to be found, as well as the meaning of my original claim that Morris does not intend to make artworks at all.

A number of preliminary generalizations will bring us to the essential feature of Morris's undertaking. First of all, it is quite impossible to be forced, as a sensitive viewer of his actual works, to favor Morris's own background intentions. For example, Morris remarks that "I've often dealt with pieces at a certain eye level—generally the level at which they rise from the ground is important to me—and that seems to be to have something to do with this question of reflexive [reference] because that tells you how high you are and where your eyes are and makes you realize you're actually seeing things from a certain height above grade."<sup>13</sup> Either this motivation is entirely private, in the sense that Morris's own choices are informed by it but no one else need bear it in mind in order to appreciate what is exhibited; or else the constraint is ubiquitous, in the sense that all perception depends on the position of the actual percipient.<sup>14</sup> Thus, though it is true that Morris opposes aerial views,<sup>15</sup> the aerial view—at least as far as the physiology and psychology of sensory perception are concerned—is just as instructive about the body's position and disposition as views afforded by the terrestrial. Also, the normal perception of a physical object requires, whether aerially or terrestrially, some movement and change of position of the percipient. There are a great many artists who have not exploited the aerial, though they have not avoided it; and, without independent knowledge of Morris's own motivation, it is not at all clear how we might be led to suppose that avoidance of the aerial, or restriction to a certain terrestrial scale (extremely generously construed), somehow informs his work in a decisive way. Imagine, for instance, that his large I-beam works were installed, after his death and ignorant of his own statements, on the ground floor of the Guggenheim Museum. Is it clear that we should then have failed to perceive his work *correctly*? The question of course is a trap: for, if there is a correct way of perceiving the work, then Morris's resistance to the separation of process and product is incompatible with his own intentions; and if there is no

specifically correct way of perceiving the work, then Morris's preference for certain terrestrial constraints must be aesthetically gratuitous. We begin to see, therefore: (i) that sculptures cannot be appreciated solely in sensory terms—reference must be made at least to the percipient's behavior in moving around a piece; (ii) that the appreciation of sculpture cannot exclude attention to the perceivable properties of a given work; (iii) that the admission of the relevance of non-perceptual features remains compatible with the rejection (for assignable reasons) of at least some intentional, motivational, autobiographical considerations; and (iv) that it is sometimes problematic, regarding the appreciation of a sculpture, how the artist's intentions bear on the perceptual constraints within which a given work is to be perceived. Normally, paintings are not to be viewed through telescopes. But a very large work—for example, Christo's *Wrapped Coast*—might well invite an aerial view. So may Morris's of course, in spite of the fact that they are very much smaller.

We may suppose that Morris was somehow unaware of this problem. In that case, he made a rather obvious and uninteresting mistake. But it is much more likely that we have misconstrued his intention in trapping him into setting perceptual constraints on the appreciation of his works. Still, in what may be regarded as his first period (after rejecting traditional painting), the period he himself regards as having some (potentially misleading) affinities with Pop art, often characterized as Minimalist or Geometric impressionist, the period in which he explicitly favors the cube—primarily because it is (putatively) the least anthropomorphic or organic, the clearest of artificial forms that exist as independent three-dimensional objects, and the most successfully modular of known forms—it is reasonably clear that Morris wishes to isolate “images” of a new sort.<sup>16</sup> So speaking, he cannot really deny (so it would appear) that he has been busy producing a new kind of artwork. It is true that he often speaks of *constructing* our sense of the presence of an object by attending to “varying perspective views and illumination.”<sup>17</sup> And this seems, once again, to signify Morris's concern to draw attention to the *correct* perceptual orientation to particular works. But the slightest reflection shows that that is impossible. The truth is that Morris is simply fascinated by the philosophical problem of perceptual realism: he offers no instructions about appreciating this or that work; he speaks rather of (what he takes to be) the universal nature of perception:

Seeing an object in real space may not be a very immediate experience. Aspects are experienced; the whole is assumed or constructed. Yet it is the presumption that the constructed “thing” is more real

than the illusory and changing aspects afforded by varying perspective views and illumination. We have no apprehension of the totality of an object other than what has been constructed from incidental views under various conditions. Yet this process of “building” the object from immediate sense data is homogeneous: there is no point in the process where any conditions of light or perspective indicate a realm of existence different from that indicated by other views under other conditions. The presumption of constancy and consistency makes it possible to speak of “illusionism” at all. It is considered the less than general condition. In fact, illusionism in the seeing of objects is suppressed to an incidental factor.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps, Morris ought to be excused for reviving some form of philosophical phenomenalism. But the fact remains that he himself sees that if the argument goes through, it must hold not only for conventional “illusionism” but also for its Minimalist replacement—and in fact, later, for the mass sculptures replacing sortal particulars. In that sense, what Morris has to say changes perception (if it does that at all) only in that a new theory of perception may inform what we are prepared to report perceptually. Morris *does* wish to emphasize the theory-laden nature of perception, and in this regard he is in good company in contemporary analytic philosophy—even if sense data theories are moribund. As a matter of fact, in most contemporary psychological theories of perception in which an element of construction is emphasized, it is normally maintained that the ingredient processes that contribute to such a construction (for instance, the changing images on the retina) are never themselves accessible to cognitive perception in the relevant sense.<sup>19</sup> So there is a double pointlessness in Morris’s remarks about perceptual position and orientation *if* he means to instruct us about how to see his works in the maximally correct way. But once again, though there is some reason to think he is a little muddled here, it is very unlikely that that could have been the primary motivation for his remarks.

The foregoing two preliminaries point in an entirely different direction. What Morris seems to be emphasizing are certain phenomenological aspects of experiencing what we perceive—as organisms groping, so to say, their way through the world. Thus, we are invited to consider—*perceiving whatever we perceive*—that every human orientation is ultimately associated with a certain terrestrial range, within which relatively small objects are measured in accord with a certain more or less standard eye-level station. Similarly, we are invited to consider—again, *perceiving whatever we perceive*—that the images

or objects that we fix in a public way depend in some complex manner on construing objects as stable, constant, possessing consistent properties, in spite of the apparently variable sensory information that we absorb as we move through the world. The world of art is particularly poignantly connected with this sort of experience, because the overwhelming force of our craft and appreciative traditions, contrary to the original impulse of art, restrict our perception within canonical constraints of one sort or another. We search for the “correct” message for what is “really” and finally represented; and we are thus relieved to discover that our perceptual intuitions accord with the prescriptions of our culture. We are content with a kind of imprisonment of experience—confinement to the labored discovery of the properties of “significant” objects. But, Morris believes, the whole undertaking of art is pitted against that very constriction. Hence, the phased program of replacing illusionism with Minimalism, and Minimalism, with mass sculptures. The images of geometric forms, tending toward the “monistic of structurally undivided,” focusing the sense of figure-ground distinction but without representational import, returning to the most immediate presence of physical materials, were obviously first favored.<sup>20</sup> I am persuaded that the point of that exercise was, however, to revivify as well our experience of conventional, illusionistic art; for the emphasis on independent three-dimensional objects most distant from the anthropomorphic was meant to reintroduce us to the naive, dawning experience of palpably discovering the solid presence of a physical object within one’s own perceptual space. This is the intention of Morris’s mild speculation about sense data theories: we move through a prepared space (possibly a museum’s) and gradually, as the result of shifting and unfamiliar perceptual glimpses, begin to “construct”—partly through our theory of the relationship between perception and the perceived world—the particular forms of a hitherto unfamiliar artifactual object.

I suggest that it is this theme of perceptual meandering—reflecting on its own habit of discerning, throughtime, the forms of particular things—that links the first and second phases of Morris’s intended reform. The replacement of Minimalist objects by masses represents both a conviction (shared by some philosophers) that the discrimination of masses is more fundamental than that of sorted particulars,<sup>21</sup> as well as Morris’s attraction to the perception of space as *opposed* to the perception of objects.

This is quite explicit in “Aligned with Nazca,” which is probably the clearest impressionistic rendering of his maturing thought. For example, speaking of the mysterious “lines” at Nazca, he holds that

What one sees on the ground at Nazca has little to do with seeing objects. For if in the urban context space is merely the absence of objects, at Nazca space as distance is rendered visible by the lines and, conversely, the lines become visible only as a function of distance.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, Morris intends to supercede Minimalism by attending to the way in which, meandering in space itself, one discovers its posited structure—distinct from that of whatever objects are found within it.<sup>23</sup> This is why Morris refused to look at the lines from an airplane. The point was not to fix once and for all the coordinates of the lines—as if the space were merely a peculiarly large sculpture; it was rather to move, at ground level, through a space known to be structured—but discernible only under certain perceptual conditions:

At close range the lines simply do not reveal themselves. It is only by positioning oneself within a line so that it stretches away to the horizon that they have any clarity. And their definition or emergence as distinct geometric figures occurs only with a mid- or long-range view, where the effect of perspective than compresses the length and foreshortening reinforces the edges.<sup>24</sup>

Morris's concern, at Nazca, was to discover "how one's behavior as an observer affects the visibility and definition of the lines"—not the propositional information about the lines themselves.<sup>25</sup> In particular, he seems to believe that he is discovering, however informally, the natural laws of perception; for example: "The lines are both more general and more distinct as lines in direct proportion to the distance focused by the eye. The gestalt becomes stronger as the detail becomes weaker."<sup>26</sup> In this way, he reverses the advice of his Peruvian guides, who regularly insisted that "there is nothing to see from the ground." The implication is the irony that, even at Nazca, the Cartesian, information-hungry orientation, has been victorious.

Now, if this is a fair picture of what Morris *intends*, some rather surprising conclusions must be drawn. In the first place, Morris is speaking not about art at all, but about the phenomenon—the important, even fascinating, phenomenon—of making perceptual discoveries through temporarily extended changes in one's way of addressing the world, influenced (certainly) by the structuring of the space (distinct from the object, artifact, or artwork within it) in which we move. Secondly, every perceptually discriminable object—natural or artificial—is, in a sense, the mere occasion for focusing our absorption in the phenomenon of reflective perceptual mean-

dering, or is, in another sense, the object contingently constructed (in the theoretically relevant regard) as a result of the process of such meandering. Thirdly, under the special circumstances of the developing and recent history of art, Minimalism and its replacement by mass sculptures, and the discrimination of organized space as such, may (on Morris's say-so) be expected to have the best prospect—regardless of intrinsic value as perceived in accord with the conventional practices of craft and appreciation—of provoking us toward the recovery of the gift of perceptual meandering. Finally, the point of Morris's endeavor is, in a generous sense, as much moral as aesthetic—certainly not in accord with the sort of fetishism of objects that (on Morris's view) constitutes the prevailing fashion. The obvious irony is that—not unlike the Dadaist objections of Marcel Duchamp, with which his efforts are not too remotely associated—Morris's *works* (that is, what the convention-bound world fastens on as his works) cannot but be collected as relatively stably placed objects subject to critical review and appraisal. So seen, there is rather little reason to suppose that they will not fade fairly quickly. For the view Morris professes, namely, that it is a fundamental mistake in orientation to elevate craft product above perceptual process, or (ultimately) to believe that there is a proper demarcation between what is posited as an object and the perceptual processes by which it is discerned as such, cannot (and is hardly intended to) insure high marks on traditional scales. The artist does have a hand (on Morris's view) in structuring the spatial context within which our perceptual meanderings are effectively ordered; but to admit that is not to admit the equivalent of conventional crafts of sculpture and painting. In this sense, Morris is only accidentally a sculptor, and his proper audience only accidentally addresses itself to sculpture.

In fact, on Morris's view, in contrast to the art of the sixties, the art of the seventies replaces "the impulse for public scale" with the sense of privacy: "Deeply skeptical of experiences beyond the reach of the body, the more formal aspect [of art] provides a place in which the perceiving self might take measure of certain aspects of its own physical existence. Equally skeptical of participating in any public art enterprise, its other side exposes a single individual's limit in examining, testing, and ultimately shaping the interior space of the self."<sup>27</sup> Morris has always viewed his endeavor as the attempt to expose the "cultural infrastructure" on which our perception and the production and appreciation of all past art depend, *and* as the attempt to change our perception—hence, also, our manner of working—with art. Still, it remains irresistibly obvious both that Morris's work was bound to be captured by the flexible conventions of the very "cultural infrastructure" he attacks and



that any perceivable objects—a *fortiori*, paintings and sculptures that might rank high in artistic value on conventional scales—could, with moderate ingenuity, invite the same curious perceptual experience that Morris offers as a new object of devotion. But if that is so, then we are entirely within our rights in returning to appraise Morris's sculptures in the putatively conventional sense of treating them as stable, culturally significant objects—which, of course, is not to say that we mean to appraise them by appealing to inhospitable standards. Actually, a number of philosophical traditions have regularly emphasized diachronic changes in our manner of perceiving and experiencing, subject to shifting background beliefs and large theories.<sup>29</sup> So it is entirely possible to advance Morris's thesis in a way that is neutral to sculptural taste.

These considerations effectively stalemate Morris's theories, though they neither disqualify what we may call his aesthetic project nor devalue what we cannot avoid treating as his sculptural production. Both are rendered vulnerable, however: the project, because it is not essentially linked with making or perceiving sculpture at all, and because, where it is thus linked, it is relatively indifferent to the imputed artistic value of particular works; the works themselves, because, on Morris's thesis, the motivation for organizing space and physical materials is not designed to yield palpable artworks subject to the usual critical scrutiny, and because, to the extent that their emergence is anticipated, conformity within the bounds of conventional craft and appreciative efforts is deliberately avoided.

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Morris's work as artistically irrelevant or deficient, on the strength of his theories. Certainly, what Morris claims can hardly be artistically decisive. It is, as I have been trying to demonstrate, largely irrelevant: both because the bona fide phenomenological activity that he favors so earnestly may be pursued as effectively through illusionism as through Minimalism (or through any comparable opposition), also as effectively with natural objects as with artifacts; and because the nonperceptual elements that he isolates in that activity (what I have termed perceptual meandering) are not of the sort that normally would inform in any relevantly differentiating way sculptures of different kinds. In spite of the clear irrelevance of his principal theory, Morris does produce sculptures. And these are open to critical appraisal, and have indeed attracted both praise and condemnation. Also, in the spirit of Morris's own insistence about the theory-laden nature of perception—though not for his reasons—it is entirely possible that certain intentional features of his way of working may both significantly inform his sculptures, affecting what we perceive, and alter our criteria for assessing his work

and the work of others. But the crucial consideration here is that such intentional features are not merely psychological (in the somewhat confessional manner Morris affects) but rather (in the current idiom) hermeneutic. That is, they are psychological only in the sense that the artist shares in (or transforms) the public currents of his own culture; they are never private.<sup>30</sup> Hence, Morris's most recent emphasis on the replacement of a sense of "public scale" with "a single individual's" sense of "the interior space of the self" fails, in the most profound way possible, to come to terms with the ontological distinction of artworks.

This is the reason we sense a conceptual discrepancy between Morris's theories and his actual sculpture. Every attempt he makes to clarify his work tends, at one and the same time, to be remarkably perceptive about the history of art and to be utterly misleading about the nature of art itself. Regarding the ontology of art in particular, Morris confuses the nature of intentionality in the cultural sense with private mental states; he also fails to distinguish between physical objects and artworks and the differences involved in speaking of the perception of either—in particular, the significance of perceiving the intentional properties of artworks. The upshot is that his theories tend to defeat our very efforts to understand his work sympathetically. He claims not to be interested in producing artworks (though he does), is interested rather in a certain perceptual meandering. His conception of perceptual discovery is keyed to sense data and gestalt theories, with no attention to the bearing cultural history on our actual perception (though he exposes just that sort of bearing in the work of earlier artists). He favors certain physical forms and materials, a certain physical scale, certain physical qualities of a monadic or nonrelational sort; but he says nothing about the fact that he actually works in a culturally prepared artistic medium, not merely with physical materials. His theories tend to be reductive and increasingly inclined to favor the private. But his sculpture belongs in a perfectly legible way to the public movements of the sixties and seventies. We cannot dismiss his theories a priori as irrelevant to his work. They are irrelevant as accounts of the ontology and criticism of art; but they may, in spite of Morris's private intention, come to inform what he has produced and even what may be valued both in his own work and in that of his associates.

But this is always true about autobiographical statements, particularly those of theoretically disposed artists, however idiosyncratic they may be. Hence, rather in accord with our initial analogy regarding well-informed, latter-day Freudian neurotics, we must read the musings of contemporary artists with a sense that their dreams may mislead us in a new way. After all,

the distinction of their latest reports is premised on their having rummaged through and rejected the imagination of the past.

In spite of themselves, they may be helped to see the essential continuity of their own sensibilities with the ineliminable themes of Western art. Perhaps it is not too contrived, then, to see their rebellion as the recapitulation of the Oedipal pressures of creativity. If so, then it may not be too unsympathetic, either, to anticipate the maturity of their later efforts and the gradual dawning of their own membership in the greater community of art.

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<sup>1</sup>Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York, 1958).

<sup>2</sup>F.N. Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *Philosophical Review*, XVII (1959).

<sup>3</sup>For a correction of this oversimplified summary, see Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands and London, 1979).

<sup>4</sup>A summary of this development appears in Joseph Margolis, "Recent Currents in Aesthetics of Relevance to Contemporary Visual Artsits," *Leonardo*, XII (1978); and in "Initial Strategy for a Philosophy of Art," forthcoming in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (incorporated in an adjusted form, in *Art and Philosophy*).

<sup>5</sup>For a sense of the plausibility of these associations—but perhaps no more than that—see Nicolas Calas and Elena Calas, *Icons and Images of the Sixties* (New York, 1971); E.C. Goossen, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Morris," *Art in America*, LVII (May 1970); William S. Wilson, "Hard Questions and Soft Answers," *Art News*, LXVII (November 1969).

<sup>6</sup>Goossen, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Pt. 4 ("Beyond Objects"), *Artforum*, VII (April 1969).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.* Cf. also, Robert Morris, "Aligned with Nazca," *Artforum*, XIV (October 1975).

<sup>9</sup>See for instance, Donald B. Kuspit, "Authoritarian Abstraction," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXXVI (Fall 1977).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Morris, "Beyond Objects."

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup>Goossen, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup>See for example, J.J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

<sup>15</sup>Cf. "Aligned with Nazca."

<sup>16</sup>The thesis is most clearly presented in Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," Pt. 3 ("Notes and Nonsequiturs"), *Artforum*, V (Summer 1967); cf. also, Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, V (Summer 1967).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup>See Ulric Neisser, *Cognitive Psychology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967).

<sup>20</sup>Cf. "Notes and Nonsequiturs."

<sup>21</sup>See Willard Van Orman Quine, *The Roots of Reference* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1970).

<sup>22</sup>"Aligned with Nazca," p. 33.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility," *Artforum*, XII (November 1973).

<sup>24</sup>"Aligned with Nazca," p. 30.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*,

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. "Notes and Nonsequiturs."

<sup>29</sup>See for instance, Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: NCB, 1975); also, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. (from 2nd ed.) Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); and Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>30</sup>See Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). The point is confused in Krauss, *loc. cit.*

# What Works?

BY LEON GOLUB

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*What works? This article discusses artmaking under maximized information release, towards an equiprobable theory of value. This is first seen under the extreme limiting condition of NOTHING WORKS, NW, and secondarily, in respect to a less extreme situation of partially significant, HALF-SIGNIFICANT, systems of possibilities.*

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## 1. DEFINITION OF VALUE. I.

What all art has in common is its ascription as art, a tautology that is the self-evident basis for valuing art.

But some art must be better than other art, *some* things are more so than *other* things, i.e., all enumerations within a classification are not the same and need not possess the same value.

Value is the necessary condition existing per se, the limiting boundary between art and non-art. It is taken for granted that art value exists.<sup>1</sup> From this, it is deduced that (1) art value is unassailable, (2) is largely decipherable (can be made known), (3) is distributed unequally, and, (4) is near-universal over large stretches of time.

At the same time, art is *known* to be relativistic, and there is controversy over artists, developments, and even eras of art. Yet

“proof” is evident in attributions of universal or near-universal value and evinced in general art and art market practice.

The argument might be termed the argument from history since the willingness to locate value is underwritten through long-range historical validation.

There are general consensual agreements as to the historical ranking of epochs and individuals. Ranking occurs in situations (societies) where ranking in general (the pecking order) is held in high esteem and is a prime means of ordering information. Western practice is highly rank-specific.

Ranking practice is a linear historical process that is rarely questioned because it is such an important tool for conceptualization and socio-economic function. Ranking as a means of selection results from dominance patterns, a hierarchical value system, and a strong expectation of aggressive individual achievement. Value prescription is *control*, and any radical extension of art idea is made *value specific* (as far as possible) and located on a value axis.

The art world locates artists on linear vertical ladders in dominance orderings or hierarchical axes. The art market is a dollar numbering system contingent upon rank. There exist large variances between ranking systems but general agreement on ranking per se. Individuals exemplify by superior achievement that ranking works and occupy *supererogatory* positions.

In highly stressed or entropic circumstances, one gets solipstic versions of value, each artist isolated in his/her ego and/or theory of knowledge but strung out along one of an incommensurable grouping of value axes. The artist must use *sufficient* means to fix rank.

## 2. WINNERS AND LOSERS.

Under the rule of monopoly capital the monopolization of the means of production by the few at the top leads to a hypercompetition for goods and status by those at the bottom...And competition...is arranged so that there can only be a few winners, and under this system even they can never win (consume) enough. So they have to run anew each day.

— P. Hock<sup>2</sup>

At the top of the art pyramids sit the successful, at the bottom are the cranks, misfits, and losers (sic!). Winners are the “money” players of the art world. Winners “psych out” the competition. Losers (who are still in the running) typically suck up to winners (simultaneously attacking other winners to topple them). Part of this is real deference, losers defer to winners, small winners defer to big winners, and big winners (if

they are smart) placate other powers, and, on occasion as part of cautionary shrewdness or impulses of patronage placate small winners or losers. The system offers possibilities of some real hope (sic!) and the “big” idea of becoming a winner.

There are continuous hegemonic struggles to win out, to assert dominance. Much art criticism espouses monopolistic claims and is preoccupied with territorial defense/aggression, *preemptive theory* to forestall other interventions. One notes coercive uses of language and authority, takeover strategies, claims of big historical victories.

### 3. DEFINITION OF VALUE. II.

What works? Attributions are usually declared in response to what is considered logical to Modernism<sup>3</sup> within a particular time frame. A current definition of value: an art area is stressed (works!) when under Modernist definition or practice, it satisfies and/or is determined by (or determines) current *limits* on art. Such art is outstanding in that it is determined under the circumstances of current unfavorable entropic contexts.

Modernist criticism has sought to verify the existence of formal systems as *true entities*. This major formalist theory stresses the reiterative nature of the “formal” properties of art, usually a denoted geometry given “universal” or generalized extension. Its secondary extrapolation specifies that the parts or coordinates extend value through internal consistency and structure or that structure be defined in syntactical logics that finalize in fixed limits or sets.

A more subjectivist criterion locates value in the verifiability of process. Operational value is affirmed to phenomena as a “content” or “idea.” Value has egress into the world, is extended as systems of belief, or at least demonstrates contents satisfying criteria of purpose, coherence, etc. It does the job of explanation of the makeup or the uses of the phenomena of the modern world.

### 4. POWER USE AND ETHERIALIZATION.

Cognition, conceptualization, and logical analysis order phenomena and are means of implementing action. The *means* of Western art are in large part refractions of the extended availability of the power/surplus, the means of Western *capability*. The *means* and *confidence* of art visualizations project the means and confidence inherent in customary “global” operations (the widespread high energy technology and capabilities of Western practice). (Objects can also project contradictory appeals or display “anxiety,” that is, reflect dysfunctional roles. “Anxiety” coexists (uneasily) with generalized “glo-

bal” practice. Power use does not preclude disassociation and disruption.) The “technological imperative”<sup>4</sup> orders data/surfaces in ever more synthesized and synoptic (ground-clearing) views. In this form, art correlates to the synchronic overviews of technology, science, or American power. The technological imperative is the arc of convergence of artmaking to technological visualization. This is how art systems are congruent with or tap “world systems.”

Contemporary artists are “invaded” by or take over current information systems, and sensibility is porous to informational spread in probabilistic situations. Artists often require advanced instrumentation, sophisticated hardware or software. The artist is correct in asserting that these instrumentalities are extensions of the sensory organs and are under control. But most “instrumentalities” are choices of power use in differential diachronic/synchronic response. Power assertion has to do with “big” overviews. These “big” systems are *etherialized* in art, but the conceptual apparatuses or operations are “technologized.”

Etherialization is how “systemic rationalization of means is introjected into Modernism”<sup>5</sup> framed as categorical limits. Etherialization is manifested through esthetic subventions or information know how and strategic use, technology becoming seemingly transparent, transcendent, “invisible.” Frank Stella’s early abstract “ideograms” are declared reference free but topological pointings are to technological know how, systemic form, serial intervals, etc. The Western space dynamic is given etherialized form, objects reduce to their own curvature in space, coated with a transcendent esthetic reflexivity. Such etherializations are vast “abstract” dissemblings of power in now/futurist guise. Even in fractured or randomized states, objects retain residues of the transactions animating technological or informational systematization.

## 5. THE ARGUMENT FROM ENTROPY.

Entropy is the measure of disorder in respect to probability and predicts the increase of random dispersal, the highest statistical uncertainty of a system. Entropy can be interpreted in field or situational analysis for the state of art information and its probabilistic distributions.

Modernism can be viewed as a system or groupings of systems or subsystems (art views and/or world views) in process of increasing randomness proportionate to the introduction of informational variables. Entropy indicates how these variable accrue to or “contaminate” the formal systems of Modernism. Instead of causal linear descents, one finds dispersed distributions and populations or new erupting subsystems. Contingent relations between subsystems replace any uniform expectan-



cies of Modernist practice.

Generally, situations which increase entropy or the probability of more information release or events are anti-hierarchical. Information is randomized (the “strewn” field) and “objectified” through equivalent or neutral-value apprehension. Randomized field perception acts to localize and level-off acute activation points increasing the *equiprobable* range of options. But a near-equalized field does not prevent interference of systems conflict.

The current sense of the over-crowding of the art world signals that overlapping subsystems coexist uneasily and crowd their spaces. Large artist populations and increased density result in conflict, territorial disputes, etc. Information flooding and pile-ups occur, the boredom-excitation cycle<sup>6</sup> fluctuates wildly, and there is futurist conflict over what is OK, what is retrograde (sic!), etc.

Randomization can be seen as new possibility towards freedom (the free introduction of information) and open process. It can also be viewed as corporate takeover. In a “crowded” situation, rates of change and atomization accelerate. Speeded-up events are evaluated through more probabilistic or “neutral” operations, translated from or parallel to corporate information use.

Nonetheless, high levels of uncertainty can be signs of open process. As randomization increases, art becomes more nominal. Nominalist occurrence points up equivalued probabilities of introduction.

It is improbable that randomization will reverse towards greater centralization or unanimity. Entropy is irreversible. Information once released can only be bottled-up by repression. (This is why art and information are real threats to coercive (bottled up) societies.) A primary assumption of information release is that the future can be expected to be more randomized (greater field equalization) than the present.

The Entropy Route Summarized:

1. Information release increases.
  2. Early technologically-typed system spread and dispersal.
  3. System conflict, dysfunctional models.
  4. Randomized fields, leveled hierarchies.
  5. Field equalization? Freedom of action?
6. NOTHING WORKS.

Modernism proposes operational theses and conditions, logics of belief, and claims of categorical inclusiveness. There is also a “logic” of NOTHING WORKS, NS, breakup and system collapse. To say NW is to say that the ranking systems have

collapsed.

The NW formulation approximates total information, equivalent to maximum freedom ("Utopia"), and perhaps, paradoxically (or not so paradoxically), total "noise." "Noise" is information pile-up and interference, background turbulence, and ultimately, the totalized accruals of information. This is a gross picture of randomized equivalences. Conditions of perfect "freedom" would occur under uniform randomness, would equal zero-value differentiation. That is, "art," the dispersal/dissolving of art, occurring under total information release would be equiprobable, an "ideal" not realizable in this world yet sufficiently a prospect (?) to presage NW.

Entropic dispersal brings on systemic conflict, the incompatibility or dysfunctionality of systems. Dysfunctionality is characterized by the collapsing heuristics of contemporary art. The formal linkages are broken and the formal a priori values of art become a stage in its systemic running down. Form is a preempted use of information particularly in regard to its systemic or "universal" connections. As "meaning" is emptied out, as the "formal" or structural components undergo randomization, belief codes shakeout into negative ground. NW is the epistemological awareness that there is no or little ground to stand on, the negative referral of any possible art actions.

The NW Route:

1. Excitation, new means, new theoretics.
2. Devising means to make the system go, *risktaking*.
3. Success!
4. Recognition of the coercions and unreal nature of success.
5. Fatigue, boredom, obsolescence.
6. Again the question, WHAT WORKS?
7. Search strategies for new means, new information.
8. Entropic leveling of information.
9. After numerous cycles of excitation, NW or maybe partial entropized workings, HALF-SIGNIFICANT systems (sec. 13).

Note: positions on the NW route coexist and are codetermined simultaneously rather than follow linear or historical derivations.

NW is a stress analysis: that art is desolving to *terminal* impasses. Rapid excitation cycles occur, a continuous emptying out and reentry of information and depreciated product use concurrent with high art/public expectancy/irritability. Excitation distributed relatively uniformly makes differential verification difficult. Under technology and/or entropy the input/output of information is so rationalized and distributed that items are processed and/or reduced to "raw" data, that is, data is de-differentiated or neutralized.

An equivalued or neutralized distribution would in theory be the limiting condition of art possibility. NW denies the verifiability of art phenomena. NW rejects “objective” phenomenological analysis or any intrinsic coherence to form/content/value. This occurs in the more or less privileged sector of the art world, an “independent” sector but which is in continuous circuit linkage to the corporate mass of the modern world.

As formal syntaxes are increasingly undermined, there are continuing search theoretics to set up higher-order value attributions or to reassert methodological control to cope with NW. These are the arguments counter entropy.

## 7. THE ARGUMENTS COUNTER ENTROPY.

Randomization does not necessarily posit the “democratization” of art or an open possibility logic. One is as likely (or more likely) to encounter isolated or separated monadic positions, “segregated systems.” (“Utopia,” the terminal entropy, is a limiting but not demonstrably a “real” condition.)

In theory, as systems evolve towards unstable or distributed states, negentropic material (the negation of entropy or anti-entropy) becomes isolable. Information addition is negentropic as complexities and relations (power distributions) are reconstituted. This occurs in isolated systems or system parts, although the general movement of art inter-systemically (the “totality” of systems) is entropically irreversible.

Typically in dispersed systems, there are fewer events to deal with, more exclusive “syntaxes,” and differentiated and isolated logics of structure or conceptualization. The “perturbations” resulting from randomization tend to force subsequent pickups to be exclusive and doctrinaire. Doctrinaire and predictive theory puffs a *terminal* unrolling of possibility. The claim to a terminal achievement is a justificatory appeal to both appropriate and abrogate history. If the *terminal argument* “works,” then all the past objects of art will be brought to completion in the present. Reinhardt was the most extreme (and only partially ironic) claimant to the terminal position:

“These shows have been called the most ‘extreme’ shows of paintings ever shown, the most ‘modern’ art, the most ‘abstract’ abstract painting of our time. They are a logical development of a personal art history and the historic traditions of Eastern and Western pure paintings.”<sup>7</sup>

A *zero-point* logic is the “starting line” of the terminal argument. Zero-point logic is the split-off from the past, the *time now* takeoff. As the leveling off of randomization appears “imminent,” there is the “possibility” of an infinity of zero-

point takeoffs. Zero-point logic takes a point of origin along a linear axial future, that is, zero-point logic can only arrive at a terminal achievement.

Each system or subsystem sets up its own sorting out process of the strategies of "Modernism." The artist ( a systems logician) sets the composite formal and ancillary schemes and strategies, an arsenal of instrumentalities, which control the categorization of limits. Such "segregated systems" are staged even while the totality of systems is being randomized.

The most far reaching terminal claim is formulated by conceptual artists/critics who derive exact specifications for the roots of art inference. The argument is prophylactic, moving from the ideographic (describing properties) to the nomothetic (establishing laws). Note the following quotes from Robert Pincus-Witten:

...the discovery of the meta-theoretical basis of activity...<sup>8</sup>

...an art which attempts to question how we arrive at knowledge itself, why we think the way we do...<sup>9</sup>

The hitching of art process to formal inference and linguistic/epistemological validation purports the "truth" value of the process. It is the claim to search out the root factors of art knowing, the means of thinking about "thinking," the very stuff of logic or perception, the very stuff of inferred reason! This is an aggressive *terminal* claim to a most perfect axiomatic and economic summation of the nature of perception/cognition. To set or discover the "meta-theoretical basis of activity" is to *conclude* the permutations possible to art. ("Verifiability" procedures are exercised to rule out more "imperfect" epistemological models. <sup>10</sup>) This *terminal* argument is a meta-linguistic "final" solution to art. Henri Lefebvre puts it this way:

"Functionalism, formalism and structuralism have this in common with scientism and positivism: they all parade as non-ideological. Yet the ideologizing process is clear enough, and consists in extrapolation-reduction whereby *the ideology makes absolute truths of relative, specific concepts.*"<sup>11</sup> (My italics.)

## 8. THE ARTIST AND THE SYSTEM I.

The Dadaists were setting up their own religion, thinking that everything was corrupted by commercialism, industry, and bourgeois attitudes. I think it is time we realized that there is no point trying to transcend these realms. Industry, commercialism and the bourgeoisie are very much with us.

Robert Smithson<sup>12</sup>

We are now aware...that the big 'modern' business concern is not content with the status of economic unit (or group of units) nor with political influence, but tends to invade social experience and to set itself up as a model of organization and administration for society in general...tends to level society, subordinating social existence to totalitarian demands and leading to 'synthesis'.

Henry Lefebvre<sup>13</sup>

#### The Market I:

1. Younger artists, risk, few sales.
2. The pickup: early reputation, low prices.
3. Success! maximizing publicity, high prices, short period of many sales.
4. Longer period, with "luck" into the indefinite future; high prices, higher prices, fewer sales but no limit to prices under conditions to market control.
5. Turnover, avant-garde obsolescence (usually under conditions of market protection); re-commencement of the process, new art, new "successes."

#### The Market II:

1. Risk often combined with
2. new technologies and
3. the claim for libertarian freedom to get
4. attention in the specialized corridors of the art/media world
5. to arrive at media success/world wide saturation.

The value system insures that valued items remain protected even as production gears up new models. The arts psych society, increments of freedom and gratification/pleasure. This has market value in a corporate society that is increasingly satisfied with the increments accruing to art investment. The market process requires superstars and dollar value is linked to scarcity. Naming (rank and renown) is carefully orchestrated. Artists are aware, however, how tenuous "renown" is and how easily the economic and political underpinnings can be pulled out.

The art market parallels and is synchronic to other markets of advanced industrial society. Each new success during the 50's and 60's as it reached intensive media/market attention spurred other developments, art capital accumulation, further spurring market information release and further accumulation. The artist as hero is not *that* different (sic!) from the entrepreneur as hero, both viewed as powerful individualists who introduce new

consumption codes, methodologies, or production processes. Art is a highly ordered product of the material forces at work. This is its surplus look,<sup>14</sup> the etherialization of the high yields and consumption patterns of the West.

“I attach great importance to style. Style is the aesthetic of action.”

Valery Giscard d’Estaing.

The gallery is the “shop” where the “little” entrepreneur of classical economics sells the artists’ wares, and as monopoly or corporate structures grow arranges trade agreements, etc., and the dealer controls, to the extent of his/her power and maneuverability, the international market in this lucrative sphere of operations.<sup>16</sup>

Artists promote their “public” interests through connections and interventions into “power”/success situations wherever possible. It is important (to art managers) that new artists be brought to attention through relatively controlled access routes. The information explosion is functional in this regard until information release runs entropically amok. The art world “bosses” (sic!) try to keep the lid on, to keep the art world (market) manageable even as they search for “new” art.

## 9. THE OPAQUE TRANSPARENCY SCREEN.

Artists monitor the scene or at least those sectors to which their intentions converge. There is a lot *out there* (the modern world!) in the dispersed spaces but concentrated power situations of the corporate society. The artist as a “cognitive hero” tracks the environment from a series of new or novel vantage points.

Wide and systemic information release, simultaneity and convergence, make intention transparent. Transparency is the condition of seeing through the object and/or the continuum of objects, opening up the crystalline nature of Modernist performance/access. This condition is built into the work, the reflexive feedback of transparency. In complex “hyper-dimensional” situations, however, transparency is the collision of mixed probabilities and their collided neutralizations and tautologies.

Transparency becomes banal in the randomized contexts of Modernism. Complex contingencies and intentionality are banalized as artists hit NW. Information and events occur and gain confirmation in “real time” and “real space.” Yet the channeling of competing and colliding “real times,” “real spaces,” or “real objects” is a complex mix of comparative equibalinalities.

There are important heuristic values to the entropic field.

There can be the pleasure of nothing working! a pseudo-liberational model of NW. The effect of transparency is to divest objects of “constraints,” conditions of “being.” THIS IS A FLATTENING OR TRANSCENDANCE. BUT IT IS THE BANAL TRANSCENDANCE OF NEUTRALIZED OR SECULARIZED OBJECTS/EVENTS. THIS IS THE REMARKABLE CONDITION OF TRANSCENDANCE EQUALLING SECULARIZATION. YET THE SECULARIZATION IS PECULIAR, FOR IT IS WITHOUT “BODY”; NOT TO POSSESS “BODY” IS TO EVADE “MATERIAL” DEFINITION. THAT IS, THE OBJECT EXISTS AS A PHYSICAL ENTITY, BUT IT IS NOT “MATERIAL” IN THE SPECIFICITY OF A LOGICALLY DERIVED HISTORICAL OR PHILOSOPHICAL LOCATION, THE CONSTRAINTS OF ITS SOCIAL INTENTIONALITY. Thus the porousness or equibalance of NW.

Information is power, and power is harnessed to the corporate state. This is Modernism’s obdurate opaque face. The information web/technology screen is set as open grid/opaque flat wall. Contemporary art is opaque in how it views domination (power and control) and/or structural relations or events. The opaque/transparency screen blocks or balks entrance/action in the “world.” Transparency becomes a means of reducing action and events that occur outside the transparent condition (in the “world”) even when brought to the attention of the will.

#### 10. THE ARTIST AND THE SYSTEM. II.

The power situation is such that artists, although engaged in “privileged” acts, often shrink from connotations of success even as success is sought. Younger artists see themselves as against or outside the “system.” But options and methodologies are inevitably stabilized within the means of Modernism.

Artists work in the interstices, the loose linkages, of the “system.” Artists do not experience coercion (in the U.S. today) or overt pressure to conform (except the conformity of what is current, the “actual!”). The “superstructures” of corporate capitalism are sufficiently “liberal” and non-oppressive. Choice is part of the information explosion and is an aspect of the aggressive will or autonomous power ascribed to Western individualism. Prestige or financial success reward artists whose performance can be successfully fixed to the “expected” unexpected(!) art moves or limits. Does success cap the power of reproducing in art the tacit controls, contents, and technological efficiencies (the etherializations) of American power? An artist can reflect the radiation of American power even while “underground” since it is to the telos of American culture that art correlates to.

Although the art scene is more decentralized and hangs

looser than at any time since 1945, it is also more corporate in its practices and uses of power. Art information is atomized and dispersed, but it is exploited by everyone connected to art including the artist as exploiter and spoiler. "Guilt" permeates the consciousness of many artists. The artist can be unaware of "guilt" or it can be ignored, unknowingly ignored or ostentatiously ignored! Guilt can be an input into the art process or deployed as a frisson or informational datum. To "epater le bourgeois" today is difficult when many of the means of art are congruent to or "mimic" structures and methodologies inherent in technology and communications theory.

The "free" act, the pure object, is celebrated as an egalitarian transparency, a prime location of pleasure and free will in advanced industrial society. The exalted strength of the artist's individual will parallels the strengths of bourgeois will (mastery) of material conditions. Modernism "demonstrates" that transcendence is a product of the modern world, its transcendental verification through art, thus proving and approving the success claims of the bourgeois world, a piling up of reinforcing global transparencies.

Modernism "proves" transcendence. But "guilt" as a condition of artmaking remains palpable. NW can be considered, from one angle, a ploy in respect to the product/value systems. Nothing works, nothing retains value, this includes economic value. While artists are hardly desirous of going all the way with NW, they can be frequently attracted to "limited value" (reduced) time material systems, products, or actions. The artist equivocally refuses to give much of "worth" to a society that judges by worth/possession. In regard to success and possession, peaking of values, the peaks are leveled by NW. From this angle, NW is a response to the exploitations of Modernism.

## 11. BODY AND THE INFORMAL.

There is recurrent appeal to the "informal" as a counter to systematization. Artists let go of (insofar as this is possible) the inferred contextual expectations and directed processes and formal accountabilities of Modernist choice. The informal invokes the free intentionality to transcend any determinist or sociological enforcement or constraint, to bypass or jump technological systematization or corporate modes.

The informal posits "natural" or "instinctual" response, primitivist or "organic" contents. Informal processes and materials can be seen as the subjectivity (to the artist) of materials and "irregular" means. Artists seek root sources, to use prime (and perhaps mythological) elements of nature, to reinvest perception in earth, water, air, insects, animals, "myth," "anthropology," "geology," etc. Primitivist gestering, "anarch-



ic” markings, a renewed interest in the crude and the “raw,” and the expressionist “deviance” of such gesturing or object making are invocations to the “natural.”

The effort to reclaim the “natural” is also a desire to relate the part (informal partial aspect) to the whole (social fabric or classificatory system). Taxonomic or classificatory modes are often set out in serial or information theory derived arrays. This is a conjunction of the informal and the computer.

Today’s informal occurs in a high excitation culture. Actions tend to be reflexive or imploded or occur as speeded-up pop-ups. Instant stimuli and gratification, the “pop” processing of “instinct” (anti-repression) are, in large part, gratuitous (although rigorously rationalized) byproducts of technological or informational processing, the “blowing off of steam” in the corporate society.

Performance is the putting of body, the intervention of body, into the spaces of Modernism. Body is prior to cultural load, and body performance is the most transparent, the least formal of mediums (even when gesture is schematized). Body is assumed to counter technological control or categoric systematization. Body for all its frantic or “impure” gesture exists in a transparent or “pure” state and like all “pure” states is a derivation of formalism. This is the paradox of body being the least formal of mediums but used in the “pure” state of the ahistorical eventless stage of the “now” world, the “now” future. Object/performances are “not ‘material’ in the specificity of a logically derived historical or philosophical location, i.e., the constraints of its social intentionality.” (Sec. 7)

## 12. THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE.

Feminist theory asserts a historically directed and ideological position, generalizing from events or biographical situations. Such practice is different from and outside of the linear descents of formalist development. Feminist positions, therefore, often cue to social intervention and future goals.

The feminist critique counters male perspectives and dominance, how the art and social orders are run. Such critiques and practice intend to uncover primary female sensibility anterior to masculine cultural assumptions or to attain social cooperations that will be harmonious rather than competitive.

Striving for alternate means will require an extended time span to prove or disprove feasibility. When anticipatory theory is stated more precisely, that feminine sensibility is more “sympathetic,” receptive, a contemplative encompassing ground or field of incipient possibilities, it contends with problems of actualization. What are the connections of art that is more spontaneous, “receptive,” “cooperative” with the uses

of power, particularly in today's corporate systems? When social curbs are removed, will women be naturally or voluntarily less aggressive or less reactive to the corporate society than men? If so, how will this occur in the contexts of technological advanced civilization, and how will women intervene to diminish corporate domination? Can such art reactions occur regardless of the determinants this article discusses?

It appears to the writer that if feminism is to modify the art/social order, to do so, it would have to occupy a privileged space separate from the inductions of mass society, and that such a privileged sector can only occur with the concurrence or tolerance of corporate society (the tolerances under which the arts perform today). Feminist positions are subject to current dominations and entropic/technological inflections, although they might be granted (unlikely) or take such a "privileged" location.

### 13. HALF-SIGNIFICANT SYSTEMS.

Maximum entropy and equiprobability are utopian/anti-utopian limits.<sup>17</sup> NW is the tacit operationalist ground of contemporary art, what constitutes a hypostasized logic of the possibilities/impossibilities for art. Art that "works" must demonstrate an ideological or "material" specificity that is functional and declarative. The fact that "THINGS WORK" is representative of graspable reality, of social intentionality.

NW is a devaluation or decentering of the "importance" of art, randomizing current or futurist choice. The "picture" of the modern world is/was, in part, given to us by contemporary art. But the picturing of the world has been consumed (made transparent) by the reality it depicted. Is our knowledge of the real more real than art can indicate? "Reality" has only peripheral need of art to describe the limits of the real. Art exists as that from which the real world has moved apart. In its sign functions, in its representability, art contacts the real, but this is noticeably more pallid in today's corporate homogeneities and atomizations. The transparency of art is a prime constituent of the phenomenological ground of NW.

The NW devolvement:

1. Mimesis, the activation and contingency of appearances; realism infers action in the world.
2. Abstraction, to reach that "other" reality beyond appearance, the abstract (structural) movement of the world.
3. Modernism, the art object, its objecthood, takes on equal reality status in the world; art and reality more or less in balance, coequal systems.
4. Simultaneity of information release, the up front nature of

the world; reality totals all sign systems (the totalizing of information) and “art” plays catch-up even as artists hitch onto up front events, technologies, etc.

5. What works?

NW has been defined as the limit of equiprobability, the extreme entropic hypostatization. Against this is set the artist’s obduracy! THINGS WORK! Things are OK in the art world! This is optimistic or half-optimistic working habit; day by day pragmatism and empirical evidence of success can be (for the artist) sufficient working theory. Confidence exists in local contexts, atomized states, or in connection with going theoretical positions. This is *sui generis* in respect to any general theory of Modernism/entropy, etc., individuals being refractory(!) or at different takes (time lags) to theory, polemics, ideology, etc. Artists claim exemption! Through free will, the artist jumps socio-historical or hypostasized circumvention. Nevertheless, the more widened the information dispersal, the more porous are any inferential grounds of possibility. Credible probabilities lessen in the general case. Individuals are/aren’t credible, i.e., NW.

Everyday working optimism is riddled with negative theoretical fallout. Artists are occupied with search strategies and differential contingencies. Artists (in impasse circumstances) will settle for or be pushed into “limited range”<sup>18</sup> or “half-significant”<sup>19</sup> systems, that is systems that half-work, half-working situations. Instead of major system coherence, “there are only sub-systems separated by irreducible gaps, yet situated on one plane...”<sup>20</sup>

HALF-SIGNIFICANT SYSTEMS SIGNAL THAT IN A RANDOMIZED SITUATION, A SYSTEM CAN BE COHERENT AND INTEGRATED WITHIN ITS OWN SYSTEM LIMITS AND/OR IN CONNECTION TO THE “REAL” EVENTS/THINGS OF THE WORLD AND SIMULTANEOUSLY BE BANAL AND TRANSPARENT: THE SYSTEM’S “REALITY” FUNCTION EATEN AWAY BY THE INFORMATION SEA, THE CORPORATE COERCIONS OF THE “REAL” WORLD OR BY ITS OWN SYSTEMIC DEGRADATION.

Half-significant systems “work,” but they do not work. There is an increasing problematic of reinventing art under half-significant, segregated, or “closed cognitive systems,” what Lefebvre calls the “space-time of voluntary programmed self-regulation.”<sup>21</sup> These are false consciousness situations, i.e., the artist’s acute (or inferred) acknowledgement of partial, half-significant, or “segregated” means. This is frequently coated by Modernist “definition” or ego-tonic and critical-euphoric language. Half-significant systems pile-up excitations, the loading of syntax and topicality, hyping and targeting strategies and

claims. Despite the virtually continuous registration of new information, the epistemological problem, the problem of “knowing” becomes increasingly up front. Decisions come out co-extensively and “rationalized,” a bureaucratic series of choices and fast turnovers. Under formalism, time (of events) drops out of art. When information becomes a guise of art, time (the world) is again on the periphery of the events of art but in wider distributions of smaller populations and less systemic locations. Today’s activist time-events are part (and attempt to make sense) of the separated or dispersed bits of art process or function, connections to history and/or the future, and the haste of the artist to get at “real” things.

There is a general umbrella of Modernism under which art actions/events can be forced into philosophic/historic conformity, but the synchronicity of Modernism is broken. What constitutes common membership is increasingly gratuitous and dispersed. Half-significant systems strain in positional struggle and uneasy coexistence. Artists/critics make enormous ideological/verbal efforts at validation. Thus, the rigid terminal claims.

#### 14. WHAT WORKS?

Sections 7 and 11 view Conceptual and Informal claims to validation. What else is “working?” Technology “works!” Technology works in the world. If it works in the world, it can work as art. The technological cut on space, its methodologies and physical circumstantialities function as use value. New art transformations are secured through advanced technologies and information systems. But technologies and information change so rapidly that the orientation problem is one of continuous entry and re-entry (space man!). Entry/re-entry probes are vertiginous as plunges are made into new space/body/information formulations. Paradoxically, the vertigo of the space formulations is very “flat.” The world and its anti-worlds, art and “anti-art,” are flat through randomization and transparency. (In Flatland, information is flat, and boredom is the mirror image of excitation.<sup>22</sup>)

What else is “working?” Photos “work” in that photography is hinged to and “verifies” the “real.” In Conceptual art photos as contingent coded appearance “substantiate” or verify theory or provide sensory complexity or amplification in “now” images. In Photo Realism the focus is on an inertial pickup that “works” in that the “interest” in people and/or situations strokes reality through supposed stereotypes. The patent “falsity” of much Pop Realism anticipated NW while demonstrating “good” painting (another false consciousness or “bad faith” reaction).

Conceptual art, Photo Realism, or art based on technology are to be understood as arts of explicit reference. Each is meaning-specific in literal intent. Verifiability is of extra-artistic significance, out in the world of directed social purpose and accountability. Technological art is verifiable through theory, operational connection, and its making. Verifiability is a subject matter of Conceptual Art (also of Photo Realism), art attempting to operate as self-corrective systems (a “technological” feedback aspect). This is a backdoor entering into rational and instrumental frameworks for art. To note one aspect of instrumentalism: “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art...To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity...the plan would design the work.”<sup>23</sup>

To be meaning-specific or exact to things or purposes is to be straightforward in location and specification. This should counter complicated theories of randomization or NW. Technology is straightforward (efficient and directive execution) and Conceptual Art seeks the structural bases of inference to resolve the “problem” of art. But “straightforwardness” is only verifiable through the most abstract of logics and is set in contingent half-significant “transparent” crossfires (of the kinds stressed in this article) that undermine or subvert the situational contexts of “straightforward” ideologies. The “straightforward” instrumentalism discussed here is a kind of ass-backwards nominalism that finalizes a long series of randomizations.

So what else is “working!” Realism “works!” Realism has always been instrumental in its explicitness. “A canon of plausibility is essential so that the passage of daily events is not openly interrupted.”<sup>24</sup> This is nominalist in that realism records what *is*, designating/verifying the nature or facts of “lived” experience. This “works” if our takes on the world are reasonably straightforward and not interrupted by “inaccessibility” or counter-explanations of the make-up of experience and the world. Realism as a theory of probabilistic response to contemporary (common?) data “works” to the extent of its “limited range” or special circumstances (inferred or “representative” probabilities). That is, realism is a limited range sector of what has long been happening to the “real,” sector of phenomenological randomization.

Does “political” and/or propaganda art “work?” Political instrumentalism, partially on political or representational grounds but also because instrumentalism as such, purposes beyond art, is suspect, is condemned under “Modernism.” This article notes how rampant technological and ideational instrumentalism is and how ideological are the strategies of verification. These can be noted as art and class strategies. Public political murals are instrumental illustrations for social change, neighborhood concerns, etc. Modernism could look at Realist

or Propaganda art with disdain because Modernist positions are self-reflexively conceived as based on true art entities. If Modernist hopes are porous and randomized, i.e., limited range, segregated, or half-significant systems, the Modernist vindications, claims to universality and “power” are eaten away. Political ideology is no more or less unverifiable or half-significant. Political art will survive uneasily in half-significant locations very like bad faith art (increasingly the general location of art systems) in general and with class strategies and situational ironies of its own. Political art’s closure on history is trapped in a methodological quagmire<sup>25</sup> of how political purposes are to be construed under Modernism as the general 20th Century cultural nexus. Entropy will have its effects here too.

One could analyze other tributaries of current art. But the above examples are sufficient to point up the spectacle of choice under half-significant circumstances or NW. Entropy will not be denied! Nor will Modernism be denied! Nor will the material and ideological function and power of the corporate state be denied! Modernism is a product/function of the information/power sources of the modern world. This very power forces the arts (if they are to survive with any grace at all) into banalization or transparency.

#### 15. COERCION AND FREE WILL.

Thus, in imagination, individuals seem freer under the domination of the bourgeoisie than before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are more subjected to the violence of things.

Karl Marx<sup>26</sup>

This right to undisturbed enjoyment, within certain conditions of fortuity and chance, has up till now been called personal freedom. These conditions are, of course, only the productive forces and forms of intercourse at any particular time.

Karl Marx<sup>27</sup>

...though man is directed, even prefabricated, by outer circumstances...he sees himself none the less as more than ever self-sufficient and dependent only on his own spontaneous conscience even under robotization...Can terrorist pressures and repression reinforce individual self-repression to the point of closing all the issues? Against Marcuse we continue to assert that they can not.

Lefebvre.<sup>28</sup>

Half-significant system predicate conflicted power use or value. Free will today is, in part, exerted through technological means and resources (technological nature). But the resources of technology are ambiguous in use content and value and breed NW situations. Operational freedom in the corporate state is ambiguous, a half-significant response, ambiguous as to what freedoms are really around and what is the ground of freedom. This occurs in time, the time of contemporary America. Modernist work is in the contemporary corporate "political" situation and out of it, in the market system and out of it. This is another way of saying that these systems, methodologies, contents, etc., are half-significant or limited range systems.

It has been a hope, an illusion of Modernism, of the possibilities of Modernism, of the possibilities of free will, that the artist was free into the future, the most unique exemplar of non-coercive possibility. This is illusory, but neither is the contemporary Western artist forced by the coercive restraints of the corporate state. The artist hangs in a vertigo of Modernism. (When this vertigo is particularly "delicious," the artist can be viewed as a victim of his/her response to the apparatuses of limits and entropies he/she is contiguous to.) To be constrained to half-significant systems is to know, however, that nothing works much. Informational randomization is equivalent to the dispersion of systems and subsystems uneasily edging between free will, banality, and corporate coercions.

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<sup>1</sup>One can refer the connections/disconnections of this argument to Bruce Boice's "The Quality Problem" and "After the Quality Problem," *Artforum*, vol. 10, Oct., 1972 and vol. 11, Feb., 1973.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Hoch, *Rip Off the Big Game*, New York, 1972, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>Modernism is here used in the general sense rather than the specifically Greenberg intent.

<sup>4</sup>Leon Golub, "2D/3D," *Artforum*, vol. 11, March, 1973, p. 60.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64-66.

<sup>7</sup>Ad Reinhardt, "Three Statements," *Artforum*, vol. 4, March, 1966, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Pincus-Witten, "Mel Bochner: the Constant as Variable," *Artforum*, vol. 10, Dec., 1972, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Pincus-Witten, "The Process of Thought is the Subject of this Art," *New York Times*, May 13, 1973, sec. 2, p. 23. Today Pincus-Witten's criticism is more "personalist." In this kind of writeup, the art/life style of the artist completes itself as a finalizing of an art personification. Pincus-Witten's self-insertion into this "situation" is an aspect of the randomization of the variables of communication.

<sup>10</sup>Milton Rokeach, "The Nature and Meaning of Dogmatism," *Thought and Personality*, Baltimore, 1970, pp. 36-51.

<sup>11</sup>Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, New York, 1971, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup>Moira Roth, "Robert Smithson on Duchamp, and Interview," *Artforum*, vol. 11, Oct., 1973, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup>Lefebvre, pp. 66-67.

<sup>14</sup>Leon Golub, "Utopia/anti-Utopia," *Artforum*, vol. 10, May, 1972, pp. 33-34.

<sup>15</sup>Valery Giscard d'Estaing, *Time*, Oct. 7, 1974.

<sup>16</sup>A cool estimate of One Billion Dollars a year moving through the New York art market. Estimate from the Art Dealers Association reported in the *New York Times*, Oct. 16, 1974.

<sup>17</sup>Leon Golub, "Utopia/Anti-Utopia," pp. 33-34.

<sup>18</sup>Erwin Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy*, New York, 1972, p. 6. Laszlo states a theory of a "hierarchy of organized wholes." This is counter to the view of this article, but the phrase is usable in the contexts where it is applied.

<sup>19</sup>Lefebvre deals with a range of situational theses relevant to this article. The phrase "half-significant systems" is dropped in passing by Lefebvre (p. 43) and is not further developed or explored. For the explanations in this article, the concept of "half-significant" systems is very suggestive and valuable.

<sup>20</sup>Lefebvre, p.86.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup>Golub, "2D/3D," pp. 64-66.

<sup>23</sup>Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, vol. 5, June, 1967, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup>Lawrence Alloway, "Realism as a Problem," *Art-Rite*, Issue 6, Summer, 1974, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup>The quagmire appears in most art/political writing, particularly for contemporary situations. See Issues 1, 2 and 3 of *The Fox*.

<sup>26</sup>Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, New York, 1970, p. 84.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>28</sup>Lefebvre, p. 66.



# **Women's Art**

## **A Series of Four Articles**

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**Titles Can Be Troublesome:  
Misinterpretations in Male Art Criticism**

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**Women's Art and  
the Failure of Art Criticism**

**Emerging Feminist Art History**

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**The Women's Art Magazines**

# Titles Can Be Troublesome: Misinterpretations in Male Art Criticism

BY ALESSANDRA COMINI

When Rene Magritte tells us with a crash that *Evening Falls*, or when Claes Oldenburg softly introduces a real *Stuffed Shirt*, the delightfully literal matching of content with title invites our good-natured agreement. Writers on art might then proceed to impose upon these two works a subtle superstructure of metaphysical meaning with monstrous moment, but, thanks to the artists' titles, we ordinary viewers—deprived of the critics' collective unconscious—can enjoy the works on a verbatim level. Truth in titles is, however, not automatically guaranteed, not even if bestowed by the artists themselves. When Larry Rivers, for example, presents us with the full measure of what he considers to be *America's No. 1 Problem*—an electric construction highlighting a rosy pink penis and its dusky twin suspended over a nine inch ruler—51.3 percent of the American population that is, women, black and white, might not agree. After all, the titillating title demands a response: America's Number One Problem—for whom? The Hite Report tells us

what we already knew: 51.3 percent of Americans do not worry about size as a stumbling block to sex. Larry Rivers' ribald rivals in phallus length are in short a fallacy.

But when writers on art enter the scene, the phantom of the false phallus still seems to attract critical, or shall we say "tongue-in-cheek" attention. Why can't we let Oldenburg just install his giant floor cone and leave it at that pop level? And why do writers—past and present—prefer to title David's great conciliatory history piece of 1799 as *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, rather than what it so clearly is, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*? My thesis is that titles can be troublesome: some titles can in fact be the first impediment affecting communication between artists and writers on art. Especially if what could be called the male mode of seeing is elevated to status of universal principle—as it has been in the past.

With this in mind—that titles can be tricky, and that the male mode of seeing has until very recently been the only set of eyeglasses around—let us examine two works which have historically suffered a misreading. They are by the Viennese artist, Gustav Klimt, and both were given tantalizing titles by the artist himself: *Judith*, painted in 1901, and *The Kiss*, painted seven years later (both in the Osterreichische Gallerie, Vienna). In both cases the titles proved troublesome for the male critics and reviewers, but for interestingly different reasons. In the case of *Judith*, writers simply refused to believe the title; as for *The Kiss*, everyone—including the imperial Austrian censor—insisted upon believing the title. Let's consider these two beautiful icons of sensuality with turn-of-the-century eyes to understand why they were both so stubbornly misinterpreted by their male reviewers.

Concerning the earlier picture, *Judith*: in spite of the fact that Klimt had specially designed a frame which unequivocally identified the work in large letters as "Judith and Holofernes," people just would not, or could not, believe that Klimt had intended, in his unmistakably contemporary-looking femme fatale, a portrayal of the pious Jewish widow and plucky heroine of the Apocrypha's *Book of Judith*. As earlier depictions had always shown, Judith never actually enjoyed her dreadful, God-given task of saving the Israelites by decapitating Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army whom she had beguiled into drinking himself into a drunken stupor before the question of serious sexual activity could arise. Surely Klimt had made a mistake, argued his critics and admirers. He must have meant *Salome*—that favorite femme fatale of Gustave Moreau, Max Klinger, Edvard Munch, Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, and Richard Strauss. Decapitation of the male by the female meant only one thing to the Symbolist generation—the lurking, lusting presence of a Salome. In that misogynous

period during which exclusively male fears were projected as universal concerns, in this case “castration” by a predatory female, the awesome Salome theme was taken up in all media, from literature and opera to the visual arts. Knowingly, art critics recognized the look on Klimt’s so-called Judith—with her half-closed eyes, flared nostrils, parted lips, and glistening white teeth—as an expression of swooning rapture that went all the way back to Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. There was no mistaking the very physical climax conveyed in both images. What made the frankly-expressed orgasm of Klimt’s female so shocking was the hideous circumstances under which it was achieved—at the mortal expense of her partner. *Judith* was consistently and stubbornly listed and reviewed throughout Klimt’s lifetime as “Salome.” What no one was prepared to concede was Klimt’s audacious interpretation.

Seven years later, in 1908, Klimt tried again: he painted a second, life-size version, showing more of both protagonists, and resolutely entitling it *Judith II*. Critics shook their heads; one writer even admonished the painter in print that “Judith would be better renamed Salome,” and both *Judiths* began to appear in contemporary magazines as illustrations for articles concerning or tracing the theme of Salome.<sup>1</sup> In these articles the identifying frame for the earlier *Judith* was deleted and the cephaloferic siren was firmly identified as “Salome.”

In the face of all this resistance, why was Klimt so unshakable on the point that his so-called “Salomes” were really *Judiths*? And why had he so blatantly transformed the thwarted lust of the historic Holofernes in to the unabashed eroticism of a modern woman? Perhaps because he remembered the Bible legends better than did his critics: Salome had received the head of John the Baptist from Herod Antipas as the reward for her dancing. No matter how much she made over her trophy later, she had not *herself* beheaded the donor. Whereas Judith had. She was Lust’s personal executioner—and thus, for Klimt, the far more spellbinding representative of Eros; just as the blood-thirsty Clytemnestra of Hofmannsthal and Strauss was an enthralling one-woman spectacle guaranteed to produce goose-bumps for those brave enough to sit through the 1909 premiere of *Electra*.

Klimt had twice presented Judith as a Salome, and if male critics jumped to the right conclusion—sex—while insisting on the wrong title—Salome—so these same writers inexplicably put on puritanical blinkers when dealing with Klimt’s glorious and almost reverent celebration of Eros, *The Kiss*. Here, in this easy-to-read image of a gold-garmented couple kneeling in an embrace at the edge of a flowery field, was a chaste, beautiful hymn to love, refreshingly different from those morbid “kisses” recently forced upon the art world by Munch—frightening

kisses in which, according to Strindberg, was depicted “the fusion of two beings, the smaller of which, shaped like a carp, seems on the point of devouring the larger, as is the habit of vermin, microbes, vampires [Munch’s actual title for several of his kissing-couple motifs] and women.” Klimt’s version, writers noted with relief, was closer in spirit to Rodin’s robust *Kiss* of 1886; both attested the mutuality of desire. Klimt’s *Kiss* was even more acceptable than the Frenchman’s, mused the Viennese critics cloyingly, since the Austrian lovers did not simultaneously engage in heroic nudity, but were circumspectly clothed. And what gorgeous garments! On this point everyone was in agreement. No contemporary writer on art looked past the sumptuous beauty of Klimt’s drapery to perceive what is so evident to the modern beholder: that here in the very squibbles and curlicues of the clothing itself was an ornate language of *biological* syntax—pulsating forms that were indebted to the science of cytogenetics and its illustrations of the development and interaction of cells. This *Kiss* had, implicitly, the primary forms of life presented not only as decoration but as content.

And yet the art critics had many clues to a profounder reading of *The Kiss* in Klimt’s earlier works. The painter’s ubiquitous awareness of the recurring cycle of life prompted him to load his canvases, whether of sunflowers or of human beings, with a double cargo of symbolic and ornamental motifs. Seizing upon the self-perpetuating principle of regeneration, he crammed his landscapes and his portraits with overlapping and interpenetrating symbols of fertility. The microscope provided the artist with a repertoire of shapes—pistils and pollen, ova and spermatozoa—as both ornate overlay and symbolic definition. From his observation of the natural world Klimt created a decorative body-fill in which anatomy became—not destiny—but ornament, and ornament became anatomy. Nowhere is Klimt’s principle of ornament as content better grasped than in the great canvas entitled *The Bride*—left unfinished in the artist’s studio at the time of his sudden and premature death in 1918. In this allegorical picture a splay-legged adolescent lies with her genitals fully exposed underneath a partially painted-in skirt. Had critics known about this work—with its undeniable confirmation of the sexual premise of Klimt’s decorative overlays—they might not have been so oblivious of the sexual urgency animating the not-so-chaste *Kiss* in which Klimt had translated the manifest Eros of his own world view into latent sexual symbolism by fashioning beautiful, enchanting shapes that cumulatively impressed themselves and their meaning upon the beholder’s unconscious. In *The Kiss* Klimt had pieced together a shimmering facade of voluptuous ornament which could be seen as just that, or more, according to what was in the eye of the beholder. Thus, in an

age of lingering Victorian (or Franz Josefian) repression, when biblical Salomes were enthusiastically contemplated, but pure kisses were demanded by society, the drastically straightforward sexuality presented in *The Kiss* was able not only to pass the unblinking eye of the imperial censor but also to be accepted by the general public, so seductively distracting was the sheer beauty of the gold and silver garments in which erect rectangles and oculated spirals explicitly acted out the ultimate implication of the painting's title. That troublesome title with which, in this instance, contemporary male critics did not tinker, preferring to misread the work!

And what of today? Misinterpretations in male art criticism still abound, particularly in regard to work by women painters. When a male artist depicts a female nude, the result is understood—as in centuries past—to be a sensual statement. When a female artist paints a male nude, the work is very likely to be interpreted as essentially a *sensationalist*. Literary criticism has interpreted as essentially a *sensationalist* statement.

Literary criticism has certainly displayed similar variations of interpretation according to the sex of the critic and of the author under scrutiny, but it has also come up with new viewpoints. Recent scholarship has demonstrated, for example, that Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is not "secretly" about the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (soon to be her husband). Amazingly, it is first and foremost about Mary Shelley!<sup>2</sup> If Adam can write about Adam and Eve, Eve can write about Eve and Adam.

Returning to art criticism, if Adam can paint Eve or Adam, Eve can paint Adam or Eve. And if in the 1970's Kyra Sullivan can produce delicately tinted life-size triptychs of her husband as a nude Dionysus responding to the presence of his wife in Elysium, and Sylvia Sleigh can depict herself as frankly appreciative of Philip Golub's luscious body—a candor which in Klimt's age would have been impossible—then perhaps we will have no further misinterpretations of art works, whatever their titles. Perhaps now with so many first-rate female writers at work, the lopsided focus of critical attention will be righted, and an even break will be given to the multiple—male *and* female—readings of a work of art.

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<sup>1</sup>See *Die Kunst*, 3, 1901, p. 540, and also the "Salome"—identified color reproduction facing the article on Klimt by Hugo Haberfeld, *Die Kunst*, 25, 1912, opposite p. 173. As early as 1903 *Die Kunst* featured an article on the Salome theme (E.W. Bredt, "Die Bilder der Salome," 7, pp. 249-254). Klimt's *Judith (I)* was reproduced without its frame in the Haberfeld article cited above.

<sup>2</sup>See Sandra M. Gilbert's persuasive article, "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve," *Feminist Studies*, 4, (June, 1978), pp. 48-73.

# Women's Art and the Failure of Art Criticism

BY LAWRENCE ALLOWAY

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I

*Well, this is the one continent where no woman has ever set foot; I can't say that it is any better on that account.*

*Richard E. Byrd (Rear Admiral, USN) on Antarctica, Alone, New York, 1938. p. 97.*

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Art criticism is often represented as a kind of writing that necessarily precedes art history. Art history is thought to derive from the critics' prior enterprising work, but the idea needs to be tested. So far as the woman's movement in art is concerned this relationship does not hold. Art historians have responded to the revisionary impulse of feminism with a promptness and conviction absent from art criticism. Women artists previously missing from the history of art have been restored to it and iconographical studies have developed insights based on the perspectives of feminism. Gloria Orenstein has pointed out that this research has been presented regularly at the annual meetings of the College Art Association since 1973,<sup>1</sup> which given the chronology of the feminist movement in art is very early. None of this work seems to be the result of preceeding stimulation by art critics.

The starting point of women's studies at the CAA is the 1972 panel on "Eroticism and Female Imagery in the Art of the 19th Century" arranged by Linda Nochlin<sup>2</sup>. She pointed out that "erotic imagery is no more controlled by mere personal fantasy in vacuo than any other type of image in art." As Edward Sapir wrote: "Every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or an implicit sense<sup>3</sup>." Nochlin's sense of the network of communications including art enabled her and other panel members to take an ideological view of eroticism. In addition to the notion of women as actors for a male audience, there is a greater awareness of the sexual realm as it involves women. For instance, Marcia Allentuck discussed the reclining figure in Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (Detroit Institute of Arts) in these terms: "Her breasts are distinctly in a detumescent state; there are no engorged nipples," but nevertheless "along the female's somewhat swollen face is the suggestion of the measles-like rash characteristic of the last stages of orgasm among many women<sup>4</sup>." Allentuck's analysis of the "eroticised" figure, her word, is conducted with the precision formerly reserved for figures in History Painting, in which past and future actions are condensed in a single present gesture. This new sensitivity to the sexual content of imagery is a subject to which we shall return.

At the CAA in the following year 1973 there was a panel on "Women in Art and Art History: Past, Present, and Future," with discussions on the imagery of women in Chinese painting, seicento Italy, and Manet, and of women artists in the 16th and 19th centuries. The latter study pointed out the inequity of male-oriented art history as shown by the neglect of Susan Macdonald Eakins. In 1975, Eleanor Tufts, a contributor to the first panel, ran one herself on "Women Artists from the Age of Chivalry to the New Deal"; also in this year there was a panel called "Women Artists Honor Women Artists<sup>5</sup>." Nochlin's panel consisted of five women and five men, but the contributors to later panels are exclusively women. It is clear that this revisionary research and argument developed parallel to, was part of, the emerging feminist movement. The question is, why were art critics not similarly inspired?

Art critics as a group have been unresponsive to the subject of feminism. Women artists have produced the work and in some cases ensured its consultability, arranging exhibitions or running co-operative galleries, but most critics have not taken these opportunities to extend their subject matter. It is not that critics have examined the women's movement and decided in print that it does not constitute a legitimate domain. Few have addressed the topic at all; usually the matter has gone by default. Because exhibitions are numerous and critics follow



the exhibition calendar, they can appear to be busy and up-to-date, even when they are negligent.

Women art critics are not automatically identified with feminism of course. They have contributed a large share of the reviews published in the New York-based art magazines since the 1950s, but without revealing any pronounced interest in artists of their own sex. On the contrary, they are not markedly different in their sources of judgment and their expectations of art from male reviewers. Their attitude is one of short-term professional performance, not taking political sides, but attentive to stylistic shifts and leads. They tend to be patriotic, preferring American to European art, pro-abstract if anything, and usually on the side of the artist. The majority of reviews are favorable, not only because editors are pleased not to irritate their advertisers, the art galleries, but because many reviewers feel complicity with the artists. The market enters art criticism via the dependence of reviewers on exhibiting artists. There is no market for women's art as such and perhaps for this reason no literature on it has developed in the magazines. The literary faculty has never received its licence to burble affirmatively in the area of women's art.

When the Tamarind Lithography Workshop published its statistical survey in 1972,<sup>6</sup> the disparity of attention given to men and women artists in the art magazines was clearly demonstrated. The four New York journals generate a lot of messages, but few of them are pro-feminist. However, the magazines seem too diverse to justify a simple conspiracy theory. The post-Thomas B. Hess *Art News* from 1972 was oriented towards news, but not news of a political sort. *Artforum*, under John Coplans' editorship, 1971-1977, changed a good deal from its 60s image (which is what most people still mean when they talk about the magazine), but did not move towards feminism. *Art in America* became more securely keyed to the current art scene under the editorship of Brian O'Doherty in the early 70s, but preserved a conventional distance from feminism. *Arts Magazine*, edited by Richard Martin since 1973, has been stylistically diverse in its coverage but with no feminist predisposition. What the magazines published by their writers was a continuous welter of homages to creativity. Analysis is restricted to the details of style and rarely expands to a contextual view of art in society. Political issues were avoided by writers who stressed, as it were, the "art" of the artist in separation from the society in which the artist is embedded.

Briefly, there is a patronage structure centered on the commercial art galleries. Museums of modern art are the clients of dealers, both as they purchase works of art from them and as they petrify dealers' initial choices of artists. This is not a symmetrical arrangement: not all advertisers are reviewed by

any means, but the magazines are cued by the exhibition schedule at large and thus ratify decisions initiated in the market. Art critics conceal their conformity to this situation by the use of writing styles that are poetic, cordial, passionate, obscure. Since feminism had no commercial representation, editors occupied with the relationship of their publications to the market, were under no pressure to lead their writers in the direction of women's art. Linda Nochlin's article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", the key piece in a special number of *Art News*, January, 1971, was available to the art world. It was the first application of emerging feminist values to art; artists and art historians acted on its arguments but critics, with their dependence on the given form of the art world, were protected from it. (The impact of the essay is suggested incidentally by the fact that this issue of *Art News* was widely stolen from University libraries.) I shall use the term "the art critic" fairly often here: typological writing has its limits and risks, but I hope the emergence of a general pattern will compensate for any vagueness. In any case, there is no need to single out individuals for blame, when the faults are so widespread.

One thing that is wrong with the theory that it is the destiny of art criticism to precede the rest of the literature on art is that it does not take account of the real form of the distribution of information. Knowledge about art is now too extensive to originate from a single node or be disseminated in a single path or sequence. The capacity of the art critic to originate significant material is shared with others in the field: artists as writers, art historians, and probably some kind of grass-roots pattern of opinion change. It was artists as writers who provided the first and unrevised definition of Minimal art in the 1960s (Robert Morris and Don Judd) and it was art historians who introduced the new information about women's art in the 70s. The proliferation of other sources supplementary to art criticism and possibly competitive threatens the centrality of the art critic, unless he or she feels the responsibility of attempting to write comprehensively. The evidential expectations of art criticism are casual compared to those of art history, so that critics have the potential to be freely responsive to present work, to extrapolate boldly from what they see. Free of the bookish restraints of art history they are in a position to speculate and follow hunches, but not many critics take the chance.

Different indeed opposed positions have emerged among art historians. There is the position declared in the title of Nochlin's article, "Why have there been no great women artists?" The other view is given by Eleanor Tufts; "Why is so little known about great women artists of the past?"<sup>7</sup> Nochlin offers a sociological and historical explanation for the comparative

marginality of women artists in traditional culture. In opposition to the view of women as the victims of their social and educational roles is Tufts' assumption that in fact, women's art is great, though the term has been withheld. Her feeble positivism is not convincing: until the 19th century, women artists were efficiently subdued.

Critics have simply ignored this issue, but the choice between the idea of women as victims or women as covert victors is important, not only as an evaluation of history but as an attitude to present culture. How can critics evade such problems in a decade marked by abundant art by women artists? Many critics seem to rely on an assumed but rarely explicated criterion of pure visibility, an approach which of course isolates the work of art from both iconography and society. Many critics rely essentially on a kind of eclectic estheticism to filter the art they see. It is eclectic because it is loosely compounded of fragments of Art for Art's Sake (visual and manual refinement, the *je ne sais quoi*) and classicizing design (formal structure). The critic can draw on elements of touch and color, on composition and balance to remove art from the world of social facts and causal objects. However, this estheticism is not neutral and continually accommodates current topics sanctioned by market interests. Consider the fact that in the 60s George Segal was usually discussed in relation to Pop art, whereas in the 70s he is customarily seen as a realist. Thus, critics follow their ambient cues but without taking responsibility for outside events.

Harris's and Nochlin's *Women Artists: 1550-1950* indicates what can be expected from the feminist revision of art history: the recovery of neglected artists within the existing style limits of their period. There is no more evidence of an inherent feminine sensibility than there is of a timeless esthetic. If there is such an entity as feminine sensibility it has been submerged by historically conditioned factors shaping the work of art. It seems that until recent times women did not have the opportunity to work in the ways called "great." If this is so the recognition of more women artists in the past cannot be expected to change the contours of art history much. Art history however, contributes to the present situation by showing women artists their predecessors. Such an overhaul of set opinions and stale values is precisely what art critics, in their innovative, even anticipatory roles are supposed to do.

II

"We called it the 'cunt' image and looked for it in other women's works."

"Miriam Schapiro," interview with Moira Roth. Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California at San Diego, 1975, pp. 12-13.

Specialized publications devoted to feminist issues, such as *Signs* and *Feminist Studies*, have introduced new ideas and reinterpreted old ones, but there is no equivalent in the art world. There have been two magazines devoted to women's art, the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Womanart*, neither of which innovated beyond the fact of being about women, or seriously tested ideas concerning feminist art. They added to the store of available information but did not press the act of interpretation. The ephemeral literature of feminism, the various newsletters, are tightly beamed to an internal audience: they perform a service for their readers, but do not deal in more widely usable concepts. Thus, they can not compensate for the missing art criticism. For example, it was suggested in a report on a panel discussion in one of these newsletters that art critics are in possession of great influence. Pat Passloff referred to "the standard critic's disclaimer, 'We have no power and no one reads us anyway'."<sup>8</sup> The writer's cynicism leads her to overestimate her ideological enemy: Passloff is applying her anti-establishment sentiment naively. Her attribution of secret power to us does not survive the examination of specific cases, such as the remarks on art criticism in relation to women's art offered here. The fact that we have ignored or discounted a subject is not a sign of the exercise of power but of conformity and of fumbling.

The one critic who recognized the emergence of women's art and the need to interpret it is Lucy R. Lippard. Her commitment to feminism is separate in a way from her attachment to art criticism which she regards as tainted by the penetration of market-values. It can be argued that despite the vitality of her monographic pieces, she has not advanced critical discussion as much as might have been expected of her given the fact that her feminism was formulated by 1971. From the beginning she has been distracted by the desire to find specifically feminine characteristics in contemporary art, an essentializing ambition that conflicts with her pronounced stylistic preferences. If gender-characteristics exist and are to

be found, they should presumably be detectable in most if not all women's art, but this is not the case with Lippard's proposals. Her concept of femininity rests on a narrow style base, compelling enough to inhibit her capacity to deal with representational art by women. She has proposed as female characteristics: "a uniform density, an overall texture, often sensuously tactile and often repetitive to the point of obsession; the preponderance of circular form and central focus (sometimes contradicting the first aspect); a ubiquitous linear 'bag' or parabolic form that turns in on itself; layers or strata,"<sup>9</sup>

This is an early but typical formulation of the matter, consisting of seven distinctively feminine traces in art. "Uniform density" and "overall texture" seem to be much the same: both posit the equal animation of all points of the surface of the work of art. Realist paintings, no less than abstract ones are in fact, defined by an allover surface, but the term is reserved for works that have no central composition or hierarchic ordering of forms, like Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. Both terms relate to Lippard's notion of possibly obsessive "repetition" to which the grid is of course congenial, as in the art of Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt. These properties are really one property and it is nominated as gender-expressive with no indication of how this common resource of 20th century art has been "feminized." The inturning "parabolic" form sounds like a variant on central imagery, which is given again in Lippard's list in terms of central "form" and "focus." There are "layers and strata": are we to take these as ranked one above another (in which case the grid returns with a hint of Mother Earth) or as successive levels viewed frontally (in which case it is the central image that is implied)? Lippard's terms have a way of collapsing into one another, leaving us with less than appeared: she is talking only about (1) allover composition and (2) central imagery, though they are presented with a deceptive variety (redundancy). And what does it mean to be "sensuously tactile"? It seems to be painterliness as usually defined in art but sharpened in relation to women because of their supposed superior physicality. It rests on a stereotype of women as the possessors of instinctual, non-intellectual gifts.

Lippard assumes the existence of a norm by which the sex of artists can be detected. Presumably, if there are female characteristics there will be male ones also, but these are usually left undiscussed or simply identified on a social level as the male establishment. There is no collection of data about observable differences between male and female artists' products or of the conditions under which they diverge. Lippard proceeds by assigning certain characteristics to women purely on the basis of her own taste and various biological metaphors (the ubiquitous bag, for instance). The idea that women's art is bound by

bodily structure and experience is one shared with Judy Chicago: “a doughnut form stood for my vagina, the repetition of that form for my multiorgasmic nature, and dissolution of that form for orgasm.”<sup>10</sup> These adventures of the doughnut are so pat that they suggest a conscious iconographical program rather than irresistible biological drives. Joan Snyder has suggested that “women tend to be more autobiographical in their work than men,”<sup>11</sup> but personal authenticity was a criterion by which all early modern artists separated themselves from preceding art. In line with Snyder’s idea Lippard has proposed as characteristic of women’s thought, “fragments, which imply a certain anti-logical, anti-linear approach.”<sup>12</sup> The implication is that formality in art and indeed the directional ordering of thought processes is inherently male. If this were so, and I don’t believe it, the outcome of gender studies would be pessimistic indeed. The point is that the gender characteristics proposed for women’s art are simple-minded and at best propagandistic. I have no resistance to gender studies in art or any other area, provided that they are not carried out casually and do not enshrine ambiguous stereotypes about instinct and sexuality.

Arguments about the feminine content of women’s art depend closely on evocations of the body. This is clearly to the point when dealing with representational art, the revisions of which according to feminist ideas has been undertaken by art historians. Allentuck’s reading of the graduated sexual responses in the reclining figure in Fuseli’s *Nightmare* is a case in point. Equally the depiction by women artists of similar others must draw upon personal and shared experiences that were not available for expression in the same way before. However, it is not on the legible representation of women that the weight of body-image theory has fallen, but on abstract art. It is as if Wilhelm Worringer’s reading of geometry as the index of the anxiety of the male tribe has been reversed, making geometry instead the symbol of women’s biological affirmation. Basic to this enterprise, of course, is central theory, as it developed in California: Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago met in 1970, wrote a joint text on “Female Imagery” in 1972 and published it in 1973<sup>13</sup>.

Body-allusions acted as a kind of intoxicant. The artists anthropomorphized abstract art in their own image, with an inventory of containing shapes: arches, calyxes, caves, grottoes, leaf-outlines, and so on. The theory seems to have been known as the cunt image from the first<sup>14</sup>. The physiological reference of this imagery would have been sexist if males had used it, but by an odd reversal the cunt image became women’s self-projection. The notion of intoxication is relevant here because it implies the romantic, irrationalist spirit in which artists embraced biological determinism as an asset. The extent of

sexualization is shown by Schapiro's and Chicago's founding paper: "What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges?" The image of a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe is likened to "the labia of the vagina" with "a series of delicately painted folds, which suggest nothing less than orgasmic throbbing or contractions of labor"<sup>14</sup>. The authors imply a privileged womanly insight into O'Keeffe, but the notion of inner space is taken without acknowledgement from Erik H. Erikson. (It is incidentally a contested part of his work.)

Central theory has prospered, despite the overloading of concentricity by enlarging incidental implications and secondary concepts. One reason for its success is the comparative paucity of ideas about women's art, but another is probably to be found in the state of abstract painting. The concept of concreteness seems to have reached a point of possible exhaustion. The term overemphasizes the primacy of object characteristics in art at the expense of the dimension of allusion. Discontent with the theory of mute presence in art had been expressed in various ways, such as the attempts to link abstract art with Pop art, symbolic Eastern designs, and linguistics. Hence, it is not only the need of women artists to assert their identity that lead to the success of central theory; the simplistic diagrams would not have been so rapidly accepted if they had been opposed by an esthetic with more energy than notions of formal autonomy or medium-purity.

Can we discuss the differences between critics and historians in a way that may account for the weakness of criticism that is alleged here? Art historians deal with problems, such as, did *this* artists do *that* work? If so, what was the occasion of the original commission? Is the present state of the work faithful to the first state? The critic, however, gets the work of art before it has been over-painted or cut-down, restored or moved, forgotten and rediscovered. The critic, therefore, deals with art in mint condition. Whether a critic is conservative or welcomes developmental change in art and celebrates the "new," most of the art he or she writes about will be in fact new. The subject of art history is flawed objects, which have to be revived and restored, whereas criticism can take autographic reality and formal wholeness for granted. The problems of connoisseurship, provenance, and iconography are reduced by critics to ultimate values: is the work of art good or bad? This is what most critics take to be their proper responsibility, the judgment about quality. Mint pieces by living artists seem to offer swift access to art's essence and the artists of course do not disagree. The critic's attention to the work of art is also a form of selective

inattention.

## SUMMARY

Art critics see art unencumbered by the problems that emerge with the passage of time. They are free to concentrate on the aura of the work of art. They work perpetually in the presence of originals which they evaluate by an eclectic estheticism. It is not a role that develops curiosity or contextual awareness. Perhaps it should be said that this is not a plea for equal time for male and female artists; my point is the critics' failure to discuss a legitimate topic. If I am right the discussion of women's art in the 70s suffered in other ways, apart from the indifference of the majority of magazine art writers, both male and female. Among interested writers there are two factors which have prevented them from compensating for the neglect. Pro-feminist writing tends to be either local news or when more ambitious is sloganistic and methodologically weak. I may be accused of threatening the feminist position in art by judging negatively its chief writer and best known theory, but this is not my intention. I want to draw attention to the need for more rigorous writing among those who support women's art. Equally I want to affirm that the absence of broad support is not a critical judgment, it is merely a symptom of the way in which art critics think and write within the support system.

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<sup>1</sup>Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Art History," *Signs*, 1, (Winter, 1975), pp. 505-525.

<sup>2</sup>Published as *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970*. Edited by Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (New York, 1972).

<sup>3</sup>Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings* (Berkeley, 1963), p. 104.

<sup>4</sup>Marcia Allentuck, "Henry Fuseli's 'Nightmare': Eroticism or Pornography?" *Woman as Sex Object*, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup>Published as a special issue, "Women Artists on Women Artists," *Women's Studies*, 6 (1978).

<sup>6</sup>Tamarind Lithography Workshop, Inc. *Sex Differentials in Art Exhibition Reviews: A Statistical Study*, (Los Angeles, 1972).

<sup>7</sup>Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage*, (New York, 1974), p. xv.

<sup>8</sup>Pat Passloff, "Crisis in Criticism: Another Look," *Women Artists News*, 5 (June-Summer, 1979), p.2.

<sup>9</sup>"Women Choose Women," New York Cultural Center, 1973. Lucy R. Lippard,



"A Note on the Politics and Aesthetics of a Woman's Show." The section quoted here is reprinted with slight revisions in Lippard's *From The Center*, (New York, 1976), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>"What Is Female Imagery?" *Ms*, 4 (May, 1975), p. 64. (Reprinted in Lippard, pp. 80-89.)

<sup>11</sup>*Ms*, p. 82

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal*, 3, (Summer, 1973), pp. 11-14. This is another case in which artists wrote their own text, instead of leaving it to art critics. Incidentally their text was accompanied by a supporting piece by an art historian, Arlene Raven.

<sup>14</sup>"Miriam Schapiro," Mandeville Art Gallery, University of San Diego, California, 1975. "Interview with Moira Roth," pp. 12-13.

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# Emerging Feminist Art History

BY SANDRA LANGER

Over the last two decades we have heard a lot of talk, read numerous publications, and witnessed extensive media coverage devoted to the women's liberation movement. Feminism, of course, is nothing new; women in America have protested their systematic exclusion from the public realm for well over a century. The twentieth century, however, has seen this movement broaden and deepen, extending its demands for the end of male domination to all aspects of American life, personal, social, economic, educational, and political. It is as part of this larger whole that the women artists' movement evolved, and it is as an application of a larger theoretical framework that its particular dynamism must be understood. Referring to any social movement, Jo Freeman suggested that it "...must not only change but also create a tension between its 'politics' and its 'vision'."<sup>1</sup> As it has been for the women's movement as a whole,

this tension between feminist practice and feminist theory has been the source of extended discussion, and even conflict, for feminists in the arts.

Freedom fighters on this art front can look back ten or more years of struggle to free themselves from patriarchal art historians, curators, gallery directors, and arts professionals. Patriarchal and patriarchy in this context refer to the social system based on father-right that universalizes male experience, institutionalizes the values of that experience in all facets of social life, and presents these social norms based upon power relationships as objective truths. Thus reified, these values are expressed through a system of sanctions that reward upholders and punish transgressors of establishment conventions. The power of originating, or naming, is thus appropriated as a masculine prerogative, and with it the power of defining what is good, right, proper and significant. Evelyn Reed suggests that "The essence of male sexual dominance in our society, which is founded upon the father-family, is the husband's exclusive possession of his wife who, by law, must restrict her sexual activities to him alone."<sup>2</sup> An analogous situation exists in modern intellectual life. Rooted in the medieval university, for centuries shaped by male definitions of what constituted legitimate intellectual inquiry, it is not surprising that the modern academy continues to reflect masculine bias. While the intellectual capacity of contemporary women is generally acknowledged, the legitimate exercise of that capacity has been defined by and limited to those areas certified by male practitioners of the past as valid. Sanctions are enforced through administrative rules that grant or withhold status on the basis of scholarly criteria. "Scholarly" in this sense, however, carries both a descriptive and a commendatory meaning. Applied to a process of methodological investigation as rigorous inquiry and rational ordering of information, it describes fact; but used to direct the proper focus of such activities or judge the significance of their findings it conveys approval or disapproval of the subject itself as a legitimate object of investigation.

The attempt to rid themselves of sexist language, images, values, and aspirations has been, and continues to be, a daily battle, requiring the constant application of feminist theory to daily professional practice, whether that practice be art criticism, art education, art history, or the creation of art itself. With the recent publication of four explicitly feminist-inspired histories of women's art, it would seem that the art historians have been particularly successful in pressing the cause of feminism in the visual arts. In this context, my purpose here is to explore this apparent praxis through a critical examination of *Our Hidden Heritage* (Tufts), *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal* (Petersen and Wilson), *Women Artists: 1550-1950*

(Harris and Nochlin), and *Women and Art* (Fine)<sup>3</sup>, beginning by contrasting them to previous works on the subject, and then exploring their relationship to the feminist challenge to the status quo, which Nochlin suggested holds the possibility of starting

...a chain reaction expanding to encompass every accepted assumption of the field, and then outward to embrace history and the social sciences or even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the very outset, to challenge traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

In her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"<sup>5</sup> Linda Nochlin predicted contemporary feminists would take one of two lines of argument in responding to the question. The first would be the defensive assertion that, indeed, there had been great women artists but they had been somehow excluded from art history by sexist male art historians. Having "swallowed the bait," as Nochlin puts it, these outraged defenders are then stuck with ferreting out the great women artists of the past using the traditional patriarchal standards of value to justify their selections, thus perpetuating the form of the initial oppression they wish to combat. The second possibility lay in the suggestion of a different standard of measure to evaluate the work of women artists of the past, a position premised upon the existence of a discernable "feminine sensibility." Many women artists and a number of art historians and critics have explored this corridor of discovery; thus we have seen a proliferation of essays and art dealing with this search for female rootedness.

While the accuracy of this prediction is amply borne out by contemporary literature on the subject, I cannot help but be struck by a certain sense of *deja vu* when I find variations on the same themes pursued in the first two works of our century written on women and art. The earliest of these, Clara Erskin Clement's *Women in the Fine Arts*,<sup>6</sup> follows the first path. In the introduction to this alphabetical listing of over 550 women artists, Clement notes time and time again the paucity or absence of reliable information about these artists. Three-quarters of a century of hindsight gives us a unique understanding of her introductory remarks:

In studying the subject of this book I have found the names of more than a thousand women whose attainments in the Fine Arts - in various countries and at different periods of time before the middle of the nineteenth century - entitle them to honorable mention as artists, and I doubt not that an exhaustive

search would greatly increase this number. The stories of many of these women have been written with more or less detail, while of others we know little more than their names and the titles of a few works; but even our scanty knowledge of them is of value.”<sup>7</sup>

Clement, if only implicitly in terms of contemporary consciousness, is in current terminology “filling the gaps.” In most of the brief biographical sketches that follow, the author introduces each artist by a listing of prizes received in established shows, notes the nature of her artistic education, and cites prominent patrons and collectors of her work. Throughout the book, she clearly makes the case that over the centuries a significant number of women have succeeded admirably in art by the same criteria applied to their male contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> She makes the traditional delineation between ‘Fine Arts’ and ‘minor arts,’ and chooses to pursue the subject of women only in the former “for want of space.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, she evidences the proper disdain for the fashionable amateur woman in the arts, an attitude perhaps best exemplified by her discussion of art in late eighteenth century England:

It was the fashion in England at this time for women to paint; they principally affected miniature and water-color pictures, but of the many that called themselves artists few merit our attention; they practiced but a feeble sort of imitative painting; their works of slight importance cannot now be named, while their lives were usually commonplace and void of incident.<sup>10</sup>

Despite her apparent adherence to the notion of individual genius and the hierarchical approach to artistic creation, Clement is aware of the social conditions underpinning the position of women artists in history. She clearly states this concern at the outset of her argument:

M.Taine’s philosophy which regards the art of any people or period as the necessary result of the conditions of race, religion, civilization, and manners in the midst of which the art was produced..... seems to me to exclude many complex and mysterious influences, especially in individual cases. At the same time, an intelligent study of the art of any nation or period demands a study of the conditions in which it was produced and I shall endeavor in this resume of the history of women in art - mere outline as it is - to give an idea of the atmosphere in which they lived and worked and the influences which

affected the results of their labor.<sup>11</sup>

Even more provocative is her explication of the scarcity of women artists of note prior to the late Renaissance:

Chivalry, the great 'poetic lie,' died with feudalism, and the relations between men and women became more natural and reasonable than in preceding centuries. Women were liberated from the narrow sphere to which they had been relegated in the minstrel's song and poet's rhapsody, but as yet neither time nor opportunity had been given them for the study and development which precede noteworthy achievement.<sup>12</sup>

With this as a starting point, Clement traces the proliferation of talented women artists over the centuries to the widening degree of access they were granted in the formal structure of artistic creation. Ending on what can only be described as a note of ebullient optimism, she regards the turn-of-the-century "French Academy, International Exhibitions, Salons, and the numberless exhibitions in various countries" as paradigms of the global equalization of artistic opportunity. Concluding, she observes that in these "...a large proportion of medals and other honors are conferred upon women, who, having now been accorded all the privileges necessary for the pursuit of art and its recompense, will surely prove that they richly merit every good that can be shared with them."<sup>13</sup> A tantalizing notion, but one which even today is assuredly premature.

Following close on the heels of Clement came Walter Shaw Sparrow's profusely illustrated *Women Painters of the World*.<sup>14</sup> In eight essays mentioning over 200 artists, Sparrow *et. al.*, consider the topic in national contexts from the fifteenth century to the twentieth. His concerns most explicitly fall into Nochlin's second category of applying different standards to the work of women artists, although he phrases these in prototypically perjorative terms. His position is made quite clear in his discussion of creative genius:

No male artist, however gifted he may be, will ever be able to experience all the emotional life to which women are subject; and no woman of abilities, how much soever she may try, will ever be able to borrow from men anything so invaluable to her art as her own intuition and the prescient tenderness of her nursery nature. Thus, the bisexuality of genius has its limits in art, and those limits should be determined by a worker's sex.<sup>15</sup>

Gallant product of the nineteenth century that he is, he goes on to state what he perceives to be a defense of the fairer sex.

His rejoinder to those “prejudiced enough to ask a question” such as “Where is there a women artist equal to any man among the greatest masters?” is a sexist classic. “Why compare the differing genius of women and men?” he replies, “There is room in the garden of art for flowers of every kind....Why should anyone complain that a daisy is not a rose?”<sup>16</sup> Why indeed! This, coupled with the language he uses in describing women’s art (delicate, fragile, charming, and the like), makes his assertion that he “tried to free his mind from bias” laughable. In the light of subsequent experience contemporary feminists might justifiably contend that try as he may he stands out as a miserable failure, good intentions notwithstanding.

These first two versions of the responses Nochlin predicts feminists will pursue cannot in any way be seen as representative of the contemporary position on the matter. Sparrow is no less than an apologist and his work is fraught with stereotypical assumptions. Clement, on the other hand, in asserting women’s creative equality prefigures much of the direction, if not the mood, of contemporary surveys of women’s art. Her incurable optimism for the unqualified success of women artists in the twentieth century, however, must now be seen to rest on shaky, if not thoroughly mistaken, foundations. The most obvious difference between these early books and the recent works of Tufts, Petersen and Wilson, Harris and Nochlin, and Fine is the decidedly accusatory tone of the latter.

Succinctly phrased by Eleanor Tufts in the preface to her *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists* the charge is unabashedly made that:

Since the Victorian age,....a conspiracy of silence seems to have descended upon male chroniclers, and while the history of art was developing into a crowded and respected discipline, historians have conspicuously, if perhaps unconsciously, overlooked or relegated to footnotes the accomplishments and even existence of women artists.<sup>17</sup>

Tufts rejects the question “Why have there been no great women artists?” and undertakes to answer instead “Why is so little known about great women artists of the past?” This notion of disciplinary culpability and assertion of the need to redress the imbalances so created is echoed by Petersen and Wilson as they quote Lise Vogel:

Where are the reproductions and slides of the work of women artists? Why can’t one find syllabi and bibliographies covering issues of women, art, and feminism? What is the meaning of the almost complete lack of feminist studio and art history courses in

the schools? Why are there so few feminist critics and art historians? What should a feminist artist, critic, or art historian do?<sup>18</sup>

Their book, they say, will attempt to “fill in these gaps”—an ambitious undertaking to say the least, especially for a work which even the authors admit “is a mere peephole into the subject.”<sup>19</sup> A variation on this theme, and an important one as will be seen later, is found in the preface to Ann Sutherland Harris’s and Linda Nochlin’s exhibition catalogue, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, where the authors note their intention “to make more widely known the achievements of some fine artists whose neglect can in part be attributed to their sex and to learn more about why and how women artists first emerged as rare exceptions in the sixteenth century and gradually became more numerous until they were a largely accepted part of the cultural scene.”<sup>20</sup> Taking a similar tack, Elsa Fine’s *Women in Art* attempts to confront the question “Why have there been no great women artists?” by “reviewing the accomplishments of outstanding female artists, past and present, and by searching out the reasons for their successes as well as the overwhelming obstacles that precluded most from achieving greatness.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus, by and large the history of art is seen by these authors as a view through men’s eyes shaped by patriarchal values and prejudices. One of their primary concerns then, as feminist revisionists, has been to “fill in the gaps” and set the record straight. How they have gone about doing so and the premises they have acted upon in the process is of essence, for the question of whether or not there is such a thing as “feminist art history,” and, if so, what its implications might be, may well hinge upon method as well as content. Thus, we now turn to examining these four contributions to the history of women in art individually in terms of scope, depth, and method.

In this context, Eleanor Tufts’ *Our Hidden Heritage* represents a milestone achievement as the first work on women’s art to find publication in sixty-nine years, and, more importantly, as the first to make a case for the quality of women’s art in an evenhanded and scholarly manner. In a series of chronological-ly arranged essays on twenty-two selected artists, her intent is to provide information about great women artists of the past. Although employing traditional art historical methodology, Tufts sets an aggressive and positive tone for the future; aggressive in that she places the blame for women’s neglect squarely upon the shoulders of the discipline itself, and positive in that she leaves little room for further unsubstantiated sexist justifications or excuses for such omissions. In so doing, she abjures the “redefinition of great” theme and explicitly rejects “some amusing and fallacious myths that have sprung up



concerning women artists, such as that of characteristic 'female touch' and 'female theme.'<sup>22</sup>

The artists Tufts selects constitute a series of test cases to demonstrate the validity of her accusation of cultural neglect. Like the now famous civil rights test cases of the '50s and '60s which demolished the long standing "separate but equal" doctrine, these choices are far from arbitrary. Although the author does not specify her substantive criteria for inclusion, she is profoundly aware of what is at stake. If you are going to play by the rules of the game you had better be sure you have a solid hand before you try to call, and Tufts has the professional gambler's understanding of the difference between calculated risk and sheer chance. She gives meticulous documentation for her chosen few, and in providing biographical, cultural, and stylistic information she makes a virtually irrefutable case for each artist's reputation in her own time. Her systematic presentation of evidence contradicts the sexist myths and assumptions that pervade the discipline, and in this sense is a necessary first step in refuting the specious generalizations about women artists typically used as excuses for their exclusion from the standard texts. In so doing, she rightfully restores to women in the arts a sense of pride and history which sets a standard of measure that subsequent researchers may build upon and investigate more critically in terms of interpretation, evaluation, subject characteristics, and style. With the exception of some minor criticisms by Cindy Nemser concerning the lack of "stylistic and iconographic discussion of each artist's work," Tufts' book was well received.<sup>23</sup> It was recognized as a precedent-setting work which dispelled the idea that there had been no significant women artists, making a case for their accomplishments and successes in their own day. The resulting "rediscoveries" make a telling indictment of the history of art in terms of its exclusions. This, coupled with her hopes to stimulate further inquiry, places her in the forefront of revisionist activity.<sup>24</sup>

In sharp contrast to Tufts' scholarly art historical style is that of Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson's *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal*, a kaleidoscopic grand tour of women artists working in the western tradition from the early middle ages to the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the 212 pages with 300 black and white illustrations and commentary, these women's honest, if naive, enthusiasm permeates every page. *Women Artists* stems from a lecture and slide show evangelizing the topic to the community at large, a performance of which was attended by a west coast scout for Harper's, who persuaded her editor that a book could be made of their presentation.<sup>26</sup> Not only did Harper make a book but they also sell four sets of full color slides and notes.<sup>27</sup> These slides are singularly inadequate as to the quality of the reproductions, as is the text with respect

to a clear and retrievable presentation of information. The result, while providing a mass audience with new information, is a superficial and quantitative triumph of consumerism.

The authors' emphasis upon pure biography rather than substantive or critical issues doubtless results from the fact that they are admittedly interdisciplinary generalists rather than "trained art historians," a circumstance for which they certainly should be held blameless. Their whirlwind tour of fifteen centuries of women in art is no doubt invaluable for consciousness raising among the general public and might be useful in the context of studies in the humanities, but as an attempt to restructure the practice of art history it has serious, if not fatal, flaws. While Petersen's and Wilson's modest claims are to be cheered, in the final analysis they have been subsumed by the very institutions they sought to sensitize.

Without doubt the most extensive exploration of what it means to be a feminist art historian is provided by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin in their exhibition catalogue *Women Artists: 1550-1950*. In a sense this catalogue represents an attempt to articulate the objectives, aims, and goals of feminism itself as it relates to art and life. Self-consciously aware of the responsibilities attendant on such an enterprise, both Harris and Nochlin have satisfied the patriarchal criteria for scholarly endeavor. Including 158 works by 84 artists, they have attempted to present the creative accomplishments of women in the light of their society, history, education, career possibilities and expectations and provided additional information on each artist's exhibitions, reputation, influences, thematic preferences (if any) and stylistic concerns.

In two brilliant and provocative essays, Harris and Nochlin not only take to task every feminine stereotype to which a sexist art history is heir, but also suggest that feminism itself is a complex system of values, the application of which to art history may lead to entirely new conclusions and possibilities both historically and socially speaking. Earlier it was noted that Eleanor Tufts considered the question "Why is there so little known about great women artists of the past?", and with this in mind it is significant that in the work now under consideration, the word "great" itself is conspicuously absent. It is symbolic of the authors' systematic revision of the feminist art historical approach practiced by Tufts.

Similarly, they see the absence of serious consideration of women's art not only as a result of omission by nineteenth and twentieth century "male chroniclers," but as a product of the sexism structured into the social edifice itself, that is, as a consequence of the cultural and institutional opportunities open to women during various periods and their subsequent concentration in those aspects of artistic creation in which

rigorous training was not required or to which the value of 'high art' was not attached. In the language of the social science statistics, they believe the effects of gender may well have been confounded with the effects of such variables as class, nationality, social conditions, and cultural and institutional opportunities, to name a few. While introducing a multiplicity of factors conditioning what has heretofore been considered a flowering of individual genius, Harris and Nochlin are not content to simply press for reconsideration of historical women artists. In addition they imply the possibility of no less than a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the discipline from the ground up, beginning with the investigation of the sociocultural matrix in which women artists work, and extending to a reconsideration of categories such as craft, decorative art, genre painting, provincial art, fashion and theatre design, and others and their traditional relegation to minor, i.e., inferior, status.<sup>28</sup> These considerations, coupled with the authors' implication-fraught suggestions for further investigation make the catalogue a primary manifesto of revisionist art history by actively attempting to redefine art itself.<sup>29</sup>

An anonymous writer for the *Yale Review* notes it is "unfortunate that Knopf's production of the catalogue, one of the most important books of the women's movement, is a publishing tragedy." This is an accurate observation, as the choice of type and page design and the awkward placement of bibliographical information and color plates all serve to make the catalogue useless for classroom reference and all but inaccessible for any but the most patient of readers. The recognition, however, that the book opens up "a new past and a new way to the future for women artists and consequently everyone"<sup>30</sup> is precisely the point. More than unfortunate is the fact that in spite of the women's impeccable art historical reputations, only three national museums and one university gallery could be convinced to carry the exhibition. Nor could the kind of public exposure be assured that such a show, which surely must be considered one of the most revolutionary of the mid-twentieth century, demanded.

At the conclusion of her preface, Ann Sutherland Harris suggested the exhibition would be a success if it helped "to remove once and for all the justification for any future exhibitions with this theme."<sup>31</sup> If this is the measure, its success is debatable. Reception of the show through reviews reveals that old myths have not been laid to rest nor was the thrust of the curators' activities even fully comprehended. For example, Jean-Luc Bordeaux in *Art International* considered the exhibition "A Historical Rescue of Women Painters" and while he admitted that Harris and Nochlin are "distinguished scholars" who wrote "two outstanding catalogue essays" he manages to

bring up the issue of "quality" in spite of the fact that those essays specify the show's intentions and allude to some of the problems encountered in putting together such a monumental undertaking.<sup>32</sup> He rates the entire show "below average to good" and comments on the lack of visual continuity which he implies has defeated the original purpose of the show. He then states, "The catalogue is not feminist art history; it brings in broad cultural considerations that must be better known to understand the so-called 'feminine' quality of women's painting and to explain its limited range of subject matter." He goes on to say, "one doesn't find a single woman painter showing the creative powers of a 'sister' such as George Sand and Sarah Bernhardt." Typically, he never reveals his criteria for such unsubstantiated value judgments.

While admitting that things have changed in the 20th century and that women have made 'remarkable' contributions, Bordeaux maintains that the "influences of their achievements is still very modest." He then suggests that women ought to create 'l'Eternel Masculin' to compliment 'l'Eternel Feminin' which he maintains has been a source for "the greatest and most complex monuments in human history." Closing, he suggests that future "...exhibitions of twentieth century woman's paintings or sculpture be organized on the basis of quality alone." I could cite other reviewers, but Bordeaux's trivialization of the show and the issues it raised is characteristic of the manner in which prejudices are institutionalized in language and unexamined assumptions. As such, it is symptomatic of the patriarchy's chronic inability to understand, let alone accept, anything outside itself. The very hegemony of 'high art' implicit in his assessment is what Harris and Nochlin suggested is due for serious critical reconsideration, and his review displays just why such inquiry would prove valuable not only with respect to women artists but in relation to art itself. All this notwithstanding, by any measure other than that of spontaneous, cataclysmic attainment of consciousness, the show and catalogue remain models of feminist/revisionist practice.

In 1978, Elsa Fine's *Women and Art* entered the fast expanding field of general surveys dealing with the social interaction of the sexes in the arts. With the methodological poles established by Tufts and Petersen and Wilson and the substantive methodological issues clearly formulated by Harris and Nochlin, it was not surprising to see the emergence of a more serious inclusive survey of art geared to the undergraduate audience in basic arts and humanities programs. Like Petersen and Wilson's earlier work, this book also has popular appeal and is reasonably priced. Considered by the author to be a companion to H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, *Women and Art* echoes the now

familiar objectives of feminism: a desire to fill the obvious gaps in patriarchal history, an obligation to analyze and illustrate the lives and works of women artists throughout history and into the recent past, and a special responsibility to make everyone who reads the book aware of sexism and how it relates to the careers of women in general and specifically to those in the arts.

Compared to Tufts' selective retrieval, Fine's is a broad salvage operation which must be seen both as a precondition for and corollary of the kind of feminist art history proposed by Harris and Nochlin. Fine's contribution is primarily an educational tool for use in basic art survey courses geared to freshmen and sophomores. Her book is a decided improvement over Petersen and Wilson's mind-boggling collection of biographical datum. The survey covers 93 artists ranging from the Renaissance through the 20th century. Each chapter is introduced with information on the social, political, educational and economic position of women in individual countries and periods throughout history. She includes both critical and stylistic considerations and substantive issues in her discussions both of social milieu and individual artists. She is to be commended for including several sculptors thus enlarging the general educational scope of her presentation. Her contribution, however, is fundamentally one of synthesis. She makes no attempt to further the theoretical basis of feminist art historical investigation. Content to discuss significant women painters and sculptors, she does not question or examine painting and sculpture as significant creative activities. Her wish, like that of Tufts and Petersen and Wilson, is to broaden a formerly narrow and conventional mainstream; she in no way challenges the basic premise upon which such a hierarchical conception necessarily rests<sup>33</sup>

It will no doubt be suggested that there is an inherent flaw in any attempt to compare apples and oranges. The works discussed above are written on different levels and aimed at different publics; they vary greatly as do both the scope and depth of their enterprise, and in a very real sense the only thing they ultimately share is their subject matter. Be this as it may, it has been the contention of this essay that through examination of the premises underlying the pursuit of this common subject and the methods adopted in their application, we might better understand the relationship between feminism, women's studies in the arts, and the more general context of the discipline of art history as a whole.

To the extent that there is an emerging pattern evident in these publications, it is the revelation of a shared consciousness of the fact that as presently constituted the discipline has either relegated women artists to inferior status or excluded their

contributions altogether. In a sense, a pattern exists in that this common assumption underlies the fact that each undertakes to fill the void. Thus, they are all revisionist to a degree; but they differ in the extent to which this consciousness enables them to be critical of the field itself. These works, then, cannot be viewed in terms of linear development, but rather must be seen in terms of their relationship to two polarities of disciplinary self-criticism. The more conservative formulation differs from traditional art history primarily in the object of its gaze. It upholds, if only tacitly, the same long-established categories of high art, great artists, individual genius, and the purity of formal aesthetic criteria. Its object is to prove that there have been women artists worthy of scholarly consideration by the same standards applied to their male contemporaries. All the works discussed above are expressive, albeit in varying degrees, of this formulation by virtue of their unwillingness to challenge the status quo and rock the methodological boat in its totality. Clement and Tufts are closest to the pole in terms of their clear adherence to the established notion of 'fine arts' and 'creative genius' as the proper object of art historical investigation. Harris and Nochlin, and to a certain extent, Petersen and Wilson, and Fine, deviate from this traditional wisdom by suggesting that social conditions influence the creative process and by introducing the status and role of women in a given period as a necessary augmentation of the study of their art. Fine, however, remains true to the concept of painting and sculpture as the highest expressions of artistic energy. Petersen and Wilson and Harris and Nochlin on the other hand, note that social conditions have resulted in the concentration of women's creative expressions in the decorative, applied, or minor arts. Although they suggest that an understanding of these conditions might expose the artificiality of such categories, none of them attempt to actually do so in their surveys of women's art. In practice they adhere to the accepted hierarchy of art historical values. They are gradualists rather than revolutionaries, reformers rather than radicals.

The radical formulation, by contrast, is not content just to add women artists to the existing honor roll of art historical judgments. In examining the social and institutional causes for women's 'success' or 'failure' in the arts, it proposes to look at art itself with new eyes. By bringing a sociological perspective to bear upon the study of art, it dismisses the idea of objective criteria for the quality of art and emphasizes instead the importance of such concepts as class, status, and power in the determination of what constitutes 'good' art in a given period. Investigation of the manner in which these factors have affected the careers of creative women is seen as the keystone of a radical revision of art history itself. If the value of a given art

form is considered less a question of individual genius or intrinsic worth and more a result of status conferred by institutional or social elites, the validity of a number of art historical sacred cows might be questioned. Art, in this sense, is projected not as the activity or possession of the few, but as an essential human activity that has been artificially segregated into hierarchical categories based upon the social position of its consumers and its relationship to institutional determinants of taste. 'High art' is considered to be both a product and a symbol of privileged position and power, which by definition subordinates the 'applied' or 'minor' arts to inferior status on the basis of their utility and their intimate association with ordinary life. Understanding the role of access to institutional training and certification as a salient factor in the productive careers of women artists thus yields a recognition of the social determinants of artistic value as a whole. By extension, this knowledge might shed some light upon the power of social and institutional centers of taste-making to demean art that has not been thus legitimized as significant. Here it is suggested that the categories of provincial and cosmopolitan might be found to reflect not the intrinsic quality of the art produced in the cultural centers, but the exercise of social and institutional power on the part of the urban elite. If women artists of the past must be rediscovered because social conventions restricted their geographic mobility or access to institutional training, if they chose still lifes for lack of access to the nude model, or pursued genre painting rather than historical epics because their provincial patrons preferred the "lesser" form, these considerations might also give us insights into the obstacles faced by provincial male artists as well and force us to reexamine the reputed inferiority of provincial art itself.

One further example will serve to illustrate the revolutionary thrust of this radical vision. If we understand that women's art has been deemed inferior by the patriarchy's subordination of 'feminine' style or content to an idealized abstraction of universal 'masculine' virtue, how can we continue to accept without question the categorization of historical periods as superior or inferior on the basis of their imputed 'masculine' or 'feminine' characteristics? Tradition tells us that the feminine characteristics of Rococo art, its charm, grace, and elegance, pale in comparison to the virile, robust and monumental characteristics of the earlier Baroque period in all its masculine splendor. This patriarchal judgment has also resulted in the reputed superiority of the Southern Renaissance over the Northern, as Svetlana Alpers noted in a paper delivered at the 1978 C.A.A. meeting in which she recalled that the Italians considered the Northern tradition "art for women" because it lacked a rational intellectual, that is, 'masculine' basis. The

radical vision thus contends the patriarchal assumptions that have heretofore excluded women artists from consideration as serious professionals have also found expression in such traditional dichotomies as 'high art' vs. 'minor art,' provincialism vs. cosmopolitanism, and 'masculine' vs. 'feminine' styles and eras. It projects the possibility of an unbiased art history through the application of feminist principles to larger cultural questions in the history of human creativity.

At the root of the difference between these two extremes lie opposing conceptions of the relationship of artistic creation to its social context. The conservative pole examines women artists as a subspecies of artists and admits of but a minimal connection between the creation of great art and the society in which it is produced. The radical formulation, by contrast, sharply diverges from this position in proposing to consider the role and status of women artists and the value attached to their work within a larger socio-cultural and institutional framework. Through re-examining the activities of women in art, it ultimately leads to a redefinition of art itself.

Stipulating the precise relationship between these revisionist activities and feminism in the larger sense, however, is difficult, if not impossible, as feminism at this time admits of no essentialist definition.<sup>34</sup> It does not necessarily reflect any internally consistent or commonly accepted system of thought, and neither does it refer to any singularly specific concrete program. Rather, it reflects a consciousness, an attitude if you will, that recognizes that things are not, and have not been, as they ought to be for women in society. As such, it denotes an egalitarian impulse which co-exists with varying explanations as to just why this is the case.<sup>35</sup> It is simultaneously the most radical extension of liberal political thought and perhaps the hoariest problem of Marxist theory, which from its earliest expressions has hotly debated the proper relationship of "The Women Question" to a class-based analysis.

Like feminism, perhaps feminist art history might be best characterized not as a defined state of being, but as a process of becoming. To return to Jo Freeman's articulation of a necessary tension between 'politics' and 'vision,' I would suggest that the two polarities noted above constitute the source of that tension in the development of a feminist art history. The radical pole represents its 'vision,' its potential, while the conservative, operating under the concrete conditions of a sexist present, answers the question 'But what is to be done now?' Both variations of the current response to this, i.e., "return great women artists to their proper place in history" and "evolve a different standard of measure for the value attached to women's art," are reactions to patriarchal exclusionary practices.<sup>36</sup> Both are essentially inclusionary by definition, and both must



ultimately, if tacitly, confront the question of why the work of women has been considered inferior, for this is the critical point. Thus, the prior question, "Why have there been no great women artists?" provides the fundamental dynamic of feminist art historical practice; it is a device for raising new questions and suggesting new methodologies that transcend the traditional boundaries and challenge the traditional assumptions of the discipline.

Ann Sutherland Harris expressed the hope that the exhibition "Women Artists: 1550-1950" would "remind us how often the 'objective art historian' functions as 'subjective critic,' as often by the decision to omit an artist as by condemning her work in print."<sup>37</sup> Thus the key to a feminist art history may well lie at the interface between art history and criticism, and as such it asserts the necessity of re-examining the past in terms of present consciousness. Lucy Lippard has given us a cogent insight into this process for a feminist critic:

I know now that I have not only to analyze my own (acculturated) taste but also to translate it into a value system which can universalize the task. (Male experience is already universal.) I have not only to re-examine the psychological and social motivations of myself and the artists I write about, but also to find out what the prevalent metaphors refer to beyond themselves. I have to develop a temperamental consciousness into a cultural consciousness. So while I wish I could claim to be establishing a new feminist criticism, all I am doing at the moment is extending the basic knowledge of art by women, providing the raw material for such a development. The ongoing process which forms my own criticism will produce neither conclusions nor solutions, but will, I hope, engender more questions, more dialogue, more investigations on the part of women artists and critics as well as myself.<sup>38</sup>

What are the implications of this process for the development of a feminist art history? I suggest they would take the form of a series of questions feminist researchers must confront in bringing their consciousness of women's historical oppression to bear upon any particular art historical task. What implicit assumptions underlie my definition of a specific art historical problem? How do these influence my choice of method? Can the method I choose affect my conclusions? How does my language affect how my conclusions are read by others? In short, how can I practice art history in such a way as to minimize its service to the continuation of sexist domination? Understanding that our practice occurs in the context of a patriarchal

reality, we cannot expect a feminist art history to spring full-grown from some superstar's forehead. Long-standing myths will not disappear in a day, but they will be eroded by constant pressure. As Rosa Luxemburg suggested:

...every new movement, when it first elaborates its theory and policy, begins by finding support in the preceding movement, though it may be in direct contradiction with the latter. It begins by suiting itself to the forms found at hand and by speaking the language spoken hereto. In time, the new grain breaks through the old husk. The new movement finds its own forms and its own language."<sup>39</sup>

In the development of a feminist art history, we are still seeking.

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<sup>1</sup>Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (N.Y., 1975) p.6.

<sup>2</sup>Evelyn Reed, *Women's Evolution: From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family*. (New York, 1975) p. 53. My thanks to Sarah Slavin Schramm for directing me to this book.

<sup>3</sup>Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists* (N.Y., 1974); Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson, *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal* (N.Y., 1976); Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (N.Y., 1976), Elsa Honig Fine, *Women and Art* (Montclair, New Jersey, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Art and Sexual Politics*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (N.Y., 1973), p.2.

<sup>5</sup>This is a shortened version of the original essay, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" in *Women in Sexist Society*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Morgan (N.Y. 1971) pp. 344-366; also published as "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Art News*, LXIX (1971) pp. 23-39; 67-71.

<sup>6</sup>(Boston, 1904/New York, 1974)

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* p. xi.

<sup>8</sup>Note particularly her reference to the misattribution of a number of Judith Leyster's works to Frans Hals, pp. 382-383.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xlix, "want of space forbids any special mention of etching, metalworking, enamelling, designing, and decorative work in many directions in which women in great numbers are engaged; indeed, in what direction can we look in which women are not employed - I believe I may say by thousands - in all the minor arts."

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. xxxv-xxxvi.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. li.

<sup>14</sup>Walter Shaw Sparrow, Ralph Peacock, Leonce Benedite (trans. Edgar Preston), N. Jany (trans. Edgar Preston), Wilhelm Scholermann (trans. Wilfrid Sparrow),

and Helena Westermarck, *Women Painters of the World* (London, 1905; N.Y. 1976).

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>17</sup>Tufts, p. xv.

<sup>18</sup>*Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal*, p. 5, from Vogel's "Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness," in *Feminist Studies*, 2, (1974): 3.

<sup>19</sup>Comments by J.J. Wilson and Mary Stofflet in Mary Stofflet, "Interview with Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson," in the *Feminist Art Journal*, 5, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup>Harris and Nochlin, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup>Fine, p. vii.

<sup>22</sup>Tufts, p. xvi.

<sup>23</sup>Cindy Nemser, rev. of *Our Hidden Heritage* by Eleanor Tufts, *Art in America* 63, (July/August 1975) pp. 19-20.

<sup>24</sup>Prior to this contribution Tufts had delivered the paper in 1973 entitled "It's Okay To Be A Woman: Some Surprising Aspects of the Status of Women Painters in the Sixteenth Century," thus establishing her revisionist thrust while still researching for *Our Hidden Heritage*. Abstracts: CAA, 1973.

<sup>25</sup>Although their preface says "western tradition" there is an appendix by Lorri Hagman, "Ladies of the Jade Studio: Women Artists of China," pp. 145-164.

<sup>26</sup>Stofflet, "Interview..." FAJ, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup>*Women Artists: A Historical Survey* (early middle ages to 1900); *Women Artists: The Twentieth Century*; *Women Artists: Third World*; *Women Artists: Images, Themes and Dreams*.

<sup>28</sup>Harris and Nochlin, see esp. Nochlin pp. 59-61 on decorative tradition and p. 54 on 19th century genre painting.

<sup>29</sup>This is even more explicitly proposed by Nochlin in "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" While the exhibition itself is no doubt primarily representative of "high art," miniatures and watercolors are included, and the curators often point to the arbitrariness of such categories in their catalogue essays.

<sup>30</sup>Anonymous, rev. of Harris and Nochlin exhibition and catalogue "Women Artists: 1550-1950," in *Yale Review* "Readers Guide," LXVII, (October 1977) pp. xi-xv.

<sup>31</sup>Harris and Nochlin, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup>Jean-Luc Bordeaux, rev. of Harris and Nochlin exhibition and catalogue "Women Artists: 1550-1950," in *Art International*, "A Historical Rescue Of Women Painters," XXI, (July/August 1977) pp. 45-49. The following quotes are from this source.

<sup>33</sup>It will be interesting to see what approach Eleanor Munro takes in her *Originals: Women Artists* (New York, 1979) Unfortunately, a review copy was not available at this writing.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example, Sarah Slavin Schramm, *Plow Women Rather than Reapers: An Intellectual History of Feminism in the United States* (N.S., 1979) esp. Introduction, "Feminism: Its Intellectual Framework" (pp. 2-16) and Part II, "Ideological Undercurrents" pp. 131-235.

<sup>35</sup>It might be added that, like many other socio-political movements, feminist

# The Women's Art Magazines

BY CORINNE ROBINS

In 1976, two women's art magazines, the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Womanart* appeared quarterly to discuss and describe the problems and successes of women artists and the women artists movement. A monthly, six to twelve page *Women Artists Newsletter* was issued regularly and the *Heresies* Collective (which included a number of women artists) announced it was about to publish the first issue of a quarterly magazine devoted to exploring broader women's issues. The next year, in 1977, the *Feminist Art Journal* announced it was "suspending publication after five and one half years of successful operation<sup>1</sup>" and *Womanart's* third issue headlined the question, "What ever happened to the Women Artist's Movement" in heavy black type on its Winter/Spring cover. Inside, the issue offered an assessment of the women artists' movement in the form of interview/statements with eight activist women artists, a wo-

man critic and a woman art historian. The upshot of these statements was that things indeed had changed for the better, all the women were proud of their past activities but, as Michelle Stuart observed, the problem was: "You have to keep going with it. You can't drop it. Even if one personally can't, you have to find someone who is going to take your place to keep going with it<sup>2</sup>." And Nancy Spero, in the same issue stated, that now for her, "Just being in the co-op gallery is idealistically and practically a political enough statement which has even politicized members who weren't<sup>3</sup>." Thus, it was obvious that these women's activism had taken a different turn. And, in the light of their statements, it was not altogether surprising that *Womenart* itself folded the next year after publishing its seventh issue because, according to its editor Ellen Lubell, "We couldn't afford to stay small and the 1977-78 inflation and recession had sent our costs way up<sup>4</sup>." Pat Mainardi, one of the first editors of the *Feminist Art Journal*, suggests that both magazines were killed by their own success. When we began," Mainardi explains, "there was no way to get articles in print that raised the issues those articles did. It was difficult to reproduce the work of women in magazines, and the other journals wouldn't even see or accept art history articles about women. One of the things that the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Womanart* did was to force major magazines to recognize women artists' existence. Thus, in a certain sense, by 1977 we had been co-opted by success<sup>5</sup>." In any case, the seven years from 1971 to 1978 were certainly the most active and exciting in the women's movement, and the two issues of *Women and Art* and the magazine's subsequent incarnation as the *Feminist Art Journal* (for five and a half years) together with *Womanart* magazine reflect and refract this period.

*Women and Art*, which appeared in the winter of 1971 and published a second issue in the summer/fall of 1972, was a highly political feminist magazine, its first issue being a series of protest articles concerning the treatment of women artists by male critics, curators, and art historians. One of the lead stories on page one of this first issue was an article on Rosa Bonheur documenting the treatment the artist had received from 1855 to the present, showing that as a woman artist, Bonheur was considered something of a freak who, it behooved all art writers to portray "underneath her smock as a very feminine woman<sup>6</sup>." (Such stereotyping of women artists by male critics subsequently became the subject of an article by Cindy Nemser in the first issue of the *Feminist Art Journal*.) Thus, *Women and Art*, which was not only the predecessor but the model for both the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Womanart*, began by publishing a minimum of one feminist art historical piece per issue. The Rosa Bonheur article was the only such article in the first issue,

while *Women and Art*, Number 2 contained accounts of the lives of both Paula Moderson-Becker and Romaine Brooks. As opposed to the documentary approach adopted by Christine Smith in the Bonheur article, which examines Bonheur's work in terms of critical response, the Moderson Becker and Brooks articles put an unequal emphasis on their subject's lives at the expense of their artistic productions. (Thus, it was the woman artist's life rather than her work that became the central subject. This trend was to become even more accelerated in later issues of the *Feminist Art Journal*. The irony here is that this is exactly the type of treatment of women artists that Christine Smith was objecting to in her Rosa Bonheur article in *Women & Art's* first issue.)

There were a total of 21 articles in the 20 pages that comprised the first issue of *Women and Art*. Its second, a double issue with a supplement, "On Art and Society," offered 16 articles, 3 poems and 7 brief "News" pieces for a total of 32 pages. The second issue devoted pages 17-22 (or approximately 20% of its space) to an open forum on "What is Feminist art" and/or "Is there a Feminist Sensibility." In this section, it published definitions and slightly longer statements by a total of 25 women. Of all of them, Joyce Kozloff's succinct description of feminism as "a sensibility under duress" would seem to come closest to summing up the then prevailing mood of women artists in the movement. This second issue also featured Carol Duncan's "Teaching the Rich" as the lead article for its *Art and Society* section. In this essay, Duncan examines the 'economic givens' behind the teaching of art history in the United States in the late fifties and early sixties. The article, mildly Marxist in tone, itself reflected the New Left perspective at the end of the sixties. But the Duncan piece aside, the second issue of *Women and Art* confined itself to focussing on the injustices done to women artists, and the rampant sexism inherent in the male power bastions of the American art world. And it was this split in emphasis that subsequently divided the editorial board of *Women and Art* and was responsible for the magazine's demise. According to Pat Mainardi, the disagreement, whether to emphasize the marxist struggle or the fight against male chauvinism came to a head over the question of publishing Mainardi's own article, "Artists Rights in the New Left" (a piece that was subsequently published in the first issue of the *Feminist Art Journal*). This article describes how artists were being taken advantage of in terms of their works being auctioned off at less than cost at benefits and their writings altered and copyrights ignored by new left organizations and publications. The way Mainardi tells it is that while none of the members of *Women and Arts's* editorial board protested the article's accuracy, several felt the article itself was "divisive and

amounted to washing our dirty linen in public.” As a result of this disagreement, Pat Mainardi, Irene Moss and Cindy Nemser resigned from *Women and Art* (the other members of the board retaining the magazine’s name but never publishing any further issues), and became in their turn, the editorial staff for the newly formed *Feminist Art Journal*, Vol. 1, number one of which appeared in April 1972.

From 1972 to 1977, the *Feminist Art Journal* published 19 issues containing a total of 225 articles, plus brief art and music reviews. *Womanart*, in its 7 issues from 1976 to 1978, published over 53 articles, together with a minimum of 20 short exhibition reviews per issue. From 1972 to 1976 though, the *Feminist Art Journal* was the only full length publication entirely devoted to women’s activities in the visual arts. Because of this, it becomes doubly unfortunate in historical terms that some of the important events *not* covered by the *Feminist Art Journal* in these years included the major “Women Choose Women” exhibition of 109 women artists that took place at the New York Cultural Center in 1973 (which was organized by *Women in the Arts*), the opening of the first women’s co-operative in New York, the A.I.R. Gallery in 1972, and the activities of Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro’s California-based Womanhouse exhibition center, which the *Feminist Art Journal* almost totally ignored. (I will discuss and document the FAJ’s aesthetic omissions later in this article.) Meanwhile, the *Feminist Art Journal* did headline the “In Her Own Image” Philadelphia exhibition in the spring 1974 issue of the magazine. This was an exhibition organized by Editor Cindy Nemser “which presented 45 images of women executed in a diversity of media<sup>7</sup>.” In the absence of a catalogue, Nemser printed her own essay on the exhibition, which turned out to be one of the few extensive pieces of art criticism, political or otherwise, to be published in the *Feminist Art Journal* between the years 1972 and 1978<sup>8</sup>. (All broadly based art critical articles after 1974 are written solely by Nemser herself. And, in point of fact, in the FAJ’s Spring 1975 issue, Vol. 4, number one, “wherein the *Feminist Art Journal* evolves from a newspaper to a magazine format,” Pat Mainardi and Irene Moss’s names disappear from the editorial page and Cindy Nemser and Chuck Nemser are listed as editors-in-chief.)

*The Phoenix*, a Brooklyn weekly newspaper, wrote up both the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Womanart* in its March 17, 1977 issue under the heading “Filling the Void: Two Women’s Art Journals Where There Once Were None.” The article describes the magazines as “two Brooklyn-based publications, both of whose editors agreed that their magazines exist, most importantly to fill a gap, a void left by the established press, which has a long and predictable history of ignoring women artists<sup>9</sup>.” Cindy Nemser as *Feminist Art Journal* editor speaking for the

magazine, explained: "We have no formula, no prescription of what feminism means." And Ellen Lubell, *Womanart's* editor concurred, saying she "had no strict feminist ideology," adding, furthermore, "I don't foist a feminist framework on anything." If the word 'feminist' was thus indefinable by 1977, from its very beginnings in 1972, the *Feminist Art Journal* emphasized a negative rather than a positive feminist critical ideology. Nemser writes against "Feminine Stereotypes," attacks "phallic criticism" and complains about the fuzzy and chauvinist ways men describe art made by women<sup>10</sup>. Also, the ways women artists were discriminated against are documented over and over again in the magazine. On the positive side, the *Feminist Art Journal* published the documents of the first Women's Caucus at the College Art Association and records of its subsequent meetings and panels along with some solidly researched articles on women artists whose achievements had been underplayed or gone unreported by male art historians. For the first time, it became possible to read material on artists such as Natalia Goncharova, Gabrielle Muntet and Sonia Delaunay, who because of their association with well-known men artists had been assigned a brief listing or footnote appearance in standard art history books. Of the 225 articles ultimately published in the *Feminist Art Journal*, 42 or a little more than 20% were concerned with these hitherto little known historical women artists. In *Womanart* magazine, the ratio of such historical pieces was even higher: 19 articles or one third of the magazine's 53 articles concerned women artists of the past. Thus, both magazines were dedicated to providing women artists with their own heroines and a sense of their own history. One article published in the *Feminist Art Journal* went beyond this, uncovering for women and men as well as hitherto neglected art. Pat Mainardi's "Quilts: The Great American Art"<sup>11</sup> combined historical research and critical analysis in an exemplary fashion. Mainardi's informed descriptions of the styles as well as the historic content involved in early American quilts made one slightly concerned for the contemporary women artists interviewed in the magazine's pages, none of whose work received such careful attention. Indeed, in the majority of the 22 interviews and write-ups of contemporary women artists, the emphasis is anywhere except on the aesthetic content of the work. Instead, it is the life of the artist, her difficulties as a woman in both making her work and getting it shown, with perhaps a little discussion of the artist's choice of subject matter that make up the bulk of these articles. Individual paintings and sculptures are never analyzed and rarely described. Most often it is the artist herself who makes references to her working process or to individual pieces in passing so that finally the subject's sense of dedication at least is



allowed to come through. Women artists such as Louise Nevelson, Deborah Remington and the late Barbara Hepworth and Eva Hesse are called to account for their lives. In the case of Hesse, the reader is also given an account of editor Nemser's difficulty in accepting Hesse's sculptures as valid, and her final gut decision that Hesse's work will continue to be important, and she therefore must be counted as an artist heroine<sup>12</sup>.

There are, happily, a few exceptions among the 22 interview/profiles on artists published by the *Feminist Art Journal*. There is Nemser's own piece on Audrey Flack, which discusses the artist's photo-realist approach in terms of both style and content<sup>13</sup>, Sally Webster's considered discussion of the changes in content that have taken place in Joan Snyder's work<sup>14</sup>, and Fay Lansner's interview with Arthur Cohen, in which she cross-examines him about the stylistic evolution of Sonia Delaunay's work<sup>15</sup>. (I cannot judge my own output, but believe my article "Nancy Spero: Political Artist of Poetry and the Nightmare"<sup>16</sup> belongs in the category of pieces that attempt a critical assessment of an artist's output.)

In the light of the aesthetic wars of the seventies in which women artists played important roles in many different camps, it seems relevant to list the 22 women written up in the FAJ between the years 1972 to 1977 in terms of the broadest stylistic divisions, into abstract and representational categories, as follows:

#### *Abstract*

Louise Nevelson	FAJ, Fall '72
Eva Hesse	FAJ, Winter '73
Barbara Hepworth	FAJ, Spring '73
Deborah Remington	FAJ, Spring '74
Joan Mitchesll	FAJ, Spring '74
Lila Katzen	FAJ, Summer '74
Lee Krasner	FAJ, Spring '75
Joan Snyder	FAJ, Summer '76
Sonia Delaunay	FAJ, Winter '76-77

#### *Representational*

Marisol	FAJ, Fall '73
Frida Kahlo	FAJ, Fall '73
May Stevens	FAJ, Winter '74-75
Nancy Spero	FAJ, Spring '75
Audrey Flack	FAJ, Fall '75
Betye Saar	FAJ, Winter '75-76
Isabel Bishop	FAJ, Spring '76
Janet Fish	FAJ, Fall '76
Chicago Women	FAJ, Fall '76
Diane Burko	FAJ, Spring '77
Kate Millet	FAJ, Spring '77

Sakiko Ide  
Irene Moss

FAJ, Spring '77  
FAJ, Summer '77

That 13 of these artists are representational as opposed to 9 abstract, and that more than a third of the abstract artists belong to the class of grand old lady or the deceased artist category (only Mitchell, Katzen and Remington can be counted as contemporary artists) would seem to shed some light on the *Feminist Art Journal's* aesthetic bias. What is even more enlightening to this reader is the fact that none of the process artists (such as Jackie Ferrar or Jackie Winsor), none of the decorative artists or pattern painters (such as Joyce Kozloff, Mary Grigoriadis and Cynthia Carlson), none of the younger abstract women painters who came to prominence in the seventies (Elizabeth Murray and Frances Barth), and none of the women landscape sculptors (such as Mary Miss, Michelle Stuart, Alice Adams and Alice Aycock) are discussed. The result is that one comes away from reading back issues of the *Feminist Art Journal* with no grasp of the aesthetic movements save for photo-realism that prevailed during the seventies and no knowledge of some of the women artists who were major leading figures. Feminism itself is not offered as an aesthetic, so, finally, what one is faced with is Nemser's own Famous Artist School. This becomes somewhat ironic when one compares Nemser's own words in the fall 1972 issue, specifically the fictional piece she wrote entitled "Interview with a Successful Woman Artist" with her last editorial written in the final, summer 1977 issue. In the 1972 interview piece, Nemser has her fictional Successful Woman Artist announce: "No matter what they (men) say, I'm still up there with the best of them—even if I've had to suck up to any man who could advance my career and shit on any woman who got in my way<sup>17</sup>." (It is probably no coincidence that in Nemser's subsequent non-fictional interviews with women artists, she pressures them one way or another to comment on both how abused and how great and glorious they are.) Thus, it seems both fitting and ironic that the final issue of the *Feminist Art Journal* was devoted to the theme: "Women: In Pursuit of success" and that Nemser's editorial preface read in part, "As we shall see as we move through this issue of the *Feminist Art Journal*...women move out of the traditional roles of wives and mothers to pursue, battle for, redefine and attain that ever allusive chimera we have tried to pin down with the word success<sup>18</sup>."

By this last issue, the magazine's concern with the visual artist had considerably lessened. In contrast with the occasional piece on a woman writer or composer that appeared in the first year's issues, of the total of 13 articles in that final 1977 summer issue, 5 of them, or almost half focussed on women *not*

involved with the arts of painting and sculpture. Considering that two years earlier, in the summer of 1975 Nemser published an article entitled "Blowing the Whistle On the Art World," in which Nemser herself seconds and applauds Tom Wolfe's book *The Painted Word*, and long-windedly describes her own growing disgust with art criticism, the art world and its contemporary aesthetics as well as non-representational art beginning with abstract expressionism, the magazine's shift in emphasis was not altogether unexpected. Indeed, the direction away from contemporary visual art taken by the *Feminist Art Journal* in 1975 ultimately paved the way for *Womanart Magazine*, which began a year later, in the summer of 1976.

The woman profiled in the seven issues of *Womanart* included: Pat Adams, Dotty Attie, Eva Hesse, Joan Semmel, Sylvia Sleigh, Nancy Spero and Michelle Stuart. In every case, each of these articles focusses on the artist's work rather than her life. There are also round-up aesthetic pieces such as Katherine Hoffman's "Toward a New Humanism" in which the author interviews a cross-section of women artists ranging from Audrey Flack to Cecile Abish<sup>19</sup>. While, as has been noted, 35% of *Womanart's* seven issues was devoted to art history, at least 28% of the magazine's issues concentracontemporary works. The remaining 37% was concerned with news of feminist political activities. The radically different percentage figures for the *Feminist Art Journal* besides indicating a different editorial emphasis also suggest the shift in political activism from the years 1972 to 1977. Certainly the early issues of both *Women & Art* and the *Feminist Art Journal* were 90 to 95% political in content (Vol. 1, No. 1 of the *Feminist Art Journal*, included for example, 30 pieces of writing, 25 of which were political in content.) The change of emphasis begins to make itself felt with the 1974 spring issue, in which only 4 of the 13 articles that comprise the issue are concerned with political matters. In the next issue, only one of the issue's 5 articles touch on politics and from then on, an average of 20% political coverage per issue prevails. Indeed, tracing the decreasing amount of coverage of feminist actions in the *Feminist Art Journal* leaves one face to face with *Womanart's* 1977 theme question, "What ever Happened to the Women Artists Movement" and, in this sense, at least, the *Feminist Art Journal* remains a good barometer of the political climate of the time.

A brief analysis of the contents of the summer 1977 issue of the *Feminist Art Journal* and the spring/summer 1977 issue of *Womanart* should tell us more about these magazine's very different approaches. The *Feminist Art Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1977, contained a total of 13 articles (as noted on page 7's break-down), of which 2 were outright historical pieces, and 5 concerned with women in other media (2 being on women

filmmakers; one on women composers; one on a book on arts and crafts and one a music review). The back of the issue offered a heavy art review section, which included 14 small reproductions, of which three were in color. The spring/summer issue of *Womanart*, Vol. 1, No. 4, contained only five articles plus a Reviews and Reports section. *Womenart's* somewhat larger exhibition review section included 20 reproductions of artists' work, but none of them was in color. Two of *Womanart's* five articles could be considered in the 'historic' category, the other three being pieces of contemporary criticism (two of which, in turn, had a more than slightly political emphasis).

The art history articles in the FAJ's summer issue included a piece on Marie de Medici, subtitled "Self-Promotion Through Art," in which Marie de Medici has Peter Paul Rubens paint her life cycle (and that's the way she got herself into art history), and an interview/profile of Adelyn Breeskin, a woman who became acting director of the Baltimore Museum in 1942. The Breeskin story was planned to appear in two parts, and the section in the summer 1977 issue gives an extremely detailed, even cliff-hanging account of Breeskin's early life, marriage, divorce and first twelve years at the Museum. Under the category of articles on contemporary art, the summer *Feminist Art Journal* issue leads off with painter Irene Moss's autobiographical piece titled "In Pursuit of Success," being another life story, but in this case told by the artist herself and centered about her need and feeling for success and recognition. There is no discussion of her work's evolution of aesthetic content. We are left to draw our own conclusions from the cover and two inside reproductions of the work. The best feature in the issue is a piece of investigative reporting by Brenda Price entitled, "Who's got What? A Survey of Collectors and Their Relationships to Women Artists." The article comes complete with a break-down chart detailing the answers of ten major collectors to the following queries: "Collector's occupation/No. of Works in the Collection/Price range paid/Types of Works Collected/Aesthetic Emphasis/How were works acquired/Accepts direct contacts from artists/Commissions works/Per cent of Women in Collection/Per cent of work brought before artist was shown in major museum, etc.—all potentially valuable information for a women artist readership. The writing that precedes and amplifies this data, Price's account of how she went about collecting this information, is refreshingly direct and free of gush. (Indeed, for this reader, this single article justified issue Vol. 6, No. 2.) The other political piece in the issue is of somewhat less general interest. Entitled, "Why is *Art talk* Threatening to New York Museums," it is Cindy Nemser's own story of her efforts to get her book *Art*

Talk stocked by museum bookstores. This, too, is a well researched story, but, even after reading it, I doubt if its political urgency is self-evident to anyone save its bemused author.

The political/critical articles in the Summer 1977 issue of *Womanart* exhibit very different concerns. One piece is a "Report From the Women's Caucus for Art" by J. Brodsky, its president, and details the Caucus' past achievements as well as current goals. The other is almost a border-line historical piece titled, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Architects" which combines a discussion of women in American Architecture vis-a-vis a show put on by the Brooklyn Museum with a survey of existing anti-feminist feeling in the field. Lawrence Alloway's discussion of Georgia O'Keefe's flower imagery suggests there are alternate interpretations other than the sexual one usually assigned to this artist's motifs. And despite its historic subject matter seems to belong in the category of contemporary criticism together with Robert Hobbs article on Michelle Stuart's paper, rock and book pieces (in which Hobbs' offers his own rather provocative views of this artist's work vis-a-vis Zen on the one hand and Robert Smithson on the other). Also under this heading could be classed Peter Frank's extra California Review section. The only straight art history article in the issue is on Paula Modersohn-Becker and discusses Modersohn-Becker's thoughts on her role as woman and artist in terms of her own, now historic, journal jottings. Thus, the final count on this issue of *Womanart* is two articles of contemporary criticism, two political pieces and one art history piece—that is without totaling up the additional review and report sections. From this, it seems clear that the emphasis at *Womanart* was much heavier on critical interpretation than that at the *Feminist Art Journal*. In fact, going no further than the issues two contents pages demonstrates that these magazines at the time were, addressing somewhat different audiences.

As I write this article, on my desk is a letter asking support for a new project, a semi-annual publication to be called the *Woman's Art Journal*, which it has been proposed will be a magazine to take the place of both the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Womanart*. In July 1977, when the *Feminist Art Journal* folded, it had, according to its editors a circulation of 8,000 and, furthermore, its editors felt "had accomplished all its goals, that museums and galleries who in the past ignored women artists totally are now making a conscious effort to include women on a more than token basis<sup>20</sup>. Well, the 1979 Whitney Annual has come and gone with one third or thirty-three and a third percent of the artists represented being women, so perhaps life for women artists is not as rosy as the Nemsers choose to believe. The *Feminist Art Journal*, which just about paid for

itself through sales during its first two newspaper format years became a “not-for-profit” quarterly supported in part by the Nemser and in part by grants from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. As far as I have been able to find out, it never, even in its later years when it managed to acquire a good bit of advertising became financially independent. *Womanart*’s middle issues, via gallery advertising, did break even, but finally, due to rising costs, the magazine became too much of a financial burden to its editor. There is a question as to whether any such art magazine could survive on a non-subsidized basis. The fact that the need and audience for such publications remain seems indisputable. Also, in terms of its documentation of political acts and, in particular, the early records of the College Art Association caucuses, and women’s panels and affirmative action groups, the *Feminist Art Journal* remains an invaluable source for future feminist historians. On aesthetic grounds—especially in terms of contemporary as opposed to historic material, *Womanart* simply wasn’t around long enough and the *Feminist Art Journal*, now in retrospect, seems plain unconcerned. Thus, if one wants to know about the directions and achievements of contemporary women artists during the seventies, both *Womanart* and the *Feminist Art Journal* remain only as adjunct publications to the other art magazines of the period.

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<sup>1</sup>Press release dated July 1977, issued by *The Feminist Art Journal* and signed by Cindy Nemser and Chuck Nemser announced the magazine was suspending publication.

<sup>2</sup>*Womanart*, Winter/Spring 1977, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>*Womanart*, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>From a conversation with Ellen Lubell, September 1979.

<sup>5</sup>From a conversation with Pat Mainardi, September 1979.

<sup>6</sup>*Woman And Art*, Winter ’71, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>*FAJ*, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>*FAJ*, Essay runs from pp. 11-18. In her Introduction, Nemser explains, “One must keep in mind that these art works could be given other interpretations which would not cancel out sexual significance but which would amplify their essential universality. However, in this essay, I shall limit myself to gender-linked readings of these works.”

<sup>9</sup>*The Phoenix*, Vol. v, No. 41, March 17, 1977, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup>*FAJ*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 1972, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup>*FAJ*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 1973, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>*FAJ*, *Ibid*, p. 12-13.

<sup>13</sup>FAJ, Vol. 4, No. 3, Fall 1975, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup>FAJ, Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer 1976, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>FAJ, Vol. 5, No. 4, Winter 1976-77, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup>FAJ, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 1975, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup>FAJ, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 1972, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup>FAJ, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1977, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>*Womanart*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Winter 1978, p. 23-25.

<sup>20</sup>FAJ Press Release of July 1977 forwarded to this writer by Cindy Nemser, who declined to be interviewed or discuss on the phone her publication.

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Re-Review

# Possibilities

BY ROBERT C. HOBBS

*Possibilities* published Winter 1947/48 is the only periodical associated with the Abstract Expressionists during their formative years. An interdisciplinary magazine edited by four men, Robert Motherwell (art), Harold Rosenberg (writing), Pierre Chareau (architecture) and John Cage (music), it had no programmatic intent.

This lack of dogma is underscored on the title page where the two main editors Motherwell and Rosenberg, the real spear-headers of this magazine, laid out their policy of as little policy as possible. Coming first, Motherwell writes of individuals who embody their ideas in their work, who leave the end open and try to avoid limiting forecasts. Rosenberg is in agreement, but he has to fight against strong political concerns. He admits, "Naturally the deadly political situation exerts an enormous pressure," but he tries to separate art and literature from the overriding social-realist orthodoxy of the preceding decade. If one chooses



the political, he states without reservations, art should be given up. The situation is not that easy, he then admits, many manage to float in an indeterminate space between art and politics. The situation is horrendously difficult: "If one is to continue to paint or write as the political trap seems to close upon him, he must perhaps have the extremest faith in sheer possibility." Hence, the title of this occasional review.

Since this one and only issue of *Possibilities* was never intended to be a focused coverage of the current scene in the arts, rather a potpourri of interests of concern to the four editors, it would be unwise to consider it a defense of any particular point of view. Recently in conversation Motherwell recounted the days when this little magazine was in the works. During the year he was occupied with it, he was living, interestingly enough, in an East Hampton quonset hut designed for him by Pierre Chareau and spending a great deal of time with Harold Rosenberg. In spite of personal connections between the editors, they did not band together and subscribe to a common attitude. Each editor was given carte blanche with his area of specialty; the end result then being fortuitous and accidental. What surprised Motherwell more than any of the contributions was John Cage's careful research. Expecting something more dadaist (Motherwell's term), he asked Cage why the lists, why the detailed accounts of works by such notables as Ben Weber, Virgil Thompson, Edgar Varese, and Alexei Haieff. Cage's response was that no one had done this for composers, and it was very much needed.

The lack of programmatic intent, the openness of inquiry, the almost dilettante search for whatever was of interest to the three other editors—Motherwell, Rosenberg, and Chareau—had affinities with Abstract Expressionism which after all affirmed the individual, judiciously eschewed anything smacking of a manifesto, and advocated the supremacy of improvisation. In surveying this magazine one has the feeling that the editors are all breaking down barriers—call it the academy of ensconced provincialism, call it the fear of America's newly found internationalism, it makes no difference. They pushed against it to allow for experimentation, to catch the freshness of the unresolved, the then nondoctrinaire, and this is its charm. In this current age of journalistic art criticism, of profit oriented periodicals whose covers are usually subvented by successful galleries, it is refreshing to look back at a time when choices were often made on faith. When I asked Motherwell how he could be so prescient in his choices—Baziotes, Pollock, Rothko, and David Smith, he replied that he knew most of the people then in the New York art world, it was small, and well he made his judgments as much on the basis of the man as on his work.

As I re-read this magazine thinking of what would be pertinent

in a re-review, it occurred to me that *Possibilities* should be considered not so much an influence on culture as a manifestation of it. I wondered about indications of a period style. Between art and literature especially there are correspondences that are worthy of note. Perhaps the correspondences were actually there as part of the context, perhaps they arose through the numerous conversations Motherwell and Rosenberg had in the late forties when they were still good friends. But they do occur, and they do give a certain, but not totally convincing, validity for believing in a period ethos. Before venturing into these connections, I should say that the literature on the whole—and here I'm referring to entries by American writers—does not bear comparison to the art in terms of quality.

It's such a different era from the present that is represented in this magazine. Mythology and magic are of great concern. The cult of individualism is still rampant. Personal vision and individual intuition still count. Terms like "transcendence" slip easily into the prose. And behind all of these varied interests is the overriding concern with another world, thought to be an impenetrable one, the unconscious or subconscious. "Possibilities" is an appropriately chosen term: it conveys the idea of openness, and the need for resolution through action.

In the arts this is especially clear. Baziotis writes of the difficulty in arriving at any specific rationale for painting. Pollock's statement, so clearly similar in many respects to Baziotis's, is his famous "My Painting" in which he acquaints the reader with the improvisatory nature of his technique. For him it is a case of the painting leading and the artist following. Subject to the dictates of the medium, hinting at being guided by another part of himself, he tells of the need to paint first and assess later.

Without the opportunity for a smallish owing of his paintings and watercolors and the request for a statement, it is doubtful that Rothko, one of the most taciturn of painters when it came to his own work, would have formulated "The Romantics were Prompted." In this statement he points out the need for transcendence and drama in the world. According to him it is obtainable in art only through veiled images, hybrids which can enact their biomorphic dramas freely without any of the constraints imposed on the so-called real world. Pictures are miracles. Through painting the artist manages to touch some part of himself, establish some private and wonderful mode of communication between himself and the work. Later, the work complete, the bond is broken, and the artist becomes another spectator, and his work the same kind of magical transport for him that it is for anyone else.

The artists manage to touch on the miraculous. According to their statements they do this because they don't calculate, they lie in wait and hope. Their quest is something magical and

elusive. Rothko touches on perhaps the main elements imbuing their works with this magic, making them believable dramas rather than fusty sets. The hybrids, the biomorphic protagonists that suggest without limiting, may appeal directly to a more fundamental level since their ambiguity only serves to puzzle the censoring conscious mind. About them there is no look of the overly researched, the archaeological trappings of someone well-schooled in the classics, or of the difficulty in resolving realistic and idealistic elements. They are free flowing and mysterious, they are very much on the same level as Edgar Allan Poe's fancies.

It was a stroke of genius for Harold Rosenberg to choose to pair Poe's description of his fancies from his section on Expressionism found in his *Marginalia* with Richard Huelsenbeck's Dada treatise. The Poe section acts as a perfect counter to the German artist's statement. It describes the efforts of one who believes in the absoluteness of his medium, words, to describe every possible thought and even tackle those impressions he calls fancies, those states between wakefulness and sleep just before one drifts off. What are the artists contained in this book concerned with if they are not concerned with forms and shapes arising from states of mind analogous to Poe's fancies? The pendant essay, Huelsenbeck's, interestingly enough contains the imperative to act. Literature, violent and forceful, is that which is made with a gun in hand. Dada deals with absolutes or action and completely irreconcilable paradoxes. The Poe essay delineates the terrain and the subject matter of Abstract Expressionism; the Huelsenbeck the means. But it should be emphasized that both dream state and improvisation were already of importance to the Abstract Expressionists before Rosenberg so strikingly paired these two essays.

Motherwell has long maintained the cruciality of the Huelsenbeck piece for Rosenberg's famous "The American Action Painters." And upon re-reading "Dada" I am inclined to agree. The emphasis on act—so tantalizing to Rosenberg, who had steeped himself, as had many others at the time, in the ideas of the existentialists and even in those of the American pragmatist John Dewey, reverberates throughout Huelsenbeck's essay. Especially: "The Dadaist should be a man who has fully understood that one is entitled to have ideas only if one can transform them into life—the completely active type, who lives only through action because it holds the possibility of his achieving knowledge."

One has only to turn from the artist's statements and small groupings of reproduced works to Lionel Abel's short morality play to see that what the artists could manage few writers selected for inclusion in this periodical could hope to attain. While there are American writers who have brilliantly handled

the problem of finding an appropriate tone and subject matter to embody their understanding of the tragic—Eugene O'Neill immediately comes to mind—there are, of course, others who have not managed to fit Greek tragedy into the constraints of modern dress. Lionel Abel tries hard to attain the proper measured rhythm and ritualistic gravity appropriate to tragedy in his play *The Bow and The Gun*. He deals with American Indians who attempt to hold onto their own weapons and also safeguard their mythology even though by doing so they are assured contradictorily—of defeat at the hands of the white man and success in remaining themselves. Tragedy is the attempted aim; the result, however, makes one think of a talking waxworks; it is forced. How much more sensible is Rothko's handling of a similar problem. By abstracting his actors, he keeps them from being prosaic. Unlike Abel's characters which never seem to be able to cast off the spirit of the dime-store western, the aura of hackneyed movies depicting cavalry charges and Indian war whoops, Rothko's figures bear some degree of resemblance to the sacred.

At least the sacred of Andrea Caffe's text "On Mythology," translated by Abel, in which the sacred is posited as unobtainable. Of course there are those who would argue that Caffe's main thesis that myths do not languish with specialization, with being channeled into religious dogma, philosophy, and science is germane to Abel's attack. Concretize, make as realistic as possible, and the myth will blossom forth with almost unheralded clarity. But such is not the case.

Andrea Caffe's essay "On Mythology," for all its confusion and lack of focus—particularly it never really provides the reader with a definition of mythology—does provide a most interesting slant on the uses to which mythology has been subjected in recent years. Caffe points out that Stalin and Hitler have both-co-opted myth to their own special interests. In the hands of despots, myth, the supposed creation of the collective mind, became a powerful tool for manipulating the masses. I wonder if this fact, namely, that myth in the hands of the enemy was used to achieve heinous ends was not lost on the New York painters who began in the early and mid-forties to recognize myth's power and to make it one of the mainstays of their art. They used myth to the common good, as pietistic testaments of what they found when treking contents at the very threshold of consciousness. They seemed to say: if I can find in myself *The Eyes of Oedipus*, *The Key*, *The Night Mirror*, *Cyclops*, *The Interior for Exterior*, then all is not lost. The death of the School of Paris, the decline of western civilization, seem as nothing, because man has within himself the very roots of culture. The Abstract Expressionists use of myth seems to confirm this idealistic and heroic struggle, and their stylistic dependence on the look of cave

painting and the general tone of primitivism helps also to corroborate this thesis.

In my opinion only one selection by an American writer in any way measures up to the art reproduced in this magazine, and that is Paul Goodman's "The Emperor of China." Between this piece and the art, there are certain correspondences. The quality of inter media res pervades both. One is plunged into the center, sink or swim, and forced to fight one's way through the symbols and forms. Participation becomes incumbent on the viewer or reader who is forced to unravel, experience, seize hold of what at first looks chaotic. It's akin to reading a Joyce novel or Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*. Common structure is avoided; the reader comes through what looks like rubble, he assimilates, makes order. It is he who perceives. Perhaps with all the seeming disorderliness, some contents are absorbed directly, the arbitrating, judicious, censoring conscious mind is circumvented. And then? Poe's fancies—subconscious connections. The narrow threshold of the conscious mind, the mean sifter of experience into the known, the orthodox, the formulated is bypassed, and the greater, or at least a less restricted, communication takes place. In traditional art and literature the recognizable subject matter or the plot masks symbols and provides a focus so that peripheral details are accepted unquestionably. In Abstract Expressionist works and "The Emperor of China," the situation is different, one might almost say reversed, because the subject matter and plot are submerged in a plethora of seemingly extraneous details. *The Key* by Pollock is an example; the look of bravura and heady conflation protect/absorb the hieratic figures pulling them into the background, removing them from the simple and clear-cut figure-ground relationship so common in traditional art. Similarly in the "Emperor of China," a leveling of distinctions takes place. Is the Emperor a dream, a leading character, or is he one more part in a tightly webbed scenario in which meaning cannot be imposed from the outside but must come through reciprocal relations established within the text?

Certain statements in "The Emperor of China" bear a striking resemblance to Abstract Expressionist ideas. "He knows what is best is easiest and what is easiest is best" and "The Way is the difficult ease" almost sound like they might have been written by Pollock or Motherwell. In 1947, Motherwell painted *The Emperor of China*, a "portrait" ultimately derived from a late thirties Picasso drawing of a figure set in dimly lit chthonic world, it seems connectable to Goodman's Emperor "...who lay seventy years aforming in the womb—in safety from every maiming womb—and he will never be formed a personalilty like you or me."

Another quotation for "The Emperor of China" relates to the

central thesis of Harold Rosenberg's long and tortured "The Stages: A Geography of Human Action," an attempt to establish a basis for a psychoanalytic and existential reading of *Hamlet*. When Goodman writes "In the Void, in the quick of the would, where the wizard has swallowed up the space, he is dancing the creation of things before they have a name," he succinctly states what Rosenberg hopes to explicate. Basically what takes Rosenberg nineteen pages of wrangling is that *Hamlet*, a play within a play and also a play outside a play, is a drama that occurs both on and off the stage. The psychologist's terrain is superimposed: the stage is the conscious world, and the other stage Rosenberg alludes to is the void or the unconscious. Also the play is an existential arena in which Hamlet is both man who is privy to thoughts, feelings, and intuitions not visible to the audience and an existentialist who bodies forth the need to act. Hamlet, as viewed in Rosenberg's terms, becomes the prototype for the modern hero. Many times in his career Rosenberg was to cast artists in the same mold: the canvas replaces the stage by becoming an arena, and the act becomes an absolute whereby the actor-painter is in touch with the other stage—the void, his unconscious—and becomes both hero and man in the realization of his act. Rosenberg was to state it with more clarity as he became more familiar with it and tended to find it incarnate in de Kooning, but his "The Stages" remains an early, if awkward delineation of it.

In this re-review of a now-established classic in the annals of American art, I have tried to stick close to native developments. To do this solely would be to give a biased review not in line with the established focus of the periodical, for it was clearly intended to be international in focus. And I think it is fair to assume not simply an international stage on which to spotlight national developments. The reason I believe this is that the selections of national and international figures appear to have been made on the basis of the various editors' personal preferences and not to fit in with any prearranged program. Formulaic pronouncements about the cultural scene were antithetic to the nature of this publication. Of course there are certain selections that do reinforce basic attitudes and were doubtlessly chosen because they were commensurate with them. The Arp selections reinforce the Dada essay by Huelsenbeck, and the Miro interview with its praise of cave painters and also of America's force and vitality backs up the primitivism and spirit of improvisation of the American artists, and even lends credence to them in the form of a blessing by one high priest of modernism. Even the single architect featured, Oscar Niemeyer, can be viewed as related to the spirit of vitalism and personally-achieved eccentricity. In spite of the obvious debt Niemeyer owes to Le Corbusier, his linear rhythms and his ebullient bulging forms suggest the indi-

vidual open-ended approach advocated by many New York School artists. The inclusion of Lino Novas Calvo's "Long Island" in terms of its force and mystery is also not totally unrelated. It can be construed as a modern Spanish development on the theme of man and the sea, a theme of paramount importance to many who regarded Melville's *Moby Dick* as an American epic comparable to Joyce's *Ulysses*.

It is regrettable that *Possibilities* remained a one time endeavor. According to Motherwell the second issue was to have featured Hofmann, Tony Smith, and Calder, and perhaps Max Ernst or Giacommetti, at least someone of that rank. Also the prospect of a second issue provided Motherwell the occasion for illuminating Rosenberg's poem "The Bird for Every Bird," resulting in a black and white study of alternating verticals and ovals that became the schema for the series of *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*.

If Motherwell's memory serves him correctly the periodical was dispensed with after Schultz, one of the publishers with Wittenborn, died in a plane crash. The publisher's widow was unwilling to undergo unnecessary financial risks, and the entire enterprise was abandoned.

Trying to be a later counterpart to the European *Minotaur* and American *Transition*, an interdisciplinary periodical in which art played a substantive role and not simply an illustrative piece of decoration, *Possibilities* followed closely on the heels of *The Tiger's Eye* (October 1947), a more lavish American periodical. The suspension of *Possibilities* after only one issue was not quite as unfortunate as it might appear since the artists already had a more appealing showcase in *The Tiger's Eye* which included space for some hand-tipped color illustrations handsomely back on black.

*Possibilities* is more potpourri than program, and any similarities resulting between the four arts presented should be considered unplanned by the editors. There is a kind of united force about this magazine all the same, and the force can be attributed to the air of risk-taking, of trial and error that characterizes it. This is, however, not to say that there is more than a little naivete involved in leaving the results open. The issue's effect, finally, is very much like that of Abstract Expressionism, the then unlabeled style of painting it so clearly celebrates. Just as the final synthesis, the bridge that must be made in this painting between realistic and mythological titles and designated abstract formats must be made by the viewer, so similarly any correspondences between the four arts in *Possibilities* is to be made by the reader. The relationships between painting and literature which do occur are occasional, the nature of the few connections that can be made suggests that the arts were not integrated into a common cause, but were more or less isolated from each other.

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ERRATA

The following misprints occurred in Joan Ungersma Halperin's article on "Scientific Criticism and *le beaux moderne* of the Age of Science" in the last issue of *Art Criticism*:

1. p. 58, in the quotation, Fenion should speak of *La Grande Jatte* as "a patient, monotonous tapestry, rather than "a patient, monotonous try";
2. p. 68, Signac should be described as "*un mariniste de grande allure*" rather than "*un mariniste du grande alluer*";
3. p. 70, note 19, *Ble et arbres* is in the catalogue by de Hauke and Brame.



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